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**Politics, History and Personal Tragedies:**  
**The novels of Jonathan Coe in the British historical, political and literary context**  
**from the seventies to recent years**

Francesco Di Bernardo  
PhD in Modern and Contemporary Literature, Culture and Thought  
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May 2014

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

**Signature:**.....

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

PhD in Modern and Contemporary Literature, Culture and Thought

Francesco Di Bernardo

Politics, History and Personal Tragedies:

The novels of Jonathan Coe in the British historical, political and literary context

from the seventies to recent years

SUMMARY

The thesis focuses on the representations of British political history in the last five decades in the works of Jonathan Coe in comparison with other contemporary British authors who deal with the same historical issues.

Specifically I discuss how the transition from the post-war consensus politics and the welfare state to neoliberalism is represented, and how these transformations British society has undergone are the subject of political commentary and criticism in the works of Coe.

I discuss the different stylistic approaches deployed by Coe to deal with history, framing my analysis in the context of a discussion around the genre of the historical novel. The comparative approach of my thesis serves the purpose of both providing a wider depiction of the historical period taken in consideration and provides a broader critical evaluation of recent trends in the genre of the historical novel. My thesis is divided in three chapters, each focusing on the representation of a specific historical period, namely: the 1970s and the erosion of the social structure of the welfare state, the 1980s and Thatcherism, and ultimately the 1990s, New Labour's reformulation of neoliberalism, Cool Britannia, and the 2007-2008 financial crisis and the society of the "precariat".

My argument is theoretically inscribed in the framework of the discourse around postmodernity. My interpretation of postmodernism relies heavily on Jameson's analysis of post-industrial, late-capitalist society from the 1970s onwards and is intended to contribute to recent arguments about neoliberalism and the novel. The definition of postmodernity is also drawn from Harvey, Lyotard, Eagleton, Baudrillard, Bauman, and Hutcheon. The theoretical discussion around neoliberal consumerist society is framed in the discourse of excess of desire production and constructed lack, and therefore I use the concept of schizophrenia as theorised by Deleuze and Guattari, drawn from the Lacanian tradition. Žižek's analysis of the last developments of the neoliberal society also contributes to the theoretical and interpretative framework of my thesis. My exploration of Coe's novels, *The Rotters' Club*, *What a Carve Up!*, *The House of Sleep*, *The Closed Circle* and *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, in relation to other contemporary works by Amis, Hollinghurst, McEwan, Barnes, etc. reveals the ways in which Coe's historical novels of the late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> century rework the realist novel tradition in light of a postmodern (or schizophrenic) late capitalist society.

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I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of my father Giovanni Di Bernardo.

## Introduction

‘The 1980s weren’t a good time for me, on the whole. I suppose they weren’t for a lot of people’<sup>1</sup>: this statement summarises *What a Carve Up!*’s protagonist Michael Owen’s attitude toward Britain’s socio-political condition in the 1980s. The sentence is imbued with irony, as we know that the 1980s were so bad for Michael Owen that he was literally unable to leave his flat. It also expresses one of the core political messages of Coe’s novels. Most of Coe’s novelistic production, in fact, is centred on critique of neoliberalism and on the vexed relationship between the individual and the neoliberal society Coe represents. The 1980s are perceived as the moment when the shift from the welfare state to neoliberalism happened. The representation and critique of British history of the last four/five decades, the critique of neoliberalism, and the literary forms deployed by Coe to represent these issues in the forms of the historical novel are therefore the main focuses of my dissertation.

In the last four/five decades Britain has undergone drastic social, economic and political changes. In socio-economic and cultural terms the change has been triggered by the transition from Fordist-structured society shaped on the model of industrial production to de-industrialisation and to the ‘flexible accumulation’<sup>2</sup> typical of late capitalism. This change has occurred on a global scale and it has redesigned the panorama of contemporary life. The transition from modern Fordist industrialisation to the post-industrial era coincided in Britain with fundamental political turnarounds: the rupture with post-war consensus with the rise of Margaret Thatcher, the end of the welfare state conceived after the Second World War, and the entrenchment in the mid-1990s of the neoliberal values Thatcherism firstly fostered. Whether Thatcherism was

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<sup>1</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *What a Carve Up!*. London: Penguin, p. 102.

<sup>2</sup> Harvey, D. (1990) *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge: Blackwell, p.141.



an ideology that made use of neoliberal precepts to implement the “modernisation” of Britain in late capitalist sense or, on the contrary, Thatcherism was a “tool” of a wider historical contingency that determined the rise of neoliberalism is a subject still largely debated<sup>3</sup>. My interest here is rather to stress the importance of the change and the momentousness of the election of Margaret Thatcher as a turning point in British history. The nature of Thatcherism is in the domain of historians and political analysts and not at the core of this work. The historical issues as background of my analysis are related to the change brought about by the rise of neoliberalism in Britain and its most recent developments. The centrality of Thatcher to this process cannot be doubted. Louisa Hadley and Elizabeth Ho argue that Thatcher has been influencing British society politically and culturally uninterruptedly for the last four decades. They refer to the late prime minister as a “revenant figure” continuously influencing, affecting and ultimately haunting British public life and consequently also the life of individuals. They also refer to Thatcherism as an open wound insofar it introduced Britain to the forms of the global late capitalism<sup>4</sup>. Thatcherism is, in fact, a phenomenon that has determined the most important shift, not only in terms of economical politics, but also in terms of values and cultural references. Thatcher’s policies caused a shift from the ideals of mutuality and communality represented by the welfare state to the logics of the market characterised by individualism and consumerism. The comprehension of this phenomenon and its entrenchment is therefore fundamental for understanding of the roots of contemporary British society. Looking back over the period of this phenomenon’s formation is crucial to understand how it has progressed during the decades, how it has mutated, and how it will develop, considering that contemporary neoliberal society is also a result of reforms and changes adopted under Thatcher’s government. The preponderance of the money-

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<sup>3</sup> Heffernan, R. (2000) *New Labour and Thatcherism: Political Change in Britain*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

<sup>4</sup> Hadley, L., Ho, E. (eds) (2010). *Thatcher and After: Margaret Thatcher and her Afterlife in Contemporary Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 1.

economy and the uncontrollable power that the financial sector has obtained are rooted in the 1986 deregulation of the financial markets. The 2008 financial downturn that it is still affecting the real economy seems to come from far back. It is therefore possible to read present events as a continuation of those started in the late 1970s.

The novel form has historically offered insight into the past and a piercing account of the historical events from perspectives often overlooked by historical narration. Lukacs affirmed that the historical novel arises from the necessity to represent social transformations and to represent individualities whose feature can represent ‘a peculiarity of their age’<sup>5</sup>. Connor claims that the novel is the best place to represent the combination of the macro (politics, history, economic forces) and the micro (individual lives in their particularities). He says: ‘the novel promises a view of that fine grain of events and experiences which otherwise tend to shrink to invisibility in the long perspectives of historical explanation. Novels seem to have some authority of the eyewitness account’<sup>6</sup>. This statement pairs with Lukacs who claims that the novel offers ‘[...] concrete possibilities for men to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned [...] to see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives [...]’<sup>7</sup>. The novel, therefore, is a valuable instrument for understanding neoliberal society in Britain, tracing its origins in the past.

The subject of my investigation is the literary representation of historical, socio-economic and political changes in Britain in the last four decades in the novels of Jonathan Coe. I will focus exclusively on the novels that overtly have as their core subject politics, and Coe’s critique of neoliberalism. In fact, Thatcherism, the rise and the entrenchment of neoliberalism and the transformations occurred in the last forty

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<sup>5</sup> Lukacs, G. (1947) *The Historical Novel*. London (1962): Merlin, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Connor, S. (1996) *The English Novel in History 1950-1995*. London: Routledge, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Lukacs, G. (1947) *ibid.*, p. 22.

years are at the centre of most of Coe's literary production. While several British authors have dealt with Thatcherism and its legacy, Coe is the only contemporary author who has produced works on the subject, which can be read as a proper series. Coe, in fact, addresses consistently the socio-political issues from the 1970s to the post-2008 financial crisis and the consequence of the money-economy on society in large part of his literary work. Thus the novels taken in consideration for my work are: *The Rotters' Club* (2001), *What a Carve Up!* (1994), *The House of Sleep* (1997), *The Closed Circle* (2004), *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* (2010).

Apart from analysing the literary forms deployed by Coe to understand the legacy of Thatcherism and the rise of neoliberal society, I seek to address the discourse around the historical novel and how it relates to the question of genre. The historical novel has been traditionally associated with realism, especially according to the interpretation of the latter stemming from the Marxian analysis of Lukacs<sup>8</sup>, Bloch<sup>9</sup> and Raymond Williams<sup>10</sup>. However, the rise of postmodernism complicates the discourse, forcing a rethinking of the whole tradition of the historical novel and suggesting new perspectives on the historical novel in the post-industrial era. This thesis seeks to frame the analysis of the works of Jonathan Coe in a broader debate about approaches to the fictional representation of history after the historiographical reinterpretation of historical narration that influenced the postmodern historical novel<sup>11</sup>, and seeks to envisage the formation of a renewed historical novel. In this regard, the question of genre is therefore essential.

Jonathan Coe received a lot of public attention after the publication of *What a Carve Up!* (1994) which gained momentum after the 2005 BBC production based on

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<sup>8</sup> Lukacs, G. (1947) *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Bloch, E., Zipes, J. (ed.) (1996) *The utopian function of art and literature: selected essays*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, R. (1970) *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*. London: Chatto & Windus.

<sup>11</sup> de Groot, J. (2010) *The Historical Novel*. London: Routledge, p. 109.

*The Rotters' Club*. Newspapers and literary magazines have increasingly dedicated space to him. However, his works have attracted so far little academic research. In a 1994 article in the *London Review of Books* Terry Eagleton defined *What a Carve Up!* as 'one of the few pieces of genuinely political Post-Modern fiction around'<sup>12</sup>. The first investigations of Coe's novels in an academic work arrived in 2001 with an article by Rod Mengham, in which the author discusses *What a Carve Up!* and *The Rotters' Club* in the context of the analysis of the contemporary British historical fiction<sup>13</sup>. Also in 2001 Merritt Moseley wrote the entry about Coe for the fourth series of *British Novelists since 1960* a biographical account of several British novelists<sup>14</sup>. In 2002, in Dominic Head's book dedicated to British fiction from 1950 to 2000 we find some references to Coe's works, and more extensive comments on *What a Carve Up!* in a chapter entitled 'The State and the Novel' that analyses the novels focused on representation of post-consensus Britain<sup>15</sup>. There is an entry about Coe also in Nick Rennison's biographical book on contemporary British novelists<sup>16</sup>. In 2004 Philip Tew's volume *Contemporary British Novel* there are a few references to Coe's works, particularly to the *Dwarves of Death* (1990), *What a Carve Up!* and *The Rotters' Club*<sup>17</sup>. The first book chapter entirely dedicated to a work of Jonathan Coe is Pam Thurschwell's 'Genre, Repetition and History in Jonathan Coe' published in a volume edited by Mengham and Tew in 2006<sup>18</sup>. In her article Thurschwell questions the role of genre, particularly tragedy and farce, in the representation of British political history in Jonathan Coe's works, and especially in *What a Carve Up!*. The article also presents

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<sup>12</sup> Eagleton, T. (1994) 'Theydunnit', *London Review of Books*, vol 16, n.8., p. 12

<sup>13</sup> Mengham, R. (2001) 'Fiction's History', *Leviathan*, n. 1, pp 110-113.

<sup>14</sup> Moseley, M. (2001) 'Jonathan Coe' in Moseley, M. (ed.) *British Novelists since 1960: Fourth Series*. Detroit, MI: Gale.

<sup>15</sup> Head, D. (2002) *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 35-36.

<sup>16</sup> Rennison, N. (2005) *Contemporary British Novelists*. Abingdon: Routledge.

<sup>17</sup> Tew, P. (2004) *Contemporary British Novel*. London: Continuum.

<sup>18</sup> Thurschwell, P. (2006) 'Genre, Repetition and History in Jonathan Coe', in Tew, P., Mengham, R. (eds), *British fiction Today*. London: Continuum.

analysis of concepts such as repetition, arrest and oblivion, in the context of representations of Thatcherism and in relation to postmodern interpretation of the concept of nostalgia. In 2006 in a short survey article Florence Noiville discusses contemporary British literature from a French perspective. The author discusses the approach to history and indicates *What a Carve Up!* and *The Rotters' Club* as examples of contemporary British political novel<sup>19</sup>. Subsequently, in a 2007 volume on the role of finance, money and speculation in contemporary British fiction, Nicky Marsh analyses the origins of the power of the City in the years of Thatcher and its representation in *What a Carve Up!*<sup>20</sup>. In 2008, Philip Tew interviewed Jonathan Coe for an edited volume of collected interviews with contemporary British authors<sup>21</sup>. Also in 2008 Colin Hutchinson talks about Coe in relation to the representation of Thatcherism in his book on the social novel and the representation of Reagan and Thatcher<sup>22</sup>. In a 2010 book on literature of and representing the 1980s, Joseph Brooker analyses the literary forms of *What a Carve Up!* and discusses its relevance for a rereading of the 1980s and for a cultural reinterpretation of Thatcherism<sup>23</sup>. Brooker defines Coe's work as one of the most celebrated retrospectives on Thatcherism<sup>24</sup>, allying his opinion with that of Head who defined it as 'the most significant novel about the effects of Thatcherism'<sup>25</sup>. Another recent academic work dedicated to Coe is an extensive chapter by Ryan Trimm on *What a Carve Up!* in a 2010 volume on the figure of Margaret Thatcher in

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<sup>19</sup> Noiville, F. (2006) 'The Contemporary British Novel – A French Perspective'. *European Journal of English Studies*, vol. 10, n. 3., pp 297-300.

<sup>20</sup> Marsh, N. (2007) 'Bang, Boom, Bust: The Fortune of the City. II, Revision and Retrospect: Representation of the City in Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up!* and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*', in *Money, Speculation and Finance in Contemporary British Fiction*. London: Continuum.

<sup>21</sup> Tew, P. (2008) 'Jonathan Coe', in Tew, P. Tolan, F. Wilson, L. (eds) *Writers Talk: Interviews with Contemporary British Novelists* London, England: Continuum 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Hutchinson, C. (2008) *Reaganism, Thatcherism and the Social Novel*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>23</sup> Brooker, J. (2010) *Literature of the 1980s: After the Watershed*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>24</sup> Brooker, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> Head, D. (2002) *ibid.*, p. 35

contemporary British culture<sup>26</sup>. Recently an article by Guignery appeared in the French peer-reviewed journal *Études anglaises* analyses postmodern rewriting of the whodunit in *What a Carve Up!*<sup>27</sup>.

The publication of an article on Coe in a French journal leads the discussion to the anomalous case of his publishing fortune and his fame as author. As also underlined in a 2010 interview in *The Guardian*, Jonathan Coe's works received much more attention in continental Europe, especially in France, Italy, Greece, Portugal, than in Britain; a quite peculiar case, considering the deep Englishness of his literature. Yet, it is exactly the Englishness, the fact that his novels are deeply entrenched in English culture and history, which makes them appealing to the European audience. Coe explains to Paul Laity: 'There is a great curiosity in continental countries about Britain that we don't really reciprocate [...] My books give them a window on to how British people talk and think, and what's been going on politically. I'm regarded as an archetype of a certain kind of English writer'<sup>28</sup>. Certainly this interest in Englishness is also connected to the political discourse present in much of Coe's production and the way he addresses it in what is perceived as a typical form of British humour. Moreover, Britain is probably the first country in Europe to fully introduce neoliberalism in Europe, during the Thatcher's years, and this probably explains the interest in Coe's historical retrospective on the birth of neoliberal society. As such, Britain is perhaps considered as a laboratory and Coe's retrospective on British political history awakens strong interest in other European countries. Although he is nowadays an author fairly well known by the public and in academia, as I said before there is still little academic research and

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<sup>26</sup> Trimm, R. (2010) 'Carving Up Value: The Tragicomic Thatcher Years in Jonathan Coe', in Hadley, L., Ho, E. (eds), *Thatcher and After: Margaret Thatcher and Her Afterlife in Contemporary Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>27</sup> Guignery, V. (2011) 'Colonel Mustard, in the billiard room, with the revolver': Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up!* as a postmodern whodunit', in *Études Anglaises*, Vol.64(4), pp.427-438.

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Coe interviewed by Laity, P. (2010) 'A Life in writing: Jonathan Coe', *The Guardian* [online]. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/may/29/life-writing-jonathan-coe> [accessed on 18<sup>th</sup> October 2013].

with my dissertation I aim to fill this gap and to bridge the critical evaluation of Coe's works to the discourse around contemporary British fiction, particularly in the context of the discourse regarding the historical novel. These latter goals also justify the necessity to provide comparative sections in which to discuss Coe in the broader context of recent British historical fiction.

I believe that Coe's works offer an important insight into British history and contribute fundamentally to build that bridge Connor talks about, between the collective understanding of history and the micro-level, the individual experiences of specific historical contingencies. Coe's comic reworking of literary forms such as the *bildungsroman* and the use of popular literary genres such as the whodunit do help to bridge the macro-narrative of "history" and the micro-narrative of individual "stories" in the broader context of history. Moreover, the works of Coe build a unique corpus of literary retrospection on recent historical events. Perhaps, only the works of Margaret Drabble such as *The Ice Age* (1977), *The Radiant Way* (1987) and *The Gates of Ivory* (1991), attempt to reconstruct a collective history of Britain from the collapse of the social structures of the consensus to the creation of the modern neoliberal society in the way Coe does. However, Coe in his "political" works connects the historical events of the seventies with those of the eighties and finally to the recent financial crisis. In other words, his works describe neoliberal society as resulting from an uninterrupted chain of events started in the seventies. In doing so, his works help to develop a rereading of those historical events which sheds light on contemporary Britain. Issues such as deindustrialization, for example, cross his novels. The novels are, conversely, intrinsically connected to each other by the recurrence of events. For example, in *The Rotters' Club* we read about the crisis in the manufacturing sector and the crisis of the Longbridge factory; in *What a Carve Up!* we read about the process of dismantling of

the manufacturing industry, then in *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, we find the result of the policies of the de-industrialisation and the dismantling of the industries. In this novel the consequences of the uncontrolled growth of the financial sector are, in fact, described as the factor that triggered the economic crisis. In the last novel, the main character drives through the same Longbridge plant described in *The Rotters' Club*. I believe that the importance of Coe resides precisely in these historical connections he makes. These connections provide a cultural terrain in which a collective understanding of the present through a rereading of the past can flourish. Works such as *What a Carve Up!* offer a unique insight into the phenomenon of Thatcherism which is central for the understanding of the present condition of Britain.

However, the importance of Coe does not reside exclusively in the political and historical writing but also in the literary forms he adopts. The use of postmodern forms in *What a Carve Up!* (and in *The House of Sleep* as well) produces what Eagleton defines as one of the most genuinely political pieces of postmodern writings<sup>29</sup>. The use of experimental realism with *The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle*, and the return to postmodernism in *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* offer an interesting lens on literary experimentation and genre-crossing typical of contemporary and millennial literature. After all, Coe helped with *Like a Fiery Elephant* (2004) to revive attention to one of the most important British experimental authors of the twentieth century: B. S. Johnson. I therefore believe that the works of Coe should be read as an important page in the British experimental tradition. Coe's use of comedy and popular culture, and the "accessibility" of his production should, in fact, be read as an experimental reworking of these forms and also as an original way to approach the tradition of the political novel. Coe's novels rework the English literary tradition. He draws from Henry Fielding,

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<sup>29</sup> Eagleton, T. (1996) *ibid.*



Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy for the use of humour and social critique, and mixes it with the experimentalism of B. S. Johnson and postmodern reinterpretation of the past and reworking of literary genres.

In this dissertation I largely focus on the social and political changes of the last four decades, namely the passage from consensus politics to neoliberalism in the broader context of the global shift toward post-industrial society and globalisation. However, I also specifically investigate the literary forms deployed by Coe to deal with those changes and how the use of the literary canon and the mix of different literary genres create a model for a new historical novel at the time of postmodern society. Each chapter includes a critical evaluation of one or more novels by Coe and a comparative section in which I compare how Coe deals with specific historical issues with the way other authors approach the same historical events. Each chapter is dedicated to a single decade or historical period.

I look at the novels in terms of the chronology of the time represented. In this regard, I have expressly inverted the chronological order of the novels regardless of their publishing dates. In fact, each of the novels considered deal with history of Britain in a specific decade. Namely *The Rotters' Club* is set in the 1970s, *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep* are about the 1980s, *The Closed Circle* about the 1990s and the early 2000s, *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* treats topics related to the post-2008 financial crisis and recent socio-economic conditions. I therefore divide the thesis into three chapters and I analyse the novels not in the chronological order of their publishing dates but rather in the chronological order of the decade at the centre of their representations. Although, for most of the novels the chronological order of their publications matches that of the decade they are set in, I invert the order between *The Rotters' Club* and *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep*. Reading Coe's novels one

can easily perceive the existence of a *fil-rouge* that connects all these works together. I therefore read his novels like a literary representation of the historical period from the 1970s to present days, and therefore I start from the assumption that all the novels together can be read as a sort of nineteenth century serial novel about the last four decades of British history.

Over the last decades, authors have experimented with finding forms conducive to understanding the contemporary history of Britain, the legacy of Thatcherism and the rising of neoliberal society. Among the vast production one can list novels, plays, songs, cartoons, films, musical, drama, art, photography. However, for the comparative sections of each chapter I focus exclusively on the novel form. I have made the choice to narrow down my analysis to the field of the novel for this thesis in order to compare creative works that make use of more or less similar narrative structures. Moreover Coe, although fascinated by other cultural forms, is explicitly concerned with the history of the novel and the place of the novel in contemporary society. In *What a Carve Up!* there is a conversation between Michael Owen and another character, Graham, on the role of the contemporary novel and its social and political engagement<sup>30</sup>. I will therefore leave to a future work the broader analysis of British political history in the last four decades in different artistic fields. Drawing from the previous works on Coe such as those of Mengham, Head, Thurschwell, Marsh, Trimm and Brooker, I aim to expand the critical evaluation of Coe's novels and to investigate how it fits into the arena of contemporary English novel. Therefore the choice to implement a comparative analysis is justified not only by the idea to offer a broader literary perspective on a crucial phase of British history but also to frame the works of Coe within the wider field of the contemporary English historical novel.

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<sup>30</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *What a Carve Up!*. London: Penguin. p. 276.

The selection of novels for the comparative sections of each chapters is based on the nature of the issues analysed in the comparative novels selected. In other words, each of the novels selected deals with the same socio-political issues treated in the chosen novels of Coe. Each of the novels considered for each of the comparative sections is included in the chapter regarding the historical decade which is analysed. Accordingly, each section provides a mix of literary works published in and about the decade on the focus of the novel(s) of Coe discussed in the chapter. This temporal intersection offers the chance to think about the issue of time and historical distance for the representation of historical events, and more generally on the historical novel.

As explained before the choice of the novels for the comparative sections are exclusively based on their vicinity to issues treated by the novels of Coe. I therefore acknowledge that some novels that focus on the historical representation of the last four decades of Britain will be ineluctably excluded and some of the issues sadly overlooked. However, the nature of a PhD thesis does not permit me to extend my analysis infinitely widely. The structure of the thesis is thus as follows:

In the first chapter I provide a critical evaluation of *The Rotters' Club*, I focus on the concept of social bildungsroman and I investigate how historical and political issues such as trade-unionism, strikes, “the winter of discontent”, race, nationalism and social formation of Thatcherism are discussed. In the comparative section of the chapter I analyse how these topics are treated in Pat Barker’s *Union Street* (1982), Margaret Drabble’s *The Ice Age* (1977) and Piers Paul Read’s *A Married Man* (1979). I therefore compare the literary forms employed in these novels with those of Coe’s novel. In this chapter I argue that the novels discussed deploy realist forms in order to address the socio-political climate of the seventies. Despite the fact that the novels were written in different decades, the use of literary realism corresponds specifically to the zeitgeist of

the 1970s characterised by political activism. The use of realism is therefore cogent with the tradition of the social novel and its use of realism to represent social issues. However, I also argue that *The Rotters' Club* narrates the phase of transition from the welfare state to neoliberalism using Lukacsian typical characters who belong to different social classes, while the other three novels prefer to focus on one specific social class: working class characters in *Union Street* and middle and upper-middle class for *The Ice Age* and *A Married Man*. I also argue that *The Rotters' Club* and *The Ice Age* through characterisation and specific references to historical events provide vivid examples of modern reinterpretation of the canon of the social realist novel. The fact that all the novels examined emphasise the influence of the grand narratives on individual stories is in line with the Lukacsian interpretation of the realist novel as a form that displays social dynamics.

The second chapter focuses on the postmodern literary forms deployed in *What a Carve Up!* to deal with the issue of Thatcherism. I argue that the pastiche form is used to propose a form of historical novel which takes in consideration the schizophrenic, individualised and fragmented condition of the post-industrial, late capitalist era. Consequently, I discuss also the theoretical issue of the postmodern novel's political engagement in the context of Jameson and Hutcheon's theorisations. In short, my aim is to discuss how Thatcherism and the neoliberal policies of the Conservative governments of the 1980s are represented and criticised in *What a Carve Up!* and in *The House of Sleep*. In the second section of the novel I offer a comparison between Coe's novels and Martin Amis's *Money* (1984) Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time* (1987), and Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004). The analysis focuses on the literary representation of Thatcherism and the political critique offered by the novels. I also consider Coe's use of realism and postmodernism. I argue that Coe uses these forms to

emphasize the schizophrenic nature of late-capitalist society. The non-linear narration and the fragmentation of narrative structure of *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep*, with their multiplicity of fragmented voices, reflects the postmodern condition as analysed and described by Lyotard<sup>31</sup>, Jameson<sup>32</sup> on the basis of the analysis of Deleuze and Guattari<sup>33</sup>. I moreover argue that the novels taken in consideration for the comparative section deploy either realist or postmodern forms, and focus on specific aspects of British society during and soon after the 1980s. I look at how this can be related to the topic of historical time-distance in the literary understanding and representation of Thatcherism and its legacy, and how the latest return to realism in the historical novel is applied to the analysis of Thatcherism and neoliberalism.

In the third chapter I discuss *The Closed Circle* (2004) and *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* (2010). I firstly analyse how in *The Closed Circle* the late 1990s and early 2000s are represented. The focus is on topics such as “Cool Britannia”, the war in Iraq and the continuation and the entrenchment of neoliberalism under New Labour. In the second part of the chapter I analyse the representation of the post-2008 financial crisis society and how Coe returns to postmodern forms to deal with issues such as globalisation, deregulated finance, and the precariat. In the comparative section of the chapter I discuss Julian Barnes’ *England, England* (1998) which focuses largely on the marketization of Britain during the cultural phenomenon of “Cool Britannia”, and John Lanchester’s *Capital* (2012) which, on the other hand, focuses on the role of finance in contemporary British society. Therefore the comparisons will be specifically between *The Closed Circle* and *England, England* on one side, *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* and *Capital* on the other side. These comparisons indicate that literary realism and

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<sup>31</sup> Lyotard, J.F. (1979) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester (1984): Manchester University Press.

<sup>32</sup> Jameson, F. (1980) ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1988*. London (1998): Verso.

<sup>33</sup> Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. (1972) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London (1984): Continuum.

postmodern forms can be used together and that the combination of these genres informs the developments of the historical novel in the post-industrial era. In fact, while *Capital*, in accordance with the latest trends of a return of realism to represent the post-crisis world, is a typically realist novel, *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* signals Coe's return to postmodern forms. On the other side, *The Closed Circle* deploys literary realism to portray Cool Britannia, while Julian Barnes in *England, England* uses postmodern forms to emphasise the 'simulacrum'<sup>34</sup> aspect of the late-capitalist reality.

The comparative section also provides a source of reflection on the question of genre in relation to the historical novel. In fact, in the first chapter the realism of *The Rotters' Club* corresponds to the realism of the novels compared to it. In the second chapter while the novels of Coe analysed are postmodern, the comparative section presents a mix of realist and postmodern novels. The same applies to the third chapter. Considering the fact that *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep* were published in the 1990s before *The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle* and that most of the novels to which I compare Coe were published in the 2000s present realist forms, it is possible to note a return to the realist historical novel. This return of the realist novel can be explained through Jameson's concept of literature as a socially symbolic act, a literature that unconsciously represents the trends and the likelihoods of a society in a certain period<sup>35</sup>. In post ideology times that led Fukuyama to theorise 'the end of history'<sup>36</sup>, the historicist approach was significantly declared as outdated. However, in the light of critiques of globalisation and neoliberal society, there has been a revaluation of realism as the appropriate form to describe the momentousness of recent socio-political transformations, the harshness of social conditions in the western world and the phase

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<sup>34</sup>Baudrillard, J. (1983) *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext[e].

<sup>35</sup> Jameson, F. (1981) *The Political Unconscious*. London: Methuen, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Fukuyama, F. (1992) *The end of History and The Last Man*. London: Free Press.

of transition from the postmodern condition to another condition not yet envisaged but yet perceived as imminent. However, *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* signals Coe's return to the postmodern forms exactly when it seems that the trend of the English historical novel is tending toward realism. The comparative section of the third chapter tries to answer questions exactly about the issue of realism/postmodernism for the representation of society after 2008 financial crisis.

The works of Mengham, Head, Thurschwell, Marsh, Brooker and Trimm are the seminal works on Coe and signal the starting point for my critical evaluation. My critical approach mostly draws on the Jamesonian concept of primacy of the political interpretation of texts and on the idea of literature as 'socially symbolic act'<sup>37</sup>. Jameson, drawing on the Marxian tradition from Althusser to Lacan and Deleuze and Guattari, argues that the cultural product, (and thus the historical novel) is a socially symbolic act informed by the current ideological climate. Therefore I argue that from the comparative analysis it is possible to resurface the political unconscious of the novels and delineate a collective cultural understanding of the history of the last forty years.

In relation to the question of genre, and specifically of realism I will draw from Lukacs the concept of "typical characters", which are the characters representative of specific social statuses<sup>38</sup>, and from Raymond Williams the concept of "community of persons", a development of Lukacs's theory, according to which the interactions between characters in a historical novel are microcosmic representations of the interactions in a society in a certain historical period<sup>39</sup>.

As one of the primary topics of my thesis is the representation of postmodern society, I use the words postmodern and postmodernism. Although in the last two

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<sup>37</sup> Jameson, F. (1981) *ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>38</sup> Lukacs, G. (1947) *The Historical Novel*. London (1962): Merlin.

<sup>39</sup> Williams, R. (1970) *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*. London: Chatto & Windus.

decades many authors have debated the usefulness of the term, and attempted a theorisation and a periodization of a post-postmodernism<sup>40</sup>, I here want to specify that my interpretation of postmodernism relies heavily on Jameson's interpretation and it is therefore synonymous of post-industrial, late-capitalist society from the 1970s onwards and it is intended in relation to the development of neoliberalism. The definition of postmodernity is also drawn from Harvey<sup>41</sup>, Lyotard<sup>42</sup>, Eagleton<sup>43</sup>, Baudrillard<sup>44</sup>, Hutcheon<sup>45</sup>. The theoretical discussion around neoliberal consumerist society is framed in the discourse of excess of desire production and constructed lack, and therefore I use the concept of schizophrenia as theorised by Deleuze and Guattari<sup>46</sup>, and then applied by Jameson also to the postmodern dilation of time-space<sup>47</sup>, concepts derived from the Lacanian tradition. Žižek's analysis<sup>48</sup> of the last developments of the neoliberal society will also contribute to the theoretical and interpretative framework of my thesis.

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<sup>40</sup> See among others: Lopez, J., Potter, G. (eds) (2001) *Afer Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*. London & New York: The Athlone Press.

<sup>41</sup> Harvey, D. (1990) *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

<sup>42</sup> Lyotard, J.F. (1979) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester (1984): Manchester University Press.

<sup>43</sup> Eagleton, T. (1996) *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell.

<sup>44</sup> Baudrillard, J. (1983) *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext[e].

<sup>45</sup> Hutcheon, L. (1989) *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London (2002): Routledge.

<sup>46</sup> Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. (1972) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London (1984): Continuum.

<sup>47</sup> Jameson, F. (1998) 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*. London: Verso.

<sup>48</sup> Žižek, S. (2009) *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce*. London: Verso.

Žižek S. (2002) *Welcome to the Desert of The Real*. London: Verso.



## Chapter 1

### 1.1- *The Rotters' Club*

Jonathan Coe's sixth novel, *The Rotters' Club*, is a portrait of a crucial decade of British history: the seventies. Combining references to popular culture, politics and specific historical events, Coe aims to re-construct the zeitgeist of the seventies in Britain and to give an account of the social and political transformations that led to the formation of contemporary British society. In particular, in this novel Coe "photographs" the dramatic moment of the erosion of the social structures of the welfare state as built since the second post-war period and the historical and political conditions that led to the development of modern neoliberal society.

The novel aims to represent a collective history of British society of the seventies, providing a retrospective view of the historical events of the decade and seeks to evoke a lost time and a country, Britain, so profoundly changed in several aspects as to appear completely different. Nostalgia plays therefore a fundamental role in this "recherché". Nostalgia is, in fact, one of the main background motifs, recognisable throughout the novel, and it is deployed through references not only to political history but also to music and popular culture. The beginning of the novel is intended as a starting point of a quest for "lost Britain". It opens, in fact, with a flash forward, a narrative device to introduce from the perspective of the modern reader exactly the starting point of a journey back to that "lost Britain": Sophie and Patrick, respectively daughter and son of Paul Trotter and Philip Chase, two of the main characters of the novel, meet in the year 2003 in the restaurant at the top of the Fernsehturm in Berlin. During the conversation they recall the past of their parents and relatives, introducing a world that has apparently disappeared: the youth of their parents and particularly a

country, which has undergone crucial changes. Sophie tells Patrick:

Let's go backwards... Back to a country that neither of us would recognize, probably, Britain, 1973 [...] A world without mobiles or video or Playstation or even faxes. A world that had never heard of Princess Diana or Tony Blair, never thought for a moment of going to war in Kosovo or Afghanistan. There were only three television channels in those days, Patrick. Three! And the unions were so powerful that, if they wanted to, they could close one of them down for a whole night. Sometimes people had to do without electricity. Imagine!<sup>49</sup>

Clearly the Britain Sophie refers to is a Britain which has disappeared: Britain which, in that decade, faced a crucial moment of its history, when the certainty built since the end of the Second World War seemed to be questioned and eroded; the decade in which can be found the origins of a traumatic transformation of the country, which began with the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister.

*The Rotters' Club* covers British political history from the Conservative government of Edward Heath, through the Labour period of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan, up to the rise of Margaret Thatcher. In the novel, Coe identifies and comments critically on fundamental issues of that time. The novel, along with referencing fashion, music, and other cultural markers of the 1970s, particularly deals with issues such as trade unionism, strikes, "the winter of discontent", the Irish situation and I.R.A., the rise of nationalisms, the problem of the integration of ethnic minorities, and the ideological formation of Thatcherism. These political topics are key for the understanding of that decade and for understanding the subsequent changes in British society. Therefore, I divide this chapter into three sections, each providing a critical evaluation of how Coe deals with certain crucial political and historical issues. The three sections are: 'Trade Unions and the "winter of discontent"', 'Nationalism and "Race"', 'The Ideology and Social Formation of Thatcherism'. These three sections are

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<sup>49</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *The Rotters' Club*. London: Penguin, p. 4.

preceded by a discussion about the novel's form and its contextualisation in the discourse about the historical novel.

### 1.1.1 - Social *Bildungsroman* and the historical novel

*The Rotters' Club* is a novel which can be comfortably inscribed in the genre of the historical novel. It portrays the zeitgeist of a specific historical period, presents references to real historical personalities, and aims to represent a historical transitional phase. However, the novel is also a *bildungsroman* because it describes a process of coming to age. The historical novel and the *bildungsroman* belong to the same tradition of literary realism and often the *bildungsroman* contains notions of and references to the historical and social background. *The Rotters' Club* is, however, a peculiar *bildungsroman* in consideration of the fact that Coe deploys literary techniques derived from this literary genre not only to write about the characters' life events but also to represent the socio-political changes in Britain in the 1970s. Rather than just providing a socio-historical background to the vicissitudes of one character's maturation process, the characters of Coe's novel live in a microcosmic world which epitomises the historical reality of the seventies in Britain.

*The Rotters' Club* differs from the *bildungsroman* inasmuch as it does not centre on a single coming of age character, but tells the experiences and the psychological changes of several characters, each one embodying either a particular aspect of British society or a specific social class status. However, Ben Trotter encapsulates the authorial self-consciousness and his life-events form a classic narrative of *bildungsroman* within the broader *social bildungsroman*. He is also the only character who narrates in first person and therefore complicates the discourse of the realist forms. The novel also

inverts the topos of the *bildungsroman* as it represents a failure rather than a success. This is here obviously related to the political use of the *bildungsroman* form and the critique of the socio-economic developments of contemporary British society. By representing a failure, the novel explicitly expresses political criticism.

Coe treats British society as a *bildungsroman* character, describing its changes in a crucial phase of transition exactly as he does for the human characters represented during that critical phase of passage between adolescence and the adulthood. The historical events mentioned in the novel are symptomatic of a transition from a type of society to another. Coe represents the developments from the welfare state society toward its fragmentation highlighting some specific events that led to these transformations: the strikes and the disappearance of the working-class cohesion, the developments of the Irish issue and the rise of nationalism as response to it, the rise of conservatism as an answer to political climate of uncertainties and the rise of Thatcherism and its neoliberal ideology as promise of a new golden age. The life-events of the characters are inescapably connected to these historical events and often their vicissitudes assume a metaphorical value of microcosmic translation of the historical events underlying the characters' life events. Moreover, in the representation of the transition from the welfare state to neoliberalism we read an underlying disappointment over the failure of the welfare state project. On the same line, while the characters grow, often their ambitions are disappointed and their coming to age assumes the traits of a failure. Coe therefore represents the two levels of narration, the historical one and the fictional one as inescapably intermingled. Moreover, the novel's approach to history follows in the footsteps of Lukacs who interprets history as 'an interrupted process of changes [...] that [...] has a direct effect upon the life of every individual'<sup>50</sup>. Coe

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<sup>50</sup> Lukacs, G. (1947) *The Historical Novel*. London (1962): Merlin, p. 20.

accordingly describes the lives of his characters as continuously influenced and moved by the macro events of history, something that is beyond individual control. On the other hand, this novel also suggests that even an apparently insignificant choice made by common people contributes to construct History. The ineluctability of the relation between chance and history is probably the most recurrent theme in Coe's novels and it is a reworking of one of the topoi of the classical tragedy.

As the novel presents a choral depiction of the seventies, the characters have substantially equal value for the development of the narration. These characters embody a range of social classes and political positions or philosophical attitudes to life and to the current historical moment. They are thus Lukacsian typical characters as they represent specific social statuses<sup>51</sup>. Following Chatman's theory of characterisation, each character represents a perspective on the issues faced, according to a specific mind-set<sup>52</sup>. Clearly the major characters are the most important and the narration of their life-events closely follows the pattern of the *bildungsroman*: the students of the King William's secondary school and particularly Ben Trotter, Philip Chase, Doug Anderton, Sean Harding, Steve Richards and Paul Trotter. In general female characters have a minor relevance in the novel, but some of them have an important role in the school-microcosm and its metaphorical representation of the society: the school-aged-girls Cicely Boyd and Claire Newman and her disappeared sister Miriam.

In the novel, the school setting represents a microcosm of society. The novel, in fact, represents society's dynamics through the micro-narratives of the characters' vicissitudes, which consequently take on what Jameson calls a socially symbolic act<sup>53</sup>,

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<sup>51</sup> Lukacs, G. (1947) *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Chatman, S. (1990) *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film*. New York: Cornell University Press, pp. 141-144.

<sup>53</sup> Jameson, F. (1981) *The Political Unconscious*. London: Methuen, p. 20.

as they are meant to symbolise the social dynamics. This metaphor serves also the purpose of a parodic demystification of the historical events as it is aimed to present to a wider possible audience crucial socio-political issues. However, it is necessary to mention the risk that this “simplification” may cause an overlooking of some aspects. Although the school microcosm contains many of the issues of the macrocosm, it does not include all the dynamics of a society and thus presents some limits.

The structure of the novel provides a multidimensional point of view and perspective. This multidimensionality of point of view is gained through a specific literary form which involves the continuous shift from historicism to subjectivity and vice-versa through narrative devices such as the recounting of an historical event through the vicissitudes of one of the characters, or through the pages of a newspaper, or one of the characters’ personal interpretation of a specific historical event. The historical narration, which forms the core of this novel, is mainly left to the interpretative filter of different characters each one embodying either a social, political or cultural specificity rather than deployed through a first person narrator. To mention some examples: the Trotters are representatives of wealthy middle-class, while the Andertons represent the point of view of the working class. Steve Richards represents the black ethnic minority while Culpepper, on the other side may represent the most conservative sectors of the upper classes. The issues faced in the novels are narrated through each of the socio-political, cultural filters embodied in the characters. In doing so, Coe also provides different interpretations of the same historical event, acknowledging the plurality of historical interpretations. However, the authorial imprint on the interpretation of history is recognisable in the way some characters are depicted or through relevance attributed to one specific event rather than another one and through Ben’s stream of consciousness, which represents authorial historical conscience. The novel offers

variable and multiple focalisations, to put it in Genette's<sup>54</sup> words, and it provides a narration filtered through the lens of several perspectives represented by the different characters.

However, Ben Trotter is the character who represents most closely Coe's position, also due to the similarities between his and the author's biography<sup>55</sup>: Coe's father used to be a physicist in a motor factory and Ben's father is a manager of British Leyland, a motor factory. Coe attended the King Edward's school in Birmingham, which finds a fictional counterpart in the King Williams' of the novel. The author and the character share a passion for rock music and have developed a precocious literary ambition<sup>56</sup> and, like Ben, Coe originally comes from a traditional, religious, Conservative family<sup>57</sup>.

Ben embodies the typical feature of the *bildungsroman* hero: the sensitive boy searching for definitive answers from life's experiences and troubles. He is one of the two sons of one of the managers of the British Leyland at Longbridge plant, a factory at the centre of a bitter industrial dispute. He is a teenager who, in spite of belonging to a family of Conservative supporters, prefers to be distant from the political mood of the period and from its antagonisms, and rather prefers to focus on aesthetics, artistic, sentimental and religious issues. However, in the process of maturing, he becomes slowly aware of the influence of the political and social situation on the everyday life of common people. In fact, in the concluding stream of consciousness he analyses critically the reality that surrounds him, synthesising and criticising the different topics faced in the novel. Furthermore Ben plays a key role as he embodies a certain authorial

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<sup>54</sup> Genette, G. (1985) *Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 142-150.

<sup>55</sup> 'Biography', Jonathan Coe [online]. Available at: <http://www.jonathancoewriter.com/biography.html>, [accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2011].

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, [accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> July 2011]

<sup>57</sup> 'A bit of a rotter', *The Guardian* [online]. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/feb/24/fiction.jonathancoe1> [accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2011].

sensitivity. The similarities between the character's biography and that of Coe, in fact, insert a certain degree of authorial presence in the novel's polyphonic representation of history.

The authorial self-reflexivity and the presence of typical features of postmodern narrative such as micro narratives, parody, time-shifts, mix of literary genres, and nostalgia complicate the discourse about the contextualisation of this novel in the frame of the social realist historical novel and pose questions about the relation of *The Rotters' Club* with the postmodern novel. This also suggests interesting questions about the historical novel in postmodernity in general.

Firstly, the novel's self-reflexivity relates to the concept of time. The novel has obviously been written decades after the historical events narrated took place. However, these events are presented in the novel as being in process. Nonetheless, while the readers experience the time of the novel through the characters' vicissitudes in historical context, they already know how the events narrated will end up and what the new historical context will then be. Although it is the norm that the historical novel represents events of the past, it is not the norm in a realist novel that the same characters gesture towards a future of which they should not yet be part. Coe's use of irony produces this "future anterior" effect. This appears clear for example when Paul approaches Doug with a sparkler and putting the fire out exclaims: 'The death of the socialist dream'<sup>58</sup>. We all know that it is exactly what will happen, and it is hinted that the characters know it too. This foreknowledge is authorial self-reflexivity, Coe's ironized reading of history. However, the postmodern use of time in narrative appears even more blatant in Ben's stream of consciousness at the end of the novel for a double reason. Firstly the authorial self-reflexivity is suggested through the authorial stream of

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<sup>58</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *The Rotters' Club*. London: Penguin, p. 182.



consciousness in which the events narrated and their developments are recapitulated in a sort of authorial summary; in other words Ben is like an author who knows what happened before and how the story will end up; he is in some way a substitute to Coe in his authorial omniscience. Moreover, when Ben recalls his conversation with Roll-Up Reg in which they prophesised that Thatcher would never be elected'<sup>59</sup>, it is ironically hinted that Ben knows how it will end up; his knowledge is thus due to the authorial knowledge of the future, his self-reflexivity in the text. In these examples the reader confronts what Currie calls 'the condition of waiting for events to happen that have already taken place'<sup>60</sup>. Coe uses the future retrospectively, and in the novel the relation between the characters' vicissitudes and the historical events results in a 'tension between the uncertainty of prospect and the certainty of retrospect'<sup>61</sup>. This tension between a world where historical events have already happened and a world where they may or may not happen (although we know that they will and the characters unconsciously know it too), and the co-existence of layers of time (the one of the reader, the one of the author, the one of the characters of who are living the events and the one of the characters who know how the events will evolve) relate to the Foucauldian concept of *heterotopia* reprised by McHale to emphasise 'the pluralism of worlds that coexist within postmodernist fiction'<sup>62</sup>. The novel confronts futurity as possibility as theorised by Currie in the idea of 'possible worlds'<sup>63</sup>. This latter concept relates clearly to the above mentioned Foucauldian theory, which stresses the existence in the post-industrial world of 'a large number of fragmentary possible words'<sup>64</sup>. However, at the same time in both *The Rotters' Club* and *What a Carve Up!* as we will see in the next

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<sup>59</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 399.

<sup>60</sup> Currie, M. (2013) *The Unexpected: Narrative Temporality and Philosophy of Surprise*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. p. 38.

<sup>61</sup> Currie, M. (2013) *ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>62</sup> cited in Harvey, D. (1990) *ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>63</sup> Currie, M. (2013) *ibid.*, pp 106-107.

<sup>64</sup> cited in Harvey, D. (1990) *ibid.*, p. 48.

chapter, the *heterotopia* is extinguished by the historical figure of Thatcher who, as the *deus ex machina* of ancient Greek tragedy, manoeuvres all the stories and leads them to a tragic end, allowing space only to the Thatcherite narrative. The extinction of the *heterotopia* implies therefore political criticism as it appears as a denunciation of the hegemony of the Thatcherite, neoliberal metanarrative.

Ben's stream of consciousness at the end of the novel is a vivid example of postmodern forms deployed in the novel. Along with the previously discussed authorial self-reflexivity, it also shows a reworking of the modernist tradition. The stream of consciousness, in fact, evokes Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses* both in forms and contents. However, in a purely postmodern engagement with literary canons, the reference to modernism is ironized. Ben's stream of consciousness demystifies history and literary canons such as the eighteenth-century *bildungsroman* and the modernist novel. Coe employs a modernist stream of consciousness within the framework of the *bildungsroman* novel, manipulating the genre's formal features. At the same time he innovates the modernist stream of consciousness and demystifies the modernist tradition in a purely postmodern approach to genre and literary traditions.

The novel also presents numerous time shifts and a continuous interrelation among different time-space settings. Harvey<sup>65</sup> and Jameson<sup>66</sup> argue that postmodernity is characterised exactly by a reformulation of the concepts of time and space, with the linearity of time put under question. Postmodern fiction typically deploys reconsideration of the linearity of time. The presence of postmodern features in *The Rotters' Club* and its intersection with social realist forms pose questions about the relation of Coe's novel with the historical novel in postmodern times. While the trend of

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<sup>65</sup> Harvey, D. (1990) *ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Jameson, F. (1998) *ibid.*

the millennial historical novel is toward the rediscovery of the realist forms to narrate the origins of contemporary society, Coe acknowledges the complexity of the post-industrial social condition and the changes of the last four decades in the transition to the post-industrial society. Consequently, *The Rotters' Club* acquires the formal features of the *bildungsroman* also in relation to the contextualisation of the genre of the historical novel in the transition from the industrial to the post-industrial period. By mixing the two forms, the novel also proposes new forms to tell history in fiction in post-industrial times.

### 1.1.2 - Trade Unions and the “Winter of Discontent”

One of the main motifs of the novel is the representation of industrial relations during the seventies and the role of the trade unions. This issue is analysed in the broader context of class conflict in the seventies. This social conflict broke out with the introduction by the Heath government of the Industrial Relations Act that embittered relations among government, industrial management and unions<sup>67</sup> and resulted in a prolonged series of strikes involving different sectors of British industry throughout the seventies, which culminated then in what is commonly known as the “winter of discontent”. *The Rotters' Club* presents the social contraposition between two different social classes through the confrontation between Colin Trotter and Bill Anderton. Their children Ben Trotter and Doug Anderton attend the same secondary school, but they look at British society from two sharply different perspectives that result in opposed points of view in politics.

In his second chapter of the novel, Coe describes an informal meeting at The

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<sup>67</sup> Childs, D. (2001) *Britain since 1945*. London: Routledge, pp. 165-166.

Bull's Head pub among the representatives of management and trade unions of British Leyland factory at Longbridge plant to reach an agreement on industrial relations which are at stake. The meeting is a symbolic representation of the attempts at compromise pursued by government, management and trade unions during the dispute. However, the widely divergent opinions on the fairness of British society and on the issue of the effective existence of a classless society expressed by the participants to the meeting shed light on the bitterness of the social conflict. Jack Forrest the chief executive of the British Leyland at Longbridge plant, basing his reasoning on the fact that the sons of Colin Trotter and Bill Anderton attend the same elite school despite the fact that they belong to different social classes, remarks:

‘You know this tells you something about the country we live in today,’ [...] ‘Britain in the 1970s. The old distinctions just don’t mean anything anymore, do they? This is a country where a union man and a junior manager [...] can send their sons to the same school and nobody thinks anything of it [...] What does that tell you about the class war? It’s over. Truce. Armistice [...] Equal opportunity’<sup>68</sup>

On the other side, Bill Anderton, considering equal opportunity far from being reality, although remaining silent, disagrees with this view: ‘Bill said nothing: as far as he was concerned, the class war was alive and well and being waged with some ferocity at British Leyland, even in Ted Heath’s egalitarian 1970s’<sup>69</sup>.

The issue of social inequality is faced in the novel in the context of the representation of the King William’s school. Doug Anderton and Steve Richards, who are there on scholarships, are the only students who do not belong to wealthy families. Both belong to working class families, and the second belongs to the black ethnic minority. Regarding the issue of class in school, Adonis and Pollard state: ‘in England

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<sup>68</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 16

<sup>69</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 16.

[...] money matters when it counts most: at school'<sup>70</sup>. Belonging to a certain social class makes the difference in terms of opportunities<sup>71</sup>. The novel exposes a reality like the one described by Adonis and Pollard, and refutes Jack Forrest's and Colin Anderton's conviction that social classes do not matter anymore.

The different points of view represented by Coe in *The Rotters' Club* notably introduce the reader to the political and historical situation of Britain during the seventies, a country challenged by a severe economic situation, aggravated in 1973 by the Oil Crisis resulting from the conflict between Egypt and Israel<sup>72</sup>. Coe describes the "mood" of the period and the policies of austerity through reference to the power cuts caused by the energy crisis. In these historical circumstances Coe focuses particularly on the labour struggles, the embitterment of industrial relations and class conflict. The novel also stresses the importance of the role of the trade unions in defending the rights of the workers and in mediating between the Government and the world of labour during a period dominated by the harshness of the economic recession.

For example, the feelings of Irene Anderton driving across the Longbridge plant during a strike led by her husband Bill give us a glimpse of the role of the trade unions in that historical context: 'Her husband meant something to these men; he was a hero to them. If it wasn't for him they would be lost, leaderless'<sup>73</sup>. The last sentence expresses the point of view of the working class of the seventies, which regarded trade unionism as the most effective way to make its voice heard. However, the fact that this statement is put in the mind of Irene is clearly ironized, as we know that Bill is cheating on her with Miriam. Thus questions arise about whether the betrayal issue is a political metaphor and whether Coe intends to imply a criticism of the role of the trade union

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<sup>70</sup> Adonis, A., Pollard, S. (1997) *A Class Act*. London: Penguin, p. 37.

<sup>71</sup> Adonis, A., Pollard, S. (1997) *ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> Childs, D. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 173.

<sup>73</sup> Coe, J. (2001), *ibid.*, p. 33.

leaders who arguably betrayed the workers in exchange for visibility and a share of power. Notably, the policies which Heath attempted to introduce and then Thatcher successfully applied weakened the trade union representation. In doing so, the Conservative governments aimed to fragment the unity of labour in order to subsequently reform the industrial relations without facing challenging opposition. The relevance of the trade unionism as “shield” of the entire working class is accordingly pointed out in the line ‘If it wasn’t for him they would be lost’, which can be considered a sort of political synecdoche to refer exactly to the role of the trade unions in that moment of British history.

On the other side, the perception that the strikes and the excessive power of the trade unions were preventing the economic development of the country is presented through a character holding political perspectives opposite to those of the Andertons: Colin Trotter who is furious for the “gruelling” delay in the processing of some pictures he took during an holiday, due to a strike at the Grunwick Processing Laboratories. This parodic metaphor is used to represent a point of view increasingly shared among those belonging to the upper-middle class and to the managerial elite:

Dad’s furious with himself for putting them in the post when he could have got them done at the chemist down the road. It’s been two months since he sent them off now but the people at the processing factory are still on strike, apparently [...] Says that strikes are going to destroy this country, like a cancer destroys the body.<sup>74</sup>

The strike at the Grunwick Processing Laboratories was a crucial moment in the history of the industrial relations in Britain. The workers of the laboratories, mainly Indian and Pakistani women, went on strike to ask for better work conditions. The workers led by

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<sup>74</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 171.

Jayaben Desai, who has recently died<sup>75</sup>, went on strike for two years, attracting the solidarity of other trade unions such as the Union of Post-Office workers, the union of miners led by Arthur Scargill, but also harsh criticism from political opponents such as the Conservative Party and the management of the factory<sup>76</sup>. Due to the harsh confrontations, the violence that occurred during the pickets, and the huge number of people arrested, the Grunwick dispute can be considered as a turning point of both the history of industrial relations and of political attitudes toward the trade unions in Britain. Coe acknowledges the historical significance of the Grunwick dispute, giving prominence to this moment of British contemporary history. In the novel, in fact, there are several references to the strike, and in a quite long paragraph, Coe describes the participation of Bill Anderton and other workers of the British Leyland to the picketing outside the Grunwick laboratories to provide support to the workers on strike:

Bill was to learn on the news that evening that eight thousand pickets had travelled from all over the country to be at the factory. It was an extraordinary display of [...] solidarity: just what the British labour movement needed at the moment<sup>77</sup>.

Coe in this fragment opts for a narration “from below” which employs the point of view of the “masses”, highlighting the heroic personality of Jayaben Desai.

This section of the novel also draws attention to another important issue: the role of women in society and, specifically in the novel, their role in the labour movements. The narration is focalised through a male character, Bill Anderton who embodies the bewilderment of men toward women’s increasing demand for equal opportunity. In fact,

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<sup>75</sup> Lewis, P. (2010) ‘Jayaben Desai, leader of the Grunwick dispute, dies aged 77’, *The Guardian*[online] Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/dec/27/jayaben-desai-dies-aged-77> [accessed on 27<sup>th</sup> January 2011].

<sup>76</sup> *Striking Women* [online] Available at: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/strikingwomen/grunwick> [accessed on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2010].

<sup>77</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 262.

while he is listening to Desai's speech, he is firstly caught by a wave of shame derived by recognition of the poor consideration usually granted to women, subsequently he finds himself strongly fascinated by the charisma of Desai and especially by what she represents for the whole working class in Britain. Bill Anderton expresses surprise and appreciation for Desai and acknowledges 'her hurried eloquence and still determination and restless, inquisitive, laughing eyes' are a direct result of the 'mantle of authority the long months of this dispute had draped on her'<sup>78</sup>. This episode is particularly relevant for the reason that it stresses women's growing contribution to politics and the economy during the seventies but also the difficulties they faced on the path of emancipation.

However, the novel's relation to gender issues is a problematic one. Although Desai's image is certainly heroic, it is idealised at times. The perspective of Bill in fact, filters the perception we have of Desai. The only image of Desai conveyed is the one projected by Bill, who admires her yet his admiration sounds at times like the admiration for something surprising, as a woman who leads a workers' movement were surprising or shocking. Thus Desai's image from Bill's is a fetishized perspective.

The workers' movement in the novel is represented mostly from a male perspective. A worker woman, Miriam, even disappears after an affair with Bill (and in some ways her viewpoint disappears too, while the only image we have of her derives from the other characters rather than from her experience of life). The episode evokes the disappearance of the female voice from the history of the workers' movements. To some extent the novel also overlooks women's narratives of workers' movement specifically in that historical phase, the 1970s, when the women's movements were reclaiming it. The fact that Bill is represented as an admirable union leader but a despicable husband and a male chauvinist points toward the failure of the social

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<sup>78</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 263.



movements to address the issues of gender, a gap which the women's movement of the 1970s started addressing more determinately.

Finally, what appears clear from this passage of the novel is the multi-faced importance of the events of Grunwick: the role of the unions, the conditions of women and ethnic minorities, the discrimination they were subject to, and the poor conditions they were obliged to work in. On the other hand, although the Grunwick disputes signalled an important moment for the British working class due to the unprecedented solidarity and unity among the workers of different industries, nonetheless, at the same time Coe underlines the strong reaction of the political and economic opponents of the labour movement. The narration of the dramatic clashes between the picketers and the police and of the brutality used to repress the strikes clearly tells us something about the change in attitudes of politicians and the British public towards the power of trade unions and the new policy of intervention against the workers on strike:

The speeches were over, and it was time to leave. Police cordons were blocking both exits from the road [...] The pickets were confused but patient. Soon enough the police would draw back and let them through [...] Where did the order come from? How was it passed along so quickly? Bill was never able to work it out. All he knew was that suddenly [...] pickets were under attack. The police charged into them and set to work with fists and truncheons [...] Screaming and shouting and swearing all around him [...] blood on the pavement and driveways too, torn clothing, the crashing of glass [...] <sup>79</sup>

In this regard, Bill Anderton's memory of the events gives us a perspective, the one of the labour movement, on how the policy towards the strikes was changing in the direction of a government's firmer reactions: "a crack on the skull with a truncheon can get your message, too. D'you know what I'm saying?"<sup>80</sup>. These sentences introduce the reader to the climate of growing impatience toward the waves of strikes, particularly

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<sup>79</sup>Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, pp 263-264.

<sup>80</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 265.

during the winter between 1978 and 1979, the “winter of discontent”, when together with the workers of productive sectors, the workers of public sectors went on strike to protest against Callaghan’s measures to contain inflation<sup>81</sup>.

The reference to the piles of rubbish uncollected in the streets of London and the rows of coffins set aside during the strikes of the gravediggers, members of the Trade Union GMWU in Liverpool<sup>82</sup> is used in the novel to recall the motifs chosen by the political opponents and by the Conservative Party to ask for the state of emergency and harsher measures against the power of the unions<sup>83</sup>, a policy subsequently adopted by Thatcher’s cabinet.

Ben’s perspective focalises this socio-political situation and his words at the end of the novel strongly criticise the way the “winter of discontent” was depicted by the British media and the perception that biased media influenced public opinion. Through Ben’s thoughts strongly opposes the idea that ‘the whole country was at the point of collapse’<sup>84</sup>:

the British papers were calling it the winter of discontent and it’s true that the weather had been incredibly bad and almost everyone in the country had been on strike, at some point, but this picture they were painting, rubbish piled high in the streets and corpses rotting in the back rooms of funerals parlours because there was nobody to bury them [...] was an exaggeration, it wasn’t nearly as bad as that, but [...] they were convinced that Britain was turning into a Communist state and we were going on the verge of economic disaster and the army was going to have to be brought in and there was practically to be a civil war<sup>85</sup>.

These exaggerating images led to the election of Margaret Thatcher on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1979.

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<sup>81</sup> ‘On This Day’ BBC [online]. Available at:

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/22/newsid\\_2506000/2506715.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/22/newsid_2506000/2506715.stm) [accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2010].

<sup>82</sup> ‘Winter of Discontent’, *Wikipedia* [online]. Available at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winter\\_of\\_Discontent](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winter_of_Discontent) [accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2010].

<sup>83</sup> Evans, J. E. (1997) *Thatcher and Thatcherism*. London: Routledge, pp. 11-12.

<sup>84</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 375.

<sup>85</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 375.

This paragraph presents historical events through a form typical of the social-realist novel and of the *bildungsroman*. The perspective of the main character thus presents the historical event to us.

### 1.1.3 - Nationalisms and “Race”

Another topic covered in *The Rotters' Club* is that of nationalisms and race. Specifically: the “Irish issue”, the integration of ethnic minorities, and the rise of forms of British nationalism and far-right parties as a reaction to both Irish nationalism and immigration. To deal with these issues, Coe again deploys a multi-dimensional perspective involving the use of characters that work as an interpretative filter to address the issues from specific socio-political angles. The idea of direct influence of the “force of history” on people is stressed also in this occasion and it is particularly reinforced in the section of the novel dedicated to the “Irish issue” and the bombing campaign perpetrated by Provisional I.R.A. during the seventies, which generated different and contrasting emotional reactions, and different political positions within British society.

At the beginning of the seventies the situation in Northern Ireland was tragically severe: attempts to reach an agreement between the discriminated Catholic minority and the loyalist Protestants ended in repeated failure. Meanwhile the death toll continued to rise and a particularly controversial and tragic incident occurred in Derry/Londonderry on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1972, during the years of Heath's government, the day remembered as “Bloody Sunday”, when a civil rights march ended up with the death of thirteen protesters<sup>86</sup>. In April 1974, during the Wilson government, due to the seriousness of the situation, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Merlyn Rees declared that a ‘total

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<sup>86</sup> Childs, D. (2001) *ibid.*, pp. 169-170.

withdrawal' is to be considered<sup>87</sup>. Throughout 1974 the crisis between Catholics and Protestants became extremely severe and generated violence on both sides. In this background, the Provisional I.R.A. intensified its bombing campaign in Britain's cities<sup>88</sup>. It provoked shock, anger and sorrow within the British population due to the fact that British cities and civilians returned to be cruelly involved in a conflict since the Second World War.

*The Rotters' Club* recalls a traumatic event for Birmingham, Coe's hometown: the Provos' bomb attack at two crowded pubs: The Tavern in the Town and The Mulberry Bush. The strike resulted in 21 people dead and 181 injured. This event is narrated through the filter of the point of view of the Trotters, particularly Lois Trotter, Ben's sister. In fact, the story of the attack at Birmingham's pubs is focalised through the narration of the love story between Lois and Malcom, the "chick and the hairy guy". The use of these nicknames says something interesting about the main idea of the novel, which aims to represent how ordinary people are affected by the larger forces of history. The chick and the hairy guy could, in fact, match a general description of young people in the 1970s. By referring to an unidentified every man/every woman therefore Coe means to refer to the relation between ordinary, unknown people and the larger forces of history. The encounter between two young people through an advert also refers to chance and fate which in the book appear as two forces dominating the life of the characters. In this episode of the novel the interaction between life and history is narrated through the motifs of the classical tragedy, with particular relevance attributed to the moment when the inexorability of historical fate "blasts" the normality of life:

On the night of Thursday, November 21<sup>st</sup>, 1974, Lois and Malcom met a

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<sup>87</sup> Childs, D. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>88</sup> Childs, D. (2001) *ibid.*, pp. 181-182.

quarter to eight [...] outside the Odeon Queensway [...] They continued up to Stephenson Street and turn right into New Street. The city centre felt quiet, friendly, peaceable<sup>89</sup>.

Nothing seems to predict what is going to happen; the couple heads to the Tavern in the Town. The pub seems too crowded and the couple is about to give up when Malcom spots an empty table ‘by some stroke of good fortune, the good fortune he knew he was blessed with that night’<sup>90</sup>. This passage exactly remarks the concept that nobody is exempt from the constraints of history and from the consequences of precise socio-political trends. Malcom is about to ask Lois to marry him, it is ‘8.20 precisely’ and ‘the timing device set off the trigger, the battery pack sent power running through the cables, and thirty pounds of gelignite exploded on the far side of the pub. And that was how it all ended, for the chick and the hairy guy’<sup>91</sup>: this is also the moment when “the Irish issue” interferes with the life of common people.

That event marked dramatically Birmingham and its population. The story of Lois, who survives but remains permanently scarred in her psyche, can be consequently interpreted as a metaphor to refer to the “injuries” suffered by the whole society of Birmingham and the collective trauma caused by the assassination of innocents. The frequent references to this episode throughout the narration of the novel are a clear sign of the tragic importance of it for the people of Birmingham. Therefore, Coe, as a Birmingham citizen, deals with that moment by representing through the narration of stories of common people the different points of view and reactions to that event. On one side the anti-Irish feelings that the pub bombing and more generally the I.R.A.’s bombing campaign generated in England recalled through different narrative filters such as the story of Roy Slater and Victor Gibbs and their far-right movement “The

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<sup>89</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, pp. 101-102.

<sup>90</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>91</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 104.

Association of British People” who insinuated anti-Irish propaganda through the workers of the British Leyland, undermining the unity of workers and trade unions<sup>92</sup>, and the letters of the parodic MBE Pusey-Hamilton, militant of the radical right-wing, who proposes a firm repression in Northern Ireland and declares his personal war to his Irish neighbours or to whomever has the semblance of Irish<sup>93</sup>. On the other side the character Glyn, Ben Trotter’s girlfriend’s uncle, who is a fierce Welsh Nationalist, anti-English and ‘supports the IRA as well’, filters the point of view of the supporters of independence from England<sup>94</sup>. This discomforts and disappoints Ben who ‘had heard nothing [...] but vilification and contempt being poured on the IRA. He had heard them being called everything from child-murderers to lunatics and psychopaths’<sup>95</sup>. Nonetheless, Ben’s encounter with “otherness” acknowledges the possibility of the existence of other points of view. The episode of the conversation between Glyn and Ben highlights exactly this possibility. On one side the reasons of the people “hurt” by Irish Nationalism through the words of Ben: ‘The IRA hurt my sister’<sup>96</sup>, on the other side the reasons of the anti-colonialists, filtered by the words of Glyn who tells about the historical atrocities perpetrated by the English against Welsh, Scots, Irish, Maoris, Aborigines, Indians and Native Americans<sup>97</sup>.

However, the references to common people’s opinion and vicissitudes, serve to stress the idea that common people are victims of political decisions taken by the ruling elite. The concept of common people as victims of the decisions of a small but powerful elite return in *What a Carve Up!* and in *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*. Coe points out, following a certain Marxian tradition, that the conflict among different

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<sup>92</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>93</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, pp. 235-237.

<sup>94</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 347.

<sup>95</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 348.

<sup>96</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 348.

<sup>97</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 352.

populations or ethnicities is indeed manipulated by elites for their own benefits and that the common people are doubly victims: by exploitation in their own countries and in the conflicts waged by their ruling elites. This idea is exemplified metaphorically by the comparison between a young Irish worker Jim Corrigan who dies because of poor working conditions, and Malcom who is killed during the I.R.A.'s pub bombing in Birmingham: 'Poor Jim Corrigan [...] Twenty-three years old [...] the life crushed out of him one Tuesday afternoon, an ordinary working day. Poor Malcom. Blown to oblivion, one ordinary Thursday evening'<sup>98</sup>.

*The Rotters' Club* also faces the issue of ethnic minorities' full integration in British society. In this novel, the perspective of the black community is narrated through the vicissitudes of Steve Richards, the only black student of King William's school. Steve, according to a Lukacsian interpretation, is the character that typifies the condition of the black community in Britain during the seventies. During the fifties the governments 'encouraged immigration from the former Caribbean colonies to overcome manual labour shortages' and Enoch Powell, later one of the fiercest opponent of immigration in UK, during the sixties welcomed this immigration to obviate labour shortages<sup>99</sup>. Nonetheless decades after the ethnic minorities, particularly the African and Caribbean minorities, still had to face social barriers preventing them from gaining complete integration and equality of conditions, a situation which worsened during the early eighties and led to the riots in Toxteth, Liverpool and Brixton, London.

Steve Richards is the only black student in the King William's school, which again represents a microcosm of the whole British society. Commenting on the low

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<sup>98</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>99</sup> Adonis, A., Pollard, S. (1997) *ibid.*, pp 245-246.

average of black people in top positions and top schools, Adonis and Pollard affirm that 'Britain's elite remains virtually impregnable to non-white people'<sup>100</sup>. Fewer opportunities in education results in fewer opportunities for social mobility, for the black community<sup>101</sup>.

The conditions of the black community are represented through a two-layer narrative filter. On one side, Coe, throughout the novel, draws attention to the surge of racist and far-right movements which opposed the integration of ethnic minorities, also recalling the xenophobic warnings of Enoch Powell, and the racist comments of Eric Clapton during a concert at Birmingham Odeon in 1976, who publicly supported the ideas of Enoch Powell<sup>102</sup>. The racist propaganda deployed by Roy Slater and his Association of British People<sup>103</sup> is a metonymy of the racist campaigns of movements such as the BNP and National Front. On the other side, the situation of the black ethnic minority is examined through the magnifying glass of the school microcosm. Steve Richards, in fact, notwithstanding his excellent skills in all the disciplines and particularly in physics, and his sports ability, is subject to discrimination due to his ethnicity. Firstly the derogatory nickname which he is given: Rastus. Secondly Culpepper's behaviour toward his black schoolmate. Culpepper is exasperatedly in competition with Steve in disciplines like sport and physics. The continuous efforts that Steve has to make when challenged by Culpepper, clearly stands as a metaphor for those xenophobic and racist currents within British society which aim to impede the social mobility of ethnic minorities on the base of racial discrimination. Moreover, the poisoning with a soporific drug to which Steve is subject during the crucial A-Level examination, and which results in failure to attain the score required to access the

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<sup>100</sup> Adonis, A., Pollard, S. (1997) *ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>101</sup> Adonis, A., Pollard, S. (1997) *ibid.*, pp 255-258.

<sup>102</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>103</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, pp 37-39.



University course he intended to apply for, can be read precisely as the impediment that society poses to the social mobility of black people. Lastly, it is possible to give metaphorical value to the episode, which can be interpreted as a way to affirm that society is poisoned with xenophobia and racism.

Ben Trotter recounts in his words the condition of his classmate: ‘Steve [...] was the only back boy there and [...] we all made fun of him and called him Rastus, God, we’re a fucked-up country’<sup>104</sup>. Furthermore, Ben in his stream of consciousness recalls his visit to Steve in Birmingham’s “black ghetto” of Handsworth and his perception that he had entered another dimension, an “alien” Britain: ‘I admit it, it was like a foreign country to me [...] and I found myself thinking how strange it was [...] that I could share the same city with those people and yet I had no contact with them’<sup>105</sup>. Ben then recalls the story of Richards, how he was obliged to work in a fast food to save money to study at University because of the failure at A-Level resulted in denial of a scholarship. The narrative’s stress on the social barriers on the path of integration of black communities is deployed through the episode of the bank loan: Ben works in the loan office of a bank during his gap year, and respecting the strict order of his bosses, denies a loan to the Handsworth-sited-fast food restaurant where Steve works, in doing so denying any chance to Steve for Higher Education<sup>106</sup>. Commenting on Steve’s story Ben finally asserts:

I feel that we have lost Steve, lost him to something, what can you call it?, history, politics, circumstance, it’s a horrible feeling, actually, a feeling that our time together at school was a sort of brilliant mistake, it was against the normal order of things, and now everything is back to how it is meant to be, Steve has been put back in his proper place and it is monstrous<sup>107</sup>.

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<sup>104</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 384.

<sup>105</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 384.

<sup>106</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, pp 384-397.

<sup>107</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, pp 387-388.

This section clarifies Coe's conception of history: people make choices, however these choices are conditioned by socio-political structures that alter the course of life-events. The result of these choices and the influence of the superstructure on these choices are unknown, unpredictable and often catastrophic. This interpretation of history is very political considering that it blatantly criticises one of the pillars of cultural neoliberal thought: the idea of free choice. Coe's critique of this ideological paradigm of neoliberalism appears clear in sections such as the one above. The idea that an elite influences (often negatively) the existence of people denounces the inconsistency of the ideology of freedom of choice and self-construction at the basis of the neoliberal thought. This section says that freedom of choice works only for those at the top of society, while the others are lost in the maze of historical contingencies, over which they have no control. In this section Coe also plays with the idea, associated to the power of the realist novelist, to play with the notions of chance and to manipulate the fate of the characters for the representation of specific social conditions.

#### **1.1.4 - The Ideology and Social Formation of Thatcherism**

In 1975 Margaret Thatcher won the election for the leadership of the Conservative party. She was the first British political leader to stand openly against the post-war consensus, basing her ideology on the creation of enterprise culture, opposing the Keynesian intervention of the State in the economy in favour of a neoliberal conception of the free market as theorised by the Chicago school<sup>108</sup>. Thatcher was assisted by political mentors such as Keith Joseph and Alfred Sherman who set up the Centre for Policy Studies. Their aim was to 'break with [...] the post war [...] consensus,

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<sup>108</sup> Evans, J. E. (1997) *ibid.*, pp 1-8.

and introduce through-going free market policies'<sup>109</sup>. She was also supported by the rising “Super-Class”, the new elite of top-managers and wealthy professionals<sup>110</sup> who pushed for a policy of tax-cuts and ‘actions against the welfare scroungers’<sup>111</sup> to build a market-based society. Thatcher thus developed a political agenda in the name of modernisation and individual aspirations.

The social formation of Thatcherism is depicted by Coe, employing largely techniques of parody aimed at the demystification and ridiculing of the “intellectual ambition” of the social group behind the ideological formation of neoliberal policy. This approach reveals authorial political views clearly critical of Thatcherism.

Coe reports the birth of Thatcherism within the school microcosm. Specifically, *The Closed Circle*, a Conservative think tank set up by some teenagers at King William’s school, is a parodic representation of the Centre for Policy Studies and of the “free-market” think-tanks behind Thatcher’s political agenda. *The Closed Circle*, a name that reveals the elitist nature of the group, is led by Paul Trotter, Ben’s brother, an excessively cynical and mature adolescent, who spends Christmas night ‘reading a collection of essays by the economist Milton Friedman’<sup>112</sup>. *The Closed Circle* is clearly a parodic school-set-form to represent the rising of the ideology behind the formation of Thatcherism. The members of this think-tank regard it as a ‘think-tank composed by the finest minds in King William’s’<sup>113</sup>, and as ‘an alternative power-base for carefully chosen, like-minded individuals’<sup>114</sup>. The political manifesto that this school think-tank produces and publishes in the school journal, *The Bill Board*, in order to “modernise” the King William’s school, can be read as a parody of the ideas that Thatcher and her

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<sup>109</sup> Childs, D. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>110</sup> Adonis, A., Pollard, S. (1997) *ibid.*, pp 67-69.

<sup>111</sup> Childs, D. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>112</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 272.

<sup>113</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>114</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 287.

ideologists intended to apply to the country. In fact, the key points of this manifesto seem to echo Thatcher's political agenda: 'Modernise, Rationalise and Aggrandise'<sup>115</sup>. The way *The Closed Circle* proposes to modernise the school is a parody of Thatcher's policies such as privatisation of public services. For example, in one of the articles published in *The Bill Board*, Culpepper, one of the members of *The Closed Circle*, proposes the privatisation of the traditional Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race, and the introduction of private-sponsored training for school sport activities<sup>116</sup>. What appears beyond the veil of the parodic representation are the radical changes that British society was undergoing. However, the reduction of historical events to microcosmic representations draws attention to the use of features of satire within a realist novel. The grotesque representation of the Thatcherite establishment within the context of the school microcosm recalls a Swiftian satire of power. The deployment of satire within the realist forms of the novel, links again *The Rotters' Club* to postmodern forms and to pastiche.

The sections of the novels related to *The Closed Circle* also comments on the massive use of media and advertisement to influence public opinion and to introduce it to a new form of consumerist society based on competition rather than inclusiveness. The media were effectively changing 'the mind-set of the nation'<sup>117</sup>. In the novel, these new ideas, mainly imported from the other side of the Atlantic, find their synthesis through the focus of Doug Anderton, whose opinion of the rising Thatcherism during the seventies is expressed in these terms: 'a new breed of Tory [...] Their rhetoric was fierce: it was anti-welfare, anti-community, anti-consensus'<sup>118</sup>. Furthermore, the rise of Thatcherism is also represented through two evocative images metaphorically powerful:

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<sup>115</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 287.

<sup>116</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, pp 227-228.

<sup>117</sup> Evans, J. E. (1997) *ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>118</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 181.

firstly Ben's first time sex with his girlfriend Cicely in Paul's room on a bed under the poster of Thatcher<sup>119</sup>; a metaphor which stands for the radical change Britain is going to face. Ben's first sexual experience represents a radical change in his life, similarly for Britain Thatcherism marks the most radical change since the end of the Second World War.

Ben knows that Cecily has a deceiving personality but the prospect of being in a relationship with the most attractive girl in the school blinds him. Ben fetishizes Cecily and in doing so fails to recognise her real personality. Similarly British society is enthralled by the perspective of renewed greatness and wealth promised by Thatcherism and fails to recognise the real nature of neoliberalism and eventually its drawbacks. Secondly, Paul's words to Doug Anderton at the moment of the election of Margaret Thatcher as PM: the young neoliberal, blowing out a match, affirms: 'The death of socialist dream'<sup>120</sup>, the end of the long-lasting politics of consensus.

The novel ends with Ben's stream of consciousness that evokes the Joycean theme underlying the novel. Ben, in fact, aims to become a writer and his stream of consciousness evokes Joyce's modernist *Kuenstlerroman*. As Joyce was capturing the transition to modernity through the ambition of the would-be writer Dedalus, similarly the *Kuenstlerroman* hero Ben writes his own stream of thoughts at the moment of another historical phase of transition: that toward postmodernity. Coe, however, does not have the ambition to be Joyce and the references to the Irish author are parodic reinterpretations of classics of modernist literature. At the end of *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus flees Dublin only to go back there at the beginning of *Ulysses*. The return to a place previously fled, obviously refers to the idea

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<sup>119</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 370.

<sup>120</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 182.

of entrapment, or self-entrapment. This is also the case with Ben, who, as we will see in the third chapter also in *The Closed Circle*, traps himself in perpetual past and in a condition of self-punishment. However, the parodic reworking of Joyce leads us to the question of how seriously Coe takes himself and how seriously he wants the readers to take him. This is a question valid particularly for *What a Carve Up!* as it is a novel which aspires to provide a definitive historical account and critique of Thatcherism; a novel which nonetheless is pervaded by parodical demystification. Coe clearly intends to demystify history and literary traditions to propose a critique of these traditions, and also to provide an avant-gardist experimentation in the footsteps of B.S. Johnson. However, the use of pastiche entails the risk that the social message of the novel may remain overlooked.

The end of the novel is signalled by a bitter prophecy: during a dialogue between Ben and Malcom's old friend, Roll-Up Reg, the latter holds in his hand a copy of *The Sun* with a large picture of Thatcher on the front page, and declares: 'that woman will never be Prime Minister of this country'<sup>121</sup>. The last words of the novel can be read as a fantasy used to stave off what it is happening around them and to imagine a different destiny for the disappearing Britain of consensus. This section highlights the role of nostalgia in the novel. Nostalgia for a "disappeared country" is particularly conveyed by numerous references to popular cultural movements and music, and in this section by the mourning for the sense of social protection the politics of consensus and the welfare state used to provide. However, this cultural and political nostalgia, far from being a form of social, cultural and political conservatism and a reactionary return to the past, is a clear manifestation of the social and political criticism deployed by Coe to approach the historical representation. In fact, the erosion of the welfare state highlighted in the

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<sup>121</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 399.

novel takes the form of a clear criticism of the ideology which praises individualism and leads to the erosion of society - communities, solidarity and social inclusiveness - represented by the post-war consensus. The words of Roll-Up Reg mourn the disappearance of the inclusive Britain of “consensus époque”. Consequently, it is possible to affirm that this choral representation of the seventies is exactly employed to regain this sense of community life and the humanism of which the welfare state and the politics of consensus were political representations, before being eroded by the rise of neoliberal ideology.

The ending paragraph thus evokes the end of this Britain, suggesting the idea that the end of the seventies and the 1979 general election signalled the last act of the post-war Britain of consensus. The characteristics and the consequences of a “new” Britain are subsequently more closely analysed by Coe in *What a Carve Up!*, another chapter of his “political saga” of British history.

## **1.2 - Comparative Section**

The main socio-political themes treated by Coe in *The Rotters' Club* provide the historical and social background of different contemporary English novels. However, among them, I have chosen three novels for a comparative analysis which is intended as both an attempt to give a wider account of the fictional representation and interpretation of a crucial period of British history and a study of the different stylistic and literary forms used by different authors to deal with the same issues considered in the previous section of this chapter. The comparison is also intended as an acknowledgement of different literary approaches to the history of the seventies in Britain and as an attempt to provide a broader historical portrait highlighting the significance of issues such as class, the strikes, and the formation of neoliberal ideology. However, the focus will be

kept on *The Rotters' Club* and the critical approach used in this section will be based exclusively on the comparison between Coe's novel and the other novels, highlighting similarities and differences in the way the authors deal with the same topics.

The novels considered for the comparative analysis are: Pat Barker's *Union Street* (1982), Margaret Drabble's *The Ice Age* (1977) and Piers Paul Read's *A Married Man* (1979)<sup>122</sup>. The choice of these novels is based on the relevance attributed by the authors to the same historical and socio-political background or topics faced in Coe's novel. In other words, through these novels more than others, it is possible to have an alternative perspective on themes such as the strikes during the seventies, the "Irish issue" and the social formation of the neoliberal ideology.

A first difference between *The Rotters' Club* and the other novels is obvious: while Coe's novel was published in 2001 when features and consequences of Thatcherism appeared clearer and had been subject to a more complete historical evaluation, the other three novels considered were published in the years when Thatcherism was in process of generation and formation, therefore the references to free-market, winner-take-all culture, financial speculation and entrepreneurial gambling we find in *The Ice Age* and in *A Married Man* are represented at their embryonic stage, thus not conceived as proper Thatcherism so far. This results in a difference of stylistic approach: Coe's novel offers a sort of detailed historical chronology of the facts, typical of temporally distanced forms of narration, while in the other novels specific and detailed historical events are detached from the fictional narration, and history appears more like a background or, more properly it resonates as an echo in the lives of the main

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<sup>122</sup> Although another novel, Carol Birch's *Life in the Palace*, describes the historical and social situation of Britain during the seventies, and as Coe's novel stresses the role of the community life during the post-war consensus Britain, it has not been taken in consideration for this thesis due to the fact that the novel does not aim to provide an historical, political and social analysis of the issues considered for the critical evaluation of *The Rotters' Club*. These issues are not clearly mentioned and remain on the background of a narration which does not engage with socio-political analysis.



characters of the novels. This difference is crucial because it reproduces the duality life/fiction. In other words, in *The Rotters' Club* the fictional properties are more visible due to the fact that the author is distant from the events and benefits from a clearer view on history. A clear perspective on history also allows Coe to produce a satire of the historical events narrated. The other novels' approach to historical representation is influenced by historical immediacy and contingency due to the fact that the history recounted is precisely "what is happening" and thus not subject to a historical evaluation. This obviously concerns the novels' relation with postmodernity. While *The Rotters' Club*, in spite of being a realist novel, presents also postmodern features, the three novels here analysed are purely social realist with no relation with postmodern narrative whatsoever. For instance, these novels do not present the typical postmodern nostalgia mode, genre-crossing or narrative fragmentation.

However, the temporal distance from the historical events affects the characterisation. The historical novel typically narrates past events and consequently the characters are representative of certain social roles. This is exactly what happens here: the narration of *The Rotters' Club* and its characterisation is built to follow the "rules" of a social novel. However, while the aim for all the novels is to represent how history affects people, often in Coe's novel the reverse happens: characters are used to describe certain historical events or social conditions.

I therefore intend to give an account of the stylistic forms and the literary techniques deployed by the authors, and to define the different approaches used for the representation of the socio-political issues considered. Firstly I need to point out that in the novels considered the characters work as representative filters of the historical reality and therefore history is described through points of view and perspectives

specific to characters' social class. While Coe aims to provide a polyphonic focalisation that takes into account the perspectives of different social classes and their experience in facing the history of the seventies in Britain, on the other hand the novels selected for the comparison, despite the fact that they also provide contrasting points of view on politics and society, are mainly focalised through characters embodying a perspective determined by belonging to one specific social class. In other words, while *The Rotters' Club* tends to provide an interpretation of historical events through a multi-dimensional lens, the other novels focus on the representation of a single social class. Specifically, the analysis of the historical and social reality of Britain during the seventies is expressed in *Union Street* through focalisers belonging to the working-class, while *The Ice Age* and *A Married Man* provide an interpretation focalised through characters belonging to the upper middle-class. However, this class-based narrative focalisation does not imply a form of social criticism biased on instances of a specific social class, it is rather a way to describe society and to criticise it through the use of diverse lenses. The class-based focalisation, as suggested by Williams<sup>123</sup>, offers the possibility to look at society through communities and through the interactions within them. This is namely the literary approach provided by *The Rotters' Club* and the novels of the comparative analysis.

However, inevitably the class-based focalisation draws attention also to issues of the audience to which the novels are addressed. The novels are perhaps mainly addressed to middle-class readers, probably to a progressive middle-class. Due to the fact that the representation of the working-class represents a crucial feature of both *The Rotters' Club* and some other novels considered for the comparison, it is important to stress that the focalisation through working-class characters appears here controversial.

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<sup>123</sup> Williams, R. (1970) *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*. London: Chatto & Windus, p. 12

In fact, both in Coe's novel and in the other novels considered the representation of the working-class appears to some extent patronising. This issue draws attention to the everlasting controversy about how realist fiction can effectively reproduce "reality" in its broad definition and how this "fictional reality" corresponds to the idea of reality formed in the mind-set of the readers. This issue draws attention to the question about whether the reality "produced" by the "authorial authority" is a result of social class bias or if it is indeed an effective mirror of objective reality.

### 1.2.1 - *Union Street*

In *Union Street* Pat Barker deals with the condition of the working-class, specifically that of working-class women in an unnamed city in northern England during the seventies, representing their daily struggle to survive in conditions of deprivation. Although the narrative form of this novel differs from that of *The Rotters' Club*, both novels aim to reproduce the collective dimension of British society before the collapse of the politics of consensus. In fact, as Kirk puts it: *Union Street* aims 'to create a collective experience and consciousnesses [sic.]'<sup>124</sup> of English working-class women during the seventies. However, Kathryn and Philip Dodd, who assert that Barker's novel is about the working-class rather than written from inside of it, have challenged the idea of *Union Street* as representative of a "new wave" of depiction of the working-class<sup>125</sup>. Moreover, the two scholars state that the novel reflects the traditional representation of that social class and that the novelist deploys a 'detached stance of zoologist-observer examining her biological specimens, trapped in their

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<sup>124</sup> Kirk, J. (1999) 'Recovered Perspectives: Gender, Class, and Memory in Pat Barker's Writing', *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 40, n. 4, p. 612.

<sup>125</sup> Dodd, K., Dodd, P. (1992), 'From the East End to *EastEnders*: Representations of the working class, 1890-1990', in Strinati, D., Wagg, S. (eds) *Come on Down? Popular Media Culture in Post-War Britain*. London: Routledge, pp.122-123.

environment<sup>126</sup>. In other words, according to the Dodds, Barker's novels is in danger of presenting a stereotyped and fetishized version of the working-class.

While *The Rotters' Club* offers a polyphonic representation of political issues related to the working-class, specifically the importance of trade unionism and the class struggle, *Union Street* offers a more domestic perspective on the condition of this social class. Nevertheless the two novels converge on the idea that historical and socio-political conditions affect the life of common people and on narrative perspective. On the other side, the two novels inescapably diverge in terms of narrative forms. While in *The Rotters' Club* the vicissitudes of the characters of the community around King William's school intersect, Barker's novel is fragmented in seven separate novellas focusing on residents of Union Street. However, the characters of the novellas do not interact with each other. Other points of interest in the comparison between the two novels are the significance of the idea of community and the role of the women, particularly in the working-class.

In Coe's novel, as noted at the end of the first section of this chapter, it is possible to note a sort of nostalgia for the community-based society of England pre-Thatcher. The narrative form, the structure of the novel and the composition of its characters suggest the idea that community life works as a protection from the world outside, a shelter within society. This idea is also central in *What a Carve Up!* where the protagonist Michael Owen finds shelter from reality locking himself in nostalgic memories of his upbringing. The nostalgia for a past community-based society is a fundamental concept at the basis of *Union Street* too. However, while in *The Rotters' Club* the working-class community is cohesive, on the other side Barker highlights also the limits of the idea of community. Brophy notes that in *Union Street* some of the

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<sup>126</sup> Dodd, K., Dodd, P. (1992) *ibid.*, p. 124.

women are represented 'in danger of slipping outside the community's support system' as in the case of the characters Kelly Brown and Alice Bell<sup>127</sup>. Thus Barker draws attention to 'the inadequacy of the social safety net in 1970s Britain'<sup>128</sup>. However, also *The Rotters' Club* calls attention to the moment of erosion of the structures of the post-war welfare state, which is imagined as the key-moment at the origins of the consequent rise of neoliberal ideology that led to the development of the new free-market society.

Notably, the two novels differ on the perspective about the role of the women, considering the different space given to female voices. While Coe's novel is narrated through a complete male perspective which results in female characters playing minor roles, *Union Street* offers a totally female perspective on the social issues the working-class faces. Regarding the issue of the women involved in the labour movement, *The Rotters' Club* shows a clear historicist perspective, inasmuch women's participation in the class-struggle and labour movement is symbolically embodied in the prominent nonfictional character of Jayaben Desai, who, as noted above, is represented as a historical heroic character. On the other side, *Union Street* represents the daily struggle of working-class women in a society where even the 'employment of men in an industrial setting is far from being reliable'<sup>129</sup>, rather than focusing on heroic figures of the labour movement. In other words, in *Union Street* themes of the labour movement are left on the background and the stress is on the burden women have to bear in working class social contexts in the seventies in Britain. Consequently, while *The Rotters' Club* offers an account of measures (the strikes, the workers' movement) adopted by the working class to cope with a social condition of deprivation, *Union Street* rather focuses on the description of the social condition (deprivation and neglect)

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<sup>127</sup> Brophy, S. (2005), 'Working-class Women, Labor, and the Problem of Community in *Union Street* and *Liza's England*', in Moneith, S. et al. (eds) *Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, p. 35.

<sup>128</sup> Brophy, S. (2005) *ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>129</sup> Brophy, S. (2005) *ibid.*, p. 24.

which caused the rise of the workers' movement. The latter appears on the background while the reader is compelled to acknowledge the normality of poverty and social alienation in which the working-class is "forced" to live by the social structures.

An explanatory case is provided by the novella about Kelly Brown, a young girl who after being raped suffers from isolation in a context of social deprivation. In this context the miners' strikes or the industrial disputes, which are indeed a political form for the labour movement to face the problem of social deprivation which can generate events like that one suffered by Kelly Brown, are not something "historical" but just an additional aspect of the daily struggle of the working-class:

It was a hard winter; the weather after Christmas was particularly cold. The miners were on strike. That didn't affect Kelly much, except that she was sometimes sent round all the corner shops to look for paper bags full of coal. You could still get those after the coalmen had stopped delivering<sup>130</sup>.

*The Rotters' Club* represents the "militant" face of the working-class and the resistance towards the consequences of the economic downturn such as the oil crisis and the cuts as measure of containment of inflation imposed by the different governments during the seventies. On the other side, in *Union Street*, we see the private face of this situation. In Coe's novel we see the pickets, the police batons, the political discussions; in Barker's we see how these socio-political issues hit the life of working-class people. For example, the elderly woman Alice Bell, whose insurance policy has been made ineffective by inflation, has to save money to keep the house warm during the cold winter, so she decides to reduce her daily amount of food<sup>131</sup>. Similarly, the miners' strikes are represented through the filter of those who are fighting the "struggle for

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<sup>130</sup> Barker, P. (1982) *Union Street*. London: Virago, p. 63.

<sup>131</sup> Barker, P. (1982) *ibid.*, pp 232-233.

survival” in a condition of poverty: ‘There were rumours of a miners’ strike and Mrs Bell was trying to economise on coal’<sup>132</sup>. As in *The Rotters’ Club*, also in *Union Street* we note a remark on the effects of the strikes on the life of people, even though in the latter novel, the perspective is exclusively that of the working-class women of northern England facing their practical life problems:

There was a cold spell towards the end of January. The women of Union Street had to cope with the problem of keeping themselves and their families warm. There were continued reports that the miners were about to go on strike<sup>133</sup>.

Although the perspectives on the events narrated differ, both authors try to depict history from below, drawing attention to the condition of common people under particular historical circumstances.

Also the “Irish issue” in *Union Street* is left in the background of the lives of the characters of the seven novellas. In *The Rotters’ Club*, Coe does not provide a complete interpretation of the issue; the Irish perspective appears, in fact, particularly limited. However, there is an attempt to describe historically the events related to the issue; the novel, in fact, combines fiction with accounts of real events such as I.R.A.’s pub bombing in Birmingham. In Barker’s novel the issue is treated marginally and references to it are used to provide a precise historical setting to the narration but there is no evidence of any attempt to provide a socio-political interpretation. The “troubles” in Northern Ireland are mentioned exclusively when one of the characters is reading a newspaper or watching news on TV. This approach is justified by the choice of focalisation through the lives of working-class women who live in a deprived area of the country. In fact, although the references to the Irish situation are needed to provide

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<sup>132</sup> Barker, P. (1982) *ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>133</sup> Barker, P. (1982) *ibid.*, p. 239.

an historical setting to the narration and to describe the problematic situation of Britain during the seventies, in Barker's novel the poor who are the central characters of the novel cannot even find time to think about issues other than their own survival. In *The Rotters' Club* we find an historical and contemporary perspective on the Irish issue, in *Union Street* the troubles in Northern Ireland are just news distractedly read on a newspaper: 'She [Kelly Brown] picked up the first sheet of newspaper. The face of a young soldier killed in Belfast disappeared beneath her scrumpling fingers'<sup>134</sup> or seen in a television programme:

Tonight, there was a programme about Northern Ireland. She settled down, expecting to be bored. But then there is this young man, this soldier, and he was lying in a sort of cot, a bed sides to it, and he was shouting out, great bellows of rage [...] You could see the scars where they'd dug the bullets out. His head was like a turnip. That was they'd done to him. They'd turned him into a turnip, a violent turnip, when they shot the bullets into his brain. The cameras switched to gangs of youths throwing stones<sup>135</sup>.

Although *The Rotters' Club* and *Union Street* focus on the violence of the conflict, the first recounting the I.R.A. bombings and the second the "troubles" in Belfast, the two novels are characterised by two divergent approaches. In Coe's novel there is an attempt to understanding the situation, and also an interaction between history and private life. In *Union Street* history remains distant.

However, these differences are related to the different styles of the novels. Coe's approach, by synthesising history is, in fact, less realistic as it is not how we experience history. Barker's novel, on the other hand, presents a more realistic approach: the news is on the background, we are living history and thus we are not able to process it yet.

Along with other topics previously mentioned, the issue of the integration of

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<sup>134</sup> Barker, P. (1982) *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>135</sup> Barker, P. (1982) *ibid.*, pp 47-48.



black community in 1970s British society is treated in *Union Street* in accordance with the perspective the author has chosen to deal with socio-political themes. In *The Rotters' Club* this issue is analysed in two different layers: firstly through the vicissitudes of Steve Richards, which assume a metaphorical value to describe the difficulties and the obstacles that black people have to deal with along the path of integration, secondly through the story of the right-wing and racist Association of British People which undermines the unity of the labour movement and draws attention to the issue of racism within the white British working-class. On the other hand, in Barker's novel the focus is exclusively on the latter issue and the story of Bertha, the only black worker in the cakes factory where Joanne Wilson works, calls attention also to the issue of disunity of women even among members of the same social class:

The trouble had started when Bertha first came to work at the factory. Nobody liked it. She was the first coloured worker there. But Elaine had gone on louder and longer than most: there was 'nigger stink' in the cloakroom; why was she being allowed to use the same toilets when everybody knew what mucky buggers they were<sup>136</sup>.

The two novels share the same preoccupation about racism within the working-class and especially among white workers who feel themselves threatened by the "other". This concern is produced by the idea common to both novels that in specific socio-economic situations, during an harsh economic crisis, the struggle to survive becomes tougher and more violent and especially in an environment characterised by educational and economic deprivation it may generate forms of xenophobia and racism which lead inevitably to a "war between poor" as represented through the story of the Association of British People in *The Rotters' Club* and that of Bertha in *Union Street*. The idea that this "war" weakens the cause of the labour movements, shifting the focus from the

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<sup>136</sup> Barker, P. (1982) *ibid.*, p. 81.

attempt to tackle the reasons of poor working conditions or redundancy, is central in both novels. This is the reason why in *The Rotters' Club* Bill Anderton is afraid that the Association of British People campaign may spread throughout the factory. Similarly, in *Union Street* the racial conflicts between the white women and Bertha along the assembly line of the cakes factory weaken their request for better working conditions, strengthening the position of the manager of the factory who finds easier to manipulate the divided women.

### 1.2.2 - *The Ice Age*

Like Coe's novel, Margaret Drabble's *The Ice Age* captures the crucial phase of transition from the age of consensus to neoliberal society. In so doing it deals with the same issues analysed in *The Rotters' Club* confirming their relevance for the comprehension of the recent British history and society. However, the narration of the socio-political situation in Britain during the seventies is narrated largely through the life of the protagonist. In fact, the novel is focused on the vicissitudes of Anthony Keating, a BBC editor 'who is caught [...] at a point of symbolic transition'<sup>137</sup>. The transition from the cultural ambition of his youth and the intellectual work at BBC to the world of financial speculation and property development is indeed a metaphor for the changes British society was undergoing. The main character, in fact, embodies a sort of consensus age liberal-conservatism: an Oxbridge Arts graduate from a privileged family whose well-paid and distinguished job at the BBC represents the natural continuum for someone of his social status. The novel specifically describes the moment of transition from British traditional liberal-conservatism to neoliberalism and free market ideology through a "Faustian" metaphor. Len Wincobank, a neo-liberal

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<sup>137</sup> Connor, S. (1996) *The English Novel in History 1950-1995*. London: Routledge, p. 60.

*avant-la lettre*, is, in fact, a Lucifer figure who leads Anthony Keating to abandon his values and embrace the free-market ideology:

the conversion took place... while Anthony was watching unedited film of an interview with Len [Wincobank] the property whizz kid [...] when the film had finished, he felt curiously uneasy [...] [Anthony] went back into the studio and played the rushes again. And it struck him, suddenly, with a dazzling flash: how could he not have noticed it before? The truth was that Len Wincobank was a genius [...] Elated, illuminated, he played the reels for a third time. Yes, there it all was [...] For three weeks, he thought hard, about money and incentive and private and public ownership: then he rang up Len Wincobank and invited him to lunch [...] They talked. To Anthony it was a revelation [...] And that was how Anthony Keating left a reasonable safe salaried job with a pension in television, and became a property developer<sup>138</sup>.

Although *The Ice Age* deals with most of the themes treated in the other novels considered, Drabble's novel differs from both *The Rotters' Club* and *Union Street* in terms of point of view and perspective filter used to deal with such issues. In fact, the author does not employ a multidimensional point of view represented by characters belonging to different social classes. Rather the narration is focalised through one point of view: a group of characters belonging to the upper-middle class. The novel employs a narrative voice which, contrary to *Union Street*, implicitly provides the narrator's judgment. However, similarly to *The Rotters' Club*, Drabble's narration is involved in socio-political criticism, which by contrast is not the core of *Union Street* where historical and political events are confined to the background.

In *The Ice Age* historical contingency is like a fog that shrouds British society affecting morally and practically the life of people. Drabble portrays Britain as an ill country, and Antony Keating's heart disease can be interpreted as a metaphor for Britain which discovers itself ill and finds it difficult to comprehend the causes of its illness.

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<sup>138</sup> Drabble, M. (1977) *The Ice Age*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, pp. 27-29.

The illness is the severe recession that affects brutally the lives of people who do not know how to cope with it:

over the country depression lay like fog [...] All over the country, people blamed other people for all the things that were going wrong – the trade unions, the present government, the miners, the car workers, the seamen, the Arabs, the Irish, their own husbands, their own wives, their own good-for-nothing offspring, comprehensive education. Nobody knew whose fault it really was, but most people managed to complain fairly forcefully about somebody: only a few were stunned into honourable silence<sup>139</sup>.

The Britain described in *The Ice Age* is a country on the edge of collapse as evoked in the final part of *The Rotters' Club* in Ben's stream of consciousness. However, in Coe's novel this gloomy portrait is described as media exaggeration, a propagandistic representation which aimed to convince people to embrace neoliberalism. In opposition to this, the novel also suggests the importance of community as a form of shelter, protection from the harshness of the times. On the other side *The Ice Age* compels the reader to face a situation of moral and social collapse and economic downturn, from which is impossible to escape. Society is a battlefield where the community system has collapsed, leaving people gripped in a battle of all against all where no one is spared. Drabble gives the reader a bleak picture of a society which has regressed to a disastrous condition, thus the apocalyptical evocation of the ice age in the title and the references to ice and freeze grip throughout the novel: 'A huge icy fist, with large cold fingers, was squeezing and chilling the people of Britain [...] slowing down their blood, locking them into immobility, fixing them in a solid stasis, like fish in a frozen river'<sup>140</sup>. According to Connor images and references to cold and ice are used to support the idea of a country with 'lowered vitality and a generalised rigor mortis'<sup>141</sup>. The socio-economic condition of Britain during the seventies is investigated through frequent references to recession

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<sup>139</sup> Drabble, M. (1977) *ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>140</sup> Drabble, M. (1977) *ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>141</sup> Connor, S. (1996) *ibid.*, p. 63.

and economic downturn that reflect the real main preoccupation of the time: ‘Casualties of slump and recession strewed the business page of the newspaper, hit the front-page headlines’<sup>142</sup>.

Drabble’s narrative approach to the socio-economic condition in Britain is similar to that of Coe. However, the stylistic approaches of the two authors differ due to the fact that the first “intervenes” through the device of the omniscient narrator, while the second deploys the filter of characters’ experience regarding the issues represented. In this regard, an episode of the history of industrial relations in Britain, the Leyland dispute, makes manifest the different literary approaches of the two authors. In fact, unlike Coe’s novel where the dispute plays a fundamental role and the whole labour movement of the seventies is analysed through the filter of Bill Anderton who is a trade union representative at the Leyland, Drabble’s novel mentions the dispute only as part of a mere general portrait of Britain in those times. The dispute is, in fact, contextualised in a wider depiction of the various issues in a catastrophic tone:

The pound was sinking, more deaths in Northern Ireland, a new strike at Leyland, the storm damage throughout the country had destroyed millions of pounds’ worth of property, the doctors were threatening to strike against our private beds, there would be a potato shortage, the Americans were still complaining about Concorde<sup>143</sup>.

Although *The Ice Age* proposes a mono-dimensional perspective, that of the upper-middle class, on these issues as well as on the related issues of the strikes, this does not undermine the social critique presented in the book. For example, the omniscient narrator suggests that speculations plays a crucial role in determining the economic crisis. This idea is also suggested metaphorically through the story of the main character Anthony Keating, who, as a speculator, feels guilty for the condition of British

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<sup>142</sup> Drabble, M. (1977) *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>143</sup> Drabble, M. (1977) *ibid.*, p. 182.

economy:

Old men were convicted of corruption and hustled off to prison, banks collapsed and shares fell to nothing. Anthony could not quite believe that the whole slump had been caused by his own desire to buy himself an expensive country house, but was nevertheless aware that it could not have happened at worse time, from his point of view<sup>144</sup>.

Moreover, in a long paragraph Drabble describes the situation that forms the historical background of the stories of novel's characters through the use of the omniscient narrator. The paragraph ends with the words 'this is the state of the nation'<sup>145</sup> and the narrator synthesises the historical condition of Britain at that specific time. The narrator also offers a form of social criticism comparing the different reactions of people to austerity imposed by the government to deal with the crisis in accordance with their class status: from the 'economist, who had just received a salary increase of £2,000 in expectation of next year's inflation'<sup>146</sup>, to the 'Odd new groups of the far left [that] hoped that each rise in bank rate and each strike in a car factory heralded the final collapse of capitalism' and 'Sociologist expressed approval of the rate of social change, the radicalising influence of increasing confrontation of worker and management'<sup>147</sup>. However, Drabble's social criticism reaches its peak in the paragraph mentioned in a sort of dark-humoured reference to the condition of poor at the time of austerity: 'There were also the real poor: the old, the unemployed, the undesirable immigrants [...] Let us not think of them. Their rewards will be in heaven'<sup>148</sup>. The blatant cynicism of the sentence appears like an implied criticism expressed through a bitter irony about the policy of indifference towards the conditions of the lower stratum of society and therefore the reference to a reward in heaven appears also like a criticism of social

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<sup>144</sup> Drabble, M. (1977) *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>145</sup> Drabble, M. (1977) *ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>146</sup> Drabble, M. (1977) *ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>147</sup> Drabble, M. (1977) *ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>148</sup> Drabble, M. (1977) *ibid.*, p. 67.

immobility. However, the sentence also refers to the literary representation of the poor. Drabble here refers to the issue of the misrepresentation, lack of representation, and fetishization, unrepresentability of the poor and the question of agency of working-class at the time of Thatcherism. Drabble's sentence underpins the idea that in the time when the working-class voice is suppressed – the crackdown on the miners in 1984 and the anti-trade union-legislation point at that direction – there is a serious problem of agency for the working-class. In his 1961 volume *The Long Revolution*, Raymond Williams highlights how the social origins of the English writers (mostly from the middle or upper-middle class) poses a serious questions of agency of working-class<sup>149</sup>. But it also poses a question regarding realistic forms, which are intended to represent reality. Williams argues realism has since the beginning been associated with the middle-class, and artistic materials representing the everyday were originally denominated bourgeois<sup>150</sup>. The issue of working-class agency obviously complicates the discourse around realism as adequate form to represent the working-class. *The Ice Age*'s realistic depictions are entirely dedicated to the bourgeois environment. However, *The Rotters' Club* and *Union Street* present also representations of working-class through the use of realist forms. Nevertheless, it can be argued that depictions of the working-class in these two novels carry with them the question of whether they can be considered “real” or rather they are interpretations of the working-class from a middle-class viewpoint.

The depiction of the systemic crisis of post-war British society as developed during the consensus age in *The Ice Age* draws the attention also to the representation of the new ideological wave which followed the collapse of consensus. *The Ice Age* through the story of Anthony Keating and his business partners proposes a depiction of the embryonic phase of what in *The Rotters' Club* is defined ‘a new breed of Tory [...]

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<sup>149</sup> Williams, R. (1961) *The Long Revolution*. London: Chatto & Windus. pp 230 – 246.

<sup>150</sup> Williams, R. (1961) *ibid.*, p. 274.

anti-welfare, anti-community, anti-consensus'<sup>151</sup>, particularly focusing on deployments of neoliberal economic policies and the related free-market culture which lately will find its political expression with Thatcherism, phenomenon at its phase of formation at the time the novel was published.

*The Ice Age* and *The Rotters' Club* present two main differences in the representation of formation and diffusion of neoliberalism within British society. Firstly, Coe's account of the political climate is retrospective, while Drabble's novel proposes a prospective view on Thatcherism. Secondly, the two novels differ in terms of literary representations of the phenomenon. In fact, although both novels focus on individualism, anti-community feelings and marketisation of society, the literary forms of the novels differ completely. Particularly, the main literary technique deployed by Coe to describe the features of the neoliberal ideology is parody. On the other side, as previously stated, Drabble deploys a sort of "Faustian" metaphor embodied in the story of the main character Anthony Keating.

This Faustian encounter represents metaphorically the spread within British society of neoliberal ideology, which is proposed as the most effective way to modernise and to create a fertile ground for free enterprise. Anthony Keating through Len Wincobank is introduced to a new, previously unknown, 'world of people: stockbrokers, merchant bankers, town clerks, local councillors, commercial architects, contractors, accountants [...] The Other Britain'<sup>152</sup>. Here we find a parodic reference to Michael Harrington's book *The Other America*<sup>153</sup>, a 1962 influential study on poverty in the US. While in Harrington's book Other means the poor, in Drabble's novel Other is

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<sup>151</sup> Coe, J. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>152</sup> Drabble, M. (1977) *ibid.*, p 35.

<sup>153</sup> Harrington, M. (1962) *The Other America*. New York (1997): Scribner.



used to describe the very wealthy, the Super Class as defined by Adonis and Pollard<sup>154</sup>: the rising class which in those years was increasingly becoming influential and which was inexorably supplanting the traditional ruling class, changing the face of society and shaping it according to its values after some decades of entrenchment. The Super Class is critically described, both in *The Rotters' Club*, as previously noted, and in *The Ice Age*. The utilitarian dogma of this Super Class is deemed as indifference and egoism:

none of them paid any attention to all those things that had previously drifted idly round Anthony's mind – they did not read novels, or go to good films, or read the arts pages of newspapers, or listen to music or discuss the problems of the under privileged. They 'didn't much go' for that kind of thing. They were far, far too busy<sup>155</sup>.

It is, therefore, possible to find in both novels a criticism of the “Americanisation” and “commodification” of life that is spreading throughout society, changing its face: ‘They want everything packaged. Everything American. They only want what they see on the television’<sup>156</sup> is the reflection of the old owner of a handmade sweets’ factory. This change in society mind-set is reflected also in the consumerist approach to education. *The Rotters' Club* denounces the marketization of education through parody, Drabble’s novel through a bitter analysis of the changing conception of higher education, which is increasingly being considered as a place of “production”<sup>157</sup> rather than as a place of culture and knowledge. Obviously, this dramatic shift in principles and values, this change of priorities in the name of presumed modernisation and rationalisation presents its disadvantages: the “devil”, to refer again to the Faustian metaphor, claims the soul of his business partner. Both for Coe and Drabble the “soul of the country” reclaimed by neoliberalism is community-based society and solidarity. Thus the disease of Anthony

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<sup>154</sup> Adonis, A., Pollard, S. (1997) *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>155</sup> Drabble, M. (1977) *ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>156</sup> Drabble, M. (1977) *ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>157</sup> Drabble, M. (1977) *ibid.*, p. 77.

Keating is the price the Faust of the time of the free-market has to pay. Interestingly Anthony Keating suffers from heart disease, a detail which seems to reinforce the Faustian metaphor as the heart is traditionally the “anti-utilitarian organ” par excellence, thus its malfunction may represent metaphorically exactly the sense of loss of communitarian values.

In addition, it is possible to find in the two novels interesting points of divergence and similarities to reflect on the way the Irish situation is represented and faced. In fact, Drabble chooses to deal with the issue from the same perspective as provided in *The Rotters' Club*. In *The Ice Age* the author introduces the problem of the I.R.A.'s bombing campaign in British cities through the representation of the interaction between this historical reality and the fictional lives of some of the characters of the novels, drawing attention to the similarities with Coe's approach and his idea of representing the effect of history on the life of people. Specifically, at the beginning of *The Ice Age*, the main character Anthony Keating reads a letter sent by a friend of his, Kitty Friedman, severely injured by an I.R.A.'s bomb attack in a Mayfair restaurant in London, which also has caused the death of her husband Max. The similarities between the story of Kitty and Max Friedman whose Ruby Wedding Anniversary is terribly marred by the attack, and the story of Lois Trotter and her boyfriend whose love story is devastated by a bomb attack in a Birmingham pub, is obvious. In both novels two women are left permanently marked by the experience and by the death of their partners, and in both novels it is possible to note the same situation of a love story blasted by bombs, a literary metaphor derived from the motifs of tragedy to represent the “intrusion” of history into the lives of common people. In *The Rotters' Club* the bomb attack and the story of the two characters involved in this tragic event are a pretext to reflect on the idea of interaction between history, political choices and lives of

people and to provide a critical analysis of the Irish issue from a perspective which tries to balance British and non-British point of view. In *The Ice Age* Drabble also adds a reference to an IRA bomb attack: ‘The bomb simply happened to have blown up Max and Kitty, a random target. This past year had been full of accidents that they had begun to seem almost normal’<sup>158</sup>. Drabble indeed suggests that the reader could make connections between accidents of this nature and the political context. However, in *The Ice Age*, as in *Union Street*, the reference to the situation in Northern Ireland is mostly employed as a means to give even a more tragic connotation to the bleak depiction of British history of the seventies.

### 1.2.3 - *A Married Man*

*A Married Man* by Piers Paul Read is another novel that offers an interesting political perspective on the historical events of the seventies in Britain. It focuses on the representation of the life of the wealthy barrister John Strickland and his reflections on the meaning of life, which force him to reconsider his life and regain the idealism of his youth. The revaluation of his life results in a relationship with a younger woman who encourages his renewed idealism. This relationship and his regained idealism ineluctably question his marriage and lead to the final tragedy of the assassination of his wife organised by his lover, a lawyer, who hires for the assassination a notorious convict she previously defended in court.

In the novel, like *The Rotters' Club*, the description of the lives of the characters provides a base for a political and historical discourse, specifically about the issues of class, labour movement and political contraposition. The angle provided by *A Married*

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<sup>158</sup> Drabble, M. (1977) *ibid.*, p. 12.

*Man* is that of the British ruling class, the Super Class as defined previously. The perspective is therefore more closely related to that of *The Ice Age* than either *Union Street* or *The Rotters' Club*. The main difference with Coe's novel is clear: while the latter provides a multi-dimensional perspective, acknowledging the different points of view and personal experiences in relation to historical events and socio-political trends, Read's novel can be considered a sort of study of the perspective, psychology and attitude of the ruling class toward specific historical events such as the trade unionism, labour struggle, strikes.

Interestingly the novel anticipates the theme of the conformation of political thoughts and the overcoming of ideological barriers in the name of an elitist management of power and close relationship between politics and corporations. This is a theme relevant to understanding of the post-cold-war era, and is analysed by Coe in *The Closed Circle*. In a paragraph of *A Married Man*, in fact, through the words of the character Guy it is possible to find a reference exactly to the admixture of political and financial powers typical of late capitalism:

although there's a lot of argument between the two main parties, I don't really see much difference between them. You might get fifty pence more on an old age pension under Labour, and the Tories might sell off the steel industry to private enterprise, but that doesn't make any difference to the fundamental injustice of the system [...]<sup>159</sup>

Another topic worth comparing in Coe's and Read's novels is that of idealism and political awareness. John Strickland, after reading Tolstoy's *The Life and Death of Ivan Ilych*, develops what he defines Ilychitis, a sort of illness which leads him toward the idealism of his youth and to stand for election as Labour candidate<sup>160</sup> despite the anger

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<sup>159</sup> Read, P. P. (1979) *A Married Man*. London: The Alison Press/Martin Secker & Warburg Limited, p. 84.

<sup>160</sup> 'Like Ivan Ilych he asked himself: *Maybe I did not live as I ought to have done?*... He could remember quite well

and diffidence of his friends and relatives who are mainly Conservative supporters. However, the idealism of this character is far from being genuine and does not even resemble the idealism of some of the characters of *The Rotters' Club*. In fact, Strickland's decision to stand for the Labour Party is even considered by the other characters risible and just as a moment of eccentricity of a wealthy professional who would never give up his privileged status to conform his standard of life to his regained ideals. In these contrasting perspectives lay a notable difference between *The Rotters' Club* and *A Married Man*. In fact, while in the first the leftist political activism is represented from the perspective of workers, unionists and labour activists such as Bill Anderton, in Read's novel it is merely a sort of eccentric game played by a dissatisfied, deluded and bored member of a Super Class whose ambition is to shock his peers to satisfy his ego.

John Strickland's political ideas are violently opposed by his friends. Even his old friend Gordon, who used to share his thoughts at the time of University, in spite of not having abandoned his socialist view, looks warily at his friend's renewed political activism, suspecting the existence of an hidden personal reason: 'What I can't understand is why you want to be a fucking Member of Parliament. Particularly now when the Party has lost most of its principles [...] It can't just be vanity, which is why most successful men want to go into Parliament [...] like owning a Rolls Royce'<sup>161</sup>.

Regarding the forms of political activism, it is particularly interesting to compare John Strickland to Bill Anderton and Ben Trotter because of the diversities, but also some similarities, of their positions toward socio-political issues. As stated previously Bill Anderton and John Strickland represent two faces of the same political

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the ambitions he had once had to dedicate his life to something more than his own material interests – to serve, indeed, the old ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity in their new guises of socialism'.

Read, P. P. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>161</sup> Read, P. P. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 52.

activism within the labour movement. However, class division plays a crucial role for the characterisation of their attitude toward the ideals they pursue. Firstly, class-belonging changes the perspective and the dedication to the cause. Bill Anderton is a worker affected by political and economic decisions, therefore feels the urge to be active, also to safeguard his life and that of those belonging to his class. John Strickland's activism is more generated by "inner" reasons: the "attacks of Ilychitis" which push him to find a psychological and "spiritual" satisfaction caring for the working-class in the way he thinks is the best: running for the Labour Party. Furthermore, while Bill Anderton is uncompromisingly devoted to the cause, John Strickland has to constantly compromise with his social class. This inner struggle often results in awkward attempts to stage his socialism, to artificially pose as a socialist militant. For example he finds himself 'caught between two conflicting ideals of society' deciding upon the model of car to purchase<sup>162</sup>, or he argues with his wife Clare about which school to choose for their son Tom, whether private or state school. While stressing in a sophisticated speech the importance of the social mix, and asserting the fundamental role of comprehensive schools in this regard, finally he needs to compromise with both his wife and his social status. When Clare affirms: 'Anyway, all the Labour leaders send their children to public schools'<sup>163</sup>, he accepts the reality of the facts. It is interesting here to note how, as in *The Rotters' Club*, the school is the point at which political ideology and domestic life collides. Families wish to give their children the best education possible, regardless of the fact that private schools are institutions often perceived in contrast with the leftist ideology.

Further in the novel we find an explanation of this compromise. John Strickland

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<sup>162</sup> Read, P. P. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>163</sup> Read, P. P. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 79.

is aware that ‘a new bourgeoisie [...] had expropriated and exploited the Welfare State’<sup>164</sup>. Through Strickland’s words the author produces social criticism of that “leftist elite”, or ‘state-employed elite’ as defined in the novel, which ‘[i]nstead of scrambling to save money to send their children to private schools [...] schemed to get them into some chosen comprehensive which [...] was then packed with the progeny of up-and-coming couples while the children of the working classes were relegated as before to the second-class schools’<sup>165</sup>. Interestingly both in *A Married Man* and *The Rotters’ Club* through the stories of the characters, the authors provide a criticism of schooling system based on lack of equal opportunities and elitism<sup>166</sup>.

Another difference between the political activism of the two characters clearly regards aims and forms of their activism. Bill Anderton is a trade unionist and, because he is a leader of a trade union at Leyland factory, his activism is pursued in constant contact with the workers and their struggles. By contrast, John Strickland has a more distant view of the needs of the working-class and his activism is aimed at a personal achievement: a seat in the Parliament as Labour MP. Paradoxically, in this regard it is possible to find similarities between John Strickland and Doug Anderton, Bill’s son, at least in terms of perspectives. In fact, after falling in love with a girl belonging to the upper class, Doug becomes “enamoured” of the lifestyle of the wealthiest classes<sup>167</sup>, and once he has grown up and he has become a famous journalist, he still continues his fierce activism in favour of the working-class but from a perspective closer to that of

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<sup>164</sup> Read, P. P. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>165</sup> Read, P. P. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>166</sup> In *The Rotters’ Club* notably Doug Anderton, Bill’s son, together with Steve Richards, is the only student belonging to working-class and throughout the novel it is stressed the social barriers determined by an iniquitous schooling system. Moreover, at the beginning of the novel, it is exactly through his ideas about the fairness of school in Britain, which the character Bill Anderton and his political activism is introduced (p. 16).

<sup>167</sup> In *The Rotters’ Club*, in fact we find the story of Doug and his encounter with Ffion: ‘Doug lost something important that night. Not his virginity... What he yielded... was less easy to define... It had to do with his sense of self, his belonging, his loyalty to the place he came from. In the space of a few hours, a lifelong allegiance was severed, and a newer more tenuous one formed. That night... he became enamoured of the upper classes’ (pp 164-165).

John Strickland even if he reached it through a path opposite to that of the main character of *A Married Man*.

Moreover, despite the fact that the two characters belong to completely different contexts (age, social position, psychology, life experience), it is also interesting to compare John Strickland and *The Rotters' Club*'s Ben Trotter. The point of convergence is clearly the social and moral "awakening" which both characters undergo. On one side, in the case of Ben Trotter maturity and experiences of life produce an understanding of the conditions of society. On the other side it is a sort of mid-age review of his life that leads John Strickland to the rediscovery of his lost idealism. However, what is interesting to stress is the role of literature which is crucial in both "awakenings": in the case of Ben Trotter his literary ambitions trigger his analysis and produce the awareness of the necessity to understand the society and to look critically at it. Literature acts similarly in the case of John Strickland who is led to rediscover his forgotten and denied part by a literary work of Tolstoy. *The Life and Death of Ivan Ilych* works, in fact, as a stimulus for him to begin to question his lifestyle, his attitude toward life and society. Finally, both characters are compelled by literature to review their approaches to life and to decide to give their contribution to society, leaving behind the social indifference, which had characterised their existence. Inescapably, these two episodes draw attention to the social role of literature as "social and moral awakener" and on the role of literature as bridge between the macrocosmic and the microcosmic as asserted by Connor<sup>168</sup>.

In addition, the two novels share the aim to represent the effects of history on the life of people. As for *The Rotters' Club* (but also for *Union Street* and *The Ice Age* as previously seen) the energy crisis, the miners' strike, the spectre of sudden power cuts,

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<sup>168</sup> Connor, S. (1996) *ibid.* p. 7.



the shortage of petrol and coal, and the austerity imposed to deal with that crisis and with severe inflation are pivotal events for the representation of the conditions of life in Britain during the seventies in Read's novel. In *A Married Man* as in the other novels examined, the centrality of these events to characterise the narration, setting it precisely in that epoch of British history, is indisputable. In *A Married Man* the author chooses to refer to these events mentioning how they affect the daily life of people, especially in its common aspects. In the novel we can find, in fact, different references to the energy crisis and its consequences on lives of people such as endangering their life while they are driving at night during a sudden power cut which switches all the road lights off<sup>169</sup>, obliging people to interrupt their dinner and talk by candlelight<sup>170</sup> or modifying behaviour and rules and generally their lifestyle:

On 2 January 1974, they returned to London at fifty miles per hour. Since the beginning of the year this speed limit had been imposed by the government to conserve fuel. Moreover electricity was now only supplied to industry on three days a week, and no television was broadcast after half past ten at night<sup>171</sup>.

Furthermore as in *The Rotters' Club* the "weltanschauung" of the seventies in Britain also in *A Married Man* is represented through the narration of the fierce political contrapositions, the struggle against the policies of austerity, descriptions of the worsened life conditions of workers, and of the fierce disputes which spread fear of prolonged series of strikes. This historical context and the continuous perspective of strikes dominates the conversations among people in Read's novel exactly like the novels previously analysed:

The increase in the oil prices means that everyone will have to take a cut in their standard of living. No one's going to like that – least of all the working

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<sup>169</sup> Read, P. P. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>170</sup> Read, P. P. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>171</sup> Read, P. P. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 157.

classes [...] There's a meeting of miners next month [...] they're likely to vote for a ban on overtime – even a strike<sup>172</sup>.

As in *The Rotters' Club* also in Read's novel the key-moment that triggers the social conflict is identified with the introduction of the State of Emergency declared by Heath's government:

The Conservative government had introduced a wages policy to control inflation – it was called Phase Three – and the trades unions would not accept it. The workers in the coalmines and the power stations refused to work overtime, so the supply of electricity dwindled and the Electricity Board was obliged to cut off whole blocks of their customers in turn<sup>173</sup>.

Interestingly Coe's novel and *A Married Man* diverge in perspectives on this issue. In fact, while in Coe's novel the reader is introduced to these historical events and to the effect of them on life of people from a multi-dimensional perspective, even if often the point of view of the labour movement is preferred, in *A Married Man* it is possible to find a representation of the same reality mostly filtered by characters belonging to the opposite side of many of the characters of *The Rotters' Club*. The upper class and its political expressions, conservatism and Thatcherism in its embryonic phase, are the filters chosen for the focalisation of the novel. The novel offers a view of the radical criticism of the policies of the trade unions among people of the wealthiest elite, represented in the novel by the friends and relatives of John Strickland who 'all shared the view that the Communists would have used the Labour Party to take over the country'<sup>174</sup> and that 'the current industrial unrest was a fruit of the Communist conspiracy to subvert society'<sup>175</sup>. The depiction of the circle of friends of John Strickland sheds light, particularly through the character Henry Mascall, a political and

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<sup>172</sup> Read, P. P. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>173</sup> Read, P. P. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>174</sup> Read, P. P. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>175</sup> Read, P. P. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 184.

sentimental rival of Strickland and his natural counterpart, on the rising neoliberal policies such as limiting the freedom to strike and the influence of the trade unions on the economic policies of the government<sup>176</sup>. Both Coe's and Read's novels, therefore, offer a depiction of "circles" formed by members of the wealthiest classes who elaborate policies to replace the post-war politics of consensus with neoliberal policies and the free market. However, the literary representation of these "circles" diverges completely in the two novels. *The Rotters' Club* opts for a parodic approach, in *A Married Man* the tone is more "dramatic" and stresses the fierceness of political contraposition and the opposition to the welfare state and the politics of consensus considered as ruinous. Finally both *The Rotters' Club* and *A Married Man* attempt to provide a wide portrait of some issues of the seventies<sup>177</sup>, providing opposing points of view.

In this chapter I have examined how the historical perspective of the novels considered varies and how they influence also the literary forms deployed to deal with history. While Coe's novel goes toward postmodern narrative fragmentation, the other novels analysed adhere more closely to the canon of the social realist novel. Moreover, *The Rotters' Club*'s viewpoint on history is clearly retrospective, while novels such as *The Ice Age* and *A Married Man* tends to interpret the historical moment while it is in progress. All the novels considered present the issue of the representation of social classes. From the analysis of *The Rotters' Club* and *Union Street*, arises more specifically the question of working-class agency and the relation between the novel form and the depiction of the condition of the working-class. This is an issue which will

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<sup>176</sup> Read, P. P. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 16 and p. 30.

<sup>177</sup> In *A Married Man*, on the contrary of the other novels taken in account, the Irish situation and the issue of nationalism and race is not mentioned for the portrayal of history of Britain during the seventies. The novel, as noticed, rather focuses on the political antagonism and on the issue of strikes and trade unionism.

return also in the analysis of the other novels in later chapters.

The conceptual ground of all the novels is, to put it in Williams's words, that '[s]ociety is outside the people, though at times, even violently, it breaks in on them'<sup>178</sup>. This is a concept underlying all the literary works analysed in my thesis, as we will see in the next chapters.

Similarly in the other chapters I will return to the concept of nostalgia. I have seen in this chapter that it is a fundamental idea underlying *The Rotters' Club* and the novels in the comparative section. Nostalgia appears here as a criticism of the present political condition and a praise of the politics of consensus. However, it appears also a paralysing force. This paralysing effect is epitomised by the character of Ben and expressed metaphorically through his impossibility to move on his relationship with Cicely. The significance of nostalgia will be return also in *What a Carve Up!* and in *The Closed Circle* and in both cases it has an ambivalent role.

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<sup>178</sup> Williams, R. (1961) *ibid.*, p. 282.

## Chapter 2

### 2.1 - *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep*

The election of Margaret Thatcher on 4<sup>th</sup> May 1979 was undeniably a pivotal event in British history and one of the events that contributed to shape the condition of the contemporary world. The effects of her monetarist and neoliberal policies are still, twenty-four years after she left office, tremendously tangible.

Neoliberalism is currently the dominant ideology in the western world and Thatcher's Britain was a laboratory for this economical and socio-political approach. Thatcher's revolution is so significant that still today she generates contrasting opinions on her roles as a politician and as woman and leader. The effect of her legacy on feminism and gender equality is also an issue still debated. On one side she is praised as a role model in a world where still there are few women in leadership positions. On the other side, the social conservatism of her policies, the self-proclaimed role of "housekeeper of Britain" and the economic policies that penalised particularly women from the lowest income families are among the arguments proposed by those who criticise her legacy on the role of women<sup>179</sup>.

Due to her role in British history, Thatcher (and Thatcherism) has been the subject of many different art works; in this regard Coe's literary representations of Thatcherism contribute importantly to a critical rereading and interpretation of that time and to the reconstruction of a crucial historical period. In fact, a broad portrait of Thatcher's period constitutes the core of what I would call Coe's "political saga",

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<sup>179</sup> Recently the release of Phyllida Lloyd's film *The Iron Lady* (2011) has inescapably revived the controversy regarding the figure of the ex-Prime Minister and her policies, with inevitable argumentations in favour or against her political activity. (*The Guardian* for example has dedicated a series of articles about the controversy generated by the release of the film in which Meryl Streep plays the role of the ex-Prime Minister: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/movie/140396/iron-lady> [accessed on 9th January 2012].)

comprising not only *What a Carve Up!* (1994) and *The House of Sleep* (1997), novels specifically about Thatcher's era, but also other overtly political works of Coe such as the previously discussed *The Rotters' Club* (2001), *The Closed Circle* (2004) and *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* (2010) which will be analysed in the third chapter. In Coe's literary representation of the social changes that occurred in Britain in the last four decades the key pivot is the Thatcher's period, a choice that rightly acknowledges the momentousness of her revolution. In Coe's literary forms the significance of the dismissal of the welfare state as built after the Second World War is literarily translated in a shift from the *bildungsroman* to the fragmented forms of postmodern narration. Thatcher's negation of the existence of society is therefore represented literarily through the "explosion" of the linear narration of the *bildungsroman* and its web of social relations among characters into a fragmented and a-spatial narration of individuals that well represents Thatcherism's praise of individualism. However, as we will see later, these individual and fragmented stories are eventually connected to show the influences of history on the lives of people. In Coe's novels, fragmented stories reflect the social isolation caused by the erosion of the community ties and the defencelessness in a society with renewed class-based vertical relationships among their members.

As seen in the previous chapter, the author tracks back Thatcherism in *The Rotters' Club* where he describes the rupture of the post-war consensus. *The Rotters' Club* is a nostalgic journey back to the pre-Thatcher Britain which retrieves the community-based and welfare state society.

Coe's reconstruction of memory and his critical analysis of recent British history continues with the description of the eighties of Thatcher in two novels which were actually published before *The Rotters' Club*: his most praised work *What a Carve Up!* (1994) and *The House of Sleep* (1997). Head considers the first 'the most significant

novel about the effects of Thatcherism’<sup>180</sup>. It is indeed an attempt to investigate characteristics and legacies of Thatcherism, highlighting its effects on people’s life. It is a novel that ‘places its judgment of Thatcherism tellingly in a broader post-war perspective’<sup>181</sup>. *The House of Sleep*, on the other side, through a fascinating and disturbing narration focuses rather on a specific issue of Thatcherism: the introduction of the market logics in the NHS, which was one of the most controversial Thatcherite reforms, as universal and free health assistance is widely recognised as a foundational institution and a significant symbol of the welfare state.

Although these two novels were published before *The Rotters’ Club*, they form the “second chapter” of Coe’s hypothetical political saga about the changes of British society. In fact, reading the political novels of Coe in a temporal-setting-based sequence, from the seventies of *The Rotters’ Club* to the nineties and early 2000s of *The Closed Circle* and the 2010s of *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, passing through the eighties and the early nineties of *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep*, it is possible to apply to them the concept of social *bildungsroman*, and read them as a political and historical saga. However, this interpretation of the genre visibly subverts the classic *bildungsroman*’s canon. In fact, the *bildungsroman*’s hero’s growth process is usually described in terms of improvement. On the contrary, through a fierce social criticism, Coe provides a bleak image of Britain during the eighties that conveys the idea that Thatcher’s policies did not produce any social advancement: ‘The 1980s weren’t a good time for me, on the whole. I suppose they weren’t for a lot of people’<sup>182</sup> says Michael Owen, the protagonist of *What a Carve Up!*, the character who embodies

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<sup>180</sup> Head, D. (2002) *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 35.

<sup>181</sup> Head, D. (2002) *ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>182</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *What a Carve Up!*. London: Penguin, p. 102.

the authorial consciousness. *What a Carve Up!*, in fact, is ‘a furious indictment of the prime minister [Thatcher] and the impact her economic slashing had on Britain’<sup>183</sup>.

While *The Rotters’ Club* follows more closely canons of classic realism, *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep* present postmodern narrative forms. Therefore the analysis of the historical issues treated in these novels are framed in debate around the political engagement of postmodern literary works.

Head affirms that *What a Carve Up!* ‘holds up [...] the consequences of Thatcherite free-enterprise, privatisation, and deregulation: the hypocrisy of the arms to Iraq affair; the undermining of the National Health Service; the intellectual impoverishment of the media; a sequence of stock-market scandals; the poisoning of the food chain in the pursuit of profit; and the displacement of aesthetic values in the art world’<sup>184</sup>. In *What a Carve Up!* these issues are analysed through the meta-fictional chronicle of the Winshaw family.

The first two sections of the second chapter are organised according to the analysis of the forms deployed by Coe to deal with issues such as deregulation, privatisation and marketization in different contexts related to the various characters and stories of *What a Carve Up!*. I firstly look at the characterisation of the Winshaws, and at the relations between these characters and the actual historical reality. The following section is centred on issues of representations and literary interpretations of the reform of the NHS, focusing also on *The House of Sleep*. In the third section I discuss the narrative forms deployed by Coe and the techniques used and I analyse more closely the character of Michael Owen.

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<sup>183</sup> Trimm, R. (2010) ‘Carving Up Value: The Tragicomic Thatcher Years in Jonathan Coe’, in Hadley, L., Ho, E. (eds) *Thatcher and After: Margaret Thatcher and Her Afterlife in Contemporary Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 158.

<sup>184</sup> Head, D. (2002) *ibid.*, p. 58.



Finally I discuss the works of Coe in relation to the topic of the historical and political engagement of postmodernism.

### **2.1.1 - Free-enterprise, Privatisations, Deregulations**

Thatcher's policies aimed to stimulate the free-market and to boost the financial sector but severely affected the national welfare state and the socio-economic condition of the poor and the working classes. In both *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep* this perspective, widely shared among the critics of Thatcherism, is translated in a narration that highlights the effects of Thatcher's policies on the lives of common people. In *What a Carve Up!* this idea is metaphorically represented through the vicissitudes of the main character Michael Owen, whose life and those of the people around him and those of the influential members of the Winshaw family, who epitomise Thatcherism, are inescapably intermingled. Through narrative devices that aim to highlight the ineluctable effects of the Winshaw family on the life of the other characters, Coe thus conveys the idea of relations between politics, history and individuals, and specifically the fateful influence of the wealthiest elites in power on the lives of ordinary people. This idea finds its climax in one of the most tragic episodes of the novel that I analyse later: the story of Fiona's death of which an over-worked market-driven NHS seems responsible. 'I don't believe in accidents any more. There's an explanation for everything and there's always someone to blame'<sup>185</sup>, Michael's words clearly imply the accountability of the political establishment for pursuing policies that affect people's lives. Making the NHS work according to market values means that some lives can even become expendable. The tragic events related to Fiona's

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<sup>185</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 412.

illness proceed in relation to descriptions of the marketization of NHS and represent the results of the process of marketization of the health system on the lives of people. In doing so, Coe's narration relates unequivocally the two happenings.

Michael Owen begins to understand the links between politics and individuals the moment he accepts Tabitha Winshaw's commission to write a chronicle of the Winshaw family, and then meets Fiona who unlocks his life frozen in a pre-adult world. Before meeting Fiona he is, in fact, trapped in an adolescent dimension and his continued immobility is essentially a nihilistic negation of any movement forward in time. Michael is a peculiar bildungsroman's character. Like Calvino's Baron, he decides to interrupt the process of growth to avoid contact with the sorrows produced by history<sup>186</sup>. However, Michael is a purely post-industrial "Baron" because his shelter is the mechanical reproduction of an artificial reality on a TV screen. The encounter with Fiona and the Winshaws is a slap on his face, a punch that compels him to look at reality and finally to grow up.

While revaluating the sources he collected for the biography of the Winshaws, Michael gets increasingly familiar with the family's endeavours and enterprises and 'discovers [...] [that their] projects are directly and indirectly responsible for personal wounds he suffers – most especially the deaths of loved ones that bring home the realities of Thatcherism'<sup>187</sup>. The characterisation of the Winshaw family's members works in the way that each of the scions of the Winshaws, endorsing enthusiastically the policies of Thatcherism, embodies a specific aspect of it in different fields of British public life. The Winshaws' centrality in the novel and the description of their occupation of Britain's public life is indeed a representation and a denunciation of the

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<sup>186</sup> Calvino, I. (1957) *The Baron in the Trees*. London (1959): Collins.

<sup>187</sup> Trimm, R. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 158.

carving up of country operated by the government headed by Thatcher and by the Thatcherite acolytes. The title of the novel<sup>188</sup> refers specifically to the “carving up” operated by Thatcherism. In fact, talking about the inclusion of references to the film which had obsessed him, Coe stated: ‘when I made that choice to use it [Jackson’s *What a Carve up!*], the political idea immediately came to be at the same time, because I thought *What a Carve Up!* is the title I want for a novel about the Thatcher’s years’<sup>189</sup>. Owen’s denunciation of the Winshaws is therefore an explicit criticism of Thatcherism and its values. As Thurschwell<sup>190</sup>, Marsh<sup>191</sup>, and Trimm<sup>192</sup> have noted, each of the members of the last generation of the Winshaws ‘represents a different aspect of the eighties establishment’<sup>193</sup>: Hilary is the tabloid columnist who uses the force of the media to shape public opinion and to make it prepared to accept the Thatcherite agenda uncritically; Henry is the opportunist politician who has passed from the Labour Party to the Conservative Party, the mastermind behind the policies of privatisations and deregulations; Roddy is the art dealer who introduces the arts to the values of the market and consumer fruition; Dorothy is the agro-food business woman who profits from the brutal rules of intensive farming and from the production of unhealthy, cholesterol-filled food targeted at the lower strata of society due to their cost-cutting prices allowed by the policies of deregulation in farming; Thomas is the banker who through speculations and insider trading finances the enterprises of the family. He is indeed a representation of the “heroes” of the deregulated City celebrated by Thatcher for

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<sup>188</sup> The title of the novel is borrowed from *What a Carve Up!* (1961) directed by Pat Jackson and based on Frank King’s *The Ghoul* (1933). We read in the novel that the young Michael Owen watched that film during a Summer evening at cinema. Since then he has been obsessed with it and specifically with the scene when Shirley Eaton undresses.

<sup>189</sup> Moseley, M. (2001) ‘Jonathan Coe (1961 -)’ *British Novelists since 1960. Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Boston: Gale, p. 71.

<sup>190</sup> Thurschwell, P. (2006) ‘Genre, Repetition and History in Jonathan Coe’, in Tew, P., Mengham, R. (eds), *British fiction Today*. London: Continuum, p. 30

<sup>191</sup> Marsh, N. (2007) ‘Bang, Boom, Bust: The Fortune of the City. II, Revision and Retrospect: Representation of the City in Jonathan Coe’s *What a Carve Up!* and Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty*’, *Money, Speculation and Finance in Contemporary British Fiction*. London: Continuum, p. 81.

<sup>192</sup> Trimm, R. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>193</sup> Marsh, N. (2007) *ibid.*, p. 81.

producing wealth easily through the “magical” instruments of finance. He is also the investor in the film industry who epitomises the sexualisation and “pornification” of the commercial film industry; Mark is the cynical weapons trader who benefits from the geo-political instability and from the conflicts in the Middle East.

The role of war in the story of the Winshaw family is highlighted by a narrative structure that links two conflicts to the destiny of the family. The novel opens, in fact, with an event related to the Second World War, the recounting of death of Godfrey Winshaw, together with Mortimer the good-hearted one among the Winshaw characters, shot down by the Nazi’s anti-aircraft artillery during a flight indicator over Berlin in 1942 while he was serving in the RAF. His brother Lawrence betrays Godfrey passing the information about the secret flight to the Nazis in exchange for money and privileges, which will help Lawrence to expand the fortune of the Winshaws<sup>194</sup>. This episode suggests the idea that the Winshaws’ wealth has an evil origin. The narration then moves chronologically to 1991, exactly at the beginning of the war campaign against the Iraq of Saddam Hussein, with whom Mark had traded, and whose regime had been supported by Hilary when the dictator was the friend of the West in the Middle-East<sup>195</sup>. The link between the Winshaws and the wars ineluctably suggests continuity between the perverse mechanisms of power, with war as the most tragic result, played by the ruling elites at the expenses of the common people, and that these elites literally make profits from deaths. Mark, in fact, is indifferent to any outcome of the war; he is only concerned about its continuation so he can make increasingly more money as the war rages. These interrelations among the different enterprises of the Winshaws, and among the various aspects of the carving up of public life, and the idea that the lives of people are determined by the decisions of a greedy minority of “better

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<sup>194</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 3

<sup>195</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 411, pp. 369-400, pp. 63-64.

offs”, underlie the political criticism of the literary works of Coe as well as the whole narrative of *What a Carve Up!*. Talking about his novel, Coe stressed this aspect in a 1999 interview:

It’s a book about how, if you have a small group of people essentially running every aspect of the country, which we do, everything is going to connect up. You’re going to find that there are the same people with fingers in every pie. That’s really the message of the book – not that we’re controlled by the fate, but by a small group of people who make up the establishment<sup>196</sup>.

The enterprises of the members of the family are effectively connected, and part of a well-designed plan of carving up any aspect of the public life of the country. Thurschwell describes these connections and the cause-effect relations between people and events in terms of ‘repetitions’: she explains that the narration of *What a Carve Up!* is based on a continuous return of events originated by malevolent causes. She argues, in fact, that ‘in the psychotic state of Thatcher’s 1980s [...] everyone turns out to be connected to everyone else, because power is invested in the hands of very few, who pull the strings and control the puppet show’<sup>197</sup>.

The Winshaws’ plan to carve up the country is implemented through some of the most controversial Thatcherite policies. Winshaw’s omnipresence in every sphere of public life coincides with the effective entrenchment of Thatcherism in the economic, political and social life of Britain since the 1980s. Consequently, the parodic and farcical literary representation of the 1980s state of affairs in *What a Carve Up!* is a fierce instrument of political and social criticism.

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<sup>196</sup> Interview with Jonathan Coe, ‘A Slice of Satire’, *You*, 4 July 199, pp. 78, cited in Thurschwell, P. (2006) *ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>197</sup> Thurschwell, P. (2006) *ibid.*, p. 35.

In the following paragraphs I analyse how Thatcherite policies are represented and criticised in *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep*. However, I firstly highlight a point that is worth considering: the Winshaws are described as one the wealthiest families in Britain, which coincides with the fact that the members of Thatcher's cabinet were all wealthy people with connections to industry, business and finance<sup>198</sup>. According to Paul Foot it was even the wealthiest cabinet since 1822<sup>199</sup>. This evidence matches Coe's notion of a small elite that is running the country and consequently conditioning the lives of people, offering the basis for the socio-political criticism deployed in the novel.

In the section dedicated to Henry, the politician who started his career with the Labour party to switch subsequently to the Conservative Party, the young Winshaw in his memoirs dated 1942 recalls his uncle Godfrey mentioning a 'Beaveredge (?) Report which apparently says that everyone is going to have a better standard of living [...] even the working classes'<sup>200</sup>. The report recalled is, as specified in a footnote<sup>201</sup> to the text, the Social Insurance and Allied Services by William Henry Beveridge, the foundational blueprint for the welfare state and the NHS. Henry's distortion of the name from Beveridge to Beaveredge, as Trimm says, anticipates the 'loathing' for the forms of social care of the adult Henry<sup>202</sup>. This attitude signals an important affinity with the Thatcher's agenda considering that it was characterised by a drastic discontinuity with the post-war consensus and by the aversion toward the structures of social inclusiveness at the basis of the idea of welfare state. As fierce Thatcherite supporters the Winshaws support the disarticulation of the welfare state in favour of policies of privatisation, deregulation and the free-market. Obviously this support is dictated exclusively by the

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<sup>198</sup> Childs, D. (2001) *Britain since 1945. A Political History*. London: Routledge, pp. 213-214.

<sup>199</sup> Foot, P. cited in Childs, D. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>200</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, pp. 119-120.

<sup>201</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>202</sup> Trimm, R. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 165.

search for personal gain in economic and social terms that characterises all their enterprises and actions.

Thatcher promised to revive the grandeur and the efficiency of British capitalism. Giving free hands to financial capitalism was the strategy she considered most viable. This needed a clear cut with the forms of assistance of welfare state<sup>203</sup>: ‘the solution [...] was to restore the primacy of the market, which alone could make the country economically competitive again, and to contract the state to its proper, neglected functions of police and defence’<sup>204</sup>. However, the revolution to be complete needed a reshape of British society from its foundations; in other words it needed principally a cultural change and a “Thatcherisation” of every aspect. This is ultimately the carving up mentioned by Coe and represented through the characterization of the Winshaws. The various activities of the different members of the family, and particularly their interrelations, are literary representations of the Thatcherite web around the country and how it gradually produced the radical change of British society.

Hilary represents the voice of propaganda, the demagogic and influential tabloid columnist whose role is not to inform, but rather to form the public opinion according to the needs of the political and economic establishment that pampers her financially. Ironically she begins her journalistic career writing for a column entitled “Plain common sense”, a title which refers parodically to the targeted audience, the middle-England which formed the core of Thatcher’s supporters. ‘Ms Winshaw was paid a yearly fee equivalent to six times the salary of a qualified school teacher and eight times that of a staff nurse in the National Health Service’<sup>205</sup>. The last sentence highlights the change of priorities in the market-oriented Thatcherite Britain. Hilary during a meeting

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<sup>203</sup> Seldon, A., Collings, D. (2000) *Britain under Thatcher*. London: Longman.

<sup>204</sup> Harris, J. (2003) ‘Tradition and Transformation: Society and Civil Society in Britain 1945-2001’ in Burk, K. (ed.) *The British Isles since 1945*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 121.

<sup>205</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 63.

at the BBC where she has been hired, yawns at the comments of Alan Beamish, the old-style quality programme TV producer, about the importance of good and informative TV to ‘collapse class distinctions and [...] [to] create a sense of national identity’<sup>206</sup>. Hilary comments range over gossip, politics, and culture. Hilary also tries to influence the public opinion on the miners’ strikes: ‘Shame on you, Mr Scargill! *How dare you put selfish greed before national interests!*’<sup>207</sup>; Hilary distracts the audience from bad news such as the High Court’s decision in favour of the trade unions in a dispute, addressing the audience with a glamorous and trivial headline: ‘It’s boobs at ten!’<sup>208</sup>. Hilary is also the voice of war propaganda: therefore according to the necessity of the establishment Saddam Hussein is first ‘*a man we can do business with*’<sup>209</sup> and then a bloody dictator, and a threat for the world. It is not by chance that when the times change according to the Thatcherite agenda and the TV is turned into that instrument of mass propaganda of consumerist values that Pasolini had prophesied<sup>210</sup>, the post-war idealist producer of ‘authoritative bulletins [...] lighter programmes which maintain the highest standard in music and entertainment’<sup>211</sup>, the ‘frightfully left-wing’<sup>212</sup> Alan Beamish, once Hilary is appointed with a managerial role at Broadcasting Company, is sacked for a comment about the decline of the broadcasting service in *The Independent* entitled *The Barbarians at the Gate*<sup>213</sup>, in which Hilary was described as an example of decline of culture<sup>214</sup>.

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<sup>206</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 68

<sup>207</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>208</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>209</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>210</sup> Pasolini, P.P. (1975) *Scritti Corsari*. Milan: Garzanti.

<sup>211</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>212</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>213</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>214</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 84



The barbarians aren't at the gate any more, Alan. Unfortunately, you left the gate swinging wide open. So we went right inside, and now we've got all the best seats and our feet up on the table. And we intend to stay here for a long, long time<sup>215</sup>.

Hilary's brutal and mocking words represent the conclusive step of carving up of the media occurred in the eighties. However, Hilary's ambitions are not limited to the columns of a newspaper and to TV. During a conversation with his editor, 'a forty-year-old Oxford graduate called Patrick Mills' in the office of the publishing company once independent and then 'swallowed up by an American conglomerate'<sup>216</sup> that published his first novel, Michael Owen finds out that Hilary Winshaw is going to get a book published. Mill's dramatic outburst denounces the changes in the notion of culture determined by marketization and by the responsible of these changes:

'Oh, yes, they're all at it now, you know. It's not enough to be stinking rich [...]: these people want the fucking immortality! They want their names in the British Library catalogue [...] 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've 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!*'<sup>217</sup>

This part ineluctably emphasises the transformation of culture into a product of mass consumption undergone under neoliberalism<sup>218</sup>. Accordingly, Hilary Winshaw, a typical example of the media celebrity figure that, according to Baudrillard, provides

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<sup>215</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>216</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>217</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>218</sup> The transformation of culture in product of mass consumption operated by capitalism has always attracted attention since the formation of liberalism in the XIX century and throughout the XX century with the Modernist artistic production and then with the rise of Postmodernism. In this regard, volumes such as Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1875), the books of Raymond Williams and Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (1970) are seminal works on this subject.

‘economic stimulus for consumption’<sup>219</sup>, replaces Dostoevsky on the bookshelf of the 1980s. In this section of the novel is thus affirmed that the advent of neoliberalism introduced by Thatcherism is specifically the agent of change of the idea of culture. Culture becomes something assessable at the stock market as any other commodities or services. As Patrick Mill tells Michael Owen talking about the editorial meetings: ‘Nobody gives a tinker’s fuck about fiction any more, not real *fiction*, and the only kind of [...] values anybody seems to care about are the ones that can be added up on the balance sheet’<sup>220</sup>.

The transformation of culture and works of art into commodities and the audience into undistinguishable mass consumers is enacted through what Smart defines as an operation of seduction<sup>221</sup>. In fact, as Bauman asserted the consumers need to be ‘exposed to new temptations’<sup>222</sup>. This seduction becomes a marketing tool to sell the desire to possess commodities. It eventually borders with pornography and its marketization of the bodies and desire. Deleuze and Guattari explain that ‘Lack (*manque*) is created, planned, and organised in and through social production’ (1972, p. 28). They subsequently add:

The deliberate creation of lack as a function of market economy is the art of the dominant class. This involves deliberately organizing wants and needs (*manque*) amid an abundance of production; making all desire teeter and fall victim to the great fear of not having one’s needs satisfied<sup>223</sup>.

Seduction in consumer society serves the purpose to sell desire for something that it is artificially advertised as lacking so that everyone feels the need to fulfil this need and to feel as accomplished as anyone else.

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<sup>219</sup> Baudrillard, J. (1989) *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage, p. 46.

<sup>220</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 102.

<sup>221</sup> Smart, B. (2003) *Economy, Culture and Society. A sociological critique of neo-liberalism*. Buckingham: Open University Press, pp. 65-69.

<sup>222</sup> Bauman, Z. (1998) *Work, Consumerism and The New Poor*. Buckingham: Open University Press, p. 26.

<sup>223</sup> Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. (1972) *ibid.*, p. 28.

In *What a Carve Up!* concepts related to the of marketization of individuality, creativity and body are embodied particularly through the characterisations of Roddy and Thomas Winshaw.

Roddy is the art dealer who values works of art in terms of marketability without taking into account the intrinsic artistic quality of a work. In the episode when Roddy is talking to the naïve artist Phoebe who is in search of a gallery that could exhibit her works, the art dealer affirms that ‘in today’s market [...] it’s naïve to suppose that you can promote an artist’s work in isolation from his personality. There has to be an image, something you can market through the newspapers and magazines’<sup>224</sup>. This sounds very much like Baudrillard’s definition of stimulus for consumption. Roddy explains the neoliberal idea of art: the artist in order to appeal to the market and the consumers has to turn into an icon, a symbol of a marketable lifestyle, an image that continuously feeds the artificially created consumers’ needs<sup>225</sup>. This is the reason why the artist Phoebe feels unease talking about art with Roddy<sup>226</sup>: the latter is not interested in art but in marketing. Phoebe believes that she is dealing with someone who shares her interests but this is a false perception. On the contrary Roddy’s focus is on her body: the whole scene underpins the idea of the woman artist as a saleable commodity. Roddy is a man of marketing who is interested in producing and selling products, specifically the commodified image of the artist. Here we find again the notion of seduction in relation to marketing. As said before, the consumer needs to be seduced to be convinced to purchase a product. The connections between seduction and market are evidently embodied in the enterprises of Roddy. Since his first meeting with Phoebe, he is merely interested in her physical appearance thus he relates to her not as an artist but the object

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<sup>224</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, pp. 177-178.

<sup>225</sup> see among others: Baudrillard, J. (1989) *ibid.*

Klein, N. (2001) *No Logo*. London: Flamingo.

Smart, B. (2003) *ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 178.

of his sexual desires. This can be interpreted metaphorically as the transformation of the artist and art into objects of consumer desire. Roddy's consumer desire is for the body of Phoebe, not for her artistic productions. The fact that ultimately she "surrenders" to his seduction can be read as a metaphor for the surrender of the art to the market at the time of neoliberalism and Thatcherism. In Roddy's case seduction stands as the commodification of the woman artist as an erotic product to buy and sell. Moreover the fact that they "consummate" a sexual relation in the Winshaws' house can be read as a further metaphor to express the idea that art and culture surrender to market in the "temple" of neoliberalism, the Winshaws' mansion or in other words, Coe suggests, Britain at the time of Thatcherism. However, the fact that Phoebe drops her artistic aspiration to work as a nurse for the ill Mortimer Winshaw again metaphorically suggests the impossibility of a pure art if it is "polluted" by the market-based values. It also suggests that nursing could be a purer profession, but as we see in the section regarding the NHS, that is not out of the reach of Thatcher's neoliberal policies either.

Phoebe denounces the annihilation of culture under Thatcher in her description of the art in Roddy's gallery. Challenged by Hilary for her opinions, she affirms that Roddy's gallery: 'was dreadful. Elementary stuff that wouldn't even have been given a pass at any decent art school'<sup>227</sup>. Subsequently she adds that 'this is how reputations get inflated and mediocre work gets promoted, and then when a good painter does manage to slip through the net you've already pushed the prices up so high that the smaller galleries can't afford to buy them and it all ends up going into private collections'<sup>228</sup>. Phoebe's sentences are a definitive indictment of the way culture is treated in Britain under Thatcherism. The entrenchment of the neoliberal idea of art associated to market conditioned British artistic production for decades. Saunders accordingly argues that

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<sup>227</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 196.

<sup>228</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 197.

Blairite Brit-art is ‘inherently reactionary’ and that ‘the taint of Thatcherism by association could also be attributed to the figure of Charles Saatchi, the assiduous patron and collector of many of these artists [of Brit-art]’ whose works were valued ‘through [their] commercial potential’<sup>229</sup>. Saatchi is a significant figure also because his wealth comes from advertising which collapses culture and economics and relies on the above discussed idea of seduction. The development of Brit-art suggests that Thatcherism did not finish with Thatcher government but the effects of her revolution on the cultural life of Britain still persist.

The idea of marketing seduction related to the transformation of culture into commodity is present also in the section about Thomas. He is the banker and investor who finances the privatisations and the enterprises of his relatives. He is also the symbol of a certain kind of egotistic and self-celebratory financial power symbolically reflected in his masturbatory obsession, a metaphor for the solipsism and egotism of the City, intent in its self-enrichment but detached from the community. To put it in Trimm’s words, Thomas ‘ocular self-satisfaction’ and masturbatory isolation personifies the detachment of ‘the free monetary practice from regulatory obligation of the actual world of humans’<sup>230</sup>. His obsession with nude scenes in film leads him to invest in the film industry with the sole intent to access the studios during shootings of nude scenes. Similarly he greets enthusiastically the introduction of the technology of the freeze frame that can stop the video in the moment undresses: Thomas ‘was convinced that it [the freeze frame] would turn Britain into a nation of voyeurs’<sup>231</sup>. The section is centred on the idea of the commodification of art and suggests that the voyeurism of certain popular entertainment that focuses merely on “seeing” rather than on “understanding”

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<sup>229</sup> Saunders, G. (2010) ‘Sarah Kane: Cool Britannia’s Reluctant Feminist’ in Hadley, L., Ho, E. (eds), *Thatcher and After. Margaret Thatcher and her afterlife in Contemporary Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 205.

<sup>230</sup> Trimm, R. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 166.

<sup>231</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 308.

finds the roots in this marketization of art and media started under Thatcherism<sup>232</sup>. Interestingly, the story of Thomas and his voyeuristic obsession, metaphorically suggests that the drift of the film industry to rely on voyeurism, lust and on commodification of the body reflects the commodification of human beings of the neoliberal, post-industrial, postmodern era. This assertion finds its confirmation also in the light of the story of Michael and his sexual life reduced to a visual interaction with a frozen frame of a film on a screen. Both these stories highlight the reduction of the interactions among humans to a state of commodification. The freeze frame allows for voyeuristic pleasure through commodification of the image but also prevents Michael from engaging with the reality that surrounds him. Metaphorically it is here expressed the idea that the commodification of life prevent people from actively engaging with reality by locking them in a pre-fabricated dimension where reality is nothing but a product to be consumed and a space for consumer desires.

However, the character Thomas Winshaw is mainly the representative of the City, one the heroes praised by Thatcher for being able to produce wealth from nothing:

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 by describing them as ‘wealth creators’, alchemists who could conjure unimaginable fortunes out of thin air. The fact that these fortunes went straight into their pockets, or those of their employers, was quietly overlooked. The nation, for a brief, heady period, was in awe of them.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Interestingly recently the PM David Cameron has publicly asked the British Cinema Industry to focus more on the production of blockbusters rather than on art films. ‘UK PM wants film makers to focus on box office hits’ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/01/11/britain-film-idUSL6E8CB2IL20120111>. [accessed on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 2012]. I find this an interesting example of conception of art as commodity typical of the neoliberal ideology and firstly “sponsored” during Thatcher times.

<sup>233</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 310.

Thomas personifies the policies of deregulations and liberalisations of the financial market of the Thatcher's period, which have been recently blamed as the origin of the current financial turmoil and economic downturn. Thomas also represents the private entrepreneurs who benefit from the 'selling of the family silver'<sup>234</sup>, the policies of privatisation wanted by Thatcher to enact the neoliberal politics of the free market. Thomas Winshaw represents indeed the deep soul of neoliberalism. He can be considered the British equivalent of the true cultural icon of the growing neoliberalism of the 1980s: Gordon Gekko, fantastically portrayed by Michael Douglas at his top in Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* (1987). Thomas as well as Gekko represents the zeitgeist of the 1980s and the contemporary diffusion of neoliberalism on the two sides of the Atlantic.

Thomas is also the man who provides funds to boost Hilary's chances to carve up media and culture and who funds the deregulated farming procedures of Dorothy Winshaw. The latter represents the dehumanising processes of industrialised farming permitted after the deregulations of the sector. Dorothy after marrying George Brunwin, starts running his well-known farm, managing it according to the most "innovative" doctrines of the industrialised farming. Their marital disagreements represent two different concepts of farming: the traditional, "organic", farming systems of George, and the industrialised ones of Dorothy. This is also associated with Michael's childhood, as the farm is the one he used to go to play when he was a child. Obviously this connection not only reveals nostalgia for the past times when agriculture was not practiced in industrial forms, above all, it reveals a criticism of dehumanised farming

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<sup>234</sup> Harold Macmillan delivered a speech during the Tory Reform Group dinner at Royal Overseas League in which he criticised Thatcher's policies of privatisation. The speech is commonly known as 'selling the family silver', although his precise quote is: 'First of all the Georgian silver goes. And then all that nice furniture that used to be in the salon. Then the Canaletto's go' quoted in Watkins A. (1992) *A Conservative Coup. The fall of Margaret Thatcher*. London: Duckworth, p. 102.

practices in the free-market times. The nostalgia mode implies a criticism of the mechanisation of human and animal existence, where humans are fed through mechanical procedures and animals treated inhumanely and raised in appalling conditions to match productive criteria. However, nostalgia in Jamesonian terms is also part of the problem. Michael rather than confronting the historical circumstances in some productive way, moves back to the comfort zone of a past which will never come back. In a broader sense, Michael embodies the shock suffered by the critics of neoliberalism who were unable to respond adequately to a new life system that was imposing itself as dominant. Also the treatment of animals can be interpreted metaphorically. The inhuman conditions they are raised in for market purposes, packed in overcrowded cages and doped to be more productive, can be read as a sort of Orwellian dystopia: the animal farms at the times of neoliberalism, pushed to match the production criteria required by the market.

Gradually George is relegated to the margins of the family activity and surrenders to Dorothy who has turned his 'old-fashioned, modestly run family farm into one of the biggest agrichemical empires in the country [...] the [...] Brunswick Holdings PLC'<sup>235</sup>. Lobbying the Government through her brother Henry, she benefits from legislations that allow her to take over gradually even more small farms that cannot compete with the low prices of the chemically manipulated products of her company, and to deregulate the sector allowing her to use even more chemical additives and cruel forms of raising animals, all measures which rise the profit at the expense of the health of the consumers of her products<sup>236</sup>. Discussing the decision of the Government to scrap free meals from the state-run schools Henry and Dorothy say:

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<sup>235</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>236</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, pp. 244-260.



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 every day. 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 is to demoralize the enemy.'<sup>237</sup>

As Trimm states, through Dorothy and her farming practice the dissolution of the welfare under Thatcherism is explained in *What a Carve Up!* in terms of 'class warfare [...] designed to undermine Tory opponents'.<sup>238</sup> Coe suggests therefore that the Thatcherite policy of 'elevation of market at the expense of the nation'<sup>239</sup> is another move against the social well-being. Dorothy's inhuman techniques of farming and her synthetic, chemically modified, cholesterol filled food are metaphors to describe the inhumanity of the elevation of the market over the human beings hidden behind the veil of what Bauman defines as the 'aesthetics of consumption'<sup>240</sup>.

As seen before, most of the legislations regarding liberalisation, deregulations and privatisations in the book are obtained through the Tory politician Henry, who represents the ties between lobbies and politics. His parable of power is documented through a chronicle, which is also the chronicle of Thatcherism. Henry's story is narrated through pages of diary and newspapers' articles and is a symbolic representation of Thatcherism from its birth to its decline and afterlife.

Henry, influenced by his uncle Godfrey, begins his career with the Labour Party. However, during these years he had kept 'a seat on the board of several companies generously supported by Thomas's bank. Should anyone have the temerity to suggest a

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<sup>237</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, pp. 254-255.

<sup>238</sup> Trimm, R. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>239</sup> Trimm, R. (2010) *ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> Bauman, Z. (1989), *ibid.*, p. 32.

conflict of loyalty between these activities and the socialist ideals which professes so loudly in the House of Commons [...] [he] has a variety of well-rehearsed answers'<sup>241</sup>. The ambiguity of this situation anticipates criticism of the Labour Party and the accusations of hypocrisy of some of its leaders that Coe will deploy in *The Closed Circle*. Henry is inescapably linked to Margaret Thatcher, whom he feels is the right person to pursue the "politics of the Winshaws". Since his first encounter with Thatcher, he feels 'that our destinies are inextricably bound together'<sup>242</sup>. Indeed reading the story of Henry means reading the chronicle of the policies of privatisations deployed by Thatcher. With the support of the financial power of his brother Thomas, Henry engineers the carving up of the state owned assets, transferring them from the taxpayers' hands to those of private investors. In this regard, he writes in his diary: 'Thomas has agreed to help us with the flogging-off of Telecom'<sup>243</sup> [...] I told him [...] that there was going to be any number of these sell-offs over the next few years [...] steel, gas, BP, BR, electricity, water [...] just wait and see [...]'<sup>244</sup>. His words literarily depict an era and are a denunciation of private investors' greedy carving up of the country. In this regard Henry is a synecdoche for all the powers that benefited from that wave of privatisations. These powers cannot tolerate obstacle and delay in their process of carving up; when the miners-unions try to stop the sell-off and the consequent dismissal of the pits, during the celebre 1984 industrial dispute led by Scargill, Henry angrily labels them: 'A whole gang of thuggish-looking miners'<sup>245</sup>. As the idealist TV producer writes in his memories, that time was 'the high tide of Thatcherism'. In this regard, he recalls 'the last few months had seen a series of aggressive measures [...] a radical

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<sup>241</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>242</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 128

<sup>243</sup> As explained in the footnotes: 'The Telecommunications Bill for the privatizing of British Telecom was introduced into the Commons in November 1982; it was not actually passed until April 12<sup>th</sup> 1984, after Mrs Thatcher had won her second term' Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>244</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, pp. 134-135.

<sup>245</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 136.

cutting-back of the Welfare State announced in June, the GLC abolished in July, the BBC forced to abandon a documentary featuring interviews with Sinn Fein leaders [...] Mrs Thatcher implacable opposition to sanctions against South Africa [...] At the same time, the question of the Health Service continued to bubble away in the background'<sup>246</sup>. As Chomsky and Harvey state, neoliberal establishments deploys different strategies to accomplish their "mission" and to convince the public opinion of the necessity of these interventions. Among those, the construction of consent orchestrated through media<sup>247</sup>. Chomsky argues that to construct consent it is necessary that 'The general population must be excluded entirely from the economic arena, where what happens in the society is largely determined'<sup>248</sup> and stresses 'the importance of "the controlling of the public mind"'<sup>249</sup>. These concepts, represented also through the story of Hilary, find other examples in the section about Henry. On Beamish's radio programme on Radio 4, when challenged by the very well-informed doctor Jane Gillam about the issue of the NHS, Henry deploys a set of incomprehensible statistic figures that aim to confuse the audience and to predispose it to accept the opinion of someone apparently more expert on economics. In fact, as Beamish recalls: '[Henry] left the studio with the victorious air of a man who has finally conquered the medium. And I suppose, in a way, that he had'<sup>250</sup>. This section of the novel overtly refers to the innovative communication strategies designed to "manufacture consent"<sup>251</sup>. The real obsession of Henry, and thus of Thatcherite government, it is suggested, is the privatisation of the NHS though. He wishes to turn the hospitals into "provider units" [of which] sole purpose in future will

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<sup>246</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>247</sup> Chomsky, N. (1999) *Profit over People. Neoliberalism and Global Order*. New York: Seven Stories Press, pp.43-64.

Harvey, D. (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 39-63.

<sup>248</sup> Chomsky, N. (1999) *ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>249</sup> Chomsky, N.. (1999) *ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>250</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>251</sup> The neoliberal communication strategies have been studied among others in Chomsky, N., Hermann, E.S. (1988) *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon Books, which my definition refers to.

be to provide services which will be *purchased* from them by Health Authorities and fundholding GPs through *negotiated contracts*. The hospital becomes a shop, the operation becomes a piece of merchandise, and normal business practices prevail'. Henry's motto is ultimately: 'pile 'em high and sell 'em cheap'<sup>252</sup>. The issue related to the marketization of the NHS is discussed widely and closely in a dedicated section of this chapter, and the analysis of this process in *What a Carve Up!* is substantiated with the integration of the analysis of *The House of Sleep*. For the moment it is possible to conclude, assuming the way this issue is described through the characterisation of Henry that the NHS is described in the novel as a natural target of the policies of privatisations for its symbolic importance as pillar of the welfare state. Henry's obsession with it finds its roots in the neoliberal notion that the dismantling of the welfare state has necessarily to pass through the disarticulation of its primary service, the free and universal medical assistance, which has to turn into another industry from which to make profit.

However, the novel stresses that the neoliberal pragmatic approach in profit making hidden behind on the propagandistic slogan 'freedom, competition, choice'<sup>253</sup> is mere cynicism. This is highlighted in the part of the novel when the decline of Margaret Thatcher is briefly mentioned. If even the symbol of neoliberalism becomes a problem, it should be stopped, thus Henry, referring to the aftermath of the poll tax riots that marked the political end of Margaret Thatcher, remarks: "Dump the bitch... And fast"... Nothing must be allowed to stop us'<sup>254</sup>. This sentence indeed marks the afterlife of Thatcherism. Paradoxically, eliminating a figure become too unpopular, the Tory establishment managed to survive and revitalise and to lead Thatcherism in the next

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<sup>252</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

<sup>253</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>254</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 141.

decade, the 1990s, following an unprecedented fourth term in power with John Major as Prime Minister. The “dumping” of Thatcher suggests that in market culture all people are expendable. Even Thatcher herself is subject to the laws of popularity and greed, eventually the laws of the market, and that no one is spared if what is at stake is the market itself and the system of life borrowed from it.

Mark Winshaw, the weapons dealer, personifies the cynical face of neoliberal pragmatism. His cynicism turns even into the traditional notion of evil, represented through his connections with Nazis. As Trimm argues, Mark pushes the Thatcherite policy of deregulation and the stress on the profits to the most extreme ‘disregard of consequence’<sup>255</sup>. In fact, in a discussion with a German scientist who served under the Nazi regime, employed to work with the Saddam Hussein’s programme of development of chemical weapons, Mark admits to have the habit ‘of not inquiring into the uses’<sup>256</sup> of the service he provides. Mark represents the cynicism of the British (and generally Western) neo-colonial attitude that disregards horrible consequences. The mantra is to maximize the profit even at the expenses of bloody conflicts around the world and particularly in the battered Middle East. This attitude of cynical pursue of profit is metaphorically represented through the story of the assassination of Mark’s wife killed in a car blast. He is, in fact, ‘devastated by the loss [...]’ not of her, but of the ‘1962 Morgan Plus 8 Drop Head Coupé in midnight blue’<sup>257</sup>. The cynicism of the political establishment and “legalization” of the greed brings tragic consequences; the backing of the nefarious plans of Saddam Hussein foreshadows future conflicts and bloodbaths. The opportunism of the British (and Western) establishment in dealing with weapon trades for self-interest and gain is synthesized in the words of Mark when he answers

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<sup>255</sup> Trimm, R. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>256</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 377.

<sup>257</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 383.

Henry about eventual objections about dealing with Saddam: ‘Henry, what does it *matter* what he [Saddam] intends to do with them [the weapons of mass destruction Mark is selling to Saddam]? If he starts to look as though he’s in a position to do any harm, then we find an excuse to attack him and wipe out the whole arsenal. And then we start selling again’<sup>258</sup>. *What a Carve Up!* chronologically is set in 1991 and ends with the First Gulf War. Marsh states that the ‘narrative of Coe’s polemics suggests that the endemic corruption of the eighties led inevitably to the war with which the next decade began’<sup>259</sup>. From this perspective, in light of the events of recent years, it is possible to conclude affirming that Coe through the words of Mark has “prophesized” the natural consequences of the entrenchment of neoliberalism. The characterisation of the Winshaws is indeed Coe’s indictment of Thatcherism, its policies and the ideology behind it.

### 2.1.2 - The Issue of the NHS

Along with the issues previously discussed through the analysis of the characterisations of the different members of the Winshaw family, the problem of the reform of NHS during the Thatcher’s years represents the core of the political criticism deployed by Coe in his novel. However, representation of reform of the NHS is primarily a literary device that connects the core theoretical issue of Coe’s work, the effects of politics on individuals, with the literary forms. In other words, the issue of the NHS lets Coe practically represent how this influence is determined.

Debates and controversies around the introduction of the market values in the institution symbol of the welfare state are echoed in *What a Carve Up!*, and play a

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<sup>258</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 387.

<sup>259</sup> Marsh, N. (2007) *ibid.*, p. 81.

crucial role in Coe's criticism of Thatcher's policies as a whole. In this section I analyse how the marketization of the NHS is treated in *What a Carve Up!*, supporting the discourse with the analysis of *The House of Sleep*, which is also concerned with the themes of the introduction of the market logics into the NHS.

Since its creation the NHS has always represented the most appreciated and beloved institution of the welfare state, thus reform proposals in the direction of privatisation have always been rebuffed as 'electorally impracticable'<sup>260</sup>. However, in accordance with neoliberal policies and along with the privatisations of most of the state-owned companies, Thatcher intended to introduce market values in the NHS. Due to the public's sensitivity on the issue, the process progressed gradually and accompanied by claims that aimed to deny privatisations of the service. The first step of this process of marketization was the Health Service Act (1980)<sup>261</sup>. In 1983 the government commissioned a study to a committee chaired by Sir Roy Griffiths, chairman of the supermarket chain Sainsbury's Plc.. The report set the milestone of the marketization of the NHS and largely influenced the policies of the Conservative government on the issue<sup>262</sup>. Subsequently, Thatcher's government legislates to reform the NHS in 1987, 1988 and 1990<sup>263</sup>. This resulted in a reengineering of NHS management in accordance with market-based values, making it more similar to a private enterprise. Although the government stressed the increased GDP expenditure for the NHS, charges for prescriptions increased, many wards in the hospitals were obliged to close and waiting list time increased. Above all, GPs were encouraged to become

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<sup>260</sup> Childs, D. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>261</sup> Health Service Act 1980 [online] <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1980/53/contents> [accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2014].

The NHS: the Conservative Legacy, BBC [online]

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/background\\_briefings/your\\_nhs/85952.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/background_briefings/your_nhs/85952.stm) [accessed on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2012].

<sup>262</sup> Ham, C. (1999) *Health Policy in Britain. The Politics and Organisation of the National Health Service*. London: Macmillan, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, pp.27-49.

<sup>263</sup> *ibid.*, accessed on 26/01/2012 at 13:35 and Ham, C. (1982) *ibid.*

fund holders and hospitals to become trusts able to sell services and to be responsible for budgets<sup>264</sup>: '[GPs] must accept the management responsibility which goes with clinical freedom', was stated in the report<sup>265</sup>. However, Childs considers that these changes caused 'loss of morale in NHS staff and [...] lower standards of cleanliness', that the regional health authorities became 'free to buy the cheapest treatment for their patients wherever it was available'<sup>266</sup>, and that as a consequence the wealthiest patients turned to private health assistance while the worse-offs were 'shunted around the country' or abroad either because of the closure of specific wards or in search of affordable treatments<sup>267</sup>.

In *What a Carve Up!* we find an interpretation which espouses Childs's line. In the novel the tragicomic literary reinterpretation of the gradual process of marketization of the NHS through the events narrated in the section about Henry is juxtaposed to the narration of the episode of Fiona, which describes the detrimental effects of the reform from the point of view of the critics of the business-like NHS. Reading Henry's diary, we discover that the opposition to the NHS has deep ideological roots in his personality. Through a metaphorical reading, this suggests the idea that the opposition to the welfare state is indeed embedded in the neoliberal ideology.

We firstly understand Henry's attitude toward the welfare state from the fact that in his diary he distorts Beveridge in Beaveredge suggesting his derision<sup>268</sup>. Subsequently, the reader sees Henry's battle for the privatisation of the NHS in different episodes.

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<sup>264</sup> Childs, D. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 260.

<sup>265</sup> Griffiths Report (1983) *NHS Management Inquiry* (DHSS), p. 18.

<sup>266</sup> Childs, D. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 261.

<sup>267</sup> Childs, D. (2001) *ibid.*, p. 261.

<sup>268</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 119.



He manifests impatience for the delays on the reform of the NHS proposed by Joseph in 1973: ‘Debate in Joseph’s NHS reforms dragged on for another day. The usual people making the usual footling objections’<sup>269</sup>. His criticism of the 1974 nurses’ strike at Charing Cross hospital who refused to serve the suites for private patients and Secretary of State for Social Services Baroness Castle’s intention to oust the private sector from the NHS: ‘Back to London in time to hear Castle’s statement on the nurses’ strike. Confirmed my worst fears – she wants to phase private beds out of the Health Service altogether. Lunacy’<sup>270</sup>. Subsequently, in 1977 Henry writes:

Work on an NHS bill is progressing. I’ve managed to convince them that the first thing to do is reverse the policy of phasing out private beds. More radical measures will have to wait, but not for long. We need a few business types in, to do a major report and show that the present system is nothing but shambles. If someone from a supermarket chain, for instance, were to come in and see how it operates at the moment [...] he’d probably have a fit<sup>271</sup>.

In this section through a tragic parody is deployed a criticism of the projects to redesign the management of NHS. Specifically, through the parodic prophecy of a “supermarket type” who could propose radical reform of the NHS in the direction of marketization, it is implied that the NHS could be managed as a supermarket; doctors and paramedical staff would be considered as retailers and patients as consumers.

However, the readers find out that prophesy of an imminent implementation of Henry’s plans has become reality under Thatcherism. Henry returns to writing in 1984: ‘Reforms progressing, although not as speedily as I’d hoped [...] the Griffiths report gives us plenty to go on, and is a firm nudge in the right direction’<sup>272</sup>. The section suggests a criticism of the Griffiths report and of the proposed reforms to the Health

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<sup>269</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>270</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>271</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>272</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 135.

system. The novel's critique of the proposed policy, in fact, stressed that the marketization of the NHS would subordinate the welfare of the citizens to profits. This idea of subordination of the human values to the market produces the literary invention of Henry's QUALY, a tragic parody of the concept. The QUALY, the Quality Adjusted Life Years expresses the cost-effectiveness of surgery in relation to the perceived quality of life of the person subject to the surgical operation. According to this algorithm the life of a person can be judged more or less valuable. It obviously raises the question about who defines quality of life and according to which criteria. It is a quite obvious criticism of one of the founding principles of cultural neoliberalism: that of meritocracy. How, by whom and according to which criteria can merits be established and an individual declared deserving? The market? Therefore again the marketization of life is at the centre of criticism.

Henry, in awe for his idea, declares: 'I've been arguing it all my life: quality is quantifiable!'<sup>273</sup>. This parody serves to criticise the cynicism of the marketization of health services but also the bureaucratic obsession of neoliberal establishments to quantify quality through audits deployed to assess the marketability of a service. In this regard, it is striking the comparison between the NHS and companies operating in consumer services: 'the sell-offs have been proceeding at an amazing rate – Aerospace, Sealink, Vickers shipyards, British Gas last year, British Airways in May. Surely the day for the NHS can't be far off'<sup>274</sup>. Coe deploys here a fierce criticism of the market values professed during Thatcher's years highlighting the cynicism of the ideology it supports.

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<sup>273</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>274</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 140.

On the other hand, through the story of Fiona we find the other aspect of the reform of the NHS: its effects on patients. As said above, the episodes regarding Fiona are among the most politically concerned parts of the novel and their narration supports Coe's criticism of the reform. The role of Fiona is crucial for the narrative of the novel and for its political criticism. She first awakens Michael Owen and compels him to face historical reality. In this regard, her role resembles both the heroine and the victim of the classical tragedy. Her "sacrifice" is result of a titanic clash with the forces of history. Her death is heroic inasmuch it results in Michael's renewed social awareness and determines Michael's awakening from his moral sleep epitomised in his self-reclusion. In addition, through Fiona's episodes Coe provides a depiction of the social condition in the 1980s worthy of the naturalist novel of 19<sup>th</sup> century, but set within a postmodern narration. The episodes about Fiona are chronologically set between the "contemporary" 1990 and 1991, thus juxtaposed to the records of the Winshaws mostly set in the past.

Fiona, Michael's neighbour and then beloved, represents the victim of history par excellence. She is described in terms of illness and weakness. She is desperately in search of a solution for her disease, apparently without finding one:

'The fact is,' – said Fiona, 'that I don't really trust my GP. From what I can see, most of his energy these days goes into balancing his budget and trying to keep his costs down. I didn't get the sense that I was being taken very seriously'<sup>275</sup>.

Subsequently, we find that what seemed to be the negligence of the individual, neglecting his responsibilities as a doctor, is a more widespread inefficiency of the system. New Year's Eve 1990 is the day of the fateful disclosure of reality: following a severe malaise Fiona is brought to the hospital where the medical staff seems extremely

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<sup>275</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 143.

disorganised and it is even hard to find a bed<sup>276</sup>. Michael at first tends to blame the staff and the incompetence of the doctors who had failed to find a solution to Fiona's health problems:

It was true that my faith in the medical science had always been limited. I knew there were many ailments which it was powerless to treat, but it would never have occurred to me that a bunch of highly qualified doctors and nurses could have such a difficulty simply transferring a patient from one place to another [...] I wonder who was responsible for this state of affairs (yes, Fiona, I still believe in conspiracies), what vested interest they might have in making these people's lives even harder than they already were<sup>277</sup>.

The conspiracies Michael refers to are the influences of history on individuals; determined political decisions affect dramatically the lives of people. Michael understands that the choices of a small minority of powerful and influential people are indeed determining his life and taking away that of Fiona. His conspiracy theories are in fact Fiona's reality. The last moments of Fiona are those when Michael 'suddenly accept[s] that [...] one of the forces [...] [was] conspiring against Fiona'<sup>278</sup>. The silence before Fiona's death is indeed the most dramatic and the most political moment of *What a Carve Up!*: silently two decades of neoliberal policies are denounced as responsible for a state of affairs in which the care of the people is scarified for the interests of the few who retain the power.

The issues related to the reforms of the NHS and to the implementation of market-driven factors in its management, offer the possibility to discuss another work of Coe concerned with them: *The House of Sleep*. The novel tells the stories of different characters, following the vicissitudes of their lives from their University years to adulthood. In this regard, the structure of the novel is similar to that of the other novels

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<sup>276</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, pp. 262-265.

<sup>277</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 403.

<sup>278</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 411.

of Coe examined so far. Here the *bildungsroman* appears again represented by narration of life's events and by discrepancies between the ambitions of youth and the reality of adulthood. The four main characters, Sarah, Robert, Terry and Gregory, friends during the University years in the 1980s part from each other once graduated, but then they find their lives reconnected due to a series of circumstances and coincidences somehow determined by their relation with sleep. The narration proceeds therefore in accordance with a sleep pattern, and the chapters of the novels relate to the different stages of sleep. The novel offers, through a fascinating narrative played on the binary relations consciousness/unconsciousness and sleep/wakefulness, different literary forms typical of Coe's work such as the tragicomic role of the fate and its coincidences, the idea of growing up, an image of frozen sexuality in a sort of pre-puberty moment as a metaphor for the inability to face the reality of the adulthood and as escape from titanic shared struggle with fate and history. However, the temporal setting of the novel (the author in a note states that the odd-numbered chapters are set in the 1980s and the even-numbered in 1996) provides further representations of the Thatcher's period's legacy in the 1990s. In this regard, the subject of the NHS plays a central role. In fact, the characters' relations with sleep in terms of pathology – Sarah is narcoleptic, Terry is insomniac, Gregory is a psychiatrist specialised in the treatment of the sleep-related problems – offer the possibility to come to terms with the issues of the health system during the years of Margaret Thatcher. I therefore limit my discussion to this particular topic of *The House of Sleep* to substantiate Coe's interpretation of this problem and to acknowledge its relevance in Coe's political discourse.

The reader is informed that the characters have obsessive and pathologic relations with sleep. Sarah suffers from narcolepsy and one of the symptoms of her disease is the inability to distinguish her vivid dreams from reality; this affects Robert's

insecure sexual personality, and eventually at the end of the novel we read of his decision to undergo surgery to change his gender. Gregory, on the other hand, is an ambitious student in psychiatry whose obsession with sleep leads him to conceive his sexual relationship with Sarah through a sort of fetishist observation of her eyes during their post-coital sleep. When Sarah confides that she feels uneasy under surveillance while she is sleeping, Gregory, disappointed, decides to break up with her. Terry is a lazy student in cinema who spends half of the day sleeping. Later in the novel we find that Terry has become a very influential film reviewer and that his career is boosted by his insomnia due to the fact that he can spend more time watching films for his job. He is invited by Gregory, who has meanwhile become Dr Dudden, specialist in psychiatry, to his clinic where he treats patients with sleep disorders. It is exactly through the story of the sleep disorder of the main characters and through the story of this clinic and the endeavours of Dr Dudden that Coe introduces his criticism of the reforms of the NHS during the Thatcher's years.

However, it is particularly through the characterisation of Dr Dudden that Coe's political criticism finds the most relevant expression. The doctor is, in fact, described as a fierce supporter of the marketization of the health system, an advocate of the complete privatisation of the service and of free-market<sup>279</sup>.

In one of the episodes that reveals a criticism of the Thatcherite reforms of the NHS with cuts in the wards, Sarah discussing her decision not to be treated at the clinic of Dr Dudden says: 'There were two reasons why I didn't want to go. One is that I couldn't afford the fees, and the waiting list for NHS patients is nearly two years'<sup>280</sup>. This inevitably suggests that Coe embraces the opinion, expressed for example by

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<sup>279</sup> He affirms: 'The Americans can afford to do what they do because they have an efficient system of private medical insurance supporting the whole structure', p. 179.

<sup>280</sup> Coe, J. (1997) *The House of Sleep*. London (1998): Penguin, p. 108.

Childs as reported above, that Thatcher's reforms resulted in longer waiting lists, reduction of wards in local communities. However, Dr Dudden is represented as a fierce opponent of the NHS. In fact, his behaviour is closer to that of a man of marketing than to that of a doctor. In an episode we read that Terry finds insulting words drawn on the walls of his room. We later discover that Robert had written the words during his University years, as the clinic is located in the buildings that once were the University residencies they all used to live in. Dr Dudden's attitude is revealed by his remarks against the NHS patients that he accuses of being responsible for the words: 'This is the sort of things that happens when you open your doors to riff-raff [...] that woman [...] for instance. The Brixton woman [...] what can you expect from someone like that? No class, no character [...]'<sup>281</sup>. On the contrary, he is very keen to introduce market logics into the health system. Coe deploys the use of parody to represent the market-based health system and its forms of management derived from the management methodology of private firms:

Even though it pained Dr Dudden to leave his clinic in the care of Dr Madison for two days, he would not have missed this conference for anything. Hingleton Pendlebury was one of the country's most prestigious firms of management consultants, and this short intensive, residential course, 'Motivating for Change', promised to do something which he felt was long overdue: namely to introduce leading members of the psychiatric profession to some basic business concepts, in keeping with the Health Service's painful but inevitable transition to the management culture<sup>282</sup>.

The workshops based on methods 'tested and approved by some of America's most successful corporations'<sup>283</sup> are represented as grotesque, childish exercises totally irrelevant to the medical profession. However, in this parody we inescapably find a sense of tragedy when we acknowledge that renowned professionals of psychiatry are

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<sup>281</sup> Coe, J (1997) *ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>282</sup> Coe, J. (1997) *ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>283</sup> Coe, J. (1997) *ibid.*, p. 253.

distracted from their main activities because of the stress on the financial and managerial aspects of their professions<sup>284</sup>. It is specifically this implied sense of tragedy in a parodic context that helps to convey socio-political criticism.

However, Coe's political criticism of the reforms of the NHS is centred on Dr Dudden's clinic which becomes a metaphor for the inhumanity that the marketization of the health assistance produces, as seen also in Fiona's story in *What a Carve Up!*. Dr Dudden's clinic, in fact, hides horrible secrets. Dr Dudden considers sleep a waste of time and does covert experiments of sleep deprivation on animals and most horribly on human beings recruited among disadvantaged students in need of money to pay the increased University fees. He explains to Terry:

Luckily the university presents us with a large pool of willing participants [...] We pay them to take part in the experiments [...] Nowadays students never tire of bleating about how poverty-stricken they are; how difficult it is to sustain their wasteful, hedonistic lifestyles. Surely you read your own newspapers [...] They're awash with heart-breaking tales of helpless scholars reduced to dish-washing, wind-screen-wiping, or worse. Life-modelling, for instance. Lovely young female undergraduates [...] forced to earn a crust in the topless bars [...] Lad-dancing, working as Strippograms; prostitution, in some cases [...] we provide an acceptable alternative to that kind of drudgery<sup>285</sup>.

The desire for sleep deprivation is modelled on Thatcher whom he admires for only needing 4 or 5 hours a night. There is a critique in here of the idea that humans can function for profit, churning out work, 24 hours a day. The neoliberal ideal would be a day without sleep, dedicated just to profitable activities. This is a view which is cruel and inhuman in the end, not only to Dudden's experimental subjects but also to himself as we will see at the end of the novel.

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<sup>284</sup> Coe, J. (1997) *ibid.*, pp. 251-262.

<sup>285</sup> Coe, J. (1997) *ibid.*, p. 174.



Dr Dudden is characterised as a grotesque, monstrously inhuman scientist blinded by a greed that borders on madness. However, he even considers himself a benefactor<sup>286</sup>, while he is indeed exploiting the real victims of the carving up of the country: the young generations. This characterisation, in fact, denounces the level of inhumanity that the achievement of profit as unique *raison d'être* can determine. Coe through satire affirms that the marketization of the cure of the illness is not only wrong but also inhuman and hits the weakest people. The story of Stephen Webb, killed in a car accident after undergoing an exhausting session of sleep deprivation at the clinic, is emblematic; it metaphorically represents the nefarious effects that a health system at the service of profits rather than human beings can determine. Once the story is revealed and the clinic survivor is at risk, Dr Dudden is seized with madness, and undergoes his own inhuman processes. His madness is indeed a metaphor for the fanaticism of free-market policies that lose sight of the human dimension and turn human beings in machines prone to the most horrible enterprises. The use of parody to make even stronger the denunciation of the policies of privatisations of the health service as ethically wrong and inhuman is indeed one the strongest act of accusation against Thatcherism as a system.

### 2.1.3 - Literary Forms and History

In both *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep* representations of the historical reality and socio-political analyses are deployed through a mix of different literary techniques and genres that also calls into question the issue of postmodern

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<sup>286</sup> Coe, J. (1997) *ibid.*, p. 178.

narration. As Thurschwell and Trimm<sup>287</sup> note, *What a Carve Up!* (I would add *The House of Sleep* too) combines realism derived from the novels of Hardy and Dickens with detective story, trashy horror film and B-movies. Furthermore references to topoi of the classical tragedy are juxtaposed to the features of the whodunit.

The historical analysis deployed in *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep* presents one of the crucial concepts of Coe's works: the idea of the inescapable influence of history on the lives of individuals derived from the topoi of the Greek tragedy. In Coe's works this influence is determined by political choices and decisions. Thurschwell points out that Coe's works suggest the idea that confrontation between history and individuals takes on tragic connotations as the individuals are often portrayed as victims hopelessly obliged to cope with a fate determined by 'large-scale political and economic forces'<sup>288</sup>. In *What a Carve Up!* political criticism of Thatcherism is therefore represented through the metaphor of the tragic conflict between the Winshaws and Michael Owen. Their adventures, choices, deeds and the events of their lives thus become a synecdoche for the influence of Thatcherism on the lives of individuals. Moreover, the everlasting and ubiquitous presence of the Winshaw family in the life of Michael is a metaphor for the influence of the political elite of the eighties and their policies on the lives of powerless individuals.

The gradual dismantling of the welfare state and policies of privatisations and deregulations often resulted in dissolution of social ties within communities and a shift in priorities and values. These changes resulted in a consequent need for "adjustments" to comply with new values, which were often detrimental to individuals. The novel specifically represents the tremendous shock of these changes through the continuous

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<sup>287</sup> Thurschwell, P. (2006) *ibid.*

Trimm, R. (2010) *ibid.*

<sup>288</sup> Thurschwell, P. (2006) *ibid.*, p. 28.

influence of the Winshaw family on Michael's life, a narration that also includes Oedipal references and farcical aspects.

The representation of Michael's life begins from his childhood, described as a sort of pre-Thatcherite arcadia characterised by that 'easy sociability'<sup>289</sup> the competitiveness, the greed and egoism of the market-based society of Thatcherism has subsequently wiped out. However, at a closer look we learn that the Winshaws started interfering with the life of Michael Owen even when he was a child, long before the 1980s. In fact, in the prologue Michael recalls a holiday afternoon of his childhood when he went to the cinema with his family and had the chance to watch Jackson's *What a Carve Up!* and the scene with Shirley Eaton while she was undressing that led his mother to drag him away from the cinema and kept obsessing him for his whole life. However, we subsequently learn that Thomas was peeping at the scene from a portrait hung onto a wall of the room where the scene with Shirley Eaton and Kenneth Connor was being shot. This indirect encounter between Michael and Thomas marks the first of series of fateful connections and relations. Moreover, the fact that this encounter takes place merely through the filter of the visual, suggests a metaphorical interpretation and a political reading of the event. If we want to interpret the roles of the characters as a metonym (Michael as representative of the common people and the Winshaws as representative of the Thatcherite neoliberal establishment) then consequently Michael's ignorance of Thomas' presence in a crucial moment of his perfect arcadia childhood life can be read as a reference to the fact that seeds of the ideology that led to Thatcherism were developed much earlier but then implemented only during the eighties due to historical contingencies.

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<sup>289</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 32.

However, in the 1980s and with the government of Thatcher the effects of the Winshaws' enterprises become evident and tragic for Michael. One day he suddenly stopped going out, seeing people, working. The decade of the 1980s is characterised for him by passivity and immobility well exemplified by the frozen frame of Shirley Eaton's scene. Michael's immobility is certainly a metaphor for the shock Thatcher's produced in British society moving it from the community-based approach to the individualism of the free-market<sup>290</sup>. His immobility in the wake of Thatcher's transformation of British society can be read either in terms of shelter or in terms of self-entrapment that resembles the mythical tradition of self-entrapment of Oedipus<sup>291</sup>. In fact, as Thuschwell suggests, the narrative follows Oedipal topoi. Firstly we learn that the self-entrapment was determined by his mother's revelation about the identity of his biological father, secondly we learn that he has been chosen by Tabitha to write the biography of the Winshaws not because of his writing fame but because she is aware of his family story and she knows that his father was the co-pilot of Godfrey who managed to survive the shooting down of the plane. Finally while playing Cluedo, Michael finds out that the murderer is Professor Plum and shockingly that Professor Plum is himself in a classical Oedipal disclosure of self-guilt<sup>292</sup>. The fact that the murderer is a "Professor" and the reference to self-culpability can be interpreted as a further metaphor for the perceived "guilt" of the intellectual for failing to stand up and denounce the consequences of Thatcherism and to propose cultural alternatives. The immobility of the intellectuals is also metaphorically expressed through the immobility of the writer Michael Owen, frozen in time and incapable of reacting to the current situation, preferring to escape in a comfortable nostalgia for the past. In this section of the novel the immobility of the intellectuals is also implied when the word *brío* is misspelled in

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<sup>290</sup> Thuschwell, P. (2006) *ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>291</sup> Thuschwell, P. (2006) *ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

<sup>292</sup> Thuschwell, P. (2006) *ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

biro. As the biro is the instrument for writing par excellence, the 'lack of biro' presumably refers to a lack of political controversy against Thatcherism and the ineffectiveness in producing a counter-narrative to the neoliberal one.

Michael is trapped in his nostalgic immobility to the extent that he is even unaware that the 1980s have passed and the new decade, opened with the resignation of Margaret Thatcher, is going toward a new disastrous conflict: the First Gulf War. This immobility and self-entrapment can be interpreted as a metaphor for the inability of the British society to understand that the policies of the 1980s were leading toward the verge of a disaster. It is through a female character that Michael then "defrosts" his life and acquires awareness of the influence of politics on his life. It is interesting to add here that in Coe's novels women are mostly portrayed as the first victims of political decisions. From Lois and Miriam, the workers of the Grunwick laboratories in *The Rotters' Club* to Fiona in *What a Carve Up!* and Sarah in *The House of Sleep* and to Poppy in *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*. This might refer to the fact that due to gender inequalities and established gender rules, women are the first to be hit by certain political decisions. This topic is interestingly and ineluctably connected to the controversy regarding Thatcher's significance as a woman and as a political leader for the feminist movement and for the role of women in society.

Through Fiona and her vicissitudes Michael understands that history counts and that politics cannot be ignored. In fact, he understands that the deregulation of the farming industry may have caused his father's death:

*All those years, I see now, my father was clogging his arteries up with saturated fats. He would die of heart attack, not long after his sixty-first birthday.*

*Does this mean that Dorothy killed my father?*<sup>293</sup>

He also understands that policies of privatisation and liberalization may have contributed to his father's death:

Phocas Motor Services was the firm my father worked for. He was there for nearly thirty years, and retired just a few months after the pension scandal came to light. The money he had been saving all that time had vanished, and he was left to survive on a state pension, supplemented by a few extra pounds brought in by my mother, who had to return to part-time teaching. It wasn't the retirement they'd been planning for.

There is no doubt, in my mind, that the stress brought on by the situation would have contributed to his heart attack.

Does it mean that Thomas was an accessory to my father's murder?<sup>294</sup>

Michael's father's death is a crucial event inasmuch it triggers a series of events that leads to the disclosure of the news of his biological father's identity, which in turn determined a traumatic shift in his life because it was the apparent the reason of his decennial immobility. Afterwards, we learn that his biological father was the co-pilot of Godfrey Winshaw when their plane was shot down and that he is the man who was killed in a failed attempt to murder Lawrence.

The influence of the Winshaws in Michael's life is not limited to his family though. The life of everyone he directly or indirectly knows is affected by the deeds of the Winshaws. In a chapter entitled *June 1982*, Michael visits his childhood friend Joan in Sheffield<sup>295</sup> and meets the painter Phoebe and the would-be film director Graham. The latter character works as a filter through which the war in Falklands is criticised.

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<sup>293</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 256.

<sup>294</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 324.

<sup>295</sup> Coe recalls the nickname given to the city during the 1980s when David Blunkett guided its council: the "Socialist Republic of South Yorkshire", p. 273.

Graham shows Michael his documentary entitled *Mrs. Thatcher's War* in which the images of the war and the speeches of the Prime Minister are juxtaposed to the story of Emily Thatcher, a pensioner who has to survive with a weekly income of £43.37, while the estimated cost of the war is £700,000,000<sup>296</sup>. Subsequently we learn that Phoebe's artistic ambitions were spoiled by Roddy and that Graham is severely injured by hit-men hired by Mark to murder him in order to stop his documentary on the arms trade.

However, the influence of history is treated in the most tragic form in the story of Fiona previously analysed. Fiona becomes severely ill and eventually dies due to a mistaken diagnosis and to the negligence of a market-based NHS. This episode is crucial to awake the awareness of the influence or interference of politics on the life of individuals. Although Fiona dismisses Michael's speculations about conspiracies as paranoia, the events confirm Michael's opinion<sup>297</sup>.

The death of Fiona can be juxtaposed to that of Michael's hero Yuri Gagarin because it exemplifies the idea that 'there's always someone to blame'<sup>298</sup>. The cosmonaut's death was followed by speculations about a plot to eliminate him due to the fact that the Soviet establishment started to think that he had become too "westernised". Similarly, *The House of Sleep* conveys the idea that people are victims of a political and economic establishment that pulls the strings and guides them into the hands of any Dr. Dudden. As Thurschwell argues, the final message of Coe's works,

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<sup>296</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, pp. 280-281.

<sup>297</sup> 'You're here because of Henry Winshaw. Ironical, isn't it? He wants you to be here because he can't bear to think that his money or the money of people like him might be used to stop things like this from happening... There's no end to the people who've died because of Mark and his obscene trade. Dorothy was the one who killed off my father, feeding him all that junk, and Thomas added a twist of the knife, making his money vanish into thin air just when he needed it. Roddy and Hilary have certainly done their bit', Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, pp. 412-413.

<sup>298</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 412.

which refers to the classic tragedy, is: ‘you may ignore history but it will always find you’<sup>299</sup>.

*What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep* embed also typical features of the classical Greek and Latin comedy. In fact, in Coe’s novels the comic sphere is employed as an instrument to criticise the political and economic establishment during Thatcher’s times in the same way Aristophanes and Plautus used to employ it to criticise the establishments of their times. However, farce also suggests the necessity to distance the narration from the ‘brutality of everyday life’<sup>300</sup>.

The presence of the classical comedy, (also mixed with thematic derived from the medieval religious drama, such as death, evil, sins, power and slaves) is even more evident in the characterisation: as in a Greek and Latin *new comedy*<sup>301</sup>, also in Coe’s works each character embodies specific aspects of the socio-political situation of the contemporary times. Thus the characterisations of both the Winshaws and Dr. Dudden fall within the canon of the classic comedy, where powerful figures and their ‘unethical’ behaviour are described as grotesque and buffoonish. However, both in *The House of Sleep* and particularly in *What a Carve Up!* with its tragicomic ending, the canonised happy-ending of the of comedy is reversed. The hysterical laughter of Tabitha while she is leading herself and Michael toward death thus also suggests narrative manipulation of the canons of the literary genres.

Interestingly the murderous plot underlying *What A Carve Up!*, and that follows in the footsteps of the most classic Todorovian definition of whodunit, is a metaphorical representation of the murdering of the welfare state<sup>302</sup>. The references to themes of

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<sup>299</sup> Thurschwell, P. (2006) *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>300</sup> Thurschwell, P. (2006) *ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>301</sup> Hunter, R. L. (1985) *The new comedy of Greece and Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>302</sup> Also Trimm (2010) mention the importance of the ‘murderous thrust’



murders and crime are frequent throughout the novel and Michael refers to the Winshaws in terms of ‘a family of criminals’. The ending chapter of the novel also presents a reversion of the canon of the whodunit as theorised by Todorov<sup>303</sup>. The plot of *What a Carve Up!* is a sort of political whodunit but contrary to Todorov’s theorisation, the culprit is revealed at the beginning of the novel; the crime is the object of gradual disclosure. The final section ‘An Organization of Deaths’ is the concluding part of this whodunit where, following the plot of Jackson’s *What a Carve Up!* or King’s *The Ghoul* (another source of Coe’s novel), the members of the Winshaws are murdered one by one. However, again here we find another inversion of the canon. In the whodunit story, in fact, the detective/hero usually overcomes unharmed all the perils, while in Coe’s novel Michael Owen is killed in a tragicomic way: crashing while travelling on a plane unexpectedly piloted by Tabitha. The plane crash thus closes the circle of the influence of the Winshaws on the life of Michael, he dies as his father did, victim of a Winshaw.

The tragicomic ending related to Tabitha’s madness and the numerous references to insanity of the Winshaw family members call into question the themes of madness in the same way as in *The House of Sleep* for Dr. Dudden does. The novels suggest that the only possible explanation for the insatiable and inhuman greed in the Thatcherite 1980s is in terms of madness. Deleuze and Guattari explain that the schizophrenic subject is driven by an excess of desire-production<sup>304</sup> and that desire is a productive force, which otherwise can be also be ‘organised in and through social production’<sup>305</sup>. The Winshaws therefore are schizophrenic inasmuch their greed is driven by insatiable desire. However, theirs it is not real madness as they profit from

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in relation with the policies in opposition to the welfare state (p. 161).

<sup>303</sup> Todorov, T. (1973) ‘The typology of detective form’ in Lodge, D., Wood, N. (eds) (2000) *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*. London: Longman.

<sup>304</sup> Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. (1972) *ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>305</sup> Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. (1972) *ibid.*, p. 29.

that “madness”, ‘organised in and through social production’, of people who are victimised by the Thatcherite policies but nonetheless accede to their own victimisation to fulfil the lack artificially-produced desire triggered by social forces, and to be “recognised” as perfectly fitting in the mainstream society. Lacan explains that ‘Man’s desire is the desire of the Other’<sup>306</sup>. Stressing the idea of desire for recognition in the mainstream society, he adds: ‘the desire for recognition dominates the desire that is to be recognized [...]’<sup>307</sup>. Eventually the novels suggest that the ideology fostered by Thatcherism, the worship of an abstraction such as the “market”, shows a grey area ‘where greed and madness become practically indistinguishable. One and the same thing’<sup>308</sup>.

*What a Carve Up!* also underlines a subplot in forms of *bildungsroman*, a literary genre which, on the other hand, *The Rotters’ Club* and *The Closed Circle* more overtly rely on. Michael is the character who embodies features of the *bildungsroman* hero. We follow, in fact, his life from his childhood, passing from his youth to maturity. However, due to the postmodern forms of the novel, the growing up process is not narrated in a linear temporality but fragmented throughout the novel. We read of his Arcadian childhood and we follow him through the vicissitudes of his life. However, subverting the topos of the genre, the character faces an “arrest”. Michael’s personality development is subject to a freeze, which is caused by historical contingencies. This “arrest” in the *bildung* process is both a sign of postmodern literary re-visitation and parodic demystification of literary genre and it is also an expression of criticism. By arresting and freezing his life, Michael refuses society who surrounds him. In parallel, the arrest is Coe’s expression of dissent: by freezing the life of his character, he makes a

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<sup>306</sup> Lacan, J., Miller, J. A. (ed.) (1998) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI: Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton, p. 235.

<sup>307</sup> Lacan, J. (2006) *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. New York: Norton, p. 431.

<sup>308</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 485.

political act: he does not allow his character to live in times he criticises and protects him in a past that works as a shelter.

Obviously this mix of literary forms, especially in *What a Carve Up!* poses the problem of genre. Is *What a Carve Up!* a detective, social realist, a *bildungsroman*, tragedy, parody or simply farce? The novel mixes all the mentioned genres and in doing so it seems closely related to the postmodern pastiche. In the novel, in fact, we find particularly illuminating examples of postmodern fiction. For example, the underlying whodunit plot with intersects the historical novel and elements of the *bildungsroman*. Specifically, Michael's Oedipical quest for the identity of his father intersects the narration of historical events from the 1980s to the early 1990s, but at the same time we read about Michael's quest for culprits of the deaths of his beloved ones. The narration of these events is filtered through a set of narrative devices: the biography Michael is writing, a third voice narrator, and personal diaries of the characters or newspapers articles related to the deeds of the characters. The intersections of different literary genres and the reworking of literary canons make *What a Carve Up!* a pastiche and an exemplary postmodern work.

Despite Jameson's argument against postmodern pastiche, which he considers as an un-reflexive imitation of modernist approaches toward literary traditions<sup>309</sup>, Lyotard argues that as modernist works challenged some aspects of capitalist society, similarly some postmodern works express criticism of the post-industrial consumer society<sup>310</sup>. I discuss the issue of postmodern literary forms and political interpretation in the following section. Here I limit my analysis to pointing out that the non-linear narration

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<sup>309</sup> Jameson, F. (1980) 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', *The Cultural Turn. Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1988*. London (1998) : Verso.

<sup>310</sup> Lyotard, F. (1979) *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester (1984): Manchester University Press.

This specific section of Lyotard's analysis of Adorno interpretation of Modernism is treated in: Rose, M.A. (1988) 'Parody/Post-Modernism', *Poetics* 17, North Holland, p. 52.

and the fragmentation of narrative structure of *What a Carve Up!* with its multiplicity of fragmented voices, reflects the postmodern condition as analysed and described by Lyotard. Pastiche seems to be an appropriate approach to the fragmentation, multidimensionality of the postmodern condition. In other words, using Lyotard's construction of knowledge, post-industrial times are characterised by a lack of extrinsic validation of norms and codes, thus also literary genres canons<sup>311</sup>, and by the dismissing of grand narratives. Genre divisions are outmoded in postmodern narration as 'the classical dividing lines [...] disappear' to create 'network of areas of inquiry [where] the respective frontiers of which are in constant flux'<sup>312</sup>. Consequently, the genre crossing deployed in *What a Carve Up!* seems the appropriate narrative form to deal with a reality of the postmodern condition and its relation to the development of neoliberalism in British society. The novel deals with the fragmentation of social nets introduced by neoliberalism and with replacement, in neoliberal society, of the traditional poles of power, such as the parties, the state, and the communities. As Lyotard points, identifying the 'great names, the heroes of contemporary history [...] is becoming more and more difficult'<sup>313</sup>, hence the difficulty to represent this new historical condition through the Lukacsian traditional canons of social realist historical novel with its anti-systemic hero, a difficulty that Coe overcomes through deployment of the multidimensionality and fluidity of the genre-crossing that perfectly matches the reality of the post-industrial society.

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<sup>311</sup> Lyotard, F. (1979) *ibid.*, pp. 6-9.

<sup>312</sup> Lyotard, F. (1979) *ibid.*, pp. 37-39.

<sup>313</sup> Lyotard, F. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 14.

### 2.1.4 - Politics and Postmodernism

Coe's works, and particularly *What a Carve Up!* with its typically postmodern mix of literary and popular genres, raise questions about postmodern political involvement, which is one of the most debated issues of the last decades in literary criticism. In this section, I focus on *What a Carve Up!*'s postmodernism, to frame discourse about the political engagement of the novel in the context of the debate about the politics of postmodernism.

*What a Carve Up!* is characterised by constant presence of the past and by a fluidity of borders among literary genres that Hutcheon<sup>314</sup> considers crucial features of postmodernism. In the novel, historical realities and literary representations are inescapably interrelated, and the 'grand narrative' of Thatcherism is replaced by metanarratives. Coe's depiction of the effect of Thatcherism, the large scale of this historical reality is, in other words, depicted through the filter of micro-narratives<sup>315</sup> of different characters, each embodying historical and social characteristics. The idea of representing an historical phenomenon through micro-narratives ineluctably relates to the notion of history as human construct<sup>316</sup> and to the notion of metaphysical history, the history which is a sum of events happened each in their own present. The sequences of these present moments form history<sup>317</sup>; the present moments in the novel are specifically those of the characters who filter the narration of Thatcherism as a grand historical phenomenon. Critics of postmodern narrative forms agree that meta-fictional narration is ahistorical<sup>318</sup>. However, as Hutcheon explains often metanarratives do not constitute a "dishonest refuge from truth" but an acknowledgment of the meaning-

<sup>314</sup> Hutcheon, L. (1988) *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge, p. 9.

<sup>315</sup> For the concepts of grand narratives and micro-narratives: Lyotard, F. (1979) *ibid.*

<sup>316</sup> Among different authors: White, H. (1978) *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>317</sup> Currie, M. (1998) *Postmodern Narrative Theory*. London: Macmillan, p. 82.

<sup>318</sup> Hutcheon, L. (1988) *ibid.*, p. 87.

making function of human construct'<sup>319</sup> and this is certainly the case with Coe's novel. In *What a Carve Up!* the discourse of authorship is indeed relevant to the above mentioned issues. In fact, the stories of the characters are told indirectly through the meta-fictional device of Winshaw chronicle written by a fictitious narrator Michael Owen, a meta-fictional author who is both an author within a novel and a character involved in the stories he is writing about. Critics of postmodern literary forms argue that 'historical metafiction'<sup>320</sup>, with its demystification of history, is characterised by historical relativism. On the contrary, *What a Carve Up!* reveals a strong tie with the historical context. As Head states, the novel significantly analyses the effects of Thatcherism 'tellingly in a broader post-war perspective'<sup>321</sup>, thus it is a narration profoundly historicised by the visible employment of postmodern forms. The novel's meta-fictional narration is, in fact, not an expression of historical relativism, and is not politically and ideologically disengaged. On the contrary, it calls into question the official, institutionalised and mythicized narration of Thatcherism also through critical 'analysis of the act of writing itself'<sup>322</sup>. The episode of Michael's review is illuminating in this regard: he criticises the author of the book he is reviewing because he thinks the book lacks of 'brio'. The word brio is, however, humorously misspelled in 'biro', a word that refers to the very act of writing. This is unmistakably a very political assertion travestied by humour as it implies criticism of the lack of biting polemic of the effects of Thatcher's neoliberal policies in the contemporary novel. The political engagement and the historical reading of the novel form are here questioned in Graham's critique and in Michael's unintentionally funny review. However, *What a Carve Up!* is, on the

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<sup>319</sup> Hutcheon. L. (1988) *ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>320</sup> Hutcheon, L. (1988) *ibid.*

<sup>321</sup> Head, D. (2002) *ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>322</sup> Hutcheon, L. (1988) *ibid.*, p. 91.

other side, a successful example of critique of the dominance of the cultural paradigm of Thatcherism.

Another distinguishable postmodern feature that characterizes the narration of *What a Carve Up!* (also true of *The House of Sleep*) is the presence of continuous time shifts. Jameson argues that the presentation of events in a temporal mode that alters the linearity of time can be interpreted as form of literary schizophrenia. He bases his analysis on Lacan's interpretation of schizophrenia as temporal breakdown:

For Lacan, the experience of temporality, human time, past, present, memory, the persistence of personal identity over months and years—this existential or experiential feeling of time itself—is also an effect of language. It is because language has a past and a future, because the sentence moves in time, that we can have what seems to us a concrete or lived experience of time. But since the schizophrenic does not know language articulation in that way, he or she does not have our experience of temporal continuity either, but is condemned to live a perpetual present with which the various moments of his or her past have little connection and for which there is no conceivable future on the horizon<sup>323</sup>.

For Jameson the continuous time shifts and the narration characterized by a persistence of present are unhistorical and produce an 'unreality'<sup>324</sup>, often characterised by pop icons and stereotypes about the past<sup>325</sup>, which Eagleton defines as the reification of the social reality determined by the neoliberal consumerist social attitude<sup>326</sup>. However, *What a Carve Up!*, and Coe's fiction generally, subverts Jameson's postulate. Coe's narration is, in fact, strongly anchored to the historical reality of Britain's 1980s. The novel provides a deconstruction of Thatcherism as phenomenon, and time shifts can be

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<sup>323</sup> Jameson, F. (1980) 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', *The Cultural Turn. Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1988*. London (1984): Verso, p. 7.

<sup>324</sup> Jameson, F. (1980) *ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>325</sup> Jameson, F. (1980) *ibid.*, p.7.

<sup>326</sup> Eagleton. T. (1985) 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', *The New Left Review*, 1/152, July-August 1985, p. 60.

interpreted as a narrative device that facilitates this critical deconstruction. In other words, Coe narratively separates a single aspect of Thatcherism in order to provide a broad and detailed criticism of it. These separate historical sections do not result in a historically detached unreality due to the fact that they are subsequently tied together by the narration of effects and results of the historical events previously addressed in those separate sections. The deconstruction and reconstruction of the past, as Eagleton notes, benefit also from a mix of genres characterised by a non-linear approach to time: from the whodunit and biographical sub-plot due to the privileged position accorded to past in these two genres; whodunit stories ‘put time in reverse: they start from the culmination of a history’ similarly to the biography that ‘strives to reclaim the past from the vantage-point of the present’<sup>327</sup>. This is closely related to Heidegger’s notion of “equitemporality”, ‘a new relation between historical elements, without any suppression of the past in favour of the present’<sup>328</sup> through which it is possible to revise and understand the historical events. Finally, the achievements determined by these literary techniques are therefore similar to those of the social realist novel. Coe’s narration focuses, in fact, on the effects of larger historical and political background on the life of individuals exactly like a social realist novel does. *What a Carve Up!* presents a social investigation not different from the way Williams conceived the nature of the realist novel, a narration that focusing on the study of the effects of history on the communities of persons offers a wide depiction of an historical period<sup>329</sup>.

The issue of genre inevitably leads to the question of the postmodern pastiche. Jameson defines the postmodern pastiche as the eclipse of parody, a ‘neutral practice’

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<sup>327</sup> Eagleton, T. (1994) *ibid.*

<sup>328</sup> Rose, M. A. (1993) *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-Modern*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, p. 213.

<sup>329</sup> Williams, R. (1970) *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



that lacks the necessary satirical and political iconoclasm of parody<sup>330</sup>. Ultimately, for Jameson postmodern pastiche tends to normalise the comic situation derived from mocking power rather than highlighting the tragic absurdity of it like satire and parody do. In other words for Jameson pastiche is a simulacrum of parody, its commodification. However, Dyer affirms that the postmodern “pasticcio” can sometimes be seen ‘intrinsically politically progressive’ as it challenges the common sense of the mainstream thought<sup>331</sup> and in doing so it is ‘inescapably historical’<sup>332</sup>. This is certainly the case of the grotesque masks depicted in *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep*, which, with their tragicomic brutality, belong to the tradition of the classic Greek and Latin satire and to parody: these masks denounce, as seen in the previous sections, the inhumanity of the practices they embody. Moreover, Baudrillard points that postmodern use of parody gives an insight into the decadence of Western values in post-industrial period<sup>333</sup>. Accordingly, far from a neutral practice, Coe’s parody represents a rigorous political indictment.

Similarly, the nostalgic mood of the novel, with its references to an edenic pre-Thatcher past, is not conservatism but, framed in a context of political criticism, is rather a political statement. As Pickering and Keightley explain, important social changes produce a sense of loss in communities and the consequent nostalgia mode is a form to bear the uncertainties of the present. They further assert that nostalgia in post-industrial society psychologically recreates a form of bridge to link the different parts of the fragmented reality<sup>334</sup>. Despite the fact that nostalgia can also have a jingoistic drift, as some observers, particularly on the left, have noticed, it is not necessarily an

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<sup>330</sup> Jameson, F. (1980) *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>331</sup> Dyer, R. (2007) *Pastiche*. London: Routledge, p. 21.

<sup>332</sup> Dyer, R. (2007) *ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>333</sup> Baudrillard, J. (1988) *America*. London: Verso, p. 104.

Baudrillard, J. (1983) *Simulations*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

<sup>334</sup> Pickering, M., Keightley, E. (2006) ‘The Modalities of Nostalgia’, *Current Sociology*, 54 Sage, pp. 919-941.

expression of conservatism. On the contrary, as Pickering and Keightley claim, it can be a very democratic form to assess the past and ‘opening up new spaces for the articulation of the past’<sup>335</sup>. Nostalgia mode in *What a Carve Up!* and in general in Coe’s work can be described as a form of recognition of the historical transformations and it is a finger pointed at the detrimental effects of the politically determined historical changes, namely the shift from politics of consensus to neoliberalism under Thatcher, and it provides, therefore, a progressive space to revise and criticise an entrenched ideology and the narrative of the progress determined by neoliberalism and Thatcherism.

Critics of literary postmodernism often stress the revolutionary impetus and social engagement of modernism in comparison with the perceived disengagement and political caricature of the first. Bürger conceives avant-gardism as artistic practice that aims to unify aesthetic with social awareness and political action<sup>336</sup>. Jameson, on the other side, denounces the postmodern artistic practice as characterised by the ‘death of the subject’. In other words, he perceives in postmodern artistic production a loss of the ‘unique vision of the world [that] forge[s] its own unique, unmistakable style’<sup>337</sup>. However, Coe in *What a Carve Up!* reveals the ability to manipulate the postmodern narrative forms to readdress them to the production of a politically engaged work and a social realist novel. Eagleton, who is among those who theorised the critique of postmodernism, acknowledges that *What a Carve Up!* is tellingly ‘one of the few pieces of genuinely Post-Modernist fiction around’ and that it is ‘among other things a social realist work’<sup>338</sup>. Coe ability to shape postmodern forms to produce social realism therefore generates a unique style to deal with history. Jencks’s definition of postmodern forms as double coding, able to retain the innovation and the radicalism of

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<sup>335</sup> Pickering, M., Keightley, E. (2006) *ibid.*, p. 923

<sup>336</sup> Bürger, P. (1974) *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Minneapolis (1984): University of Minnesota Press.

<sup>337</sup> Jameson, F. (1980) *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>338</sup> Eagleton, T. (1994) *ibid.*

modernism and at the same time going beyond it generating a new meaningful alternative form that generates a ‘radical eclecticism,’<sup>339</sup> seems to adhere perfectly to the postmodern works of Coe, which, establishing a dialogue with the past, as Hutcheon would say<sup>340</sup>, contribute to a new vision of the past, enabling a narrative alternative to that of the “official” narration of Thatcherism. To conclude with, Coe’s “exploitation” of postmodern forms and literary genres produces a politically and socially engaged fiction and artistic practice that bridge aesthetic and social commitment can be even rightly considered a mark of avant-gardism in line with Bürger’s theorisation.

## 2.2 - Comparative Section

The role of Thatcherism, and the changes in many aspects of society neoliberalism determined, has been the main focus of different artistic works that have attempted to capture the zeitgeist of the 1980s. In this section I focus on literary works that deal with issues related to the creation of a neoliberal establishment in the UK, the policies it produced, and how they affected society and individuals. I selected three works for a comparison with Coe’s approach. As for the first chapter this comparative section is intended to provide a wider perspective on different political topics discussed and on literary forms, themes and motives deployed to interpret, represent and eventually criticise such a fundamental historical passage. I discuss these works in the framework of the debate around the post-industrial condition. The three novels in question are: Martin Amis’ *Money* (1984), Ian McEwan’s *The Child in Time* (1987), Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty* (2004).

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<sup>339</sup> Jencks, C. (1977) *The language of Post-modern Architecture*. London: Academy, p. 79.

<sup>340</sup> Hutcheon, L. (1985) *A Theory of Parody*. London: Methuen, pp. 111-115.

With the exception of *The Line of Beauty*, both the other novels were published during the eighties themselves, the time when Thatcherism was in progress. Consequently, similar to the novels taken into account for the comparative part of the first chapter, these novels portray the events from a perspective that has not benefited from the temporal distance that Coe's novels have. *What a Carve Up!* was published in 1994, four years after the resignation of Margaret Thatcher but when Thatcherism effectively continued under John Major. The difference in temporal perspectives of the novels taken in consideration raises questions about historical writing and about the way these novels, from a different temporal perspective, engage with the issue of historicity. The four years separating Coe from the historical moment described in his novel mean that *What a Carve Up!* is a product of historical retrospection. The critique the novel moves to Thatcherism returns in Coe's later novels, particularly in *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, in the forms of broader critique of neoliberalism and global capitalism. This fact signals a broader understanding of the social and historical processes brought about by neoliberalism from the rise of Thatcherism and beyond it thanks to a wider historical perspective Coe acquires with time. *Money* and *The Child in Time* certainly also capture historical trends and foresee future developments of those trends. However, their historical perspective is rather in prospection. The differences in historical perspectives also explain the dystopic nature of Amis' and McEwan's novels. The issues of time and temporal retrospection have inevitable implications on the issue of genre. *Money* and *The Child in Time*, exactly because their viewpoint is prospective, rely on dystopia and satire. The effects of neoliberalism can only be foreseen (in nightmarish or grotesque forms) but not fully analysed in a realist account. The fact that *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep* also rely substantially on forms of satire and the grotesque can only signify that the four and seven years that respectively separate

the novels from the historical events described are too a short historical gap to fully represent the historical significance of Thatcherism in a realist account. Coe gets back in his later works to Thatcherism and makes connections between it and the wider changes brought about by neoliberalism as global phenomenon. In an interview for *Salon* he, in fact, explains that *What a Carve Up!* was written in the urgency to express criticism on Thatcherism after Thatcher's resignation and the poll tax riots. Its parodic tone, Coe affirms, was deployed 'in response to a slew of pamphleteering and rather morose novels about Thatcherism that had started to come out in the early '90s'. He adds: 'I found myself responding to those in a complicated way, because politically I was very much in sympathy with them, but as a reader I found them dampening'<sup>341</sup>. The last sentence points out that the novel was written to respond to a political urgency and to an aesthetic need to add his voice to the ongoing literary publications on the topic of Thatcherism.

*The Line of Beauty* has an even longer historical distance from the events narrated than Coe's novels have. The retrospection therefore allows realist representation of the British upper-class in the 1980s. However, the novel is more interested in aesthetics than political issues and the realist depictions are not directly aimed to provide a political commentary on Thatcherism or critique of neoliberalism.

*What a Carve Up!*'s postmodern playing with genres, narrative structures and temporality aims to represent Thatcherism in its totality. By contrast, the novels chosen for the comparative section focus on specific issues related to Thatcherism and deploy a style very different from Coe's novel. *The Line of Beauty* presents echoes of Henry James, while *The Child in Time* and *Money* have features of a postmodern work. The

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<sup>341</sup> Taylor, C. (2002) 'In conversation with Jonathan Coe', *Salon*. [online] available at [http://www.salon.com/2002/03/12/jonathan\\_coe\\_2/](http://www.salon.com/2002/03/12/jonathan_coe_2/). [accessed: 10<sup>th</sup> April 2014].

novels offer critique of neoliberalism and Thatcherism from different perspectives. *The Child in Time* offers a denunciation of the authoritative and elitist conception of education and reveals the spectres of the dehumanisation in neoliberal society, *The Line of Beauty* is concerned with the class system and with the hypocrisy of the Conservative establishment, especially regarding the issues of the rights of LGTB in a context of the discussion of the aesthetics of wealth. *Money*, on the other hand, provides criticism of consumer society without specifically contextualising the discourse in British history; it pays attention rather to the transnational nature of neoliberalism. I talk more in detail about the political and literary approaches in the following sections, but it is interesting to note in first instance that Margaret Thatcher is never openly mentioned in any of the novels considered. There are references to the Conservative government, to a gender unidentified Prime Minister of a Conservative government, and to a charismatic woman Prime Minister. The reference to Margaret Thatcher is therefore implicit. *Money* lacks any explicit references to the political situation of Britain; the criticism is focused on the consumer and post-industrial society in general. The lack of clear reference to Thatcher perhaps depends on three reasons. Firstly, the novels published during the eighties do not benefit from the historical distance ideal to produce a clear analysis of the different effects of a specific historical phenomenon. Secondly, there is a precise stylistic choice: by not naming her, the late Prime Minister becomes a more powerful, quasi-mythical figure that determined a dramatic, irreversible change in history. By leaving this powerful figure unnamed (while evidently everyone knows that it is Margaret Thatcher) the novels reach the peaks of tragedy, where the ineluctable and indomitable forces of history collides with everyday existence. Thirdly, the novels are more concerned with the zeitgeist of the 1980s but less with the political figure of Margaret Thatcher. This obviously relates to the debate I mentioned in the introduction about whether Thatcher

and Thatcherism were the makers of a socio-political, economic and cultural change or they were just “tools” of an historical transformation brought about by the formation of the neoliberal ideology.

I begin the comparative analysis with Martin Amis’ *Money* for three reasons: it is chronologically the first in order of publication; it is the one that is ideologically more distant from *What a Carve Up!* although they share the same view about the objectification and commodification of human beings in contemporary consumer society. Finally, *Money* is, along with *What a Carve Up!*, the novel which is most typically postmodern in form. The discussion about it can be framed in the context of the discourse about postmodernism in its theoretical aspects. Subsequently, I analyse the other novels in order of publication, taking in consideration thematic specificities, literary forms, how they deal with the historical and political issues determined by Thatcherism and finally the question of realist and postmodern literary forms.

The main difference between Coe’s *What a Carve Up!* and the other novels is the way they approach Thatcher as a subject. In Coe’s novel history is the central focus. Postmodern forms are deployed specifically with the aim to address the representation of history in the novel. *The Rotters’ Club* and *The Closed Circle*, published after *What a Carve Up!*, have offered insights to rethink the forms of the realist historical novel. In *What a Carve Up!*, Coe approaches history through an experimental approach. The whodunit and the reworking of the themes of the classical Greek and Latin tragedy are literary experiments that play with questions of history and agency. Ultimately *What a Carve Up!* is an historical novel. The other novels here considered do not take history as a central topic; they have history as a background though. They do not aim to approach the historical moment in its totality. They are certainly novels which provide socio-political critique, and which are deeply interested into the social transformations

ongoing in the 1980s but the representation of a whole historical period is not their central preoccupation; rather they use history as an excuse to reflect on some specific topics generated by social transformations of the 1980s. The issues discussed are: the role of education and childhood, the consumer society, money, class, hypocrisy, wealth, aesthetics, parenthood, loss of innocence, illness and death. Notwithstanding these differences, all the novels feature main characters that embody the spirit of the time and therefore can be read as Lukacsian typical characters.

### 2.2.1 - *Money*

Martin Amis' novel was published in the middle of Thatcher's revolution. It was the time when the politics of consensus was replaced by policies inspired by monetarist doctrines theorised by Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman and the Chicago School. The monetarist revolution had its momentum with the 1986 Big Bang, the legislation strongly supported by Thatcher that determined the complete liberalisation and deregulation of financial activities<sup>342</sup>. The "Wall Street on the Thames", Canary Wharf, was built few years later as a symbol of the new neoliberal Britain and temple of monetarism.

At the time of the publication of *Money*, 1984, Margaret Thatcher had won her second term in power. Thatcher's electoral success had undoubtedly benefited from a sense of renewed British Imperial grandeur, which had long been in decline since the end of the Second World War, but was regained following the victorious war in the Falklands against Argentina in 1982 that was saluted with jingoistic rhetoric. It is

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<sup>342</sup> Plender, J. (2012) 'Markets Insight: Bank deregulation part of Thatcher legacy', *The Financial Times*. [online]. Available at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/7f8aaf08-a122-11e2-bae1-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2ysNy6zag>. [accessed 14<sup>th</sup> April 2014].



interesting to note that the year of publication of the novel was the dystopian year par excellence, the Orwellian 1984. The postmodern narration of *Money* accordingly seems to acknowledge the symbolic significance of that year deploying a dystopian narrative of the changes in ethics, values and practices introduced by neoliberalism. The increasing relevance of greed, entrepreneurship and individualism determined by the implementation of monetarist policies are described in the novel as factors of unstoppable decline of the Western society. The novel is, in fact, a satire of the consumerist values which had turned citizens into consumers and the world into a market place where everything is explained in terms of commerce, acquisition, selling, ultimately money. The novel is presented as a “suicide note”, a peculiarity which links consumer desire to death drives and self-destruction. Furthermore, similarly to *What a Carve Up!* and *The House of Sleep* it presents escapist fantasies from consumer society through death. Moreover, the suicide note form reinforces the self-destructive connotation of neoliberal capitalism and consumerism.

The first interesting point of the novel is undoubtedly the narrative voice, which represents the viewpoint of the main character, John Self. Tredell points out that this character ‘could be seen to embody the acquisitiveness of the 1980s in the era of Thatcher and Reagan, the desire, above all, for money’<sup>343</sup>. Interestingly the name of the narrator/character is composed by the name John, probably the commonest name in Britain, and the surname Self that is evidently related to both the self-reflexivity of the postmodern narration and the neoliberal stress on individualism. Moreover, the surname Self, as Marsh notes<sup>344</sup>, reflects the notorious affirmation of Thatcher ‘there is not such a thing as society. There are individual men and women’ with its negation of community solidarity and stress on individualism. On the other hand, the name John

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<sup>343</sup> Tredell, N. (2000) *The Fiction of Martin Amis*. Cambridge: Icon Books, p. 55.

<sup>344</sup> Marsh, N. (2007) *Money, Speculation and Finance in Contemporary British Fiction*. London: Continuum, p. 41.

also suggests the “common person”; therefore in the light of the working class origins of John Self, the combination of his name and surname reflects the Thatcherite rhetoric about self-made, hard-working man, gifted with entrepreneurial spirit. This post-industrial and consumerist version of the classic rhetoric of the American Dream was one of the most convincing propagandistic strategies to gain electorate. However, undoubtedly big private investors profited from the policies of deregulation and privatisation. John Self is exactly a representative of this small elite of “self-made men”. As Brooker claims, John Self represents the ‘*nouveau riche*’<sup>345</sup> class resulting from the financial gambling deregulated during the Thatcher’s era. Brooker further explains that John Self with his mix of greed, violence and misogyny is ‘a characteristic period figure’<sup>346</sup>. By representing his insatiable lust for junk food, pornography, alcohol, drugs, Amis aims to criticise consumerism through satire.

The ambivalence of the character highlighted above also draws attention to reader’s identification and de-identification with John Self. On one side, as Self represents a ‘characteristic period figure’, reader’s identification with Self’s consumerist habits and desire for an upward social mobility is certainly in Amis’ intentions. On the other side, his personality traits and habits are exaggerated to the grotesque and therefore he is not certainly conceived as a realist typical character. The process of de-identification with this character is therefore due to the sense of antipathy that this character generates. Amis wants this character to be as unpleasant as possible to show in the most provoking way the effects of consumerism on individuals.

John Self interprets all the aspects of life in terms of money, a word that recurs obsessively throughout the novel. The marketization of human life is also

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<sup>345</sup> Brooker, J. (2010) ‘Literature of the 1980s: After the Watershed’, *The Edinburgh History of Twentieth-Century Literature in Britain: Volume Nine*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 57.

<sup>346</sup> Brooker, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 57

manifested through the obsessive presence of pornography. For John Self sex is nothing but a currency, and bodies are goods that can be sold and bought: 'I can't go on sleeping alone – that's certain. I need a human touch. Soon I'll just have to go out and buy one'<sup>347</sup>. Money's misogyny manifests itself in the characterisation of Self's partner Selina Street. Here again a name has a symbolic meaning as through the word "street" is conveyed the idea of sex in exchange for money, prostitution: 'I walked home the long way round to kill time before she came – my shop-soiled Selina, my High-Street Selina'<sup>348</sup>. The association between the high-street and his lover reveals Self's psychology where the female figure and the relationship with her exist solely in terms of exchange. Further in the novel the neoliberal attitude to marketization of the human relationships is presented even more overtly in terms of prostitution: 'Selina Street has no money, no money at all [...] She has fucked for money. No money hurts, it stings. Right, dead right, to give her some. She has always said that men use money to dominate women. I have always agreed'<sup>349</sup>. In Self's world there exists a misogynist equation between women and money, in other words the objectification of women and a perception of the woman's sexuality as lust for money. This is closely related also to issues of Selina's faithfulness. John Self is obsessed with the idea of his partner's betrayals. He is at the same time disgusted and excited by the challenge of controlling what he sees as her incontrollable lust for sex, which is for Self nothing but lust for money. Marsh explains that John Self's relation with Selina is a metaphorical attempt to 'understand or to command the money economies'<sup>350</sup>. He accepts the challenge of being in a relationship with the "unfaithful" Selina because he equates this relationship with a challenge of business management. Sex is therefore for Self just a consumer product

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<sup>347</sup> Amis, M. (1984) *Money*. London: Penguin, p. 60.

<sup>348</sup> Amis, M. (1984) *ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>349</sup> Amis, M. (1984) *ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>350</sup> Marsh, N. (2007) *ibid.*, p. 55.

inescapably related to money: ‘While making love, we often talk about money. I like it. I like that dirty talk’<sup>351</sup>. The expression “dirty talk” referred to money in a context of sexual fetishism underpins criticism of the role of money in neoliberal society. Money is, in fact, turned into a fetish, object of lust, a sexual desire. For John Self relations among human beings exist solely in terms of transactions. Marsh points out that the idea of possession of Selina, and the nihilism and the professed self-destruction of the novel, reflect the ‘catastrophic view of money’s possession of sovereignty’ proposed by Toni Negri and Michael Hardt according to which the financial power is gradually determining a new order replacing previous ethics with ‘its own ethical order’<sup>352</sup>. The fact that John Self continuously travels between New York and London, the two capitals of neoliberal financial power, metaphorically represents and prophetically anticipates the transnationalism of the globalised market and the loss of national sovereignty on money. Amis is more interested in the transnational nature of money; Coe more interested in Britishness or English identity, as evident in the Englishness of the cultural references in *What a Carve Up!*

The dehumanization of the relationship among humans is also represented through Self’s loathing of culture. The hatred of culture means a negation of the human aspects of the existence: ‘I chose not reading. Not reading – that’s where I put my money’<sup>353</sup>, Self affirms proudly. Similarly, John Self expresses the diffidence of the *nouveau riche* toward culture and education, considered as something useless: ‘I hate people who are beneficiaries of a university education. I hate people with degrees [...] And you hate me, don’t you. Yes you do. Because I’m the new kind, the kind who has

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<sup>351</sup> Amis, M. (1984) *ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>352</sup> Marsh, N. (2007) *ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>353</sup> Amis, M. (1984) *ibid.*, p. 42.

money but can never use it for anything but ugliness'<sup>354</sup>. This sentence synthetises two typical situations of the post-industrial condition. Firstly, the neoliberal “rhetoric of envy” according to which those with an education, especially in a discipline that cannot produce immediate financial profit, loathe the bad taste of those rich without education because of their deep-rooted envy for financial status of the latter. Secondly and more importantly, the idea that economical return is the only unit that determines what is good and what is bad, what is successful and what is unsuccessful.

The aversion of neoliberal pragmatism to something such as culture that cannot be immediately monetised is also expressed through the description of Self's satisfaction when he notices the changes that neoliberalism has produced to urban architecture:

There used to be a third-generation Italian restaurant across the road [...] It's now a Burger den. There is already a Burger Hutch on the street. There is a Burger Shack, too and a Burger Bower. Fast food equals fast money. I know: I helped. Perhaps there is a money-room for several more. Every window reveals a striplit boutique. How many striplit boutiques does a street need – thirty, forty? There used to be a bookshop here, with merchandise ranked in alphabetical order and subject sections. No longer. The place didn't have what it took: market forces [...] There used to be a music shop [...] This has become a souvenir hypermarket [...] My way is coming up in the world. I'm pleased<sup>355</sup>.

This section tellingly reveals the dystopian landscape produced by neoliberalism. Traditional food is replaced by junk food; undistinguishable chain shops replace places of distribution of culture. This section highlights the homogenisation and commodification under neoliberal global capitalism but it is also, in literary terms, a satirical representation in dystopian and exaggerated terms of contemporary society. This section also reminds us that *Money* is essentially a ferocious satire of contemporary

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<sup>354</sup> Amis, M. (1984) *ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>355</sup> Amis, M. (1984) *ibid.*, p. 71.

society. Self with his insatiable appetites reminds us, in fact, Swift's satirical representations. Nevertheless, this quotation, with its mix of sardonicism and sadism also describes the post-industrial condition and refers to the changes in the urban architecture of the city. In the case of London, as described in the novel, these changes clearly reflect a change in the zeitgeist. The urban dystopia is often in *Money* a form to represent the social malaise of Thatcher's Britain characterised by a huge divide between rich and poor, and where the urban cities become a mirror of this condition: 'I opened my tabloid', Self says, 'to find that [...] the whole of England has been scalded by tumults and mutiny, by social crack-up in the torched slums. Unemployment, I learned, was what had got everyone so mad [...] Inner cities crackle with money chaos – but I've *got* money, plenty of it'<sup>356</sup>. The sentence clearly refers to the 1981 riots in Toxteth, Liverpool and Brixton, London. The events took place in a country severely affected by the recession determined by the monetarist policies, bad housing condition and racial discrimination. That sentence depicts in dystopian terms the effects of the monetarist and neoliberal policy. The 'money chaos' can be interpreted as the monetarist policy that contributed to increase the unemployment and cut the services to the most vulnerable communities, but also the widening of the gap between social classes. On the other hand 'I've *got* money' points towards individualism. By affirming his wealthy status, Self affirms that he is completely uninterested in the condition of the not haves, and in a broader interpretation the expression is a reference to the class divide caused the by neoliberal policies.

*Money* and *What a Carve Up!* are two novels that clearly share affinities: specifically the postmodern literary forms deployed and harsh criticism of neoliberalism and post-industrial society. Both novels deal with the post-industrial condition through

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<sup>356</sup> Amis, M. (1984) *ibid.*, p. 66.

postmodern literary forms such as the non-linear dimension of time and space and the blatant use of parody to demystify history. Moreover, both novels are characterised by postmodern self-reflexivity. In *What a Carve Up!* it is deployed through the character Michael Owen who embodies the authorial status, and in *Money* through the narrator voice and through a character named Martin Amis, a mark of authorial presence (and conversely authorial absence as the voice of the author is concealed behind the characterisation of the protagonists). The character Martin Amis has, in a way, a similar role to that of Michael Owen in *What a Carve Up!*.

Both novels propose a representation of the neoliberal society as dominated by a greedy entity that influence the lives of people. Moreover, in both novels, this entity finds representation in characters that are a revised version of the classic character of the villain: John Self and the Winshaws. However, the two novels differ on political grounds for several reasons, despite the fact that both denounce the marketization of the human condition and of the relationships between humans. Coe's novel is more preoccupied with the British condition while *Money*, through the narration of Self's journeys between London and New York, has a more global perspective on the situation of the post-industrial condition, bridging the historical and political changes undergoing in the two world financial capitals that lead to a change on a global scale. The novels present different forms of political expression. *What a Carve Up!* offers criticism of Thatcherism as specific actor of the social change. *Money*'s criticism is focused on the money itself, an abstract engine of the changes that led to the primacy of the market. In the post-industrial society, according to the neoliberal doctrine, money and the market are similar to an abstraction that acts as a deity, controlling the lives of nations, communities and individuals. This is in a way reflected in *Money*, where money is indeed an entity that controls the life of people, included that of the villain John Self

who is more like a puppet in the hands of the god-money. On the contrary, Coe's novel denounces the puppeteers. The god-money entity is physically embodied in the Winshaws who, thus, represent the political and economic powers behind the neoliberal revolution of the 1980s. Another difference is probably determined by the political position of the authors. Amis's criticism of neoliberalism appears to be from a nihilist position, while Coe's offers a more progressive stance and identifies the alternative with the welfare state. However, the nostalgia for this state also indirectly raises fear that this type of society is permanently compromised.

*Money* often appears misogynistic as women and their sexual desire are described as related to the lust for money. The novel at the same time has a misogynistic tone and analyses misogyny through satire. By contrast, even though it offers an incomplete female perspective on the neoliberal society, Coe's novel depicts women as active actors in both the role of "executioner" (Hilary and Dorothy) and victim (Fiona) of the neoliberal revolution. The female character that comes closer with *Money*'s vision is perhaps Phoebe who sells herself (unsuccessfully) to have access to the art world and to success. *Money*, contrary to *What a Carve Up!* does not aspire to propose any possible social or political alternative to neoliberalism. The novel is characterised by a resigned and mocking nihilism. Its misanthropic and misogynistic tone anyway highlights sadistic aspects of neoliberalism.

### **2.2.2 - *The Child in Time***

*The Child in Time* is a novel that presents different thematic insights on the condition of life in the post-industrial era through a complex narrative structure, while also presenting an analysis of the contemporary historical situation through socio-



political criticism. Narratively the novel is characterised by a third person omniscient narrator, who mainly follows the point of view of the protagonist Stephen Lewis, a successful author of children literature. The topic of childhood is central in the novel. In fact, the novel begins with the narration of the abduction of Stephen's daughter in a crowded supermarket. The topic of lost childhood returns also in the vicissitudes of Stephen's friend Charles Darke, a young Conservative MP who, after a violent nervous breakdown, like Calvino's Baron<sup>357</sup>, finds shelter from the dreadful reality in a renewed childhood. These particular events can be read as metaphorical representations and criticism of the post-industrial condition. In the first event, the setting has a crucially symbolic role. The supermarket is an emblematic place of the postmodern society because it is an impersonal, aseptic, space for commodities. The supermarket is the temple of consumerism par excellence, a place where the dynamics of society are replicated but artificially reconceptualised in a consumerist dimension. McEwan's description of this typically post-industrial locus is enlightening in this sense, as it offers an insight into this artificial locus of consumerism:

The people who used to the supermarket divided into two groups, as distinct as tribes or nations. The first lived locally in modernised Victorian terraced houses which they owned. The second lived locally in tower blocks and council estates. Those in the first group tended to buy fresh fruit and vegetables, brown bread, coffee beans, fresh fish from a special counter, wine and spirits, while those in the second group brought tinned or frozen vegetables, baked beans, instant soup, white sugar, cupcakes, beer, spirits and cigarettes<sup>358</sup>.

This section is intended as a demystification of the neoliberal myth of the classless society. Social differences and the class system are not extinguished but replicated in the politically neutralised forms of the consumer society. The social classes appear

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<sup>357</sup> Calvino, I. (1957) *The Baron in the Trees*. London: Collins (1959).

<sup>358</sup> McEwan, I. (1987) *The Child in Time*. London: Jonathan Cape, p. 15.

transcended in the commodifying space of the free-market society but in fact, as appeared in the quote the social differences are reinforced.

The abduction of Stephen's daughter is a metaphorical reference to idea of loss of childhood, and it can be also interpreted politically as the loss of that 'easy sociability' that Coe mentions in *What a Carve Up!* when he refers to the pre-neoliberal era. Childhood in McEwan's novel is the edenic place. In political terms, the Eden represented by childhood is society before neoliberalism. This is similar to the celebration of the consensus Britain that we find in *What a Carve Up!* and in *The Rotters' Club*. *The Child in Time* is therefore a novel that shows socio-political criticism of post-industrial society. Indeed 'the world of the novel is a dystopic vision of what one might call Thatcherite Britain'<sup>359</sup>. The novel narrates contemporary society in dystopic terms. The novel is set in a climate dominated by a renewed fear of atomic annihilation<sup>360</sup> and, similarly to *What a Carve Up!* and *Money*, describes a world where obscure forces conjure to determine the lives of individuals. Although the novel clearly criticises the politics of the Conservative government lead by Thatcher, Margaret Thatcher is never overtly named but there are references to a gender non-specified Prime Minister. The choice might be determined by McEwan's desire to give the novel a dystopic dimension that goes beyond the contemporaneity and aims rather to highlight the dehumanising effects of the neoliberal policies. The issue of the non-gendered Prime Minister in the novel is also related to the polemics around the gender perception of Margaret Thatcher, a debate which animated the cultural and political discussion of the

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<sup>359</sup> Malcom, D. (2002) *Understanding Ian McEwan*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, p. 97.

<sup>360</sup> Ian McEwan visited the site of the women's campaign against the decision to implant atomic weapons in the RAF military base Greenham Common and wrote about it for a work for BBC1 and in the work *Or Shall We Die?*. Brooker, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 200. The protest was one of the symbols of the anti-Thatcherite campaign and was particularly significant because the role of the women rights movement. The activists, in fact, were all women. The protest signed the link between the feminist movement and peace movement. The protest was also referenced in a line of a song, *Ask*, of one of the most prominent rock bands of the 1980s, The Smiths: 'the bomb will bring us together'. Brooker, J. (2010) *ibid.*, pp 172-209.

role of the Prime Minister as a woman and her policies towards women during the years of her government. Nonetheless, the criticism of Thatcher's policies is evident for a series of reasons such as references to the Conservative Party, specifically through the story of Charles Darke, who having 'no political convictions, only managerial skills and great ambitions'<sup>361</sup> embodies the quintessential features of neoliberal pragmatism of the Thatcherite cabinet. The novel begins with a clearly political assertion, criticising the privatisations of public assets: 'Subsidising public transport had long been associated in the minds of both Government and the majority of its public with the denial of individual liberty'<sup>362</sup>. The sentence introduces the readers to the historical background of the novel, referring to the ongoing privatisations during the Thatcher's years and offering a criticism, in a sardonic tone, of the propaganda behind the policies of privatisation: the neoliberal propagandistic equation between privatisation and individual liberty. Furthermore in the novel the Thatcher years are reset in an a-temporal, dystopian dimension. As Brooker writes, in *The Child in Time* 'the calamitous state of the world is insistent [...] Police are armed, licensed beggars patrol the streets, traffic is gridlocked, schools are for sale, and the state sponsors an all-day channel of trash TV'<sup>363</sup>. In the words of Stephen the policies of the Prime Minister, (a Thatcher figure) are 'a mess, a disgrace'<sup>364</sup>. Such stance against Thatcherism echoes the words of Michal Owen who, awakened from his state of political unawareness, accusing the Winshaws of being criminals, denounces the policies of Thatcher.

The dystopian nature of Thatcher's politics is conveyed through descriptions of the fictional committee instituted by the government to draw guidelines for the education of children, *The Authorised Childcare Handbook HMSO*. The main character,

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<sup>361</sup> McEwan, I. (1987) *ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>362</sup> McEwan, I. (1987) *ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>363</sup> Brooker, J. (2010) *ibid.*, pp 202-203.

<sup>364</sup> McEwan, I. (1987) *ibid.*, p. 154.

Stephen, thanks to his role as a famous author of books for children, has been co-opted to work in this committee and thus through his vicissitudes the readers are informed of government's intentions in relation to education. Stephen, having a privileged access to power, can witness how the educational state apparatus works to entrench the neoliberal ideology. The character of Stephen thus becomes the key through which the novel deploys social criticism. Stephen becomes increasingly critical of the practices and the aims of the committee, especially when it becomes clear that the handbook has been written in advance and the members of the committee play a mere role of instrument of propaganda, which aims to convince the public opinion that the government is seriously committed to openly debate the role, the goals and the forms of the education of children. In the novel the discussion about the role of education implies a clear and firm political criticism of Thatcherism especially in its more authoritarian aspects. Critics of Thatcherism have always pointed that this phenomenon has always combined free-market and financial *laissez-faire* with an authoritarian approach toward dissent and alternatives. The foundations of Thatcherism, in fact, lie in this tension between an exasperated push toward modernisation and a nostalgic return to the Victorian past. Policies of deregulations were accompanied by the rhetoric of Victorian imperial grandeur, hard work and discipline that led many commentators to talk of "nanny state" when referring to Thatcher's ideal of the country. The novel specifically denounces the authoritarian and "nanny" attitude of Thatcher's government. Through Orwellian echoes the novel denounces the government's intentions to subjugate people and to force them to the acceptance of the neoliberal ideology and the rules of the free-market. The Official Commission on Childcare, which is 'known to be a pet concern of the Prime Minister'<sup>365</sup>, is described as an "Orwellian" institution that aims to form a citizenry on

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<sup>365</sup> McEwan, I. (1987) *ibid.*, p. 9.

the basis of their socio-political agenda: ‘There were strong opinions about what should be done to children to procure one for the future’<sup>366</sup>. The government is described as a Big Brother (in neoliberal forms) that aims to shape the future of the country bringing up new species of citizens. The novel denounces this authoritarian approach and the intention of the Government to ‘intervene in the intimate realm through its new *Authorised Childcare Handbook*’<sup>367</sup>. Sections of the Handbook appear as epitaph in the incipit of each chapter; in doing so it reminds of the existence of a dystopian super entity dominating the existence of the characters/individuals. The tone of the Handbook is inspired somewhat by Victorian moralism, but here the aim is to form a post-industrial citizenry according to values and the rules of neoliberalism:

In the past, too much has been demanded of parents who have been exhorted to inculcate altruism in their children at all costs. Incentives, after all, form the basis of our economic structure and necessarily shape our morality; there is no reason on earth why a well-behaved child should not have an ulterior motive<sup>368</sup>.

The fictional Handbook is used to criticise the intent to create a place where human relations are subject to the rules of the market and where altruism is sacrificed in the name of economic profits. The section above denounces the rhetoric of values of discipline and hard work borrowed from Victorian age to provide an indoctrination of new generation’s citizens. As Malcolm rightly pointed out, the novel tends to describe as facts the tendencies of the period<sup>369</sup> and in this sense, narrating the attempt of the Government to produce a new citizenry, it anticipates and forecasts the danger of the entrenchment of Thatcherism.

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<sup>366</sup> McEwan, I. (1987) *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>367</sup> Brooker, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>368</sup> McEwan, I. (1987) *ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>369</sup> Malcom, D. (2002) *ibid.*, p. 96

Interestingly, the novel identifies in education the tool used by the Thatcherite establishment to entrench its narrative and its values. In doing so, it may also refer to changes in the role of education and knowledge in the post-industrial society. One of the most effective ways adopted by the neoliberal political and economic establishment to entrench neoliberal ideology is to mutate the nature and the role of educational institutions. As Althusser noted, the school is one of the state apparatuses at the basis of the re-production of ideology<sup>370</sup>. By introducing the school to values of the free-market, the neoliberal establishment lays the foundations of its re-production and its hegemony. As pointed out by Lyotard in the postmodern and post-industrial world, education is valued on the basis of performance and the funds are allocated on the basis of the 'logic of power growth'<sup>371</sup>. Lyotard adds that 'educational institution can sell on the world market'<sup>372</sup> and that the old criteria of educational purposes are substituted by 'mercantilization of knowledge' with its related questions 'is it saleable?', 'is it efficient?'<sup>373</sup>. The novel, through its fictional narration, reproduces the preoccupation with the changing role of education and about the marketization of education and its impact on the nature of society. Lyotard points out that in the postmodern and post-industrial world the role of education is to 'create skills, and no longer ideas'<sup>374</sup>. This consequently perpetuates the entrenchment of the neoliberal ideology. The novel seems to be concerned with the role of the education (here described more like indoctrination) as form to generate the citizenry of the future as desired by the neoliberal establishment. The dystopian tone of the novel, in fact, reflects the preoccupation with a political and economic establishment that controls, through education, and therefore through the

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<sup>370</sup> Althusser, L. (1970) 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Monthly Review Press (1971), pp 150-152.

<sup>371</sup> Lyotard, F. (1979) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester (1984): Manchester University Press, p. 47.

<sup>372</sup> Lyotard, F. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>373</sup> Lyotard, F. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>374</sup> Lyotard, F. (1979) *ibid.*, p. 48.

perpetuation of its values, the life and the future of individuals. In this sense *The Child in Time* and Coe's novel share the same concerns. *What a Carve Up!*, in fact, similarly highlights how through the use of media, cinema or journalism, the public can be influenced and individuals can have their lives affected by the entrenchment of market-based values. McEwan's novel pushes a little forward the dystopian aspect, arriving to imagine an entire progeny "genetically modified" by the Governmental guidelines. Furthermore, the two novels identify in the past the escape from a dreadful present. However, while in *What a Carve Up!* nostalgia for the welfare state constitutes a political example for the future and an alternative, in *The Child in Time* the loss of childhood is a sign of political resignation. 'The past [...] has been destroyed in the name of efficiency, individual freedom, and national self-sufficiency'<sup>375</sup> is the message of the novel and Charles's attempt to regain childhood, which ends up with his death, conveys that Thatcherism is incontrovertible and the consensus Britain, represented also in *What a Carve Up!* and *The Rotters' Club* in forms of youth, is lost forever. Similarly to *What a Carve Up!* here postmodern forms and nostalgia mode are forms of political criticism. The difference between the two approaches lies in the fact that while *What a Carve Up!* offers a retrospective look at the historical period of entrenchment of neoliberalism, McEwan's one offers a dystopian view of a probable future determined by the neoliberal policies in education. The birth of another child that brings Stephen and his wife together again at the end of the novel, however, is a sign of hope. It metaphorically suggests a sense of rebirth or at least hope. The end of *The Child in Time* is completely opposite to that of *What a Carve Up!*. The end of Coe's novel is characterised by the presence of death, the end of *The Child in Time* is characterised by the presence of birth. In Coe's novel the death of all the novel's characters suggests

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<sup>375</sup> Malcom, D. (2002) *ibid.*, p. 102.

fantasy of escapism from a historical reality considered unbearable. In McEwan's novel, the birth of the child conveys hope and resilience. This is due to the nature of the novels: while Coe is more concerned with Thatcherism as historical phenomenon, McEwan is interested in dealing with one of the possible outcomes of the ongoing social transformations. Moreover, Coe's novel is more concerned with politics while *The Child in Time* is a complex novel about the loss of childhood and about parenthood and loss of innocence and the social and political dimension is often a dystopic background.

### 2.2.3 - *The Line of Beauty*

Alan Hollinghurst's fourth novel, *The Line of Beauty*, offers several points of discussion about the representation and the analysis of the Thatcher period. Firstly, like *What a Carve Up!* it was published after Thatcher's resignation but ten years after Coe's novel, and at the end of the New Labour experience. This historical detail is crucial, considering that the novel's retrospective on the aesthetics of the 1980s benefits from the observation of the entrenchment of the neoliberal narrative into British society. Duff, summarising the topics faced in the novel, claims that: '*The Line of Beauty* folds in ideas of homosexuality, AIDS, and drug abuse into the Conservative Thatcherite lifestyle of the 1980s upper classes in a way that makes ironic bedfellows of homosexuality, consumption, and Thatcherite Conservatism'<sup>376</sup>.

Hollinghurst's novel, unlike *What a Carve Up!*, deploys realist forms and it is narrated through a third person voice, 'but everything is filtered through a single

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<sup>376</sup> Duff, K (2010) 'Let's Dance: The Line of Beauty and the Revenant Figure of Thatcher', in Hadley, L., Ho, E (eds) *Thatcher and After: Margaret Thatcher and Her Afterlife in Contemporary Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan p. 182.



consciousness, Nick's<sup>377</sup> in a Jamesian narrative construction. Nick Guest is the main character of the novel and its "consciousness". Through him the reader witnesses also the parable of Thatcherism in the 1980s. The aspiring middle class Nick Guest, who enters the world of the British establishment having been at Oxford and being lodger of the affluent family of the Tory politician Gerald Fedden, represents metonymically the aspirational working class and lower middle class of Thatcherite years. Thatcher's promise to give people access to wealth was indeed interpreted by working and lower-middle class as a way to earn full membership in the country's elite and stop being a guest. This is also Nick's aspiration. He wants to be fully integrated into the Fedden family. However, Nick's story from the access to the world of the elite to the tragic end, evokes exactly the parable of the neoliberal classless society, where the apparent "we are all in this together" shows in the end its fallacy. In this regard, Nick's surname, Guest, suggests exactly the sense of persistent otherness in relation with the upper class and the neoliberal establishment. Nick is a guest in that world, like the Thatcherite aspirational working and lower middle class are guests of the wealthy elite despite of aspirations of the first to be an integral part of the latter. Obviously the sense of being "guest" and the sense of otherness are reinforced by Nick's homosexuality, which in the Thatcherite neo-Victorianism is condemned<sup>378</sup>. The novel focuses on the dichotomy between public and private, a polarisation that echoes Thatcher's policies of privatisation. The dichotomy is expressed in the novel through dealing with the issues of homosexuality. The fact that Nick is gay has to remain hidden and so have his relationships with young men belonging to the same elite that publicly decries

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<sup>377</sup> Jones, T. (2004) 'Welly-Whanging', *London Review of Books* [online]. Available at: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n09/thomas-jones/welly-whanging> [accessed on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2012].

<sup>378</sup> In 1988 with the Section 28, Thatcher's government added to the Local Government act 1986 the following section: shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality" or "promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship": <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1986/10/section/2A> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup> April 2013, 18:31.

homosexual relationships. This homosexual secret, its removal from what remains of the public aspect in the Thatcherite privatised existence, echoes the policies of marginalisation of those who do not embody the Thatcherite prototypes:

As “the development of local citizenship and identity” became progressively tied to private enterprise, the marginalized populations such as the lower classes, immigrant populations, and gay identities were imagined as a different type of citizen, in a way always a “guest”, than the individual who could afford to move freely within private, commercialized spaces such as shopping malls, or the Feddens’ garden (a private space that is accessible via the purchase of real state and, thus, a demonstration of wealth and inclusion)<sup>379</sup>.

Nick is therefore twice a guest, for being a gay man and for not being from the wealthy elite. In fact he lives a double existence. There is an aspirational middle-class ambitious Oxford graduate who dreams of belonging to the world of the elite and there is another Nick with his working class lover. However, as a middle class person, his relationship with Leo who is black and working class is ambivalent. He fetishes Leo’s ethnicity and class; his relationship with him is portrayed as a self-centred desire for adventure of a privileged young person. Leo attracts him because he is not like him and he will never be. However, Nick is also writing a dissertation on James thus his attitude towards the upper-class is ambivalent. Like Henry James, Nick is aware of the hypocrisy of the rich.

Nick’s two worlds are described in diametrically different ways: in the Feddens’ world Thatcher is an idol, in Nick’s “other” world is a disgrace: ‘It’s a fucking standstill here. It’s going backwards. Another four years of Madam and we’ll all be on the street’<sup>380</sup> says Pete, a friend of Nick’s lover Leo, in a scene that draws attention to the deprived conditions of the poor and ill people during the years of Thatcher’s neoliberal revolution with the cuts at the welfare state biting hard the weakest. It is interesting to

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<sup>379</sup> Duff, K. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>380</sup> Hollinghurst, A. (2004) *The Line of Beauty*. London: Picador, p. 108

stress that the illness in question is AIDS, which in the early years of its outbreak was a highly socially stigmatised disease. In this regard it is interesting what further in the novel Wani says about Thatcher: ‘She takes such extraordinary pains to help those she [...] cares about’<sup>381</sup>, namely the rich as later is explicitly affirmed by Nick in a witty remark to Gerald Fedden: ‘In Britain the poor have got poorer and the rich have got [...] well, they’ve got the Conservatives’<sup>382</sup>. Hollinghurst’s novel share the same ideas as Coe’s: the fact that a small elite is “carving up” the wealth of the country at the expenses of the “other” people. This similarity is reinforced by the centrality, in both novels, of the idea of family to represent the privatisation of public goods. The Feddens like the Winshaws are metonymic characters; they embody the elite that carves up the public good.

One of the most important insights the novel provides in relation with Thatcherism is certainly, as also Duff notes<sup>383</sup>, the commodification of life expressed through transformation of the materiality of the body into a consumer product. The novel shares the same preoccupations with *What a Carve Up!* and *Money* which in different ways, and through different narrative forms, also deal with the commodification of the individual. The central point of *The Line of Beauty* is the aesthetics of the Conservative establishment. The novel offer an insight of the neoliberal “marketized” upper-class.

During a lunch with the Fedden family and their friends, Penny, fascinated by the subject of Nick’s doctorate on Henry James, wonders: ‘What would Henry James have made of us [...]?’<sup>384</sup>. This question regarding James’ perception of the Feddens

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<sup>381</sup> Hollinghurst, A. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 319.

<sup>382</sup> Hollinghurst, A. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 394.

<sup>383</sup> Duff, K. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>384</sup> Hollinghurst, A. (2010) *ibid.* p., 140.

underpins the issue of commodification of individuals. In fact, James in novels such as the *Golden Bowl* broadly looks at the commodified nature of the relationships among the wealthy, describing explicitly almost the purchase of beautiful spouses by rich individuals<sup>385</sup>. Moreover, the question raises the issue of commodification inasmuch it suggests the idea of people treated as product in display: “us” means the wealthy elite, intended as a luxurious commodity. Penny goes on: ‘Because he did write about high society, didn’t he?’<sup>386</sup>. Nick’s answer is similarly illuminating:

‘Quite a lot [...] People say he didn’t understand about money, but he certainly knew all about the effects of money, and the ways having money made people think [...] He hated vulgarity [...] But he also said that to call something vulgar was to fail to give a proper account of it’<sup>387</sup>.

Nick suggests that he is aware of the power of money to change people, of the effect of money on the lives of people and the narcissistic sense of self-fulfilment that the money gives, but he also expresses a critically ironic distance from the aesthetic ambitions of the neoliberal consumer society, suggesting instead the idea that the new wave of elitism is nothing but “vulgarity” grotesquely masked with a consumer aesthetics.

The neoliberal consumer aesthetics, as noted by Duff, is particularly represented through the ‘fictional portrayal of Thatcher that embodies the consumer driven economic and privatizing policies [...] through its representation of parts of Thatcher’s body’<sup>388</sup>, therefore through the fetishisation of the social and historical role of the British Prime Minister. Margaret Thatcher becomes an idol, the embodiment of the ideology of the free-market society. Thatcher’s body is consumed and subject to a veneration that falls into fetish and lust. As Duff claims, in *The Line of Beauty* the

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<sup>385</sup> James, H. (2009) *The Golden Bowl*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>386</sup> Hollinghurst, A. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>387</sup> Hollinghurst, A. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>388</sup> Duff, K. (2010) *ibid.*, p., 181.

commodification of neoliberal society is expressed through the commodification of Thatcher's body<sup>389</sup>. The fact that Thatcher's name is never explicitly mentioned but she is just referred to as "the Lady" or "Mrs T" increases the perception of commodification because she seems to be perceived not as a person but as the fetish, the idol of an ideology. This is made clear by the obsessive references to just parts of her bodies such as the eyes: '[...] the lady's eyes'<sup>390</sup>, 'it's those blue eyes. Don't you just want to swim in that – what?'<sup>391</sup>. The representation of the commodified Thatcherite body reaches its climax with the famous scene when Nick invites Thatcher to dance during a party: 'Prime Minister, would you like to dance?'<sup>392</sup>. It's with their intimate connection that Nick "consumes" the Thatcherite body, finally interacting intimately with the object of a fetish:

Nick successfully consumes Thatcher's body in terms of his own social production and thus also engages in a postmodern capitalist exchange where he purchases "history" through the social currency he acquires as a result of his intimacy with Thatcher<sup>393</sup>.

Therefore *What a Carve Up!* and *The Line of Beauty* share the same preoccupation with the commodification of life following the neoliberal revolution. However, while in Coe's novel we see how the marketization of the human relations affects the lives of individuals, in Hollinghurst the commodification of the human lives is so pervasive and aestheticized that even the agent of this ideology itself, Margaret Thatcher becomes "victim" of this social transformation. Hollinghurst commodifies Thatcher's body in order to describe the extent of the phenomenon of the commodification of the human bonds. Hollinghurst's attitude to Thatcher and Thatcherism, while exposing its

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<sup>389</sup> Duff, K. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>390</sup> Hollinghurst, A. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>391</sup> Hollinghurst, A. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 319.

<sup>392</sup> Hollinghurst, A. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 384.

<sup>393</sup> Duff, K. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 194.

hypocrisies and evils, is also ambivalent. The book, like Nick himself, may be somewhat seduced by wealth, the aesthetic, Thatcher herself.

Similarly to the other novels analysed in the comparative section, also *The Line of Beauty* ends tragically with the presence of the death. The last chapter of the novel is, in fact, entitled “The End of the Street” and it is set significantly in 1987 after the “big bang”, the deregulation of the financial markets. The narration of the vicissitudes of the characters is dominated by the shadow of AIDS and death. Hollinghurst describes metaphorically through Nick’s vicissitudes the whole parable of Thatcherism from the first years of Thatcher’s populist rhetoric directed to the aspiring lower/middle class to the dismantling of the national industries and the deregulation of the city that revealed the real beneficiaries of the neoliberal revolution. In fact, while in the first chapter Nick is an Oxford graduate who is a “guest” in the world of the privileged, in the last chapter he is integrated in the elite. However, the fulfilment of his aspirations is accompanied by the presence of tragedy. Interestingly, the novel takes on a more tragic tone when Nick, having broken up with his working class boyfriend Leo, meets his new lover Wani, a sophisticated and rich young man, son of an important investor. It is in the last chapter of the novel where, similarly to what happens in the other novels I discuss, the destructiveness of greed and money becomes manifest, and with it Hollinghurst’s social criticism. It’s through Wani that Nick makes his first encounter with cocaine, the line to which the title of the novel, along with the Ogee curve, refers: ‘Well, just a small line’<sup>394</sup>. However, it is the spectre of AIDS that darkens the novels. Marsh notes that ‘The conflation of AIDS with the financial crash speaks to the larger cultural parallels [...] between money and the disease’<sup>395</sup>. Furthermore Marsh’s uses of Jameson’s

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<sup>394</sup> Hollinghurst, A. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>395</sup> Marsh, N. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 89.

criticism of the deregulated finance seen as a virus that spreads as an epidemic<sup>396</sup> (the “contagiousness of the 2008 financial crisis proves Jameson’s words right) can be useful to clarify the parallel drawn in *The Line of Beauty* between the money-economy and the disease, the fear of the financial crash and the fear of the disease. Above all the ghost of disease and death evoked at the end of the novel means the loss of the innocence of a époque. As the fear of a new incurable disease determined the loss of innocence of the hedonistic 1980s, so the deregulated finance and the financial crisis following the Black Monday of 1987 makes manifest the fallacy of the “greed is good” which signed an époque. In both *What a Carve Up!* and *The Line of Beauty* there is a criticism of the money economy expressed through the presence of death.

For Hollinghurst, as for Coe, money in the eighties represents established class power and the discourse that seemed to suggest otherwise, those which celebrated its libidinous liberation or emphasized its apparent discursivity, served only to conceal the hegemonic power of these class interests [...] In both novels the apparent death of the central protagonist deflects the redemptive political power suggested by their possession of knowledge. In Coe’s novel, Michael’s plunge to earth undercuts the significance that the incriminating completion of his biography would suggest; and in Hollinghurst’s novel, Nick’s uncertain future renders finally irrelevant the power of his aesthetic deflection of his complicity<sup>397</sup>.

In conclusion, the presence of death in all the novels analysed makes for a social criticism as it can be interpreted as the lack of future after the carving up operated by neoliberalism, its ideologists and the Thatcherite pundits.

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<sup>396</sup> Marsh, N. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>397</sup> Marsh, N. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 93.

## Chapter 3

### 3.1 - *The Closed Circle* and *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*

This section of the third chapter seeks to explore the representation of the contemporary British society from the mid-1990s to the post-2008 financial crisis in two novels of Coe which are in many ways very different from each other. The first one is the sequel to *The Rotters' Club*, *The Closed Circle* (2004) and the second is the latest of Coe's novels, *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* (2010). The two novels differ in both content and style. However, both novels explore the social reality of modern Britain and deal with the legacy of Thatcherism or more properly with the entrenchment and the formation of a socio-political and economical consensus on values and forms of neoliberalism, fostered by Margaret Thatcher and her government.

The novels represent two phases of the post-Thatcherite neoliberal consensus. The first is characterised by an enthusiastic embracing of neoliberal policies and values by the Labour Party with the re-branding into New Labour initiated by Tony Blair and the new leadership of the party. Chronologically this phase is identifiable with the years 1993-2004, from the moment Tony Blair proposed to shift the party towards the centre with the elimination of Clause IV from the Labour Party Constitution, until the Second Iraq War that followed the attacks of 9/11. The second phase is from the 2007-2008 financial crisis onwards. Interestingly these two phases represent two crucial moments of contemporary neoliberal, globalised society. The first is characterised by enthusiasm for the market values, the second one by the abrupt awakening from the neoliberal dream but also the inability of a de-politicised society to cope with, and to elaborate viable alternatives to, the excesses of an apparently failed system.



### 3.1.1 - *The Closed Circle* and Cool Britannia

The shift towards the centre and the “third way” policy of New Labour resulted in a landslide at the election of the 1997 that brought the Labour Party to power after 18 years. New Labour instead of proposing an alternative to the Thatcherite agenda, began to consider neoliberal values as immutable and the values fostered by Thatcherism unalterable. Therefore, it just continued on the same path of Thatcherism, de facto causing the entrenchment of neoliberalism into British society. The first act of Tony Blair as Prime Minister was to invite Thatcher to n.10 Downing Street. The event has a symbolic relevance as it “physically” marks the handover of the neoliberal agenda. Practically the act marked the creation of a neoliberal consensus according to which political parties have divergent views on mainly minor issues but converge on keeping the neoliberal approach as the foundation of the socio-political and economical system. Richard Heffernan asserts that ‘consensus politics are [...] characterised by an imperfect transition in which one political tradition is influenced by another. In the contemporary world, Labour’s social democratic appeal has been colonised by a neo-liberal politics’<sup>398</sup>. This consensus is a dogmatic one: neoliberalism is viewed as the structural framework of the administration of public affairs. The divergences between actors on the mainstream political spectrum are limited to minor issues of administration of state finance while critique of neoliberalism is relegated to an outsider position. This is the preoccupation expressed in *The Closed Circle* in a debate about protest movements between Doug Anderton and Paul Trotter. Paul’s position supports the view of the indisputability of the neoliberal dogma. He says: ‘[T]hese people weren’t to be taken seriously. If they want to contribute to the political process, then they have to renounce

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<sup>398</sup> Heffernan, R. (2000) *New Labour and Thatcherism: Political Change in Britain*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 157.

violence and they have to work *within the existing structures* (my italics)<sup>399</sup>. Doug Anderton, replies pointing the finger against at the lack of alternatives and the neoliberal consensus:

Brilliant [...] except for the tiny fact that you're the people who've shut them out of the existing structures in the first place [...] the entire system is only geared to accommodating a tiny minority of political opinion. The left's moved way over to the right, the right's moved a tiny bit to the left, the circle's been closed and everyone else can go fuck themselves<sup>400</sup>.

Doug's remark highlights precisely the lack of a narrative alternative to the neoliberal one. As Doug comments to Paul's assistant Malvina '[People] still believe that they've voted in a left-wing party. Whereas really they've just voted for another five years of Thatcherism. Ten years. Fifteen, even'<sup>401</sup>. Doug therefore represents those who saw in New Labour a betrayal of the social democratic stances and saw the Blairites as in reality, post-Thatcherites who adopted the neoliberal agenda and even pushed it a step further. The sentence above also is relevant to the meaning of the title of the book. The closed circle mentioned in the title refers, in fact, to the think tank Closed Circle founded by Paul Trotter. However, in a larger sense it refers specifically to the idea that the political power and the financial power concocted to become a privileged gated elite at the expenses of the wider population.

In a 1998 cartoon for *The Times*, Peter Brookes<sup>402</sup> represents of the Blair's "third way" politics in 'transgendered terms'<sup>403</sup>. Blair literally "embodies" Thatcherism, being depicted with the body of Margaret Thatcher. This subversive image implicitly argues

<sup>399</sup> Coe, J. (2004) *The Closed Circle*, London: Penguin, p. 138

<sup>400</sup> Coe, J. (2004) *ibid.*, pp 138-139.

<sup>401</sup> Coe, J. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>402</sup> Brookes, P. (1998) 'The Third Way', *The Times*. Available online at *Cartoons: British Cartoons Archive* <http://www.cartoons.ac.uk/record/PC4574> [accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> July 2013].

<sup>403</sup> Joyce, H. (2010) 'Parodic Reiterations: Representations of Margaret Thatcher and Thatcherism in Late Twentieth-Century British Political Cartoons', in Hadley, L., Ho, L. (eds) *Thatcher and After: Margaret Thatcher and Her Afterlife in Contemporary Culture*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 232.

that due to the entrenchment of Thatcherism, political authority is gained conceivable exclusively through the embodiment of Thatcher's ideological and political characteristics, here metaphorically expressed through the 'acquisition of Thatcher's gendered characteristics'<sup>404</sup>. Similarly in *The Closed Circle*, the neoliberal colonisation of the Labour Party is represented through a physical embodiment too: Paul Trotter, supporter of theories of Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman and former supporter of the Conservative Party under Thatcher in *The Rotters' Club*, becomes a member of the Labour Party in *The Closed Circle*. Indeed, New Labour's inheritance of the neoliberal agenda determined an absorption of neoliberal values and culture in the deep tissues of the British society and therefore produced a settlement on the neoliberal paradigm. Obviously, the settlement produced a de-politicised society which is no longer aware of and concerned with political issues and conceives politics as a mere administration of public affairs within the framework proposed by neoliberal economists and theorists. In the first pages of *The Closed Circle*, in fact, we find exactly a reference to the climate of collective political apathy which enveloped British society during the years of Blair's government. Claire, coming back to Britain after many years recounts:

A few months ago I read an article in the *Corriere della Sera* which was called 'Apathetic Britain'. It said that now Tony Blair had been voted in with such a huge majority, and he seemed like a nice guy and seemed to know what he was doing, people had breathed a sort of collective sigh of relief and stopped thinking about politics anymore<sup>405</sup>.

New Labour embracing of the neoliberal values and their entrenchment in the British society produced a notable cultural change. The political disengagement and the widespread idea that the market would open a new set of possibilities for personal

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<sup>404</sup> Joyce, H. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 235.

<sup>405</sup> Coe, J. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 14.

achievements and success, and would regulate the existence of individuals produced a culture which strongly reflected those values. This is the context that underpins the development of the most significant cultural phenomenon of the New Labour's years: Cool Britannia. After the divisive years of Margaret Thatcher, where lot of artistic production had been explicitly anti-Thatcher and had been an instrument of political opposition to Thatcherism, the neoliberal settlement fostered by New Labour produced an art that far from the militancy of the previous artistic production could be "sold" as a successful brand. Ken Urban explains the phenomenon saying that 'London was now to be the epicentre of a cultural renaissance, its inhabitants no longer citizens of a fading imperial power, but the vital members of a country blazing into the new millennium high on rush of newness'<sup>406</sup>. Cool Britannia becomes a saleable brand, a cultural phenomenon that embodied the market values. New Labour was interested in and actively supported Cool Britannia, as documented, for example, in John Rhys Harris's book about Brit-pop, which recounts the meetings between rock bands such as Oasis, Blur, Pulp, Suede and the Blairite establishment<sup>407</sup>. New Labour wanted to present itself as the advocate of a new cultural renaissance under the umbrella of renewed British pride and market saleability. Discussing the nature of Cool Britannia artistic production, Saunders claims that most importantly 'what made [...] [it] appealing to New Labour was its absence of any political engagement'<sup>408</sup>. It is not by any chance that the most significant artistic event of the Cool Britannia was the 1997 exhibition *Sensation* characterised by the stress on the 'commercial viability' of the works presented regardless of their 'intrinsic artistic value'<sup>409</sup>. The condition of the British cultural scene

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<sup>406</sup> Urban, K. (2004) 'Towards a Theory of Cruel Britannia: Coolness, Cruelty, and the "Nineties"' *New Theatre Quarterly*, pp 355-72, p. 355.

<sup>407</sup> Harris, J. R. (2004) *The last party: Britpop, Blair and the demise of English rock*. London: Harper Perennial.

<sup>408</sup> Saunders, G. (2010) Sarah Kane: Cool Britannia's Reluctant Feminist, in in Hadley, L., Ho, L. (eds) *Thatcher and After: Margaret Thatcher and Her Afterlife in Contemporary Culture*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 205.

<sup>409</sup> Saunders, G. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 205.

soaked in the neoliberal values is denounced in *The Closed Circle* through the words of Doug who describes ‘the obscene *weightlessness* of [British] cultural life, the grotesque triumph of sheen over substance’<sup>410</sup>. Cool Britannia is as Ken Urban explains a ‘counter-cultural individualism – the 1960s without the stink of collective’<sup>411</sup>. Cool Britannia is therefore perfectly in line with the Thatcherite ‘there is no such as thing as society’ mind-set. It is a direct derivation of individualistic and competitive neoliberal values. Coolness is expression of disinterest; Keith Urban explains: ‘Nothing is crueller than coolness [...] Marked by a libertarian attitude of ‘whatever’, cool is highly individualistic, preferring the role of the detached onlooker to the passionate commitment of politics’<sup>412</sup>. Coolness rejects any commitment to public affairs and to “the other” in general terms. In fact, for example, Claire who had been away from Britain for long time, once arrived is struck by the violent individualism and the aggression of the modern neoliberal society. She notes:

People on the highway were driving differently. It’s not just that they were driving faster than I remembered [...] there was a kind of anger about the way they drove. They were tailgating each other, flashing their headlights when people stayed in the outside lanes and won’t shift [...] people drive about five yards behind them for a while, pressuring them to move, and then, when they don’t move, they swing out into the outside lane and swing back in again before it’s really safe, cutting into their path. And there were drivers who were happily cruising along at seventy and then, when they noticed that someone was overtaking them, they would accelerate [...] as it was a personal affront<sup>413</sup>.

This section clearly highlights the change that society has undergone. The highway metaphor is deployed to explain the dynamics of the modern neoliberal society. Continuously people have to be efficient, fast and ready to compete with each other; to

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<sup>410</sup> Coe, J. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 325.

<sup>411</sup> Urban, K. (2008) ‘Cruel Britannia’ in D’Montè, R., Saunders, G. (eds) *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 40.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>413</sup> Coe, J. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 14.

be slower is to be overcome. As a Radiohead's song says in the neoliberal society one must be 'fitter, happier, more productive'<sup>414</sup>. Bauman affirms that in the modern neoliberal society the world and people who populated it are seen as '*disposable* objects, objects for *one-off* use'<sup>415</sup>. Indeed, the word chosen by Bauman to describe the neoliberal society is liquid due to its extreme flexibility, ephemerality and weightlessness mentioned above. What Claire notes is the 'consumerization of a precarious world and the disintegration of the human bonds' Bauman described.<sup>416</sup> Claire also gives an insight in the consumerization of life in the liquid society when she describes how increased interactions through technology do not mean that people really talk to each other, understand each other, and spend time to know each other<sup>417</sup>.

*The Closed Circle* is indeed a novel that represents the weightlessness, the political disengagement and the individualism of modern British society in its own essence. It is a sequel to *The Rotters' Club*, which narrates the historical events of the seventies, but the mood is completely changed. *The Rotters' Club* described a country challenged by a severe economic downturn but still a country capable of expressing community solidarity, cultural vitality and courage to hope for changes. *The Closed Circle* represents a society closed in its individualism, incapable of producing alternatives to the dominating neoliberal order and deeply drenched in the ephemerality of consumerism. The development of the characters crucially represents the final transformation of citizens into consumers, the abandonment of the illusion of a change, the retreat from the public life into the realm of the individuality. Thus, for example, in *The Closed Circle* the representation of the industrial dispute at the Leyland plant caused by the proposed sell-out of Rovers to BMW is a just a weak echo of the fierce

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<sup>414</sup> Radiohead, 1997, 'Fitter, Happier', in *OK Computer*. London: Parlophone.

<sup>415</sup> Bauman, Z. (2000) *ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>416</sup> Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 165.

<sup>417</sup> Coe, J. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 7.

dispute at the same industrial district in the 1970s represented in *The Rotters' Club*. While in the previous novel the unionised workers could make their voice heard, in the sequel the de-unionised workers, also deprived of the community solidarity existent in the pre-Thatcher Britain, have to surrender to the spirit of the times and to the new condition of the work at the time of the global market. Doug and his mother Irene, who witnessed and participated actively to both industrial disputes at the Longbridge industrial area in the seventies and in the recent times, read in the *Sun*:

**Fifty thousand jobs were doomed last night as all hope of rescuing car firm Rover vanished.** In a day of industrial disaster for Britain, the Alchemy group **SCRAPPED** its deal to take over the company from BMW. Workers **CHEERED** as the news broke - because they believed that the rival Phoenix bid for the firm would resurface, saving more jobs than the Alchemy plan. *But last night the cheers had turned to tears as the bleak reality sank in the thousands of Midlands homes – there will be NO Rover rescue and many families are set to face life on the dole*<sup>418</sup>.

Doug explains to a distressed Irene: this is the 'spirit of the times, Mum. Spirit of the times'<sup>419</sup>. A sense of surrender to the logics of the globalisation seems to dominate the characters and the mood of the novel, which describes resigned characters coping with a feeling of impotence. Even Benjamin who at the end *The Rotter's Club* had awakened from his social disengagement locks himself in a sort of semi-autistic retreat from reality, pursuing a love finished decades before and other ghosts from the past that haunt him. Similarly, Doug Anderton, far from being the working-class activist he was in *The Rotters' Club*, in the sequel appears more representative of certain champagne socialists. Coe seems to suggest that in the de-politicised space of postmodern society rather than a real political activism, some kind of leftism appears more as another form of self-promotion and self-marketing. One of the chapter's titles is *Pale People* and

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<sup>418</sup> Coe, J. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>419</sup> Coe, J. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 136.

indeed the whole novel in comparison with its prequel exudes emaciated impotence and resignation. At the end of *The Rotters' Club* the scene of Rollo Reg and Ben laughing while proclaiming that Thatcher would have never made it to win the elections summarised perfectly the spirit of those times. Coe, from a position of future anterior knows that what they had predicted would not have matched the reality, because Thatcherism would have wiped away their hopes. Nevertheless, the novel's ending summarises the spirit of the seventies when, in spite of difficulties and challenges, society still had a socio-political awareness and therefore there existed a hope for change. In *The Closed Circle* the events are running parallel to the narration of the novel. The author has witnessed development of the post-Thatcherite neoliberal consensus and the rising of a global super elite which has even more power than the Thatcherite politicians to control governments and affect the lives of individuals. In a section of the novel, Philip Chase, who has become an author, writes an illuminating article to denounce the lobbies working in cahoots with the government:

*The neoliberals [...] are seekers after purity just as much as the fundamentalists or the neo-Nazis. The only difference is that they are not setting out to create a nation state based on religious or genetic principles. The state they are building [...] is supranational: global travel being one of its defining characteristics. Its geographical features are exclusive hotels, exclusive resorts, gated communities of wildly expensive houses. Its inhabitants will not travel by public transport, and will only use private hospitals. The impulse which drives these people is fear of contact with, and contamination from, the great mass of humanity. They wish to live among them (or rather, they have no choice in the matter) but use their money to put up as many screens as possible, as many boundaries as possible, in order that need only come into meaningful contact with people of their own economic and cultural type*<sup>420</sup>.

This section refers to the new globalised elites that took control over the governments and with which New Labour transacted business: '*New Labour has got into bed with*

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<sup>420</sup> Coe, J. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 271.



*these people [...] it basically supports them in their elitist and divisive objectives*<sup>421</sup>, Philip comments in his article. In fact, in the novel the Closed Circle metaphorically represents the tight ties between the global economic elites and New Labour. While in *The Rotters' Club* it was a neoliberal think tank set up by the teenager Paul and Culpepper and evoked the Centre for Policy Studies, in the sequel the Closed Circle represents an super-national organism Bilderberg-like where politicians and the economic elites set the agenda for the governments and decide the future of societies. Culpepper is now a wealthy financier and Paul Trotter a New Labour politician in charge of taking care of the business relationships between the market forces and the political agents:

The aim of the CIRCLE [...] was to create a space within the commission where the most far-reaching ideas could be floated for the first time. [...] Mr TROTTER reminded his fellow-members that private finance initiatives had now made their way into the public sector in ways which would have been unthinkable [...] under the Conservative government. Responsibility for substantial areas of health provision, state education, local government, prison services and even air traffic control were now in the hands of private companies whose duty of care lay towards the interests of shareholders rather than the general public. In order to advance this programme even further - to 'roll back the frontiers of the state' to a point which even the author of that phrase (Margaret Thatcher) would not have recognized – members of the CLOSED CIRCLE were going to have to think the unthinkable, and imagine the unimaginable<sup>422</sup>.

This section provides criticism of the connections between big corporations and New Labour, a net of power uncountable to the public. David Osler's book *Labour Party PLC* (Mainstream, 2002) was largely Coe's source for political criticism in *The Closed Circle*. In this novel, Coe's critique of neoliberalism in Britain goes beyond the idea of New Labour as a continuation of Thatcher and but denounces the birth of new trans-

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<sup>421</sup> Coe, J. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 271.

<sup>422</sup> Coe, J. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 206.

national, trans-party, trans-cultural elite that pursues their own gain. In postmodern society there is no space and no hope for alternative anymore. Accordingly, the novel ends with a sense of despair. While *The Rotters' Club* described a society on the verge of a radical and ruinous change but still aware and hopeful, *The Closed Circle* describes a society where the change is not possible. 'This is a kind of society which no longer recognizes any alternative to itself and thereby feels absolved from the duty to examine, demonstrate, justify (let alone prove) the validity of its outspoken and tacit assumptions'<sup>423</sup>. This is why Paul says: 'You don't have to make it clear exactly what you mean any more. In fact, you don't even have to mean what you say, really. That's the beauty of it'<sup>424</sup>. The change of mood is also in a way reflected in a stylistic sense. *The Rotters' Club*, while being principally a realistic novel, experiments with the forms of the social realist novel by playing with genres. The reworking of the *bildungsroman* to narrate a historical transition and then the playful insertion of the modernist stream of consciousness at the end of the novel that evokes Molly Bloom's monologue at the end of *Ulysses*. On the other hand, in *The Closed Circle* the tone of the narration is resigned, all the characters have been through more or less painful transformations. Accordingly the novel does not provide any experimentation with genres or styles and the tone is plain instead, as it represents the mature age of the characters and the maturation of a new political consensus around neoliberalism that does not leave space for alternatives and experimentations.

In *The Rotters' Club* Ben was socially awakened at the end of the novel; at the end of *The Closed Circle* he is locked in his own past. Moreover while the earlier novel ended with a (bitter) joke on the impossibility of the election of Margaret Thatcher which is nevertheless a sign of hope, *The Closed Circle's* most significant ending

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<sup>423</sup> Bauman, Z. (2000) *ibid.*, pp 22-23.

<sup>424</sup> Coe, J. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 53.

remark is Claire's affirmation: 'perfectly ordinary people continually have their lives fucked up by forces outside their control'<sup>425</sup>. The hopeless ending recalls the conversation between Michael and Fiona when Michael remarks 'I don't believe in accidents any more. There's an explanation for everything and there's always someone to blame'<sup>426</sup>. Michael's and Claire's affirmations and the death of all the characters at the end of *What a Carve Up!* question the possibility of escape from history. In fact, death is an escapist fantasy from the acknowledgment of the impossibility to escape the influence of history on individual life. So while *The Rotters' Club* and *What a Carve Up!* in two different ways end with a fantasy of denials of the ineluctability of history (Rollo Reg dismissal of the chances of election for Thatcher in the first novel and the death/escape in the second), *The Closed Circle* seems to suggest that at the times of the new global neoliberal power the only possible escape is a resigned retreat in the individuality and acceptance of the current state of affairs.

### 3.1.2 - "Liquid Society" and Financial Crisis in *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*

Jonathan Coe's most recent novel, *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* (2010), further explores themes related to postmodern, neoliberal society. In the novel, there are echoes of Coe's previous works. The main character, Maxwell Sim, while driving passes by the King William's School and by the Longbridge factory which are two highly symbolic places in *The Rotters' Club*. Those are the places where the community life described in the above mentioned novel was organised. They are symbols also

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<sup>425</sup> Coe, J. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 369.

<sup>426</sup> Coe, J. (1994) *ibid.*, p. 412.

because the school and the factory represent two fundamental institutions of the society of the welfare state. However, Maxwell Sim recounts:

I was driving past the old Longbridge factory. Or rather, I was driving now past the gaping hole in the landscape where the old Longbridge factory used to be. It was a weird experience: when you revisit the landscapes of your past, you expect to see maybe a few cosmetic changes [...] but this was something else – an entire complex of factory buildings which used to dominate the whole neighbourhood [...] throbbing with the noise of working machinery, alive with the figures of thousands of working men and women [...] all gone. Flattened, obliterate. And meanwhile, a big billboard erected in the midst of these swathes of urban emptiness informed us that new development of ‘exclusive residential units’ and ‘retail outlets was on its way – a utopian community where the only things people would have to concern themselves with were eating, sleeping and shopping<sup>427</sup>.

What Maxwell Sim describes here is the landscape of the post-industrial society which is characterised by ‘a movement of de-concentration and de-centralization’<sup>428</sup>. The description with its stress on ideas of destruction, obliteration and flattening, highlights the major and structural changes the British society has undergone during the last four decades. Communities and their bonds are dissolved, the very conception of society is dissipated and it is fragmented in nuclear existences, scattered individualities. Bauman asserts that Margaret Thatcher’s statement that ‘there is no such a thing as society’ was simultaneously ‘a shrewd reflection on the changing nature of capitalism, a declaration of intent and a self-fulfilling prophecy: in its wake, there followed the dismantling of normative and protective networks [...] redemption and doom alike are of your making and solely your concern – the outcome of what you, the free agent, have been freely doing with your life’<sup>429</sup>. *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* deals with the total fragmentation of the community nets and with the condition of isolation of the individuals in postmodern society. A feeling of resignation crosses the novel:

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<sup>427</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*. London: Penguin, p. 155.

<sup>428</sup> Kumar, K. (2005) *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society, Second Ed.*. Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, p. 143.

<sup>429</sup> Bauman, Z. (2000) *ibid.*, p. 64.

everything seems ephemeral, unstable. The political criticism advanced in the previous novels, here appears like a ghost of the past, ghosts like the ruins of the Longbridge plant. The main topic of the novel is certainly the solitude of the individual, deprived of any human or social bonds, left stranded struggling with an uncertain reality. The novel opens with a description which is highly metaphorical of the postmodern condition. The narrative device deployed is the article in a newspaper, the title of the article is

**Salesman found naked in car:**

Grampian Police patrolling the snowbound stretch of the A93 [...] spotted a car apparently abandoned at the side of the road [...] On closer inspection it became clear that the unconscious driver was still inside the car. Clothes belonging to the middle-aged man, who was almost naked, were found scattered throughout the vehicle. On the passenger seat beside him were two empty whisky bottles. [...] The man was suffering from severe hypothermia [...] he was later identified as Mr Maxwell Sim. [...] Mr Sim was a salesman employed on a freelance basis by Guest Toothbrushes [...] a company specializing in ecologically friendly oral hygiene products. The company had gone into liquidation that morning<sup>430</sup>.

The section evokes Miller's *Death of a Salesman*: the failure to fulfil the American Dream in Miller's play is mirrored by Maxwell's failure to fulfil the neoliberal dream of self-entrepreneurship. The themes of cold and freeze remind the reader of the Alaskan and Western imaginary of Miller's play. The loneliness faced by the human being when the individualist pursuit of success ends in failure is a central theme in both Coe's and Miller's works.

Apart from the literary references, this section has also multiple relevancies. Firstly it represents the condition of solitude of the individual in the postmodern times through an imaginary that reminds of apocalyptic novels or films: the extreme weather condition, the cold, the snow, the hypothermia, and the incumbent spectre of the death.

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<sup>430</sup> Coe, J. (2012) *ibid.*, p. 1.

This in some way refers to the issue related to the globalisation, and the effects of the climate change. The liquidation of the ecologically friendly company mentioned reinforces the reference to the disastrous environmental situation of the postmodern times. Furthermore what strikes us is the sense of loneliness and despair that the scene conveys. The naked body certainly symbolises the lack of social protection, the hypothermia reminds of the lack of empathy and the un-affectivity of what Bauman calls the “liquid society”. Bauman explains that the liquid society is characterised by the ‘policy of deliberate ‘precarization’ conducted by the operators of labour markets’<sup>431</sup> and this critique of the postmodern condition of work is conveyed in this section through the reference to Sim’s employment on freelance basis.

The idea of freelancing not only refers to the post-industrial condition of work but it is a concept that epitomises the condition of the liquid postmodern society where relationships among humans are “consumed” as a product and commitments are made on temporary basis, ‘until further notice’<sup>432</sup>. Throughout the novel Maxwell Sim engages in relationships which are all ephemeral and superficial, with an expiry date. During a stopover from Sydney to London, Maxwell meets Poppy, a young woman; between them there is soon great connection and sympathy, nonetheless Maxwell knows that ‘the sad truth was that any closeness I felt between us was likely to be temporary. At the end of the flight, it would probably be gone’<sup>433</sup>. Poppy works as an adultery facilitator for important business-people. She works for a company that provides support to the people who are cheating on their partners. A great deal of this job consists in travelling around the world from one airport to another to record airport announcements to produce background noise for the clients of her company when they

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<sup>431</sup> Bauman, Z. (2000) *ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>432</sup> Bauman, Z. (2000) *ibid.*, pp 162-164.

<sup>433</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 66.

would need to make a phone call to their partners to justify their nights out as a business trip. We find here the idea of relationships consumed as products, the modes of conduct and spaces of the global elite. As Bauman notes: ‘bonds and partnerships tend to be viewed and treated as things meant to be *consumed* [...] if the pleasure derived is not up to the standard promised and expected, or if the novelty wears off together with the joy, one can sue for divorce, quoting consumer rights and the Trade Descriptions Act’<sup>434</sup>. This is what also happens to Maxwell’s relationship with his wife which wears off after a while because of social standard expectations: ‘One can think of no reason to stick to an inferior or aged product rather than look for a ‘new and improved’ one in the shops’<sup>435</sup>, Bauman notes. The subject of love becomes the object of love, a ready-to-eat product to be consumed or a consumer fetish. In fact, Maxwell falls in love with the female voice of his GPS navigator. This epitomises the Baumanian concept of liquid love which is the temporary consumerist infatuation for a fetishized commodity<sup>436</sup>. Deleuze and Guattari explains that capitalist desire is a machine attached with a body without organs, which represents the Self deprived of the identity and prone to desire what is considered desirable because of a socially constructed logic<sup>437</sup>. The love for the voice represents exactly the idea of love in the liquid neoliberal society, where love becomes a consumer fetish.

The postmodern condition is characterised by individuality, solitude, consumer junk and non-places such airports, shopping malls and tourist areas. This is well represented in a paragraph of the novel of great visual and emotional impact. Maxwell Sim is alone in a restaurant at the Sydney harbour and a Chinese woman and her daughter draw his attention due to the genuine human affection that they seem to radiate.

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<sup>434</sup> Bauman, Z. (2000) *ibid.*, pp 163-164.

<sup>435</sup> Bauman, Z. (2000) *ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>436</sup> Bauman, Z. (2003) *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*. Cambridge: Polity.

<sup>437</sup> Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. (1972) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Continuum, p. 9.

After the Chinese woman and her daughter have left, Maxwell makes his way to the toilet in the basement of the restaurant:

So I sat down in one of the cubicles [...] and that was when it really hit me. The loneliness. I was sitting, underground in a tiny little box, tens of thousands of miles from home. If I were to have a sudden heart attack sitting on that toilet, what would be the consequence? Some member of the restaurants would probably find me just before they locked up. The police would be called and they would look at my passport and credit cards and somehow, I suppose, through the use of some international database, they would work out my connections to Dad and to Caroline, and they would phone them up and tell them. How would Caroline take the news? She'd be pretty upset, at first, but I'm not sure how deep that would go. I didn't play much part in her life any more. It would be worse for Lucy, of course, but even she was growing steadily more distant [...] and who else there? [...] my passing wouldn't send out many ripples [...] A Facebook account gone inactive – but would any of my Facebook friends really notice? I doubt it. I was alone in the world, now, terribly alone. I would be flying home the next day, and pretty much all that would be waiting for me when I got there was an unlive-in flat full of Ikea furniture and three weeks' worth of bills, bank statements and pizza delivery adverts<sup>438</sup>.

In this paragraph there are references to the individualism of the postmodern times and its “liquid love” and to the landscape in which un-bonded individualities live their existence: a place filled with consumer junk and characterised by a virtual life as replacement of the real one. As Žižek claims: ‘Virtual Reality simply generalizes this procedure of offering a product deprived of its substance: it provides reality itself deprived of its substance, of the resisting hard kernel of the Real - in the same way decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like the real coffee without being the real one, Virtual Reality is experienced as reality without being one’<sup>439</sup>. This is exactly the reality of Maxwell Sim who perceives himself alone in the “real” world and in company of 46 friends on Facebook. The postmodern hyper-reality is what Maxwell ponders about looking at the contact list on a mobile phone: ‘A face, a personality, a pair of lively eyes,

<sup>438</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, pp 14-15.

<sup>439</sup> Žižek, S. (2002) ‘Welcome to the Desert of the Real’ in *The Symptom* online Journal for Lacan.com, Spring 2002. Available at: <http://www.lacan.com/desertsymf.htm> [accessed on 16th July 2013].



a body, a human being, all reduced to eleven digits on a screen'<sup>440</sup>. The virtual reality and virtual contacts seems the only interaction among humans in postmodern times, when the individualism is so entrenched that the interaction with the other is perceived as a threat as Maxwell also notes: 'Every time I tried to make eye-contact, or looked as though I might be about to speak to them, they would look away, hurriedly and pointedly, and quicken their step. [...] even the little spark of common humanity I was trying to ignite between us made them panic, turn tail and flee'<sup>441</sup>. Individuals live a compartmentalised existence, closed in cages well epitomised by the resorts and the compounds where the neoliberal elites live. This existential condition has therefore become the norm with the result of a society where a human interaction is to be feared and the only possible interaction is a virtual one. In the postmodern world depicted in the novel, everyone is afraid that the "other" could interfere with their lives and threaten their spaces, thus the need to protect the "privacy" that, as the title claims, is a terrible one. Therefore there is a contradiction between the need to protect the real essence and the need to "appear", especially through social networks such as Facebook, which becomes a real life albeit virtual one; this life does not present any connection or resemblance whatsoever with the real one but it is just a way to "advertise" a product, a consumer-like life, like for Maxwell Sim and his 46 "friends", whom indeed he has never met in person. This reminds us of the claim of Baudrillard who affirms that the postmodern life is indeed a simulacrum, which, while does not have any connection with reality, constitutes a separate reality<sup>442</sup>. Coe clearly believes that another life different from the one described exists and the nostalgia mood of his novels reminds of that existence. However, at the same time nostalgia means loss, impossibility to regain

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<sup>440</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>441</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>442</sup> Baudrillard, J. (1983) *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext[e]

that life lost forever. The postmodern style and the nostalgia mood underlie the disappearance of a world into the maze of the postmodern life.

While in the other novels there was political criticism expressed through the characters, in *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* the characters are passive objects in the hands of a-corporeal, fluid and supra-national powers which determine the lives of people. In Coe's earlier novels the theme of the influence of the power on the lives of ordinary people is one of the main issues and the main source of political criticism. In *The Rotters' Club* and *What a Carve Up!* some characters embodied a sort of political opposition to the dominating neoliberalism. By contrast, in *The Closed Circle* the characters are resigned to a mere acceptance of the change determined by the transformation of the society. In *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* this political passivity and resignation is pushed to a further stage. The characters appear blatantly manipulated by an unidentified force of which just in one occasion its source is identified. When Maxwell asks Poppy whether she has any qualms about helping people cheat on their partners she replies, explaining that was the only work available:

We may be Mrs Thatcher's children, as far as you're concerned, but *you* were the ones who voted for her, again and again, and then carried on voting for all the people who came after her, and followed exactly in her footsteps. You're the ones who brought us up to be these consumerist zombies. You chucked all the other values out of the window, didn't you?<sup>443</sup>.

This section is very important because it refers to a crucial political issue of our times. The Italian ex-Prime Minister, the technocratic Mario Monti, referred to the generation of people in their 30s as a "lost" generation<sup>444</sup>. Indeed the precarization and the forced

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<sup>443</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, pp 37 – 38.

<sup>444</sup> Pinotti, F. (2012) 'Monti si confessa: «Che ci faccio qui?»'. *Corriere della Sera*. [online]. Available at: [http://www.corriere.it/sette/12\\_luglio\\_25/2012-30-pinotti-monti\\_3fd54164-d65e-11e1-bdd2-f78a37bd7a67.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/sette/12_luglio_25/2012-30-pinotti-monti_3fd54164-d65e-11e1-bdd2-f78a37bd7a67.shtml). [accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2014].

zombification through TV and consumerism have produced a generation unable to reclaim their rights and unable to present a valid alternative to neoliberalism. This is the issue that has arisen with the various Occupy movements around the world. In this section the young woman Poppy points the finger against the middle-age man, responsible for voting for governments which have applied forcibly the neoliberal doctrine causing the precarization of the work and simultaneously moralistically have accused the younger generations of “laziness”, a neoliberal rhetoric variously used by neoliberal governments in Britain and other areas of the world. The sentence above is the only real political claim expressed by otherwise disillusioned, de-politicized and passive characters of the novel.

The narration moves in the territory of the post-industrial consumerist society built up on the ephemerality of money-economy. The novel, published in 2010, presents several references to the financial catastrophe followed the collapse of RBS in the UK and Lehman Brothers in the US. The 2007-2008 financial crisis revealed the fallacy of the alchemic dream of deregulated finance. The liberalisation of the financial sector in Britain in 1986 appeared in the eyes of politicians and ideologues of neoliberalism to be the engine of a wealth-creating machine. Since the “big bang”, generations of “Gordon Gekkos” have been praised as alchemists capable through their abstruse algorithms to generate sound money, incredible accumulations of wealth and jobs in the de-industrialised space of the postmodern neoliberal society. Due to its immateriality, volatility and flexibility, but also utter control over the “real economy” and over the materiality of everyday life, finance is the totem of the neoliberal political economy. However, John Plender wrote in the *Financial Times* that at the time of the Thatcherite policy of deregulation of the financial markets ‘Few foresaw the dangers in looking at

an inherently fragile financial system as a motor of the economy’<sup>445</sup>. Indeed, the short-termism of the money-economy ineluctably took its toll on society with a crisis that is still affecting the global economic system. The “libidinal” greed for immediate and grand wealth accumulation has had the high price of ‘loss of jobs [...] livelihoods and savings [...] [and with the] near implosion of the global economy, and then a worldwide recession/ depression’<sup>446</sup>.

Throughout *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* we find several references to the financial crisis and indeed the events narrated are haunted by a spectre of a financial Armageddon that would annihilate the Western civilization: ‘The world seemed to be on the point of economic collapse and the newspapers were full of apocalyptic headlines saying that the banks were about to crumble, we would all lose our money and it would be the end of Western civilization as we knew it’<sup>447</sup>. However, criticism of the practices of the financial sectors are conveyed through a re-visiting of the Faustian myth. In 2012, a book by the equity analysis expert Andreas Loizou described the practices of the financial sector. The title of the book was *The Devil’s Deal*<sup>448</sup>. Somewhat uncannily, two bankers who were interviewed by Joris Luyendijk for his banking blog in *The Guardian* said, ‘Trading can take over your life’<sup>449</sup> and ‘you work for someone and his world’<sup>450</sup>. Indeed, it seems that even those who work in the financial sector see the relationship between finance and society like a Faustian parable. According to Ian Watt,

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<sup>445</sup> Plender, J. (2013) ‘Market Insight: Bank Deregulation part of Thatcher Legacy’, *Financial Times* [online]. Available at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/7f8aaf08-a122-11e2-bae1-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2Xc2P1F6P> [accessed on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2013].

<sup>446</sup> Lanchester, J. (2009) ‘Bankocracy’, *London Review of Books* [online]. Available at: <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v31/n21/john-lanchester/bankocracy> [accessed on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2013].

<sup>447</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>448</sup> Loizou, A. (2012) *The Devil’s Deal*. London: Financial Times Series.

<sup>449</sup> Luyendijk, J. (2013) ‘Derivatives trader: ‘Trading can take over your life – but only if you let it’, *The Guardian* [online]. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/joris-luyendijk-banking-blog/2013/may/22/derivatives-trader-take-over-life-if-let-it>. [accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013].

<sup>450</sup> Luyendijk, J. (2013) ‘You don’t work for the bank – you work for someone and his world’ *The Guardian* [online]. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/joris-luyendijk-banking-blog/2013/jun/06/bank-interviewee-back-office-investment-banks> [accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013].

Faust is described in different cultural contexts as the magician, the alchemist, the charlatan and most importantly the ‘unrepentant individualist’<sup>451</sup>. The abstruse financial algorithms that bank traders seem to apply to create wealth out of nothing resemble the magic formulae used by alchemists and magicians. Finance has affected society so deeply that, as Bauman notes, modern society is characterised by a replication of the financial market’s forms: volatility, instability, ephemerality, commodification of human bonds<sup>452</sup>.

The narrative device deployed to rework the Faustian myth to apply it to finance is a novella embedded in the novel, which takes the form of memoirs written by Maxwell Sim’s father, found by the former while digging into his father’s documents. The events narrated are set in the late 1950s, however, the date on the top page of the memoirs is June 1987, the date of Thatcher’s landslide in the general election, and the year between the 1986 “big bang” and beginning of the construction of the financial district in Canary Wharf in 1988<sup>453</sup>. By dating back the narration of the events to the 1950s the events of the novella acquire a prophetic aura. The story begins with a comparison drawn by Harold Sim between the old city and the new one and their different codes of conduct:

The old City of London [...] had witnessed a revolution [...] All the arrogant buildings were still there [...] but wedged in amongst them there were dozens of new tower blocks [...] As for the working practices... Well, nearly all of the trading was done on screen now [...] Traders apparently took lunch at their desks these days [...] never lifting their glazed eyes from the screens where figures flickered their ceaseless announcements of profit and loss, from early morning to late at night<sup>454</sup>.

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<sup>451</sup> Watt, I. (1996) *Myths of Modern Individualism: Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Robins Crusoe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 10.

<sup>452</sup> Bauman, Z. (2000) *ibid.*

<sup>453</sup> Canary Wharf Group Plc. [online]. Available at: <http://www.canarywharf.com/aboutus/Who-We-Are/Our-History/1988/>. [accessed on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2014].

<sup>454</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 246.

Afterwards, Harold Sim recalls his meeting with Roger Anthruster and the events related to this encounter. Roger is a trader but firstly a dandy whose main artistic interest is in music but who ‘could [...] discourse, with absolute authority, on any [...] branch of the arts’<sup>455</sup>. Interestingly the novella shares the themes of two of the major reinterpretations of the Faustian myth, *Dr Faustus* by Thomas Mann and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. In Mann’s novel a friend of the dandy musician Adrian Leverkühn narrates the vicissitudes of Adrian’s parable from artistic perfection to perpetual damnation. Similarly, the relationship between the friend/narrator and the main character is a dominating and deceitful one. Harold Sim, like Zeitblom with Leverkühn, is enthralled with the fascinating personality of Roger Anthruster. ‘He dominated me completely’<sup>456</sup>, wrote Harold Sim, a statement which echoes the relationship between Dorian Gray and Lord Henry. At the same time he immediately perceives the demonic and masochistic nature of the relationship: ‘I was in thrall to Roger. However cruel he was to me, I could not escape him’<sup>457</sup>.

Roger suggests that to get enough money to fund a grandiose trip to the sites of the ancient Roman and Greek civilization, they could follow the advice of the stockbroker Crispin Lambert. Here the Faustian metaphor becomes clearer: Crispin Lambert, the stockbroker, is Mephistopheles and the solution that he offers to make money is betting on horses through complicated formulae which are in fact notorious derivatives. As Gammon and Wigan explain, ‘the derivative provides that the seller gains if the debt is repaid and the buyer, who purchase insurance against non-payment, gains if the borrower fails to pay’<sup>458</sup>. Thus Roger explains to Harold:

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<sup>455</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>456</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 251.

<sup>457</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>458</sup> Gammon, E., Wigan, D. (2012) ‘Libidinal political economy: a psycho-social analysis of financial violence’ in Palan, R. (ed.) *Global political economy: contemporary theories, 2nd Edition*, London: Routledge, p. 214.

Mr Lambert has already placed his bet [...] this is the betting slip, and what he is proposing, is that he sells us the right to buy it from him, in the future. What he wants to sell us, in effect, is an option on the bet [...] if we just bet one pound at 6-1, we'd only make five pounds profit. This way we make almost twice as much' [...] 'it's what we call leverage'<sup>459</sup>.

Roger and Harold, excited by the easy money, keep betting using the increasingly complicated and obscure but more remunerative algorithm of Crispin. The references to the Faustian myth as a metaphor for the relation between society and finance becomes progressively clearer as Roger starts accumulating 'volumes on witchcraft and paganism'<sup>460</sup>, a reference to the legend of Faust as the magician. Finally Roger suggests that they could bet using a single gigantic high-risk algorithm. To Harold who denounces the danger of the bet, Roger replies: 'We're alchemists'<sup>461</sup>. This clearly refers to the tradition of Faust as the alchemist but metaphorically also to the bankers' megalomania; they regard themselves as alchemists capable of making money out of nothing. However, as per the Faustian tradition, Mephistopheles takes his toll; because of one single variable out of control Harold and Roger lose the bet and end up in misery. When Harold asks Roger if he could ask Lambert to waive the debt, Roger replies: 'The City has a code of conduct for this sort of things. *Dictum meum pactum* – My word is my bond'<sup>462</sup>. The pact with the Devil cannot be broken. Faust must repay the debt. Faust must go into ruin. This is the price for relying on finance as the engine of the economy. Finance takes society's soul, shaping it to its own image and obliging society to the damnation of the debt. Deleuze and Guattari explain that desire takes form of political economy and <sup>463</sup> and Gammon and Wigan, deriving from that claim, assert that 'individuals engage in behaviours that confer minimal or ephemeral pleasure despite

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<sup>459</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>460</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 263.

<sup>461</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>462</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 269.

<sup>463</sup> Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. (1972) *ibid.*, p. 13.

foreseeable painful outcomes'<sup>464</sup>. This is exactly the nature of the money-economy, which exchanges long-term ruin for immediate gain. This is also exactly the topos of the Faustian myth. Coe represents the masochistic relationship between society and finance and the short-termism of the money-economy specifically through a rewriting of the Faustian myth.

As per the other novels previously analysed Coe draws attention to the effects of the political and economic decisions on the lives of ordinary individuals. In this case money-economy overwhelms the lives of Poppy and Maxwell relegated to a precarious existence. These two characters represent in this context the majority of the population, which is paying the consequences of a disastrous political economy. While walking in a wealthy area of London and looking at the solid Georgian terraced house owned by wealthy people, Maxwell notes: 'These people had built a solid wall of money around them, and it wasn't about to fall down any time soon'<sup>465</sup>. Ordinary people bear the brunt of the effects of the crisis instead.

Coe employs some postmodern narrative forms in *The Terribly Privacy of Maxwell Sim*. The novel is characterised by typical postmodern features such as embedded narratives, time shifts, and above all meta-fiction. Coe reworks literary sources such as Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and the Faustian myth. Moreover the novel is characterised by typical postmodern narrative devices. For example we read about Maxwell's father through pages of personal documents, which also include a novella through which we find more information about Maxwell's father biography and the source of Maxwell's psychological dilemmas, but also criticism of global financial capitalism through a reworking of the literary myth of Faust. Another section

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<sup>464</sup> Gammon, E., Wigan, D. (2012) *ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>465</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 108.



particularly exemplary of postmodern formal features is the concluding paragraph. Here, the direct intervention of the author in the plot reminds us of examples of postmodern fiction such as John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* in which the author intervened directly showing his presence and commenting on both the novel's narrative techniques and formal features and on the events narrated. In this case, as we see later in the chapter, the author intervenes talking with the main character of the novel and imposing his presence as "creator" of the story. In this regard, Coe also plays with the literary tradition of the omniscient narrator: here the narrator not only is omniscient but reveals his existence to one of the characters and to the readers.

Zižek and Baudrillard affirm that reality in the postmodern world is a net of different virtual realities intersecting each other. The French philosopher calls these virtual realities simulacra. Eventually these simulacra replace the reality and become themselves the only possible reality. Baudrillard calls this net of simulacra: the matrix. One of the first fictional representations of this philosophical concept was developed in the 1999 film *The Matrix*: enslaved humans are taken under control by intelligent machine invented in 21<sup>st</sup> century in the matrix which a simulation of the world as it was in 1999, while the real world is a desert of ruins. When Morpheus shows Neo the real world he proffers the famous sentence reprised by Zižek in a 2002 book: 'welcome to the desert of the real'<sup>466</sup>. The film stressed both the idea of virtual reality as simulacrum and the concept of an author overshadowing the life of individuals. These are two key concepts of theories of postmodernity. Life in postmodern times is the result of constructed narratives while the true reality remains hidden. *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* suggests that this concept can be translated into political terms: reality is owned by powerful, dehumanised super-national corporations and banks which replace

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<sup>466</sup> *The Matrix*, 1999, sci-fi, directed by Andy Wachowski, Lana Wachowski. USA, Australia: Warner Bros.

the reality with the consumerist reality of the contemporary life. Coe expresses this political idea specifically through postmodern narrative forms. In fact, the novel is characterised by a juxtaposition of novellas and stories dis-located in many different space and time settings. However, the concept of postmodern reality as a matrix constructed by superpowers appears clear just at the end of the novel, when we see Maxwell finally at peace with himself after the recognition of his homosexuality. He is approached by a man with ‘the eyes of a serial killer’<sup>467</sup> who tells him that the story (and therefore the novel) is not going to finish as Maxwell wishes, but as he wishes. The man is actually the author who prevents any other ending to Maxwell story but what he chooses for Maxwell: ‘you’re not going anywhere’ says the man to Maxwell, ‘but I have to catch that plane’, Maxwell responds. ‘But the story’s finished, Max’. Then we read: ‘it can’t have finished’, I protested, still I don’t know how it ends’. ‘Well, that’s easy’, said the writer, [...] ‘like this’<sup>468</sup>, and then the novel ends.

Here the postmodern concept of authorial consciousness and narration as human construct acknowledged in the narration itself, functions also as political criticism: our reality is determined by some superior powers which substitute a reality with another one, like in *What a Carve Up!* when the author kills unexpectedly Michael preventing any development of the character. When Maxwell says “I” and when he acknowledges the existence of an author who is writing his life, conversely he is saying that he is a mere character of someone else’s narration. Conversely, the novel conveys the idea that contemporary society is a mere construct of economic power that has turned individuals in consumerist zombies. In this reality even the concept of freedom is relative, when Maxwell says that he is going to take a flight the author denies Maxwell’s claims and therefore his freedom of action. That clearly refers to the idea that in neoliberal society

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<sup>467</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 339.

<sup>468</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 3

freedom is limited to the framework of the neoliberal narrative, exactly like in a novel freedom is limited to the framework of the authorial wish. At some point in the novel Maxwell thinks: ‘Most people have gone about their daily business on the comfortable assumption that something real and solid underpins everything we do. Now, it’s no longer possible to assume that’<sup>469</sup>. The “solid” reality has been replaced with a “liquid” one, fluid and ephemeral determined by a will that is beyond the freedom of ordinary individuals such as Maxwell Sim.

### 3.2 - Comparative Section

In this section of the third chapter I look at the representations of contemporary British society in *England, England* (1998) by Julian Barnes and *Capital* (2012) by John Lanchester. I draw a comparison between these two novels and the previously analysed novels of Coe which deal with contemporary British society and postmodern life. The choice of these two novels, among several which represent contemporary British society, is based on the fact that they are concerned about the same issues at the core of Coe’s novels. Specifically, *England, England* deals with the entrenchment of the market values into the British society and with the post-Thatcherite neoliberal policies adopted by New Labour and its cultural product, Cool Britannia, of which the book is a parody and a socio-political critique. *Capital*, on the other hand, similarly to *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* represents the post-financial crisis Britain and focuses its socio-political criticism on the role of the money-economy. Both novels, like *The Closed Circle* and *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, present criticism of neoliberalism, its different aspects and its different manifestations in contemporary life.

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<sup>469</sup> Coe, J. (2010) *ibid.*, p. 110.

Similarly to the novels analysed in the previous section of the chapter, these two novels represent the two phases of British neoliberal society. *England, England* represents the phase of enthusiasm for the market and the rebranding of neoliberalism in the name of coolness under the Cool Britannia, while *Capital* represents the phase of awakening from the neoliberal dream of pursue of consumerist happiness and alchemic wealth creation.

### **3.2.1 - Cool Britannia as the Desert of the Real in *England, England***

The 1998 novel of Julian Barnes is a swiftian parody of Cool Britannia and, as per Swift's satirical tradition, a novel that provides fierce socio-political criticism of the British state of affairs. The main target of Barnes' satire is the commodification and marketization of British culture under the neoliberal agenda of New Labour. Unlike *The Closed Circle*, *England, England* is a postmodern work which makes use of postmodern literary forms such as historical meta-fiction, re-using of literary canons and parodic demystification of contemporary society. The novel deploys the Gulliverian topos of the fictional island populated by people who organise their society in a way that reflects in microcosm some of the features of the real society. However, unlike Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* in *England, England* the fictional country is a consciously fictional one, in the sense that the novel narrates the foundation of a fictional country which should reproduce Britain and its historical and cultural heritage for touristic purposes.

The novel is divided in three parts: "England", "England, England" and "Anglia". The first part is connoted by nostalgia as it focuses on the main character Martha Cochrane and her childhood in the English countryside. Martha's most vivid memory of her childhood is a jigsaw puzzle of the English counties with which she used

to play with her father before he abandoned the family. The English countryside and the childhood memories represent a sort of Arcadia of the past times. As previously seen, nostalgia for childhood is a theme very common in Coe's writings. In socio-political terms the phase of passage between childhood and adulthood represents the changes Britain underwent during the shift from the welfare state to neoliberalism. In *England, England*, the turning point is Martha's father departure from the family, which symbolises the rupture with the past, and the beginning of a new era. We have seen previously how for Michael Owen in *What a Carve Up* the abandonment by/death of loved figures and loss represent metaphorically the phase of passage from the two historical periods. Also in *The Rotters' Club*, Benjamin's loss of virginity is a metaphor for the historical turning point. As previously seen, Benjamin loses his virginity in a bed positioned under a poster of Margaret Thatcher: the symbolism is clear, the childhood which represented the welfare arcadia is going to be confined to the past and the new neoliberal "age" is at the gate. Similarly, the death of the father marks the loss of childhood and metaphorically the turning point from a historical phase to another. In the second chapter of *England, England* Martha Cochrane is in her forties and works as a manager for the super-rich entrepreneur Sir Jack Pitman who plans to buy the Isle of Wight and turn it into a mega amusement park conceived as a replica of the real England. England's historical and cultural heritage in this amusement park becomes commodity for mass tourism. The end of Martha's childhood therefore coincides with the ushering in of postmodern neoliberal society.

The section entitled "England, England" commences with the description of the Pitman House, headquarter of the corporation Martha works for. The description of the building resembles a Jamesonian interpretation of postmodern architecture: pastiche, use of glass and pretentious harmonisation with the surrounding environment.

PITMAN HOUSE had been true to the architectural principles of its time. Its tone was of secular power tempered by humanitarianism: glass and steel were softened by ash and beech; licks of eau-de-nil and acid yellow gave hints of controlled passion; [...] The supernal atrium objectified the aspirations of this worldly cathedral; while passive ventilation and energy-saving showed its commitment to society and the environment. There was flexibility of spatial use and candid ductwork: according to the architectural team [...] the building combined sophistication with transparency of intent. Harmony with nature was another key commitment [...] <sup>470</sup>.

Pitman House with its neutralisation of utopian ideals of humanitarianism and eternal aspirations (the reference to the cathedral, locus of eternal aspirations par excellence) and their transformation into a corporate totem, visually represents the entrance to postmodern times. The description of Pitman House is symbolically located in the first lines of the second part of the novel, which describes Martha's adulthood. When Martha steps in Pitman House, she symbolically steps into the postmodern neoliberal times and moves away from her childhood, which conversely represented the Arcadia of the past. Interestingly buildings have a symbolic relevance also in Coe's novels. In *The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle*, Sophie and Patrick, the children of respectively Paul and Philip meet in a restaurant at the top Fernsehturm in Berlin. The tower was built by the DDR communist regime as propagandistic displacement of technological power. After the collapse of the DDR it becomes a restaurant and a touristic attraction. Therefore metaphorically it represents the passage from a world to another, namely the world of neoliberal mass tourism and postmodern transformation of history into a commercial commodity. Similarly Whinshaw tower is also symbolic locus of neoliberalism.

In the quote above there are references to the transparency of intent and the environment-friendliness of Pitman Corporation. These references are a parody of corporate responsibility policies typical of the global capitalism of the last couple of

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<sup>470</sup> Barnes, J. (1998) *England, England*. London: Picador. p. 28.

decades. As Žižek explains, the neoliberal establishment consists of a gated global elite whose concern is to avoid the contact with the world external to their “private” network. This elite contacts the “external world” through business and humanitarianism<sup>471</sup>, which becomes a form of self-legitimation<sup>472</sup>. It refers also to the rebranding of neoliberal capitalism and its “detoxification” from the divisive legacy of the 1980s. Neoliberalism becomes “cool” during the time of New Labour and its cultural product, Cool Britannia, becomes a form of ‘counter-cultural individualism’<sup>473</sup>. Indeed the megalomaniac project to buy the Isle of Wight and turn it into a replica of real Britain for mass tourism purposes is exactly a critique of Cool Britannia and its market values. Cool Britannia was a rebranding of Britishness through the market logic, in other words: nationalism for export. The old symbols of Britishness were rebranded as consumer commodities; for instance, the band Oasis, symbol of Cool Britannia, referred constantly to their Britishness: Liam Gallagher was photographed wrapped in the Union Jack which was also emblazoned on one of Noel’s guitars. Ken Urban writes that ‘New Labour looked at England as a brand, as a commodity, to be marketed and managed’<sup>474</sup>. In *England, England* this approach is criticised through parody. Britain becomes a commodity to be marketed and managed. England, England, the amusement park on the former Isle of Wight, is nothing but the actual transformation of Britain into a commodity and its flag, the Union Jack, a corporate logo. When the Pitman Corporation looks for a logo for its “new England” it is just ‘unacknowledged revisions and quiet steals of familiar

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<sup>471</sup> Žižek, S. (2009) *First as a Tragedy, then as Farce*. London: Verso, p. 4.

<sup>472</sup> Žižek, S. <http://www.thersa.org/events/rसानimate/animate/rसानimate-first-as-tragedy,-then-as-farce>. [accessed on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2013].

<sup>473</sup> Urban, K. (2008) ‘Cruel Britannia’ in D’Montè, R., Saunders, G. (eds) *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 40.

<sup>474</sup> Urban, K. (2008) *ibid.*, p. 40.

symbols'<sup>475</sup>, a clear critique of the use of the Union Jack as a corporate brand in Cool Britannia.

However, while *The Closed Circle* presents criticism of New Labour for having contributed to neoliberalism's entrenchment, in *England, England*, parodic criticism of Cool Britannia is an excuse to formulate a broader critique of neoliberalism and of the postmodern condition. In this regard, the novel shows some affinity with Coe's most recent work. Firstly, both novels acknowledge the fictitiousness of reality in postmodern times. The sequence of novellas and the ending of *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* espouses precisely the idea that reality is indeed a narrative, and freedom of choice exists as long it is inscribed into the neoliberal ideological framework. In Barnes' novel, the very idea of an island where with its limited territory and small scale copy of "real" life gives precisely this idea of limitedness. Despite the libertarian rhetoric of neoliberalism and its stress on pure freedom of choice, freedom of choice is indeed restricted within the borders of the neoliberal framework, which is obviously a constructed one. Conversely in the novel, the neoliberal island is the heaven of freedom which is anyway limited to the borders of the island, and moreover the island itself is a construction, an invention of a corporate power, the Pitman corporation, which indeed controls that freedom on the island complies with Pitman's will. The island is the quintessence of free-market and New Right's ideal of market of libertarianism<sup>476</sup> and it is often visited by bankers and members of the IMF and chief executives of corporations for appraisal of the system's functioning:

Richard Poborsky, analyst for the United Bank of Switzerland, told the *Wall Street Journal*: 'I think this development is very exciting. It's a pure market state. There's no interference from government because there is no

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<sup>475</sup> Barnes, J. (1998) *ibid.*, pp 119-120.

<sup>476</sup> The terms "libertarian" and "libertarianism" are used here according to the American conception. Although the terms are widely associated, especially in Europe, to the tradition of Anarchism, here I refer to it in the American meaning which refers to the free-market ideology, New Right, Tea Party, etc.



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 agenda and election promises<sup>477</sup>.

Here is the neoliberal ideal of the free-market and deregulation of any state activity and control whatsoever. The island, the place where the neoliberal ideal comes true, is an obvious reference to the "other island" the bigger one, Britain, where Conservative governments first and New Labour's ones afterwards applied neoliberal policies, de facto transforming the country in a way that business comes first than citizens. In fact, on the island bankers, wealthy tourists move comfortably while the citizens of the island (people employed by Pitman to act like British historical characters) are nothing but 'low-cost labour'<sup>478</sup>, as Sir Jack Pitman puts it. This is clearly a parodic form of critique of the idea of a country where corporations enjoy the rights of citizenship and common citizens become labour at the service of the formers.

This very idea is physically epitomised by the deregulated City of London which is the symbol of the corporate power, where indeed, as George Monbiot explains, banks and corporations are considered physical persons and, due to the rules that allow the corporations to have more or less power proportionally to their business size, have right to decide over the rest of the population<sup>479</sup>. In fact, Sir Jack Pitman, accompanying bankers, members of the IMF, members of think tanks for a visit, proudly refers to the island as 'a single hundred-and-fifty-five square mile'<sup>480</sup>, a parodic reference to the

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<sup>477</sup> Barnes, J. (1998) *ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>478</sup> Barnes, J. (1998) *ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>479</sup> Monbiot, G. (2011) 'The medieval, unaccountable Corporation of London is ripe for protest', *The Guardian* [online]. Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/oct/31/corporation-london-city-medieval>. [accessed on 26<sup>th</sup> July 2013].

<sup>480</sup> Barnes, J. (1998) *ibid.*, p. 179.

Square Mile, the informal name of the City of London and specifically the area of it where all the financial activities are concentrated.

The fact that the “citizens” of the island are mere slow-cost labour for the Pitman Corporation brings us back to the critique of the notions of freedom and constructed narrative. The metaphor is clear; the citizens of the island who act like the various personages of the British history are not those personages, although they think they actually are. They have been given a role to play but their lives are nonetheless the result of someone else’s narrative. This refers to the idea that the notion of freedom of choice is constructed as a narrative, and the lives of common individuals are “narrated”, “constructed” by a more powerful entity: the neoliberal establishment. This is a concept at the core of all Coe’s novels as well and blatantly expressed in *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* and *What a Carve Up!* through meta-fiction. The reality itself is constructed and it is a narrative, as per Baudriallard’s simulacra to which *England, England* tellingly refers when Sir Jack, justifying the idea of replicating the British society, says:

What is real? [...] are *you* real, for instance? [...] you are real to yourself, of course, but that is not how these things are judged at highest level. My answer would be NO. [...] but I could have you replaced with substitutes, with... simulacra<sup>481</sup>.

Thus the reality “created” by the global free-market is a simulacrum projected in the life of individuals. What remains of reality is indeed a wasteland: the desert of the real. In the last section of the novel, Martha becomes the CEO of the island, having obliged Sir Jack to retire through blackmailing. However, the situation goes out of control and the groups of citizens/workers disguised as British historical/legendary characters start

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<sup>481</sup> Barnes, J. (1998) *ibid.*, p. 31.

fighting against each other for the control of the island. Specifically there is a battle between ‘the libertarian free-market Hoodites and the wicked Sheriff of Nottingham backed by his corrupt bureaucrats and hi-tech army’<sup>482</sup>. This battle is clearly a parody of the confrontation between the Conservative Party and New Labour, a simulated confrontation by people who share the same fundamental convictions (they both want the control of the island but they do not want to change the island’s system) but slightly differ merely regarding the management of the island. The battle on the island is used to express the idea that between the two parties there is not much choice, and that confrontation between the two major political actors is inscribed within the neoliberal system and does not presuppose a dialectics of two different ideals but merely technical divergences about the administration of neoliberal political economy. This is a political criticism of New Labour, which is also shared by *The Closed Circle*, but it is here expressed through postmodern parody.

The replica England, England, after the ousting of Sir Jack Pitman, continues its economic development so that it effectively replaces the real England after proclaiming independence. While in England, England the economic growth continues, Old England falls into oblivion, international irrelevance and economic disaster. Using a Baudrillardian interpretation, England, England thus represents a simulacrum; its steady economic growth, development and good standard of living under the aegis of the free-market is a constructed narrative, a hyper-reality, and product of the neoliberal narrative. In the third chapter of the novel, *Anglia*, when Martha goes back to the places of her childhood in the “Old England” what she witnesses is a ‘vertiginous decline’<sup>483</sup>. Old England has regressed to a pre-industrial state, an immense wasteland. When Martha goes back to her native place she sees the same eerie images of ruin that Maxwell Sim

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<sup>482</sup> Barnes, J. (1998) *ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>483</sup> Barnes, J. (1998) *ibid.*, p. 251.

sees when he goes to the place of his childhood and witnesses the industrial decline and the destruction of the communities which populate those areas. In *The Matrix* Morpheus reveals to Neo that the reality he is living is not the actual reality. Morpheus then shows Neo the actual reality, a wasteland, and welcomes him to the desert of the real<sup>484</sup>. Similarly the critique of neoliberalism underlying *England, England* and *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* relies on the idea that neoliberalism has produced a hyper-reality that hides the true reality and the detrimental effects of the neoliberal ideology on society. In both novels this concept is deployed through the narrative forms of the novel itself, acknowledging that reality in narration is a constructed category. As previously seen Coe employs meta-fictive devices, Barnes, on the other hand, uses the metaphor of the two countries, England, England and Old England. What indeed we find in both novels is exactly a criticism of neoliberalism, a denunciation of its hyper-reality and of the “ruins” hidden behind the veil of the neoliberal narrative.

### 3.2.2 - Financial Crisis and post-Financial crisis society in *Capital*

The 2007-2008 financial crisis, triggered by the collapse of RBS in the UK and Lehman Brothers in the USA, not only revealed the fallacy of the alchemic dream of deregulated finance but has also lift the veil of the neoliberal ideology unmasking the detrimental effects of the neoliberal system. The financial crisis and the following years of austerity, economic recession/depression and their human costs opened a Pandora’s box and changed the public attitude toward the system we are currently living in. All around the world people started to stand for their rights and demanding more equality and redistribution of wealth. The rise of movements such as Occupy Wall Street,

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<sup>484</sup> *The Matrix*, 1999, sci-fi, directed by Andy Wachowski, Lana Wachowski, USA, Australia: Warner Bros.

Indignados and so on, which mostly represented the young generations locked in the trap of the “precariat” caused by neoliberal policies, signalled the beginning of a slow process of social and political awakening<sup>485</sup>. The financial crisis triggered intellectual debates about the state of our societies. Several movements of youth opposing the status of consumer zombies have started demanding a more active participation in the society. In cultural terms the current phase has generated a sense of change. A few commentators have also talked of a post-postmodernism. However, without wanting to endorse the term post-postmodernism completely, it is possible to acknowledge in cultural productions a widespread return to realist forms to interpret and represent society.

John Lanchester’s *Capital* is a purely realist novel. It deals with the effect of liberalised finance on the lives of individuals and it does so presenting a variety of characters, which are Lukacsian “typical characters”. The setting of the stories narrated is the London at the time of the house bubble determined by the transformation of the city into a financial heaven. The title in fact refers to London as Capital but also obviously to capitalism (and obviously to Marx’s *Capital*). All the characters live in the fictional Pepys road which is paradigmatic of the areas of London which, discovered by the financial industry, underwent redevelopment and gentrification:

[A]s people from the financial industry discovered the area [...] and began to be paid huge bonuses [...] which were big multiples of the national annual pay, and a general climate of hysteria affected everything to do with house prices – then, suddenly, prices began to go up so quickly that it was as if they had a will of their own<sup>486</sup>.

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<sup>485</sup> Berardi, “Bifo” F. (2006) ‘The insurgence of European precariat’, *transform.eipcp.net* [online]. Available at: <http://transform.eipcp.net/correspondence/1144338908#redir>. [accessed on 30<sup>th</sup> July 2013].

<sup>486</sup> Lanchester, J. (2012) *Capital*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 5

The novel presents a variety of human characters at the time of the financial crisis in a realist way: Mary, who suddenly becomes wealthy when she inherits a house in the gentrified Pepys Road at the death of her mother, old resident of the area; the young Ghanaian football player Freddy and his father Patrick overwhelmed by easy money following a contract with Arsenal and then got trapped in a web of contractual clauses with the insurance after Freddy's serious injury that caused the end of his career; Quentina, the well-educated Zimbabwean asylum-seeker who works as traffic warder; the Kamals, a family who owns a corner shop and whose one member is erroneously involved in an alleged terrorist plot after hosting an acquaintance; the polish building constructor Zbigniew who does financial trading from his computer at home; the Hungarian baby sitter Matya who dreams of being a part of the Londoner elite; the artist Smitty whose art consists in provocative street "happenings" such as digging holes in the streets and especially in keeping his identity secret; the banker Roger and his family and their obsession for wealth and social status. Several other minor characters gravitate around these characters all tied together by the *fil-rouge* of money. Indeed money is a spectral presence that haunts the lives of all the characters. Their lives are immensely affected by pursuit of wealth.

*Capital* is a novel that provides a cultural and political criticism of the deregulated finance and especially of the role of the money-economy on the lives of individuals. Money is represented as a demonic figure that traps the lives of the characters and affects their lives. Similarly to *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, criticism of the modes of conduct of the financial world and the money-economy is expressed through Faustian echoes. An unidentified plotter fills the mailboxes of the residents of the fictional wealthy area of Pepys Road with postcards that says 'we want what you have'. The sentence evokes the spectre of house reposessions which followed

the 2008 financial crisis and at the same time evokes the Faustian's repossession of the soul. Unlike Coe's novel, in *Capital* there are no direct references to the myth of Faust. However, Faustian echoes are present throughout the novel. For example the "we want what you have" cards, which warn the residents of Pepys Road that their lives will be sooner or later repossessed. The sentence evokes the spectre of the house repossession widely feared after the implosion of subprime loans. It also evokes the repossession of Faust's soul brought about due to the deal with the devil, here in the shape of de-regularised finance. Money is like Mephistopheles who offers immediate gains in exchange for future damnation. The vicissitudes of the banker Roger echo more closely the Faustian myth. Roger is a manager at the Pinker Lloyd, a financial service firm based in Canary Wharf. Roger represents the Faustian unrepentant individualist. He is so obsessed with the annual bonus that it becomes the main goal in his life. While Faust is in search for the primacy of knowledge, Roger's final goal is a bonus as high as one million pounds. The amount is needed both to satisfy his gargantuan expenses but primarily to assert his own self. In the neoliberal liquid, society, individuals are valued according to the market's paradigm: I earn, therefore I am. Roger's only preoccupation is the bonus. Financial trading has given him whatever he wanted in terms of belongings but it has also taken his life, a situation described by the trader interviewed by Joris Luyendijk for his banking blog in *The Guardian*<sup>487</sup>. As per the Faustian tradition sooner or later Mephistopheles takes back what he has given and with a high interest rate. In fact, Roger's ruin starts when he has "just" a 30,000 pound bonus instead of 1 million pounds. His life starts sinking; he has to downgrade his lifestyle and that of his family.

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<sup>487</sup> Somewhat uncannily, two bankers who were interviewed by Joris Luyendijk for his banking blog in the Guardian said, 'Trading can take over your life' and 'you work for someone and his world'.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/joris-luyendijk-banking-blog/2013/may/22/derivatives-trader-take-over-life-if-let-it>. [accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013].

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/joris-luyendijk-banking-blog/2013/jun/06/bank-interviewee-back-office-investment-banks>. [accessed on 1<sup>st</sup> July].

Indeed, it seems that even those who work in the financial sector see the relationship between finance and the society like Faustian parable.

This is perceived as a disgrace because his family will be considered in the circle of friends and acquaintances as being worth less. Roger's ruinous descent to hell continues while the "we want what you have" campaign goes on with its ominous allusion. In fact, Roger's even greedier colleague Mark devises a plan to do rogue trading with high-risk derivatives. When the subprime crisis explodes, Roger is fired from the bank for not having taken the necessary steps to control what was going on. Roger's vicissitudes are a sort of synecdoche for the whole financial system and its relation with the society. The same day Roger is sacked 'he saw the billboard advertising the Evening Standard [...] It said: Bank Crisis [...] but it wasn't about Pinker Lloyd but about Lehman Brothers'<sup>488</sup>. Mephistopheles has finally asked for his credit to be paid but those who didn't choose to sign the pact will repay the debt, the history of the recent days teaches us. The last pages of the novel leave us with the image of Roger in ruin leaving the house in Pepys Road. While leaving, he repeats to himself 'I can change, I can change, I promise I can change change change'<sup>489</sup>, a claim that metaphorically advocates a return to a society not controlled by finance.

The stories narrated in *Capital* and in Coe's *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, with their tragic endings of impoverished, indebted and harmed people echo the artistic representations of the Great Depression. The abrupt awakening from the dream of wealth and prosperity promised by Capitalism and the new reality of hardship and austerity in Coe's and Lanchester's novel evoke words like those of *Brother, Can you spare me a Dime*, just to mention one of the most popular artistic creations of the time of the Great Depression, where the protagonist of the song says: 'They used to tell me I

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<sup>488</sup> Lanchester, J. (2012) *ibid.*, p. 477.

<sup>489</sup> Lanchester, J. (2012) *ibid.* p. 577.



was building a dream/With peace and glory ahead/Why should I be standing in line/Just waiting for bread?’<sup>490</sup>.

Both *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* and *Capital* use the Faustian myth to highlight the damage that the neoliberal system has caused by relying on the ephemerality of finance. Immediate gain has been paid at the price of a debt that will affect ruinously the future generations. The essence of the Faustian myth is used politically to criticise the short-termism and the greedy short sightedness of neoliberal policies. It is interesting to draw a comparison with Mann’s interpretation of the myth. *Dr Faustus* was written in the years preceding the tragedy of the Second World War and Mann intended to use the Faustian metaphor to refer to pact between society and fascisms that led to the tragedy of the war. Similarly here the Faustian myth is deployed to describe the disastrous consequences of pursue of the omnipotence that has led the neoliberal society on the verge of the damnation. This refers to the very nature of the Faustian myth, which denounces the limits and the dangers of blind individualism. Moreover, the fact that the modern Faust makes the deal in order to accumulate money while the Faust of the tradition was an academician who made the deal for the primacy of knowledge tells much about the modern pact with the devil/finance. The pact with the deregulated finance is made in order to obtain an ephemeral gain: this is explicative of the neoliberal ideal of society. Therefore in these novels the Faustian myth is employed to refer to the selling to the devil of the soul, the selling of society to the skewed logic of the marketplace.

*Capital*’s representation of the neoliberal post-financial crisis society differs from that of Coe in terms of literary forms. As previously said, *Capital* is a realist novel

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<sup>490</sup> Harburg, Y., Gorney, J. (1930) *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime*. [online] Available at: <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/cherries.html>. [accessed on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2013]

which employs typical characters to represent a specific fragment of the society. The characters are contextualised in the setting of modern London with its expanding gentrified areas and with the increasing influence of money on their life. Often the narration is centred on description of context in which the character move in order to provide the social background typical of the realist novel. While Coe's novel describes the solitary existence of a lower-middle-class character such as Maxwell Sim, in Lanchester's novel the focus is on middle-upper-middle class characters or "aspiring" working middle class. However, also in *Capital* there is an idea underpinning the whole novel, the idea that a tiny minority that detains the financial power affects the life of individuals. Even the wealthy residents of Pepys Road are dominated by a more powerful entity. In Lanchester's book, the idea is that money is a force completely out of control, a force which, created by humans, is now beyond human control. This again reminds of *The Matrix* and its story of machines that take control of and enslave their creators. However, contrary to Coe and Barnes' novels, Lanchester does not deploy postmodern forms to refer to the fictionalised reality created by the neoliberal system. Despite the difference in genre and literary forms, all the novels analysed present a critique of the neoliberal narrative deemed as artificial and deceiving. The wealthy characters of Pepys Road, following the neoliberal rhetoric, thought that through money they could be in control of their life. However, the end of the novel shows that this belief is inconsistent with reality. A crude reality hides behind the veil of the neoliberal dream of self-fulfilment, a different reality made of crisis, economic catastrophe and austerity. Indeed *Capital* seems to follow the claim of the anti-austerity movements that there is a 1% that controls the lives of the remaining 99%. Although simplistic to some extent, the rhetoric of 1% and 99% signals the realisation that the lives of ordinary individuals is manipulated by a tiny elite, the same that has construed the ideas of self-

realisation, individual responsibility and individuals as author of their own lives. The political novels analysed denounce specifically the fallacy of that narrative and pose questions about authorial creation. Coe's and Barnes' novels do that by focusing on the idea of self-reflexivity and narration as construct, Lanchester on the other hand, realistically shows lives shattered by the forces beyond the individual control. All the novels analysed crucially demystify the foundational concept of the neoliberal ideology, that of self-realisation, the concept that lies at the foundation of its rhetoric.

## Conclusion

As I previously argued in my introduction, there is still a limited academic literature on Coe's works. I have therefore aimed with my dissertation to add to the scholarly literature on Coe and I have contextualised my arguments within broader discussions around contemporary British literature. I believe that Coe's work offers valuable insights into contemporary representations of British history and on the most recent developments of the historical novel. My dissertation has focused specifically on the representation of the transition from the post-war consensus to neoliberalism and globalisation. I have analysed how this decisive historical process has been understood in the works of Coe, and which literary forms have been deployed to narrate this specific historical moment. Coe's works indeed offer an insightful critique of contemporary society. The novels specifically address the disintegration of community bonds, the precarization of existence and the sense of helplessness and isolation that these phenomena have produced. The novels of Coe analysed deal largely with markers of contemporary society such as de-politicization, anxiety, and social withdrawal.

The comparative sections have been meant to propose a broader view on this historical transition, and to frame the discussion of Coe in the context of the contemporary British historical novel in relation to the formation of neoliberal society.

In this conclusion I briefly review some of the most relevant issues raised in the thesis: the question of genre and the contextualisation within the discussion around the historical novel, the presence of death and its relation with tragedy, comedy, the issue of characters' withdrawal from reality, childhood, and nostalgia.

To begin with, a first consideration regarding the genre of the historical novel: as seen through the analysis of Coe's novels and the novels considered for the

comparative section, the most recent forms of the historical novel deploy a multiplicity of literary forms derived from literary realism and postmodernism. All the novels analysed, in fact, present different stylistic approaches to narrate history. Coe deploys alternatively realist and postmodern forms. Drabble's and Barker's novels are typically realist. The novels of Barnes and Amis are, on the other side, typically postmodern. *The Line of Beauty* and *Capital* mark a return to realism instead. Unlike the nineteenth century historical novel, and the post 1945 historical novel, which relied on realist forms, the historical novel at the time of late capitalism, in fact, is not exclusively realist but instead makes use of different literary genres to represent the fragmentation typical of the post-industrial society.

The mix of realism and postmodernism is specifically a mark of Coe's historical representation. *The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle* are typically realist novels, deploying Lukacsian typical characters and embodying the forms of the *bildungsroman*. However, as discussed in the first and in the third chapter, those two novels present features typical of the postmodern narrative techniques within the realist narrative framework. *What a Carve Up!*, *The House of Sleep* and *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* on the other side are typically postmodern novels.

Coe's historical writing therefore oscillates between social realism and experimentalism. The continuous shifts between different literary forms and the experiments with genre are related both to the nature of Coe's intellectual interests, for example his fascination with the writing of B.S. Johnson, and to his socio-political awareness. However, the oscillation between realism and postmodernism responds also to the nature of the society which Coe's historical novel aims to represent and to critique. Jameson's and Eagleton's critiques of literary postmodernism focus on

pastiche as fetishization of the past<sup>491</sup>. *What a Carve Up!* indeed presents an idealised version of the past. The nostalgic references to Sid James and other cultural markers of the 1960s, the presentation of the pre-Thatcher Britain as a sort of Arcadia undoubtedly are akin to idealisation and fetishization of the past. However, Coe's postmodern novels also acknowledge the schizophrenic nature of postmodern period and the fragmentation of space-time reality in a non-linear form<sup>492</sup> in a fragmented narration that mixes realist and non-realist forms. In *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* the authorial self-reflexivity highlights the concept that the historical narration is a human construct. Moreover, the direct intervention of the author in the vicissitudes of the novel mimics interventions and interferences of the neoliberal establishment on the lives of individuals. The authorial self-reflexivity might be seen as an oblique critique of neoliberalism. The authorial self-reflexivity, in fact, refers here to construction of a grand narrative of neoliberalism, and to neoliberal society as a society of control in which the life of individuals are "narrated" by external super powers (the entities of global capitalism). Moreover, the continuous shifts from realist forms to postmodern forms and vice-versa relate to the shift from a "solid" reality to the "liquid" one, the transition to the liquid modernity described by Bauman and used as framework of discussion in the third chapter<sup>493</sup>. Coe thus opts for a historical writing that takes into account the characteristics of postmodern society. In other words, the interchangeability of realism and postmodernism in Coe's works specifically points towards a renewed impetus to narrate history, a trend also seen emerging in the comparative sections. The shift from social realism to postmodernism appears visible from *The Rotters' Club* to

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<sup>491</sup> Jameson, F. (1980) 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', *The Cultural Turn. Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1988*. London: Verso (1984), p. 7.

Eagleton, T. (1985) 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', *The New Left Review*, 1/152, July-August 1985, p. 60.

<sup>492</sup> Harvey, D. (1990) *The Condition of Postmodernity*, London: Blackwell, p. 48

<sup>493</sup> Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

*What a Carve Up!*. However, the first novel, which was written and published after the latter, is hybrid form of social realist novel considering that it incorporates several stylistic and formal features of a postmodern novel as I have shown in the first chapter.

The novels analysed, both those of Coe and those discussed in the comparative sections, are also characterised by the ubiquitous presence of death: murders, disappearances, disease, and suicide. Similarly the novels deploy stylistic forms that underline this constant and haunting presence of death: historical accounts, whodunit sub-plot, and dystopia. This presence also raised questions regarding Coe's fascination with death.

To understand the way Coe explores death it might be helpful to link the deaths in his novels to his interest in post-industrial politics. Zygmunt Bauman explains that the distinctive features of the post-industrial, 'liquid'<sup>494</sup> condition are: '*globalization, excessive individualization, and the prevalence of consumer societies*'<sup>495</sup>. Regarding consumer society, Deleuze and Guattari explains that: '[t]he deliberate creation of lack [is] [...] a function of market economy [...] This involves deliberately organizing wants and needs (manque) [...]; making all desire teeter and fall victim to the great fear of not having one's needs satisfied'<sup>496</sup>. According to Deleuze and Guattari one of the most powerful tools of control of the late-capitalist society is fear. Again Bauman affirms that the modern liquid (or late capitalist, neoliberal) society is characterised by anxiety. Drawing from Lagrange, Bauman describes contemporary society as characterised by "derivative fear", described as 'the sentiment of being *susceptible* to danger; a feeling of insecurity [...] and vulnerability'<sup>497</sup>. Mark Currie moreover affirms that 'in an age of

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<sup>494</sup> Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

<sup>495</sup> Higo, M. (2012) 'Surviving death-anxieties in liquid modern times: examining Zygmunt Bauman's cultural theory of death and dying', *Omega* 65 (3), pp 221-238, p. 7.

<sup>496</sup> Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. (1972) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London: Continuum. p. 28.

<sup>497</sup> Bauman, Z. (2006) *Liquid Fear*. New York (2013): Wiley, p. 3.

increasingly interested, detailed and accurate prediction, the notion of the unpredictable has emerged as a way of characterising the new epoch'<sup>498</sup>. As Bauman<sup>499</sup> and Roos, among many, note postmodern society is characterised by a 'pervasive sense of anxiety'<sup>500</sup>. This sense of anxiety is caused by the stress on productivity and the financialisation of neoliberal global capitalism<sup>501</sup> and by the short-termism of its policies. According to Gammon and Wigan under financial global capitalism 'individuals engage in behaviours that confer minimal or ephemeral pleasure despite foreseeable painful outcomes'<sup>502</sup>.

Under the conditions created by global capitalism '[l]iquid life cannot keep its shape or stay on course for long'<sup>503</sup>, in other words 'liquid life is a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty'<sup>504</sup>. Anxiety is therefore the mark of postmodern life. Anxiety is the fear of a sudden, abrupt, destructive event which can change the course of life. The ultimate change and disruption is, of course, death. Anxiety is a warning of *memento mori*, which casts its shadows over daily existence. The novels of Coe and those analysed in the comparative sections deal with the modern fears: precariousness, sense of futility, instability and volatility of the existence. In some of the novels analysed these modern fears are represented through the rewriting of the topoi of the ancient Greek Tragedy.

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<sup>498</sup> Currie, M. (2013) *The Unexpected: Narrative Temporality and the Philosophy of Surprise*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 55.

<sup>499</sup> Bauman, Z. (2006) *ibid.*

<sup>500</sup> Roos, J. (2014) 'Where is the protest? A reply to Graeber and Lapavistas', *Roarmag.org*. [online]. Available at <http://roarmag.org/2014/04/protest-austerity-graeber-lapavistas/> [accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> April 2014].

<sup>501</sup> Finger, B. (2014) 'Financialization and Profitability', *New Left Project*. [online] Available at [http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article\\_comments/financialization\\_and\\_profitability](http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/financialization_and_profitability). [accessed: 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2014]

<sup>502</sup> Gammon, E., Wigan, D. (2012) Libidinal political economy: a psycho-social analysis of financial violence, in *Global political economy: Contemporary Theories*. 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed. London: Routledge, p. 205.

<sup>503</sup> Bauman, Z. (2005) *Liquid Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 1.

<sup>504</sup> Bauman, Z. (2005) *ibid.*, p. 2.



According to Aristotle's theorisation of tragedy, one of the main components of this genre is *pathos*, 'the destructive, painful act, such as deaths [...] paroxysms of pain, wounding and all that sort of thing'<sup>505</sup>. *Pathos* is often caused by Fate (as in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*). The novels analysed share the idea derived from ancient Greek tragedy that the force of history ineluctably affects life of individuals. Coe therefore uses the features of Greek Tragedy in his works in ways that shed light on modern forms of anxieties and fear of death. Precisely the novels deploy features of Greek Tragedy in order to represent the effects of specific policies on the lives of individuals. Hence, the story of Malcom and Lois in *The Rotters' Club*, the death of Fiona and the section entitled 'An Organisation of Deaths' in *What a Carve Up!*. That section of the novel, in fact, through a tragic parody deals with topics such as the redesigning of the management of NHS and its reform in the direction of marketization. Henry's QUALY, the cost-effectiveness of surgery in relation to the perceived quality of life of the person subject to the surgical operation, exemplifies in tragi-comic forms the policies which inescapably influence the lives of common people. According to Henry's algorithm the life of a person can be judged more or less valuable. That section of the novel suggests the underlying fear of not complying with the logics of the market and the devaluation of life as result. Furthermore the idea of Fate as force which directs the life of individuals is translated in stylistic forms through the postmodern authorial self-reflexivity in novels such as *What a Carve Up!*, *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, Julian Barnes' *England, England*. The author becomes Parcae who control the life of the characters. As seen more specifically in *What a Carve Up!*, *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim* and in *England, England* the postmodern reworking of ancient Greek tragedy is politically aimed: it is meant to affirm that our reality is shaped by superior

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<sup>505</sup> Aristotle, Arbor, A. (trans.) (1967) *Poetics*. University of Michigan. p. 37.

powers, that our life is constantly influenced and decided by the policies decided by the neoliberal establishments. In *What a Carve Up!*, for example, Coe's use of the Greek tragedy shows the ways in which neoliberalism starts to seem inevitable, decreed by Gods. The direct correlation between the deeds of the Winshaws and the tragic events of Michael's life is reminder of the features of Greek tragedy. The Winshaw family, which epitomises the neoliberal establishment, could be seen like the Gods of the Olympus, playing havoc with common people. The postmodern rewriting of the tragic canon highlights the impossibility of an alternative to neoliberalism after the "carving up" of society operated by the establishments. The only possible narrative is that produced by the establishment/Gods of Olympus.

Conversely another feature of the novels of Coe analysed in this dissertation is his use of comedy, parody and satire. These literary forms are employed, as seen, in some of the works evaluated in the comparative sections, namely Amis' *Money* and Barnes' *England, England*. Parody, satire and comedy are here inscribed in the context of postmodern literary forms. The use of parody as political criticism has been revaluated by the works of Hutcheon, who sees postmodern pastiche as a demystification of the mainstream historical narrative<sup>506</sup>. Hutcheon's view agrees with that of Dyer who claims that postmodern parody can sometimes be seen as 'intrinsically politically progressive' as it challenges the commons sense of the mainstream thought<sup>507</sup>. *The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle*, which unlike *What a Carve Up!*, *The House of Sleep* and *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, are realist novels, nonetheless make use of parody and pastiche, embedding feature of postmodern literary forms into an otherwise mainly realist style. The combination of social realism, tragedy, farce, and postmodern parody appears as a reformulation of the genre of the historical novel. It is

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<sup>506</sup> Hutcheon, L. (1985) *A Theory of Parody*. London: Methuen, pp. 111-115

<sup>507</sup> Dyer, R. (2007) *Pastiche*. London: Routledge, p. 21.

possible to affirm that, in a broader perspective, taking in consideration also the novels analysed in the comparative sections, post-industrial historical novels present different trends, from the reworking of myth and modernist themes, to a renewed interest in realism. Coe therefore embeds in his historical writing the different techniques of the contemporary historical novel. Coe's aim, as stated in an interview for *Salon*<sup>508</sup>, is not only to produce a historical narration but also to experiment with genre and with literary techniques. After all, on several occasions Coe has shown interest in this sort of experimentalism. He has published the biography *Like a Fiery Elephant* and has co-edited with Philip Tew and Julia Jordan a volume of selected prose and poems of B.S. Johnson entitled *Well Done God!* (2013). More recently he has worked on a re-writing of the classic of satire of historical reality: Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. The reworking of Coe is entitled *The Story of Gulliver* (2013) and manifests the keen interest of Coe in playing with genre, with the classics and with the historical account. Coe's prose embeds features of experimentalism specifically to address historical and political issues. As discussed in the three chapters of the thesis, the intersection of realist and postmodern forms aims to address social issues and produce social critique, to narrate the historical transition to postmodernity in *The Rotters' Club*, to represent the schizophrenic post-industrial times in *What a Carve Up!* and to acknowledge the existence of a super-structure which affects the live of individuals as seen in all the novels discussed.

Moreover, *Gulliver's Travels* is a novel that presents and critiques through satire the social reality of eighteenth century Britain. In this regard, Coe might be interested in Swift's work exactly because it offers an example of literary experimentation through satire aimed at a social critique. As discussed previously Coe is in search of a style able

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<sup>508</sup> Taylor, C. (2002) 'In conversation with Jonathan Coe', *Salon*. [online] available at [http://www.salon.com/2002/03/12/jonathan\\_coe\\_2/](http://www.salon.com/2002/03/12/jonathan_coe_2/) [accessed: 10<sup>th</sup> April 2014].

to conjugate political criticism, entertainment and reworking of literary genres. His works embed topoi of Greek tragedy, of eighteenth century British satire (Swift and Fielding), nineteenth-century social realist novel and Dickensian reminiscences. By crossing these literary themes and styles, Coe produces a socially aware historical novel which is aimed at a wider possible audience in order to deliver political message of the novels. In this regard, his works have been quite successful as demonstrated by the impressive attention bestowed to his works not only in Britain but also in continental Europe. His works have the advantage of having attracted attention to historical issues such as Thatcherism and the formation of contemporary neoliberal society in Britain.

Another theme treated in this thesis and common to some of the novels discussed is that of nostalgia and childhood. In the novels analysed nostalgia is often associated with childhood. Childhood metaphorically often represents an edenic pre-Thatcher past. According to critics of postmodernism, such as Jameson and Eagleton, nostalgia in postmodernism has a backward and regressive connotation, and its deployment is akin to fetishization of the past<sup>509</sup>. However, as I argued in chapter II, Pickering and Keightley explain that important social changes produce a sense of loss in communities and the nostalgia mode can be a productive form to help bear the uncertainties of the present. Consequently nostalgia in post-industrial society psychologically recreates a form of bridge to link the different parts of the fragmented reality<sup>510</sup>. It can be a very democratic form to assess the past and ‘opening up new spaces for the articulation of the past’<sup>511</sup>. Nostalgia in Coe’s novels and in Drabble’s *The Ice Age*, McEwan’s *The Child in Time*, and Barnes’ *England, England* implies a

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<sup>509</sup> Eagleton, T. (1985) ‘Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism’, *The New Left Review*, 1/152, July-August 1985.

Jameson, F. (1980) ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’, *The Cultural Turn. Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1988*. London (1984): Verso.

<sup>510</sup> Pickering, M., Keightley, E. (2006) ‘The Modalities of Nostalgia’, *Current Sociology*, 54 Sage, pp. 919-941.

<sup>511</sup> Pickering, M., Keightley, E. (2006) *ibid.*, p. 923.

criticism of the shift from political consensus to neoliberalism under Thatcher, and provides a space for critique of the entrenched ideology of neoliberalism.

As we have seen, nostalgia is usually associated with childhood. Coe's characters such as Ben Trotter, Michael Owen and Maxwell Sim and McEwan's Charles Darke are represented as trapped in a perpetual repetition of a childhood. For these characters childhood represents a shelter from a reality which they strongly dislike. The refuge in the childhood becomes therefore often self-entrapment. Thus nostalgia in the novels analysed has an ambivalent role. It is, in fact, part of the problem too. Ben, Michael, and Maxwell rather than confronting their historical circumstances in some productive way, move back to the comfort zone of a past which will never come back. In this regard, nostalgia is indeed, as Jameson states, a form of entrapment and political dis-engagement. Instead of confronting reality, proposing alternatives to the current situation, nostalgia offers an easy escape. By representing the suffocating self-entrapment of these characters Coe and McEwan, on the other hand, specifically propose the idea that nostalgia can indeed be a withdrawal from reality and a surrender to the contingencies of the present; in other words, a form of political apathy. The role of nostalgia is therefore ambivalent: on one side it is political criticism and on the other side it can represent the political disengagement typical of neoliberal society.

A similarly ambivalent role is attached to the presence in Coe's novels of characters defined by forms of withdrawal from society: Ben in *The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle*, Michael in *What a Carve Up!*, Sarah, and to some extent Robert in *The House of Sleep*, Maxwell in *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*. This condition of

withdrawal, Stuart Murray argues, is typically associated to cultural representations of autism<sup>512</sup>, and Coe's protagonists might be productively viewed in relation to this work.

Murray notes that the common understandings of autism and representations of it mostly focus on the notion of withdrawal<sup>513</sup>. However, commenting on Brown's photography depicting two autistic children who apparently 'closed themselves off'<sup>514</sup> while they were sitting on a swing, he affirms that the "presence" of the two girls and the necessity to recognise their presence underpins discourse of agency. He thus writes:

I see the potential for sentimental reading but also see the possibility of advocacy; I see a lack of interaction but also the suggestion of difference that undermines the theoretical grounds on which such an idea of lack might be based. I see two girls who may well be oblivious to the photographer's presence, but who nevertheless can set the agenda for the interpretation of the photograph<sup>515</sup>.

Coe's novels portray characters whose representations reflect the classical representation of autistic withdrawal. In all the novels of Coe analysed, the main characters, to paraphrase Murray's words, close themselves off, usually locking themselves in childhood or a teenage memory. Ben in *The Rotters' Club* and in *The Closed Circle* avoids dealing with the present and with the issues of his life by locking himself in memories of his first love Cicely. Towards the end of *The Closed Circle* the idea of withdrawal from life becomes manifest when Ben literally locks himself in a monastery in France instead of dealing with a marriage in ruins and with his disappointed career ambitions. In *What a Carve Up!* Michael refuses to leave his flat for the whole decade of the 1980s, closing himself off in a perpetual repetition of his

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<sup>512</sup> Murray, S. (2008) *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. pp xiv-xv.

<sup>513</sup> Murray, S. (2008) *ibid.*, pp xiv-xv.

<sup>514</sup> Murray, S. (2008) *ibid.*, p. xiv.

<sup>515</sup> Murray, S. (2008) *ibid.*, p. xvii.

childhood fantasy. In *The House of Sleep*, Sarah's narcolepsy signals detachment and withdrawal from reality. In *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, Maxwell is locked in an existential solitude from which he is unable of getting liberated. These characters resemble McEwan's *The Child in Time* in which we find a character, the Conservative MP Charles Darke similarly withdraws himself, refuting in a regression to childhood.

As we have discussed, Coe (and McEwan) uses the concept of autistic withdrawal and refuge in the childhood for political purpose. Withdrawal can mean a refusal of neoliberal society and free-market values. Consequently, Murray's re-theorisation of the autistic presence as advocacy can be useful for interpreting the way in which withdrawal is used in the novels discussed. The presence of these characters and their refusal to engage with life can be read as a political stance against neoliberal ideology, that advocates dynamism, competition, self-promotion; these characters oppose by withdrawing, refusing to compete, to marketise themselves. Neoliberalism advocates pragmatism; they propose overwhelming emotionality. To a neoliberalism that advocates speed, they respond with slowness. To paraphrase Murray's words in the quote above, the presence of these characters sets an agenda or, a counter agenda to the one of neoliberalism and compels the readers to ponder on their presence and reevaluate the meaning of their withdrawal.

However, the idea of withdrawal and detachment conveyed by these characters also has other interpretations. In the body of my dissertation, I have discussed its relationship to the issue of de-politicisation in contemporary society. Jerome Roos claims that in neoliberal society, the oppositional voices are silenced by three factors: 'dis-aggregation and atomization of the social fabric', 'pervasive sense of anxiety', and 'overwhelming sense of futility'. He further explains this latter concept:

Futility — the conviction that “there is no alternative” to capitalist control — thus becomes the most important weapon in the ideological arsenal of the neoliberal imaginary<sup>516</sup>.

Withdrawal in the novels’ context points to the idea that the political and intellectual opposition to neoliberalism is futile and that there is no possibility of implementing an alternative to neoliberalism.

As most of the characters represented in detachment from society are writers or would-be writers and intellectuals, another reading of their withdrawal is plausible. As seen in the section dedicated to *What a Carve Up!* the representation of characters’ withdrawal is deployed to provide a criticism of intellectuals’ social dis-engagement; what is criticised is specifically the failure to provide a counter narrative to the one of Thatcherism and neoliberalism. This interpretation is more clearly hinted in the section of *What a Carve Up!* when Michael misspells brio in the book review he is writing. Michael, in fact, affirms that novel he is reviewing lacks biro. As the biro is the instrument for writing par excellence, the ‘lack of biro’ presumably refers to the lack of a sustained political critique against Thatcherism; novelists’ (such as Coe himself) ineffectiveness in producing a counter-narrative to the neoliberal one. The missing biro might also refer to the perceived incapacity of the authors to produce literary works that could attract the attention of the public to ongoing political issues. This interpretation is also supported by Coe who affirmed in an interview with *Salon* that he had written *What a Carve Up!* as response to a series of literary works on Thatcherism with which ‘politically [he] was very much in sympathy [...], but as a reader [he] found [...] dampening’<sup>517</sup>. Coe’s words justify his choice to use comedy and parody to discuss

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<sup>516</sup> Roos, J. (2014) *ibid.*

<sup>517</sup> Taylor, C. (2002) *ibid.*



political issues. These literary techniques are specifically deployed to address political issues in an entertaining and compelling way to attract as large an audience as possible, to compel the readers to face the historical reality of contemporary Britain.

The idea of withdrawal also suggests reflections about the role of the author. Coe's characters are, in fact, mostly aspiring authors, thus their withdrawal can be also conceived as a reflection on the role of the authors who detach themselves in order to have a distant perspective on the life-events they narrate. Conversely, the withdrawal of the authors also suggests a sense of underlying disappointment with their role in relation with political activism. Detachment and isolation are seen as signs of limited agency. This condition is emblematically embodied in Ben Trotter. In *The Rotters' Club* he stays away from any social engagement even though everything around him is rapidly changing. At the end of the novel his monologue shows awareness of new historical conditions. However, significantly in *The Closed Circle* Ben locks himself up in a monastery in France after an existential crisis due to the inability to move on from a love affair happened decades before. Furthermore, one of the chapters of *The Closed Circle* is significantly entitled 'Pale People', a title which reminds of people locked in closed spaces. Indeed what is suggested here is emaciated impotence and resignation towards a socio-political situation where, as another of the characters of the *The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle*, Claire, puts it: 'perfectly ordinary people continually have their lives fucked up by forces outside their control'<sup>518</sup>. The presence of characters locked in themselves suggests that at the times of the new global neoliberal power the only possible escape is a resigned retreat in the individuality and acceptance of the current state of affairs. Coe is thus portraying, through his detached, repetitive, isolated,

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<sup>518</sup> Coe, J. (2004) *ibid.*, p. 369.

and regressed protagonists, a kind of autistic society where citizens are reduced to production machines and consumerist zombies.

To conclude, Coe's works offer an important insight into British history and into the postmodern condition. His novels contribute fundamentally to build a bridge between the collective understanding of history and the micro-level, the individual experiences of specific historical contingencies. Coe's reworking of literary forms such as the *bildungsroman* and the use of popular literary genres such as the whodunit do help to bridge the macro-narrative of "history" and the micro-narrative of individual "stories" in the broader context of history. The relevance of Coe in contemporary British literature is specifically due to the uniqueness of the corpus of literary retrospection on recent historical events he provides, and to the formulation of new forms of the historical novel.

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