

Vera Nünning, Ansgar Nünning (Eds.)

The British Novel
in the Twenty-First Century

Cultural Concerns – Literary Developments –
Model Interpretations

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- Ross, Michael. 2008. "On a Darkling Planet: Ian McEwan's *Saturday* and the Condition of England." *Twentieth-Century Literature* 54.1: 75-96.
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15.

THE CONDITION OF ENGLAND NOVEL IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY:
ZADIE SMITH'S *NW* (2012) AND JONATHAN COE'S
NUMBER 11, OR TALES THAT WITNESS MADNESS (2015)

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1. 'Is This What It's Come To?':
The Condition of England Novel in Past and Present

The state of England has preoccupied writers for nearly two centuries now, but since the turn of the 21st century, the Condition of England novel has reached a second peak after its Victorian heyday. Its predominant stance comes powerfully to the fore in Kate Tempest's Condition of England poem *Let Them Eat Chaos* (2017). In her introduction, the award-winning poet, rapper, playwright and novelist encourages her audience to adopt the perspective of one newly arrived on earth, rightfully daunted by its deplorable state with striking social and economic inequalities, armed conflict and a general sense of unrest. What is at stake here is a type of socially and politically committed contemporary writing that shuns straightforward didacticism for the benefit of a more nuanced representation. Its purpose is to prompt readers to reflect various aspects of the condition of England. Like Tempest in her poem, Condition of England novels typically use multiperspectivity to address topics like money, justice, the role of the media, the housing crisis, class, and the gap between rich and poor, which looms prominently in most current examples of the genre.

The gap between rich and poor harks back to the roots of the genre in early and pre-Victorian Britain. In his essay "Signs of the Times" (1829), historian, philosopher, and essayist Thomas Carlyle, one of the foremost critical thinkers of the Victorian era, criticises his age as "sick and out of joint" (47). Carlyle focuses on the repercussions of the process of mechanisation which the Industrial Revolution had set in motion. His vision of this "Age of Machinery" (34) is one in which political, spiritual and social values have fallen apart. Most of all, though, the 'Condition of England Question' is chiefly equivalent for Carlyle to the condition of the working classes, marked by an unequal distribution of wealth in which those who actually made England flourish are severely disadvantaged. For most novelists, too, the 'Condition of England' question was synonymous in the 1830s with the 'factory question', the appalling conditions of factory workers in the wake of industrialisation (cf. Simmons 2002: 338). The desire to make the public aware of the workers' atrocious situation inspired the genre of the 'industrial novel', the central type of Condition of England novel then (cf. *ibid.* 337), such as Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil; or, The Two Nations* (1845), Charlotte Brontë's

Shirley: A Tale (1849), Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854) or Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (1848) and *North and South* (1855).

Towards the later part of the 19th century, the industrial novel ceded its place to another type of Condition of England writing, the social novel or social problem novel, still a prominent subtype of the genre today. If Victorian social novels like George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1872) or Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875) offer a broad panorama of the social, political and intellectual life of their time, the same holds true for their 21st century descendants. Indeed, Alex Preston (2012: n.p.) deduces from Trollope's novel a range of typical features which current examples of the genre share with it, such as "shifting viewpoints, keen engagement with contemporary themes, and use of London as a microcosm". For Preston, these "Neo-Trollopians" (ibid.) include Amanda Craig's *Hearts and Minds* (2009), Sebastian Faulks's *A Week in December* (2009), Justin Cartwright's *Other People's Money* (2011) and John Lanchester's *Capital* (2012). The perspectives which these novels take on the state of the nation are varied, but rooted in a shared social and political reality. In the 1980s and 1990s, texts like Martin Amis's *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984), Pat Barker's *The Century's Daughter* (1986) or Jonathan Coe's *What a Carve Up!* (1994) targeted the materialism and moral as well as social desolation effected by Margaret Thatcher's rigorous politics (cf. Guignery 2015). In the 21st century, the genre shows itself above all concerned with the effects of the politics of austerity introduced by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government under David Cameron in 2010, along with the ongoing issue of immigration.

Charting the repercussions of austerity, recent Condition of England novels, such as Elizabeth Day's *Paradise City* (2015), Jonathan Coe's *Number 11* (2015) and Martin Amis's *Lionel Asbo: State of England* (2012) are predominantly absorbed with the issues of class, social status, and, above all, money. This preoccupation becomes perhaps most apparent in Amis's vitriolic satire *Lionel Asbo*. The adopted surname of the protagonist – an acronym for anti-social behaviour order – pins down his defining feature. With his two "psychopathic pitbulls" (7), whose temper he tries to render particularly nasty through generous amounts of alcohol and Tabasco, Lionel is a finished caricature of the asocial working class criminal without morals or conscience. As he explains his dogs to his nephew in his trademark dialect: "Joe and Jeff – they not *pets* [...]. They tools of me trade." (7) But it is not simply the subtitle that identifies this character as symptomatic of Britain today. The location of his flat in an estate called "Avalon Tower" after the mythical island from the Arthurian legend and the fact that four of his brothers are named after the Beatles ironically underscore the representative nature of his life. When Lionel wins a fortune through the lottery, he manages to recommend himself to the public as "a kind of national symbol of intransigence, of peculiarly English intransigence in the face of relentlessly blighted hopes" (226), which sheds a very negative light on a society in which only money, fame and publicity count: The novel painstakingly identifies him as the personification of vulgarity, crudity, cruelty and greed.

But how do we recognise texts that do not, like *Lionel Asbo*, advertise their genre in their title, as Condition of England novels? If addressing universal human experiences is generally a hallmark of good fiction, the Condition of England novel must achieve more. Instead of focusing only on important aspects of the human condition as such, these novels explore key aspects of the social reality of their time. Combining a portrait of contemporary reality with at least implicit social commentary and criticism, most of these novels aim at presenting an array of different social spheres and ways of life. Their purpose is to evoke, as Steven Connor puts it, "the thickened space and time of national identity" (1996: 83). The genre, in other words, is "premised upon the delineation of a national totality through the orchestration of typifying patterns of social experience" (Begley 2001: 34). The narrated world readers encounter in a Condition of England novel is always emblematic of the state of the nation as a whole. As the following analysis of Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) and Jonathan Coe's *Number 11* (2015) will show, the state of the nation novel now typically explores an overarching feeling of insecurity and vulnerability as well as rigid structures of inclusion and exclusion at work in various spheres of life.

2. 'Not Everyone Can Be Invited to the Party': Social Hierarchies, Transgression and Role Play in Zadie Smith's *NW*

Zadie Smith's fourth novel shows convincingly that by no means all recent Condition of England novels "attempt to redo the Victorian panoramic whopper with a contemporary setting" (Toby Litt qtd. in Piggott 2010: n.p.). Instead it takes its cue from modernist novels like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) (cf. James 2013: 205; Hubble 2016). Tracing the protagonists' lives in London, it supports Alex Preston's (2012: n.p.) claim that 'state of the nation novel' has nearly become synonymous with 'state of the city novel'. Large sections of *NW* are focalised through the characters in the associative, fragmented style of the stream of consciousness. Indeed, Wendy Knepper (2013: 113) notes a range of modernist devices in *NW*, which suggest a notion of life itself as diverse, incoherent, and difficult to grasp. In sum, *NW* creates an impression of fragmented and isolated identities that distinctly recalls its modernist antecedents.

Setting *NW* during the Notting Hill Carnival in 2010, Smith uses carnival as a potent metaphor for the condition of England. With its colourful but violent history, the Notting Hill Carnival provides an ambivalent foil for depicting the current state of the nation. It originated in the mid-1960s in Notting Dale, previously the site of racial riots. Residents of various ethnicities quickly embraced it as an event "where, for once in a year, racial barriers could be surmounted" (Phillips/Phillips 1998: 276). According to Russian philosopher and critic Mikhail Bakhtin, carnival subverts the hierarchies of everyday life. It promotes a type of human intercourse that is "frank and free, [...] liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times" (Bakhtin 1984: 10), entailing "a reversal of the hierarchic levels" (ibid.: 81) achieved through parody,

humiliation, profanation, travesty and role-play. This process characteristically involves “the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (ibid.: 19f.). Originally, this transgression of norms was limited to one season in a year, but in *NW* Smith uses carnival as a metaphor for the state of 21st century Britain, depicting a society dominated by the transgression of norms, role-play as well as the absence of the abstract and ideal to the detriment of consistent lives and identities.

Set in the area of the eponymous postal code in Willesden and Kilburn, *NW* traces the lives of four characters who have known each other from childhood: Leah Hanwell, Keisha Blake, who changes her name to Natalie, Felix Cooper and Nathan Bogle. While Leah, employed in a minor social organisation, is constantly struggling with the concepts of adulthood and motherhood (she has several abortions), her formerly best friend Natalie, mother of two and married to a wealthy banker, has fought her way to become a successful barrister. What these characters share is their upbringing on the fictitious Caldwell estate. As in other contemporary novels, such as Monica Ali’s Black British *bildungsroman* *Brick Lane* (2003), Martin Amis’s *Lionel Asbo* or J.K. Rowling’s acerbic Condition of England novel *The Casual Vacancy* (2012) as well as in other media, such as Bola Agbaje’s play *Off the Endz* (2010) or the TV series *Top Boy* (2011–2013), the estate, a prototypical signifier of social disadvantage, features in *NW* mainly as a place to escape from. It represents a place “which fails to provide individuals with the ballast of a real place, with a sense of continuity, personal and familial tradition, a sense of belonging” (Pope 2015: 172). Often characterised by a “vicious circle of violence and crime”, council estates represent “Britain’s most underprivileged and highly stigmatised communities which are segregated along class, ethnic and religious lines” (Cuevas 2008: 383). Felix and Nathan in particular – the first a former drug addict and the latter a failed football star turned drug dealer – embody the stereotypical downside of the council estate. As a rule, the boundaries of the estate are impermeable in so far as few people manage to leave this social milieu behind (cf. ibid.). In *NW*, however, the estate signifies a more overarching deficit in personal substance and opportunities that pertains to the state of England as a whole, as Kate Tempest illustrates in her Condition of England novel *The Bricks That Built the Houses* (2016) depicting the lives of four characters from South London. In both novels, the paths of all younger protagonists to successful and meaningful lives and identities are ultimately thwarted.

The setting of the council estate functions in *NW* as a metaphor for rigid hierarchies and a clear-cut system of inclusion and exclusion which *NW* identifies as a central feature of the condition of England. Leah’s ambitious husband advocates a ruthless ethics of social exclusionism – to his mind, “not everyone can be invited to the party. Not this century” (3). The way in which Leah and Natalie celebrate the Notting Hill Carnival encapsulates this exclusionist outlook on life. Instead of joining the crowds on the streets, they retreat to the private carnival pad of a friend: “No need to queue for the toilets, no accumulated street filth between the toes, no six pounds for a can of red

stripe.” (81) *NW* shows people obsessed with privacy and seclusion instead of community and togetherness, a predilection that becomes visible in their preference for closed spaces: “Private wards. Private cinemas. [...] Security systems. Fences. The carriage of a 4x4 that lets you sit alone above traffic. There is a perfect isolation out there somewhere, you can get it, although it doesn’t come cheap.” (76) Leah finds this attitude embodied in London’s foxes, a leitmotif of *NW*. A very territorial species, foxes are wont to live in pairs of two with their pups, “and that’s how we live now”, Leah muses, “defending our own little patch, it didn’t used [sic] to be like that, but everything’s changed, hasn’t it” (45). This territorial thinking contrasts in a highly ironical manner with the novel’s motto from a medieval sermon calling for the abolition of hierarchies (cf. Knepper 2013: 118; Hubble 2016: 12). Ex negativo, the motto highlights a notion of social exclusionism crucial to the Condition of England novel as a whole. In John Lanchester’s *Capital* and Amanda Craig’s *Hearts and Minds*, for instance, this exclusionist tendency materialises in immigrant detention centres; beyond a critique of immigration politics, these centres function on a more abstract level to indict the exclusionist mechanics of a society perceived as profoundly elitist and hierarchical.

This society is peopled in *NW* by characters who are mostly other-determined and alienated from themselves, a feature which casts the state of England in a negative light. Their interaction is marked by a notion of role-play that resonates distinctly with the novel’s background of carnival. Smith specifically emphasises the notion of role-play in the name of Shar, a drug addict who extorts money from Leah using a lie. Shar is the name of a goddess of darkness and destruction associated with trickery in the setting *Forgotten Realms* of the fantasy role playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (1987–) (cf. Lusin 2017: 257). Besides pinpointing Shar’s deviant nature, this name foregrounds the theatrical interaction that dominates identities in this novel. *NW* systematically reveals how the characters have imbibed the need to conform to roles and expectations to the extent of having lost touch with their selves. As the narrator observes concerning Natalie: “In the child’s mind a breach [...] appeared: between what she believed she knew of herself, essentially, and her essence as others seemed to understand it. She began to exist for other people [...]” (165) Her change of name signals a conscious adjustment to her new role of the sleekly elegant barrister (cf. Lusin 2017: 260f.). Indeed the content of her wardrobe bespeaks a pronounced habit always to assume a certain role according to the situation:

Daughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag. Each required a different wardrobe. But when considering these various attitudes she struggled to think what would be the most authentic, or the least inauthentic. (*NW*: 245)

The description of this wardrobe stresses the idea of role-play, especially since ‘drag’ denotes “feminine attire worn by a man” (OED: n.p.), thus emphasising the notion of a masquerade where the external appearance is inconclusive concerning the interior. As Beatriz Pérez Zapata (2014: 92) argues, “[t]he metaphor of ‘drag’ is used here not only

for gender, but also for Natalie's disguises in terms of class, nationality and the private/public divide, exposing them as constructions". This emphasis on clothes as disguise (cf. Guignery 2014: 36f.) is reminiscent of Elizabeth Day's *Paradise City*, which highlights continuously how the characters exploit clothes as makers of social identity. Yet Smith takes this motif a step further. Section 165 of Natalie's part, "Stage directions", is written in the mode of a play, an aesthetic experiment that reveals the theatrical character of human interaction in general (cf. 241f.): Frank, too, for instance, on one occasion consciously puts on "his grown-up face [...], the one he wore daily to work" (199). Not unlike millionaire businessman Sir Howard Pink in Day's *Paradise City* or investment banker Roger Yount in Lanchester's *Capital*, he has become consumed by his social role. Like other examples of the genre, *NW*, then, ruthlessly uncovers the artificiality of human interaction as a central feature of the state of Britain now.

Smith's critique of hollow identities combines with a rigid attack on the media, which exacerbates the discrepancy between outside and inside entailed by the daily masquerade of role-play. For Natalie, the impact of the media becomes especially acute during her pregnancy, when she fails to reconcile her beliefs with the culturally canonical images of motherhood she encounters in the media:

Pregnancy brought Natalie only more broken images from the great mass of cultural detritus she took in every day on a number of different devices, some hand-held, some not. To behave in accordance with these images bored her. To deviate from them filled her with the old anxiety. She grew anxious that she was not anxious about the things you were meant to be anxious about. (237)

The media confront Natalie during her pregnancy with a range of different, incoherent concepts of self that destabilise her anyhow unstable identity even further. In fact, she is so insecure about her own identity she finds herself "wondering whether she herself had any personality at all or was in truth only the accumulation and reflection of all the things she had read in books or seen on television" (162). In sections like this, Smith harshly depicts the consequences of a life oriented on external factors. At one point, Frank sums Natalie up with the words: "Showing off. False. Fake." (245) Her anonymous internet identity KeshiaNW@gmail.com (212), along with her busy sex life online, signals a split of identity in which everyday life is a mere façade. But Frank, too, has lost his sense of self: "He didn't even know how to be the thing he was." (191) Smith showcases this general loss of meaningful selves in a suggestive image in the novel's first scene. Having heard on the radio a line that intrigues her, Leah attempts to write it down but fails: "I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me." (3) While the notion of being the sole author of oneself suggests a self-determined identity, Leah's failure to write it down suggestively illustrates her failure to define herself (cf. Guignery 2014: 41). As Hui Wang puts it:

The sense that we are all masters of our own destinies has been shattered. For those who are fortunate enough to be born and live in the middle and upper brackets of society, it is still possible to believe in the myth of autonomy, self-making and self-definition, but for the rest there is very little hope. (Wang 2016: 386)

As the characters' attempts to better themselves prove abortive – Leah remains stuck in a council flat close to the estate, Natalie's marriage collapses, Felix is stabbed in a mugging and Nathan ends up a murderer –, *NW* reveals the brittle basis of their identities.

The concept of autonomy indeed appears a myth in a novel that pins its characters against a web of intertextual foils evoking a world reduced mainly to the physical and material. The first scene offers a parody of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) that degrades the sacred to the profane, the high to the low:

Four gardens along, in the estate, a grim girl on the third floor screams Anglo-Saxon at nobody. Juliet balcony, projecting for miles. It ain't like that. Nah it ain't like that. Don't you start. Fag in hand. Fleshy, lobster-red. [...] Shrivelled blossom and bitter little apples. Birds singing the wrong tunes in the wrong trees too early in the year. (3)

The dispute on the mock Juliet balcony is truly a travesty of Shakespeare's lovers; the canonical embodiment of love and beauty has degenerated into a vulgar, smoking harpy. This parody ironically underscores the lack of an abstract, ideal dimension in contemporary life. Indeed *NW* puts a stress on sexual relations that recalls the moral liberties associated with carnival. The previous story of Leah and Michel is reduced to the unconventional sequence of their sexual relations:

When they met, the man and the woman, the physical attraction was immediate and overwhelming. [...] The physical came first, always. They had sex before either new the other's surname. They had anal sex before they had vaginal sex. They had dozens of sexual partners before they married each other. (20)

The narrator explicitly identifies physical attraction as the basis of their relationship and the only thing they have in common (cf. 21). Smith implicitly reveals this shift from the ideal to the material and the body in a suggestive image: "Look, there, on the library carpet between Science Fiction and Local History: a knotted condom filled with sperm." (47) This image contrasts the library, a metonymy for the sphere of knowledge and learning, with the sphere of transgressive sexuality characteristic of carnival. When Natalie is giving a speech on "time management, identifying goals, working hard" (252), she virtually practices this shift from the abstract to the physical. Speaking about high aims in life, she is secretly concerned with "what Leah and Michel [...] did in the privacy of their bedroom. Orifices, positions, climaxes" (252f.). According to her, "[a]nything purely based on physicality is doomed to failure" (252), a very ironic statement in view of her own preoccupation, particularly since she indulges her own sexual fantasies on the website www.adultswatchingadults.com (212). This shift to physicality and the profane, *NW* suggests, is characteristic of human relations, supporting Philip Tew's (2014: 22) notion "that death and sex [...] and fertility [...] are central to the novel".

As a Condition of England novel, *NW* paints a bleak picture of a world in which the transgression of norms, the lack of perspectives and the failure of autonomous

selves have become the status quo. In her previous novels, *White Teeth* (2000) in particular, Smith considered the notion of identity primarily in a multicultural milieu. In *White Teeth*, the characters are struggling with being somehow Black or Asian and British (see the contribution by Jan Rupp in this volume). The action of *NW*, too, unquestionably unfolds in a multicultural scene. Leah is Irish, Natalie is of Afro-Caribbean descent, and their husbands are of mixed Franco-Caribbean/Algerian and Afro-Italian ancestry respectively. Yet this novel is more inclusive in its approach to identity than Smith's previous multicultural fictions suggest; the area of *NW* functions as a synecdoche for the nation as a whole.

3. 'We're All in This Together': Politics, Money and Justice in Jonathan Coe's *Number 11*, or *Tales That Witness Madness*

Where *NW* continues a modernist tradition, *Number 11* is indebted to postmodernism. Besides displaying a high degree of self-reflexivity, it continuously disrupts the illusion of fictional reality. Coe's experiments with intertextuality, intermediality and magical realism place *Number 11* among the best examples of the moderate version of postmodernism characteristic of British literature in the 1990s. The first scene of the novel deliberately leaves the reader uncertain as to what kind of narrative to expect. A scenery framed by "two leafless, skeletal ash trees" against a "threatening sky" (3) creates a sinister atmosphere. The location seems haunted indeed, especially since it evokes "Hansel and Gretel" by featuring a boy and a girl. The apparition of a woman with a bird that seems "more like some fantastical hybrid creature from mythology than any real bird" (5) prepares the reader for a fictional world in which everything is possible. The motif of darkness and threat established here lays the foundation for the novel's marked political subtext contained in its motto, a quotation by Tony Blair: "In another part of our globe, there is shadow and darkness." (n.p.) Taken from a speech to the US Congress on 17 July 2003, these lines acquire an ironical twist in Coe's novel. In the original speech, Blair (2003: n.p.) specified this darkness as poverty, repression, various kinds of fanaticism and a lack of freedom. *Number 11*, however, illustrates how these are not matters of foreign, far-away states only, but an integral part of Britain. Where Coe's earlier Condition of England novel *What a Carve Up!* (1994) was "an unashamedly and unambiguously anti-Thatcher novel" (Guignery 2016: n.p.), *Number 11* chiefly investigates into the 'War on Terror' as well as the effects of the new politics of austerity introduced by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010.

Coe's use of generic hybridity crucially aims at making readers aware of the slippery nature of truth and reality in a world dominated by the media. The beginning introduces the protagonist Rachel from the perspective of the heterodiegetic narrator, but the second chapter suddenly shifts to Rachel as an autodiegetic narrator. Rachel appears to be telling the entire story under the cover of a heterodiegetic narrator, apart from some sections told by Livia, a Romanian immigrant. In fact, the second chapter

told by Rachel recurs towards the end embedded in a heterodiegetic chapter (cf. 319f.). By transgressing different levels of fictional communication, *Number 11* disrupts the illusion of reality in a postmodernist manner. On the level of the story, too, Coe vigorously drives home to the reader the manipulations of the media. When Val, the mother of Rachel's childhood friend Alison, takes part in the Jungle Camp, the dialogues are unscrupulously cut and rearranged for commercial purposes to make her appear an entirely different, reprehensible person, causing a torrent of murderous abuse on Twitter (cf. 102; 109f.). Val's image on TV and online is a fake, an aspect of media critique Coe underscores through his use of intermediality. While *What a Carve Up!* is based on the eponymous comedy horror film of 1961, *Number 11* takes its cue from *What a Whopper* (1962), a comedy about the Loch Ness Monster. Tracing the story of an author who fakes photographs of Nessie to promote his book, *What a Whopper* mirrors the media critique and the ontological indeterminacy at the core of *Number 11*.

The Gothic atmosphere of the beginning prepares the novel's central notion of 'haunting' connected to a loss of political innocence. *Number 11* is fundamentally a novel of development with Rachel at its centre. Setting in when Rachel is six years old, in 1999, the novel traces the stories of herself and Alison from 2003 up to 2015. Aged ten, Rachel witnesses the news reports of the mysterious death of United Nations weapons inspector Dr David Kelly in 2003. From the beginning, it is obvious to Rachel that with this death, "a line had been crossed" (22). Kelly had been involved in the dispute about whether Iraq commanded weapons of mass destruction – then one of the major arguments in favour of war against Iraq. He had apparently doubted this allegation and died on Harrowdown Hill under dubious circumstances. Later in her life, Rachel's teacher Laura explains to her the significance of this event:

[E]very generation has a moment when they lose their innocence. Their political innocence. And that's what David Kelly's death represented for our generation. Up until then, we'd been sceptical about the Iraq war. We'd suspected the government wasn't telling us the whole truth. But the day he died was the day it became absolutely clear: the whole thing stank. (150)

Quoting from the song "Harrowdown Hill" by Thom Yorke from Radiohead, Coe underscores the notion of fraud: "You will be dispensed with/ when you've become inconvenient" (139). Kelly's death signifies a loss of trust in the truth of (political) information and the integrity of the political system. When she watches the news of his death on TV, Rachel realises "that this was not an ordinary death, that [...] Britain would be a different place from now on: unquiet, haunted" (16f.). By thus showing Britain's present metaphorically 'haunted' by the guilt of its immediate past, Coe latches onto the discourse of haunting prominent in recent historical novels by Sarah Waters, Peter Ackroyd and Hilary Mantel (see the contribution by Marion Gymnich in this volume).

This discourse of global politics combines in *Number 11* with a harsh critique of a society chiefly characterised by its rigid structures of class. Rachel here functions as a go-between to reveal the inequalities of a world essentially split in two. Hired by the

rich family Gunn as a tutor, she marvels at their lavish lifestyle, “wondering if she had somehow passed through a looking glass [...] and emerged into a parallel world” (244). This allusion to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) alerts the reader to the distinctness of two worlds whose contrast is firmly inscribed into the novel’s spatial set-up. In the Gunns’ house the family part is strictly separated from the servant one by a door that embodies a rigidly exclusive social structure: “‘I feel’, Rachel said, that there’s my world, and there’s their world, and the two co-exist, and are very close to each other, but you can’t really pass from one to the other.’ She smiled. ‘Unless you use the magic door, of course.’” (264) On the one hand, there is the fantastic wealth of the Gunns, for whom a daytrip to Lausanne on their private jet is perfectly normal; on the other, there is the reality of food banks, in which the gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’ becomes most tangible. To enhance the contrast of these worlds, Coe dissolves the “Londoncentricity” (Preston 2012: n.p.) of most current Condition of England novels by including Birmingham as a second major setting. This juxtaposition recalls Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855), which contrasts Manchester alias ‘Milton Northern’ in the industrial North with the traditional, rural South. In *Number 11*, the distinction is one between a struggle for existence in a Birmingham affected by the politics of austerity and a fantastically affluent London. In Birmingham, Alison’s mother spends part of her days on the bus to save on heating; in London, the Romanian immigrant Livia feels “the air itself getting heavier with the tangy scent of money” (233) on her way to the centre. Like *NW*, *Number 11* is, in the words of David Marcus (2013: n.p.), “a work of fiction built on the clipped images, solicitudes, and often spectral traumas of class”.

Number 11 is more ruthless than most current novels in displaying the blatant injustice of a world based on exploitation. In a scene modelled on Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), Rachel ventures into a cellar to discover what strikes her as a gruesome female corpse, which turns out to be a Chinese man. Previously involved in illegal forced labour in a chicken factory, he embodies the horror of modern slavery. He is associated with a real-life tragedy, the Morecambe Bay disaster of February 2004, when 23 Chinese workers searching for cockles where drowned by the incoming tide (cf. Pai 2014: n.p.). In 2014, *The Guardian* drew attention to “numerous cases of gang-master abuse over the past decade, from the hospitality industry to food processing and agriculture” (ibid.). In a characteristically self-reflexive move, Coe elucidates his use of intertextuality when Rachel explains her boyfriend’s thesis on H.G. Wells’s *The Invisible Man* (1897): “He’s using invisibility as a metaphor [...] to talk about politics. How people become invisible, when the system loses sight of them.” (276) It is one of the purposes of *Number 11* and other condition of England novels, such as Amanda Craig’s *Hearts and Minds* and John Lanchester’s *Capital*, to draw attention to the plight of these people and make them visible again – in the latter two cases, modern slaves in the Eastern European sex trade and illegal immigrants. The motto of the novel’s final part, “We are all in this together.”, taken from an address of George Osborne to the Conservative Party in 2009, acquires a highly ironic undertone in view of these blatant inequalities.

In *Number 11* the existence of human ‘ghosts’ is the flipside of a fiercely commercial world in which money rules all spheres of life. The title ostensibly refers to Number 11, Downing Street, the seat of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, emphasising the role of money, a key topic in much contemporary fiction (see the contribution by Joanna Rostek in this volume). A loose sequel to *What a Carve Up!*, which traces the story of the Winshaw family, *Number 11* shows how the power of this dynasty has infiltrated all areas, such as food industry, politics, health, education, weapons’ industry and the media. Its harshest censure concerns the commodification and quantification to which all areas of life are subjected. These processes culminate in *Number 11* in the foundation by one of the Winshaws of the Institute for Quality Valuation, motivated by the idea “that quality of human life could be valued. Priced, to use a more accurate word” (262). From tourist sites to cities and feelings, the institute strives “to express everything in monetary terms” (258f.), human life included. Coe foregrounds the results of this policy when the National Health Service (NHS) refuses a medication to Rachel’s grandfather, not deeming his life valuable enough (283) – one of many shortcomings of the NHS criticised also in Sarah Moss’s *The Tidal Zone* (2016). In *Number 11*, Laura puts her finger on the root of the problem: “We’re dealing with people who have *no notion at all* that something is important unless you can put a price on it.” (262) Coe pinpoints the effect of this obsession with money from Livia’s perspective, simultaneously criticising the explosion of house prices, which “have multiplied by almost six” in the previous two decades (Engel 2016: n.p.):

These beautiful big houses in Chelsea are not homes in any sense that I understand. For most of the year they stand empty. Or at least, you think they are empty, but inside, there is a kind of life taking place. A phantom life. Members of staff [...] dust haunted rooms and polish cars in underground garages [...] Other houses are even emptier. [...] It is as if some terrible plague has come to London and everybody has had to leave but nobody has told me. (*NW*: 235)

For his choice of words and images, Coe draws on Gothic and horror to underscore the unnatural state of things. In fact, Livia shortly after employs an image from Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) to describe the effect of boundless wealth on the city: “[J]ust as a certain famous Romanian used to suck the blood from his victims’ necks, now it is money itself that has begun to drain the life out of this great city.” (236) Where *Dracula* epitomised the Victorian fear of being conquered by the ‘other’, it is now money, *Number 11* suggests, which threatens to conquer and destroy the nation. Or, as Kate Tempest puts it in *The Bricks That Built the Houses*: “People are killing for Gods again. Money is killing us all.” (3)

As a counterpoint to social inequality, commercialisation and exploitation, Coe introduces a notion of justice and retribution that combines the Victorian heritage of a socially committed realism with the genres of horror and fantasy. The feeling of ontological insecurity introduced in the very first scene culminates in a motif derived from horror fiction, a gigantic spider that emerges from the deep shaft excavated for the Gunns’ basement conversion as if straight out of horror fiction:

The creature's legs were long and double-jointed [...]. The belly, the huge distended belly, was covered with short hairs which in the moonlight appeared to have a greenish hue; it sagged heavily against the ground, an obscene sac containing vast, revolting liquid secrets. (325)

With its huge belly, the monster distinctly reminds of the evil spider Shelob in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954-55). As a creature of the pit, it echoes the horror movies *Quatermass and the Pit* (1958-59) and *Death Line* (1972), which are both mentioned in the novel (cf. 259). *Death Line* associates its underground horrors with guilt and retribution, dealing with the zombie descendants of Victorian railway workers buried alive. Indeed, in a fictitious interview about a real mass grave dating from the Great Plague found in 2015, Laura suggests that in London "[t]here is always the sense that if we dig too deeply beneath London's surface, we might uncover something sinister, something nasty" (259). *Number 11* depicts the notion of advancing underground as a transgression, relying for its imagery on the craze for subterranean extensions in London. Some builders, like the Gunns in the novel, certainly dig too deep. Oliver Wainwright (2012: n.p.) wryly comments on the actual state of things that "[y]ou would be forgiven for thinking that the residents [...] have established a kind of coal-mining cottage industry". Indeed the building sites in *Number 11* evoke Carlyle's "Signs of the Times", where he deplored the displacement of artisans by machines:

Instead of artisans chipping away at brickwork [...], there were gigantic cement mixers grinding away deafeningly, huge skips full of bricks and aggregate being transported on industrial hoists, fifty-foot cranes blocking the carriageway while they hauled their massive loads of girders and breezeblocks from one place to another. (250)

With its eleven underground stories, the extension of the Gunns' house is particularly immoderate. The monster's emergence from the excavated shaft associates it with retribution, especially since all the people it kills belong to the Winshaw circle, the embodiment in *Number 11* of greed and exploitation; significantly, all of them were involved in a meeting in Number 11, Downing Street, shortly before. The fact that the number eleven recurs in various places, such as Phoebe's house, a storage compartment, a table, a bus in Birmingham and the number of stories planned for the Gunns' basement, illustrates the extent to which the financial system permeates life. The spider, then, a physical manifestation of the horrors from Britain's past haunting the present, delivers some justice – if perhaps only in Rachel's imagination.

4. 'When Did It Fall Apart?': Conclusion

Alluding to Britain's central national symbol, left-wing activist, singer and songwriter Billy Bragg paints a bleak picture of the condition of England in his song "Take Down the Union Jack" from *England, Half English* (2002). His perspective is strikingly similar to that adopted by current Condition of England novels: "When did it fall apart? Sometime in the 80s/ When the Great and the Good gave way to the greedy and the mean/ Britain isn't cool you know, it's really not that great [...] / It's just an economic

union that's passed its sell-by date". The England he depicts is ruled by money and devoid of higher ideals. The fact that Bragg traces this state of things back to the 1980s draws attention to the repercussions of Thatcherism today. Indeed, John J. Su (2014: 1083) argues that "contemporary British literature is defined in terms of responses to a set of political, economic, and cultural forces associated with Margaret Thatcher". That Su should describe Thatcherism and Thatcher as "a kind of trauma or ghostly presence that the nation has yet to work through" (ibid.: 1095) resonates strongly with the pervasive notion of 'haunting' contained in *Number 11* as well as with the ultimate failure of the characters in *NW* to escape their past. Current Condition of England novels are certainly indebted to the 1980s, associating Thatcherism with their Victorian heritage. In economic terms, one of the most palpable repercussions of Thatcherism today is the housing crisis, a shortage in affordable living space that originated in Thatcher's politics. In the Condition of England novel as well as in real life, housing creates processes of inclusion and exclusion that render the rift between rich and poor perhaps most tangible. The state of England thus almost appears the same today as the one described by Benjamin Disraeli in *Sybil; or, The Two Nations*, which casts rich and poor in the role of two nations "between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other's habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were [...] inhabitants of different planets" (Disraeli 2017 [1845]: 33). Today, the categories of rich and poor may be more diverse and connected to other factors, such as ethnicity or status of residence; the gap between them remains very similar. Shared by all Condition of England novels, this diagnosis is not exclusive to novels alone: Alex Sierz' (2011) book on contemporary British drama also features a chapter on the fundamental split in contemporary British society between rich and poor as well as different ethnicities and communities.

To adequately capture this state of things in fiction, Zadie Smith and Jonathan Coe advocate a more experimental type of writing. In her essay "Two Directions for the Novel" (2009), Smith questions what she calls the "Balzac-Flaubert model" of lyrical realism: "Is it really the closest model we have to our condition? Or simply the bedtime story that comforts us most?" (73) Coe (2012: n.p.) delivers a similar diagnosis in *The New Statesman*: "If there is a problem with the 19th century model, [...] it is too formally satisfying to suit our current state of mind." With *NW* and *Number 11*, both authors have found a way to realise these ideas in a novel (cf. James 2013: 211ff.). Both deny their readers any simplistic conclusions, rendering them sensitive to certain issues instead. Coe explicitly mentions this aim in a highly satirical, self-reflexive chapter with the subtitle "A 'Nate of the Station' Story". In this section, Coe lets Police Constable Nathan Pilbeam – nicknamed 'Nate of the Station' in a witty wordplay on 'State of the Nation' – reflect on the function of art, namely "to make people aware of ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning" (203), which is exactly what Smith and Coe strive to achieve in these novels. Despite their experimental aesthetics, both texts are in a sense proponents of "a new social realism [...] capable of capturing both the mechanics and experience of today's growing inequality" (Marcus 2013: n.p.).

Inequality and social borders, one of the central topics in Condition of England novels now, could grow yet more pressing as Britain faces the consequences of leaving the European Union, as two of the most recent examples of the genre suggest. Rachel Cusk's *Transit* (2016) is a novel about change or its absence, told by a homodiegetic narrator who mediates the monologues of a wide range of characters. The notion of transit echoes the phase of transition Britain is going through now. Even more strikingly, Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016) depicts the state of Britain after the Brexit vote. The country Smith describes has fallen apart, united only by its differences:

All across the country, there was misery and rejoicing. [...] All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing. [...] All across the country, people looked up Google: *what is EU?* [...] All across the country, people looked up Google: *Irish passport applications*. [...]

All across the country, money money money money. All across the country, no money no money no money no money. [...] All across the country, the country was divided, a fence here, a wall there, a line drawn here, a line crossed there [...]. (59; 61)

If *Autumn* again emphasises the familiar issues of borders and exclusionism, the processes of inclusion and exclusion at work in *NW* and *Number 11* have become even more virulent in this first anamnesis of post-Brexit Britain, and the general concern with money even more pervasive. This gloomy scenario of dissent makes us truly wonder, in the words of Kate Tempest (2017: 5), "'Is this what it's come to?' [...]" 'What am I to make of all this?'" Whether future Condition of England novels will be able to answer these questions remains to be seen.

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