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**The Blurring of Politics, Postmodernist Aesthetics and Writing in  
*What a Carve Up!* and *Number 11*, Jonathan Coe**

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## Table of contents

<i>Introduction</i> .....	5
<b>I. <i>Satire, Engagement and Humor in Coe’s Novels</i></b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>1. <i>Coe as a Political Satirist</i></b> .....	<b>9</b>
a. Coe’s Background and Influence .....	9
b. <i>WACU</i> : an Acrid Criticism of Thatcherism.....	12
c. <i>NII</i> : A Dark Portrait of Blairism and Cameronism in the Same Vein as <i>WACU</i> ? ....	15
<b>2. <i>Present Versus Past</i></b> .....	<b>21</b>
a. When the Past does not Pass... ..	21
b. Coe’s and the Immediacy: Current Society Issues .....	23
<b>3. <i>Politics and Humor</i></b> .....	<b>25</b>
a. Coe, the Humorous Satirist for All? .....	25
b. When “Britain is in Danger of Sinking Giggling into the Sea”.....	28
<b>4. <i>The “Coesian” Position</i></b> ... ..	<b>32</b>
a. The In-between, the Lack of Political Positioning and Indeterminacy .....	32
b. A Real Protest to Overturn the Status Quo or a Bowdlerized Satire? .....	36
<b>II. <i>Postmodernist Aesthetics and the Issue of Label</i></b> .....	<b>40</b>
<b>1. <i>The Usual Recipe of Postmodernism with Post-Postmodern Sprinkles</i></b> ...	<b>40</b>
a. The Continuous Intermingling of Genres.....	40
b. The Collage and Patchwork .....	42
c. Post-Postmodernist Sprinkles ? .....	44
<b>2. <i>The Parody of the Parody of Parody?</i></b> .....	<b>46</b>
a. The Gothic Novel and its Parody .....	46
b. From a Parody of a Detective Novel to an Academic Detective Novel .....	47
<b>3. <i>An Antagonistic Whirl of Magic, Realism and Tragedy</i></b> .....	<b>49</b>
a. The Condition of England Novel and the Dickensian Dimension .....	49
b. A Tragic Story? .....	52
c. A Fantasy Novel Tinged with Magical Realism .....	54
d. A Swerve to Dirty Realism?.....	56

<b>III. The Blurring of Writing and Writing the Blurring .....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>1. The Blurring of History and Story .....</b>	<b>59</b>
a. Macro-Narration Versus Micro-Narration .....	59
b. The Autobiographical: Coe himself in the Novel.....	62
c. The Artist or Would-be Artist: Authorial Self-Reflexivity .....	64
<b>2. The Blurring of Arts .....</b>	<b>67</b>
a. The Picture, the Instant and the Freeze-Frame .....	67
b. An Almodavarian Writing and Aesthetic .....	70
c. The Mirror and the Dream: Coctalian Devices to Image Coe's Imagination.....	72
<b>3. An "Eye" for an "I" and a "Voice" for a "character"?</b> .....	<b>76</b>
a. The Blurring of Narrative Voice(s) .....	76
b. The Eye(s) and the Spectator(s) .....	79
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</b>	<b>87</b>

## Introduction

Jonathan Coe, the author of eleven novels, has indisputably the wind in his sails. His contemporary Nick Hornby calls him “probably the best English novelist of his generation” (108). His output includes experimental fictions, panoramic depictions of the British society, political satires, and above all the lives of emotionally disturbed individuals. Coe has more than one string to his bow; he is also famous for being a biographer, a music commentator and a film critic. However success was not immediate. With his first three books – *The Accidental Woman* in 1987, *A Touch of Love* in 1989 and *The Dwarves of Death* in 1990 – Coe did not make a big name for himself.

His career actually took an important turn in 1994 with *What a Carve Up!* (*WACU*) which has remained Coe’s most admired and discussed novel and most importantly his signature accomplishment. The book, translated into sixteen languages, was a success in the United Kingdom but also abroad and won the Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger, an award given annually since 1948 to a foreign language book by a group of literary directors in France. Indeed, Coe’s work is most admired in France, Italy, Germany and Greece. For many observers and critics, *WACU* is still his best work and Coe is most of the time referred to as the “the author of *What a Carve Up!*” (Moseley 2). According to Merrit Moseley, Coe began to occupy a different position in British fiction with the publication of this novel.

With his latest novel entitled *Number 11 (N11)*, one could assume that Coe has intended to offer a sort of sequel to *WACU*. This idea of a sequel would first seem difficult since Coe made sure to slay all the Winshaws at the end of his novel. Indeed, the sequel has more to do with echoes that is to say the story and history of this family who took prominent positions in the Thatcher era resurge several times while survivors strive to celebrate their remembrances. *N11* is once more the testimony of Coe’s narrative complexity as it is divided into five parts, linked to one another but each telling a story with characters set in different periods, from 2003 to 2015. Apart from the economic crisis and its wide range of injustices – precariousness and foreign labor exploitation – Coe lampoons the British politics such as Tony Blair’s intervention in Iraq or the policies of austerity. In this novel as well as in *WACU*, the author tries to capture a political atmosphere with a satirical, realistic, fantastic and

humorous tone, and to take a critical look at the evolution of our societies.

Coe is not only a satirist; he is also famous for challenging and redefining the contemporary British novel. As Laurent Mellet argues in *Les politiques de l'intime*, Coe is hailed for “the narrative complexity and ingenuity” (16) of his books, giving a new impulse to the metafictional and postmodern novel, and for many academics, offering a “new literary object” (16). In 2004, Coe analyzed the contemporary British Novel thus:

In the last three decades the British novel has reinvigorated itself...by recognizing the multi-ethnicity of modern Britain and opening itself to influences from other cultures; by tapping into the energies of popular film, music and television; by turning its back on modernist elitism and rediscovering the pleasures of humor, storytelling, demotic, and so on. (Guignery 16)

These words encapsulate his literary philosophy and style by advocating for the multiplicity of influences and frames, a generic hybridity, a use of humor and a will of cultural democratization.

This dissertation will be a means to undertake and to discuss the critical assessment related to Coe's work stimulating academic discussions among critics. Indeed, before 2015 no book in English was written on Coe's work. The first to write a monograph in French is Laurent Mellet, *Les politiques de l'intime* in 2015, in which he explores the relations between the political and the intimate, two notions that seem antagonistic at first. In doing so, he analyzes the way Coe politicizes the intimate through characters, plots and narratives. Mellet shows how Coe re-defines the political writing in contradiction with satire through intimate stories rooted in failure, error, chance, absence or excess. He also tackles the opposite effect of satire leading to laughter and inaction. Reading Coe's novels and Mellet's book, one may assume that Coe withdraws since he puts up a smokescreen between the intimate and the political so as to confuse readers, giving them the freedom or responsibility to re-define his output, a form of detachment that blurs the positioning of the writer and his work.

In the same vein, Guignery's book entitled *Jonathan Coe* in 2016, reveals that

the critical reception of his work and the critics that it raised belong to two categories: a political one where his work is considered as a satirical portrait of the contemporary British society, and a generic one relating to narration, intertextuality, self-reflexivity and intermediality. Some critics actually place Coe in the category of realist and political writers such as Dominic Head who asserts that *WACU* is “the most significant novel about the effects of Thatcherism” (158) or Laurence Discoll who points out that Coe is a “political realist novelist par excellence” (158) because of his accurate representation of strikes, NHS cuts and IRA bombings. Thus, one can notice that even Coe’s critical reception seems difficult to grasp since it blurs the exchange of academic ideas.

Indeed, Coe’s work goes beyond a simple issue of categorization since it also questions and blurs postmodernist aesthetics. Critics like Pamela Thurschwell are much interested in the complex form of Coe’s production: the use of intricate narrative constructions, the intertwining of humor and tragedy, the parodies of the Gothic novel, the nostalgic references to B-movies, the use and abuse of detective fiction. This examination of Coe’s generic complexity is broached with his insertion of film and music in his literature. One may assume that Coe’s fiction is a new redefinition of postmodernist literature and one may wonder whether these aesthetics can merge with politics, economics, and be called like that. According to some theoreticians such as Ihab Hassan or Jean François Lyotard, politics and postmodern fiction are incompatible while Eagleton and Fredric Jameson consider postmodernism as the manifestation of specific political and historical circumstances.

On American soil, the critical assessment to Coe’s work is even more limited. Merritt Moseley is the latest critic and one of the rare American academics who wrote a book about Coe’s work entitled *Understanding Jonathan Coe* in 2016. Even though Coe remains the author of *WACU* or to something similar to it, Moseley posits the difficulty characterizing his major work and the author himself. Moseley’s main concern is Coe’s generic intricacy in addition to the difficulty categorizing the author. In fact, he tackles the author’s regret at being categorized as the author of *WACU* by readers and the fact that when his production fails to conform to the latter, it is seen as a disappointment. Reading Moseley, one can suppose that the blurring of categorization can be influenced by the reception of his books among readers, so as to grant liberty for Coe to follow new trails without really disappointing his followers, the latter finding points of references in the new directions he swerves off. Another

point that deserves to be pointed out is that Merritt explains how Coe's oeuvre is based on borrowed material. Coe is actually a writer whose novels replete with references to popular culture but also to classics and academic contemporaries. Listening to many interviews, Coe's desire to popularize or democratize culture is a recurrent leitmotiv and this use of intertextuality shall be put into perspective in this dissertation.

As aforementioned, Coe is an author who is not much studied in universities; there is still a limited academic literature on Coe's works, hence the aim to write a dissertation about him and to contextualize his works within broader discussions around British literature. The fact that *Number 11* is quite a recent book also involves a limited presence of articles about the novel, mainly secondary sources such as press articles. As Mellet explains, his name is rarely present in contemporary literary and when Coe's novels are analyzed or mentioned, it is most of the time to underline their "contemporaneity" (16). Reading the two novels, one may have the feeling that Coe's fiction seems to be difficult to grasp as his narratives, his genres and the tone of his criticism appear to be endowed with a form of blurring. Blurring, indeed, affects not only the way he writes but also the label of his two books, difficult to categorize. This dissertation shall propose to analyze the concept of blurring as a key feature in *WACU* and *III*. The notion of blurring appears first as a mode questioning what satire and engagement are and if the author in question is not playing too much with its codes and conventions. Through a certain tension between the past and the present, a sense of humor that questions politics, a political positioning lacking clarity, Coe revisits the traditional genre of political satire. In a second time, the analysis shall focus on the proclivity of these books for hybridity leading to the delicate issue of label. Coe's books oscillate between multifarious genres and their characteristics, blurring the lines between them and extolling multiplicity and decompartmentalization, thus revitalizing the movement of postmodernism. The third part of this dissertation shall focus on the blurring of writing as well as the writing of blurring. Coe writes vertically - different texts, arts and languages - and horizontally - from history to story - and blurs the voices, narratives and forms of representation. This metafictional confusion breaks the codes of fiction and shows how Coe reworks the figures of the author, the narrator and the reader. As a whole, the concept of blurring will be a means to broach Coe's literary evolution and to reveal the continuities and ruptures in



his fiction.

## **I. Satire, Engagement and Humor in Coe's Novels**

### **1. Coe as a Political Satirist**

#### **a. Coe's Background and Influence**

Coe was born on 19 August 1961, a middle-class suburb of south-west Birmingham, in the West Midlands, close to a small town called Bromsgrove, “a solid Tory Constituency”, “overwhelmingly white” (Guignery 32). The city of Birmingham and the regional area are recurrent features in his oeuvre and play a major role to portray characters' social and political backgrounds. Coe refers to himself as “a Birmingham writer, even as a provincial writer” (Moseley 5), “part of an English provincial tradition rather than being a metropolitan writer” (Guignery 32) unlike a wave of contemporary writers such as Zadie Smith, Will Self, Ian Sinclair whose fiction is deeply-rooted in a London setting. In *WACU*, Michael Owen actually comes from the outskirts of Birmingham: “the point where Birmingham's outermost suburbs began to shade into countryside, in a placid, respectable backwater, slightly grander and more gentrified than my father could really afford” (159). Even though Coe has lived for thirty years in London, he “still feels like an outsider writing about the capital and doesn't believe he could write with the confidence of Londoners such as Peter Ackroyd or Zadie Smith (Guignery 42). In *WACU*, the opposition between London and the province is striking when Michael, a figure of Coe, contrasts his life in London, “given over to the aggressive pursuit of self-interest” with “what he encounters in Sheffield, where Joan and her lodgers are perceived to be enjoying a more intimate and socially cohesive life” (94). In the same vein, *NII* contrasts two different areas: the province and the city. The story begins with Rachel's grandparents who seem to live a peaceful life in rural Yorkshire and ends with a gloomy setting in London, more precisely in Kensington, a symbol of the excesses of the haves. Coe, through the omnipresence of Birmingham and this duality between the city and the province shows how space, the intimate and history are intertwined notions working together.

Coe comes from a quite ordinary middle-class family. His grandfather actually exerted a great influence on him. On his website, Coe explains: “my grandfather,

James Kay, was a great influence on me when I was growing up. He was a warm, funny man, slightly to the left politically”. Coe’s father, who passed away in January 2013, was different and voted Tory. He was actually “a great admirer of Thatcher, my dad. An instinctive and lifelong Conservative, he was full of praise (as much as such a quiet man can be) for the Iron Lady and all those who surrounded her” (*Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* 4510). Coe’s political views evolved when he entered the selective secondary school King Edward’s in Birmingham (1972-79): “it was a high pressure environment, and because I was anyway quite shy and introverted, I withdrew. I don’t thrive on competition” (Guignery 35), a competition he will never cease to condemn in *WACU* and *NII*. When he studied English at Trinity College in Cambridge, “a big intimidating college full of Harrovians, Etonians and Westminster school people who would not give the time of day” (Guignery 35), just after Thatcher’s victory he felt “fear and despise” (Guignery 35) for every credo of the Conservative party. Coe affirms that “in a state of hopeless and political and literary naivety, [breathing] the rarefied air of political puritanism [and feeling] despair at the state of Michael Foot’s Labor Party [Coe was on a] constant search for a political home elsewhere” (Guignery 35). These words encapsulate the motif of in-betweenness broached in this dissertation as well as the search for a political alternative.

Coe as a child had a “routine suburban upbringing in which books never loomed very large” (Guignery 35). The presence of books was limited as he recalls: “in my youth there were no book-lined rooms, no bookish family. My Dad used to read Harold Robbins and Arthur Haley, my Mum Agatha Christie” (Guignery 35). As a child, Coe had a fondness for comics and detective stories, Sherlock Holmes and James Bond stories. At the age of eight years old, he wrote a detective story entitled *The Castle of Mystery* he referred to as “a long mock-Victorian detective story...full of cliff-hanger chapter endings and bizarre historical detail” (Guignery 35) that he winks at in *WACU*. At the age of fifteen, Coe wrote a satirical novel called *All The Way*, which he sent to a publisher and burnt after, as it did not follow up. He described it as “would-be Kingsley Amis, or actually would be Spike Milligan” (Guignery 37). When he was sixteen, Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews* was “a revelatory reading moment” for him: “Fielding just opened up for what could be done with the novel in terms of architecture, you could have multiple plotting and complicated interrelationships on a large scale. That really set me thinking about the novel in a

completely new way” (Guignery 37). At the age of seventeen, Coe got acquainted with Joseph Heller’s novel, Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two Birds* (1939) that he appreciated for its “formal playfulness, its mixture of Irish melancholy and pessimism, and its subversive humor” (Guignery 38).

After completing a BA dissertation on Byron’s *Don Juan* (1983), an MA dissertation entitled “Samuel Beckett and the Double Act: Comic Duality in Fiction and Drama” (1984), Coe wrote a doctoral thesis entitled “Satire and Sympathy: Some Consequences of Intrusive Narration in *Tom Jones* and Other Comic Novels” (1986). *Tom Jones* has had a profound effect on Coe’s novels such as the eclecticism of form, the figure of the intrusive narrator, the relationship between narrator and reader and the complexity of narratives. Coe still considers *Tom Jones* as “the first great English novel and the first great English essay on the art of novel writing” (*Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* 123) as well as his “great inspiration, the English novel that towers over everything else (Guignery 40). Coe likes it because it is a social panorama of England in the mid-1740s and an experimental novel, full of self-reflexivity, many aspects of *WACU* and *NII*.

Coe has also been fascinated by music since an early age. As a child, he played the piano and was given a guitar at the age of nine. He is a big fan of Miles Davis, Keith Jarrett and Pat Metheny (*Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* 3035). Influenced by jazz and rock music, he was open to different styles of music and recalls that at the age of seventeen, he was “in thrall to many different kinds of music: the density and elaborate structures of the classical repertoire, the wild but disciplined freedoms of jazz, the energy and directness of pop music” (Guignery 38), all that eclecticism is visible through his fiction. In the 1980s, he composed music for jazz and cabaret and played the keyboards in a band, formed in 1985 when he was a student at Warwick University. He also composed for a feminist band named the Wanda and the Willy Warmers. His experience as a musician inspired many of his novels such as *The Dwarves of Death, The Rotters’ Club, The Closed Circle*. Coe puts forward that back in the 1970s, people “defined themselves by what kind of music they listened to”, that music somehow “said everything about you, about your intellectual pretensions, about your political view”, and was “very much part of the characterization” (Guignery 43).

Moreover, Coe is interested in film studies. He wrote film reviews for two magazines – The Metropolitan Magazine and Law London Australian Weekly -

before working as a film critic for *The New Statesman* in 1996-97. He was also hired to write the biographies of two American Actors: *Humphrey Bogart: Take it and Like it* (1991) and *James Stewart: Leading Man* (1994). His interest for cinema explains the visual aspect of *WACU* and *N11*.

#### **b. *WACU*: an Acrid Criticism of Thatcherism**

Although there are many past references from 1942 onward and the period from autumn 1990 to January is fairly short, the book concentrates on the Thatcher years, that is to say from 1979 to 1990, and “the Thatcherite policies that were continued in most respects under her successor, John Major, who is prime minister in the present-day sections” (Moseley 38).

Indeed, Margaret Thatcher was not a usual politician; she left an emphatic mark on British politics and culture. She was frequently depicted in the arts and popular culture as a hate-filled figure that attracted opprobrium like no other British political leader. Moseley concurs with this idea that “Mrs. Thatcher, beyond anything else that she may have done for or to the country, served the useful purpose of providing a productive hate-figure for novelists” (38). Paradoxically, Coe hardly refers to her name in *WACU* and *N11*. *WACU* is indeed not about her as a person since she is almost unmentioned by name. For Moseley, “it is about the whole complex of attitudes embodied in the society that developed during her premiership, to some extent with her encouragement and that of her party. The ruling force was greed; and it was unleashed by a growing heartlessness about the weak and unfortunate” (38). Coe explains that he knew that he wanted to write about “Thatcherism” but he intended to “express this pervasive sense of unease and betrayal” (Moseley 38). However, with the portrait of Mark, the arms dealer, Coe comes closest to Thatcher as her son, also called Mark, was involved and charged with arms trading.

At first, reading the title and later on what Michael states: “the Winshaws have pretty well carved up the whole bloody country”, *WACU* suggests a form of unequal distribution of wealth “by the ruthless and privileged rich” (Moseley 4) in Britain. It confirms that Coe clearly intended to write a social and political satire dealing with different areas of national life in the 1980s. The French reviewer Bruno Portesi calls Coe “l’écrivain de l’anti-thatchérisme par excellence” (Moseley 16). Back in the 1990s, Coe aimed at writing “a big political novel” (Guignery 66). The book

broaches, through the Winshaws, the triumph of materialism and privatization, the dismantling of social welfare, the growth of individualism as well as a veer towards philistinism. Coe confirms that he wrote *WACU* “as a response to the seismic changes in British popular culture during the 1980s” (*Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* 2593). The writing of *WACU* was by some manner cathartic as he says that “a socially panoramic story was incredibly liberating” (Guignery 63).

The criticism towards British politics appears straight and fierce at some parts of the book: “You shouldn’t take notice of anything that Henry tells you, you know...After all, he is a politician” (14); “The trick is to keep doing outrageous things. There’s no point in passing some scandalous piece of legislation and then giving everyone time to get worked up about it. You have to get right in there and top it with something even worse, before the public have had a chance to know what’s hit them” (313). These lines evoking the numbing of political awareness speak directly to the multifarious reforms implemented by Thatcher in the 1980s.

The upper class Winshaw family depicted in *WACU* is a metaphor for the British Ruling Class and each of them represents the evils of the decade. As Coe explains, “I sat down one morning beneath the benign dome of the British Library’s old reading room...and drew up a list of six areas of public life I wanted to examine: finance, culture, politics, arms dealing, the media and the food production. Each [of the Winshaws] was to be assigned an individual member of my venal family, and then it was a question of delving into each area” (Moseley 38). The latter are described in a hyperbolic way as “the meanest, greediest, cruellest bunch of backstabbing penny-pinching bastards who ever crawled across the face of the earth” (209). They are considered as contemptible characters, literally vermin and each of them is the personification of a specific sector. The occupation they embody is carefully reflected through different narrative modes in different chapters – diaries, political debates, newspaper articles. Hilary, a tabloid journalist, represents the media and its manipulative power; Henry, a ruthless and arriviste politician, the National Health Service and its severe deterioration because of budgetary cuts; Dorothy, a brutal chicken and pork farmer, the agricultural sector and mass production; Roddy, a predatory art-dealer, the financialization of culture; Thomas, an unscrupulous investment banker, the fraud in pensions funds; Mark, the arms dealer, the economic interests of Britain to do war. In each of these sections, the novel describes the way in which individual actions from the same family, serving their own greedy interests,

have consequences on a great scale. Coe provides a long list of crimes oscillating between the comical and the satirical in a hyperbolic tone: “swindling, forgery, larceny, robbery, thievery, trickery, jiggery-pokery, hanky-panky, plundering, looting, sacking, misappropriation, spoliation and embezzlement” (88). The burlesque dimension of these quotes epitomizes Coe’s satirical style. Coe wrote *WACU* “in response to a slew of pamphleteering and rather morose novels about Thatcherism that had started to come out in the early 90s” that he referred to as “dampening” (Guignery, 65). Coe ambited “to write intensely political” “to combine anger with warmth and humanity” (Guignery 65).

The more we progress in *WACU*, the more Michael discovers awful crimes committed by the Winshaws and the dizzying decline of the country. Thomas took perverse pleasure in “snatching these huge state-owned companies from the taxpayers’ hands and carving them up among a minority of profit-hungry shareholders’ (321). Mark sells arms and make huge profits with his colleagues, of them saying “What a carve up, eh...?” (321). In a hyperbolic way, once again, Coe describes the country’s plight “Our businesses failing, our jobs disappearing, our countryside choking, our hospitals crumbling, our homes being repossessed, our bodies poisoned, our minds shutting down” (413).

The financialization of culture and art is a theme developed in *WACU* as well as in *NII*. Roddy is a perfect symbol of that in *WACU* as well as Patrick who says “the only kind of values anybody seems to care about are the ones that can be added up on a balance sheet” (102). This theme will also be tackled in *NII* when people will be debating on the financial value of the Loch Ness.

What is interesting is the fact that, despite this obvious personification, Coe did not put everyone under the same umbrella. The Winshaws are also composed of “good” people, but this concerns the older generation. Mortimer, who still lives at Winshaw Towers is kind and Tabitha, who has been adjudged insane and confined to an asylum, is lucid about her family and wants to reach the truth about the death of her brother, Godfrey, who was a good Winshaw. Mortimer who employs Phoebe comments: “They’re the meanest, greediest, cruelest bunch of back-stabbing penny-pinching bastards who ever crawled across the face of the earth...There’s only been two nice members of my family: Godfrey, my brother, who died in the war, and my sister Tabitha, who they’ve managed to shut up in a loony bin for the last half

century” (209). Coe, with this heterogeneous portrait of the Winshaws, associated greed to a more contemporary generation and thus transcends categorization.

*WACU* is no isolated example, other novels broached Thatcherism such as Ian McEwan’s *The Child in Time* (1987), David Lodge’s *Nice Work* (1988), Tim Lott’s *Rumours of a Hurricane* (2002), Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty* (2004), David Peace’s *GB84* (2004) or Philip Hensher’s *The Northern Clemency* (2008). Many academics consider Martin Amis’s *Money* (1984) as one of the first novel railing against Thatcherism and thus the “political novel par excellence” (Guignery 16). However, Coe argues that Alasdair Gray’s *1982, Janine* (1984) “skewered the early years of Thatcherism with a greater prescience and accuracy” (Guignery 16).

All in all, “putting the selfish greed before the national interest” (76) is a sentence that encapsulates the Winshaws’ state of mind. They embody capitalism unfettered by scruples. Through the Winshaws, Coe highlights the folly of Thatcherism to rationalize everything, to make life a market operation, to subordinate lives to market decisions. Paradoxically, this anti-Thatcherite critique is paralleled with an admiration for Thatcher by some characters in *WACU* and in *NII* – some Winshaws and Rachel’s grandfather – so as to blur the lines.

### **c. *NII*: A Dark Portrait of Blairism and Cameronism in the Same Vein as *WACU*?**

Coe’s novel *NII* is definitely a witness of its time. *NII* whose story is told by a nine-year old girl named Rachel, starts in 2003 with a political framework – the death of Dr David Kelly, the UN weapons inspector found dead at the height of the Iraq war. All along a dense political context, Coe focuses on the life of Rachel, from childhood to adulthood: from Yorkshire to Oxford and London to become a tutor for the children of the very wealthy.

As Robert Epstein writes in his article entitled “Slating the Obvious”: “*Number 11* is a perfunctory patchwork of grievances against the regime of Blair to Cameron”. In line with *WACU*, *NII* is another state-of-the-nation novel lampooning Cameron’s Britain; it also covers different aspects of modern life, from free-market capitalism to social-media bullying. Several consequences of austerity measures are broached in the novel – budget cuts, library closures, food banks – and the vacuity of western societies – modern celebrity, reality TV... London, which has a negative connotation in many novels by Coe, is the main geographical target of his criticism. It

is referred to as a global city characterized by a vertical and horizontal emptiness. It is devoid of humans on its streets and the huge basements that tycoons have created are unoccupied. For instance, Rachel's employers living in Kensington, are busy, never present but add an 11-storey basement to their house. This yawning void spawns and conveys a gloomy atmosphere of death and absence, a sort of end of time.

*N11* actually starts in 2012 when Britain underwent an unprecedented crisis but covers the political period of 2003-2015. The book tackles budget cuts in the public sector. The Chancellor of the Exchequer is one of the main targets in the novel and has been in office since the 11<sup>th</sup> May 2010 and lives at 11 Downing Street. The number 11, which is also the title of the book, is endowed with a derogatory connotation. This number is also associated to a cursed room which will cause the downfall of Roger obsessed with the quest of a film reminding him of a pleasant childhood memory. This very same number appears many times, in particular during the presentation of the Winshaw prize. In addition to the economic crisis and its share of inequalities – precariousness and the exploitation of foreign workers – Coe lampoons Blair's positioning when the British army interfered in Iraq. As Moseley writes, Coe staked out strong positions against military adventurism, "especially the British collusion with U.S. adventurism in the Middle East (4). The plight of foreign workers is also of prime importance in *N11*. Through a political program on TV that Alison's grandfather watches; the political charge of the narrator's following comment is substantial:

Of course, I'd never heard either of these expressions before, and when the narrator started talking about migrant workers enduring conditions of 'slavery' I was very puzzled, because to me the word 'slavery' conjured up images of Roman gallery slaves being held in chains or whipped by muscular guards with shirts off. But the subject of this program, in a way, seemed just as horrifying: I was soon distressed by the litany of tales of builders and agricultural workers being made to work long hours and live twenty to a room in horrible bedsits. (28)

Racism towards foreigners is also broached through the character of the grandfather when he says: "Week in, week out, the BBC gives us this left-wing propaganda. If these Latvians and Lithuanians don't like doing British jobs, they



should go home and get better ones. Did you know there's a shop in Selby that only sells Polish food now?" (29). This idea is reinforced, later in the novel, when a lady from the local Conservative club says: "I have personally noticed a marked increase in the presence of...*undesirables*. She practically sang the word out, in a deep, throbbing alto, stretching the third syllable to a semibreve at least. Many of them, needless to say, belong to the *ethnic minorities*" (36).

In *N11*, Coe questions the fake notion of connectedness through his critique of the Internet. With the rise of multifarious social networks providing discussion platforms, people have paradoxically become more and more individualistic and brutal. This is what is suggested when Val is insulted on twitter. Coe also deals with the misunderstandings provoked by social networks with the typing error of *nicest* by *incest* and the devastating effects that it had between the relationship of Rachel and Alison (306). Coe, here, attacks the virtualization of social cohesion but also the contemporary family structure with the "abandoning" of these two "unattended nine-year old girls" (311).

*N11* does not fit the label of sequel, as portrayed in many press articles. Except the fact that they are both state-of-the-nation novels where British politics represent the main focus of Coe's criticism, the two novels take different paths in terms of plots and do not rely on any form of interdependency. There are some references to the Winshaws – Winshaw prize and the presence of two Winshaws representing the villains who still control many sectors of Britain - but the idea of sequel seems to have been mainly promoted for commercial purposes. Robert Epstein posits that *N11* has nothing to do with *WACU*; they are "sequels which are not really sequels. Sequels where the relationship to the original is oblique, slippery", these same words ironically written in *N11*. For Epstein in his article entitled "Slatting the obvious", *WACU* and *N11* do not have the same satirical charge; unlike *WACU* which is "damning" and "powerful", *N11* is perfunctory". The motif of the number 11 appears superficial, except recalling the fact that Coe is writing his eleventh novel:

The Number 11 of the title recurs throughout, and refers also to the fact that this is Coe's 11th novel, but while the Chancellor's residence has a part to play in the plot, it feels more tricky motif than integral theme and, ultimately, this takes on the moral bankruptcy of modern Britain is

let down by being too obvious, both in its targets and in their subsequent takedown.

The two novels are actually means, for Coe, to slip a multitude of authorial comments on the evolution of the British society and politics. Coe shows that Blair abandoned the historic socialist principles of the Labor Party and Cameron extended what Thatcher started. The compromised Labor government of Blair and Cameron have crushed the political renaissance that Britons expected after the Thatcher revolution. The end of *NII* is quite paradoxical and concurs with the recurrent notion of the in-between in Coe's fiction. The end has actually a double reading – an optimistic and a dystopian one.

#### **d. Political and Social Dystopias?**

Coe remembers that he read George Orwell's *Animal Farm* at the age of eleven, which had a hold on him as he admired how "a political allegory was smuggled into a fable" (Guignery 36), a technique he tried to emulate in *The Broken Mirror*. *WACU*, in some ways, resembles Orwell's fiction since it talks about a family that exerts a totalitarian influence over a country and its subjects. It's no surprise that Coe, in an interview with Shannon Roger, admits that *Lanark* by Alasdair Gray is a political novel par excellence. There are similitudes between Coe and Alasdair since they show how society controls individuals' destinies. This dystopian context resembles Coe's fiction where individuals appear to be trapped. Coe says about *Lanark*: "il a pour sujet principal le rapport de l'individu à la société, sujet qu'il inscrit non seulement dans le récit mais aussi dans la forme même du roman, en mettant en abyme l'histoire de l'éducation de son héros dans un contexte dystopique à la Orwell" (Mellet 183).

The theme of frustration is recurrent in Coe's work, with the characters who cannot fulfill their dreams and fall into failure. This theme recalls famous dystopias like Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or George Orwell's *1984*. At the end of *WACU*, Michael realizes that the Winshaws are part of his life. As Ryan Trimm comments: "Owen's epiphany [at the end, when he realizes he is central, not peripheral] is not the happiest realization, for it suggests a larger collision, once concerning his failure to stop the Winshaws and the values they signify" (Moseley

44). Michael is also described as a retarded man who cannot fulfill his sexual impulses and spends his time drooling in front of videos. This idea of sexual frustration is also present in *NII* when Rachel and Jamie can't satisfy each other and remain on the brink of orgasm. There are many passages that evoke this sexual interruption: "Then, just as Rachel was about to reach her second climax, Jamie's mobile phone rang. To her amazement, he leaned over to answer it." [...] Furious, Rachel flopped back on to the bed, panting heavily, more with frustration than anything else. She had been on the very brink of orgasm" (330).

Even though *WACU* and *NII* do not deal with stories set in the future, the two novels resemble dystopias in many ways. The latter are characterized by a form of dehumanization of politics that seem to control the lives of individuals in a totalitarian way. There have been many cultural references that portrayed Thatcher, the iron lady, as a dictator. The decline of society provoking social and environmental disasters, as aforementioned, is another specific feature of dystopias. The goal of dystopia also concurs with Coe's aim to draw attention to real-world issues regarding society, politics, economics, and environment. In terms of politics, dystopian rulers are depicted as brutal and uncaring almost fanatical, which resemble the Winshaws who rule with an iron hand over the country, whose decisions result in negative consequences for individuals. In terms of economics, the main targets are extensive privatization, capitalism, free-market economy, the death of the welfare-system and characters that are at the mercy of its mechanisms. The idea that people are contaminated by this ideology is present and recalls Michael when he presents Fiona as a form of investment or when the Winshaws control the alimentation of individuals and their consciousness and the way they intend to dull their minds to undermine any form of protest.

Dystopias also tackle the fact that wealth is not equally distributed, this is something that is developed in *WACU* as well as in *NII* where the ruling class is described as living in abundance. They own buildings that they do not even live in; materialism, consumption and excessiveness are themes of prime importance in *NII*. Hedonism and the quest for pleasure are also conveyed through the rich trying to abuse the poor. There are examples of attempted rapes in both novels (the accountant tries to rape Rachel in *NII* and a Winshaw assaults Phoebe in *WACU*). Both novels draw stark contrasts between the privileges of the ruling class and the shabby existence of the working class. This social stratification runs the novels. Like many

dystopias, violence is also prevalent, in the form of austere reforms, insults, war or sexual assaults. Family is also a social institution that is shaken. The family of Michael is not that present when he is in trouble; the young author is overwhelmed with loneliness. The descriptions of characters alone are brimming in the novels and tend to confirm that family is an institution on the wane. Moreover, the end of *NII* is quite dystopian since it draws a futurist vision of London colonized by the rich and anti-austerity protests on the way.

Another characteristic of *NII*, which makes it look dystopian, is when the participants of a TV reality show are sent on an idyllic and wild island, a place recalling William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. On this Island, the weak like Val ends up undervalued, there is a form of social hierarchy where the strongest and the most beautiful are praised. The social system in which is set Val looks to emphasize animalistic behaviors. It looks as if the contestants had lost the meaning of civilization since they adopt an animal status. The violence of this social system is amplified by the harsh comments of people commenting the game on social networks. Still in *NII*, the novel suggests a decline of social and human values since they behave brutally, in an animalistic way. There is a scatological example that is symptomatic of this decline in humanity when Val is forced to take part in a humiliating game, consisting in eating an animal defecating in her mouth. This example represents the dulling of people's minds: "And then Val thought, Oh my God, have I killed it?, but this thought only lasted for a second or two because then she felt something in her mouth, something liquid, and a taste – Christ – a taste fouler and more viler than anything else she had ever tasted or imagined tasting, and she realized that the stick insect was shitting in her mouth, literally shitting itself with fear" (104).

Still in *NII*, the way Coe presents the direction that the NHS is taking and thus the plot looks dystopian. The NHS will resemble a service where life is considered as a commodity and care extremely expensive like "cetuximab" for Rachel's grandfather who suffers from cancer (282). Coe pushes the criticism to its paroxysm when the doctor explains Laura what are ICER and QALY: "An ICER [...] is the incremental cost-effectiveness ratio of a therapy. A QALY is a quality-adjusted life-year. A service like the NHS has to keep a very close eye on its costs. To put it bluntly, not every year of human is valued as highly as every other" (283).

## 2. Present Versus Past

### a. When the Past does not Pass...

Guignery posits that Coe refers to the past without any nostalgia, which is to be put in perspective (17). In some articles, Coe depicts Britain in the 1970s as “a dismal and stagnant place where the unions were perpetually involved in bitter and increasingly violent confrontations with the representatives of capital, a shabby country with a failing economy, obsessed with memories of its former Imperial glory, taking refuge in tradition and outdated ritual in an attempt to forget its contemporary problems” (18). Even though Coe’s own point of view on the past seems to lack clarity and consistency, this notion plays a major role in his fiction. In an interview, Coe describes the 1980s as “vibrant, energetic, ruthless, dynamic” (18). However, in *WACU*, when Michael refers to the past, the 1980s, his words turning into authorial comments are bitter: “The 1980s weren’t a good time for me on the whole. I suppose they weren’t for a lot of people” (102).

Indeed, in many passages of *WACU*, the past is haunting. For instance, the whole novel portrays Michael who is obsessed with the memory of the film *What a Carve up!* that his mother interrupted when he was nine years old. As evoked in the first quote of this subpart, the past tracks people but people also try to reach it as though it was a way to escape the present and to hide behind the “curtain” of denial. The past actually promotes escapism from reality such as the act of writing or reading fiction, thus allowing a form of catharsis. This may be correlated with Coe’s saying that readers enjoy novels, in the 1970s, for their “good-old escapism” in a period when “Britain’s experiment with socialism descended into chaos, and the dampening realities of the Thatcher revolution started to sink in, the nation was beginning to take refuge in nostalgic fantasies of elegance and privilege” (*Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* 1796).

The past is also tackled in *NII*, no wonder that a chapter is entitled *The Comeback* and deals with a “has-been” singer, Val. It is also a notion associated with obsession and political nostalgia as in *WACU*. Coe describes a past that no longer exists: “A long time before you were born. The culture was different back then. Very different” (176). In *The Crystal Garden*, Laura is worried about the idea that her son would get obsessed with the past like his deceased father. She hopes that her son will be obsessed with “something other than the past”; she says “like a lot of people,

Roger was convinced – even if he never really admitted it, even to himself – that life was better, simpler, easier, in the past. When he was growing up. It wasn't just a hankering for childhood. It was bigger than that. It was to do with what the country was like – or what he *thought* it had been like – in the sixties and seventies” (176). This political nostalgia is much more developed a few lines later: “For Roger, it was about welfarism, and having a safety net, and above all...not being so weighed down by *choice* all the time, I suppose. He *hated* choice [...] a time when we trusted the people in power, and their side of the deal was treat us... not like children exactly, but like people who needed to be looked after now and again” (177). These lines directed towards the past, towards a political era that disempowered people, reinforce Coe's distance with the political present and convey an atmosphere of disillusion and disenchantment. The refusal of choice concurs with Coe's promotion of the alternative, a motif that shall be developed. Reading some passages of *NII*, Coe's reference to the past is quite slippery since he may promote passivity and the idea that politics should not be the responsibility of people, even a form of oligarchy. He writes about Roger: “The whole thing that defined that situation, and the whole beauty of it, as far as he was concerned, was passivity. Other people were making choices for him. People he trusted. He loved that. He loved the idea of trusting people to make decisions on his behalf” (176). As in *WACU*, the past is also referred to as something haunting in *NII*: “This vision cannot have been anything but a memory, come back to haunt me, and that's why I've decided to revisit that memory now, to see what I can learn from it, to understand the message it holds” (319). This personified past seems to merge into memory, which is different in terms of objectivity. The past and the memory – two different and independent notions – are blurred as if characters confused both. These reflections on the past concur with Hutcheon who argues that postmodernist novels depict biased portraits of history (Hutcheon 146). *WACU* and *NII* are therefore “historiographic metafiction” (146) that constantly offer partial and oriented discourses on the past, through memory and visions. For instance, Michael makes no secret about his often anti-conservative and pro-labor likings (273). In *NII*, Rachel's grandfather clearly shows his sympathy for conservative policies or for the Daily Telegraph, a right-wing newspaper (24).

Even though, some academics, and even Coe himself, portray the past as a matter of obsession, some characters would tend to glorify it and bring a nostalgic dimension to it. The reference to the past is thus more complex than it seems.

### **b. Coe's and the Immediacy: Current Society Issues**

Coe acknowledges that his novels examine contemporary issues. He explains: "I realized at that point that I had been taking myself far too seriously. As for addressing contemporary politics in a novel – well, that's always difficult, but no more so in Britain than in any other country. I wouldn't have thought" (Moseley 43). Florence Noiville praises Coe's "fashion of anchoring his universal truths in the immediacy of contemporary society" (298).

Guignery distinguishes "two trends in contemporary British fiction: one toward retro-Victorian fiction and pastiche, and another resolutely anchored in the present, dealing with topical issues, Coe belonging to the latter" (Guignery 15). I would say he belongs to both. In the 1980s and 1990s, the success of novels such as Rose Tremain's *Restoration* (1989) and A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) led to the idea that the British novel had to deal with historical pastiche and disinterest for contemporary British life. There was a fixation almost obsession on the past that was epitomized by the 2001 Booker Prize longlist on which only three books were set in contemporary Britain. As a consequence, Coe decided to write a book anchored in the present dealing with the Thatcher era "a large-scale panoramic representation of what Britain looked like at that particular moment" (Guignery 15). It is clear that Coe wants to anchor his work in the present. For Guignery, the result was *WACU*, a book revealing Coe's skills to anchor "his universal truths in the immediacy of contemporary society", to express "the great and the small, the destiny of nations and the heartbeats of beings" (Guignery 15).

For Guignery, "Coe's work provides the reader with snapshots of the present and the recent past without succumbing to a kind of nostalgia" (17), something put into perspective above. For Richard Bradford, Coe tackles the issue of contemporaneity, "the questions of how the novelist is expected to deal with contemporaneity" (Guignery 17). For Tim Adams, "only a handful of significant English novels have responded directly to the monumental changes in the society of our times". Coe is the second author, after Martin Amis's *Money* in 1984, contrary to the authors of the 1990s who tend to focus on the past disconnecting their production from the here and now.

Coe's work deals with current society issues and tries to capture a specific period and place: the Thatcher Era or the period of austerity. Both novels were written

in a contemporary framework. *WACU* and *NII* are set in contemporary Britain and evoke events in the past. *WACU* focuses on the 1980s and the 1990s, the Thatcher era, and relates events dating back to the 1940s, with the Second World War. *NII* is set in the 2010s and alludes to events dating back to 1999 (from 1999 to 2015). Coe intends to connect the here and now with the past through repeated back and forth motions in time – prolepses, analepses. Time seems difficult to grasp and complicate the temporal structure of the novels and narration, creating a circular movement and an impression of blurring. Doing so Coe transports the reader and avoids developing his story. He deconstructs narration by skipping chronological steps. It is a whole reevaluation of time and it gives the impression that the narrator and the author are struggling with time to tell their stories. Connecting the past and the present, Coe's work shows that politics as his work is the result of continuity, the present being the result of the past. However, Coe's novels deal with stories where there is no time continuity, time and historical periods becoming difficult to categorize.

Indeed, *NII*'s plot is set in a very contemporary context since it deals with the latest means of communication and their profusion: “Nowadays, when it came to ways of keeping in touch, she [...] and Rachel were spoiled for choice: they emailed and texted, and they talked on Facebook and WhatsApp. In the last few weeks, they'd even started using a newly launched app called Snapchat” (75). There are many themes that are issues belonging to nowadays such as foreign immigration, in *NII*, when immigrants from China are compared to “slaves” or with the story of Lu, the Chinese immigrant (60). Rachel, referring to TV, highlights their exploitation: “I saw this programme on the television the other night, I explained. Apparently there are slaves in England. Real slaves. Most of them come here from other countries and they have to work, like, twenty-four hours every day and if they try to run away they get beaten up or attacked by dogs” (60). Money and unemployment are also frequent issues at the core of the family: “Ok. Depressed about work, like everyone else” (75). Coe also lampoons the media's hardness since they appear very judgmental, especially when they deal with Val's presence in the TV reality show: “SHE'S A NONENTITY – GET HER OUT OF THERE was a typical headline [...] Who the hell is Val Doubleday?” (98). To this violence is added the severity of people on social networks who seem to shirk their responsibility when they insult her - “ugly”, “shite”, “witch”, “cunt”, “bitch” (99).



In addition to money, the financialization of culture and education is an issue developed in *NII*. Coe excoriates the current British education system that consists in increasing tuition fees and reducing education to a financial transaction: “education, the elevation of the young mind to a higher level of knowledge and understanding – had now been redefined as a commodity, something to be bought in the expectation that it would one day yield a financial return” (130). In the same satirical vein, Coe tackles the financialization of culture with the idea of expressing everything in monetary terms. *NII* is teeming with examples on monetizing the wonder with the Loch Ness (131) and even feelings with the London Dungeon (259). The example of the Loch Ness as a generator of income is the most striking:

Paranoia

The numinous/supernatural

The Loch Ness Monster, in films/books/poetry

The Monster is nearly always a fake – often at the centre of some conspiracy to make money out of tourists/locals

What is being sold? What is being commodified?

Some sense of awe – wonder – the UNKNOWABLE”. (131)

According to Florence Noiville, Coe’s relationship to immediacy is unique. She comments: “What is striking about Jonathan Coe’s work... is his fashion of anchoring his universal truths in the immediacy of contemporary society. One has the impression of glancing through the *Times* with one eye while reading a novel with the other in his recreation of four years of Blairism still so close to us (1999-2003)” (298).

### 3. Politics and Humor

#### a. Coe, the Humorous Satirist for All?

Coe has always been referred to as a satirist taking as models Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope and Henry Fielding. Coe wrote about *Gulliver’s Travels* in an essay in 2007 and adapted it as a children’s book in 2011 under the title *The Story of Gulliver*. Coe is an admirer of Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* for its “concentrated and calculated intensification of satiric outrage” (Guignery 24), a satirical novel written “to vex the world, rather than to divert it” (24). According to Guignery, satire is

different from humor since the former is “endowed with a moral purpose” (24), promoting a better world. The characteristic of Coe’s satire is that it is “more ethical than moralizing because it appeals the reader’s empathy” (24). For Northrop Frye, in *Anatomy of Criticism*, “two things are essential to satire; one is wit of humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or absurd, the other is an object of attack” (224).

In Coe’s fiction and especially in *WACU*, which according to Coe, is “the only genuinely satirical book” he has ever written, “all kinds of domains of contemporary life are subjected to the irreverent gaze of satire, be it the world of advertisement, new technology, educational reforms, the academic microcosm, the press, television, private enterprise, Thatcherism, New Labor, investment banking, the National Health Service or food production” (25). Yet, pondering on *WACU*, Coe finds the novel “preachy” (Guignery 25), something that he tries to avoid now and developed in his Phd thesis on Fielding’s *Tom Jones*. Coe notes that the problem of contemporary satire is that it only aims at “preach[ing] the converted” (25). He also rues a quite contradictory phenomenon, the profusion of political satire alongside the lack of political opposition in modern Britain (25). This is not only political evils that Coe depicts in his novels but also their normalizations in the British psyche and political landscape that he emphasizes. To quote Paul Gilroy, “Coe’s refined sense of the absurdity of contemporary political culture is attuned to the possibility that in Britain greed and selfishness have been normalized to such an extent that satire becomes effectively impossible” (198). Thus, satire becomes ineffective, having no impact on people.

A central characteristic of Coe’s work is his commitment to humor and satire, and combining each other. Coe aims at being a bringer of laughter. Coe notes that “the need for laughter is universal and absolute” (*Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* 3422) and that laughter, recalling his childhood, is “something that drew people together...something shared. It forged bonds of sympathy between people, among friends and among families” (3422). He remembers that his first ambition was “to become a television comedian” and then “a writer whose words would make people laugh”. Becoming aware that different types of laughter exist: “melancholy laughter, mad laughter, despairing laughter, angry laughter”, he realized that “laughter itself could be a weapon in the battle against injustice” (3434). Michael, in a metafictional remark that encapsulates Coe’s novel and typical of his combination of

laughter and outrage, declares: “We stand badly in need of novels, after all, which show an understanding of the ideological hijack which has taken place so recently in this country, which can see its consequence in human terms and show that appropriate response lies not merely in sorrow and anger but in mad, incredulous laughter” (277). Indeed, Coe excels in burlesque dialogues and situations making one of the best representative of British humor in line with Evelyn Waugh, Wilde, Lodge, Sharpe... Among the most comical scenes in *WACU*, one can recall the meeting with Findlay, the spontaneous erection in the tube against an oaf while he is dreaming about Katleen Turner, in a black humor even sarcastic the series of problems and resolutions of Dorothy or the interview for Hilary’s maternity. In fact, his plots oscillate between the Boulevard comedy and the B movie.

Coe has always made efforts to reconcile high and low culture so as to make his work the most popular possible, hence the use and combination of different forms of art. Coe posits that the satirical British sitcom *Yes Minister* (BBC Television, 1980-84) was “a source of inspiration” (*Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* 3192) for *WACU* alongside the satirical puppet show *Spitting Image* (ITV, 1984 – 96) and the early 1960s comedy stage revue *Beyond the Fringe* regarded as seminal to the rise of satirical comedy in Britain. Writing *WACU*, Coe wanted to represent the atmosphere of the 1980s by “tap[ping] into the energy and unpretentiousness of British popular culture” (*Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* 3192). In *WACU* and *N11*, the presence of television that he considers as the main source of information, is hardly arbitrary. In *WACU*, a TV producer praises the role and impact of television stating it “is one the fibers that hold the country together. It collapses class distinctions and helps create a sense of national identity” (68). This quote will be ironically taken up by Hilary Winshaw, adding “And that’s definitely a tradition I hope to encourage and foster” (70). For Guignery, Coe questions “the supposedly egalitarian and humanist ambition of television” (Guignery 72). What is interesting to point out is that Coe has also tried to avoid irony “that baneful, ubiquitous, superior mindset which has gripped so many people in the post-Thatcher era” (Guignery 24). This intention shows that some tones may have a social value and tend to classify people. Seen like that, irony appears to be a tone dividing people.

However Coe’s frequent use of borrowed material becomes obvious and this intertextuality puts in perspective the author’s will to make literature popular, a sort of democratic art. As the narrator explains in Flann O’Brien’s *At Swim-Two-Birds*:

The Modern novel should be largely a work of reference. Most authors spend their time saying what has been said before –usually said much better. A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimblerriggers and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature. (Moseley 114)

Keeping this in mind, Coe’s oeuvre appears exclusive.

One may notice that *WACU* and the work of Coe in general are not only famous for their humorous dimension. The book tackles also serious and grave issues, characterized by great melancholy and nostalgia, developed further in this dissertation. The two books are actually mixtures of tones where the reader undergoes tension between humor and seriousness. Coe is actually strong at swerving the responsibility to laugh or not to the reader.

All in all, Coe redefines satire and brings several questions to light whether satire should be scathing and be entertaining at the same time. His novels are definitely reflections on the form and contemporary processes to criticize what has already become normalized.

#### **b. When “Britain is in Danger of Sinking Giggling into the Sea”**

First and foremost, as aforementioned, humor plays a seminal role in Coe’s fiction. Coe, himself, said that he is “not interested in non-comic writing” (Moseley 47). Mellet, quoting Northrop Frye, recalls the central place of humor in any literary satire: “Deux éléments, donc, sont essentiels à la satire: l’esprit ou l’humour qui repose sur l’imagination et le sens du grotesque ou de l’absurde, et une cible à attaquer. L’attaque sans l’humour, ou une pure dénonciation, constitue l’une des frontières de la satire” (33). Mellet also recalls the Latin etymon of *satire*, which is *satira* meaning mixture and thus echoing the idea of blurring developed all along this dissertation. This first meaning goes back to the Latin satire consisting in a mixture of genres and forms.

As Moseley so rightly points out, Coe excels at combining comedy and rage (6). Indeed, humor and thus laughter is a means for Coe to deliver a message, to

lampoon society but also to question the role and the consequences of laughter itself. Coe, a great admirer of David Nobbs, found at the age of 15 years old was struck by the collision of “high seriousness and low comedy” (*Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* 1655). In his thesis dissertation, Coe already posits that satire has become innocuous and self-defeating as it might lead to a “comfortable feeling (laughter)” (*Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* 3458). In 2013, Coe determined “a growing disillusionment with the role played by laughter in the national political discourse” and put forward that “Britain’s much-vaunted tradition of political satire was itself an obstruction to real social change, since it diverted everyone’s contrarian impulses into harmless laughter” (1586). Coe even argues that “laughter is just ineffectual as a form of protest but...it actually replaces protest” and turned into a “substitute for thought rather than its conduit” (3587). Coe, referring to Peter Cook, argues that “Britain is sinking giggling into sea” (3527) and that laughter does not reverse the established order but preserve it since it is a “unifying, not a dividing force”, “bring[ing] us comfort, and draw[ing] us into a circle of closeness with our fellow human beings” (346). Satire, therefore, slays action and promotes compliance even a form of political and social paralysis. For Coe, satire is “one of the most powerful weapons we have for preserving the status quo” (3456). “Satire, therefore, “suppresses political anger rather than stoking it up. Political energies which might otherwise be translated into action are instead channeled into comedy and released – dissipated – in form of laughter”. According to Guignery, this disappointment accounts for the fact that Coe, after *WACU*, turned into a “more gentle form of humor ... tinged with melancholy” (26).

According to Gilroy:

Satire creates a welcoming space in which like-minded people can gather together and share in comfortable hilarity. The anger, the feelings of injustice they might have been suffering beforehand are gathered together, compressed and transformed into bursts of laughter and after discharging them they feel content and satisfied. An impulse that might have translated into action is, therefore, rendered neutral and harmless. (198)

Humor is, through satire, a vector for politics but a vector that has a harmful and pointless result, a compliant and accepting laughter where the subversive has turned

innocuous. This image of a vicious circle - humor, laughter - is another example heightening the notions of blurring, imprisonment, asphyxia, inaction and paralysis.

Indeed, in *Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* (“The Paradox of Satire I and II”), Coe develops a pessimistic portrait of political satire as a form of protest. To do so, Coe gives the example of Boris Johnson to illustrate the inefficiency of laughter in the face of political problems and explores the attitude and responsibility of public audience. In fact, humor has been a weapon for politicians in defusing awkward situations or simply avoiding politics. Johnson is one of the best instances of this trend with his repartee and his escapades. The politician has built his career by creating a grotesque character of himself, the image of “a self-mocking buffoon” (3582). Doing so, Johnson has created his own satire for a better control of it; in other words he made himself his own political strategy. He is frequently invited in *Have I Got News for You*, a British television panel show with Ian Hislop – a British satirist – that looks like a puppet theatre with Johnson its muppet. The sounds of bursts of laughter in the background music reinforce the grotesque nature of the show and the political vacuity of Johnson’s remarks. Watching the show, the dramatization of politics seems to be a great technique to avoid politics. As Coe writes: “It was laughter, more than anything else that let Johnson off the hook” (3569). In an era where politicians are glamorized and judged on personality, “it’s easier and much more pleasurable to laugh about a political issue than to think about it” (3582). In his critique of politicians and the media’s outstretched hand, Coe also excoriates the audience. In his analysis, Coe argues that satire leads to the categorization of two types of readers: the readers who like a book because they agree with the author’s political state of mind and the readers who do not like it because they reject the author’s set of values. Thus, satire appears to spark off a simplistic categorization of the reader leading to the failure of satire as a potential agent for change or conversion. Laughter becomes therefore a dividing force whose access is determined by the reader’s political beliefs or political intimacy, a condition to read and accept the genre. This analysis shows a lack of distance among contemporary readers since satire do not seem to put into perspective but consolidate their own system of values by making “like-minded readers” laugh. Coe, here, depicts a bleak and pessimistic portrait of the reader and spectator whose attitudes nurture the disclaiming of any form of responsibility. In a time where laughter becomes counterproductive or a

“substitute for thought” (3594), the technique to make people react becomes a challenge.

In his article entitled “Will satire save us in the age of Trump” in *The Guardian*, Coe explains how caricature and reality have become so blurred, pointing out the hazardous nature of laughter, a phenomenon underlined in *NII*. In *The Winshaw Prize*, Nathan Pilbeam, a young policeman investigates the deaths of two comedians and ends up identifying the killer, a man who thinks that comedy is making people complacent and is a peril to democracy. In the article, Coe uses the example of Alec Baldwin and his Donald Trump impersonations to show that political comedy is not much efficient. Coe referring to Michael Frayn and *Beyond the Fringe*, posits that political comedy results “no to undermine but to confirm the audience’s prejudices, and has less in common with satire than with community hymn-singing – agreeable and heartwarming as that may be”. Coe suggests that laughing at a political satire can spark off a form of complaisance and a counter-productive effect. This theory seems weird since Coe considers himself as a comical satirist. The idea that comical satire is inefficient is reinforced by the fact that it is only read by people who share the same point of view; “it [satire] gives pleasure to those who already share its point of view”. As Coe writes: “who wants to pay good money, after all, to have their core beliefs challenged and insulted?”. Even though Coe’s conclusion on satire appears quite pessimistic, the author calls on to promote satire, regardless of its form, to expose social ills: “In short, the present moment calls for absurdism, caricature and tomfoolery, because these are the only ways to capture our current reality”.

In *NII*, Coe examines the efficacy and the purposes of humor when it intends to expose society’s evils. Humor seems to have encroached on political life as “every kind of public discussion has to have a veneer of comedy. Politics especially” (190). Therefore, Coe questions the difficulty keeping up with the reality for a satirist since “the boundaries between reality and caricature have become so thoroughly blurred”. In this article, Coe writes:

To give just a small example: in my novel *Number 11*, wanting to satirize the silliness of prize culture, a culture in which artists and others can only be ascribed worth by being put in competition with one another, I invented what I thought was the stupidest idea imaginable: the Winshaw prize, a prize for the best prize, in which the Booker, the

Turner, the Pulitzer and others fight it out for supremacy every year. A few months later in *Private Eye* I read that an outfit called the Global Conference Network is setting up the “Awards awards”. “With directors of awards companies as judges,” their website proclaims, “this is a long overdue chance to receive recognition for the best awards initiatives and ceremonies.” (That “long overdue” is especially astounding.) What’s a satirist to do?

Mellet, in his article “From laughing along to mislaughing oneself away and coming out in Jonathan Coe’s fiction” questions the role of laughter but also Coe’s sense of humor in order to account for the author’s satirical distance. Building his paper on Coe’s *Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* (“Comic Novels”), Mellet argues that the failure of a satirical form of laughter and Coe’s allegiance to comedy have led the author to spurn ironic distance and swerve towards a sweeten form of satire in favor of “empathy, attentiveness and connection”. This could explain *NII*’s satirical tone and its more humanist content. In his article on *Expo 58*, Jean-Michel Ganteau demonstrates that Coe’s novel has become “a comic novel that is not so comic, a satire that is not quite a satire, and a comedy that is full of *gravitas*” (Ganteau 20). Mellet and Ganteau put forward that Coe has distanced himself from the traditional satire to a more “grave comedy”, endowed with emotion. All this shows how Coe questions our relation to laughter and laughter itself. As he said there are various forms of laughter. This stance may be also a way, for Coe, to differentiate himself from the myriad of contemporary satirists. After all, is a writer not always trying to nurture his or her alterity? Anyway, if it is not through or by comedy that Coe excoriates the British society, satire has paradoxically become one of the best instruments to hinder the political revolt that it intended to extol.

#### 4. The “Coesian” Position...

##### a. The In-between, the Lack of Political Positioning and Indeterminacy

Henry Sutton, in 2003, regretted the lack of “gritty, politically engaged novels”, putting the emphasis that “just two novels really stand out as having much of value to say about Britain in the 1980s and early 1990s” (13) referring to Martin Amis’s *Money* and Coe’s *WACU*. He stated that *WACU* “was probably more overtly



political in its wicked dissection of the Thatcher-inspired me, me, me generation and a group of toffs long past their sell-by-date” (16).

If one reads Linda Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Coe’s oeuvre, which is considered as postmodern, is therefore political. She writes in *The Politics of Postmodernism*: “L’art postmoderne ne peut qu’être politique, du moins en ce que ses représentations, ses images et ses histoires, ne sont jamais neutres, quand bien même elles paraissent “esthétisées” dans une autoréflexivité parodique” (3). Therefore, by suggesting biased representations, postmodern esthetics is political, despite being esthetic.

Regarding political commitment, Coe seems to be confident. He explained: “I began to work on the novel in 1990, at the far end of Thatcher years, when I was 29 years old and flushed with political and literary certainties. The most fixed of these certainties was my anti-Thatcherism...I wanted to express this pervasive sense of unease and betrayal, while somehow writing a novel that consisted of more than just liberal hand-wringing. One way of doing this. I thought, might be to try to tap into the energy and unpretentiousness of British popular culture – comedy in particular” (*Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* 3180). However, reading Coe, one may wonder where to assess the political degree of his novels and where to put the slider on a political ladder. His work raises the question of how a novel should be political.

Guignery develops the fact that Coe’s novels do not only talk about contemporary Britain but also “firmly engages with the political, social and economic failings of the contemporary world” (18). In his essay “Outside the Whale” (1984), Salman Rushdie emphasizes the political dimension of any work of art: “works of art, even works of entertainment, do not come into being in a social and political vacuum...the way they operate in a society cannot be separated from politics” (92). He also insists on “a genuine need for political fiction”: “it becomes necessary and even exhilarating, to grapple with the special problems created by the incorporation of political material” (100).

As for Coe, his novels are political as he asserts “all story telling is political, being an attempt to control and influence the imaginative life of another person for a period of time” (*Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* 2631). In his PhD thesis on Henry Fielding, he compares *Tom Jones* (1749) as a “political novel” as Fielding “seizes on the form’s potential for enacting change in narrative terms and for provoking it in the reader” (235). Guignery argues that Coe is interested in analyzing

“one of the smallest political units” (19), that is to say - the family – and the political dynamic between parents and children. His writing is thus politically engaged with the society it intends to dissect and its relationship to individuals. In Coe’s words, “the theme is always the relationship between individuals and larger social movements” (in Murphy) and the main goal of what he calls political novels is “to show people trying to get on with small, blameless lives without being flattened by the juggernaut of historical events over which they have no control” (in Murphy).

I can admit that Coe’s novels are political as tackled above but his commitment may be put into perspective and allows a redefining of commitment. There is no clear, precise and homogeneous definition of what political commitment is or should be. There are various definitions about the notion making it difficult for Coe’s work to be classified as committed. For instance, Jason Cowley describes the political committed novelist as writers who help us “to see things as they really are” in his article entitled “After Orwell”. He quotes Christopher Hitchens, Martin Amis and Ian McEwan as contemporary writers who can be compared to Orwell or Wells, the genuine figures of commitment. According to Cowley, *WACU* is a good political novel but its author does not show the qualities of a political writer since Coe’s main goal is to entertain “rather than be overtly didactic” and denounce. Another academic like Mellet points out, referring to Adorno and Jacques Rancière, that a work of art is political when it does not yield to the temptation of political commitment.

Coe’s fiction definitely hinges on indeterminacy. Indeterminacy is when readers are expected to make their own decisions about the text’s meaning. As aforementioned, Coe’s novels do not provide full closure since numerous questions are unanswered and Coe’s intention remains blurred. Chris Baldick, a literary critic, describes the concept of indeterminacy in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* as “a principle of uncertainty invoked to deny the existence of any final or determinate meaning that could bring to an end the play of meaning between the elements of a text”. Thus, indeterminacy is the belief that it is impossible “to decide entirely what a word means when used in a certain circumstance, so the meaning of the whole text must remain open to interpretation”. However, “the presence of indeterminacy does not mean that decisions about meaning cannot be made at all, but only that there will be no final official judgment or approval on any individual interpretation” (in Baldick). Furthermore, the presence of indeterminacy does not result in all interpretations being of equal legitimacy; instead it indicates that all meanings drawn

from an indeterminate text are “partial and provisional, and that what we write about it itself as a text, is open to further interpretation”. Another substantial argument regarding indeterminacy is that the approach promotes imagination; the reader’s “concretization is left to a large extent to... imagination” (Stanzel 116). In the field of comparative narrative fiction, the novel has an advantage contrary to the movie. Stanzel cites John Fowles in regards to the indeterminacy of narratives as an advantage: “There are hundreds of things a novel can do that a cinema can never do. The cinema can’t digress; above all it can’t exclude... you’ve got to have a certain chair, certain clothes, certain decor. In a novel you don’t have to “set up” the whole screen. The delight of writing novels is what you can leave out on each page, in each sentence”.

Coe’s indeterminacy can be explained by his rejection of political consensus and his interest in dealing with political inaction and inability to choose (Mellet 122). In *WACU*, Henry recalls the Thatcherian definition of political consensus as “the process of abandoning all beliefs, principles, values and policies” and “something in which no one objects” (135). This remark suggests that consensus is a means to numb politics since the latter is originally a place for discussions and choices. In *Qu’est-ce qu’une décision politique*, Bruno Bernardi points out that a decision is intrinsically political and that politics is a matter of decision:

Que la politique soit par excellence le lieu de la décision, cela paraît évident: le pouvoir politique, de quelque manière qu’on le considère, ne consiste-t-il pas précisément en un pouvoir de décider? [...] Si la politique en effet se donne comme sphère de la décision, la notion même de décision n’est elle pas dans son fond politique [...] C’est un rapport politique qui est constitutif de la décision. [...] La décision est supposée désigner l’essence de la politique et la politique constituer le paradigme de la décision. (8)

In *Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements*, Coe already warns us about the dangers of a single mindset, the necessity to choose and the fact that nowadays citizens no longer understand the differences between the left and the right (Mellet 122). Some critics or readers could conclude that Coe’s fiction is deeply rooted in indeterminacy, the idea that he prefers not to choose but I support Mellet’s view

arguing that the refusal of choosing is itself a decision, to believe in the reconciliation and the preservation of contraries as well as a redeeming alternative (127).

The meaning of indeterminacy can also be associated with deconstruction, which refers to blurring. Deconstruction is a post-structuralist theory developed by Jacques Derrida and is described by Baldick as “a philosophically skeptical approach to the possibility of coherent meaning in language” (1). This notion also echoes the blurring of language that will be tackled in the second part of this dissertation. According to indeterminacy theory, all texts can have the “multiplicity of possible interpretations of given textual elements, because the author’s meaning or intent may be unclear, or distorted by pop culture” (McHale 36). Therefore, indeterminacy has limits and appears to be not always undetermined. However, while some indeterminacy in literary fiction is permanent; the gap will never be filled or closed; other areas of indeterminacy are temporary, and deliberately planted by the author with the intention of leaving a gap that the readers themselves can fill, by the “process of realizing or concretizing the text” (McHale 36).

Reading *WACU*, one can notice that even characters have difficulty to agree on what politics should be. This blurring of points of view is illustrated when Fiona who believes in coincidences and accidents, develops that politics cannot explain everything and opposes Michael’s view that politics is based on explanation (354).

#### **b. A Real Protest to Overturn the Status Quo or a Bowdlerized Satire?**

Using historical and political facts in order to deliver a political message, therefore a personal and subjective point of view is a first step towards engagement. Engagement is a notion difficult to define because of its subjectivity, its abstract dimension, its implicit dimension and the fact that there are different forms and levels of an artist’s involvement. This question of engagement questions the notion itself as well as Coe’s political degree when the latter intends to raise political awareness.

Reading Moseley, Coe has been considered as one of “the most openly political novelists of his generation, writing from a sometimes fiery left-liberal position about the ruthlessness and greed” that Thatcher and other politicians brought upon taking office (4). Coe also acknowledges that he was not the only writer to be anti-Thatcher; he estimates that “90 percent of British writers shared this stance of enmity” (38). As aforementioned, Thatcher nurtured a feeling of resentment and hatred around her and “writing an anti-Thatcher novel would hardly distinguish Coe

from many of his contemporaries: it is what he did with his anti-Thatcherism that counts” (38).

Reading Mellet who quotes Fredric Jameson, Coe’s oeuvre could be referred to as “committed without being lampoonist” (25). In fact, if one refers to Jameson’s definition of postmodernism, a work of art is political since it conveys an ideology. This politicization of art and its estheticization of ideology are expressed in what Jameson wrote about Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes tropiques*:

Dans cette perspective, nous suggérons que l’idéologie n’est pas ce qui informe ni investit une production symbolique; mais plutôt que l’acte esthétique est en lui-même idéologique, et que la production d’une forme esthétique ou narrative doit être perçue comme un acte pleinement idéologique, dont la fonction est d’inventer « solutions » imaginaires ou formelles à certaines contradictions sociales insolubles. (Mellet 25)

Mellet, through his analysis of Coe’s fiction, also questions the connection between engagement and political writing. According to Rancière, engagement is not required to be referred to as political. It may even not be a necessary condition: “Il n’y a pas de devoir des écrivains de s’engager, d’être plutôt à droite qu’à gauche, d’être pour la liberté contre l’oppression. Ils peuvent devenir des personnalités politiques ou intervenir comme collectif sans nécessairement écrire de la littérature engagée et sans répondre à une exigence d’engagement de la littérature” (Mellet 26). Quoting French philosopher Rancière, Mellet argues that the former goes one step further by rejecting the validity of any form of engagement within art: “un artiste peut être engagé mais qu’est-ce que cela veut dire que son art soit engagé? L’engagement n’est pas une catégorie de l’art. Cela ne veut pas dire que l’art soit apolitique. Cela veut dire que l’esthétique a sa politique – ou sa métapolitique – à elle” (26). Eventually, Mellet concludes that Coe is not simply a committed writer, a state-of-the-nation artist or a political satirist; Coe constructs a political fiction by other means through the politicization of the intimate – a notion developed in my third part. In his novels, Coe’s definition of the political is not reduced to the sphere of political action contrary to what he paradoxically wrote in the introduction of *The Unfortunates* by B.S. Johnson: “Johnson était un écrivain extrêmement politisé, en tant que membre actif de plusieurs syndicats d’auteurs et de réalisateurs, mais ses romans sont pour la

plupart apolitiques, tournant autour de questions personnelles et intimes” (Mellet 27). For Mellet, this remark seems to be ironical since the intimate is forcefully political in his fiction.

However Coe’s politicalness needs to be put into perspective since he does not offer the possibility of another social model (Mellet 21). Reading Coe’s fiction, one may wonder if we should consider his books as rather manifestos for praxis or simple stories detached from political action. Reading Mellet, it can be inferred that there are different levels of engagement. The first form of engagement concerns the fact that Coe’s satire uses humor to represent moral, political and social drifts (33). Mellet develops that humor is the weapon used to lampoon, while the moralizing dimension of the satire balances the author’s intention transforming the work into a text whose action is not content to condemn and mock, but also supports a better order (33). For Mellet, satire is as comical as moralizing. This support for a better order and a new social system is to be put in perspective though. The targets of Coe’s satire revolve around the contemporary society and its misdemeanors: deceptive communication via social networks in *NII*, television and its subterfuge of equality in *WACU*.

Coe has doubts regarding the efficiency of the novel, more particularly the state-of-nation novel, to produce political changes: “If we ourselves living through an era where everything – economically, socially, culturally - seems to be going wrong, why do we think that reading a novel about it is going to help?” (*Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* 2605). This statement shows that literature has political and social limits and runs counter academics eulogizing commitment through literature.

Indeed, Coe’s efforts to change society and protest against class relations have been judged ineffectual by some observers. Nicola Allen claims that Coe made efforts to depict “the lives of the undocumented but having little to say about the truly marginalized, the poor, and working class” (15). In a more forceful way, Dominic Head, in “The Demise of Fiction”, explains that the novel, even in the hands of “inheritors of the liberal-realist mode of political fiction, such as Martin Amis or Jonathan Coe, inevitably becomes a hegemonic tool, a reactionary cultural force that serves, broadly, to reinforce the status quo” (16). In the same vein, Laurence Discoll posits that Michael, representing the middle social strata, does not speak to the working class and its predicament. He goes on saying:

Coe's textual function is not to politically undermine Thatcherism from a social perspective, but to simply restore the culture to a middle class, decent, honorable center. This desire to attack Thatcherism for its greed, callousness, and its inhuman distaste for all things decent, leads Coe directly toward a satire of his social and economic commitment, as opposed to any radical desire to overturn capitalism. (159)

As Moseley points out, Discoll and Head lampoon Coe from a left-wing perspective. James Delingpole, a critic on the right who interviewed the author, is curious to know "how an author [Coe] of such evident skill and sensitivity could have written a book so bitter, so tub-thumpingly unsubtle, so glibly prepared to dismiss a whole class and political ideology as vile and worthless" (7). He actually describes *WACU* as "quite the nastiest, crudest, chippiest, least generous book I have ever suffered the misfortune of reading a few pages of before giving up in disgust. (34)

To conclude this first part, Coe, with the *Winshaws*, provides the reader with a synecdochic version of politics from the 1980s onward. He describes a social reality full of political references where everything is controlled, hence the word of panorama. Coe also experiments new forms to denounce. Instead of simply showing the failings of British society, he questions our ways to criticize what is wrong in our modern societies. It is a renewal of satire where the balance between criticism and irony is shaken. As Mellet claims, Coe "explodes" satire (197). Political does not involve a committed and moralizing production. These two novels meander back and forth through time creating thus movement and preventing the plot from plodding. Coe offers a political vision anchored in the in-between on a path that snakes between humorous satire, political engagement and resignation. This in-between is also for Coe, a technique to distance himself from the usual moralizing tone adopted by satirists. Moreover, Coe uses humor as a major feature of his satire to question and discuss humor itself and its impact on people and politics. He also shows that there are degrees of engagement, degrees of satire, degrees of humor. He actually blurs the contours to show the difficulty or the impossibility to gauge and categorize a literary work. Coe therefore suggests a form of alternative in the way he conceives political satire. This conception echoes and contrasts with Thatcher's famous slogan "There is

no alternative” meaning that free-market economics, capitalism and globalization were solutions and beneficial phenomena.

## **II. Postmodernist Aesthetics and the Issue of Label**

### **1. The Usual Recipe of Postmodernism with Post-Postmodern Sprinkles**

#### **a. The Continuous Intermingling of Genres**

Sally Vincent goes on to say that Coe was “crowned the prince of postmodernism” (36) with *WACU* whose title suggests eclecticism as it refers to an oxymoron genre: horror-comedy film. *WACU* and *NII* include a great variety of genres reflecting “the plural and fragmented dimension of contemporary society” (Guignery 29). In both novels, there is an overlapping of narratives that could be independent. The genre to which the books belong remains blurred, uncertain – autobiographical? Detective story? Gothic novel? Political novel? Historical chronicle? Tabitha’s words may encapsulate what *WACU* attempts to be “parts personal memoir, part social commentary, all stirred together into one lethal and devastating brew” (476). In both novels, the border between realism and magical realism, facts and fantasy, orality and written traditions, History and stories, is constantly blurred. Indeed, Coe does not favor one genre to another and brings to light new genres such as popular films, television and music into literature. For Guignery, Coe deconstructs the hierarchy between genres and prefers a “syncretism that is emblematic of the postmodern episteme” (30).

One main aspect of postmodernism is the use of pastiche, which means combine, “paste” together different elements. For Hutcheon, postmodernism is the combination of intertextuality, usually parodic, and History. This can be a tribute to or a parody of past styles. As Guignery says, “one of the characteristic features of postmodernist writing consists in overtly acknowledging and borrowing from, the literary past, acknowledging that legacy both consciously and ironically through the use of pastiche and parody” (67). The multifarious polygeneric dimension related to *WACU* and *NII* concurs with this idea. The pastiche is actually regarded as a representation of the chaotic, pluralistic, information-drenched aspects of postmodern society. This is a combination of various genres since Coe uses detective fiction, tragedy, farce, and autobiography... Another feature of pastiche, which is present in



Coe's fiction, is that it involves metafiction and temporal distortions. Coe mixes history and story, the political-public and the personal-intimate.

Another constituent of postmodernism is its narrative inventiveness. For instance, Coe starts *WACU* with a prologue and ends it with a preface. He alternates chapters using first and third person narration in *NII* and does not follow any chronology transporting the reader in the past and the future through analepses and prolepses. The presence of a preface at the end of *WACU*, using the same first sentence at the beginning of the novel "Tragedy had struck the Winshaws twice before, but never on such a terrible scale" (3-498), creates an impression of circularity suggesting closure and imprisonment. With this epanadiplosis conveying pessimism, the dislocation of Michael's life and the country's situation – if one may differentiate both - is made more severe.

They are different points of view about the technique of Coe's novels. Contrary to Discoll who minimizes the formal experimentalism of *WACU*, Head puts forward the formal adventurousness of his work: "The state-of-the-nation novel, it seems, struggles to survive in its conventional phase. It now requires the rare ingenuity of Jonathan Coe to breathe into corpse" (20). According to Moseley "the most important products of that ingenuity are the parallel strands, or microcosmic plots; the inventive use of film and, to a lesser extent, other popular culture; parody; and bricolage and intertextuality" (44). However, this inventiveness has been largely decried. The reviewer Hugh Barnes claims that "the book reads less like a study of the manners of a period than an inventory of the clichés of its entertainments" (33). Mellet points out that the narrative ingenuity of Coe is more elaborate than it appears. Quoting Head, the narrative fragmentation of Coe's novels appears to follow an ideological positioning (20), hence Guignery's following statement: "la nécessité d'accueillir de multiples genres au sein d'un seul texte afin de refléter la dimension protéiforme de la société contemporaine" in her article "Transfigurations des genres littéraires dans la littérature britannique contemporaine" (61-62). For Bradford, a critic that Mellet quotes, the style of the novelist is not that elaborate and his efforts to create a postmodern work turn out to be limited. According to Bradford, whose criticism is quite curt, Coe is a sad and traditional novelist whose style is reduced to a flirt with postmodernism:

La façon qu'a Coe d'entremêler l'actualité et l'imaginaire est un clin d'œil

complaisant à la technique postmoderne, mais [*Bienvenue au club* et *Le Cercle fermé*], comme ses autres romans, demeurent fermement du côté traditionnel et réaliste. [...] [II] ne serait en rien la figure littéraire considérable qu'il est aujourd'hui sans le thatchérisme. Dans sa fiction et dans sa biographie de B.S. Johnson, il flirte avec les charmes de l'expérimental, non sans une certaine nostalgie, mais dans la pratique il reste foncièrement respectueux des codes du réalisme. (Mellet 21)

All the same, Coe's novels can be considered as postmodernist for their polygenericity.

### **b. The Collage and Patchwork**

*WACU* is a carve-up of the British Society and as Eagleton coins in his article "Theydunnit", "a carve-up of a book". It is a collage of texts-within-texts, interview transcripts, newspaper articles, tabloid newspapers, diaries, letters, and social networks. Coe justifies this multiplicity of narrative modes: "the fragmented, fast-changing nature of the reality I was trying to capture dictated that no single narrative approach would be adequate" (Guignery 69). For Guignery, "the negation of any approach and formal coherence mimics the thorough collapse of moral and ethical principles in Thatcherian Britain" (69), and builds "a formal refutation of the homogeneity stresses by Thatcher" (Trimm 160). *WACU* is definitely postmodernist for many reasons whence the constant presence of connection between things that are totally different.

A term that we find in Moseley's book and suggests this idea of collage and patchwork, is "bricolage" to illustrate this kind of assemblage: "a French word for tinkering or putting around, means assembling an art work from diverse materials that happen to be at hand" (46). This definition reflects somehow Coe's work. There are different techniques illustrating this notion. The first one is Coe's technique to create an interrelationship between texts. This is called intertextuality defined as "the full range of relations among a text and its various predecessors (or intertexts), including quotation, allusion, and parody" (Moseley 46). Among the most important texts are three movies: *What a Carve Up!* by Pat Jackson, a film that Michael saw at the age of nine and will haunt him with the scene where Shirley Eaton begins to undress; *With Gargarin to the Stars*, a documentary about the Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gargarin,

young Michael's hero, whose life and death will be interwoven with Michael's, shown with the previous movie on his birthday; and Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus*. For Andrew Higson, these are not simple references or "touchstones", they are in Coe's novels "film features as subject matter, as structuring device, and as reference point or intertexts" (25). As Moseley points out, Coe has always been attached to "film, including demotic, lowbrow productions like *What a Carve Up!* and the more middle-brow works of Alfred Hitchcock or Billy Wilder (and, of course, Humphrey Bogart and Jimmy Stewart). In the pairing of *What a Carve Up!* and *Orpheus*, he demonstrates the ready mixture of high and low that is a regular and agreeable feature of his fiction" (46).

Another characteristic of Coe's collage or bricolage is his technique to assemble heterogeneous types of material or texts in his novels. The chapters in *WACU* and *NII* include a great variety of discourses, including extracts from journals, newspapers articles, transcripts of radio, TV interviews, songs, letters and emails. All these elements take the shape of a textual patchwork. Each material is not chosen at random; Coe carefully selects a discourse symbolizing the sins of his targets in *WACU*. As Moseley coins "there is an art to making a collage" (47) and Coe proves to have this ability.

Furthermore, one can notice that this notion of collage also concerns language since Coe juxtaposes a wide range of texts with different tones. For instance, in *WACU*, Coe juxtaposes a cloying description of Hilary's marriage and her maternity and a cruel conversation with the nanny who confesses that Hilary mistreats her baby and calls her "it". The parody is also a means to see how words can be powerful and deceptive since they can arouse different emotions. Coe actually assembles different linguistic registers. In *NII*, the plot alternates different styles of English: formal, journalistic, casual, slang...that may well echo the complexity of the contemporary British society. *NII* is in the same postmodern perspective that *WACU* where characters develop stories with different tones and plots, going through jokes. Simon Dentith, in the same vein, compares *WACU* to Thackeray's novels, because, like them, they are "full of the diverse languages of the contemporary world, many of them drawn from popular or commercial culture" (74).

According to Eagleton, in his article "Theydunnit", "Coe's novel is so flagrantly Post-modern, so shrewdly conscious of its own busily parodic technique, that it has the curious effect of parodying Post-Modernism, raising it to the second

power, and so, to a certain degree allowing it to cancel itself out. What it then cancels into is realism”. Coe’s *WACU* is not a simple postmodernist novel that revolves around “historiographic metafiction” to cite Hutcheon (146); it is so aware of itself with Michael writing his fiction and addressing the reader that it appears to be a parody and therefore a debate on postmodernism, giving birth thus to a form of realism with its contemporary issues and the way they are represented. This quote by Eagleton underlines the complexity of Coe’s work to be categorized as a postmodernist or a realist novel, the two being intertwined and questioned, or as a postmodern parody or a parody of parody. Coe’s novels are indeed difficult to label since the author intermeshes a postmodernist form with a realist content. Reading Véronique Pauly’s article “L’héritage Postmoderne dans *What a Carve Up!* de Jonathan Coe”, Coe’s fiction seems to celebrate and to reject post-modernism at the same time. In *WACU*, this generic issue is illustrated with Michael not knowing if he is writing a novel or a historical chronicle (92-93), something he will be paying a high price when his editor severely answers: “well, what does that leave us with, exactly? That leaves us with a book which is scurrilous, scandal-seeking, vindictive in tone, obviously written out of feelings of malice and even, in parts – if you don’t mind me saying this – a little shallow” (106).

Like many other artistic and literary movements, the contours of postmodernism appear to be blurred. Indeed, the two novels may arouse debate about the definitions and limits of this aesthetics. A lot of reviewers do not agree on what postmodernism is. For Richard Bradford, *WACU* is “generally traditional and realist in form with a slight nod towards postmodernism” (40), which seems startling in the light of the complexity and inventiveness of Coe’s oeuvre.

### **c. Post-Postmodernist Sprinkles?**

Post-postmodernism explores the use of fantastic plots in contemporary novels to re-think postmodernism. It develops an aesthetic that revolves around creation and communication instead of subversion and deconstruction and can no longer be seen as deconstructive but rather reconstructive. The post-postmodernist theory is relatively new and a clear definition is still on process. Nevertheless, many literary theorists (Tom Turner, Slavist Mikhail Epsetin, Eric Gans, Alan Kirby Slavist, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker) whose definitions vary, agree on several characteristics, that faith, trust, dialogue and sincerity can work to transcend

postmodern irony.

The use of the fantastic mode and the optimistic ending of *NII* show that Coe's aesthetics has evolved. In *WACU*, even if Fiona dies, Michael shifts from an obsessed and frustrated man whose nose is glued to a video screen to a man who falls in love and grows in maturity. This epiphany and passage from virtuality to reality is epitomized when he realized the limits of television: "It was as if cracks had started to appear in the screen and this awful reality was leaking out: or as if the glass barrier itself had magically turned to liquid and without knowing it I had slipped across the divide, like a dreaming Orpheus" (411).

Coe's recent work, through *NII*, can actually be interpreted as a transition towards post-postmodernism. The end of *NII* contrary to *WACU* is much more optimistic than *WACU*. Rachel is back at her grandparents' house with her friend and filled with nostalgia: "The juice was deliciously sweet in her mouth. It was the taste of her childhood, the taste of home; the taste of autumn sunshine" (349). In many ways the new book is a plea for a kinder, fairer Britain, for Liz Hoggard in her article entitled "Dark Days in David Cameron's UK". *NII* ends with a form of reconciliation and a return to human values, reinforcing the author's argument that humanity – a lost value – is on the wane in our contemporary societies. As Mellet puts forward, one of the specific feature of Coe's positioning towards postmodernism is to offer a return to humanism (25). The end of *NII* is also optimistic since female power – a recurrent motif I will develop in my third part – is at the heart of the book.

Reading Coe's point of view about the role of the writer and literature in general, his artistic work may be part of a humanist approach. In fact, his satire aims at providing an alternative to his or her reader:

Je crois que le rôle de l'écrivain est d'écrire le meilleur livre qui soit pour que le lecteur pense plus librement et de façon plus indépendante, de fournir une alternative aux discours de la presse et des politiques: de tenir un discours plus mesuré, plus réfléchi, qui permette aux gens de voir les choses en profondeur. Autant d'aspects politiques que l'écriture, politiques au sens large. (Mellet 201)

Another quote by Coe in *Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* confirms the shift towards humanism in 2013 and shows that Coe may have learnt lessons from

writing a mere political satire whose goal is only to reverse the established order: “My view nowadays is that an understanding of the workings of human nature is what has to come first: after all, all social structures arise out of, and are dependent upon, the interplay of individual human consciousnesses” (4324).

## 2. The Parody of the Parody of Parody?

### a. The Gothic Novel and its Parody

Self-parody is a process dear to Coe and that since his young days. As a teenager, Coe loved to watch *Monty Python* and the *Holy Grail*, especially for its sense of parody: “I got my first exhilaration at the idea that a TV show, or a film, or a novel, could parody itself, deconstructs its own conventions” (Guignery 36). As Coe says so aptly, *Monty Python* fixed in him “an early love of parody, surrealism and subversion” (Guignery 36).

The two novels are characterized by the presence of gothic elements in terms of settings, characters but also stereotypical situations and narrative devices. The early chapters of *NII* are replete with gothic elements. For instance there is the presence of woods, this haunted house that creates suspense, a frightening woman called the Mad Bird Woman living in Needless Alley who scares Alison to death, the weather is often cold and the sky grey or cloudy. There is also the presence of a corpse who comes to life in the attic (55). Moreover, many places are described as dark, gloomy and replete with cobwebs. Indeed, *WACU* and *NII* have traditional gothic settings – the Winshaw towers or the Black Tower in rural Yorkshire. The description of the painting in *NII* is a perfect example of this genre and a hint to *WACU*:

She laid her finger upon a patch of canvas. Perched almost on the crest of a vast, forbidding ridge, overlooking a large expanse of dismal and featureless water, was a gaunt mansion rendered in the blackest of blacks [...] a mad conglomeration of gothic, neo-gothic, sub-gothic and pseudo-gothic towers which collectively resembled nothing so much as a giant hand. (53)

In *NII*, the girls discover a body in the woods and suspect a tattooed artist to be a murderer. Next to the body, they find a playing card with a spider. The description of the way that Alison takes to go to The Mad Bird Woman is also symptomatic of the gothic genre, with its eighteenth century setting and the dark

house covered with ivy that looks unoccupied:

Newbegin was a long way one-way street leading from Westwood down towards the town center. The Alley peeled off from it towards the left, running at first between the walls of two very tall houses: this part of it was so narrow that there was barely room for the two of us to walk abreast. Soon, however, it widened into a short cobbled street with large, venerable, eighteenth century houses on both sides. The one we were looking for could not have been easier to spot. It was set quite apart from the other dwellings, being separated from its nearest neighbor by a long, low wall running around an expanse of unkempt, not to say chaotic, front garden. On the front door was the house number in rusty silver numerals. It was Number 11. (39)

A few lines later, this gothic description adds the presence of many birds (39) and gives to the house a Hitchcock-like dimension recalling the film *Birds*. This Mad Bird Woman is moreover described as a monster, whose sex is difficult to identify, another form of blurring: “that’s him! I mean – that’s her – it – whatever it was... And finally, just to spell it out for me: That’s who I saw yesterday in the woods” (42).

#### **b. From a Parody of a Detective Novel to an Academic Detective Novel**

Coe’s fondness for the detective – Hercule Poirot, Sherlock Holmes, and James Bond - is no longer to be questioned. The references to this genre are various and replete in the two novels. In *WACU*, Michael is commissioned to investigate on the murder of Godfrey Winshaws and to write the history of the Winshaw family, receiving a generous stipend from Tabitha Winshaw to do so. Michael is helped by a gay detective whose “Islington apartment”, for Guignery, “is furnished exactly like that of Thaddeus Sholto in Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of Four*” (36). When the young artist Phoebe is invited to Winshaw Towers, the woman is received by Hilary who welcomes her to “Baskerville Hall” (19). In “Diary of an Obsession” on Coe’s website, the writer explains that his liking for Sherlock Holmes dates back to discussions with his maternal grandfather which turned into obsession as he used to compulsively watch the adaptation of Billy Wilder’s *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*. *WACU* obeys the codes of detective fiction as it starts with two mysterious deaths, an investigation lead by Michael, and overthrows them with the appearance of a gay detective Findlay Onyx who has a weakness for cottaging. *WACU* complies

with the Whodunit, a subgenre of detective fiction. With its coded messages, its clues, red herrings, manuscripts, the stealing of photographs and private of documents, a mysterious man following Michael and lurking in the shadows, the novel falls within the conventions of the Whodunit.

*NII* includes typical characteristics of the detective novel such as a murder(s), an attempted rape and people acting like detectives trying to resolve mysteries. However, Coe tends to revisit the detective novel since two young girls turn into detectives trying to investigate about the “dead body” and find other cards around the tree: “what were we supposed to do now? I had read enough kids’ adventure stories and Sherlock Holmes mysteries to know that there was a procedure to be followed in these circumstances. I knelt down and began to stare intently at the ground. What are you doing? Alison asked. Looking for clues” (31).

However, Coe does not only follow the codes of the detective novel, he goes further by intellectualizing the genre and comparing the detective to a sociologist: “PC Pilbeam’s theory, developed over many years’ reading and thinking, was that every crime had to be seen in its social, political and cultural context. The modern policeman, he maintained, had, to be familiar with, attuned to, all the most diverse currents of contemporary thought” (184). The political context is of prime importance since “the criminal does not act in a political vacuum” (185). This theory echoes the essence of Coe’s fiction that is to write a state-of-the-nation novel which is suggested by Nathan Pilbeam’s nickname: “Nate of the Station”. PC Pilbeam, the intellectual criminal investigator, actually explores the epistemology of humor and ends up finding than not much had been written on the history and philosophy of humor from Plato, Aristotle and Cicero, quoting Thomas Hobbes, René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, Kierkegaard, Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, Milan Kundera (203). He eventually discovers that few of these intellectuals have pondered on satire or political humor.

What’s more, Coe romanticizes the figure of the detective novel in *NII*. In *The Winshaws Prize*, Nathan, the policeman who investigates murders connected to the Winshaws, falls in love with a woman called Lucinda, a beautiful primary school teacher working at the local foodbank. Lucinda, in the eyes of Nathan, is described as an unattainable woman, a figure of desire and perfection. The novel is brimming with romantic passages illustrating this unrequited passion which turns into obsession: “She wore her hair pulled back and tightly tied behind her head, thereby encouraging



Nathan to picture, during his fevered nocturnal fantasies, the moments when she would untie it, shake it loose and remove her horn-rimmed glasses, which would be his cue to utter the traditional words, ‘Why, Lucinda – but you’re beautiful’” (187).

### 3. An Antagonistic Whirl of Magic, Realism and Tragedy

#### a. The Condition of England Novel and the Dickensian Dimension

Reading *WACU* and *NII*, the two novels replete with Dickensian characteristics. Many academics have classified *WACU* as a condition-of-England novel. This term comes from the Victorian sage Thomas Carlyle who coined it in his long pamphlet *Chartism* in 1839 and refers to novels that highlight “important social questions” (Moseley 41). Victorian examples include Dickens’s *Little Dorritt*, Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now*, Elisabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, more modern instances are Margaret Drabble’s *The Ice Age*, Martin Amis’s *Money*, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* and Ali Smith’s *Hotel World*. Coe himself made a pun in *NII* with the character of Nate of the Station, a wink to “State-of-Nation” in his interview with Shannon Roger. Coe himself is not convinced that he is writing condition-of-England novels; he actually says in *Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements*:

Although it invariably gets described as a state-of-the-nation novel, I’m not even sure that *What a Carve Up!* fits that label. Readers wanting to get a handle on the glittering textures of the 1980s would be better off with Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty*; those who want a chronological overview of the Thatcher years could try Tim Lott’s *Rumors of a Hurricane*. My novel now (that is to say in 2009) feels to me more like the story of a depressed young hero through a crisis of identity, while being swept along on current of historical forces towards a destiny over which he has no control. (3204)

This quote illustrates one more time how his fiction remains difficult to define even for him.

It is clear that eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature has a significant impact on Coe. The British writer admired Dickens and refers to him as “an almost mythical figure” for “his social commitment and his high spirits” (*Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* 3259) and dedicated around twenty pages of his PhD thesis to an analysis of the shifts in narrative perspective in Dickens’s novels and in particular *The*

*Old Curiosity Shop*. In this thesis referring to the Victorian novel, Coe explained in 2013 why its model is inadequate to the modern times, echoing B.S. Johnson: “ If there is a problem with the nineteenth-century model, it’s not so much that it is invalid or irrelevant but that, paradoxically, it is too formally satisfying to suit our current state of mind. It induces to stolid consolations of closures and catharsis and I’m beginning to think these are not what our present difficulties require” (Guignery 41). Some of Coe’s work has been nevertheless considered as “a parody of prim Dickens”, borrowing from the Dickensian grotesque and Coe himself has been called a “second-rate Dickens”, although it was said to be a “compliment”. *WACU* actually recalls Dickens’s *Bleak House*. Other books like *The House of Sleep* includes quotes from and a witty pastiche of Chapter 50 of *Great Expectations*, or references to craves for Dickens *In Expo 58*, when Thomas confesses that he likes Dickens. As Guignery develops, “one of the characteristic of postmodernist writing consists in overtly acknowledging and borrowing from the literary past, acknowledging that legacy both consciously and ironically through the use of pastiche and parody” (67). In her book, she argues that Coe conceived the Winshaws as “19<sup>th</sup> century Dickensian villains”; the books starts with a Victorian address to the readers with “my friendly readers”; the revelation of the identity of Michael’s father is quite Dickensian, with echoes to *Great Expectations*. The end of *WACU* is also typically Dickensian as it ends with a reassuring moral closure through the series of murders of the Winshaws putting an end to the Winshaw dynasty and bringing “individual and poetic justice” (Guignery 69) as the Winshaws are killed in a way that is related to their own crimes.

As *Bleak House* by Dickens, *WACU* and *NII* is moreover a panoramic description of England. This anatomy of British society is endowed with substantial topicality as current societal, political and economic issues are broached all along the novels. The main themes are injustice, corruption, destitution, a strange will (like *Bleak House*) and money. The dual narrative is also present in *Bleak House* linking and opposing personal stories and public issues. Pamela Thurschwell suggests that *WACU* “mirrors the double structure of Dickens’s *Bleak House*” (31) as the latter alternates passages of present-tense, omniscient, panoramic narration with passages in which a young girl tells us her experience in the first person and in the past tense. As Dickens, Coe attacks all of the society’s evils and does not offer a consistent or clear system that could replace the incumbent system. Indeed, Coe is not a reformer. Both writers are more literary reformers that political ones. They both have intended to

democratize literature – Dickens through serialized publication and Coe through B movies and other references to popular culture. Another Dickensian aspect noticed in the two novels is the presence of features to the Bildungsroman, a typically nineteenth and Dickensian genre. The Bildungsroman or novel of education is a literary genre that focuses on the psychological and moral development of a protagonist from youth to adulthood. In *WACU*, it is Michael who embodies this character and in *NII* it is Alison. For Guignery, it is almost a “Künstlerroman” (73) as the reader witnesses the development of a writer as well.

In *NII*, one may read passages that are typically tinted with a Victorian atmosphere. The image of poor people suffering in the cold and struggling to make both ends meet recalls *A Christmas Carol* by Dickens or *The Little Match Girl* by Hans Christian Andersen. This illustrates the sympathy that Coe, as well as Dickens, have for the poor. This imagery of suffering associated with cold is not traditionally English but a wink to children during Victorian times with characters in the most awful destitution and overwhelmed with misfortunes. A motif present in *NII* when Alison goes back home and stays in the Number 11 bus because she cannot afford to heat her house.

The weeks went by, the days grew shorter and colder, until one day, in early November, a turning point came. Val’s hours had been reduced from four days to three mornings a week. Her salary was cut in half and she was having to spend more time at home. The house was freezing. She started to worry about her next heating bill...One Wednesday lunchtime she was coming home from the library on the Number 11 bus. She got on in Harborne and planned to get off close to her home in Yardley, a journey of some twenty-five minutes. But as she approached her stop, she changed her mind. The bus was full of people; her house was cold. The view from her seat on the bus was ever-changing; the views from her house were monotonous. Suddenly she felt no inclination at all to get up from her comfortable seat and step out in to the cold...Why her house was so cold? And even she couldn’t afford to keep the radiators on all day. (88-89)

All in all, one can see that there are outright references to Dickens through genres, political consciousness and imagery. However, other critiques suggest that

Coe's Dickensian dimension is to be questioned or put in perspective. For Discoll, Coe remains elitist and has no link to the working-class. Coe admits that he does not "know enough about the lives of working class men and women to write about them with real confidence" (Guignery 20). Even though he remains "the political realist novelist par excellence" (159) or "the political writer of the current generation" (159), Coe belongs to a tradition of "épater le bourgeois [...] in which the middle-class author, struck between the upper and lower classes turns his anger toward the upper classes and their excesses while never really having any real economic connection to the working classes" (159). Still for Discoll, Coe is not the only one to occupy this position; authors like Zadie Smith, Graham Swift, Will Self or Alan Hollinghurst are all part of the British literary establishment as their novels leave "class formations unaltered" (159).

#### **b. A Tragic Story?**

As Head claims, Coe's fiction is "a work of great flair that ranges assuredly between the pole of comedy and tragedy" (35). Indeed, Coe's writing is endowed with fatalism and determinism; there is this idea that a transcendental force exerts influence over people who do not have any power over the course of their lives, a leitmotiv reminiscent of Greek tragedies. In an interview with Maxence Grugier, Coe explains:

J'ai toujours pensé que nos destinées n'étaient pas choisies, mais qu'elles étaient déterminées par des forces sur lesquelles nous n'avions aucun contrôle: la chance, la foi, les accidents, mais aussi l'histoire et la politique. Il me semblait que c'était le bon moment pour aborder ces sujets. La vie de quelques personnes et la manière dont leur existence est affectée par les décisions de gens bien au-dessus d'eux, les gens au pouvoir. (Mellet 152)

Epiphany is a feature of Greek tragedy, coming from ancient Greek meaning "manifestation", "striking appearance". In *WACU*, there are passages where Michael discovers himself in an epiphany-like way: "All my life I'd been trying my way to the other side of the screen: ever since my visit to the cinema in Weston-super-Mare. Did this mean that I'd made it at last?" (411). Michael is searching for his identity – the

motif of the quest is of prime importance – after the revelation of his mother that the father he has ever known is not his biological father. Once again, in the style of a Greek tragedy, Michael discovers the identity of his father. Coe says “My novel now [that is, 2009] feels to me more like the story of a depressed young hero going through a crisis of identity, while being swept along on a current of historical forces towards a destiny over which he has no control” (*Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* 3216). Equally, Michael realizes that he is himself the culprit (303). In “Theydunnit”, Eagleton actually compares Michael to Oedipus, “the detective in pursuit of the criminal who is himself”. Little by little, he discovers that his life is intricately linked to the Winshaws and his obsession will take the shape of reality in the third part of the book.

As a matter of fact, many details suggest that life is driven by chance, in so far as some characters have no control over their fate, as if they were drifted by the current of life. Coe asserts: “Dans tous mes romans « politiques », l’objectif est de montrer comment les individus tentent de mener leur petite vie irréprochable, sans être anéantis par le poids écrasant d’évènements historiques sur lesquels ils n’ont aucun contrôle” (Mellet 183). Reading this remark, Coe’s oeuvre could be referred to as a political tragedy. A lot of actions or “accidents” seem to be conducted by the randomness of life, recalling tragedy. Life is subordinated to destiny and fate, another way to remove all sense of responsibility. The tragic end epitomizes the lack or absence of control over his life; Michael perishes in the crash of an airplane piloted by the insane Tabitha. This idea that everything is already decided and ineluctable, reinforcing an impression of fatalism and determinism is well illustrated by Michael when he affirms “Dr Gillam’s been explaining everything, and I understand it all now. It turns out that I was right all along? I was right, and you were wrong. I don’t believe in accidents any more. There’s an explanation for everything: and there’s always someone to blame” (576).

The end of *WACU* is even more tragic with the deathbed scene, typical of tragedy and melodrama. The character that has found love, after so much trouble in life, is separated from his beloved and is the witness of his death. Moreover, one can notice that Michael’s death is characterized by dramatic irony since his obsessive dream turns against him. Indeed, he dies the way he has always dreaded and dreamed, in a plane crash.

Thurschwell also posits that Michael's destiny seems to be oriented by a film as if it was a transcendental force. This idea recalls *NII*, more precisely *The Crystal Garden*, where Laura's husband's life seems to be ruled by his obsession for a short film, which will lead to his death. The obsession of this movie, seen as a child, echoes Michael's and the two characters appear to be trapped by an obsession that had turned into a superior force running and destroying their lives. Thurschwell writes "Throughout the book, Michael's dreams, desire and destiny, are determined by the movies from *What a Carve Up!*, to Cocteau's *Orpheus*, to *With Gargarin to the Stars*".

Furthermore, the several references to Orpheus in both novels provide a tragic dimension. In *NII*, Rachel explains to Jamie that there is a magic door, like a big mirror, that you can pass through so as to reach another world like the one Orpheus uses in Cocteau's film (264). This passage evokes Cocteau's play and movie in which one can see Jean Marais as Orpheus saying: "Je vous livre le secret des secrets... Les miroirs sont les portes par lesquelles la mort vient et va. Du reste, regardez-vous toute votre vie dans une glace et vous verrez la mort travailler comme les abeilles dans une ruche de verre". This quote bearing tragic dimension reveals our finitude and the ephemeral nature of our existence.

All in all, the end of *WACU* ends with a moral closure that is quite reassuring for the reader, typical of Victorian novels. The Winshaws are killed in a way that reflects their sins and crimes. There is a liberating feeling of punishment and justice at the end that recalls catharsis in tragedy. However, this impression is overthrown, leading to an emotional swirl for the reader, by Michael's unfair death and the fact that the system denounced by the narrator is not destroyed.

### **c. A Fantasy Novel Tinged with Magical Realism**

*WACU* and *NII* include characteristics belonging to the genre of magical realism, two words that appear antinomic at first and convey generic blurring. In order to understand and assess the fantastical, even magical dimension of the two novels, it is essential to define magical realism and its contrasts with other similar genres.

Magical realism actually intends to offer a renewed vision of the real, taking into account the strangeness, the irrationality, the mystery and the oddity of human existence. The traditional notion of realism is made obsolete by the intervention of the paranormal or the supernatural in the fiction without putting in doubt the veracity of

the plot. The boundaries between magical realism, fantasy and the fantastic are complex but different. The difference between magical realism and the fantastic is that the intrusion of the irrational into the real is ambiguous, leading to many hesitations between the supernatural and the natural, the possible and the impossible, and sometimes the logical and the illogical. Magical realism is also different from fantasy in which magic belongs to an imaginary world and often comes under the myth. Many critics have actually questioned the nature and the role of magical realism in fiction. On the one hand, magical elements would intend to reflect the mystical of some cultures, their faith in magic, miracles and supernatural forces in opposition with the rationalism of western civilizations. On the other hand, magical realism is a means to question the concepts of fiction, that is to say meaning and truth, as modernist and postmodernist authors have done.

In addition to the various passages about the magical mirror that shall be developed in my third part, many scenes bear features of magical realism in *NII*. The following passage deals with the sudden transformation of a corpse coming into life that Rachel has just touched:

At the moment of contact something truly astonishing happened. The corpse jerked abruptly and violently into life. It swiveled around in its chair and instead of being confronted by a fleshless skull I found that I was looking into a pair of wide-open, startled, madly staring eyes. And then the mouth opened, too, and a terrible sound came from inside it. Along, animal monotone: a single-note scream of fear and incomprehension which, the moment it started, felt as though it was never going to stop. (56)

But the most representative scenes related to magical realism are the ones about this Romanian migrant making a living by walking the dogs of rich Londoners who turns into a giant spider that eats human beings and drags them into the excavated basement of a Knightsbridge mansion. The presence of this spider may have multifarious meanings. In a state-of-the-nation novel that excoriates human cruelty and appropriation, it may echo the worst actions that human beings can show in order to obtain what they want, a wink to the Winshaws: snare, possess, act cruelly, satisfy one's basic needs through the other by emotionally and energetically eating him or her. Indeed, this woman spider devours Tories and rich Londoners. Secondly,

this spider can take the form of a Deus ex Machina, a sort of transcendent force bringing justice and comfort for the reader expecting the villains to be punished. Even if the wrongdoers are punished, this retribution is operated in an unrealistic way, probably to show that this is only through the unreal that the latter can be punished. However, this spider that Coe justifies in an interview with Shannon Roger as a simple element of horror, can appear badly integrated in the story and a potential figure of narrative or script laziness to find a reassuring end, which lacks consistency within the novel.

Using magical realism for Coe is therefore the perfect means to be in the in-between since it skims over oneirism and reality, without breaking with the social realism expected in a novel supposed to gauge Britain's pulse. As in Hispanic literature, magical realism offers a reality less conditioned by rationality without interrupting or contradicting fiction. It is another way to see the world, an invitation to reconsider the notion of border where the dividing line wipes out, without causing damage to the credibility of the story.

#### **d. A Swerve to Dirty Realism?**

In *NII*, misuses of languages are noticeable and are reminiscent of the North-American movement of dirty realism. Dirty realism is a movement that depicts ordinary aspects of life putting the stress on its squalid and gloomy dimensions, using a spare and unadorned language. *NII*, contrary to *WACU*, is characterized by the use of a familiar even vulgar register. The novel is teeming with examples. For instance, Rachel says that Alison's mother is free to do what she wants on holidays: "Course I do. And I don't see anything wrong with it either. If your mum wants to go abroad for a week and spend her time shagging the arse off a Greek waiter, why shouldn't she?" (28). One of the most compelling examples is when people take it out on Val and call her all the names under the sun on social networks. This passage is an instance of this linguistic shift, among others, in the novel:

"Omg she is so dull

Get this woman of my fucking tv screen

Join the campaign#getridofval

Fucksake what a bitch



How many blowjobs did you have to give to get on this show  
Grammar nazi!  
Lay off Danielle  
Correcting Danielle who the fuck do you think you are  
How dare you speak like that to Danielle you ugly old sow  
Anvil faced mare #getridofval  
Get back to your fucking library and leave Danielle alone  
#teamDanielle  
Fuck off back to ur library  
Squid squib who gives a fuck apart from some dried-up librarian  
Fucking bitch the viewers are going to make you suffer for that. (102)

There is also another passage that is reminiscent of dirty realism. This is when Val takes part to a game and swallows a foul insect that defecates in her mouth. After the brutality and vulgarity of words with social networks, Coe tackles a more physical brutality revolving around disgust:

And then Val thought, Oh my God, have I killed it?, but this thought only lasted for a second or two because then she felt something in her mouth, something liquid, and a taste – Christ – a taste fouler and more viler than anything else she had ever tasted or imagined tasting, and she realized that the stick insect was shitting in her mouth, literally shitting itself with fear, and as she felt the first trickle of liquid excrement sliding down her throat, her stomach heaved and her gorge rose and with a loud, choking gurgle she spat the insect out on to the table, followed by thin trail of drool, after which she must have...[...] drinking mouthful after mouthful of water and swilling it around and spitting it out in a desperate attempt to get rid of that taste, that hideous taste which was coming back to her even now and making her want to gag again... (104-5)

Misuses of languages through dirty realism send us back to the thorny problem of the power or I would say powerlessness of words, itself broaching the issue of the unspeakable. Coe develops that he, paradoxically for a writer, hates

words: “I get very frustrated by words, of what they will not do for you” (Guignery 43). Coe, in *The House of Sleep*, wrote the following words illustrating its harmful dimension: “...language is a cruel and faithless mistress; it is a sly cardsharp, who deals us a pack full of jokers... it is a fork in the road; it’s a knife in the water” (293) or the inability to reflect accurately the mind:

Language is a traitor, a double agent who slips across borders without warning in the dead of the night. It is a heavy snowfall in a foreign country, which hides the shapes and contours of reality beneath a cloak of nebulous whiteness. It is a crippled dog, never quite able to perform the tricks we ask of it. It is a ginger biscuit, dunked for too long in the tea of our expectations, crumbling and dissolving into nothingness. It is a lost continent. (282-3)

To conclude this second part, one can notice that Coe’s novels are postmodernist in terms of form and narrative structure since they revolve around substantial polygenericity and the use of parody even self-parody. Coe and his oeuvre defy definition. His novels are emblematic of postmodernist inventiveness and inclusiveness but replete with traditional references to classical genres and forms of narrations. *WACU* and *NII* are definitely postmodernist puzzles since Coe plays with genres and labels blurring the contours of the contemporary novel. His fiction – more particularly *NII* – is also a transition towards a new artistic movement – post-postmodernism – since he is taking some distance towards postmodernism.

Coe also offers a personal and unique version of the contemporary novel. Many critics place Coe’s novels in the label of condition-of-England, but as Head argues, “there is an implicit debate about what kind of state-of-the-nation novel it still possible to write” (36). Head shows that Coe’s vision of the form is of prime importance and has always been thoroughly thought, proving his conviction that “an elaborate fictional work is required to offer a meaningful commentary on a fragmented society” (35).

As aforementioned, Coe’s oeuvre can be labeled as realist since the stories are set in a realist context and this contributes to developing characters and pushing the plot forward. The constant political referentiality, the use of different visual texts and the introduction of political discourses are mechanisms that collide with and merge

into fiction. In fact, Coe excels at blurring the boundaries of realism and fiction since fictional characters rub elbows with historical figures. For instance, the confusion between realism and fiction is made much more difficult to grasp when Michael confesses to having invented some conversations by the Winshaws: “Here’s a thought: why not suggest Lawrence? I think he’s still got his wits about him...and he could certainly be relied upon to come to the right conclusions” (432). In the same vein, Guignery writes about *WACU*:

Il semble que le caractère fictif des personnages du roman contamine les figures historiques insérées dans cet ouvrage [...]. La confusion générique, temporelle, narrative et énonciative atteint alors le niveau ontologique: le statut des personnages fictifs et réels se révèle flottant tandis que la véracité des informations insérées dans l’ouvrage et la fiabilité de certains documents est mise en doute. (Mellet 33)

### **III. The Blurring of Writing and Writing the Blurring**

#### **1. The Blurring of History and Story**

##### **a. Macro-Narration Versus Micro-Narration**

*WACU* and *NII* are two novels that tell stories at different levels. On the one hand, Coe describes England at a national level since he tackles political, economic and social issues. On the other hand, the two novels are also personal stories where characters, more particularly narrators, tell the stories of their lives. All along the novels, there is an overlapping, an oscillation of a macro-narration and a micro-narration where the boundary between history and story appears porous. There is a reason why Coe’s work is sometimes considered as state-of-nation. Head concurs with this idea: “The state-of-nation novel, it seems, struggles, to survive in its conventional phase. It now requires the rare ingenuity of a Jonathan Coe to breathe life into corpse” (47). Moseley also points out that Coe’s fiction replete with “microcosmic and macrocosmic plots”. However, Coe’s boldness goes farther since he creates interactions and forces between history and story.

In *WACU* British history has a significant impact on the lives of common people: Thomas Winshaw swindling schemes contributed to ruining Michael’s

father's life, who was then killed by the junk food from Dorothy Winshaw. Henry Winshaw played a major role in running down the National Health Service leading to the death of Owen's girlfriend. The death of Fiona has also a link with the Winshaws and the Thatcherist macrocosm that they encapsulate. Indeed, Fiona's death is accelerated by a series of mistakes made by an ill-managed and understaffed hospital. What's more, Michael Owen is writing his life as he discovers that the Winshaws are responsible for the death of his girlfriend and his father. Owen says "Does this mean that Dorothy killed my father?" (256), words echoed later on in the novel when he confirms that "Dorothy was the one who killed off (his) father" (413). In the same way, Thomas has taken hold of the company in which his father had worked all his life, emptying the employees' pension fund, leaving them to survive on a meager state pension. One more time, as Guignery explains, Owen questions himself "Does this mean that Thomas was an accessory to my father's murder" (324) and finds an answer later on "Thomas added a twist to the knife" (413). Thus, Coe shows how history impacts on people. In his article "Theydunnit", Eagleton argues that this is representative of the Post-Modernist text, "where everything is at once arbitrary and obsessively interconnected, and where – for all the world as in a novel – the contingencies of real life turn out to be densely plotted". For Eagleton, "we are back in the sphere of High Victorian realism where personal and political destinies are secretly intermeshed, and where the role of the author is to bring the submerged affinities to light". Macro-narration and micro-narration are a means to show how the public sphere has penetrated the private sphere "there seems no room left for chance or free play, a world of public secrets and private transparencies". Another connection between micro-narration and macro-narration is when Michael Owen, designated as the chronicler of the Winshaw family, discovers that his life is not peripheral but central in the story of the Winshaws. As Trimm argues "Owen, though, cannot for the bulk of the novel, properly forge connections between the emotional privations of his own life and the carve-ups of Thatcherism and the Winshaws" (176).

This motif is tackled by Serge Chauvin in the preface to Mellet's *Les politiques de l'intime* (10) in which he argues that Coe pays a particular attention to the effects of the political macrocosm on the intimate microcosm, whether they belong to history (since the Cold War or even the Second World War in *The Rain Before it Falls*) or to topicality (the war in Iraq for instance in the *The Closed Circle*). According to Mellet, the intimate symbolized by the characters and their personal

stories - microcosm- is not to be dissociated from the political – macrocosm. The intimate and the political are not antagonistic notions, “they meet, they merge into each other, they question each other, forging politics of the intimate” (28). Mellet also argues that politicizing the intimate has a narrative function in order to set a historical framework, to define characters and thus to accelerate the narration. Indeed, at the heart of the intimate lies a political space. For instance, in *NII*:

I don't really know why I think so often about David Kelly's death. I can suppose it's because, at the age of ten, it was the first national news story that made any impression on me at all. Maybe, too, because it evoked such a strong and chilling image: the loneliness of his death, the body discovered so many hours later in that remote woodland, silent and unvisited. Or maybe because of the way Gran and Grandad reacted: the way they made it clear that this was not an ordinary death, that it would have consequences, send ripples of unease and mistrust throughout the country. That Britain would be a different place from now on: unquiet haunted. The first I heard of it was on the six o'clock news, the day Alison and I arrived in Beverley. (17)

The reference to politics and history is a means to slide into the intimate. As Coe said in an interview with Shannon Roger, to justify the political dimension of *The Rain before it Falls*, the family and intimate stories are the first spaces where politics and balance of power meet. In an interview by Bertinetti, Coe started to develop the idea of a connection between the intimate and the political suggesting that the family unit is one of the smallest structures, with the couple, that one may analyze (*Marginal Notes, Doubtful Statements* 4444). Guignery concurs with Mellet by saying that “the intimate sphere is not necessarily apolitical” (27).

One can notice also that Coe always starts a story joining a death and a national element with a focal point, an event from which he creates a story (once again, circular structure). For instance, he started *NII* with the invasion of Iraq and death of David Kelly. *WACU* started with the shooting of Godfrey by German anti-aircraft fire during a secret wartime mission over Berlin, on 30 November 1942.

Thus, the writing of Coe is vertical, from History to story, even circular as the notions merge into each other and create an impression of blurring, but also horizontal

through the multiplicity of genres and forms of texts. The several images of a circle and the circular structure of the text may suggest closure hence the progressive withdrawal of the British into themselves like the BREXIT referendum in June 2016, as well as an identity blurring. Even though a strong symbiosis between History and story is conveyed, the limits or the boundaries between the self and the country – microcosm and macrocosm - are to be questioned, as they seem hard to differentiate and question the readers on its definitions and limitations. Coe, through this tension between macrocosm and microcosm questions what characterizes us, external forces - work, politics, economics, society- or/and internal forces -fears, obsession, family, love, friendship, sexuality-. It is a clear reevaluation of our identities and our selves difficult to capture. It could also be seen as an invasion of history by story.

#### **b. The Autobiographical: Coe himself in the Novel**

Coe admits to the autobiographical dimension of his novels. He refers to *WACU* as “a political novel alongside this personal story about my childhood” (Moseley 3). Coe drew his inspiration from the diary that he kept when he was in sixth form, hereon he learned more about the political climate of the period. He says: “The background detail is authentic – or at least, as accurately researched and remembered as I could manage - but all the main narrative threads are entirely fictional” (Guignery 30). The first autobiographical wink is when Michael is said to have been “brought up with on a diet of Hercule Poirot and Sherlock Holmes” (232), like Coe. Like him, Michael was born in Birmingham, a common feature – already broached – in his novels, and “was only eight when he created his first fictional character, a Victorian detective who went by the exotic name of Jason Rudd” (284). In *NII*, the ceremony in the chapter *The Winshwaw Prize* is also in Birmingham (209). On page 284 begins the story of *The Castle of Mystery*, the very first 180 typed pages by Coe at the age of eight, another proof of the *mise-en-abyme* and the circular structure of Coe’s literature to explore the limits of the autobiographical. Once again, so as to reflect Coe’s generic experiments, Michael’s detective story revisits genres since “Holmes and Watson revisited with a healthy dash of surrealism” (284). In addition to Michael who is a version of Coe himself, the presence of students and universities is based on autobiographical material. In *WACU*, Graham takes courses of film-making and in *NII*, more precisely in *The Crystal Garden*, Laura is a lecturer at Oxford University and Rachel is a student that ends up being a private tutor. Another

echo to Coe's life and more particularly to his novels are the reference to Michael's first two novels *Accidents Will Happen* and *The Loving Touch* (284), which are hints to *The Accidental Woman* and *A Touch of Love*.

Coe has always identified himself as melancholic, already as a teenager. Coe remembers that "his sensibility was being pulled into two different directions – towards humor and towards melancholy – and he wanted to find a way of writing that would reconcile these two opposite approaches" (Guignery 26). Coe himself declared in 2013 that he has "been writing about loneliness and depression for most of [his] working life now, from one book to another" (27) and for Guignery, "the vein of melancholy which runs through all his novels is buried under the comedy, satire and social commentary" (26). Coe, described by his friend Will Self as "quiet and melancholy", compares the novels as "an introvert's form" (in Laity). Reading *WACU*, Michael embodies this melancholy tinged with loneliness since he is portrayed as retiring and lacking self-confidence. Loneliness is also portrayed in *NII* with characters such as Val, Rachel and Alison. The representation of weak characters looking back to the past is a leitmotiv in these two novels. In *NII*, Val is reminiscent of the figure of the failed artist too and more particularly of Coe since she is reserved. For instance, Alison explains that her mother is "quite shy [...] that sounds weird, for a singer, but she really is. Very shy, in fact" (116). Still in *NII*, more precisely in *The Crystal Garden*, an academic tracks down a black-and-white German film he saw on TV as a five-year-old, convinced it represents his lost childhood. Here, Coe tackles the danger of nostalgia, as the academic in question will end up crushed, literally, by his obsession.

Furthermore, the figure of male protagonists having difficulties making decisions and fulfilling their goals and dreams – "who Coe says are all part of himself" (Guignery 28) whether this means reviving a career like Val in *NII* or the completion of a book in *WACU* or the building of a relationship based on love or friendship – is present in both novels. Coe explained that he developed a violent dislike for his male protagonists (Moseley 3). Michael dreams of being a successful writer and his interest in Shirley Eaton turns into obsession. Equally, Val chases after glory and success and her attempts are fruitless. Many characters have goals that appear unreachable and that is reminiscent of the figure of the medieval knight and the quest for the Holy Grail. Guignery, quoting Coe, argues that "in their inability to seize the propitious moment, [these characters] resemble Britain teasingly described... as world leader in

the field of anti-anticlimax, of missed opportunities” (28). From this quest for success also emerges frustration.

*WACU* and *NII* show clear movements towards autobiography and include metafictional passages where the author, through Michael for instance, takes the floor to respond to what the critique says about Coe such as the typing error of brio by biro (300) or the following comment: “He had been repeatedly credited with a playful irony, a satiric lightness of touch which seemed to me entirely lacking from his work, characterized as it was by lumbering sarcasm and the occasional abject attempt to jog the reader’s elbow with well-signposted jokes” (277). These metafictional remarks by Coe are therefore the opportunity for Coe to settle his scores.

### c. **The Artist or Would-be Artist: Authorial Self-Reflexivity**

There are many references or mises en abyme of writing in the two novels. In *WACU*, Michael is a writer or a would-be writer of a book entitled *The Winshaw Legacy: A Family Chronicle*. The main protagonist is a young writer with a couple of moderately successful novels behind him who is commissioned by Tabitha to write the history of the Winshaws. There are not only simplistic references to writing but also reflections on writing, the novel and more generally literature. In *WACU*, Grahame Packard, a young film-maker with strong left views, and Michael, have a discussion about the situation of the novel at the beginning of the 1980s. Graham does not understand “why people write novels any more” (276), borrowing some of his arguments from B.S. Johnson’s *Aren’t You Rather Young to be Writing Your Memoirs* (11-13). This student in film-making directed a film about the Falklands conflict called “Mrs Thatcher’s War” (280) and regrets the fact that “there is no tradition of political engagement” in British literature, “it’s all just a lot of pissing about within the limits set down by bourgeois morality” (276). As for Michael, he presents a pessimistic assessment of the novel in one of his literary reviews: “We stand badly in need of novels...which show an understanding of the ideological hijack which has taken place so recently in this country, which can see its consequences in human terms and show that the appropriate response lies not merely in sorrow and anger but in mad, incredulous laughter” (277). In an interview, fifteen years after the publication of *WACU*, Coe winced at “that brazen and lofty pronouncement” and admits that it was a “clear statement of the author’s personal ambitions” in a novel combining the “worst excesses of Thatcherism and the ruling elite” (*Marginal Notes*,



*Doubtful Statements* 3180). *WACU* includes also several self-reflexive comments that can be hints to the title and to the ambition of Coe's creation. For instance, Tabitha contemplates a chronicle that would be "part personal memoir, part social commentary, all stirred together into one lethal and devastating brew" (476) and Michael craves a "fantastic, funny, angry, satirical book" (299). *NII* also deals with the motif of the writer and writing. A metafictional passage appears when Laura and Rachel speak about the topic of word targets: "I'm sorry I didn't hear you. I meant to have hit my word target hours ago but the dreaded emails intervened as usual. They never stop – not even on a Saturday. So I'm afraid I've still got a bit to do. It's nice to know lecturers have to set themselves word targets as well" (142).

The would-be writer or artist is a recurrent motif in Coe's fiction, also reinforced by the themes of failure and melancholia with Michael in *WACU* and Val – the has-been singer – or various wannabe artists of reality TV programs in *NII*. What is interesting in Coe's fiction is the way he develops weak characters; he actually acknowledges that his characters and narrators are most of the times overwhelmed with passivity, loneliness and depression. In the article "Guardian Book Club: Week Three: Jonathan Coe on Writing *What a Carve Up!*", Coe says about Michael in *WACU*:

I wonder, though, whether the central character, Michael Owen, is really strong or sympathetic enough to support a lengthy narrative. He is a very passive figure, certainly. In fact, thinking about it, seven out my nine novels feature or are narrated by passive, slightly depressed men – often failed writers or composers or both – who show a rather uncommitted sexuality and tend to fixate on past romantic disappointments. (33)

In *NII* and *WACU*, Val and Michael are two characters that constantly fixate on past disappointments. Failure is heightened by Michael's sexual frustration; he is longing for love but ineffectual in obtaining it. Indeed, failure is clearly associated to sexuality and frustration. Sexuality is even a source of misunderstanding when Alison comes out as gay in *NII* and unease in *WACU* when Findley Onyx reveals his liking for cottaging. As Ben Platt says "The beauty of [Coe's] novel emerges [...] in the way these failed, fractured people rediscover, and often unwittingly, help one another...

Ultimately, these fragile chains of human interaction add up to an unexpectedly unified whole, in a style that recalls the fiction of Virginia Woolf” (37).

As aforementioned, failure is a recurrent motif and the following remark of Coe in an interview by Clare English can explain its paramountcy in his oeuvre:

Je ne retire pas vraiment de sentiment de satisfaction dans l’écriture de romans, car pour moi toute la satisfaction vient de l’idée elle-même; les procédés pour réaliser cette idée, la concrétiser, sont réellement pour moi des procédés d’échec et de déception. [...] [Les précédentes générations d’écrivains] avaient, en fait, le droit d’échouer pendant longtemps, ce qui est très important car nous échouons tous. Cela ne veut pas dire qu’on n’y arrivera jamais, mais on doit avoir le droit d’échouer, et en tant qu’écrivain, il faut avoir le droit d’échouer publiquement” (Mellet 45).

Poioumena, also referred to as “roman à clef” could be attributed to Coe’s *WACU*. The former is a term coined by Akastair Fowler to refer to a specific type of metafiction in which the story deals with the process of creation and writing. Fowler puts forward that poioumenon metafiction allows exploring the boundaries between fiction and reality in order to assess the limits of narrative truths. Examples of this type of metafiction that were also great inspirations for Coe, are Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*, Samuel Beckett’s *Trilogy* which, like *WACU*, include a narrator’s frustrated efforts to tell his story.

All those elements help us to assert that Coe’s oeuvre is exuberantly metafictional since it draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to question the relationship between fiction and reality. Self-reflexivity actually puts into perspective the writer and the reader in their connection to truth. This technique is a means to write writing, to broach the status of the writer and to debate about literature. The figure of the would-be artist may also be considered as a fictional projection of Coe as an experimental writer, a mise-en-abyme where the contours of the author’s writing oscillates between his fiction and an awareness of his literary creation. Therefore, referring to Waugh’s *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, metafiction can appear at first a form of distance from the real becoming paradoxically a means to get closer to it (18). In the same vein, Rushdie explains that

fiction – and here metafiction - can be a path to find truth and reach the real (in Sudhamahi), a proof that fiction can give birth to reality.

## 2. The Blurring of Arts

### a. The Picture, the Instant and the Freeze-Frame

The cinematic dimension of Coe's novels is of prime importance, blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, which is another characteristic of postmodernist literature. One can notice that Coe's fiction is made to be read and seen by his readers so as to question the power of the image in crystallizing a moment.

Coe's conviction of the narrative role of the image is encapsulated in the following remark: "Les photographies ont cette capacité, ce pouvoir: elles capturent des moments éphémères mais parfois incroyablement chargés de sens. [...] Cela dit, dans tous mes romans existe cette conviction que le sens réel d'une relation entre deux personnes, peut-être même le sens d'une vie, peut se cristalliser sur un moment furtif, une image" (Mellet 241). There are actually many references to photography in the two novels. In *NII*, Rachel and Alison find a mysterious card with a picture in the gothic house. In *WACU*, Michael's father is interested in photography; the picture that Michael's mother gives to his biological father and that Tabitha will have will play a crucial role in the plot of the novel and will serve as a narrative accelerator.

Cinema is also a theme that runs through the novels when the boundary between fiction and reality gets blurred. For instance, Michael becomes the actor of a movie seen in his childhood, which turned into an obsession. Thomas Winshaw meets the real-life actors Dennis Price, Esmá Cannon, Sid James, Shirley Eaton and Kenneth Connor on the 1961 *What a Carve Up!* shooting directed by Pat Jackson. There are other examples where imaginary characters appear in real life. Likewise, *NII* depicts a character, Laura's husband, obsessed with a movie seen when he was a child where the boundary between the dream and reality is once blurred:

When I was just a kid, probably aged about five or six, I saw this film. At least, until today I wasn't really sure whether I'd seen it or not. I didn't know whether it was something I'd invented, or dreamed, or misremembered, or whatever. All I know is that memory of it – even if it was a false memory – was so precious that I'd barely even allowed myself to think about it all that time. [...] and it was called *The Crystal Garden*.

At least, I was pretty sure that must have been the title. It's so hard to distinguish what belongs to memory and what belongs to real life. I can't remember anything about the story. I can only remember... an atmosphere, a feeling. (155)

It is a way to show how the process of memory is a constant conflict between truth and untruth, remembrance and imagination.

Still in the field of cinema, there are some extracts in Coe's fiction that should be rather seen than read. In fact, Coe describes some scenes in the way of a film director insisting on the moment, the instant and thus conveying a feeling of time standing still. The deathbed, in *WACU*, is quite symbolic of that idea since death turns into a film scene. It starts with Michael's narrative "I was in the middle of deep sleep" (416) and a few lines later, a third person takes part in the story "And sitting next to her was Michael, her lover or friend or whatever he liked to call himself" (416), and Michael reappears on the very same page "I began to get a big fidgety in my seat" (416). Reading this scene, the reader moves from a first person to a third person narrative, totally devoid of emotion, as if we were the spectators of a movie and comes back to an emotionally charged reflection. This practice of emotional scale/swing through internal and external focalizations is also for Coe, a way to give the reader the responsibility to feel pathos or not. After this scene where Michael disappears and reappears on the visual picture, the second part of the novel turns into the death of the film according to Nicky Marsh, who argues that at the end of the second novel, the filmic becomes mortal since Michael dies fulfilling, literally, his dream, *What a Carve up!*, (Marsh 85). One can also notice that the room in which Fiona dies can be compared to a cinema room and a movie set: "I had a strange dream in which the hospital became a film set and I was sitting in the darkened auditorium of a cinema, watching myself on the screen as I held Fiona's hand and spoke to her" (344). Eventually, the freeze-frame is also something that Michael enjoys for masturbation purposes, hence the purchase of a video recorder. The chapter entitled "An Organization of Deaths" is a wink to Franju's *Blood of the Beasts*, a short documentary film in 1949 about a Parisian slaughterhouse.

Indeed, there are also passages when the narrator describes scenes as if they were freeze-frames in *NII*. There is an example at the very beginning of the novel when Nicholas and his sister Rachel flee the mad woman: "Only when they were at

twenty yards' safe distance from the scene did they stop and turn to take one last look. It was a tableau, a moment in time, that would remain forever stamped on Rachel's memory; the Mad Bird Woman" (7). In *NII*, in the same vein as *WACU*, the characters use films to move the plot forward. Alison refers to the movie *Psycho*:

I couldn't tell you, now why it was this argument – the silliest and most irrational argument of all – that finally clinched it for me. Perhaps Alison had just worn me down. But from now on, without agreeing that every feature of the situation corresponded with every detail in the film (besides which I was, in any case, still very hazy on most details), I was more persuaded than ever that we had stumbled into the very epicenter of a mystery; that the Mad Bird Woman was the key to it. (45)

Like *WACU*, where Michael finds correlations between a film and reality, *NII* shows how reality comes from art, how the two narrators take the road of fiction to reach truth.

## **b. An Almodavarian Writing and Aesthetic**

Coe's fiction gives cinema star billing and is reminiscent of Pedro Almodovar. His novels replete with references or influences of the latter and questions the role of the image – still or moving – in the diegesis. The themes such as homosexuality and bisexuality are recurrent and are presented in a positive manner. Like Almodovar, Coe alternates between humor and emotion, melancholy and farce. He deals with our relationship to the past through filiation (father-son, mother-daughter). The notion of lies and truths, family secrets and psychological repression are always on the brink of rising up. Women have most of the time the lead roles and their relations with men are generally perceived as chaotic. For instance, there is not surprise that *The Rain Before It Falls* has been called a “woman's book”. In the article “My Literary Love Affair”, Coe said that he wrote the book as “an homage” to the important series of modern women's books, the Virago Modern Classics that is a publishing company for women writers. Like Almodovar, Coe has a liking for embedding and the multiplicity of voices. The liking of Coe for mirrors also recalls Douglas Sirk whose work played a major role on Almodovar's movies. Coe also refers to television, cinema, music, theatre, and dance... Coe incorporates an embossed, sensual dimension to his novels and uses freeze-frames to capture “emotional moments”.

One can notice that Almodovar's movies question the connection and the role of fiction towards reality. Fiction transforms into reality as if fiction was a necessary process to reach reality or truth. As in many Almodovar's movies, Coe uses film scenes to talk about or replace reality or even to translate real facts. In Almodovar's *Talk to Her*, the director uses a silent movie, *Shrinking Lover*, to evoke the “real” sexual act between Begnino and Alicia. In *WACU*, the passage of Shirley Eaton taking off her clothes has played a very important role in Michael's life and will become reality at the end of the film. The border between film, fiction and reality seems to be porous, as they all seem to merge into one another, questioning the reader on what is true. The simple reference to a film is also a way to move the plot forward in *NII* for example. That is the case when Laura argues that losing innocence is the worst thing that can happen and compares it to the movie *Paradise Lost* (150).

Sex and gender affiliation are recurrent motifs in Almodovar's and Coe's production where both artists give the floor to the ones that the society reject and condemn. As Mellet argues, literature - and the arts in general – can give body to the

invisible and the mute in society (193), which Coe and Almodovar are attached to.

Sex and gender often imply a precise orientation and thus a label, a categorization. The latter is echoed by the general motif of closure in the novels expressing the feeling of imprisonment that people have to face when they question their sexuality. Coe's eye on sexuality, like Almodovar's, is modernized, challenged and it debunks stereotypes. In Coe's *WACU*, heterosexuality is seen as contentious or weary and a source of misunderstanding. In fact, Michael has difficulty exchanging with Fiona and misses many opportunities and their privacy is violated by the presence of Findlay Onyx who tracks them (218). Michael seems to be on a balance of power – with Fiona – where he does not emerge victorious. The relations of Hilary and Dorothy with their husbands go to the dogs and sink into weariness and frustration. Even though homosexuality is associated to cottaging in *WACU*, with Findley Onyx, this sexual orientation seems simpler and smoother. Alison and Findley Onyx are examples of a fulfilling sex life providing comic passages when he admires Michael's buttocks "Do you work out, Michael? No. Why do you ask? It's just that you have unusually firm buttocks? For a writer, that is" (217); or when he normalizes cottaging "Can you believe this society of ours would be so cruel? To punish a man for the most natural of cravings, for indulging his forlorn, lonely need to find companionship with the occasional passing stranger" (217). Transexualism, a theme broached in *All About My Mother*, is also present in *The House of Sleep* when Robert, deeply in love with Sarah, a lesbian, is prepared to become female to win her.

The presence of actors and directors play a crucial role in Almodovar's movies. At the end of *WACU*, Michael speaks to the readers as if he were a director, a possible technique to remind the audience that his fiction is an artifact:

It was never enough, being able to see it whenever I wanted: because I wasn't just watching it, that day. I was living it: that's the feeling I thought would never come back, the one I've been waiting to recapture. And now it's happening. It's started. All you people" – he gestured at the circle of attentive faces – "you're all characters in my film, you see. Whether you realize it or not, that's what you are. (462)

In *NII*, the figure of the director is a recurrent motif too. Coe focuses on the mise en scène of the production company in *The Comeback*. Players are described as actors

with specific roles. Danielle has the role of the glamorous girl who falls in love with the handsome man of the game and admits to Val that she was only “doing it because the director keeps telling us to look more romantic with each other” and Val is “surprised to hear that they had been getting instructions from the ‘director’” (106).

All in all, one can see that cinema is a recurrent subject in Coe’s novels; it has a narrative role in the plot and offers pictorial writing. The influence or connection between Almodovar’s fiction and Coe’s oeuvre can no longer be denied. Both seem to yearn for portraits of zany characters, to pay tribute to women and to provoke in substance and in form.

### **c. The Mirror and the Dream: Coctalian Devices to Image Coe’s Imagination**

Coe’s oeuvre constantly questions the mechanisms of writing and artistic creation. Reading the two novels, the mirror and the dream are recurrent motifs in Coe’s fiction and leave the reader perplexed. For Trimm, the link between Thatcherism and a comedy horror film “positions Coe’s novel as an angry satire framing the Thatcher era as a gross inversion of social values, a distorted *mirrorworld* simultaneously comic and tragic” (159). Thurschwell, in the same vein, argues that Coe’s novel “mirrors the double structure of Dickens’s *Bleak House*” (31). For Quinn, reviewing the novel in *The Independent*, “the plot becomes a mirror of, and an analogue to, the denouement of the famous film” (26). These motifs are endowed with symbolical complexity and echo Cocteau’s and Sirk’s cinematographic work.

Indeed, *NII* includes many passages that broach the motif of the mirror. The two following extracts describe a door with a magical mirror separating the staff from the owners:

Yes. You will eat your meals with them, down in the kitchen. The staff side of the house and the family side of the house are quite separate. There are doors that connect them, but the only one you will be able to use is the door with the mirror. Right, said Rachel. I’ll remember that. Good. But you will not even use that door, said Madiana, unless you are invited. (254)

‘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.’ ‘What magic door?’ asked Jamie. ‘Well, that’s what I call it. It looks like a big mirror. A mirror you can pass through.’ ‘Like Orphée’, said Laura, ‘in Cocteau’s film’. (264)

In these two quotes, among many, the mirror is representative of the allegorical complexity of mirrors and mirror imagery that has served the imagination of writers for centuries. Here, this motif reinforces the issue of social fragmentation but also reflects oppositional themes, reality and illusion. Evoking magical realism and presented as a passage from the real to the unreal, Coe has a very pessimistic view on British society. When Laura talks to Jamie the only alternative, solution, to pass from one caste to another seems to reside in imagination. With this outright reference to Cocteau in *WACU* and *NII*, the mirror becomes a pivotal vehicle for intertextuality and interartiality. The mirror in *NII* actually recalls *Through the Looking-Glass* by Lewis Carroll where Alice enters a fantastic world climbing through a mirror. However the most substantial influence remains Cocteau’s *Orpheus* who passes through the mirror and other films by the same director. The link is initiated from the beginning in *WACU*, just before the prologue and written in the first and the second parts of the book in French and in English: “Orphée: Enfin, Madame...m’expliquerez vous? La Princesse: Rien. Si vous dormez, si vous rêvez, acceptez vos rêves. C’est le rôle du dormeur” (prologue, 167 – 467). Reading the two novels, one may draw parallels between Cocteau and Coe in the following dimensions: the oneiric atmosphere, the motif of the mirror and creation. These themes are dear to Cocteau and present in his movies *The Testament of Orpheus* and *The Blood of a Poet*.

Creation, through metafiction, is a theme that both artists pay particular attention to; a topic Cocteau tackles in *The Blood of a Poet*. In this movie, Cocteau dealt with creation and staged a painter who is none other than the double of the poet. In *WACU*, the theme of the mirror is conveyed through the mirror that Michael created around the representation of himself writing and more generally about the representation of the writer. In many passages, Michael writes passages reflecting himself as if he were holding a mirror to the reader or viewer. The mirror or reflection of the writer, once again, has a function to question the novel and more particularly the process of writing, to bring our attention to its artefacts, its absence of structure or

the blurred dimension of human consciousness. Creation becomes an underlying subject in Cocteau's cinematographic work that enables the spectator to enter the poet's imagination. The numerous embeddings or mise-en-abyme tackling creation, a form of reflection on the process of creating, run through Coe's fiction and Cocteau's work. Creation is also conveyed through the multifarious passages describing or evoking the descent in Coe's fiction. In *NII, What a Whopper!* focuses on the building of an extravagant eleven-level basement in Kensington by men who keep on "digging, digging, digging" so that Rachel can hear "movement in the bowels of the earth" when "the silence descends" (319). In *The Black Tower*, Phoebe's studio is in a cellar and when Rachel thinks about it her memory is filled with "images of her horrific descent" (58). The descent is also conveyed by Val's artistic career failing and her demise leading "into nothingness" (120), and in *WACU* when Michael is killed in a plane crash saying the last words "I'm going down, I'm going down" (492). According to Cocteau, the descent depicts the obscure world of the artist at work, a descent associated to the concept of "phenixology" borrowed from Salvador Dali (El Guarbie), meaning to be reborn from ashes.

The dream is another Coctalian characteristic in Coe's novels. In *The Blood of a Poet*, when the poet arrives at the Hotel des Folies-Dramatiques, the poet is in a long corridor with four doors and discovers four unrealistic and oneiric scenes. The latter convey suicide, drugs, disobedience and sexual ambiguity, all aiming at showing the "invisible" (in El Guarbie) – themes of prime importance in the environment of Cocteau and recalling Almodovar's at the same time. This filmic and thematic inconsistency, fragmentation, evokes the mechanism of the dream. The scenes mentioned above evoked Cocteau's opium smoking, his detoxification, his sexuality and the suicide of his father. The poet posits that the dream and its mechanism give to poetry a lighter and more recent tone. One may notice that the dream becomes an almost autobiographical material to create and give body to the poet's imaginary. *NII* actually recalls Cocteau's work since it also follows the mechanism of the dream. In *NII*, there is the feeling that there is no consistency between the stories, that they are independent from one another. They succeed without much connection – without a logical cause and effect relationship and a preference for chance – and immerse the viewer in a dream-like atmosphere, the unconscious of the writer – poet – director. As Cocteau said, the film is "une succession d'actes réels qui s'enchaînent avec l'absurdité magnifique du rêve" (47).

For Cocteau, the dream is life, because it talks about existence, something Michael repeats twice before dying “life is but a dream” (493).

But the most prominent example of Coe’s link to Cocteau lies in the symbolic of the mirror, a frequent object in the films of the poet and a means to travel in his imagination. In Cocteau’s *Orpheus*, the passing through the mirror is a pivotal scene that guarantees the passage to another world. In *Orpheus*, Heurtebrise explains to Orpheus the secrets of mirrors: “Je vous livre le secret des secrets, les miroirs sont les portes par lesquelles la mort vient et va. [...] Du reste, regardez-vous toute votre vie dans un miroir et vous verrez la mort travailler comme les abeilles dans une ruche en verre”. In *The Blood of a Poet*, the poet is also invited by the statue to pass through a mirror. The mirror becomes a door that death uses to enter life or life to enter death. For El Guarbie, the image reflected in the mirror appears paradoxically more real than reality. In *WACU*, which is as much an acrid criticism against Thatcherism as a reflection on the postmodernist novel, the novel presents several metaphorical mirror effects. For instance, the story of *WACU* is based on the 1961 comedy horror film *What a Carve Up!* hence Michael thinking that he is “inhabiting it” (152 – 466). The narrative structure of *WACU* reveals two plots mirroring each other – the story of Michael and the story of the Winshaw family. The theme of the mirror is also echoed through the parody of parody since imitation suggests the reflection of itself. There is one passage that encapsulates the motif of the mirror as well as the motif of the dream in *WACU*:

Whatever the reason, when I looked at myself in the mirror of the men’s washroom later that night, I could scarcely believe what I saw. It was the face which had once been revealed to me in a nightmare more than thirty years ago: the face of an old man ravaged with age and grooved like an ancient carving with traces of pain. (416)

Besides being a reflection on the passing of time, this passage turns into an epiphany since Michael discovers that the man haunting his dreams is nothing more than him. Here, Coe brilliantly condenses the motifs of the mirror and the dream to question the relationship between the visible (Michael’s face) and the invisible (his past and obsessions). Coe, like Cocteau, dims the limits between imagination and reality, the visible and the invisible. For Cocteau, the mirror reflects the essence of

existence, thus the invisible.

The presence of mirrors can also refer to Douglas Sirk's passion for mirrors in his movies. Sirk, a great inspiration for Almodovar, uses symbolical sceneries and decorations. Mirrors, for Sirk, are a way to let someone's mask slip or enable to reflect an image multiplied by loneliness. Sirk also uses stairs evoking the desire of the protagonist to rise up and dominate their lives, when they go up. The mirror Coe uses in *NII* can also be regarded as a passage between two worlds and thus a window to another form of reality. According to Sirk, the window allows a break in the narration, and also an emotional and moving punctuation: "la femme à la fenêtre est un témoin passif, situé à la frontalité du monde clos, intérieur, et du monde extérieur, à la limite de la cellule familiale et de l'univers social, mais – quoiqu'elle regarde à l'extérieur – elle ne franchit pas cette limite, elle ne cesse pas d'appartenir au cercle domestique qui simultanément la protège et l'enferme" (184). Sirk is not the only artist who got inspired by windows; Salvador Dali is also reminiscent of this motif.

All in all, the imprint that Cocteau left on Coe is undeniable. The oneiric atmosphere, the theme of creation and the motif of the mirror contribute to nurturing the Coctalian nature of Coe's fiction. As well as conveying the vanity and the elusiveness characterizing the ruling class, the mirror is a means to make Coe's imagination and his creation visible, in other words, to capture and image his imagination. In the style of Cocteau, Coe blurs the limits between the real and imagination and creates an "unreal realism" (in El Guarbie). The image in Cocteau's fiction, as well as in Coe's, is not between the real and imagination but a condensation of both.

### 3. An "Eye" for an "I" and a "Voice" for a "character"?

#### a. The Blurring of Narrative Voice(s)

According to Moseley, Coe drew inspiration from Fielding in his narrative approach. He describes the latter as an "intrusive narrative subverting its conventional possibilities" (Moseley 10). *NII* and *WACU* present complex narratives with different narrators whose involvement in the story and identity appear ambiguous and flexible, suggesting therefore a diegetic blurring.

Indeed, Michael who is the main narrator in *WACU* provides the reader with information about the Winshaws and tells his personal story at the same time. The

numerous first-person analepses send us back to his childhood. His story is actually the nerve center of the book, a bridge between the private and the public despite a blurred time frame. He is a perfect example of the postmodern author-narrator who is conscious of his writing and of his relationship with the reader. Many times he addresses the reader and shares with him/her the difficulty of his tasks as a writer/creator. In this way, in the prologue, Michael addresses his readers in a self-reflexive comment: “the patron and sponsor of the book which you, my friendly readers, now hold in your hands” (3). In fact, he admits in forms of confessions that he has difficulty writing in the most genuine manner. For instance, he is “fleshing out incidents... speculating on matters of psychological motivation, even inventing conversations” (90), “yes inventing, I won’t shy of the word” (90), parts of the books shall be “read like a novel and parts of it read like a history” (91). This is an immersion in the writer’s life and more particularly in Coe’s. Michael also questions the genre of his work; he actually wonders whether he has “to present it as a work of fact or fiction” (772). Michael also puts in perspective his position; is he neutral? Is he involved in the story he is creating? Michael says: “I thought I was supposed to be writing this story... but I’m not. At least not any more. I’m part of it” (476).

However, in the third part of *WACU*, the story is told by a third person. From one chapter to another, the narrative voice changes. In some chapters, the origin of the voice remains ambiguous. The chapters related to Michael’s life are written by himself and the chronicles too since he was commissioned by Tabitha to do so. Nevertheless, other narrative voices appear in *WACU*. In the chapter dedicated to Henry, one can notice some extracts of his diary, published in 1995, after Michael’s death, and some footnotes directing the reader to “*Michael Owen, The Winshaw Legacy: A Family Chronicle*” (120). One question that remains unsolved is who wrote the last chapter dealing with Michael’s death. It cannot be him since he is dead. In the preface, the editor Hortensia Monks declares herself as the author of the second part of the book “An Organization of Deaths” stating: “ I have therefore taken the liberty of including, by way of introduction to Michael’s history, a full and detailed account of the horrific murders which took place at Winshaw towers on the night of January 16<sup>th</sup> this year” (497-98). She, like Michael, addresses her readers “my such readers” (498), which places her on the same level as a postmodern narrator. The latter also acknowledges the authorship of the prologue 1942-61 since she writes: “my intention in the remainder of this Preface is to summarize, in a few concise, vivid pages, the

entire early history of the entire early history of the family” (498). The epanadiplosis “Tragedy had struck the Winshaws twice before, but never on such a terrible scale” found at the beginning and the end of the novel is another proof that Hortensia may have written the prologue as well. For Guignery, Hortensia Tonks’ entire authorship of the prologue is still questionable. In fact, she explains that on the fourth page the narrator refers to Tabitha’s relics which “came into the hands of the present writer” (6), that is to say Michael. Coe confirms that there is a form of narrative blurring, that there is meant to be some ambiguity about whether Michael writes that first sentence or not in Guignery’s article entitled “Colonel Mustard, in the billiard room, with the revolver: Jonathan Coe’s *What a Carve up!* as a postmodernist whodunit”. Last but not least, is that Hortensia Tonks can also refer to the intrusion of publishers into literary production nowadays.

One has to notice that the multitude of voices in Coe’s fiction is also a way to undermine the unequivocal control of the author, a specific feature of postmodernism. This multiplicity of voices and therefore visions is part of Coe’s approach that is to provide another vision. The necessity of an alternative vision is well illustrated by Coe’s remarks on the role of contemporary literature: “Je crois que le rôle de l’écrivain est d’écrire le meilleur livre qui soit pour que le lecteur pense plus librement et de façon plus indépendante, de fournir une alternative aux discours de la presse et de la politique” (Mellet 201) or “Ce que le roman du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle peut apporter à son lecteur, c’est l’occasion de s’immerger dans une autre vision de la vie, une vision alternative” (Mellet 202).

In *NII*, there is also a multitude of narrative voices. Indeed, there are neutral third person narratives, biased first person narratives and an unidentified voice that seems to lecture characters. Indeed, this god-like voice has a moralizing tone when it directly addresses Val with a “you” when she comes back from her TV program: “Still, you’re out of debt now. Look on the bright side. Out of debt, for the time being [...] Truth is, you don’t belong with people like that. Stupid to think you ever did. This is where you belong. On the Number 11 bus. Look around you. Get real. *These* are your people. Ordinary people. Decent people” (125). Still in *NII*, more precisely in *What a Whopper!*, the chapter 16 begins with a third person narrative and switches to a first person narrative embodied by Rachel who asks herself a multitude of questions regarding writing. One may witness the beginning of her writing, her questions and her doubts (319). Through this passage shifting to introspection, this is

a whole metafictional reflection on the process and motives of writing: “Also, I’m taking my pen for another good reason [...] And I’ve decided that this task will be to write something [...] This is our story, really the story of how we first became close, before strange – not to say ridiculous – forces intervened and drove us apart. And it’s also the story of – But not, I mustn’t say yet” (320).

Coe, through these layers of narrative voices, throws the reader off balance and enmeshes him or her in the literary act of creation. In both novels, there is a kind of reconciliation of narrative modes suggesting in-betweenness, since narratives are homodiegetic and heterodiegetic. The epanadiplosis at the end of *WACU* is typical of Coe’s circular structure in his oeuvre. This multitude of narrative voices may also be a means to break the traditional passivity of the spectator.

#### **b. The Eye(s) and the Spectator(s)**

The eye, through scopophilia, is also broached in *WACU*. Scopophilia is deriving pleasure from looking, a form of voyeurism. It refers to sexual pleasure from looking an object or someone that convey eroticism. Voyeurism and male gaze are considered as the main elements of scopophilia. Scopophilia was defined by Freud who put forward that the one who is seen is seized, controlled by and submitted to the observer. An example of scopophilia is when Thomas Winshaw invested in the technology of video recorders. Thanks to Video Cassette Recording, he can pause films and gaze at actresses in *déshabillé*, for masturbatory purposes. Another instance is when Thomas, uninvited to the filming of *What a Carve Up!*, peeps through holes in the wall to see Shirley Eaton taking off her clothes. Thomas who claims that he was only checking the “soundness of the construction materials” (320) is therefore frogmarched off the scene by the actor Sid James. Another circular and repetitive example concerns Michael himself who is described as obsessed with Shirley’s body, finds similarities with Phoebe’s and thinks about spying on her: “And yet there was something irresistible about the idea of spying on her work in progress; something wickedly analogous, I suppose, to the thought of glimpsing her in a state of undress” (288). This idea of control and possession of the other, through the gaze, concurs with the notion of privatization so fiercely condemned by Coe. This is also an example of how the visual can take the form of action and how art can serve for narrative purposes. Jacques Lacan explained that scopophilia is a form of desire that is captured by the imaginary image of the other (183). This idea of privatizing the

body is also reflected by the rape. In *NII*, Rachel is sexually assaulted by Freddie, the accountant who tells her: “you are...so...fucking...gorgeous” [...] I can’t die happy...until I’ve got inside your pants” (323). In Coe’s work, the reader and some characters have the feeling of being spectators of characters’ lives. Life is actually represented as a play. What is important to recall is that Coe’s fiction cannot only be read but rather seen. The visual is of prime importance. The representation of the eye, the visual, is a notion present in *WACU*, suggesting embedding and an ontological perspective, that is, every human is constantly being looked at, not only by a transcendent power, but simply by someone else.

The eye also refers to Coe’s and as aforementioned, the two books raise the question of the author’s legitimacy to write about the underprivileged. Can a writer who belongs to the middle or upper class write about the downtrodden? Can somebody write about the ostracized without being in contact with the latter? This question can be pondered and Coe seems to lack legitimacy as he has always belonged, such as various writers, to a rather privileged social class. Coe himself, in an article on Contemporary London novels, argues that “many of the most successful British writers live in London, command large advances for their novels, inhabit some of the capital’s most gracious districts, and own substantial homes” and wonders “is this really the best vantage point from which to chronicle the lives of the underprivileged and the urban poor?” (Guignery 21). A lot of his misgivings are illustrated through his characters.

In *NII*, Coe also tackles another form of eye – the gaze of production companies – that can alter reality, and in a certain way, truth. Writing about the filming of some scenes of TV reality shows, he focuses on the smokescreen and its fake dimension to underline the distortion of truth. The description of the arrival of the plane on the island is almost made theatrical: “The pilot had made a lot of unnecessary swoops and dives, to get her screaming and to make their arrival look more dramatic, but then she was deposited safely in the middle of the forest and there was a guide on hand to walk her towards the camp...” (96). Coe showcases the discrepancy between Val’s efforts to convey an image and how she is visualized by the production. To this gaze of production companies is compounded the obsession of the gaze in our contemporary societies. The participants in *NII* are described as courtiers or favorites whose obsession revolves around being looked at and “the thrill of being recognized again, of no longer feeling invisible...” (95) despite the torturing



and humiliating activities they are asked to do. The distorted gaze of Val reaches its height when her own daughter does not recognize her mother in the game:

She knew her mother intimately: better – far better – than she knew anyone else on the world. And the woman on the television had recognizably been her mother. And yet, in the very occasional glimpses of her which the program had afforded, it had also been like watching a stranger. She had seen her as the cameras had seen her, and as the people editing the show had seen her, and these perspectives, the thought, were unforgiving. (102)

Once again, Coe's use of cinema in his novels is an opportunity to question the role of this art and to compare it to literature. Coe's novels questions art and literature and this reflection takes the form of a debate around intertextuality, in the words of Graham in *WACU*, a budding film director: "Well, I don't really understand why people write novels any more, to be honest. I mean it's a total irrelevance, the whole thing. Has been ever since the cinema was invented. [...] the problem with the English novel is that there's no tradition of political engagement. [...] There's no radicalism" (276).

All in all, the presence of film studies, film critics or the quest for a film, are recurrent in both novels. Coe's novels prove that the narrative can become visual. This presence of scenes described as pictures may well echo the biased and blurred dimension of representation, which is layered in its subjectivity. In fact, every scene or act is seen and described by a subject who incorporates his or her – own – truth, a personal and private vision. This subjectivity of the image also recalls *The Rain Before It Falls* where Coe develops what an image can hide.

To conclude this third part, Coe uses intermediality - the crossing of arts- and hybridity - the combination of different genres - to explore the limits of the novel. Coe's fiction oscillates between cinema and writing making his work look visual. The emblematic motif that is the *mise en abyme* may be meant to echo this feeling of closure and imprisonment representing the nail-biter dimension of our society, as well as the confinement of the writer in his work. In Coe's fiction, the *mise en abyme* is also a means to nurture complicity with the reader – spectator but at the same time to

put things into perspective about what he or she sees or reads. Indeed, the *mise en abyme* creates closeness where the author is on the same level as the reader assists the process of creation. Eventually, Coe's novels question the act of representation and the biased dimension of writing connected to it. Through the multitude of blurred and layered points of view, he shows how vision can deceive a reader.

## Conclusion

Coe has created a genre of his own, a new postmodern and metafictional literary work, a "Coesian" style in which he plays, deconstructs and transcends the codes of postmodernism. As Moseley writes: "Jonathan Coe has carved out a special niche in the Modern British literary novel" (114). He is actually a writer of the in-between as his oeuvre is endowed with ambivalence and tensions between realism and magical realism, facts and fantasy, orality and written traditions, History and stories. Coe is a player and a navigator between poles – the political and the intimate. Coe offers the reader an intimate fiction where the author reveals his insecurities: nostalgia, melancholy, loneliness and sickness. *NII* is one of the rare novels dealing with the human approach and perception of cancer and that makes it very contemporary. Thus, Coe transports the reader to an extraordinary story that is both anchored in the real world and an imaginary world, a place where the author refuses to separate these two worlds. His novels almost always border on the limit of a before and an after, a pauper England and an opulent one, a socially stratified England. Coe's fiction is based on an in-between-ness where the literary frontier is moving, genres and narrative forms are blurred imitating a form of chaos, the latter needed to find meaning and to force the reader to question the lineage of the text.

Coe may not offer a new social order but his writing – in the two novels studied – is deeply rooted in the alternative – a possibility between two options – recalling the motif of in-betweenness. Indeed, Coe eulogizes the alternative and therefore contrasts with Thatcher's famous slogan "There is no alternative". This perspective also reminds us of Rancière's argument, saying that the alternative is deeply political since politics is based on confrontation: "le propre de la politique est l'existence d'un sujet défini par sa participation à des contraires. La politique est un type d'action paradoxal" (Mellet 147). Contrary to what many detractors say, Coe's

oeuvre is political in so far as his political stance is paradoxical.

As a matter of fact, Coe's fiction shows that literature is grafted on to politics. Literature, content and form, is substantially influenced by politics. Coe's oeuvre is esthetically, stylistically, narratively, philosophically blurred and fragmented because it aims at representing and giving body to the erosion of the British society and politics. Echoing Rancière's argument, Coe aims at showing the people who suffer from a lack or even no-representation – "the invisible", a term repeated several times in *NII*. This subordination of literature towards politics, involving the different transformations evoked above - are another proof that Coe's fiction is political and not reduced to a mere political referentiality.

Another characteristic pointing out the political dimension of Coe's oeuvre is the author's liking for satire. One cannot deny the fact that Coe's novels are satires of British politics and *NII*, more particularly, a satire of the dominance of comedy in British culture. However, Coe's fiction is not only a satire of contemporary politics – as developed in the first part of my dissertation – but it is also a satire of satire and therefore a renewal of the genre.

Many critics and readers have argued that Coe's satirical charge was to be put into perspective but if one takes the definition of Duval and Martinez, his work is a clear example of what satire should be. I quote from these two authors: "La volonté de cumuler les contraires et le refus de choisir entre eux apparaissent comme les principes fondateurs de l'écriture satirique. C'est de là que découlent l'expansion infinie du texte et son ambiguïté polyphonique, qui produisent désordre et prolifération" (253). The ideas of chaos, blurring and ambivalence pointed out in this quote, bowdlerize the moralizing and satirical tone usually expected in satires. Doing so, Coe distances himself from the usual ingredients of satire.

The study of these two satires – *WACU* and *NII* – has been an opportunity to show the evolution of Coe's with regard to satire but also to explore the duality of these two novels. "Sequels which are not really sequels. Sequels where the relationship to the original is oblique, slippery" (151) is a metafictional note by Laura's husband about the films *What a Whopper* and *What a Carve Up!* that could reflect the ambiguous nature and link between *NII* and *WACU*. Indeed, *NII* is quite different from *WACU*. Coe may appear to skim over some contemporary subjects and

the novel might appear like a list of authorial comments on a multitude of contemporary issues. The novel is also replete with many stereotypes about: the rich getting richer losing the sense of family, the foreign exploited maid coming from Romania, the employee Rachel – becoming an almost 19<sup>th</sup> century maid – who sleeps in a bedroom where there is “just enough room for an armchair” (253), the young graduate who is crippled with debts and last but not least the archetypal paragon of discrimination, a black one-legged lesbian. In terms of structure, *WACU* has a much more elaborate plot contrary to *NII* that appears more like a collection of novellas whose connection between characters, the motif of the number 11 and the plot seems loose. The mean characters are also different in the two novels; on the one hand the monsters – the Winshaws – are human and on the other hand the monster is a giant spider. This passage from human to animal monstrosity appears to bowdlerize the political satire and could disappoint the reader yearning for the poignant tone of Coe when it comes to lampoon the British elite. This satirical shift of *NII* concurs with the decline of satire developed in the novel: “Every time we laugh at the venality of a corrupt politician, at the greed of a hedge fund manager, at the spurious outpourings of a rightwing columnist, we’re letting them off the hook” (176). To conclude, it would be inappropriate to present *NII* as a sequel to *WACU*, *NII* is another state-of-the-nation novel that works rather as a stand-alone with some winks and echoes to the first novel.

Furthermore, one may have noticed that Coe’s writing is actually anchored in the logic of chaos, so dear to postmodernists. The blurring conveyed through the collage effect suggesting chaos and the absence of order echoes the postmodernist’s view that there is no meaning. Coe’s writing is voluntarily fragmented by its polygenericity, its compromise of contraries and its intertextuality. The following remark by Coe illustrates this postmodernist parceling: “Je sais que l’une des raisons pour lesquelles j’écris, c’est que j’aime réorganiser le monde à mon goût, en prendre des morceaux éclatés et les remodeler d’une manière que je trouve plus satisfaisante que le chaos dans lequel je les prends” (Mellet 154). According to Mellet, who posits the fact that this idea of chaos, reinforced by the motif of blurring I would say, goes along with the “secret project” of satire developed by Sophie Duval and Marc Martinez: “La satire emploie donc son énergie à propager un désordre croissant. Selon la théorie de l’entropie appliquée à la littérature, la satire opère une dégradation

productrice de travail à partir d'un état initial de désordre qu'elle développe [...]. Le projet secret de la satire serait donc de dynamiter la littérature et tout système de pensée par la corrosion des genres, l'instabilité de l'écriture, l'ambiguïté du langage, la coexistence des contraires, la négation du monde et la coprésence du sérieux et du comique" (256).

Reading the two novels, another prominent motif appearing in Coe's fiction is the narrative and thematic circularity associated to *WACU* and *NII*. This circularity may be illustrated by the motif of the whirl between realism and fantasy and other genres, the mise en abyme through self-reflexivity, the mobility of narratives – analepses, prolepses – and stylistic devices like the epanadiplosis. They all convey confinement and closure, which may well echo the writer's isolation, confronted to his work as well as the stationary character of our contemporary societies.

What's more, Coe's novels allow the questioning of Coe himself and the reader so as to put into perspective the act of literary creation. The metatextual dimension appears to take the form of a participative writing. Coe, through Owen, brings to light the genesis of his story as if it were written before our very eyes. This reflexive stance of writing where the narrator observes himself in the act of writing, distancing his own self while staging himself at the same time, is present many times. This blurred dimension is also a way to show how the narrator, as well as the author, stutter their ways into the novel and find it difficult to give birth to their stories. Therefore, the reader is invited to reflect on the process of writing, to tackle down-to-earth issues and to penetrate the fantasy world created by the author, hence a blurring of perspectives to reach meaning and truth. With the motif of the in-between Coe's oeuvre steers the reader towards a participatory reading where he or she is asked to find sense.

Coe is therefore a hybrid writer, difficult to define as well as his critical reception. Even though Coe's production contributes to redefining political engagement and satire, Coe is more a literary than a political reformer. His will to democratize literature and to appeal for political commitment are questionable. This blurring image associated to the author might be a way to avoid categorization, the usual label of the author. It is also a way for Coe to dare new paths without disappointing his followers, so attached to his novel *WACU*.

To put it in a nutshell, Coe's literature questions literature and more particularly the contemporary British novel. In doing so, he shows that you can get at the truth in different ways and that literature can be a way of coming back to the world by the road of fiction or, to quote Rushdie in "To Truth through Fantasy", "arriving at the truth by the road of untruth".

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