

# **The Collapse of Responsibility**

## **Staging Fragmented Communities in State-of-the-Nation Novels**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the illustration of power dynamics within English society. My reflection spans from 1918 to 2012, so as to understand how the genre of state-of-the-nation novels deals metonymically with microcosmic entities (such as families or local communities) in order to address the fragmentation of society at large. The intertwined communities of my corpus reflect how the most vulnerable individuals are left out, marginalised by dominant groups, therefore endangering what Paul Ricoeur's called "the fragile". This study sheds light on the tension between our necessary ethical responsibility towards the other (as defined by Emmanuel Levinas) and anchored political and social practices within English society, through the prism of fiction.

### **Keywords:**

Responsibility, Ethics, Community, British Literature, Fragmentation, Vulnerability, Precarity.



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In his 1992 talk entitled “Fragility and Responsibility”, Paul Ricoeur contends that responsibility

has the fragile as its specific vis-a-vis, that is to say, both what is perishable through natural weakness and what is threatened under the blows of historical violence. [...] We feel [...] required or enjoined by the fragile to do something, to help, but even better, to foster growth, to allow for accomplishment and flourishing. The strength of this sentiment initially consists in making us experience a situation which is, but should not be. The imperative is embodied in what we perceive as deplorable, unbearable, inadmissible, unjustifiable. (1995, 15-16)

Ricoeur draws his definition of responsibility from Emmanuel Levinas’s *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974) and Hans Jonas’s *Imperative of Responsibility* (1979), suggesting that responsibility cannot be escaped and defines the individual’s relationship with the Other. The latter, according to Levinas, is defined by its “unabsorbable alterity” (2000, 22): it escapes total comprehension, exceeding the ego that can no longer be self-sufficient. The Other beckons, yet eludes me. It is because we cannot entirely know ourselves or the Other that we are vulnerable and thus require responsibility (Butler and Athanasiou 2013). This tension between the unknown and our interdependency is at the core of what

Ricoeur calls the fragile. Departing from Levinas, Ricoeur endows the “imperative of responsibility” with an historical and political dimension that is of a particular interest to the present study. Richard McKeon draws attention to the origins of the word responsibility, which was first used both in English and in French in 1787:

It was not only used first to apply to the operation of political institutions in the context of the American and French revolutions, but it continued in use during the nineteenth century when constitutional government was vastly extended, in scope of operation and in spread among nations, as a result of contacts of cultures and peoples. (1957, 23)

The concept of responsibility has been developed with the creation of nations and the interactions between different types of communities, thus suggesting that Ricoeur’s definition rightly encapsulates the necessary interaction between responsibility and socio-historical forces.

The evolution of the imperative of responsibility as a political and historical concept finds its way into fiction as well, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, in “Condition of England novels” such as Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853) or Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1854). Much like responsibility in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the genre is rooted in the political climate of 19<sup>th</sup> century England. One of the most prominent figures of the Chartist movement, Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), raised the “Condition of England” question in his essay “Chartism” (1839) and his book *Past and Present* (1843). He deplored England’s ambiguous position, as both a wealthy nation and an oppressive one when it came to the working classes. Dedicated to denouncing the unfair living conditions of the lower classes, Condition of England novels – whose name still bears the mark of Carlyle’s own work and commitment – offer a new vision of responsibility which lays emphasis on “the individual character” rather than on “relations of accountability” (Robbins 1990, 219). The Chartist movement played an important part in the development of several social reforms which extended suffrage to the working classes and agricultural labourers, paving the way for a more unified and equalitarian society under the reign of Edward VII. Condition of England novels therefore evolved at

the turn of the century, under the influence of E.M Forster's *Howards End* (1910); the focus shifted from one single social class to the whole English nation, as is suggested by the new label given to such narratives – “State-of-the-nation novels”. The original opposition between the Wilcoxes and the Schlegels is reminiscent of a fragmented Victorian society, torn between ambiguous values such as materialism and spirituality. Nevertheless, *Howards End* can be seen as the utopian illustration of a more unified nation, embodied by Helen's son. Margaret underlines her desire for unification in the novel: “Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer” (2006, 133). Forster's reaction against Victorian conventionalism foreshadowed and even fuelled the Bloomsbury Group's dedication to challenge norms and codified behaviours, such as gender roles for instance. As *Howards End* moves from the familial microcosm to the national macrocosm, it offers a representation of the construction of English society and the need to question its codes of conduct. State-of-the-nation novels present a particular relationship to history and the place of individuals in it, thus recalling Ricoeur's definition of responsibility.

However, E.M. Forster's call for unity could no longer be sustained after the First World War. Katherine Mansfield advocated for a change in fiction that would take into account this disruption, this “blow of historical violence”:

What is it about the novel? [...] But seriously, the more I read the more I feel all these novels will not do. [...] I can't imagine how after the war these men can pick up the old thread as though it had never been. Speaking to you I'd say we have died and live again. How can that be the same life? (1937, 209)

The imperative to represent the effects of the war transforms the past into a coercive force acting upon the characters and upon the society they are part of: the past seems to generate a break, a fracture from which they are trying to escape, thus recalling the historical and social determinism of Dickens's Condition-of-England novels. The first World War transformed the genre; though the legacy of Victorian writers

and of Forster remains when considering the novels' inherent critique, state-of-the-nation novels can no longer advocate for a possible unified society. As Peter Childs contends in *Modernism* (2000), *Howards End* is "driven by a [...] fear of crisis and longing for rejuvenation" (28). State-of-the-nation novels which emerged afterwards are, on the other hand, embracing crisis; the main events of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have weakened political and social relationships and therefore the notion of responsibility as well. The communities depicted in state-of-the-nation novels reveal the progressive fragmentation of English society from the First World War to the 2008 credit crunch, by way of the Second World War and of the rise of neoliberalism. State-of-the-nation novels addressing Brexit will not be included in this analysis but nonetheless represent a new perspective to the genre. In *Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism* (2010), Alexander Regier shows that

Fracture describes a break that is located on the structural level. It is not a process, and does not encompass a temporal element in that sense. It might be historically or genealogically located, but that is not its deciding feature. [...] Fragmentation, differently from fracture, is a process. Even though it can be final, it is defined by a series of changes. It is the unfolding of a break that happens either once or over and over again. (2010, 7)

World War One, as shown by Mansfield, can be considered as the primary fracture of both society and fiction, generating the process of the fragmentation of English society throughout the last centuries. As it unfolds, responsibility is challenged as well: if "responsibility is always the concern of a community" (Petzäll 1957, 92), it thus inevitably suffers from the disintegration of the latter. The relationship to the fragile is therefore questioned and even jeopardised. What becomes of responsibility if the communities at its core are growing further and further apart? Are we heading towards the abandonment of the fragile? Can state-of-the-nation novels be considered as a safeguard against the progressive collapse of responsibility?

It will be essential at first to study the use of metonymy in state-of-the-nation novels, so as to understand how the social structures depicted in the novels

are indeed illustrations of the English nation. They reveal how different types of communities – the family, the local and the national – intertwine. This will allow us to see how responsibility can or cannot unfold, dwelling on Judith Butler’s observation that “the question of what binds me to another and in what way this obligation suggests that the ‘I’ is invariably implicated in the ‘we’” (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 107). The second part of this paper aims at showing how such embedded communities are constructed and thus defined by norms and codes of conduct. The development of societies necessarily involves dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, often determined by the dominant group and therefore leading to the in-betweenness of the fragile, which becomes an outcast that needs to be taken care of. The two preceding points tend to showcase society’s “moral and emotional atrophy” (Bradbury 1985, 143) one that seems to be linked with the development of neoliberalism and growing indifference, causing responsibility to progressively disappear. This phenomenon thus raises the question the individual’s own role in enabling this process of fragmentation.

### **Intertwined responsibilities**

In her article “Habitations of the Past: of Shrines and Haunted Houses”, Catherine Bernard analyses the metonymic device of the country house in British fiction. She states that:

Modern fiction has, from the eighteenth century onwards, systematically built on such metaphors or metonymies to reflect on the overall social dynamics. It has symmetrically contributed to legitimize and naturalize the metonymy of the house, great or humble, as a trope standing for society. [...] In it, collective time and a powerful sense of the local, family history and national history merge and are subsumed under a common political economy. The law of the house becomes the law of the country. (Bernard 2005, 161-163)

The use of metonymy reveals how private and public spheres intertwine in British fiction – a figure particularly prominent in state-of-the-nation novels. The family, the local and the national are, as Bernard suggests, intimately connected: the

metonymic approach of state-of-the-nation novels offers a kaleidoscopic vision of the notion of responsibility, especially as they tend to focus on disruptive historical events that challenge ethical relationships. In *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), Rebecca West explores the troubled return of a shell-shocked soldier to the family home. The war operates a redefinition of the relationship with the Other, as it reverses the dynamics of the Baldry couple; Kitty is left stammering about the Baldrys' responsibilities ("We - we've a lot of responsibilities you and I" (West 2004, 26)) which Chris is no longer able to assume. The 'Angel of the House' legacy of the vulnerable woman depending on her husband is jeopardised as "the fragile" – according to Ricoeur's definition – becomes the soldier returned home. The upset patriarchal structure is here reminiscent of the emergence of the New Woman at the turn of the century and is a token of West's own political commitment. Kitty is now in charge of the society Chris and her created: "with all the land you've bought, there are ever so many people to look after" (26). Both class and social responsibility are here shattered since the responsibility of the "we" is left to the sole "I" of Kitty, as Chris becomes someone Kitty has "to look after". West pays tribute to the disruption of society and its codes after the First World War. Nevertheless, if she decided to stage the return of an amnesiac soldier, it is but a foil to put to the fore the community that suffered the "blows of historical violence" even before the war broke out: women. As Nicole Rizzuto shows, "West's novel also implicitly asks who bears responsibility for and to the past, and to those silenced when historical truth founders upon a collective memory riven by trauma" (2012, 9). Kitty's own trauma - her inability to cope with the loss of her son - is undermined by the return of her husband which stands as a metonymy of the whole nation. West pinpoints gender inequalities, revealing the nation's lack of responsibility towards women and making the characters' story a symptom of the whole country. Focusing on family spheres is thus a way to comment on the state



of the nation by dealing with microcosms and to show how responsibility affects every level of interdependency.

The use of metonymy extends to larger communities, such as towns or cities, which brings about another dimension of the concept of responsibility, as private spheres come to interact with one another. The prologue of Winifred Holtby's *South Riding* (1936) confirms the entanglement of the local and national scale: "Local government was an epitome of national government. Here was World Tragedy in embryo. Here gallant Labour, with nothing to lose but its chains, would fight entrenched and armoured Capital. [...] Here Corruption could be studied and exposed, oppression denounced, and lethargy indicted" (2010, 3). Holtby's *South Riding* represents the ideal of responsibility as Ricoeur defines it; Sarah Burton, the main character, epitomises the new emancipated woman of the interwar period who stands for equality and justice throughout the novel. She even declares: "There are certain things I hate – muddle, war, poverty and so on – the things most intelligent people hate nowadays, whatever their party. And I hate indifferentism, and lethargy, and the sort of selfishness that shuts itself up into its own shell of personal preoccupations" (109). Her words find their echo in Ricoeur's work and are symptomatic of Holtby's own personal beliefs, as Marion Shaw observes:

The novel is also a mature embodiment of all Winifred's most fundamental beliefs: her pacifism, her equalitarian feminism, her belief in social democracy and in the value of education, in the importance of the individual human being and of the individual's obligations towards society." (2012, 242)

However, the novel's division into several books resembles municipal archives, revealing both the connections between the residents and the social divisions between the rich and the poor, between corrupted figures (embodied by Alderman Snaith) and progressive ones (epitomised by Sarah Burton). These "archives" disclose the sclerosis of the interwar English town; corruption, class tensions and the ghost of the First World War are all factors that weaken and endow

responsibility with a sense of doom that betrays the vulnerability of the socio-political tissue and thus of ethical relationships.

According to Hans Jonas, the symbol of family goes beyond the private sphere, as the politician is a “son” of the larger community he wishes to represent:

There does exist an emotional relation comparable to love on the part of the political individual toward the community whose destiny he wishes to guide to the best, for it is "his" in a much deeper sense than that of mere community of interests: he is (in the normal case) descended from it and through it has become what he is; he is thus, indeed, not the father but a "son" of his people and country (also class, etc) and thereby in a kind of sibling-relation to all the others – present, future, even past – with whom he shares this bond. [...] It is difficult, though not impossible, to carry responsibility for something one doesn't love, and one rather generates the love for it than do one's duty "free from inclination". (1985, 104)

Jonas's conception of the political individual finds echoes in Holtby's novel, as the epigraph reads “we are members one of another” (2010, xviii); it illustrates the necessary filiation between individuals of the same community. Nonetheless, state-of-the-nation novels (Holtby's included) do focus on the lack of responsibility of national leaders, thus questioning the actual connection between them and “their” entire community. In *What a Carve Up!* (1994), Jonathan Coe uses the Winshaw family as a metonymy for the Thatcher government: the Winshaw children are either members of the government, media personalities, heads of the food industry and so on. Ryan Trimm rightly underlines that

All operate without regard save for profit, an inconsideration of others in line with Thatcher's disavowal of society. Concordantly, the family represents a constellation of financial and cultural interests coming to the fore during the Thatcher era [...] The drive for wealth, the opportunism, the lack of scruples – these family traits correspond with the theory and practice of Thatcherism. (2010, 164)

The Winshaws' own “disavowal of society” is responsible for the disintegration of the filiation between citizens and politicians, who no longer seem to share a bond with the people they govern. This is illustrated by Mortimer Winshaw, who eventually murders all his siblings:

I was born into money and like the rest of my family I was too selfish to want to do any good with it. Unlike them, at least, I never did anyone such harm. But I thought I might redeem myself, slightly, by doing mankind a small favour before I died. Ridding the world of a handful of vermin. (Coe 2016, 484)

The family therefore becomes guilty of metaphorical and actual murder: they are responsible for “a prolonged attack, a carve up, on the national core” (Trimm 2010, 164) as unemployment, restrictions and the crumbling of the NHS intensified, while Mortimer’s massacre only appears as a real enactment of what the rest of his family slowly did to the nation (even more so as each Winshaw died in a way that replicated his/her deviant occupation). If Mortimer’s deed sounds like justice, he is no different from his siblings as far as responsibility is concerned. Drawing from Levinas, Ricoeur reminds us that:

when the face of the other raises itself before me, above me, it is not an appearance that I can include within the sphere of my own representations. To be sure, the other appears, his face makes him appear, but the face is not a spectacle; it is a voice. This voice tells me, “Thou shall not kill.” Each face is a Sinai that prohibits murder. (1996, 336)

*What a Carve Up!* stages the Winshaws’ lack of ethics as the ultimate “blow of historical violence” on responsibility itself. With the indirect and actual murders taking place in the novel, responsibility, along with English society, crumble. Both drawing from the historical novel’s use of family as a symbol of “national identity” (Parrinder 2006, 33), West and Coe reveal the vulnerability of responsibility and question the foundation of communities and their relationship with the Other. If West’s *The Return of the Soldier* is emblematic of modernist writing and its destabilisation of inherited structures (such as a male dominated society), Coe further subverts the image of family and genealogy which can no longer be maintained. Resolutely postmodern (Guignery 2011), *What a Carve Up!* uses the legacy of Condition of England novels and of modernist writers to carve a new portrait of a fragmented nation. By subverting past literary codes, Coe’s novel suggests that the asymmetric relationships denounced in previous state-of-the-

nation novels are becoming more insidious and more polarising. It is therefore essential to understand the nature of such a process, as the genre calls into question the construction of communities and the place of the fragile in it.

**“Contact zones”: outlining the community**

Richard McKeon considers the responsibility of a nation to be the result of the interaction between different types of

cultural communities - determined by religion, education, taste, ethnical derivation, economic situation, occupation, and many other factors - and the political responsibilities of nations reflect and protect the cultural values of societies. [...] A responsible community reflects a tradition of responsibility based on the character of the community or nation and responsive to the requirements of common values and of the common good. (1957, 25)

McKeon here joins Benedict Anderson and his concept of “imagined communities” (1983), wherein such communities are defined by a set of internalised common values and social codes. If the *a priori* constitution of the nation as a community of communities could ideally be based, to paraphrase McKeon’s words, on the reflection and protection of the “cultural values of societies”, the intertwining of different levels of responsibility already revealed a discrepancy between interacting parties which questions the definition of “common values”. In fact, the nation rather appears as a “contact zone” between these cultural communities. Marie-Louise Pratt uses this expression “to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (1991, 34). The exposure to such relations is at the core of state-of-the-nation novels: if some have been already addressed in the first part of this paper, it appears that the genre denounces the polarisation of English society between dominant groups and precarious ones, which leaves the call of the fragile partially or completely unanswered.

Perhaps one of the most commented divisions within English society is class conflict. Just like state-of-the-nation novels, the English class system is a legacy of the Victorian era. Historian David Cannadine explains that

[...] despite the best efforts of many of today's historians to take class out of the 19th century, the fact remains that the Victorians *were* obsessed with it - or at least, with something very like it. Read any contemporary novel, newspaper, or parliamentary debate, and the preoccupation is immediately apparent - not with class in the Marxist sense of collective and conflicting relations to the means of production, but with those finely graded distinctions of prestige ranking to which sociologists give the name status. (1998, 146)

This sense of class and status runs through state-of-the-nation novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and is symptomatic of Pratt's "asymmetrical relations of power". The tension between the rich and the poor intensifies the fragmentation of the South Riding community in Winifred Holtby's novel, as Midge Carne's remarks suggest: "The Carnes, she knew, were not Poor People. Poor people lived in cottages; the Carnes lived in a Hall, which was the biggest house for miles round [...]" (2010, 15). The capitalisation of the expression "Poor People" acts as a stigma on this community which is even attributed a specific type of habitation. Erving Goffman defines the features of stigma as such:

an individual who might have been received easily in ordinary social intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us. He possesses a stigma, an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated. We and those who do not depart negatively from the particular expectations at issue I shall call *the normals*." (1963, 5)

These lines of segmentarity in the individual identity are embodied by Midge's use of "Poor People" which creates an undesirable social category that undermines the power of the dominant group, i.e. the rich part of the population. The stigmatisation of the poor goes as far as creating geographies of exclusion that are legitimised by the topography and toponymy of the city: "Two miles south of Kiplington, between the cliffs and the road to Maythorpe, stood a group of dwellings known locally as the Shacks. [...] A war raged between Kiplington Urban District Council and the

South Riding County Council over the tolerated existence of the Shacks” (Holtby 2010, 30). The word “shack” transforms the location into a metonymy for poverty, while the map of the South Riding included in the novel inscribes this stigma into the territory and its archives, so as to secure the poor’s social status as is. This rejection of the Other denies the possibility of responsibility, as the geographical detachment from him/her causes delay in the construction of ethical relationships. Over 75 years later, John Lanchester’s *Capital* (2012) denounces the same process of geographical and moral exclusion based on class, as his novel focuses on one single wealthy road in London:

Having a house in Pepys Road was like being in a casino in which you were guaranteed to be a winner. If you already lived there, you were rich. If you wanted to move there, you had to be rich. It was the first time in history this had ever been true. Britain had become a country of winners and losers, and all the people in the street, just by living there, had won. (2013, 7)

The reader’s introduction to life on Pepys Road reveals the geographical and social divide animating not only London but the country as a whole. Difference in social class apparently informs on the moral character of the Other who doesn’t have a right of residence if he/she does not fit into the “winners” group. The nation becomes a “contact zone” between economic and social communities that cannot cohabit in the same space, continually dealing the “blows of historical violence” to the less fortunate. In her *Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon considers that with postmodernism, “the “ex-centric” (be it in class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity) take on new significance in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith (that is middleclass, male, heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed” (12). However, the similarities between Holtby’s and Lanchester’s works, along with the other state-of-the-nation novels analysed in this study, suggest that some modernist fictions were already taking into account the ex-centric and already recognised the plurality of experiences and narratives. As they draw from the legacy of the

Condition of England novels, state-of-the-nation novels necessarily deal with the “ex-centric” of their times, such as the poor in the case of *Holtby*, women in West’s novel, or such as immigrants and political refugees for instance.

The repetition of the same asymmetrical interactions between individuals consolidates the establishment and legitimisation of privilege as the norm on a national level. In her dialogue with Gayatri C. Spivak, Judith Butler analyses this rhetoric of belonging as part of a compliance between nation and state in the treatment of marginalised communities:

In other words, the nation-state assumes that the nation expresses a certain national identity, is founded through the concerted consensus of a nation, and that a certain correspondence exists between the state and the nation. The nation, in this view, is singular and homogeneous, or at least, it becomes so in order to comply with the requirements of the state. The state derives its legitimacy from the nation, which means that those national minorities who do not qualify for “national belonging” are regarded as “illegitimate inhabitants.” (Butler and Spivak 2007, 30-31)

Peter McAllister, a judge of the London centre for asylum and immigration tribunal, embodies this desire to preserve the apparent homogeneity of both state and nation, up to the point where the Other becomes an ambush in this process:

[...] he was fighting the good fight by injecting the traditional values of Englishness into an immigration system which was always in danger of ‘producer capture’. The people who worked with immigrants always ran the risk of coming to believe that they worked for the immigrants. That was a mistake Peter never made. He remembered who paid his salary.” (Lanchester 2013, 484)

Moral responsibility is under the yoke of political affiliation and social privilege: Peter went to “Radley and St Andrews” and “looked like a privileged man passing into early middle age with his early assumptions and prejudices entirely intact” (486). Responsibility is no longer due to the fragile but to the state, whose aim is to monitor, rather than ensure, the latter’s “accomplishment and flourishing”. Peter’s opposition to his colleague Alison Tite – who considers that “immigration work felt more connected to the larger currents of history” (484) and thanks to whom “the applicant stood a much better than average chance of winning the right to remain legally in the UK” (485) – illustrates not only the arbitrariness of the UK

immigration system but also the arbitrariness of responsibility as well. The asymmetrical relationships in the contact zone turn the imperative of responsibility into a state discretionary power. Quentina Mkfesi, the Zimbabwean woman on the other hand of Peter's decision whose story is developed throughout the novel, is now reduced to a name on a file. Her identity is erased under the law of the contact zone and its legal avatars:

[...] the judge at the final appeal had ruled that she could not be sent back to Zimbabwe because there were grounds for thinking that if she was she would be killed. At that point Quentina had entered a legal state of semi-existence. She had no right to work and could claim only subsistence-level benefits, but she couldn't be imprisoned and deported. She was not a citizen of the UK but she could not go anywhere else. She was a non-person. (Lanchester 2010, 131-132)

The fragile is therefore in a state of in-betweenness that mutes his call. Peter's prioritisation of the state's interests over "what we perceive as deplorable, unbearable, inadmissible, unjustifiable" announces the collapse of moral responsibility. French philosopher Guillaume Le Blanc sheds light on this process:

The inexistence of the precarious is the dark heart of the social question. There actually is a social status for precarity: inexistence. The precarious do not live outside of society. They are not excluded, but they are dispossessed of themselves by the same society which produces them by keeping them afloat – one foot in, one foot out – thus creating the reserve army capitalism needs to endlessly prosper. Self-dispossession reaches its paroxysm when the precarious are deprived of their voice and their face. (Le Blanc 2007, 19-20 [my translation])

The polarisation of society leads to a perverse system of inclusion/exclusion that denies the possibility for responsibility and thus for responsiveness. The laws of the contact zone, defined by processes of detachment enabled by institutions, question our ability to "[critically] engage with social norms" (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 108), as state-of-the-nation novels denounce English society's growing indifference and compliance with unethical behaviours.



### **Towards a “moral and emotional atrophy”?**

Le Blanc hints at the fact that capitalism led to a redefinition of ethical relationships, as he demonstrates how precarious lives are both generated and maintained by a prioritisation of profit over moral values. The social polarisation evoked earlier is combined with a growing thirst for capital and wealth that heightens social tensions and is at the core of the development of indifference. In *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, Wendy Brown explains that the rise of neoliberalism caused the *homo oeconomicus* to supersede the *homo politicus*:

All conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized. In neoliberal reason and in domains governed by it, we are only and everywhere *homo oeconomicus* [...]. (2015, 9)

Brown argues that “the neoliberal triumph of *homo oeconomicus*” is “vanquishing the subject that governs itself through moral autonomy” (79). Brown’s and Le Blanc’s observations show that responsibility is under threat and even already collapsing under the clout of capitalism, as it becomes monetised as well. If Winifred Holtby’s novel started to address such issues, the dehumanising power of capital is much more developed in state-of-the-nation novels written after the Second World War. Angus Wilson’s *No Laughing Matter* (1967) satirises Clara and William Matthews, parents of six children whom they managed to neglect (and even abuse) throughout their childhood to ensure their personal well-being. Their thirst for wealth and pomp is often mocked by the Matthews children who re-enact their parents’ immoral behaviours in theatrical incursions:

CLARA MATTHEWS: [...] But the important thing is the financial settlement and that’s where you can help. Let’s hear what settlement you children propose so that your father and I can live separately without too much diminution of the little standards we’ve tried to build up to do credit to our successful children.

WILLIAM MATTHEWS: A very sound point, my dear. You’re all doing so well now, you can’t afford shabby genteel parents. It only proves what I’ve always said, that the more you neglect your children the better they’ll fare later on.

CLARA MATTHEWS: Don't be absurd, Billy. We've never neglected the children. We taught them early to be adult and responsible and as a result they're responsible adults. (Wilson 1969, 212)

Clara, the mother, is here played by her son Marcus, while Rupert plays the part of William/Billy Pop. The irony of the passage illustrates the parents' moral inability to provide for their children: Clara's syllogism reveals the complete absurdity of the parents' behaviour, as moral responsibility is a burden that can only be compensated by financial support. According to Malcolm Bradbury, Angus Wilson can be considered as the heir of the social-realist novel:

Even as he relishes his world for its style, its social flamboyance, he measures and judges according to a comic and ironic mode. And one of the functions of irony and comedy in his work is to be directed, as it is in Forster's novels, towards a centre, showing up moral and emotional atrophy, self-deceit and unrecognized failure in the realm of the personal. (1985, 143)

Bradbury associates this "atrophy" with "an awareness of society not as a solid substance but as a seeming [...]" (144). The fragility of both individual psyche and society creates a vacuum that allows for seemingly stable and profitable capital to replace and eventually erase ethical relationships – cynically reinforcing the individual's "moral and emotional atrophy" as he/she becomes more and more isolated from others. In keeping with Wilson's humorous twist, John Lanchester comments on Pepys Road's inhabitants' lack of consideration through the ironic anthropomorphising of the houses:

As the houses got more expensive, it was as if they had come alive, and had wishes and needs of their own. Vans from Berry Brothers and Rudd brought wine; there were two or three different vans of dog-walkers; there were florists, Amazon parcels, personal trainers, cleaners, plumbers, yoga teachers, and all day long, all of them going up to the houses like supplicants and then being swallowed by them. [...] The houses were now like people, and rich people at that, imperious, with needs of their own that they were not shy about having serviced. (Lanchester 2013, 6)

The accumulation reveals the paradox of the saturation of space and the dehumanisation of the neighbourhood. The liminality of the house encloses the inhabitants in their own personal space which becomes the embodiment of

materialism devoid of meaningful connection with others. The same saturation crops up in conversations, as “it began to be all right for people to talk about house prices all the time; the topic came up in conversation within the first minute of people speaking to each other” (5). As Brown showed, “all conduct is economic conduct”, which means the necessary collapse of ethics as the foundation of the community which becomes inevitably more and more fragmented.

Brown’s insistence on the demise of democracy as a result of neoliberalism also questions the people’s own responsibility when it comes to political choices; if the *homo oeconomicus* does supersede the *homo politicus*, what part does the individual play in allowing this to happen? Åke Petzäll explains that:

The institution answers, as living organisation, to the interests of individuals and the institution itself, made of individuals, can only live by the conscience of its wards. It means that it is the individual’s responsibility to let himself be represented only by institutions that he can, as a responsible being, trustfully support.” (1957, 69 [my translation])

In *The Holiday* (1949), Stevie Smith uses the Second World War and the beginning of the Cold War to denounce the compliance between unethical governments and individuals: “We are among corrupt people, how can be innocent? How can we have a revolution and make a new world when we are so corrupt?” (Smith 1979, 131) Celia, the main character, considers each and every member of English society as guilty as the government for the horrors of the War and even guiltier for keeping wrongful institutions afloat. She blames Western people’s thirst for consumerism for fostering the Cold War, “the person-by-person, consumer-by-consumer selling-of-soul, and selling of consciousness as well as conscience, that in Smith’s view made all of her compatriots culpable” (Hulk 2005, 206). Smith’s criticism echoes Brown’s and reveals that the insidious development of capitalism generates ethical numbness. The four state-of-the-nation novels written after the Second World War considered in this study (*The Holiday*, *No Laughing Matter*, *What a Carve Up!* and *Capital*) re-enact the development of a “neoliberalist rationality” (Brown 2015, 36)

which has been progressively fragmenting British society. Victim of the Winshaws' Thatcherite government, Michael Owen, the protagonist of *What a Carve Up!*, indirectly comes to the same conclusion after listing the evidence of the Winshaws' manipulation and corruption of the nation:

And so they sit at home getting fat on the proceeds and here we all are. Our businesses failing, our jobs disappearing, our countryside choking, our hospitals crumbling, our homes being repossessed, our bodies being poisoned, our minds shutting down, the whole bloody spirit of the country crushed and fighting for breath. I hate the Winshaws Fiona. Just look what they've done to us. Look what they've done to you. (Coe 2016, 413)

As he blames the government and other types of institutions led by the family, Michael considers himself and his fellow countrymen responsible as well for the country falling apart. Neoliberalism creeps up in every aspect of daily life and becomes inescapable. John Su underlines that

Owen's growing awareness of how global events and national economic policies have concrete, everyday consequences is the central trajectory of the second half of the novel. He ultimately recognizes that the responsibility for Fiona's death is not to be laid on the chance misfortune of illness or the underfunded National Health System, but on the totality of Thatcherism as part of a global neoliberal project—a project that he unwittingly supports in everyday activities from food choice to livelihood. (2014, 1090)

The rise and legitimisation of immoral practices questions the individual's ethical position, as his own call for responsibility meets no responsiveness from institutions. The reciprocity at the core of responsibility shatters and leaves the individual alone, facing an unreflective mirror. Henceforth, the "moral atrophy" of the individual denounced in state-of-the-nation novels exposes how the community of the nation is progressively fragmenting, making it impossible to engage and answer to the fragile. Judith Butler argues that: "responsibility requires responsiveness. Indeed, I think that many of the affective dispositions that are required for political responsibility, including outrage, indignation, desire and hope, are all bound up with what one wishes not only for oneself, but for others as well" (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, 68-9). Yet, the combined dynamics of detachment

from the Other and the seclusion of the self annihilates the individual's propensity to care and to react – causing political and moral responsibility to fail at all levels of society.

### **Conclusion**

The fragmentation of English society and of the different communities that compose it leads to an inevitable collapse of responsibility which concurs with the rise of misrepresentative governments. The overlapping of personal and national spheres gives way to asymmetrical relationships that determine a set of oppressive social codes which reach their paroxysm with the rise of capitalism and neoliberalism and the effacement of the *homo politicus*. If members of the dominant group, like Michael Owen, grapple with the unethical behaviour of institutions, the fact that Coe, like Lanchester, have been reproached with not giving a voice to the suffering working class<sup>1</sup> suggests that the call of the fragile is but only partially answered. Its sclerotic condition leaves the fragile in a state of in-betweenness that allows it to be part of society from afar – a position used as a tool for the good conscience of the dominant group which acknowledges its presence, yet without allowing it to “flourish”. Against the destabilisation of political communities, state-of-the-nation novels nonetheless appear as a safeguard for responsibility. Maureen Whitebrook argues that “novels help mediate between modernist responsibility to action and postmodernist responsibility to other/otherness, showing the injunction to put oneself in the place of others not only as a question of “moral compassion” (as in Nussbaum’s work) but *politically* necessary” (1996, 47). If the political commitment of the authors’ considered in this study is undeniable, the division of responsibility between modernism and postmodernism as suggested by Whitebrook does not seem to hold; dividing responsibility between “a call for action” and an

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<sup>1</sup> See Lawrence Driscoll, *Evading Class in Contemporary British Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 158 and 227, as well as Barbara Korte, “John Lanchester’s Capital: financial risk and its counterpoints,” *Textual Practice*, vol. 31.3 (2017): 502.

answer “to the other” would be denying the genre of state-of-the-nation novels, which blends both impulses. If *South Riding* could be considered in light of Whitebrook’s categories, Holtby’s portrayal of lower-classes shows that she also calls for a reconsideration of the other, much like Rebecca West. The same could be said of postmodernist state-of-the-nation novels: they do call for responsibility towards the other but also call for action. The only difference with earlier novels of the genre may lie in the fact that action seems deferred by neoliberalism, as profit and market-logic permeate both public and private spheres. Through their often fragmented and experimental form, state-of-the-nation novels draw a revealing portrait of a fragmented English society throughout the centuries. Ironically enough, the development of the genre, though at times bearing the aesthetic marks of the *Zeitgeist* in which the novels are produced, stands as a beacon of stability against the fragmentation of communities and ethics. The genre allows authors to “critically engage with social norms” (Butler) and to present societies that “should be otherwise” (Adorno 1977, 194). State-of-the-nation novels enjoin their readers to (re)consider their relationship with the fragile. Marion Shaw captures the essence of state-of-the-nation novels in her analysis of *South Riding*: “The characters through whom we see Holtby’s landscapes and communities also become the individuals through whom we plot a changing perspective on society, and through them Holtby urges her readers to assess their own position and responsibility” (2012, 12). However, in light of the recent novels of the genre, Shaw’s stance appears rather optimistic: if our societies are indeed condemned to “moral and emotional atrophy” and if responsibility is replaced by individualism and indifference under neoliberalism, literature’s own political role is under threat. More than ever, state-of-the-nation novel writers (and writers in general) have a responsibility towards their readers, towards society – provided the latter still consider literature “worthy” of their time and ever-fleeting attention.

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