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Class and the Middle-Class Novel: Jonathan Coe's Trotter-Trilogy

1. Introduction: Coe and Class

Early on in Jonathan Coe's *The Rotters' Club*, a character reckons that when it comes to class, "[t]he old distinctions just don't mean anything any more," and he goes on to declare the class war to be "over" (*RC*, 16).[1] The scene takes place in Birmingham in 1973, the year of the oil crisis, and the character speaking is a manager at the British Leyland Longbridge car plant. This setting alone invites a different conclusion regarding the alleged 'classlessness' of 1970s Britain. Indeed, the novel encourages a more critical view by giving us insight into the thoughts of the shop steward Bill Anderton: in Bill's view, "the class war was alive and well and being waged with some ferocity at British Leyland" (*RC*, 16). *The Rotters' Club* charts the period of the 1970s up until the general election of 1979, but it was written and published later, in 2001, and begins with a frame narrative set in the year 2003. As a "novel of retrospect" (Dix 2010, 31), Coe's narrative thus also implicitly comments, with historical hindsight, on the developments that were to follow in the intervening two decades. Following the Conservative victory in the 1979 general election, the idea of a 'classless society' whose seeds had been sown by the postwar consensus shifted its purport and gained firm ground in the neoliberal agenda of Thatcherism; it was further articulated by John Major and yet again mobilised by New Labour, with Tony Blair asserting in 1999 that "the class war is over" ("UK Politics" 1999). The end of class surfaces here both as an ideal and as a (constructed) statement of fact, a 'fact' that then negates socioeconomic inequality, uneven distribution of wealth and opportunity, social degradation, and so on. Bill's rebuttal in 1973 is geared towards the union strikes that dominate both the company and the country, but in casting doubts on a statement that directly echoes Blair's at the end of the millennium (see e.g. Guignery 2016, 79), the novel generally appears to show the notion of a classless society to be ideologically motivated.

The two sequels to *The Rotters' Club*, *The Closed Circle* (2004) and *Middle England* (2018), share this stance of critical interrogation, which is not new to Coe. He satirised the Thatcher-era in his 1994 novel *What a Carve-Up!* and became known as a writer "in tune with the present political times and willing to reflect on them" (Guignery 2015, 162). Further following the histories of protagonist Benjamin Trotter and a recurring cast of friends and family, both novels shed light on the transformation of Britain under neoliberalism, combined with a continued keen interest in right-wing nationalist and racist currents in British society. As before, Coe combines this serious subject-matter with a humorous tongue, mockery, and an eye for situational comedy. While *The Closed Circle* is preoccupied with the marketisation of political culture under New Labour and its 'third way,' *Middle England* tackles the ins and outs of the Brexit

1 The in-text references for Coe's novels use the following abbreviations: *RC* (for *The Rotters' Club*), *CC* (for *The Closed Circle*), and *ME* (for *Middle England*).

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referendum in a Britain marked by the austerity programme, and revisits a 'middle England' pervaded by rural nostalgia and consumerism as brought about by the Thatcher years.

If such concerns suggest wariness towards the proclaimed end of class, criticism has been levelled against Coe's 2001 and 2004 novels precisely for evading matters of class (Driscoll 2009, 157-167). Lawrence Driscoll ascribes this oversight to both the dominant theorems in literary studies and to a range of contemporary British novelists, which in conjunction universalise a middle-class point of view that is complicit with the capitalist system, "producing a supposedly 'classless' norm" and omitting genuine questions of class, respectively of social inequality and the working class (Driscoll 2009, 3). Aided by postmodern theory's "celebration of hybridity and difference,"[2] Driscoll argues, these texts "enabl[e] and sustain[] the ideological notion of a 'classless' contemporary British literature and culture" (2009, 1). Philip Tew similarly holds that "many writers retain a conceptual world-view based on liberal values and the cultural significance of the middle class" (Tew 2004, 61), translating into an exclusion of the working classes. When such fiction addresses this state of things, it "does so almost entirely in terms of evoking middle-class existence and its turbulences, making of this class 'a microcosm of the whole of England'" (2004, 61).

Indeed, Coe's novels are largely about and of the middle class. Coe's choice for a microcosm of British society in *The Rotters' Club* fell on the prestigious King William's school, a thinly veiled version of King Edward's, which the author attended. Coe himself concedes this to have been a "naive stratagem" in a piece for *The Guardian* in 2021, "since the school was far too privileged and unrepresentative an institution to fulfil that function" (Coe 2021). However, neither a reading that fully endorses Driscoll's position nor one that denies certain limitations of Coe's middle-class vantage point seems particularly productive to me.[3] Rather, I would argue that the Trotter-trilogy, as I will call it in the following, navigates its agenda of social criticism, including a critique of class, and its simultaneous middle-class point of view not by positing a universal, because concealed, middle-class norm, but by consciously engaging with its own status as middle-class writing. All three novels are prime examples of the Condition-of-England novel, a genre with a firm anchoring in socio-political reality, and constitute "a type of socially and politically committed contemporary writing" (Lusin 2018, 247). While this links Coe's trilogy with recent state-of-the-nation writing, the author adds his characteristic use of humour and satire to the realist mode employed by other examples of the genre. It is this aspect of the novels which conveys, at times, a condescending outlook but, at the same time, delivers self-deprecating mockery.

2 It is all the more ironic that in his interpretation of *The Closed Circle*, Driscoll resorts to a postmodern reading himself in order to disqualify the novel's realism (Driscoll 2009, 166-167).

3 In a similar fashion, Dominic Head identifies a strand of critique against politically engaged middle-class writing and its "deluded liberal vantage point […] that masks its own vested interests" (Head 2006, 243), but he goes on to qualify this criticism: on the one hand, it discredits the majority of novels with regard to delivering valid political concerns; on the other, it conflates the novelistic endeavour with political activism (Head 2006, 242-244).

2. Functions of the (Serialised) Condition-of-England Novel

Although Coe has elsewhere deemed conventional or realist state-of-the-nation writing inadequate to present times,[4] he takes up established, if slightly modified, features of the nineteenth-century Condition-of-England novel for his trilogy. It is this 'traditional' form which renders the novels most suited to their project of capturing contemporary social and political life, and of offering contextualisation and commentary. Coe's formal choices also foreground the novels' social criticism instead of suggesting postmodernist concerns that, at least according to Driscoll, side-track matters of class. As Tew writes with regard to *The Rotters' Club*, "Coe in effect recuperates the role of the novel, its need to critique and engage, even in a postmodern environment" (Tew 2004, 81). Like other Condition-of-England texts, the novels profess a "keen engagement with contemporary themes" (Preston 2012) and "explore key aspects of the social reality of their time" (Lusin 2018, 249). In fact, the meticulous attention to detail with which the trilogy chronicles events in British politics and society exceeds that of most texts of the genre. The novels provide exact dates for most plot segments, and they repeatedly interlink the private and the political (see e.g. Guignery 2016, 74-75), as when *The Rotters' Club* correlates the (factual) two year-long strike at the London Grunwick factory with Barbara and Sam Chase's marriage (in 1977, "[t]he difficulties remained intractable;" *RC*, 259). That *The Rotters' Club* additionally "blur[s] the frontiers between incompatible ontological realms" by including historical figures in its fictional narrative further "firmly situate[s] the novel in a realistic historical context" (Guignery 2016, 79). Such embeddedness in political reality is conducive to how the novels tackle moments of national crisis, take stock, and come to terms with developments, sometimes as they unfold.

These genre-related features also mean that the novels remain alert to questions of class. In *The Rotters' Club*, the Longbridge car plant distinctly harks back to the industrial novel and its concern with the condition of the working classes. It provides the stage for the struggles of labour unions for better working conditions and specifically Bill Anderton's mobilisation of the workforce in terms of "[t]he ruling class versus the labouring class" (*RC*, 239). While in *The Closed Circle*, all graduates of King William's have achieved upward social mobility and are largely unconcerned by socioeconomic considerations, with *Middle England*, the car plant has been replaced by a shopping centre, but class has made a 'full return.' Going back to the narrated world of the two previous novels, *Middle England* allows Coe to make a point about the persistence of class under neoliberal parameters that would have remained less distinct had the narration ended with *The Closed Circle*. The swimmer who interrupts the Cambridge-Oxford boat race on the day of Sophie Potter's wedding does so to "protest against inequalities in British society, government cuts, reductions in civil liberties and a culture of elitism" (*ME*, 98). In fact, the novel has several characters witness the 2011

4 In a piece written for *The New Statesman* in 2012, Coe called for less conventional, less "formally satisfying" modes (such as narrative closure) to address the state of the nation (Coe 2012). Regarding his novel *Number 11, or Tales that Witness Madness* (2015), he stated that "realism is [not] good enough these days to write about contemporary reality" (qtd. in Guignery 2018).

London riots and their spreading to other cities, and it repeatedly refers to the rising number of people relying on food banks. The novel identifies these developments as results of what is a central theme in current state-of-the-nation novels (Lusin 2018, 248): a "cruel austerity programme whose effects have been felt by everyone in the country except the super-rich" (*ME*, 188).

When it comes to the middle England of its title, too, the novel all but suggests a levelling of socioeconomic difference. Middle England is both a geographical and sociological category in that it refers to the geographical centre of the country and the politically conservative heartland of British society. Socioeconomically, Mark Easton places it "in the middle," too, describing middle England as "a comfortable place, neither rich nor poor" (2010). In Coe's novel, middle England is shown not to be as 'comfortably in-between,' neither economically nor politically. *Middle England* diagnoses a growing sense of precariousness in a section of society that would once have counted themselves as part of the 'established' middle class. Doug Anderton explains to Benjamin that "[p]eople see these guys in the City who practically crashed the economy two years ago and never felt any consequences […]. Wages are frozen. People have got no job security […]. A few years ago they felt wealthy. Now they feel poor" (*ME*, 14). A microcosmic portrayal of the nation is no longer found in King William's, but at a speed awareness course, attended by "men and women of all ages, and all skin colours" (*ME*, 36). What the diverse participants of the course have in common is "a profound and abiding sense of injustice" (*ME*, 37). At the same time, the novel's exploration of middle England betrays a specific vantage point that is common to all three novels and that effectively hinders their project of critical evaluation of the status quo. Coe's Trotter-trilogy maintains a distinct 'middle-classness' not unlike its Victorian forerunners, whose function it was to alert middle- and upper-class readers to the fate of the industrial working classes (Simmons 2002, 336). How the novels indicate but also negotiate this point of view will be analysed below.

3. A Middle-Class Norm? Petty Bourgeois and 'Proper Bourgeois'

The novels of Coe's Trotter-trilogy quite insistently make their readers see class as operating in British society, not least because of the confrontations between the upper-class education offered at King William's and some of its pupils' lower middle-class background staged in *The Rotters' Club*. Class aspirations and social prestige are a recurring theme in the first novel of the trilogy. Benjamin, who has a non-academic lower middle class upbringing,[5] only recovers from a lifelong yearning for Cicely Boyd by the time *Middle England* is set. Cicely, artistic and bohemian with an actress as mother and sculptor as uncle, represents social and cultural capital that Benjamin also

5 These terms are used as rough orientations rather than as fixed definitions of class positions. 'Lower middle class' communicates a position below 'the middle class' (when considered an ideal type rather than an empirical category and effectively amounting to what also would be called the 'upper middle class') with regard to economic, social, and cultural capital. My use of the term 'petty bourgeois' below corresponds to this; its derogative connotation further foregrounds a relatively lower symbolic location and corresponding aspiration towards the middle class that Coe's novels seem to evoke and deride.

strives for. Their shared life, in Benjamin's imagination, is spent hosting dinner parties in a converted mill (*RC*, 377-378) – a dream that later comes true sans Cicely. The *conversion* of a former space of agricultural labour already hints at the upward mobility Benjamin aims to achieve through the union. If this makes it difficult to speak of 'one' middle class in Coe's novels, the trilogy can still be said to favour one specific point of view in the middle-class stratum. Coe's narratorial consciousness is that of the characters who have received an education at King William's, though matured, and to a certain degree, the novels might instil such a position as the norm of literary writing. The novels' satirical streak does, in fact, feature a condescending outlook on other (especially lower middle-) class positions. Yet, while I would not fully agree with Tew's assessment of *The Rotters' Club* that no class "is ultimately privileged in a narrative sense" (Tew 2004, 80), I would equally stress that the novels are critical of their own position, which they satirise as well.

Benjamin's parents Colin and Sheila are amongst the characters the novels treat with detached amusement. While all characters fall prey to Coe's biting humour from time to time, in the case of the Trotters, the mockery revolves chiefly around markers of class, as it does during a dinner scene with the Chases:

> In what amounted, for him, to a fit of extravagance, Colin had bought not one but two bottles of Blue Nun to accompany the meal. Add to this the fact that the Chases, by some happy chance, had arrived with a gift of the very same wine, in a litre bottle no less, and the stage was set for a scene of almost orgiastic excess. (*RC*, 54)

The night is an immediate success, and Coe's narrator makes it clear that the Trotters and Chases bond because of their shared petty bourgeois habitus. Both strive towards social prestige while depending on middlebrow values and tastes to do so: it is "extravagant" to buy two bottles of a wine which these characters consider to be of high quality ('properly' bourgeois/middle-class readers know the opposite to be the case: Blue Nun was not only immensely popular and affordable but also not very good). That the Chases made the very same choice of wine is not taken as a sign of both couples' lack of expertise, but of their equally good taste, and is a "happy" coincidence also because it threatens neither's value judgments. The litre bottle in turn does not spell vulgarity, but "orgiastic excess," a concept more in line with upper class hedonism. In what Coe himself has called an "English comedy of manners" (qtd. in Guignery 2018), the novel lays bare and clearly satirises the lower middle-class habitus of these characters, and in doing so, it invites the reader to share the perspective of Coe's narrator.

The satire relies on Coe's use of free indirect discourse with a strong inflection of the narrator's own commentary. This mock-free indirect style at once gives insight into the characters and subtly establishes a superior distance from them – the ridicule derives not only from the Trotters and Chases's attitudes, but also from the discrepancy between their self-perception and the narrator's, captured in the latter's exoticising diction. The term "orgiastic excess," for instance, is clearly put into Colin's mouth (or mind) by a narrator who uses their privileged education to gently deride the scene, and it highlights the incongruity between what the couples perceive to be an 'excessive' night (though lacking the term) and the narrator's and reader's take on the scene as a very moderated,

socially acceptable, and philistine form of hedonism. That this narrator stands above the habits on display becomes clear as the evening progresses. Sam and Colin move on to another beverage, "Colin's homemade light ale, which he brewed in a forty-pint plastic keg in the cupboard under the stairs, using a kit from Boots the Chemist. The cost, as he was always ready to point out, worked out at a little under 2p per pint" (*RC*, 55). The proto-Thatcherite character of Colin, a small entrepreneur with a firm eye on expenditure and revenue, is shown to be somewhat petty, but he is also fully caricatured when the novel describes his concoction as giving an "afterburn like fermented WD40" (*RC*, 55).

Read as a comedy of manners, this scene features social criticism of a class and its manners (ignorance towards education; pettiness; complacency), but if the grounds for such criticism rest in the narrator's (and reader's) elevated position, criticism gives way to condescension. On the other hand, the novels also render their own narratorial position visible and a target of critique. At parent-teachers night, the art teacher Mr Plumb commences an extended attempt at courtship towards Barbara Chase which largely rests on the former's use of highbrow cultural references and an absurdly copious lexicon. The novel directly contrasts Mr Plumb's diction with Sam Chase's more limited range when it shows both Chases spending a night on the sofa. While Sam cannot find the correct answer to the crossword puzzle question about a '"[*l*]*arge feline*.' Five letters, beginning with T, ending with R" (*RC*, 139) – he holds on to his first guess *tabby* – Barbara is secretly reading a letter by the art teacher addressing her as "*my paragon, callipygic enchantress, apogee of all that is pulchritudinous in this misbegotten, maculate world*" (*RC*, 141; original emphasis). Once Barbara, flattered, starts questioning her marriage, Sam embarks on a mission to expand his verbal repertoire with books such as *Twenty-five Magic Steps to Word Power* (*RC*, 259). The novel here extends its ridicule: Sam, a bus driver by profession, in a similar vein as the Trotters before is made laughable for his simple-minded nature and hopeless attempts at gaining the esteem of his wife. Even worse than Sam, however, is snobbish Miles Plumb, a caricature of the educated middle-class climber (like the main characters and the narrator) who is derided for his unabashed self-promotion and his will to exhaust the means of the English tongue bordering on the nonsensical.

In the end, the novel gives more credit to Sam's down-to-earth response to Mr Plumb's advances; he wards them off once and for all on the phone to the teacher when "instinctively, without thinking about it, [he] blew the longest and loudest raspberry he had ever blown in his life" (*RC*, 303). Sam's reaction is strangely satisfying because it is 'normal.' Commenting on a different scene, Tew goes so far as to maintain that "[i]f there is any priority in Coe, it is to the instinct of the working classes and those of the lower middle class when uninfluenced by its love affair with aesthetic intellectualism" (Tew 2004, 81). Neither is the narration itself exempt from the linguistic flights it mocks with so much delight. A description of Barbara and Mr Plumb is distinctly reminiscent of the lists of words Sam Chase studies: Barbara's "eyes were closed, languorously," and a character throws "surreptitious glances at the amorous couple" (*RC*, 218). Such lapses in the otherwise more accessible tone of the narration occur throughout the novel, and they invite us to consider the narrator by the same critical standards as the characters, especially against the 'norm' of Sam Chase's common sense.

What emerges is not only "a series of middle-class voices – including [Coe's] own implied narrative position – where each one exists simply as a contributory viewpoint" (Tew 2004, 81). It is also an undercurrent of deviation from 'thoroughly' middle class positions that goes to challenge the implied superiority of 'proper middle-classness.'

4. Looking from Above: Enigmatic Middle England

Middle England broadens the class spectrum, but it is also here that the limitations of the middle-class Condition-of-England novel become most visible. The 2018 novel introduces several new characters, such as Sophie's husband Ian, and uses this ensemble cast to provide "shifting viewpoints" spread "across the social spectrum" (Preston 2012) in the tradition of the Condition-of-England novel. It thereby sheds light in particular on the state of mind of middle England, often represented in contrast to the established characters and Benjamin's niece Sophie, who now fills the role of protagonist. This society panorama also means that Coe's middle Englanders tend towards one-dimensionality because they are reducible to social types, a general pitfall of the genre which Coe's novel cannot fully avoid. The narrative privileges Benjamin and Sophie, he an Oxford-educated, Booker prize-longlisted novelist and she a university lecturer of art history, by focalising parts of the narration through their perspectives and allowing them to develop as round characters. An educated, upper middle-class position is indeed rendered as the text-internal norm. Both characters are from the Midlands but presented as spatially distanced from middle England: Benjamin lives in Shropshire at the end of a "single-track road" in an "absurdly remote and secluded spot" (*ME*, 6), and cosmopolitan Sophie, as a review puts it, "marries a driving instructor after *speeding to catch the train back to the capital*" (Pite 2018; my emphasis). That "*Middle England* is a book about middle England – both the geographical midlands and the country's [supposed] social centre – but […] projects an international and European perspective" (Pite 2018) is part and parcel of its limitation in scope. Thus, instead of merely diagnosing the divide that exists between its main characters and middle England, the novel seems to uphold that same divide by setting up a vantage point that looks upon middle England from a critical distance.

The portrayal of middle England in the novel oscillates between its function in the wider critique of neoliberal structures and a somewhat elitist perspective on its 'provincialism.' Colin, by now in his 80s, for instance, is sensitive to a lost sense of social cohesion and community that has been replaced with individualism and consumerism, but he also resorts to nationalist prejudices ("We've gone soft, […] the rest of the world's laughing at us;" *ME*, 262) that are contradicted by Benjamin ("I don't think anybody's laughing at us;" *ME*, 263). The paternalistic side of this oscillation becomes most clear from what stands as the epitome of middle England in the novel, the Woodlands garden centre. Since its opening, the centre "had blossomed and expanded into a kingdom, a mighty empire, whose subjects could roam for hours […] through a succession of different purlieus and provinces in which every aspect of human life was represented, catered for and commodified" (*ME*, 58). The novel further anthropomorphises this temple of consumption and gives it a "throbbing heart" and "well-filled stomach" as if it was a devouring monster (*ME*, 59). Benjamin is not

entirely exempt from the lure of the centre – he, too, likes to roam in it – but in addressing the consumerist values which have replaced industrial labour in the region, the novel cannot avoid degrading a stratum of the population that falls prey to such attractions. Within this encompassing commodification, middle England furthermore becomes the seat of a backward-looking, rural, and nostalgic idealisation of Englishness. Such an 'England' is on sale at the centre, which comprises a "toyshop with a particularly impressive array of jigsaw puzzles depicting farmyard scenes from pre-industrial days, Spitfire and Hurricane aircraft in mid-flight, [and] scenes of traditional English village life" (*ME*, 59). The novel at once visualises the imprint of a Thatcherite Little Englandism and its heritage obsession and takes issue with a middle England that it otherwise aims to explore and understand. In the end, the novel leaves us with a notion of middle England as a black void, not unlike its depiction in *The Closed Circle*. Here, a character stares out into a Midlands night and finds its blackness and silence evocative of middle England (*CC*, 120).

Ultimately, this consideration of class attends to the established explanatory models of the Brexit vote – the divide between a 'cosmopolitan elite' and the more rural 'ordinary people'[6] perceived by both sides and the idea of the "post-industrial edgelands" beset by a "sense of powerlessness and impotent rage" (Shaw 2018, 23).[7] Yet, again, *Middle England* includes a level of reflection on its own point of view that goes to challenge this perspective's positioning as an invisible norm. One outlet of such self-reflexivity is provided through Benjamin, a gifted but struggling writer and a stand-in for the author himself. Benjamin's aspirations are indeed mocked rather than enshrined by the novels. His apparent rise to artistic maturity in the fashion of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, a lengthy interior monologue at the end of *The Rotters' Club*, is undermined by the fact that what provides him with inspiration, his first sexual encounter with Cicely and the prospect of a shared future, is already disintegrating at the moment Benjamin utters his thoughts. Much of *The Closed Circle* sees Benjamin as a failed writer and character, stuck in an unfulfilling marriage and working as an accountant, and when he leaves England for Europe to blossom as an author, he fails even more desperately, resorting to alcohol and "strange auto-erotic practices" (*CC*, 385). Only in *Middle England* does success finally arrive for Benjamin, though still at the cost of him having to cut down his *magnum opus*, a work "longer than the complete works of Jane Austen and E.M. Forster put together" and something of an ongoing joke throughout the trilogy: "Supposedly combining a vast narrative of European history since Britain's accession to the common market in 1973 with a scrupulous account of his own interior life during that period, it was further complicated by the fact that it had a musical 'soundtrack'" (*ME*, 107). The description meets, of course, what the trilogy itself does on a smaller scale (*The Rotters' Club* sets in in the year 1973 and was

6 In his contribution to this special focus section, Dennis Henneböhl engages with these discursive divisions in much more depth and eloquence than I can do here.

7 It should be stressed that the novel does complicate this divide at several points. Sophie is shown as based on the rather precarious income of a university lecturer, while her friend Sohan's partner "earns ten times as much" as a banker in the City (*MC*, 250) – there is not 'the one elite.' Middle English Colin, on his part, soon grows "sick" of Woodlands (*MC*, 257).

originally planned as the beginning of a six-part series; Guignery 2018), with the musical component replaced by thick intermedial references. If the novel thus mocks the overly ambitious and pretentious middle-class writer[8] – and itself – it further comments on its own goals through the figure of Doug Anderton, left-leaning reporter of the school newspaper and, later, political commentator for national magazines. Where Benjamin mainly comes to stand in as an idealised Romantic author figure withdrawn from political reality, Doug represents the novels' attention to day-to-day politics. Having moved up on the social ladder and married into an upper-class family, Doug ponders in *Middle England* that, despite his job, he is "out of touch" with the realities of most people in the country: "That resentment, that sense of hardship. I don't *feel* it. I'm just a spectator. […] I don't know what I'm talking about. And it shows up in my writing" (*ME*, 15; original emphasis). Doug's inability to empathise, the novel suggests, does not rest on a lack of knowledge, but on divergent affective scopes or 'structures of feeling' (Williams 1977) between different class experiences. Thus, the novel scrutinises its own removed point of view, especially towards middle England, and while it cannot fully redeem this perspectival limitation, at least it does not leave its own disposition unquestioned.

Finally, *Middle England* also emphasises that Benjamin's life could have taken a different path altogether by introducing Benjamin's childhood friend Charlie. They lost touch when Benjamin got accepted at King William's and reconnect throughout the novel. In many ways, Charlie is a mirror character to Benjamin: both are or were stuck in an unhealthy, exploitative relationship with a woman, both have a daughter but the relationship is complicated (Benjamin only finds out about his daughter after he has developed amorous feelings towards her; Charlie's daughter is not his biological child or even his stepdaughter). Both, Benjamin and Charlie, are, to a degree, 'clowns' (Charlie professionally; Benjamin in a social sense), and both have a conflict with a rival that revolves around the daughter. Charlie and Benjamin grew up as direct neighbours and best friends on the same street, but after Benjamin's change of school, as he himself surmises, "a gulf had opened up between them. Not an educational or academic gulf, primarily, but a social one" (*ME*, 175). Benjamin learns only later that Charlie is dependent on food banks and sleeps in his car when he cannot stay at his partner's house, although Benjamin's self-absorbed character only realises this long after the reader.[9] Through this contrast of characters, Benjamin's social position, too, is shown to be contingent rather than an unquestionable norm – Benjamin and Charlie's roles could easily have been swapped.

4. Conclusion: A Classless Society?

Stretching from the year 1973 to 2018, Coe's Trotter-trilogy covers almost half a century of British history, beginning with a decade of crisis that heralded a turning point from the affluent postwar years, the end of the postwar consensus, and of Keynesian

8 The figure is doubled and fully parodied in the character of Lionel Hampshire, a self-absorbed and adulterous writer who seeks financial advantage and clings to past successes.

9 It is only fitting that Charlie in the end, too, turns out to be a writer – perhaps the kind of writer it would take to write the Condition-of-England novel today.

economics. Coe's larger oeuvre shows a preoccupation with "the economic ideology people have come to take for granted in Britain" as well as with "the ruthless triumph of the money economy" (Guignery 2015, 160; 161; see also Lusin 2018, 257). As part of this agenda, what emerges as the prevalent concern within the broad social and political canvas of the trilogy is Coe's attempt to render in novelistic form the advent and consolidation of the neoliberal era in Britain. The self-spun narrative of this era posits that class, a term negatively connoted with industrial production, collective action, and socialist revolution, has become obsolete in a merit-based society of individual consumers – the old fault lines of class struggle have vanished; the economy has been transformed, and affiliations to political parties are no longer binding. As Coe's novels show, a backward-looking idea of the nation, propelled by the Thatcher years, seems to have replaced social identifications that would earlier have been filled by class affiliations. Nonetheless, the novels illustrate that class still remains relevant in the organisation of British society, as a designator of social hierarchies, identities, and entrenched patterns of behaviour and thought, and as a marker of economic status. His realism and use of the Condition-of-England template are the main mechanisms by which Coe conveys this perspective. This mode, indeed, points to socio-political concerns, rather than inviting the 'postmodern' reading Driscoll considers to be so detrimental to discussions of class. At the same time, Coe's realism is wedded to a middle-class point of view that has been the chief catalyst of the realist novel – and of Victorian Condition-of-England writing, for that matter, too. For one thing, however, this does not mean that we cannot take Coe's novels seriously as Condition-of-England writing and as a critique of class. Coe's novels offer valuable contributions to our conversations about class in post-industrial Britain just as Elizabeth Gaskell and her Victorian contemporaries, for example, offered valuable contributions to the factory question. In addition, Coe appears to be keenly aware of the limitations of his own writing about the contemporary moment and therefore employs a strategy of "self-reflexivity about the purpose of his art and craft within his novels" (Guignery 2015, 167). In this vein, the three novels discussed here also consciously flaunt their own point of view, rendering tangible and contestable their own middle-class standpoint. What Coe shows, then, is that "in portraying a middle-class world, there can exist both a plural and intelligently critical view of middle-class culture and its place in British society" (Tew 2004, 80).

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