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***Middle England* by Jonathan Coe: a Brexit Novel or the Politics of Emotions**

Imad Zrari

Abstract

The latest novel of Jonathan Coe, *Middle England* (2018), addresses issues such as national identity and the growing role of emotion in British politics. Coe's novel, which was recently awarded the Costa Prize for being a "perfect" Brexit novel, seems to have paved the way for what has been defined as "Brexitlit". As a matter of fact, this novel appears to be a means to further our understanding of Brexit giving shape to its causes, its symptoms and consequences on British society and national identity. My contention is that British politics are not really following an ideology but rather a performance based on sensationalism and emotion. *Middle England* illustrates how Brexit concerns with emotions, to wit the divorce of the British people having the difficulty of rooming together. This new genre appears to be a medium to depict a nation in crisis and to put to the test notions such as the interweaving of the emotional and the political, the definition of satire and engagement, as well as the representations of nostalgia and anger. The latter notion is being reworked as an allegory to express the political in a context of a theoretical debate claiming the end of postmodernism and the advent of metamodernism. Once again, Coe shows how he excels at oscillating between tradition and experimentation. *Middle England* is a feat of experimentation where Coe centres on British identity and turns his back to the satirical mode of his former books such as *What a Carve Up!* or *The Closed Circle*.

Key words: *Brexit, Brexitlit, identity, anger, nostalgia, satire, postmodernism, metamodernism*

Brexit is undoubtedly a watershed in British history and still proves to be a challenging event to understand. As Robert Eaglestone writes in *Brexit and Literature*, "Brexit is not only political, economic and administrative: perhaps most significantly an event in culture, too." (1). In Coe's latest novel, *Middle England*, the author actually traces the fracturing of Britain from April 2010 to September 2018, which lies "at the core of the nation" (Shaw 2019, 33), and this through one aspect of culture, literature. In his novel, Brexit and the referendum of 2016 are portrayed as pivotal events in the history of British politics. By attempting to grasp the national mood of that period, Coe shows how the decision to leave the European Union has affected the country and its inhabitants from different perspectives and proves, once again, his ability to weave national history – especially topicality – and fiction. This novel is without contest a means to enter the British psyche and the national mood preceding Brexit and its aftermath, so as to understand the causes of the fault line running through British society. As a matter of fact, the answers are multifarious and broached in Coe's novel: the rise of populism and British nationalism, the disparities between a thriving and cosmopolitan London life and a forlorn province, the decline of politics, a breeding-ground for banter and indecision. The consequences appear to be hefty for British society: the fragmentation of solidarities, the prominence of two social worlds and a strong sense of division. As John Clarke and Janet Newman posit:

The divisions then were not just between Leavers and Remainers. The referendum brought to the surface, condensed and amplified deep-seated fissures—of class, of gender, of race, of age, and of place—as well as producing new antagonisms. Here, then, Brexit acts as signifier of 'emergent politics': new fractures, new alignments, and new identifications. (68)

In *Middle England*, Brexit is not reduced to a mere political or societal issue but goes a step further by questioning satire once again and suggesting new narrative alternatives and techniques to tackle politics. From a political point of view, Coe, who is known for his earlier use of satire, has proved to show detachment and disengagement but appears to have modernised his use of satire. Despite Coe's vision of satire as an instrument that proves to be inefficient in articles and essays that we shall explore, *Middle England* may be considered as an acrid criticism of British politics and society. Brexit may have crystallised various forms of discontent that question British identity but also attempt to give voice to the soul of a nation. From a diegetic point of view, anger seems to be of prime importance, a driving force through characters and narratives. Anger may have a substantial role in presenting Brexit as both an emotional and political answer, an interweaving of politics and emotions that can appear dangerous since it may fall under the yoke of populism and public performance.

From a theoretical point of view, Brexit could also be linked to the current critical debate on metamodernism, a theory developed by Robin Van den Akker and Thimotheus Vermeulen. Their main thesis in 'Notes on Metamodernism' is that twenty-first century literature no longer depicts a world blurred by irony, fragmentation and ruination as many postmodernists did. For these two academics, metamodernism is characterised by the motif of oscillation and could be compared to a pendulum swinging between opposite poles such as modernism and postmodernism, suggesting a post-postmodernism and therefore a new artistic era. Indeed, the portrait of Brexit according to Coe oscillates between the political and the emotional, two notions that turns out to be antagonistic. It is in this critical context and on the basis that postmodernism hinges on fragmentation, chaos and meaninglessness (Chris Baldick 266) that I shall argue that when reading Coe, the notions aforementioned - the political and the emotional through anger - seem to characterise *Middle England*.

Thus, my paper shall intend to explore Brexit as a source of inspiration in British literature and Brex-lit as a new "fledgling sub-genre" according to literary critic Jon Day in his article "BrexLit: the New Landscape of British Fiction article", in order to examine how it is voiced and whether it appeals for narrative experimentation or low-key prose. Indeed, Coe does not seem to favour experimentation, however this novel takes on the appearance of a cathartic fiction where Coe, through the main protagonist and alter ego Benjamin, explains some literary choices. In fact, Coe seems to examine the making or dissolution of a nation in crisis. Thus, the main observation and question when reading *Middle England* is to what extent Coe appears to have swerved towards an emotionalisation of politics. How the politics of Brexit is voiced and given body through the channel of emotion, partly anger. Some controversial notions such as British identity and collective nostalgia are here put to the test. This paper will aim at understanding the new role of satire and the preference of Coe for anger rather than traditional satire. The aesthetics of this novel epitomised by a genuine desire for emotions suggest that Coe has recently adopted new narrative strategies. Coe actually examines the nation and Brexit through the allegory of emotions in order to express the political. To explore the overlapping of the political and the emotional, I first look at the ways in which *Middle England* portrays an intimate and national divorce of a disunited nation where Brexit embodies a social and national revenge. In the second section, I shall explore the growing role of emotion in satire through Coe's ranting against the sensationalist treatment of information by the media and the importance of humour in contemporary British politics. I shall eventually suggest that Coe has offered new narrative strategies to tackle what I could term as the politics of emotions in which (collective) nostalgia has become a political instrument and anger a metaphor for national politics.

The British People and the Difficulty of Rooming Together

Middle England is clearly a social and political meditation that aims at voicing the emotional state of a whole country, may it be ambitious or not. Coe endeavours to understand what led people to vote remain or leave through his attachment to the imbrication of intimate and collective narratives: "nowadays, the political and the personal have become intertwined" (32'15, interview in France Culture). As usual in Coe's novels, the intimate is woven with national history. Indeed, the imbrication of micronarration and macronarration - collective history - is one of Coe's traditional features. However in his latest novel the intimate is deeply linked to the political since it is mapped onto it. Indeed, the main protagonist's expected divorce is a metaphor of a national one, the divorce of British society and the division caused by the politics of Brexit. Reading the novel, the heterosexual couple, to wit Sophie and Ian, embody British people, having difficulty living together. The heterosexual couple appear to symbolise the difficult cohabitation of different social classes and evoke the disuniting of the country. Coe actually writes the story of two Englands that are no longer able to live together. Sophie and Ian represent these two different nations. The interview with Lorna illustrates this point:

'Sophie, why are you so angry that Ian voted Leave? And Ian, why are you so angry that Sophie voted Remain?'

Sophie had thought for a long time before answering:

'I suppose because it made me think that, as a person, he's not as open as I thought he was. That his basic model for relationships comes down to antagonism and competition, not cooperation.'

Lorna had nodded, and turned to Ian, who had answered:

'It makes me think that she's very naive, that she lives in a bubble and can't see how other people around her might have a different opinion to hers. And this gives her a certain attitude. An attitude of moral superiority.'

To which Lorna said:

'What's interesting about both of those answers is that neither of you mentioned politics. As if the referendum wasn't about Europe at all. Maybe something much more fundamental and personal was going on. Which is why this might be a difficult problem to resolve.'

She had suggested a course of six sessions, but it turned out that she was being optimistic. In fact they attended nine, before admitting defeat, and calling it a day.' (327)

As suggested in this passage, *Middle England* deals with a political scission and an intimate one causing estrangements as Brexit did hence the necessity for some characters to visit "Post-Brexit counselling" (325). Sophie admits that Brexit partly ruined her marriage (326), since it has favoured the emergence of a class struggle (her husband belonging to the lower-middle class). Coe has used personification in this novel and shows how Brexit is a class conflict rather than an ideological one (327) where the answers of each character seem somehow understandable. Helena, Ian's mother, is another character that enhances this social division.

'But we do not have freedom, of speech or of anything else...Our views are not allowed to be expressed on television or in the newspapers. Our state broadcaster ignores us, or treats us with contempt. Voting becomes a waste of time when all the politicians subscribe to the same fashionable opinions. Of course I voted for Mr Cameron, but not with any enthusiasm. His values are not our values. He actually knows as little of our way of life as his political opponents do. They're all on the same side, really - and it's not our side.'

Brexit appears therefore to be a national revenge, an emotional answer, and a form of retributive justice to a crisis that was first considered political. It is referred to as a settling of scores, a form of revenge against David Cameron. This portrait of an intimate decision based on sense and feeling, and not a political or ideological one, contributes to the personification and the intimisation of this political crisis. Thus, Coe clearly emotionalises the political in this novel. To do so, Coe addresses issues such as Brexit, national division and identity through the instruments of the intimate and an extreme emotionalisation of political life. As Eaglestone argues: "Brexit has stirred up a terrifying political discourse in which opponents of Brexit are described as 'saboteurs' or 'enemies of the people'" (6). The intimate recalls the work of Laurent Mellet in *Les Politiques de l'intime*, where he develops this idea, relying on the work of Jacques Rancière, that the intimate is in itself a political gesture in Coe's fiction. This intimisation of the political could also be linked to Catherine Bernard's work on the notion of the body politic insofar as the emotionalisation of the political may be paralleled to the transcription of the political onto the body. The new role of emotion in the political in *Middle England* may recall "The Angry Young Men" and shall be examined more thoroughly in my third part. As Peter Kalliney writes:

In the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century critics have interpreted this emphasis on domesticity as a metaphor for national culture and the "repatriation" of British culture. Many Angry writers, including Amis, Osborne, and Lessing, made self-conscious attempts to British literature from the influence of French letters, which were commonly seen as pretentious, abstract, and overtly intellectual. [...] Osborne, in his contribution, insists that his audience must feel and react first: thinking and contemplation could come later. (46)

A satire of the growing role of emotion in British society and politics?

In many interviews, Coe claims that *Middle England* is not really a satire but a panorama of British society (in LGL). Nevertheless, one can notice a substantial critical streak in his latest work. As in many novels of Coe, Margaret Thatcher, David Cameron, the coalition government, the two-party system are recurrent objects of criticism. For instance, the author holds Thatcher partly responsible for the recent national division of Britain and this through the character of Charlie putting forward that the arrival of Thatcher has deeply changed the face and history of the country:

'The way I see it, everything changed in Britain in May 1979. Forty years on, we're still dealing with that. You see - me and Benjamin, we're children of the seventies. We may have been only kids then, but that was the world we grew up in. Welfare state, NHS. Everything that was put in place after the war. Well, all that's been unravelling since 79. It's still being unravelled. That's the real story. I don't know if Brexit's a symptom of that, or just a distraction. But the process is pretty much complete now. It'll all be gone soon.'

This description is thwarted by Claire who remembers that the era was also already crippled with inflation, economic instability and industrial unrest (316). Both characters are right and it shows how history is a biased perception that relies on the emotions and (collective or not) memory of individuals. As Linda Hutcheon develops through her theory of historiographic metafiction, history can be explored through different eyes. This use of emotions can also be linked to Vermeulen and Van den Akker's contention that twenty-first century literature has put an emphasis on the emotional, an idea of authenticity and simplicity.

Besides targeting traditional figures of British politics, *Middle England* rants about the sensationalist treatment of topicality in the media. The novel is a critique of the media's quest for sensations, their growing power to destroy politics. The media are described as being muzzling, as gagging public opinion and reigning supreme over the British political life. From the very beginning of the novel, the media use the fact that Gordon Brown was trapped insulting one of his supporters as "'a sort of bigoted woman" to criticise him (5). The *Mail* is criticised by Ben for causing the failure of Ed Miliband's campaign (190). The tabloid *Sun* excoriates the way Ed Miliband eats his bacon sandwich and compares the way he eats it to a potential devouring of England. The media do not hesitate to condemn politicians' intimacy in order to sell images and articles that could generate controversy. Moreover, the media distort the truth. After Benjamin's interview with journalist Hermione Dawes, the article published is fallacious, a web of lies. Benjamin's answers are shortened and distorted making him a snobbish and a racist writer fleeing the multiculturalism of London and ruining the increasing number of British writers with foreign backgrounds (222). Coe insists on the sensationalisation of the media controlled by far-right think tanks, "the Imperium Foundation" organised by Ronald Culpepper (357), a big donor to the Leave campaign (288). Here, Coe reveals how the media are responsible for the dulling of British politics and the invasion of politicians' privacy.

What's more, the media appear to be more interested in stories than facts and tend to fictionalise politics. Benjamin says about Cameron: "'He was almost certainly misquoted'", "'The papers are only interested in getting a story out of it. And if the story isn't strong enough they'll make it stronger.'" (290). Doug declares: "*You*, Douglas, of all people, should know that very few people of the stories printed in British newspapers have any truth in them. As someone who's been feeding stories to the papers for years, I do know what I'm taking about.'" (331). The media has gained more and more power in ruling the country. Theresa May may receive her directions from the *Daily Mail* and some think tanks:

'It's a very simply chain of command. Everyone takes instructions from Theresa, and she takes her instructions from the Daily Mail. Them, and a couple of think tanks who are so bonkers about free trade that you wouldn't allow them -', the Imperium Foundation, a far-right think tank managed by Ronald Culpepper: 'They're all over us, those guys. Always coming in for meetings. Bombarding us with spreadsheets. Forget about the will of the people. These are the kinds of lunatics who've taken over.' (334).

The media stir up anger: "'And the more the papers stroke up the anger by using words like "treason" and "mutiny" and "enemy of the people", the more likely it gets that something like that will happen again.'" (394). The media take their tolls and fuel an atmosphere of hatred on social networks revealing Brexit mutineers (355). Sophie is insulted by her students on social networks: "'#sackColemanPorter'". (248). Because of the media, Gail is insulted on twitter (356):

'Ransom you bitch - that's Ransome without an "e", of course - you will burn in hell for this. Look over ur shoulder when ur walking home tonight. You attack the people the people will attack you. Oh, and this is a nice one: Remember Jo Cox it could happen again.'

Politics: a Matter Reduced to Game and Humour

In his former novels such as *Number 11*, Coe warned us about the excess of humour in satires and political discourses that tends to impede democracy and to reveal the inability of politics to transform the real. It is a recurring motif in *Middle England*. The

policy of the cabinet is based on banter with an emphasis on the lexical field of game through words such as "bantz", "banter", "jokes", "mickey-taking" (34). In this passage, British people's lives seem to be gambled and represent nothing in the eyes of the ruling class. Nigel claims that the old two-party system ("you're used to an antagonistic form of party politics. But Britain's moved on. The old system's is broken now", 35) is obsolete and has been replaced by humour and indecision ("I call it radical indecision - the new spirit of our times. And Nick and Dave embody it perfectly", 35). Indeed, the referendum is referred to as "A huge gamble. The country's future decided on the roll of a dice" (184). The importance given to the Olympic Games (97) by politicians concurs with this idea. Politics has become a hazardous game while Cameron knows that the opinion is divided (184). In chapter twenty, there is an extended metaphor of game and the idea that Cameron made a bet: "bet", "the roll of a dice", "logical contortions", "have a better one up his sleeve" and above all "gamble" are words occurring many times. However, he is not the only one to play on the ground of politics. Before *The Telegraph* went to press, Boris Johnson had prepared three articles that reveal the inanity of politicians: "one for Leave, one for Remain, and one for not being able to make up his minds" (266). Politics as the media intend to be sensationalist and play with one another. Doug says: "'This campaign's going to be won on slogans and soundbites, and instincts and emotions. Not to mention emotion prejudices - which Farage and his fruitcakes are pretty good at appealing to, incidentally.'" (269). In this context, politics has become a farce that is also reflected through the discussion around the terminology of the crisis between Nigel and Doug to know whether one should say Brexit or Brixit.

Middle England could be read in conjunction with two essays and one article Coe wrote: "Sinking Giggling into the Sea", "What's so Funny about Comic Novels?" and "Will satire save us in the age of Trump?". In the former essay, Coe expressed "a growing disillusionment with the role played by laughter in the national political discourse" (Coe 2013, 1586). He argued that "laughter is just ineffectual as a form of protest but [...] it actually replaces protest" and turns into a "substitute for thought" (Coe 2013, 3587). The narrativisation and dramatisation of politics is emphasised in his novel entitled *Number 11*, in *Middle England* as well as in Coe's article "Will satire save us in the age of Trump?". This public performance by politicians is described as an impediment to democracy. In the latter article, Coe develops the idea that it has become difficult keeping up with reality for a satirist since "the boundaries between reality and caricature have become so thoroughly blurred". Mellet, in his article "From Laughing along to Mislighing Oneself away and Coming out in Jonathan Coe's Fiction", analyses the role of laughter but also Coe's sense of humour so as to explain the author's satirical distance. He claims that the failure of a satirical form of laughter and Coe's use of comedy have resulted in the author's ironic distance and a swerve towards a bowdlerised form of satire. This could account for *Number 11*'s less satirical tone and its more humanist streak. In his article on *Expo 58*, Jean-Michel Ganteau shows, in the same vein, that Coe's novel has actually 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 develop the idea that Coe has distanced himself from the traditional satire to what could be called "a grave comedy", more endowed with emotion. This ambivalent interweaving of gravity and comedy actually resonates with some aspects of metamodernism and embodies a growing desire to reconstruct what has fallen apart in the postmodern era. As a matter of fact, twenty-first-century fiction appears to have heralded a different artistic epoch, from one based on deconstruction to one yearning for meaning standing away from the "defeatist attitude of postmodernism" (Stravis, Rudrum 306). The terminology of this literary transition, namely "metamodern", is part of a theoretical debate that reveals new visions and perspectives on

postmodernism.

In an interview (34'40, France Culture), Coe posits:

You describe my book as a satirical book, no it's much more empathy than a satire. I wanted to inhabit the point of view of each character equally, without judgement, without taking sides. I think of this book and of the two that preceded it as a kind of history of British life, but more important, as an emotional history. I wanted people to be able to read them in the years to come [...] to see what we felt at that time.

Following this statement, one could suppose that Coe takes some distance from the categorisation of his novel as a satire. I find that his novel shifts away tout from traditional satires since Coe condemns but does not ridicule or caricature politicians as he did in *What a Carve Up!*. He excoriates British politicians such as David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson, the two-party system, the coalition government but he intends to give power to the people and voice to the Other - the silenced working and middle-class-, hence his attachment to vocal pluralism (in LGL). Contrary to traditional satires, Coe offers no political alternative in his novel especially at the end of his novel when he suggests fleeing abroad as Benjamin opens a holiday cottage in France - a lost paradise? -. As in *Expo 58*, a novel recalling the light comedy films of the 1930s and 1940s, *Middle England* seems to draw its inspiration from these decades by a tone and atmosphere oscillating between light comedy and satire. The novel actually reminds of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and the "Angry Young Men" in a less acrid and desperate tone.

Anger and Nostalgia as Instruments of the Politics of Emotions (Dickensian and "Angry Young Men" resonances)

The politics may have been emotionalised and transcribed in the novel through one main emotion, anger. Coe turns out to prefer insisting on emotions, to wit collective anger and madness in this novel (356, 357). Sociologist Lisa McKenzie, in her article "'It's not ideal': reconsidering 'anger' and 'apathy' in the Brexit vote among invisible working-class" in 2017, insists that the apathy of British working class "gave way to a howl of anger" not necessarily because they were mad at the European Union and the British class system but because they could not longer bear being ignored. Indeed, this book portrays this anger and the reasons that led to it. First, one of the reasons that led Coe to write *Middle England* was his own anger when he learnt about Brexit (in LGL). In La Grande Librairie, Coe affirms that writing was cathartic, a personal attempt to understand the crisis, and claims that the genius of the leave campaign was its ability to take the emotional temperature of the country with success. As a matter of fact, the campaign managed to gather discontents, to blame European bureaucrats, to develop the idea that problems would be resolved by leaving the EU and by coming back to an independent and sovereign state.

Social anger is the main ingredient of Dickens's novels, an admired author and a source of inspiration for Coe. Social anger pervades *Middle England* insofar as Coe tries to come back to an England that has been ignored and made invisible. According to Coe, anger appears to be born from the fact that Britain would have been anesthetised. This emotional deficit would have sparked social anger and aroused interest in the emotional history of the country:

'I think for a lot of people... there's nothing much going on in their lives. Emotionally. I mean, maybe their marriages have dried up, or everything they do has become a kind of habit, I don't know. But they don't feel much. No emotional stimulation. We all need to feel things, don't

we? So, when something makes you angry, at least you're feeling something. You get that emotional kick.' Sophie nodded. This seemed to make perfect sense. (44).

There are many Dickensian characteristics showing how *Middle England* looks like a satire on anger with themes such as the depiction of destitution. In the very first pages of the novel, Collin talks about a folk song (19), an eighteenth or nineteenth century ballad expressing the misfortunes of a prisoner waiting for his deportation. Poverty (bed of straw), famine (shortage of bread), servants and prison (21), social injustice and death are references that contribute to making the novel look Dickensian. The portrait of Charlie also looks Dickensian. As he did not have the same educational background as Benjamin's, he ends up depending on a food bank to eat (276). His girlfriend has difficulty keeping a job. He has no housing and sleeps in a sleeping bag in his car. His girlfriend no longer likes him due to his financial status and yearns for a sugar daddy (277). Coe uses these motifs to create an atmosphere favourable for the depiction of public wrath in contrast with a financial and political aristocracy:

the sense of simmering injustice, the resentment towards a financial and political establishment which had ripped people off and got away with it, the quiet rage of a middle class which had grown used to comfort and prosperity and now saw those things slipping out their reach: A few years ago they felt wealthy. Now they feel poor... (19-20).

As aforementioned, wrath is a notion that acts as a frame where Brexit crystallises, epitomises different forms of discontents: "Just as Doug told him, 'People are getting angry, really angry,' even if they could not have explained why, or with whom. " (21). Anger affects all the social classes and all the generations: Coriander belongs to the upper class and yearns for chaos. She takes part in riots: "'Pure terror and havoc.' Coriander liked the sound of that, very much indeed." (80). Coriander is an angry character; anger becomes an addiction: "I think she's just addicted to being outraged on other people's behalf." (196). Violence excites her (80). She strikes against a car pushed out of adrenaline (80). She and her boyfriend are voyeurs: they enjoy watching violence between the police and the rioters and take videos (81). Into frenzy, she steals coats and throws them on the floor (82). Al will end up calling her to order twice (82). She enjoys this atmosphere of anger: "the taste of anger" (82). Tension rises in an atmosphere of thick anger:

There was an amazing energy in the air and what Coriander could taste at the back of her throat was not the smoke from the burning car but the sharp, invigorating taste of anger. The rioters were angry at the killing of Mark Duggan four days before and the years of unfair treatment from the police, and the police were angry at the lawlessness of the protest and the violence they were being threatened with. Years of anger, years of bitter, rancorous, resentful co-existence were rising up and coming to the boil. It was fantastic. (82-83).

Many characters are overwhelmed with wrath. Derek, is called M. Angry by Naheed (43) and is the symbol of this angry England. Naheed says: "there's a lot of anger out there." (43)/"And it's not always to do with race anyway. People like to get angry about anything." Doug discovers in the file composed of political documents and given by Nigel, an article of the foundation entitled "*Keeping the Fires Burning: Media Strategies for Sustaining and Harnessing the Energies behind the Referendum Result.*" in which the recipe of Brexit is public anger and elaborated to fuel discontent and a feeling of treason of the British towards the ruling class (359). Colin becomes more and more angry and reactionary. Anger appears also to be transmitted through generations, from Doug to Coriander. Old and young people are angry which is suggested by the riot composed of

Coriander and Aj. Wrath actually reinforces the personification of an angry and disunited country:

Doug had hoped that she would overcome, sooner or later, her anger at the world and specifically at the world that his generation had bequeathed her [...] The country was in a wretched state at the moment: bad-tempered, factured, groaning under the pressure of an austerity programme that seemed never likely to end. Maybe it was inevitable that Coriander should despise him for his part in all this, however small. Maybe it was time to learn from her, to remind himself that there were some principles that should never be abandoned or diluted, and that it was not necessarily a noble thing to gravitate towards the centre ground in pursuit of a quiet life... (388)

Middle England echoes the "Angry Young Men", dramatists and novelists who emerged in the 1950s to express scorn and anger towards the established political and social system in Britain. The novel has resonances with the famous play that embodies this movement, *Look Back in Anger* (1956) by John Osborne. As in *Middle England*, it also deals with a married couple belonging to two different social universes: the working-class and the upper-middle class, a failing marriage, the importance of social realism with issues of race, gender, class and sex (kitchen sink realism), the disillusion with modern society, the emphasis on the province - in the Midlands - against metropolitan dominance, a character named Helena (a hint to Ian's mother bearing the same name?). Like the "Angry Young Men", Coe has embraced social realism, the display of class-consciousness and the rants against England's social barriers, the focus on disgruntled lower-middle class characters, the criticism of marriage, the swerve towards a narrative simplification contrary to high modernists (Oxford Encyclopaedia of British Literature, Peter Kalliney, 44). Besides Jimmy Porter looks like Sophie (an intellectual who has an adulterous affair). However, contrary to this movement, the homosexual sensibility is one of Coe's trademarks, something that the "Angry Young Men" didn't want to be associated with for Kenneth Allsop (*The Angry Decade*, 18) and for Peter Kalliney (45), in order to differentiate themselves from the Bloomsbury Group and hence the emphasis on hyperbolically heterosexual male protagonists.

Britain still entangled with its past

When reading *Middle England*, the past seems not to pass once again and has proved to become an instrument employed by Brexit to arouse nostalgia. The latter notion creates an imaginary world to the service of politics and turns out to be a powerful weapon for populists and politicians. *Middle England* is actually a book that broaches the power of nostalgia becoming a narrative and political strategy that refers to an imaginary period and world. The past promoted by Brexit with the image of a people still entangled with it, alludes to an epoch when England controlled its destiny. Politicians have realised that British people were sensitive to this collective memory, a powerful weapon for political campaigns. This nostalgia may be one of the roots of Brexit, causing mind and imaginary divisions. Thus, Brexit has sparked a conflict of visions around what it meant to be English and what one should identify to in terms of collective nostalgia. As Coe puts forward in *La Grande Librairie*, Brexit has touched a nerve among the British: their national identity, the sense of belonging to a country and what they wanted their country to be, causing division between Leavers and Remainers.

In this novel, nostalgia plays a substantial role among characters, whether it is an intimate or a national feeling. Benjamin is described as a prisoner of his past, of his obsessed love for Cecilia in a country where people are "obsessed with their bloody past". Benjamin is a melancholy and nostalgic character who can't live in the present; his memory is stuck in a united vision of England shattered by his sister's sarcasm:

He was annoyed with his sister for making that sarcastic comment about the dearth of TV channels in the 1970s, which undermined (without her realizing it, probably) one of his most cherished early memories. It was still a cornerstone of his belief system that Britain had been a cohesive, united, consensual place during his childhood (all that had started to unravel with the election result of 1979), and the fuzzy glow he still got from watching seventies comedy shows was proof of that, somehow. But of course, for Lois, none of that could be expected to register: for her, that decade had been a time of tragedy, of horror. (49)

For Gail Ransome, Doug's girlfriend, Benjamin's book is depressing in its melancholy: "'That was depressing. Beautifully written, but depressing.' 'Melancholy,' said Doug, 'is very much Benjamin's thing. English melancholy in particular. With a side order of morbid nostalgia.'" (198). Benjamin's childhood friends are all nostalgic of the 1970s. When Doug goes back to his childhood school, he says words that he already said forty years before: "'Nostalgia is the English disease'", "'Obsessed with their bloody past'" (391). Benjamin answers to that: "'It's nice to look back sometimes'" (391). Doug is surprised by the fact that his friends cling to so many details of the past: "you guys are obsessed with the past" but he is also nostalgic of the England in the 1960s. He seems to constantly repeat the stories of his childhood to bear his present life. As for Philip, he is the publisher and editor of Chase historical; he has built a mall, Woodlands, that pictures a nostalgic and picturesque England where postcards of a folkloric England are sold as well as fish and chips, steaks and ale pies, Yorkshire tea, scones and lemon drizzle (59). The nostalgia of a white Britain is implicit. Contrary to Benjamin's old friends, Culpepper their past enemy, has succeeded in life by exploiting the past. He has commodified nostalgia to make benefit from it. As Doug tells him, Culpepper has been consuming people: "'You're happy to use them [the people] just like you use everybody else.'" (394). Colin, Benjamin's father, is another character who represents the nostalgia; but one of the industrial era. The character has difficulty facing the economic transformation of his country especially when he no longer recognizes Longbridge, the old car factory where he used to work (259). The description that he makes of the site being replaced is somehow dystopian (261), as if collective memory was buried. In short, Brexit has developed the emergence of a mythical England through nostalgia and melancholy. Remainers and Leavers convey different collective images of Britain, one liberal based on the welfare system and a conservative one praising the motif of a glorious empire. This confirms what Robert Eaglestone claims in his latest work: "nations are produced in the imagination by concepts, narratives, memories and traditions: that is, through the work of culture" (1).

Conclusion

This novel has been a means to voice and assess the various roots of Brexit. It is clear that these date back much farther in the past than 2010. Contrary to Coe's vision that Brexit has become an ideology disconnected from the people (in LGL) and what he claims about the satirical streak of his novel, my contention is that British politics are not really following an ideology but rather a performance based on sensationalism and emotion. *Middle England* has remarkably illustrated how Brexit concerns with emotions, to wit the divorce of the British people having difficulty rooming together. The fact that politicians misjudge the public mood so badly during this crisis may explain the emergence of emotion in the political and this desire for taking the temperature of a nation through literature.

Coe has shown how he excels at oscillating between tradition and experimentation. It is a clearly a social novel firmly set in a realist context that copes with a divided and torn Britain, that depicts a shattered country through various fractures: generational,

geographical, social, political, and educational. Through Coe's cast of middle-class characters, one can notice the same tropes as in his most famous satire *What a Carve Up!*: "inequalities in British society, governments cuts, reductions in civil liberties and a culture of elitism" (*Middle England*, 98). However, the novel is rather a fierce critique of contemporary politics than a satire. Coe offers no alternative or resolutions about the society he questions; my contention is that it is an engaged criticism, a humanist and empathic thanks to emotions and the genre of choral novel.

As aforementioned *Middle England* is a feat of experimentation where Coe reworks the allegory of anger, where he centres on British identity and turns his back to the satirical mode of his former satires such as *What a Carve Up!* or *The Closed Circle*. It is a topical novel where nostalgia and anger are instrumental in voicing the fragmentation of a nation and in sweetening the genre of satire as he did for *Number 11*. Each novel by Coe is a means to experiment with tradition and satire whether it is to shift towards the absurd and the quirky in *Number 11* or towards social realism with his latest one partly indebted to the "Angry Young Men" recalling his attachment to popular culture and comedy. This oscillation is a feature of Coe's literary evolution allowing the author to imprint an emotional texture on his political texts.

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