The Critical Study

A Study of Jonathan Coe's *The Rotters' Club* As a Coming of Age Novel

By
Richard Griffiths
Submitted for the degree of MPhil in Writing
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of South Wales

Tutor: Professor Kevin Mills
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This dissertation focuses on Jonathan Coe's *The Rotters' Club* as a coming of age novel. The first chapter will examine how Coe illustrates the coming of age of British society in the 1970s, specifically the transition from an era of post-war consensus politics to a different society driven by Thatcherite policies of neoliberalism. The second chapter will focus on the novel as a bildungsroman, with particular emphasis on how its period aspect allows Coe to depict his characters in 1970s society. Both chapters will also analyse the narrative strategies Coe employs to achieve his thematic aims. The third chapter is a reflection on my own writing project (a novel entitled *That Summer, The Sky*) in light of studying *The Rotters' Club*, examining similarities and differences in narrative approach, characterisation and form.

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Introduction

Jonathan Coe's *The Rotters' Club* is a genre-defying novel. It is, in parts, comic (though to label it a 'comic novel' in the vein of *Lucky Jim* would be misleading). It is a period novel, attractive to a modern audience with a sweet tooth for nostalgia. It is a suburban novel in the vein of Julian Barnes's *Metroland,* or Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*. It is literary fiction which most would place on the popular end of that spectrum. It is also a bildungsroman, tracing the development of its characters through adolescence, and their negotiations with society. Coe was born in a suburb of Birmingham (where *The Rotters' Club* is set) in 1961 and though there is a good deal of autobiography in his novel its main theme is political, seeking to delineate the change in British society from the age of post-war consensus politics towards the neoliberalism of the eighties, and beyond. According to Guignery, Coe skilfully intertwines the story of the coming of age of his characters with the coming of age of a society at 'the personal and the national levels', thus subverting notions of the bildungsroman form as essentially optimistic against the backdrop of the oncoming Thatcher era (74).

In discussing period aspects of *The Rotter's Club* I use John Mullan's definition to distinguish between a period novel and a historical one:

> A historical novel takes us back to a time discoverable only from research; a period novel revives an era that many can recall. Jonathan Coe's The Rotters' Club, whose main events occur between 1973 and 1979, is a period novel […] Its period details are calculated to revive memories rather than invent a world (Mullan, 2005).

Chapter 1: Changes in society

The Rotters' Club traces a line from the post-war consensus of the early seventies (from Edward Heath to James Callaghan) to a changed Britain of the nineteen eighties (Thatcherism and its attendant erosion of societal values, the dismantling of the manufacturing industry and the trade unions, and the escalation of mainland Irish terrorism). Di Bernardo suggests that the novel could therefore be considered a 'social bildungsroman' in that it 'represents the socio-political changes in Britain in the 1970s'; and that Coe 'treats British society as a bildungsroman character' (21). This chapter will examine two of Coe's strategies employed to portray this transition in character, or 'coming of age': the microscopic representations of the macroscopic, and the role of nostalgia.

The microscope and macroscopic

Connor suggests that the historical novel 'is concerned with the presentation of particular characters and events in a way that gives them typifying force and reach' (130). This allows the novelist to 'translate private into public events', thereby ensuring that the micro or individual narratives reflect the 'larger movements of history', or society's macro-narrative (130). The story of Ben Trotter's sister, Lois, is one such micro-narrative in The Rotters' Club, representing both the broader tragedy of the escalation of the Irish Troubles as well as the effect of larger political forces on individual lives. Lois's story is also an example of how, according to Thurschwell, Coe's novels borrow motifs from classical tragedy, such as 'the roles of contingency, chance and destiny… [and] each individual's potentially catastrophic confrontation with a historical situation he or she cannot control' (20).

Aptly, it is the close third person narrative of her daughter Sophie that recounts how, aged sixteen, Lois ‘knew what she was looking for’ as she scours the personal ads in the music paper for a date (Coe 10). Her modest longings represent the more straightforward desires and aspirations of the period’s less ambitious population, and form part of the novel’s nostalgic dimension. Sophie describes how her mother’s needs 'were simple, and in the end she was punished for it' (Coe 10). This is an example of the prolepsis Coe utilises at various points in the narrative; a reaching forwards into characters’ future lives, allowing the reader, as Lodge points out in *The Art of Fiction*, ‘to make connections of causality and irony between widely separated events’, thus offering a poignant counterpoint to their imagined brilliant futures (75).

It is just as Malcolm is about to propose to Lois in a Birmingham pub, that the forces of history intervene, and a ‘battery pack sent power running through the cables, and thirty pounds of gelignite exploded’ (Coe 104). Malcolm is killed and Lois survives, haunting much of the rest of the book; a mute figure, struggling to cope with post traumatic shock. It is only much later in the novel, when Emily Sandys (who is in love with Ben and will eventually marry him) writes to Claire Newman seven years after the event, that the reader finds out more details about what happened on the night of the bombing, as well as what happened to Lois in the intervening period. Emily describes Ben’s recollections of taking his sister for walks in a wheelchair around the disused canals of Birmingham, talking to her without response. She also describes Lois’s descent into depression and hospitalisation. The use of multiple narrative modes works especially well here; providing a sense of distance as well as a filter through which the story of the brother and sister can be told. From the author’s perspective it enables Ben’s tender, loving act of attempting to revive his sister to be

conveyed in detail, without the self-regard of a first persona narration, or the potential sentimentality of a third person voice. The letter end with Emily's account of Ben's description of the horrific denouement to Lois and Malcolm's tale:

> He's lying in her lap. She's cradling him as he dies. […] 'Not him,' [Ben] said to me. 'She wasn't holding him. Not Malcolm. Not the whole of him. She was holding his head.
>
> 'Just his head.'
>
> And while I was trying to take this in he managed to say a few more words, he said, 'A bomb… A bomb can do terrible things to a human body' (Coe 312).

The structure of this passage creates a double effect. Ostensibly, the sentence 'Just his head' conveys the stark consequences of political ideology, but it also has the whiff of a punchline about it, giving the scene a slightly farcical tone. Thurschwell points out that 'Coe's farce is often designed to enrage' however much 'postmodernism's forms can distract us from the potential sadness' (29). Here, Coe's economical description of the bomb's destructive power, and his depiction of Lois's broken, ghost-like presence throughout the rest of the novel conveys realistically and compassionately how individual lives are not exempt from the consequences of greater political forces; what Di Bernardo terms the 'inexorability of historical fate' (37).

In framing the details of the bombing in a letter written by someone recounting the story once removed from the actual event, Coe is also able to impart some of its horror without having to describe the precise feelings or reactions of the protagonists. Lois's experience is conveyed indirectly; through her speechless grief

echoing through rest of the narrative, described largely from the point of view of her concerned, loving brother.

Birmingham is also the place where strikes where led to protest against the shutting down of the Longbridge plant of the car manufacturer British Leyland. In an interview with Vanessa Guignery, Coe, whose father was a research scientist at the plant, describes the factory's 'incredible life and urgency, an absolute sense that this was the hub of the community and the economic bedrock of the community as well' (Guignery, 2018). Longbridge thus becomes a microcosm for Britain's manufacturing base, its micro-narratives forming the main political thrust of Coe's novel in portraying the move towards Thatcherism, privatisation and the free market economy.

The informal meeting between the representatives of management and trade unions at the Bull's Head pub in chapter 2 symbolises the awkwardness of the industrial negotiations between the two sides involved in the dispute. Tew notes how, in a general sense, the novel's 'provincial setting allows a bridging of the gulf often portrayed in depictions of London culture', and the setting of this early chapter is similarly useful for the wider examination of class and character, whilst also establishing period details (83). The figures involved all represent archetypes: Jack Forester (a chief executive at Longbridge), Colin Trotter (Ben's father, and a manager at the plant), Bill Anderton (a shop steward) and Roy Slater (a low ranking union member).

Jack Forest patronisingly attempts to claim that the meeting is symbolic of the post war egalitarian ideology, telling Colin Trotter and Bill Anderton that 'The old distinctions just don't mean anything any more' (Coe 16). The group are invited to 'Let your imaginations run wild' in ordering dinner:

> Roy ordered fillet steak and chips, Colin ordered fillet steak and chips, Bill ordered fillet steak, chips and peas and Jack, who went to the South of France for his holidays ordered fillet steak with chips, peas and mushrooms on the side, a touch of sophistication that was not lost on the others (Coe 17).

Coe's deadpan depiction of the men's lack of sophistication is conveyed through a mode of narration Keen calls 'the authorial narrative situation' where 'the narrator exists outside the story world of the characters and possesses capacities consistent with an external perspective' (39). There is sleight of hand at work here, in the sense that although it is Lois's daughter who is actually narrating the story, her ironised account of the pub meal, and the precision with which details are recounted are implausibly insightful. This would be intrusive to the reader were she not a covert narrator, her voice concealed by the changing focalisation of the narrative. In this way Coe's authorial voice floats in and out of the narration, creating an immediacy and closeness when required, yet allowing the kind of intervention and ironised commentary demonstrated in the passage.

The scene also skilfully conveys character by linking social categorisation to menu choices. Colin Trotter's choice of steak and chips without any trimmings is significant; an effective example of 'show, don't tell'. His food choice (the same as Roy Slater's, who is beneath him in class and education) signals his small c conservatism (later, he will reveal his large C conservatism by voting for Thatcher), and hints at the kind of life-paralysis that will grip his son, Ben. Less skilled writers can spoil character description with detail overload, but Coe's deftness highlights Keen's assertion of faith that 'the readers of narrative routinely add and fill in as they reconstruct people on paper into inhabitants of fictional worlds' (57).

Shop steward Bill Anderton does not carry his principles into his marriage, where he is serially unfaithful. His roving eye at the Boar's Head is described thus:

> Bill paused for a while, sipping his beer, his eyes narrowed. A waitress arrived with their food and he was distracted, momentarily, by the sight of his steak and then, more extensively, by the sight of her calves and slender thighs encased in sheer nylon, the promise of an untried body (Coe 18).

The juxtaposition of 'beer' and 'eyes narrowed' (likewise 'steak' and 'the sight of her calves') signals Bill's predatory nature and his tendency for female objectification, further emphasised by his lascivious noting of the 'sheer nylon' of the waitress's stockings. Here again, the falsity of Coe's narrator might jar with anyone still linking the narrative voice to that of Lois's daughter. (How, for instance, would she know the details of Bill's sexual urges?) Genette's term for such occurrences is 'alterations'; the giving of more information 'than is necessary in principle in the code of focalising the whole' (195), though, as stated earlier, Coe's narrative strategy is made less obtrusive due to the changing points of view. Di Bernardo notes how 'the presence of postmodern features in *The Rotters' Club*... [intersect] with social realist forms', and it may be that Coe's narrative experimentalism in combination with real events is making the point that writing history is a subjective, creative act; its supposed objectivity as vulnerable to narrative falsity as an work of fiction (28). In a broader sense, it could be said that the playful switching of different modes of narration, along with the novel's temporal non-linearity, varied typesetting, intertextuality and pastiche contribute to an overall mis en scène, evoking not only a

sense of multiple perspectives, but the aesthetic of a compendium-type book from the period, or a revue-style play (28).

Bill Anderton's infidelity not only typifies the male chauvinism of the period, but is a political metaphor of broken promises and trust between union leaders and the workers they represented, in exchange for power and other favours. This is accentuated by placing the scene where Bill's wife Irene's passes a picket line, believing that 'Her husband meant something to these men', immediately prior to a list of Bill's female conquests ('Most of them from the factory, the typing pool, the sewing shop' (Coe 35).

Bill's affair with secretary Miriam Newman is noted by Victor Gibbs, a lecherous accounts clerk with affiliations to the far right. Miriam disappears, her fate unexplained. Not only is this episode in itself a metaphor for the society and politics of 1970s Britain (nasty, dishonest and violent), its tone also captures a particular mood and atmosphere not often recalled by the nostalgia industry.

This pre-internet era was a time when crimes against women went unpunished (Lord Lucan, The Yorkshire Ripper), creating a kind of dark folklore; a time when it was possible to disappear (Lucan, Reginald Perrin); a time when an imposter Yorkshire Ripper taunted the hapless police force with tape recordings while the real one continued to thrive. As Doug Anderson says at the Queen Elizabeth Hall event:

> People forget about the 1970s. They think it was all about wide collars and glam rock… Fawlty Towers and kids' TV programmes, and they forget the ungodly strangeness of it, the weird things that were happening… all those cranks and military types who talked about forming private armies to restore order and protect property when the rule of law broke down (Coe 176).

Miriam’s story is, therefore, a reminder of the era when Britain could be a strange, violent place, with grim towns half-lit by sodium lamps, post-war rubble littering waste ground, and the moral compass of the country yet to settle into equilibrium after the sixties. The stain on the national psyche that had begun with the Moors Murders had mutated into various malignant forms that bubbled up in society through violence, corruption and political extremism.

Miriam’s literal disappearance also represents the absence – or at least the marginalisation – of women in the seventies workforce. Coe seems to have chosen her profession deliberately; as a typing pool secretary, Miriam is replaceable, disposable, not missed in work or by the authorities. Her objectification by Bill (‘those lovely breasts… And she was – the ninth, was it? The tenth?’) is a reminder of women’s lack of worth in such a society; unwanted in boardrooms and pubs, their demands for equal opportunities struggling to be heard by the male dominated media, trade unions and political parties (Coe 35).

It is also through Bill’s eyes that the strike at the Grunwick Processing Laboratories is portrayed, where the workforce with a high percentage of Indian and Pakistani women were galvanised by the ‘amazingly charismatic’ Jayaben Desai (Coe 263). Bill’s idealised, ‘fetishised perspective’, illustrates his unwittingly patronising attitudes towards women politicians, but also points forwards to the arrival of Mrs Thatcher as Conservative Party Leader in 1975, later to be Prime Minister from 1979 (Di Bernardo 33).

A rally at the plant, broken up by a police charge with suspect motives, is described in a series of snapshot images:

> A teenager being lifted by two policemen and smashed head first into the bonnet of a car.
>
> A press photographer having his camera seized and stamped to pieces. An elderly west Indian being rammed up against a low garden wall and then levered over it, his legs contorting as he landed in a twisted heap (Coe 263).

It is possible in this filmic segment to detect Coe's love of French New Wave cinema, where jump cuts and image montages revolutionised cinematic narrative. In the same way that jump cuts allowed film viewers to fill in details that are not shown, so too does Coe's montage of images in this section, allowing a depiction of events without requiring detailed description that would slow down the overall narrative. The present indefinite tense makes the focaliser Bill more of an observer than participant, enabling – like Emily's letter describing the pub bombing – a more objectivised description of the police charge, devoid of personal or political allegiance.

The denouement of the trade union story is the meeting of the British Leyland workforce with the new chairman, Michael Edwardes. Bill Anderton, one of a group of the twenty-five most influential union officials, is waiting in an oak-panelled room before the chairman's speech to the conference hall. The account is intercut with Sam Chase's attempt to confront his wife's lover, the loquacious art teacher Mr Plumb, on the telephone. Chase has been working to improve his vocabulary in order to be able to compete with his rival, and has prepared a lists of possible insults ('peccable', 'scrofulous', 'suppurate', 'malignancy'); all connected for symbolic reasons with dishonesty and disease (Coe 299).

It is no coincidence that the trade union episode takes place in a hotel, linking Anderton's sordid involvement with Miriam with the pinioning his workforce are

about to undergo. He feels a 'weariness lying over him' as he senses the inevitability of large-scale redundancies, and thereafter a Tory victory in the general election, like a fading boxer who knows the writing is on the wall, or the Labour movement by the 1979 election (Coe 299). There is little resistance from the workforce to Edwardes's speech, outmanoeuvred by his cunning rhetoric, anaesthetised by his euphemisms and management-speak which are listed in italics just like Sam Chase's insults: '*contingency, product strategy, over-capacity, de-manning*' (Coe 300). Even Anderton's response to the overwhelming vote to back management proposals is drained of real anger. He ironically describes the chairman's 'agonised reasonableness', then gazes reflectively over the ornamental gardens in the February sunshine (Coe 301). Chase, meanwhile, has not gone ahead with his plan to beat his wife's lover at his own game, and has instead blown a raspberry down the line. Rather implausibly, 'it seemed to have done the trick. There had been a shocked pause… neither he nor Barbara ever heard from the Sugar Plumb fairy again' (Coe 303).

Sam Chase's inability to use the new words he has learnt – to claim them as his own – appears to highlight that the egalitarianism proposed earlier on in the novel is false; that the management class does indeed speak a different language the workers do not understand and do not have the guile to learn. After the police attack of the protesters at Grunwick, Bill Anderton contradicts Chase's comment that 'a word can cut deeper than a sword' with the reply that 'a crack on the skull with a truncheon can get your message across, too' (Coe 265). The raspberry blown by Sam Chase, therefore, might owe a lot to Coe's absurdist humour (he is greatly influenced by David Nobbs's *Reginald Perrin* novels), but could also be considered a symbol for the rejection of the discourse of consensual politics. In linking the raspberry to the dark arts of rhetorical trickery, and in repudiating language altogether in favour of

more direct means, Coe may be alluding to the methods by which the neoliberalism of the nineteen eighties was achieved and propagated. The government's change in policy (dismantling the trade unions, moving towards privatisation and the out-sourcing of industries), which culminated in the conservative movement's march towards power, involved doublespeak and lies, as well as intimidation and coercion.

Chase quotes to Bill Anderton from a book called 'Twenty-five Magic Steps to Word Power':

> "When a Hitler, a Mussolini or a Peron takes over, his first act is to commandeer words – the press, the radio, and books… Even in a democracy words are magic instruments. He who governs, or wants to govern, must be skilled in the science of employing words. Man is more influenced by language than the facts of surrounding reality" (Coe 265).

In light of this passage Edwardes's speech certainly seems to exemplify the malleability of language as a political weapon. In a similar vein, the novel also recalls the sensationalised tabloid reporting of the 'Winter of Discontent' in the UK in 1978-79. The phrase from Richard III (coined, ironically enough, by James Callaghan the Labour Prime Minister) was leapt upon and popularised in a Sun editorial, and quickly became 'an inescapable political cliché' (Simpson 480).

Ben Trotter criticises deliberately such inflated rhetoric, as well as the 'perception-is-reality' manipulation of the truth in his stream of consciousness reflections in the novel's final section:

> The British papers were calling it the winter of discontent […] but this picture they were painting, rubbish piled high in the streets and corpses rotting in the back rooms of funeral parlours because there was nobody to bury them […] was an exaggeration, it wasn't nearly as bad as that (Coe 375).

Di Bernardo notes how 'Ben's perspective focalises this socio-political situation', thus presenting historical events from the point of view of the main character, a characteristic typical of the bildungsroman and the social-realist novel (35).

It seems entirely appropriate, however, that the main micro-narrative of the novel's trade union story is focalised through Bill Anderson's principled yet fallible character, thus illustrating the movement's failure to halt the restructuring of Britain's manufacturing industries, as well as the job losses that followed the shift towards Thatcherite policies.

Period Details and Nostalgia

Along with microcosmic narratives illustrating wider aspects of society, Coe also uses period details and nostalgia in The Rotters' Club to evoke a world which no longer exists, and, in doing so, demonstrates how acutely British society was changed from the consensual society of the early seventies.

In his 2008 article for Prospect magazine the novelist Philip Hensher criticises novels about the nineteen seventies for their clichéd evocations of the period, especially for focusing too much on renderings of the past, 'at the expense of convincing characters and stories' (Hensher, 2008). Although it seems a little myopic to suggest that Coe's work should be placed in the same bracket as the populist,

‘journalistic’ views Henscher criticises, it cannot be denied that *The Rotters’ Club* is steeped in nostalgia for the world before the Thatcher era. This seems to serve more than one purpose. Most obviously, the narrative must be anchored in history, and so there are references to such period details as cheesecloth shirts and Francis Pym, then later to punk rock and the ‘Winter of Discontent’. Another function of period details is to evoke comedy and nostalgia (giving the novel its wide appeal). The nostalgia is for a disappeared world; the consensual post-war society which became extinct after the 1979 Conservative General Election victory. Single sex schools, brown-carpeted pubs, teenagers waiting up late to glimpse sex scenes in French films on BBC2 – all represent for Coe a Britain that has disappeared; a less knowing, gentler age.

The passage describing a meal between the Trotter and the Chase families illustrates how comedy and nostalgia are often interlinked throughout the novel:

> After hors d’oeuvres of salt and vinegar and cheese and onion crisps, they had moved on to a course of melon slices, topped with glacé cherries and washed down with generous glassfuls of Blue Nun. It was followed by sirloin steak – each portion charred, with exquisite calculation […] served with chips, mushrooms, salad and unlimited dollops of salad cream, while the Blue Nun, needless to say, continued to flow in a Bacchanalian torrent. Finally, fat wedges of Black Forest gâteau, doused remorselessly with double cream (Coe 55).

The naming of the wine as Blue Nun (the ubiquitous seventies brand) is both an accurate and easily recognisable period detail. Like the Boar’s Head scene, the narrator and implied reader are on the same level of understanding; the temporal

distance between the characters and narrator/reader enabling an ironised telling and reading. This is another example of what Keen terms the 'ironic gap' between narrator and the characters, allowing a commentary on the characters' internal thoughts and motivations (35). This narrative voice becomes more overt in comic exaggerations such as ‘washed down’, ‘charred, with exquisite calculation’, ‘Bacchanalian torrent’, the description of dolloping salad cream on the meal in clueless faux sophistication, and so on. A more covert narration could also work in this passage, but its comedy would be subtler. In choosing a third person narrator the ironic interventions produce a more obvious comic effect, verging on the slapstick.

Simultaneous with the comedy the scene also illustrates the societal position of middle/lower-middle class British families at this point in twentieth century history. Like any post-war family, the Trotters and Chases are aspirational, though it is clear that achieving sophistication is not so high on their list of priorities. Their half-hearted, bungling attempts at suaveness have more in common with the unpretentious, post-war, all-in-this-together spirit, as opposed, say, to the solipsistic dinner parties that became de rigour in British middle class circles on either side of the Millennium. The Trotters’ and Chases’ haplessness – and the comedy of recognition the scene induces – represents the pre-yuppie spirit of consensus, and the nostalgia for such attitudes is as much of a signifier of the change in society Coe seeks to trace as Bill Anderton’s seventies brand of trade unionism.

Another example of nostalgia as a means of signifying shifts in society is when Ben watches the 1977 Morecambe and Wise Christmas Show with his grandfather:

> Suddenly, sitting entranced before the television […] Benjamin had a fleeting vision: it came to him that he was only one person, and his family was only one family, out of millions of people and millions of families throughout the country, all sitting in front of their television sets, all watching these two comedians, in Birmingham and Manchester and Liverpool and Bristol and Durham and Portsmouth […] all of them laughing at the same joke, and he felt an incredible sense of… oneness, that was the only word he could think of (Coe 274).

The programme became famous for its enormous viewing figures, and the mass viewing experience came to symbolise how television was once a force for social cohesion. The show was also the last before the comedy duo left the BBC for ITV, a defection Coe describes as being 'like an affront to the very nature of public-service broadcasting and all the liberal ideals that lay behind it' (Coe, 2005). The episode, therefore, which might initially seem like little more than a period signifier or empty nostalgia, is actually symbolic of the move from state ownership to privatisation; another example of a gentler, more consensual age, when the country all 'laughed at the same joke'. The feeling of togetherness the episode illustrates would soon be broken up into an atomised, individualised society, to the point where Thatcher would even question its existence. In linking Ben's character – doomed to procrastination, destined never to fulfil his early promise – nostalgia becomes a symbol for the inability of the seventies consensus society to deal with changes in global politics, socio-economics and society in general, and thus be overtaken by them.

Chapter 2: The Rotter's Club as a Period Bildungsroman

The Rotters' Club is a bildungsroman whose orientation in history (between 1973 and Margaret Thatcher's election victory of 1979) is intrinsic to the narrative. This temporal encapsulation enables the reader to engage with the characters with a sense of historical perspective and a good understanding of the society in which events take place. In this way the novel's bildungsroman and period aspects work in tandem with one another: the historical setting is used to portray the characters, whilst the characters reflect and illuminate their society. This chapter will examine the narrative strategies Coe uses to depict the transitions of its teenage characters in 1970s society, including his use of period details as signifiers, or a lens through which sensibilities and events are filtered.

Coe's narrator Sophie specifies the date of the beginning of the novel's main narrative as the evening of November the 15th 1973. The fact that she is recounting a story told to her by her mother, Ben's sister Lois, makes this necessary; neatly avoiding having to identify the era in which the action is taking place by other, more obvious, means. The falsity of the novel's framed narrative is not hidden, though the brio and sleight of hand of Coe's storytelling renders it as near to invisible as possible to the casual reader. Lee suggests that when 'the 'real' view is framed within a painting, it ceases to be real and becomes instead an imaginative construct', and it is as if Coe (in the manner of B.S. Johnson, whom he so admires) is actually hinting, through Sophie's narration, that historical realism is not an objective truth (5).

Other details in this scene help reveal character and class. The fact that Ben has drawn a Monty Python cartoon on the cover of his English book hints at the fact that he is a culturally tuned-in teenager with an interest in comedy. Ben's sister Lois

is reading about the release of a Uriah Heep album in *Sounds* magazine, a weekly bible for teenagers who followed the music scene. The choice of Uriah Heep as the band is not merely tokenistic, however, representing a reality of the seventies (hairy men playing lumpen, masturbatory rock for hairy, masturbating adolescent males) rarely eulogised alongside Abba and Chopper bikes. The scene is subtly nostalgic. No-one is on the internet, or busy doing anything much, and the fact that this is a family where 'long periods of silence were common' is part of a wider sense of yearning within the novel for quieter, simpler times (Coe 10).

Mullan makes the point that the novel is full of dates as a way of measuring 'the strange timescale of teenage life' (Mullan, 2005). The dates belong to the private histories of the main characters (who age from puberty to A-levels) recording their 'comically self-concerned sense of passing time' (Mullan, 2005). This aspect denotes both teenage solipsism, and also describes the (particularly male) tendency of the period to calibrate passing time against sporting, pop culture or political events. Late 1973, for example, is after the high point of glam rock and before the dawn of punk; a hiatus where progressive-rock would flourish. Ben Trotter's dabbling in this musical genre further denotes his personality; dreamy and gentle, and soon to be left behind by the punk revolution. Thus, the recurrent specificity of dates gives the text historical veracity whilst also delineating character.

The predominant narrative mode in the opening chapter is third person subjective, where the narrator is able to convey the thoughts and feelings of more than one character, a mode according to Gardner which 'requires a skilful handling of psychic distance' to avoid becoming awkward and distracting (158). The shift into this mode is tentative at first:

> As for Benjamin… I suppose he is doing his homework at the dining table. The frown of concentration, the slightly protruding tongue (Coe 9).

The narrative shifts from the authorial voice (that of Sophie, the narrator) into such insights as Lois Trotter 'was beginning to despair' of ever finding a suitable boyfriend, and that Ben 'seemed to think [that her reading *Sounds* before him] gave her privileged access to top-secret information' (Coe 10). The understanding of characters' thoughts and motivations enabled by a third person narration also allows the reader to follow the internal trajectory of the characters; an essential aspect of the bildungsroman. Genette calls this 'multiple focalization', referring to the character through which the point of view is focussed (190). It is interesting to consider how the 'multiple dissonance' of the changing perspectives affects the novel as a whole (195). However, even if one accepts that Sophie could know all the details and internal thoughts she describes, there is a logical disjunction in that some of the letters she refers to are secret, seen only by one person (e.g. Gibbs's letter to Bill Anderton). The discerning reader must therefore decide whether Coe's narrative comes with unrealistic flaws or, rather like a conjurer, he succeeds in pulling off his postmodern telling of events. Genette describes the inconsistencies that arise as a result of multiple focalisers as 'a momentary infraction of the code', calling them 'alterations […] when the coherence of the whole still remains strong enough for the notion of dominant mode/mood to continue relevant' (195). Rather than a single, more objectivised narrative voice, this provides multiple perspectives and points of view; a choric effect with, according to Di Bernardo, 'each one embodying either a social, political or cultural specificity' (23). Thus, for example, the Trotters represent the educated middle class, the Andertons the post war working class (with staunch

political and educational ideals). Steve Richards represents the black ethnic minority, Cicely Boyd, the bourgeoisie, and Harding the burgeoning far right.

Coe has stated in numerous interviews that Ben Trotter is the character most closely associated with his own teenage self. The fact that Ben is a budding writer and composer provides the means to chart the development of artistic temperament and ambition within the novel. Artistic pretension is the stuff of many bildungsroman; notably *Jane Eyre*, *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, *Billy Liar*, and *The Buddha of Suburbia* to name a few. This is often due to their autobiographical nature, reflecting the author's own developments, but it is also a way of charting a character's self-awareness that comes with growing maturity, of portraying their increasingly individualised self-expression and understanding of the world as they strike out towards a new vision of themselves.

Anyone who has dared to follow such a path knows that the road to competence is a long and often comical one (to other people, that is), and the description of Ben's primitive recording process in his grandparents' house is one such evocation of this kind of struggle. It is a beautifully understated piece of comic writing ('First of all he had to stop their cuckoo clock… since it was ticking far too loudly and was liable to sound the hour at the most inappropriate moment'), as well as a skilful way of describing the confused, foggy territory between inexperience and greater maturity – between Ben's acknowledgement of his artistic vocation and its attempted realisation (Coe 136). Coe describes how Ben 'always regretted that these pieces never turned out to be quite as avant-garde as he would have liked', how Acorn the cat's miaow 'was clearly audible when he played the tape back', and Ben's final assertion that it 'scarcely mattered' about the 'lost time… and handful of bum notes' (137). Here, Coe merges Ben's character (his innate conservatism means that he will

be never be a revolutionary, neither artistically nor in real life) with the more universal experience of disappointment in early creative endeavours. The mundane inconvenience of the cat spoiling Ben's masterpiece (its title 'Seascape No. 4' – a nod to Debussy – achieves just the right amount of pretension and precocity) is a detail that would resonate with anyone who has ever undertaken a creative project. The success of Coe's evocation of nascent artistic expression (and youthfulness) lies also is in the reference to Ben's careless attitude towards mistakes in the piece; creating a sense of recognition in the reader and subsequent feeling of poignancy.

Ben is also in a 'prog-rock' band with his friend Philip Chase. The band's name, 'Gandalf's Pikestaff', reflects the boys' delusional inadequacy, where Philip has spent so long in completing his first masterpiece (a five movement rock symphony 'even longer than [Genesis's] 'Supper's Ready'') that it is rejected some minutes into the first rehearsal, when – in a despair-induced epiphany – the drummer and guitarist rebel from their roles and launch into a two chord, screaming punk thrash (Coe 179).

The account of the band's demise is told in recollection as part of a speech given by Doug Anderton (in his future career as a London-based journalist), at a millennium valediction event in Queen Elizabeth Hall. It is thus part of the novel's multidimensional point of view; another different focalisation. The son of a British Leyland shop steward, Doug is impatient for his life to start, having no truck with Ben's bourgeois navel gazing. As such he is representative of a 'typical character', used, according to Lukacs, to dramatise historical transformations through which the reader can 're-experience the social and human motives which lead men to think, feel and act as they did in historical reality […] to bring out these social and human motives' (42). Doug symbolises the kind of smart, upwardly mobile chancer that

would have recalled a David Bailey type figure had the novel been set in the sixties, though Coe's analogue was probably an amalgamation of the autodidact NME music journalists Tony Parsons and Julie Burchill.

The collapse of Gandalf's Pikestaff is a depiction of the heart-breaking moment when youthful optimism meets reality, and the lights come up on an ill-advised, unachievable dream. The description of the inordinate amount of time Philip has spent attempting to refine his composition perfectly captures the teenagers' inadequacies and overblown artistic ambitions; an event, in fact, from which they never recover as musicians, doomed to a lifetime of musical obscurity.

The episode is juxtaposed with Anderton's account of a Guy Fawkes' night gathering the next evening near the Longbridge car plant. The Tory opposition have just won a massive by-election swing, and many are despondent about the Labour government's chances to survive. When Ben's brother points to a fizzling out sparkler and says, 'The death of the socialist dream', it is clear that the death of Ben's and Philip's band also represents the end of a gentler, quieter era (including consensual politics) in seventies Britain before the Thatcher era (Coe 182). Di Bernardo explains how this creates a 'future anterior' effect, whereby the authorial foreknowledge produces an 'ironised reading of history' (25). One consequence of this is the tension it creates between the characters' lack of knowledge of the future and the reader's more objective understanding. Just like the founding members of Gandalf's Pikestaff had failed to appreciate their band was outmoded, so too have the left-leaning idealists in the novel (Doug Anderton, his father and Sam Chase amongst others) failed to appreciate that the post-war political ideals are about to be rendered extinct. Coe therefore manages to achieve a number of things in this episode. Firstly, the narrative propels the plot forwards, amusingly and poignantly. Secondly, it continues

the trajectory of this period-based bildungsroman, along with the historical and societal detail required of the form. Thirdly, it maintains its delineation of the collapse of consensus politics through personal narratives filtered through the consciousness of different characters, as part of the novel's choral effect.

Along with artistic dreams, teenage mistakes – trying and failing at adult pursuits – are another typical trope of the coming of age novel that Coe utilises for comic and realist effect. When Philip Chase's review of the group Yes's 'Tales from Topographic Oceans' is accepted by the school paper, run by 'a cartel of sixth-formers in [the] glamorous secrecy […] above The Carlton Club', Coe's mimesis not only captures Philip's youthfully naivety in comic fashion, but also his lack of flair:

> Tales from Topographic Oceans [he had written] is the fifth album from Yes, without doubt the most musically talented and advanced rock group in Britain today, if not the whole world. […] The concept behind the album was created by Jon Anderson, Yes's brilliant lead singer and songwriter. […] Side Three of the album's Four sides tells of the Ancient Giants Under The Sun, who are 'tuned to the majesty of music.' These words could equally apply to Yes themselves. They too are 'tuned to the majesty of music' (Coe 62).

In *The Technique of Modern Fiction* Raban notes that 'one of the natural functions of the novelist is to record the prevailing registers of the language' used (149). In a period novel like *The Rotters' Club*, such accuracy is an essential aspect of the credibility of its rendering of the period. 'To a degree' Raban states, 'all language […] betrays an attitude of mind, an historical occasion and a social context', and Philip's review needs to be consistent with this analysis if it is to capture both the

voice of his character as well as the voice of the period (144). The review's gentle, clichéd prose and the triteness of his points not only mimics that of a sensitive teenage music fan of the era, but also of contemporaneous music writing; a more benign time for musical discourse before punk made savage, sensationalist reviews compulsory in the UK music papers (this also mirrors the more unified political climate of the time). The prose is also consistent with the social context, in that Philip's family are working class. (His father, Sam Chase, is a bus driver who struggles to answer the easiest Readers' Digest crossword clues.) This contrasts with Ben's father, who is a manager at British Leyland, and it is no coincidence that Ben's talent for writing is far in advance of his friend's agonisingly banal efforts. This disparity emphasises Coe's point that social mobility in the seventies was nearly as strongly linked to social background as it was at the start of the post-war era of consensual politics. (This is further underlined later in the novel, when Steve Richards, a black pupil from working class Handsworth, fails to get the A level grades required for university, and ends up working in a chip shop.)

Another intimation of unfulfilled potential, of lives being stymied by instantaneous decisions, is when Ben doesn't follow Doug Anderton to London (where he has received a typically nebulous seventies invitation from the NME to call into their offices). An exasperated Doug tells him:

> You won't get out there. You won't take life by the throat and give it a good old shaking. You'll never do that, will you, Benjamin? You'll never take your chances […] and go and see something *happening*, something really happening (Coe 147).

Coe is interested in the way in which some characters get stuck in adolescence, and, through forces of history, Ben Trotter is tied to his sister Lois, whom he visits every Saturday in the asylum. Thurschwell notes that although postmodernism can distract from the sadness and brutality of life, ‘Coe’s fury remains at the forefront of his postmodern pastiching’, and the scene is brought to a close with great pathos when Ben finally explains his excuse to Doug (29):

> Doug said that he was sorry and then fell silent. There could be no arguing with that (Coe 148).

This echo of Billy Liar not only evokes a common coming of age dilemma (to escape or to stay, as seen for instance in McMurtry’s *The Last Picture Show*, Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* or Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*), but also deals obliquely with the awful effects of the IRA bombing, where Lois, and to a lesser extent Ben, are living memorials to the event. Thurschwell also notes that, in Coe’s universe, ‘history will always find you’, and that however tangentially Ben has lived through the political upheavals of his youth, he is not exempt from the effects of these greater forces (37).

In the novel’s final section Ben narrates his account of the one and only time he sleeps with the fragile, enigmatic Cicely Boyd, the love of his life. It takes the form of a 36-page sentence, deliberately recalling Molly Bloom’s monologue in *Ulysses*. In recalling the consummation of his and Cicely’s passion, he wonders whether ‘there are moments in life with purchasing with worlds, somehow timeless’ (Coe 363). This is ironic in the sense that he will never get beyond that blissful moment, and his youthful promise will fade without the completion of a novel or his musical masterpiece. In quoting Marx recalling Hegel’s remark that ‘all facts and personages

of great importance in world history occur, as it were twice […] the first time as tragedy, the second as farce' (28), Thurschwell concludes that Coe's novel, with its mix of genres and narrative modes, 'leads us to the recognition of modern history as tragedy, but also towards the incredulous, shared laughter […] for postmodernism's endless historical reruns: our second time farces' (38). Ben is unable to escape the weight of historical forces, and the impact these have had on his sister. But he is also unable to escape his own inertia, his fixation on an ideal (Cicely, progressive music) that prevents his development and fulfilment. Coe's mixture of tragedy and farce encapsulates the course of Ben's journey through adolescence; closer to that of Billy Fisher and his attendant frustrations, than Jane Eyre's negotiations towards contentment.

Ben's streams of consciousness sentence brings the novel to an end on a happy note for him. It is the day of the 1979 General Election and he and Cicely have made a trip into Birmingham city centre and have come across Sam Chase sitting in a pub reading *Ulysses*, happy that his wife's affair is over and optimistic about the future. Like Joyce's novel, the entirety of the last section is written in a heightened state like a drawn out epiphany. This has been induced by Ben finally getting to sleep with Cicely (reaching 'Paradise Place' as he describes it, in his brother's room beneath, symbolically enough, a picture of Margaret Thatcher) (Coe 379). Post coitally, Ben and Cicely see everything as hilarious:

> like the fact that we had done it for the first time in my little brother's bedroom, and the we had done it on election day, because, yes!, there is a general election today, the fate of my country hangs in the balance, and that is

> hilarious too […] I refuse, from this moment onwards, to worry about anything any more […] there has been too much of that (Coe 398).

Moretti states that 'the bildungsroman is situated on the border between two social classes and at the transition point between them', and this is borne out by the respective fates of Ben and Sam who are heading in opposite directions: Ben to Cambridge university and a career in accountancy, Sam to take his chances in the Thatcherite eighties (viii). The passage's reflections have the ring of the certainty of youth about them, culminating in Ben's implicit agreement with Sam Chase's predictions:

> Number one, you and Cicely will have a long and happy life together, and of course I laughed at that, because I know that it's true, […] and then he pointed at the newspaper […] it was a copy of The Sun, with a big picture of Mrs Thatcher on the front page, Number Two, he said, that woman will never be Prime Minister of this country, and then we both roared with laughter and clinked our glasses (Coe 399).

Coe, therefore, wraps up *The Rotters' Club* with this bittersweet vignette, allowing his character a moment of happiness whilst signalling to the reader that, like the prediction about the outcome of the election, it will amount to nothing. Ben's ambitions for his relationship with Cicely will not be fulfilled, the country will soon change political course, bringing with it mass unemployment, the near collapse of the trade unions and a colder political landscape, and his own artistic yearnings will amount to nothing (as evidenced in the follow up novel, *The Closed Circle*). Coe does

not allow his characters to escape the forces of history; they are, as Thurschwell notes, ‘as inescapably intertwined for Coe, much as they were for Thomas Hardy’ (29).

Coe captures the euphoria of the adolescent mind through this passage, and allows it for a brief moment to hang in the air at the novel’s end, before its inevitable plunge to earthbound reality. This is a modern bildungsroman after all; subtly subverted like the rest of Coe’s reflections on the 1970s, and there will be no great insight for Ben, and no great happiness.

Chapter 3: Reflections on my own novel in light of studying *The Rotters' Club*

Jonathan Coe was a writer I knew fairly well, having read *The House of Sleep*, *What a Carve Up!, The Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle* for pleasure. I was aware of the strain of experimentalism in his work, his interest in politics, pop culture, suburban lives, as well as the way his humour is counterbalanced by realism and darkness. I wanted to know more about his narrative approach, what his thematic intentions were with *The Rotters' Club*, and how he set out to achieve them. Whilst I felt that his novel and mine would have some commonality (the coming of age aspect, the seventies setting) Coe's was sufficiently different from what I was attempting that studying it would not prove inhibiting.

The impulse for writing my novel *That Summer, The Sky* appears similar to Coe's in that it came from a genuine feeling of despair. I had spent a lot of time in West Wales since the early nineties, and seen for myself how some villages were deserted after September. I walked, one Saturday morning, through St David's, Pembrokeshire, past exquisitely furnished houses, all empty. I had witnessed the same thing in Cornwall and in northern Spain. There seemed to be no answer to the forces of the free market economy, and I began to reflect on how people react when there is no political solution to problems involving community and national identity. Both novels, therefore, deal with a shift in socio-economics: Coe's with the move towards Thatcherism, and mine with the way in which the trend for second homes can destroy culture and language.

Whilst Coe's novel is an elegantly constructed political allegory, I felt neither clever enough nor experienced enough as a writer to attempt something similar. Besides, the idea for my plot was comparatively primitive: a revenge tragedy of sorts,

leading to a brutal denouement. I had had a minor epiphany watching Truffaut's *The 400 Blows,* which I remembered as a series of scenes moving linearly forwards in time, and began to revel in the simplicity of this narrative structure. My instinct was also not to approach the story from a realist standpoint in case it was didactic and preachy, like a bad folk song. I wanted instead for the nationalistic, political and slightly sentimental aspects of the story to be offset by something off-kilter, leading to greater ambiguity in its main character's motivation. I had become interested in the pulp novels of the early seventies published by the New England Press, and could recall the sulphurous whiff their covers gave off on the revolving racks in the newsagents. I also remembered how children's television programmes from the period like *Cloud Burst* and *The Owl Service* gave me a similar shiver, whose narratives revelled in their sheer implausibility. I wanted, therefore, for some of the residual feelings induced in me by vague memories of such period pieces to find their way into my narrative.

Whilst my intention was to write prose that was more literary in character than pulp fiction, I hoped that the submerged pulp influence would give the narrative a piquancy, or taste on the tongue. In the same way that Coe's polyphonic narrative and multiple focalisers suit his postmodern representation of history, I felt that my simpler narrative voice would suit the linearity of the story arc. The close third person narration felt immediately suitable; the world as Gwyn sees it, with the 'special privilege' referred to by Booth, of being able to go inside his mind (160). In discussing Muriel Spark's approach to characterisation, James Woods describes how her novels are 'devoutly starved' so that the reader is 'compelled to turn the mere crescents of her characters into solid discs' (88). Whilst nowhere near as reduced as this, the third person subjective mode of *That Summer, The Sky* enables the reader to

see through Gwyn's eyes, to know his thoughts without existing constantly in his mind, and without knowledge of what other characters think.

After ironing out novice slips such as Gwyn recognising Palladian architecture, I strove to make his voice as authentic to his character as possible. Woods notes 'the tension present in third-person narration', how the reader 'has to make a treaty', whereby they accept that the character sometimes sounds like themselves and sometimes like the author (25). The following passage, from chapter 9 of my novel, exemplifies this tension:

> Steering's serenity, gliding between [moments of anxiety] like a swan on a millpond, brought a calmness Gwyn hadn't felt in a long time. He loved to look out of the grimy window in the study and listen to the silence in that part of the house. He loved it more when Steering was there, reading in the fat leather chair with the stuffing oozing out of the seams, pausing to bring a tumbler to his lips before placing it on the table with infinite care, as though it were a Fabergé egg.

Looking through the 'grimy windows' in a state of blissful closeness to Steering is Gwyn's internal thought, the voice authentically his. The description of the chair and the stuffing is also true to his character, as is the Fabergé egg (Gwyn's reference to this hints at the extent of his exposure to expensive tastes whilst in Steering's company). The 'swan on a millpond', however, whilst arguably not entirely out of reach of Gwyn's imagination, is more authorial; a switch that enables the style to become more lyrical, thus magnifying Steering's exquisiteness in Gwyn's eyes. Such moments occur throughout the narrative, such as Gwyn expressing the quality of light of a full moon in poetic terms.

In an earlier scene Steering and Gwyn look at the village through a camera obscura, marvelling at the novelty and beauty of its images. In a way, a narrative is like the image produced by such a mechanism; refracted through lenses, unreal, shifting, magnifying and reducing, mesmerising. I hoped that my own narrative voice would have similar properties; filmic, vivid, zooming in and out over the landscape of the story in space and time. Technically, the voice was much simpler than Coe's choral narrative, though I wasn't, of course, trying to achieve the complex task of evoking swathes of society through the microcosmic world of my characters. Neither was I attempting to mix genres like Coe, and there is none of the overt authorial intervention in my narrative, such as his insertion of ironic commentary during the comic passages of his novel. The narrative of my novel also contains none of the objective hindsight of *The Rotters' Club* (in the sense that the historical facts of the period were firmly established at the time of its writing, and used ironically at points in the narrative); its close third person voice knowing no more than Gwyn does, maintaining its camera-like function through to the final moment.

The characters in my novel emerged and developed organically, though studying the way Coe illustrates the macro-narrative of society with micro-narratives sharpened my characterisations. Gwyn, for instance, is the first of his family to go to university, and is thus symbolic of post-war working class attitudes towards self-improvement; of the south Wales mining community's ethos of education as a means of escaping the pit. More subtly, Gwyn represents the generation of pupils who attended Ysgol Gyfun Rhydfelen, the first south Wales comprehensive that opened in 1962. This offered a bilingual education to many from non-Welsh speaking homes, and contributed to the resurgence of the Welsh language in the south.

Similarly, though not their primary function, characters such as Julia and Beth

epitomise in a wider sense the raw deal that talented women of the period were often dealt. Julia is a brilliant yet fragile artist, trying to succeed in a difficult male-dominated business. Drink and drugs give her confidence and fuel her work (like many artists of the period), and she takes part in the permissiveness of the times, though attitudes towards sexual equality are signified by Gwyn's rather hypocritical reaction to her hard drug use. Though less extreme than Julia, Beth is the writer who still has to be a mother of sorts to Steering's entourage; a published poet who she also carries and fetches and manages the manor house. Somewhere between a housewife and a maid, she is meant to recall figures like Sylvia Plath, or even Beryl Bainbridge's put upon female character in her autobiographical novel *Sweet William*, itself set in the early seventies.

None of the female characters in my novel are elevated to the same degree as Ben's worship of Cicely Boyd in *The Rotters' Club*, or Bill Anderton's idealisation of Jayaben Desai. Julia does what she wants, with no care for tradition or decorum; her behaviour mirroring what became known as the 'me decade'. Her instincts are selfish and hedonistic, though like many women of the period who modelled their behaviour on men, this does not lead to any great happiness. Beth, like Miriam Newman in *The Rotters' Club*, is the forgotten – or marginalised – female, not as important as the males in the centre of things. In contrast, Julia and Beth do fulfil something of their potential, and, on reflection, this has to do with their educated, upper middle-class background. Unlike Miriam Newman, a typing pool secretary used for sex by the trade union representative Bill Anderton, Julia and Beth are capable of following their vocations, and moving in whatever social circles they choose. Gwyn, who has also gained social mobility through university, sets his sights on teacher training as his career option, illustrating the notion that as a first generation university graduate, he

can only ascend so high.

Another aspect both novels have in common is their period setting, which is essential in more ways than one. There is the initial immediate mind's eye association with Coe's novel – clichéd but accurate, nonetheless – of tank tops, platform shoes, badly proportioned haircuts and the like. This is a perfect backdrop for a more guileless, less narcissistic society, as opposed to the pinstriped self-absorption of the one that followed. I hoped that setting my novel in the summer of 1972 would have a similar associative effect, and conjure images of sultry days, sunburn, scorched grass and women's sunglasses with lenses the size of beermats; perfect for the epicureanism of Steering's entourage and Gwyn's many temptations. Also, in the same way that Coe uses period details to illuminate changes in British society (the IRA's bombing campaign, changes in music, the nostalgic symbolism of the Morecambe and Wise show), I wanted the particular year of 1972 to represent the curdling of the 'long sixties', when ideals such as explorations of communality and free love were lurching towards something darker, and notions of a twentieth century renaissance were succumbing to bad drugs, violence, and breakdowns in political discourse (such as the terrorist murders of the Munich Olympics, or the escalation of the Irish Troubles).

References to music are meant to reinforce this change in the culture. By 1972 the UK had been infected by Glam Rock, a genre of pop music described by Simon Reynolds as a 'plastic insurrection… barbarian bubblegum' (2). Unlike the introspection that characterised much rock music at the end of the sixties, glam was cheap and nasty and irresistible to anyone under fourteen (the musical equivalent of riding on fairground dodgems with a stick of candy floss), and as such it represents everything the quasi enlightenment of the preceding five years was not. The hit song Gwyn keeps hearing is meant to hint at the change into a more troubled, flippant

society, as well as foreshadow the ‘not rightness’ of what begins to unfold in his own world. The change from 1960s principles of peace and love and anti-consumerism also manifests itself in character types like Steering (based on well-to-do hustlers such as Kit Lambert, the manager of the Who, and Andrew Loog Oldham), who is it for the money as much as the art, and Lenny who will distort concepts of communality for his own gratification. Coe’s use of music to highlight societal change occurs in the wiping out of the genteel introspection of prog-rock by the punk’s year zero, symbolising the ending of the pastoral era of consensus by the street-wise cynicism of neoliberalism.

As Coe does with Ben’s and Philip’s characters in *The Rotters’ Club*, I also use music as a character index. The scene where Gwyn chooses to put on a Beatles LP when prompted at a party is meant to illustrate his lagging behind the new aesthetic. In comparison with Gwyn’s relative conservatism, Lenny and the rest of Steering’s court listen to old blues records; the records of public school dormitories (later in the seventies it would be reggae; a sort of reverse colonialism). Coming from the valleys, Gwyn does not have the same cultural sophistication; neither the knowledge of arcane blues artists nor the confidence to enjoy the new bubblegum records – under the pretence of irony or otherwise.

The ending of both novels point towards a transition in society, and period setting is important in evoking this. In *The Rotters’ Club* Ben’s exultant declarations end with him and Sam Chase toasting their futures and a Labour victory in the 1979 General Election. With the benefit of hindsight the reader knows that they are living in the final days of an era that will soon be consigned to history. The final act of my novel also uses a change in tone to reflect a wider change in society. After he is hit with a bar when his uncle’s garage is attacked Gwyn is never the same. His left eye

changes colour (in homage to David Bowie, whose self-actualisation and personality changes throughout his career are mirrored to an extent in Gwyn's journey), his vision is blurred, his personality changes (he echoes the truckers' sexist behaviour with a girl in a cafe, sobs in a wreck at Alys's feet) – though whether that is a result of his physical injury or his discovery of Steering's betrayal is left open-ended – and his only desire is to destroy the manor house. The movement towards the brutality of the final scene echoes the violence that shocked British society in the seventies, such as the beginning of the IRA's mainland bombing campaign.

There is a dark irony in the ending of both coming of age stories. Ben imagines himself blissfully happy, though this will be short lived, never to return. Gwyn, who thought that the world had opened up its doors for him, has unwittingly helped to kill the people he thought were his friends. The contrast between Coe's experiments with form and genre, and my blunt evocation of 1970s terrorism, is a convenient illustration of the differences between the two novels; one a choric representation of a vanished period with its social stratification and flawed ideals, the other a linear narrative on course to an ending I hoped would echo some truths about nationalism and human nature (love and lust, hypocrisy, the desire for revenge, the ambiguity of motive in acts of terrorism) after its final sentence.

Studying *The Rotters' Club* contributed greatly to my understanding of my own writing project. It gave me a sharper sense of how period fiction works: how a period can be evoked, certainly, but also how its temporal framework can be used to reveal character. It was illuminating how Coe's representation of social change within the bildungsroman form achieves a kind of resonance, illustrating the way in which individuals both shape society and politics and are shaped by them. Coe's Lukacsian use of character types, and the way in which micro-narratives suggest the wider

reality of history, has already been discussed in detail, but is a powerful example of the way in which his writing often works on more than one level at once.

Perhaps what I was most attracted to in *The Rotter's Club* was the oblique, non-didactic way in which Coe – through his kaleidoscopic postmodern narrative – expresses anger at the political route Britain chose at the end of the seventies. In attempting to write a story with deeply nationalistic themes I was also conscious of not approaching the subject 'head on', but – like Coe – as part of a strange, coming of age story, in the hope that its more fantastical aspects might sweeten the bitter pill at the heart of its narrative.

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Glossary

Abba: Swedish soft-rock husband and wife foursome whose records were ubiquitous on British radio in the mid 1970s. Popular amongst housewives and the suburban bourgeoisie, the band has subsequently come to symbolise – alongside space hoppers and fondues – an unthreatening, lazily airbrushed view of the decade.

David Bowie: Shape-shifting autodidact pop artist and actor, whose golden era spanned the 1970s.

Chopper bikes: A chopper-motorcycle style pushbike synonymous in Britain with the more outlandish, anti-ergonomic designs of the 1970s.

Cloud Burst: Children's television series transmitted as part of the *Look and Read* programme for schools in the mid 1970s.

Jayaben Desai: A prominent protestor in the Grunwick dispute of 1976 in London. Desai instigated a strike among the mainly Asian and female workforce, protesting about working conditions, pay inequality and racism within the company.

Grunwich dispute: An indutrial at the Grunwick Film Processing Laboratories involving trade union action which led to a two year strike in 1976. The protest became a cause célèbre of trade unionism and involved thousands of protestors in confrontations with the police.

IRA (Irish Republican Army): An Irish paramilitary movement whose mainland bombing campaign terrorised Britain in the 1970s

Jump cut: A type of film edit in which sequential shots of the same subject give the impression of moving forwards in time.

Kit Lambert: Upper class music industry hustler of the late 1960s/early 1970s. Son of composer Constant Lambert and manager of English rock band the Who.

The Long Sixties: The post-war period of cultural and social change characterised by a sense of optimism and an increase in personal freedom and social mobility that began, arguably, in Britain around 1963 ('Between the end of the 'Chatterley' ban/And the Beatles' first LP', according to Larkin's *Annus Miribalis*) and ended around 1972.

Lord Lucan: The notorious British peer who in 1974, suspected of killing the family nanny, disappeared and was never seen again.

Monty Python: Anarchic, surrealistic, irreverent and wildly original sketch show originally broadcast on British television between 1969 and 1974. Its frequent allusions to highbrow topics such as philosophy and the classics made it particularly beloved of sixth form pupils and university students.

The Moors Murders: Child murders carried out in and around Manchester, between 1963 and 1965 by Ian Brady and Myra Hindley. The depravity of the killers' actions shocked British society during their trial in 1966.

Morecambe and Wise Christmas Show: These Christmas specials featuring the iconic comedy double act became part of the cultural fabric in Britain between 1969 and 1980. Broadcast on Christmas day, they attracted record viewing figures. Their 1977 show is seen as the high-water mark of the pre-internet age of mass viewing and common experience.

New English Library: London-based publishing imprint specialising in mass-market pulp paperbacks about skinheads and Hell's Angels in the 1970s.

NME (New Musical Express): A weekly music paper.

Andrew Loog Oldham: Upper middle-class record producer and manager associated with the Rolling Stones in the 1960s.

The Owl Service: A novel by Alan Garner made into a slow, atmospheric children's television series in 1968.

Reginald Perrin: The main character of a popular British 1970s television sitcom (based on the novel by David Nobbs) who, in the throes of a midlife crisis and disillusioned with his bourgeoisie existence, fakes his own death.

Progressive Rock: A symphonic, inward looking mid seventies musical genre derived from late sixties rock music, often involving complex time signatures and long instrumental soloing in the vein of jazz, as well as allusions to fantasy novels and science fiction. Intellectual, and antithetical to the bubblegum pop of the early 1970s, 'prog rock' was beloved amongst sixth form males who had consumed too much Tolkien.

Punk Rock: A style of music (and subsequent youth movement) imported from New York by music impresario Malcolm McLaren in 1975. Though its musical aesthetic was primitive and angry, the philosophy behind it was the more positive idea that anyone can make music, and that self-expression does not require years of formal training.

Francis Pym: Served in the Heath government between 1970 and 1974; as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1973-74).

Readers' Digest: Middle-brow general-interest magazine, often found in dentists' waiting rooms.

Sweet William: 1975 novel by Beryl Bainbridge about a philandering, manipulative male playwright and a put-upon female narrator.

Sounds magazine/Weekly music papers: Quasi-intellectual weekly music papers were popular amongst serious minded males between the late 1960s and early 1990s in Britain. The articles – written by over-qualified philosophy and English Literature graduates – were as much about structuralism as they were about the new Genesis drummer.

François Truffaut: French film director and part of the French New Wave: an influential form of European cinema notable for experimentation with narrative structure, editing and visual style.

Winter of Discontent: The phrase used in a speech by James Callaghan to describe the period marked by widespread trade union strikes from 1978-79 in Britain. The phrase was subsequently used to define the crisis by tabloid newspapers – notably The Sun.