

# Exploring the Modernist State of England Novel by Women Novelists: Rebecca West, Radclyffe Hall and Winifred Holtby

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*Le roman moderniste féminin et l'état de l'Angleterre : le cas de Rebecca West, Radclyffe Hall et Winifred Holtby*

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# Exploring the Modernist State of England Novel by Women Novelists: Rebecca West, Radclyffe Hall and Winifred Holtby

*Le roman moderniste féminin et l'état de l'Angleterre : le cas de Rebecca West, Radclyffe Hall et Winifred Holtby*

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- 1 This paper means to focus on (and confront) three novels by three British women novelists of the 1920s and 1930s: Rebecca West, Radclyffe Hall and Winifred Holtby. Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) deals, as the title suggests, with the return of a veteran and has been mainly analysed as a pioneering study of shell-shock and of the traumatic experience of the First World War.<sup>1</sup> Radclyffe Hall's *Adam's Breed* (1926) ranks with the forgotten works of art of the early twentieth century, overshadowed as it has been by the scandalous fame and trial of *The Well of Loneliness* (1928); it depicts the success story of an Italian orphan that is cut short by the war. Finally, Holtby's *South Riding* (published posthumously in 1936) offers a depiction of post-World War I England and the slump it went through in the 1930s in an imaginary corner of Yorkshire. While Holtby's novel engages directly with contemporary social and political issues and seems to fit quite easily the definition of the Condition of England novel, the others are more difficult to label and might first be read as popular romances.<sup>2</sup>
- 2 These novels will be discussed here as Condition or State of England novels, albeit of a new brand. In their own ways and through their take on class, money and marriage, they renew and complicate the genre, displacing its methods, and finally reverberate on our understanding of modernism.<sup>3</sup> The condition of England novel is an umbrella term that refers to the novels that from the 1830s to the late 1860s, dealt with the 'factory question,' the 'Hungry Forties,' poverty and the conditions of the working-class, class conflict and capitalism. As Simmons puts it, 'The novel became a method of teaching the middle and

upper classes about the “real” condition of England’ (Simmons 336), in the wake of Thomas Carlyle’s *Chartism* (1839) which had awakened people to the ‘Condition of England Question,’ i.e., the gap between the rich and the poor. Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855), where Mr. Thornton, a successful manufacturer, falls in love with Margaret Hale, an impoverished young lady from the south of England, is regarded as the epitome of the condition of England novel. ‘The contrast between the rough world of northern industry and the genteel “aristocratic” South is at the heart of Gaskell’s liberal middle-class outlook’ (Parrinder 208). In this ‘Victorian *Pride and Prejudice*,’ as *North and South* was called (Parrinder 212), the politics of marriage and the politics of the nation are closely related.

- 3 The central question asked in the Condition of England novel, ‘can marriage unify the nation?’, is taken up in E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910) while some displacements and additional elements are introduced that mark the shift from the Condition to the State of England novel: the North-South division is transformed into a threefold one between London, the suburbs and the country; Gaskell’s scepticism about the healing power of marriage is turned into a utopian ending where Leonard Bast’s and Helen Schlegel’s child, the fruit of the illegitimate union of the lower and upper classes, inherits England, an England where the English Henry Wilcox can marry the half-German Margaret Schlegel.
- 4 In the World War One or post-war novels that have been selected, the marriage issue has been superseded by the cataclysmic conflict of the time. What is at stake in these writings that will be read here as a new brand of State of England novels, is how the war interacts with the politics of the nation, namely, issues of class, gender and marriage, identity or nationality. As Virginia Woolf writes in a 1916 essay, ‘the war is breaking down barriers between the classes which seemed adamant’ (Woolf 1987, 112),<sup>4</sup> and, quoting the author whose book she is reviewing, she adds that, in spite of its horror, the war is creating ‘a community of suffering’ (Woolf 1987, 113). The war, in a way, is expected to play the role marriage played in nineteenth-century England and Condition of England novels, i.e., resolve social divisions, create a ‘community of suffering’ and above all, a sense of community.
- 5 What Woolf asserts in her review ‘A Cambridge VAD’ seems to be confirmed in the novels under study. Although her ‘photographic mind’ (Woolf 1984, 382) seems to be at odds with Woolf’s aesthetics, Holtby in *South Riding* bears witness to this ‘community of suffering’ which World War One created and shows how it has endured into the early 1930s.<sup>5</sup> Most characters and families have been affected by the war: Mrs Beddows, the Alderman, lost her son by gas poisoning,<sup>6</sup> Sarah Burton lost her lover; the wound the war inflicted is a daily reality in South Riding where the mutilated bodies of veterans, like one-armed Heyer and all those who have been confined in the area called ‘Cold Harbour Colony,’ are a familiar sight. The ‘community of suffering’ becomes tangible when Sarah Burton, the new headmistress who is still unknown to the community, attends a local concert and on hearing Edward Elgar’s ‘Land of Hope and Glory,’ starts crying: she is reminded of her sweetheart who was killed during the war; the woman sitting beside her immediately sympathises:

In the darkened, stifling, stamping, shouting audience, Sarah dropped her head into her hands and wept shamelessly.

She became aware of someone patting her knee, of a motherly voice saying below the din:

‘There, there. It’s all right, love.’

‘I know’. She fumbled for her handkerchief. ‘It’s nothing. I’ve no right...’

'It takes you like that sometimes. I know. I lost my man.'

The first notes of 'God Save the King' swept them to their feet. Sarah and Mrs Marsh stood up together. Mrs Marsh knew that Sarah suffered from unaccountable weaknesses. Sarah knew that Mrs Marsh's 'man' was not her present husband.

They had shared an experience. (73)

- 6 Rebecca West also shows how war affects people whatever their class: the wealthy Baldry family as well as the poor people in Margaret Grey's circle.
- 7 However, when in *The Return of the Soldier*, Margaret Grey—the poor innkeeper's daughter and now a married woman—hears that her former lover, Christopher Baldry, has been wounded on the front, she immediately goes and tells his wife, regardless of propriety and the way it may affect her own reputation. She simply feels for the woman Chris has married. Her instinctive feeling of human solidarity and her ability to ignore the class divide is met by Kitty's, Chris's wife's spiteful arrogance, which suggests that the upper classes may not be ready to enter the same community of suffering as the lower ones: West thus qualifies Woolf's statement, hinting that the war may have created a community of suffering but only within the existing social classes and their exclusive sense of class solidarity.<sup>7</sup> Such a fragmented community of suffering is also exposed in *South Riding* where middle-class farmers like Robert Carne are repeatedly said to have benefitted from the war and become richer at a time when most people were being ruined.
- 8 Similarly, national barriers seem to have endured beyond the war. In Radclyffe Hall's *Adam's Breed*, the protagonist, Gian Luca, an Anglo-Italian waiter, is mobilised like any other Englishman, circumstances apparently pointing to the integrating effect of the war on immigrants. However, while he was expecting to be sent to the front and given a chance to prove he is a real English citizen, he is sent to the army's kitchens and becomes a cook. Kept away from the front, the Italian is symbolically prevented from becoming an English hero, from displaying his patriotism and being recognized for it; he is the victim of English xenophobia. The fate of the half-Italian, half-English orphan child is used to unveil the persistent xenophobia in England that Victorian novels had also displayed.<sup>8</sup> Gian Luca is a "mongrel" and although he was born in London (the very place where people can change their status in Victorian times, as Pip does in Dickens's *Great Expectations*), works there and serves many famous men and women in an Italian restaurant, he is regarded as a foreigner who does not belong.<sup>9</sup> E. M. Forster's 'we are all of us mongrels' resonates in Hall's own novel which exposes (English)<sup>10</sup> xenophobia as Forster does in his essay 'Racial Exercise' (Forster 1979, 20).
- 9 In various ways, the 'community of suffering' is shown to be deeply fragmented. What seemed to be communal to Woolf in 1916 is exposed as being but a myth by West, Hall and Holtby. The war, in spite of the suffering it generated for all, has not united the nation in 'a community of suffering'.<sup>11</sup>
- 10 If the war has not succeeded in breaking down class and national barriers (as Woolf believed it would), it has not definitely changed national character either, especially what Ford Madox Ford identified in his second essay 'On Impressionism' (1914) as the main feature of Englishness, i.e., repression of feelings and desire.<sup>12</sup> In *The Return of the Soldier*, when Chris Baldry married Kitty, he subscribed to the aristocratic rules of intermarriage and repressed his feelings for Margaret. Later, Chris and Kitty lost their child. As we learn at the end of the narrative (when Margaret shows Chris a toy that belonged to his son), the child's death has never been mentioned by Kitty who has done her best to erase the

boy's memory from their home and from Chris's life. The reader is led to assume that such repression and absence of mourning may have been, in the end, just as traumatic as the shell-shock Chris suffered and equally responsible for his amnesia. The tragic irony of the story lies in the fact that Margaret's successful efforts to make Chris recover his memory by working against the double repression of his feelings (his love for her and for his son) end up in sending him back to Kitty—the guardian of the repressive ways of her class—(and to the front). Chris is saved from repression to better go back to a world advocating self-control and repressive feelings.

- 11 Radclyffe Hall also deals with repressed feelings in her novel *Adam's Breed*. In his childhood, Gian Luca was refused love by the woman who raised him, i.e., his Italian grand-mother because he was born out of wedlock and fathered by an Englishman. Gian Luca's own young desire to be loved and to love is thus thwarted. As a result, he becomes unable to feel. Although he is raised in an Italian catholic family living in London, and his circumstances are different, Gian Luca suffers from a repression of feelings similar to Chris's in *The Return of the Soldier* and to what is supposed to be the hallmark of Englishness.<sup>13</sup>
- 12 While Rebecca West suggests, in the wake of E. M. Forster and F. M. Ford, that emotional self-suppression may be a class phenomenon affecting 'the undeveloped heart' (Forster 1996, 5)<sup>14</sup> of the educated and well-to-do, Hall (like Winifred Holtby<sup>15</sup>) questions a narrow definition of Englishness as repression of feelings that encompasses only the upper classes. Hall goes so far as to question national character by pointing out, in her representation of xenophobia, that Gian Luca's Italian grand-mother who hates the fair hair he inherited from his English father, is also guilty of such a fault, thus meeting E. M. Forster who staged the universality of xenophobia in *Howards End*, for instance, in the comic conversation between Mrs Munt and her German cousin (Forster 2000, 144–146).
- 13 If these women novels take up the same issues (of class conflict, national barriers and national character) as the Edwardian State of England novels and thus reflect on the state of England, they deal with them differently after the war and because of the impact of the war. Indeed, they first of all bear witness to the reality of war as well as its perversity. Holtby, in a conversation between ex-service man Heyer, ex-Captain Sawdon turned innkeeper and socialist Alderman Joe Astell, hints at the raw motivations underlying the national exaltation of patriotism:
- 'Well, we had only the girls, but if I'd six sons', Sawdon was saying, 'I'd put 'em all in the Army or the Police Force. Army for choice. The King's uniform—you can't beat it. It's a grand life if you know how to behave yourself.  
'That's right. . . . You know where you are in the Army' . . .  
Here, thought Joe Astell, is the raw material of cannon fodder in capitalist quarrel. You know where you are in the Army—do you? He looked at Heyer's mutilated body; he thought of the millions dead in the Great War. (Holtby 107)
- 14 Hall goes the same way, suggesting through Gian Luca's plight that he has unwittingly been complicit with mass-killing. Indeed, this man who worked all his life in restaurants, caring for endless customers, feeding them with the best food the Italian cooks could provide, has been asked, once in the army's kitchens, to feed soldiers who in turn became cannon-fodder. Gian Luca's refusal to eat on his return from the front reads as a traumatic result of the war, even if he never was confronted with the actual butchery of the front, and like a clear condemnation of the way war toys with men.

- 15 The absurdity of war is perhaps nowhere as blatant as in *The Return of the Soldier* where war is shown to protect the wounded, like Chris Baldry who is sent back home when shell-shocked, and paradoxically, is ready to kill them once they are cured and fit again, as Chris is at the end:

When we had lifted the yoke of our embraces from his shoulders he would go back to that flooded trench in Flanders, under that sky more full of flying death than clouds, to that No-Man's-Land where bullets fall like rain on the rotting faces of the dead. (West 81)

- 16 The inanity of the patriotic discourse is laid bare in narratives that echo the pacifist discourse of the early twentieth century.<sup>16</sup>
- 17 Furthermore, these post-war novels display a great attention to the poor. If the very poor 'are unthinkable' for E. M. Forster (Forster 2000, 38), beyond the class of clerks Leonard Bast stands for, West and even more forcibly, Holtby bring them within the range of their characters and 'make poverty thinkable'.<sup>17</sup> The poor feature large in West's and Holtby's novels just as the immigrants and their unequal fate do in Hall's.<sup>18</sup> In *The Return of the Soldier*, poverty is seen through the eyes of Jenny, Chris's cousin, who narrates the story and belongs to the upper classes. She cannot help being repelled by the poverty of Margaret, who is 'repulsively furred with neglect and poverty' (10) and 'physically offensive to our atmosphere' (50). If Jenny's perception of poor Margaret is stereotypical, it is counterbalanced by her acknowledgement of Margaret's goodness. More importantly, Margaret is the heroine of the story. She is the only one who can and is ready to help Chris. She is willing to make him happy by coming every day to his place and spending time with him in the forest as if she were still his sweetheart. She is above all, the woman who is ready to give him back his dignity, i.e., his memory, whatever the cost to her. In a way, West challenges the Victorian view that the poor need compassion and aid from their betters by reversing the situation. In her novel, material deprivation does not go together with victimisation; poor Margaret does not suffer from a lack of agency but on the contrary, is the only one who acts.<sup>19</sup>
- 18 Holtby offers a comparable if wider perspective. In a way, she conflates different historical moments and visions of poverty by describing on the one hand the poor farm-workers who belong to Carne's farm and regard him as their master and provider, as they would have done in Victorian or even earlier times, and on the other hand, the slum-dwellers, the inhabitants of the Shacks, who live in derelict railway coaches on the outskirts of town. The Victorian discourse that the poor need compassion and aid from their betters is exposed through irony<sup>20</sup> and through the socialist discourse of Astell who rephrases it as disguising a capitalist system of oppression.<sup>21</sup> Holtby makes us discover the dreary life of the Shacks during the slump of the early 1930s through the eyes of teenager Lydia. Long before Bourdieu's call in *The Weight of the World* 'that novels should become a model for sociological representation of social suffering' (Korte 11), we witness the mother's struggle to make ends meet and give a somewhat decent life to her children until she is defeated by her fifth pregnancy and dies in childbirth. Love means death for such poor women. If the absence of birth control and the lack of money affect her beauty, her health and her freedom and turn her into a victim, education will provide her daughter with an opening. However, Holtby suggests that Lydia is not so much 'saved' by the local council and its school as by her father's wit and humour.<sup>22</sup> In other words, Holtby believes in the empowerment of the poor.

- 19 On the whole, these women novelists give voice to the voiceless, the anonymous, like Margaret Grey, whose name is significant, to the destitute like Lydia, and the illegitimate and nameless, like Gian Luca who literally has no family name. They thus broaden the social spectrum in a way that many of their male contemporary writers do not do. Indeed, if we think of F. M. Ford's *The Good Soldier* (1915) or John Galsworthy's *Maid-in-Waiting*, contemporary of *South Riding* (1933), the focus is mainly on the aristocracy, 'once feared and respected, [...] now a dying breed treasured for its absurdity', in Parrinder's words (342).<sup>23</sup>
- 20 West, Hall and Holtby reintroduce poverty, thus renewing with the nineteenth century tradition of the Condition of England novel while displacing it. Poverty is indeed here far from being a moral or spiritual ideal as it could be in George Eliot's *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866),<sup>24</sup> which is regarded as the last Condition of England novel (Simmons 350). It comes rather as a questioning and a probing of the contemporary theory of historian G. M. Trevelyan who believed in the progressive nature of history.<sup>25</sup>

## Aesthetic Issues

- 21 When we come to aesthetic issues, it becomes apparent that these writers, although seemingly very dissimilar, all resort to indirect methods, intertwine fiction and reality, and defend, by dealing with similar issues, a similar belief in humanist values.
- 22 Holtby seems to be the odd woman out, relying as she does on mimetic devices, introducing in her narrative the minutes of local committees and organising the chapters like the agenda of a meeting of the local council,<sup>26</sup> and capturing the life of South Riding so well that her mother, an Alderman like one of the characters, Mrs Beddows, tried to prevent publication of her book. Vera Brittain, Holtby's life-long friend and partner, had to fight her after Holtby's early death to get her book published. However, *South Riding* may only be deceptively traditional and mimetic: indeed, Holtby's anonymous narrator, although ever present and often giving voice to his many characters through pieces of dialogue, constantly gives way to their thoughts and feelings and their free indirect discourse. Holtby also repeatedly confronts various points of view, compelling the reader to construct her own version of the characters or the events at stake. For instance, is Robert Carne, the farmer, a copy and caricature of Mussolini, whom he is repeatedly said to look like, a man who was so aggressive with his wife that she went mad or a man who was desperately in love with a woman who has deeply wounded him? The author obviously learnt a lot from Virginia Woolf whose work she knew very well as her sensitive appraisal in *Virginia Woolf. A Critical Memoir* (1932), the first monograph published in England on Woolf, shows. In her witty, now satirical now humorous account of South Riding, Holtby thus resorts to an indirect method and devices usually recognised as typical of modernist writing and intertwines them with a mimetic approach, renewing the State of England novel.
- 23 Conversely, it is through indirect (and inverted) representations of society that West and Hall manage to send back an image of England as striking as mimetic writing would do. Both writers place their characters at some point in a forest.<sup>27</sup> Margaret takes Chris to the forest every day when she is asked to meet him by his family. In Hall's novel, Gian Luca once the war is over, leaves his home and far from society, in the forest, turns to animals, feeds them and helps the wounded ones. The forest functions as a heterotopia, a 'separate

space' where, in *The Return of the Soldier*, a married man can love a married woman who is not his wife and vice versa, and the poor and the rich can fall in love; there, the law of marriage and class is not binding.<sup>28</sup> In Hall's work, the forest is also a space of tolerance set beyond the law since there the law of money-making does not avail.<sup>29</sup> The forest contains the ambiguities of the heterotopia, located as it is both in the reality of the narrative and outside of all the places described. It is, as Foucault writes, a 'real place[s] . . . which [is] something like [a] counter-site[s], a kind of effectively enacted utopia' (Foucault 360). Unlike a utopia (which literally means 'no place,' an unreal space), it is a real space but, like a utopia, this heterotopia presents society turned upside down. The forest points out that the only space where barriers of all kinds (social, sexual, national) can fall down is a space beyond the law, a space where 'a gift economy' can be practiced. It is very close to Astell's socialist ideal of a classless society which, in Holtby's novel, is presented as utopian. As such, the forest refracts the English society of the 1920s-1930s as a class- and money-bound society where love is thwarted; it exposes the arbitrariness of class division and the falsity of the justifications of its existence (giving food and work to the poor, knitting for the poor as Kitty does in *The Return of the Soldier*, is but a way of enforcing the power of one class over another and ensuring its wealth). The function of utopia is 'to set the system at a distance' as Ricoeur shows (Ricoeur 36), drawing a parallel between utopia and ideology, two concepts that may seem wide apart (for phenomenology) but which both play a radical function by grappling with the question of power. In other words, a fiction with 'utopian freight'<sup>30</sup> (Waddell 6) is connected with what is at stake in a State of England novel.

- 24 The forest is an elsewhere where classlessness, equality (*The Return of the Soldier*), disinterested love and care (*The Return of the Soldier*, *Adam's Breed*) are possible, a real place which is nowhere yet, as the tragic endings of the two narratives point out. In a way, West and Hall signal the dead end 'utopian possibilities' such as E. M. Forster's lead to since they locate their dreams of a new form-of-life in a 'separate place'.<sup>31</sup>
- 25 Holtby, even if tentatively, provides a different, more pragmatic conclusion in *South Riding*. In her bleak world deprived of illusions, where death, loneliness, madness and poverty prevail—even if at times relieved by humour—,<sup>32</sup> Sarah Burton understands that the form of life she is trying to find is there for her taking. It does not lie in looking elsewhere but in struggling to improve what already exists and accepting her humble role and responsibility in society. Sarah's revelation at the end amounts to understanding that the form of life she is after is an ethical form of commitment grounded in the problems of society and the failings of human beings, in giving and being in debt to the other.<sup>33</sup> For Holtby, the future lies in a 'now-here' (Waddell 12) rather than in the nowhere of a utopian elsewhere.
- 26 Anchored in the reality of the time, these writers' fiction reflects on the fabric of England but is also deeply anchored in literary tradition. Their indirect method is in each case complicated by intertextual references, but somewhat unexpected ones. Indeed, if Hall in her novel exposes the state of England in 'utopian possibilities' reminiscent of William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (and of E. M. Forster's utopian State of England novel), she also relies on the rewriting of a realist work. In a way, Gian Luca, in *Adam's Breed*, is the illegitimate son Hettie, in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, would have raised if she had not killed him at birth. In Eliot's time, it was scandalous for an unmarried woman to have a child (especially if the mother was a servant and the father a master); in Hall's time, the scandal affects the son who is branded for life, not only because he is the son of a fallen

woman but also half-Italian and half-English, an outcast who neither belongs to London nor to Italy, who is neither a pauper (since his grandparents run a prosperous Italian grocer's shop) nor a member of any social class. His hybridity and the ensuing absence of belonging are the fatal circumstances in the early twentieth century.

- 27 Conversely, in Holtby's novel, there are a few reminiscences of Gaskell's *North and South*,<sup>34</sup> but where we would have expected, for a novel set in Brontë-land (the West Riding of Yorkshire), with its take on class and poverty, ideology and local power, intertextual references to *Shirley* (1849), Brontë's Condition of England novel, we find a parodic re-writing of *Jane Eyre* (the school headmistress Sarah Burton falls in love with Carne, the squire, just as Jane, the governess falls in love with her master; both male characters are plagued with a mad wife; both love stories are thwarted: when Jane can finally live with Rochester, he has become blind; when Sarah offers herself to Carne, he has a heart attack). In a way, giving a mimetic reflection of the fabric of England, for Holtby, goes together with rewriting fiction.
- 28 These writings negotiate tradition in unexpected ways offering a crisscrossing of utopian and mimetic modes of writing, of fiction and reality.<sup>35</sup> By instituting a dialectical relation rather than an opposition between ideology and utopia or between mimetic writing and indirect writing of the modernist type, they both blur the limits of the State of England novel and renew this (sub)genre. Whether they are openly feminist, left-wing liberal or not,<sup>36</sup> through their take on class, gender, money and marriage, these novels read as political statements on the state of England. Although they are not labelled as State of England novels nor, for some of them, as modernist ones (Hall and Holtby), these writings seem to fit the definition of this (sub)genre while displacing it. They are both anchored in the Victorian and Edwardian tradition and escape it; they resort to modernist devices but don't belong to mainstream modernism (except, perhaps, for Rebecca West). All fight repression and division; what they propose is a form of gift and giving, of dignity, generosity and care. As such they belong to the humanist trend of modernism, and might thus be defined as humanist modernist State of England novels of the interwar period.

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## NOTES

1. See BONIKOWSKI, COVINGTON or PINKERTON on that subject.
2. Martin HIPSKY addresses the popular romances of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, and shows how canonical modernist writers (Joyce, Mansfield, Woolf) borrowed from it. West's *The Return of the Soldier* may be read in that light, as a popular romance and a modernist work. As for Hall's *Adam's Breed*, not much work has been done on it except for Dellamora's chapter on *Adam's Breed* and Catholicism. The reader of *Etudes britanniques contemporaines* may turn to Tina TERRADILLOS'S recent article on Hall and appreciate the original angle from which she proposes to read her work.
3. Indeed, as we shall see, when post-Forsterian State of the novels are mentioned, they are usually male ones (Waugh, Ford, Powell) (see PARRINDER). When war novels are mentioned, they are often novels written by ex-service men, like Ford, and, as Gindin remarks, 'Not until the thirties was the First World War fully part of the general literary consciousness' (22). When the literature of the 1930s is discussed, it is or has long been dominated by the poetry of W. H. Auden, a domination detrimental to the reputation of many women novelists (See GINDIN or JOANNOU'S introduction on that subject). Gindin writes: 'For a number of years, the most frequent reconstructions of the decade's climate have focused on what has been called the "Auden generation"' (3). On the renewal of our perception of modernism: see RADFORD, PYKETT and DELLAMORA.
4. In this essay, Woolf reviews a book by a fellow of Newnham who became a nurse during the war and experienced horror but above all, 'a community of suffering.'
5. Indeed, the action in *South Riding* is set in 1933 and ends with George V's Jubilee celebrations in 1935.

6. 'her son, so strong so gay, so full of promise, choking out his life in the army hospital, dying from pneumonia after gas poisoning in a war which had come upon them all like an upheaval of the earth' (HOLTBY 198).
7. If class solidarity is still very strong in *The Return of the Soldier*, signs of class bonding abound in *South Riding* as well. A class 'instinct' still exists between totally different people, and in most unexpected ways: for instance, Carne and Mitchell, although one a farmer, the other reduced to pauperism, display such signs of middle-class bonding in the face of ruin (HOLTBY 302).
8. Forms of intolerance, prejudices and discrimination, such as anti-Semitism can be found in many Victorian novels, and (in)famously, in Dickens's *Oliver Twist* or Trollope's *The Way we Live Now*. *Adam's Breed* could also be compared with the example Parrinder gives of metropolitan alienation, i.e., Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, with its focus on immigrants and exiles such as Ossipon and the Professor.
9. Gian Luca shares the fate of most immigrants: he does not belong to Italy either as his trip to Italy with his wife shows.
10. This is qualified in *Adam's Breed* where Gian Luca's grand-mother's xenophobia is exposed (she hates her grand-son's fair hair); xenophobia is thus shown to be universal rather than typically English, as will be seen further on.
11. What achieved this, according to HOLTBY, is the slump of 1930 which, for instance, ruined farmers while the war had made them richer; it ruined squires like Carne. In *The Return of the Soldier*, Kitty's cousin who is the narrator, gradually comes, unlike Kitty, to empathise with Margaret and ignore the class divide. A potential change in the English set up is here hinted at but on the whole, the divisions remain as clear-cut as in E. M. Forster's *State of England* novel, *Howards End*.
12. Ford writes: '... it is only in countries like England and the United States that the abominable tortures of sex ... are not supposed to take rank alongside the horrors of lost honour, commercial ruin, or death itself. For all these things are components of life, and each of equal importance' (FORD 269).
13. Hall also denounces religious belief that verges on superstition and has erected marriage into a sacred bond, thus preventing people like the grand-mother from accepting Gian Luca as her grand-son and loving him.
14. E. M. Forster used this phrase to refer to the middle classes and the education they received in 'Notes on the English Character' (1920), later used as the opening essay in *Abinger Harvest* (1936). Tibby Schlegel and Mr. Wilcox in *Howards End* have such an 'undeveloped heart.'
15. In *South Riding* indeed, Robert Carne, the farmer and squire, is associated with silence and repression; Mrs Beddows, the Alderman, is caught in a loveless marriage and represses her feelings for him; Sarah Burton, the headmistress, also loves Carne and suffers from a repressed sexuality.
16. See Brockington on that subject. One could also say that they wrote about the reality of war before men could, who had served and survived, as like Ford Madox Ford later did. Indeed, 'Not until the thirties was the First World War fully part of the general literary consciousness, for the shocked survivors took some time to write' (GINDIN 22).
17. I borrow this phrase from Barbara KORTE who uses it about contemporary British novelists, such as Jon McGregor.
18. Mario in *Adam's Breed* struggles all his life while other Italian immigrants, like Gian Luca's grand-parents, thrive.
19. Here again, a parallel could be drawn with contemporary fiction, analysed in similar terms by Korte.
20. For example, Carne, who gives a bottle of bad whisky every Christmas to his shepherd, is, when in distress, invited by his man to have a drink of the same whisky.
21. See, for instance, chap. 6, book V.

22. Mr Holly actually manages to marry a widow who is fairly well-off and willing to raise his children, thus relieving Lydia and enabling her to go to school instead of raising her many brothers and sisters.

23. Parrinder writes: 'The novel-sequences of Ford [*Parade's End*], Waugh, and Powell enable an extension of the timespan rather than a widening of the social range of single-volume fiction' (342).

24. In *Felix Holt*, Esther must show she is 'fit for poverty' in order to marry Felix; as Parrinder reminds us, poverty is here a spiritual ideal rather than a social reality (PARRINDER 260). This ideal is laid bare in Hall's *Adam's Breed* where Gian Luca's destitution at the end does not lead him closer to heaven but simply to death.

25. G. M. Trevelyan, in his *History of England* (1926), develops a theory of English history that 'was of the gradual consolidation of the British nation and the gradual transition from hereditary despotism to a healthy and prosperous democracy' (PARRINDER 295).

26. As Gindin writes, 'the novel is organised under headings that reflect the documentary journalist's attempts to impose order on contemporary chaos. The headings, like "Education," "Finance," "Public Health," "Public assistance," of the eight books that comprise the novel are like the agenda of a meeting of the county council' (GINDIN 65). The subtitle of *South Riding, An English Landscape*, also points to Holtby's mimetic impulse, which is what critics have generally been interested in in her writing.

27. Apart from the forest and among the indirect methods used by West, we could include the use of amnesia, which allows Chris to see his own world totally differently. As Guillaume LE BLANC writes about Charlie Chaplin's amnesia in the film *The Dictator*, 'l'amnésique . . . ne se donne pas seulement de l'intérieur de la pathologie qui le prive de son passé, mais expérimente qu'il veut voir comme pour la première fois, à neuf, le monde qui l'entoure' (27).

28. The forest is a space reminiscent of Monkey Island where Margaret used to live with her father and where she met Chris. However, the island is both an idyllic space and a stereotypical place where the upper-class men can seduce lower-class maidens (the Duke did in former times: the weight of the past thus puts a pall on Chris's love from the start). The island appears again in *The Judge* where it is an equally ambiguous space: the protagonist takes his lover there before going to prison. The island is the space of love where the protagonist means to give his lover a child but this is also a way to imprison her in the life of a fallen woman, as his own mother had been. Through the topos of the island, the end of the novel spells the impossibility of emancipation and freedom for women: there seems to be no way out.

29. Gian Luca's feeding the birds in the forest is totally disinterested, unlike his feeding customers in the restaurants he had worked in before.

30. Waddell deals with 'responses to politics and utopian thinking in British modernist literary cultures' (5) between 1900 and 1920. He is not so much interested in self-proclaimed utopias as in the 'utopian "freight" or "implication"' of some early modernist writings that provide 'their readers with a means of more effectively grasping (and thereby perhaps in time resolving) the contradictions of the social conditions by which they were, at the outset of the twentieth century, encircled' (6). He discusses Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, D.H. Lawrence and Wyndham Lewis to that effect. This concept of utopian 'freight' or 'implication' yields fruitful results and I borrow it to explore the novels I have selected, thus adding to Waddell's exclusively male list of writers.

31. Indeed, in West's novel, Margaret appears as a Christ-like figure in a world deprived of transcendence. Her aura is that of generosity, goodness and dignity. She is intent on giving back his dignity to Chris even if it means relinquishing her (and his) happiness in the forest. Her ethical choice can only result in sorrow and loss. In Hall's novel, giving is what Gian Luca does in the forest: he gives what he has to the birds, feeds them and takes care of the wounded animals; such feeding is totally disinterested: no money is at stake contrary to what happened in the

restaurants, and feeding is not meant to produce cannon-fodder, contrary to what it did during the war. Giving turns Gian Luca into a secularised St Francis but means adopting a form-of-life that is so bare that it can only lead to death. The latent criticism of E. M. Forster's choice may be understood as a nostalgic and even reactionary move or as a more dynamic move towards a still hazy future. It is a complex issue that would be worth addressing at length but would take us far from our present topic.

32. Humour illuminates the narrative with bright moments and sparks of hope: Mrs Brimsley and Mr Holly's improbable marriage, for instance, is based on desire and humour—the unconquerable working-class humour, according to Holtby, or 'the traditional humour of the poor', in the words of ASTELL (296).

33. In some ways, Sarah's choice is close to that of Holtby who, like West, was one of the women of the 1930s who 'refused to separate their theory from their practice' (JOANNOU 4).

34. Although the opposition between the North and the South of England is not as emphasized as in Gaskell's novel; only towards the end of *South Riding* is London opposed to Yorkshire (see chap. 2, book VIII).

35. Conversely, these novels have become tradition, as West's novel has through Ford's *Parade's End*. See Seamus O'Malley's article on this subject.

36. West and Holtby were. Hall was ultraconservative.

## ABSTRACTS

This paper means to focus on three novels by three British women novelists of the 1920s and 1930s: Rebecca West, Radclyffe Hall and Winifred Holtby. While Holtby's *South Riding* (1936), which offers a satiric depiction of post-World War I England and engages directly with the contemporary social and political issues, seems to fit quite easily the definition of the Victorian Condition of England novel, the others are more difficult to label. West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) deals, as the title suggests, with the return of a veteran and has been mainly analysed as a pioneering study of shell-shock and of the traumatic experience of the First World War; Radclyffe Hall's *Adam's Breed* (1926) ranks with the forgotten works of art of the early twentieth century, overshadowed as it has been by the scandalous fame and trial of *The Well of Loneliness* (1928). This paper will argue that these novels are State of England novels, albeit of a new brand. Under the guise of dealing with the traumatic experience of World War One, West and Hall's novels comment upon their own society. Adopting narrative techniques at odds with the Victorian Condition of England novel, building on E. M. Forster's State of England novel and questioning it, departing from Holtby's own brand of satire (and yet meeting her in some measure), these novelists offer from their own specific vantage points (and various social backgrounds) their views on wealth and poverty, social classes, the condition of women or immigrants. On the whole, they rethink the role of the war and of women while assessing the state of England and radically exposing the mechanisms of the English society of their time. The purpose of this paper will be both to reexamine or re-value these novels and show how, in original and yet somewhat similar ways, they reinvent the genre of the Condition and State of England novel, weaving into their writings intertextual references, utopias and various forms of indirection that end up in delineating an original anatomy of the English nation.

Cet article se concentre sur trois romancières britanniques des années 1920 et 1930, Rebecca West, Radclyffe Hall et Winifred Holtby, et sur trois de leurs romans. Alors que *South Riding* (1936) de Holtby semble correspondre à la définition du roman victorien dit « Condition of England novel », les autres sont plus difficiles à saisir. *South Riding* offre en effet une description satirique de l'Angleterre de l'entre-deux-guerres et se confronte directement aux problèmes socio-politiques du moment. *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) de West évoque pour sa part, comme le titre le suggère, le retour d'un vétéran et a été essentiellement analysé comme une étude pionnière du « Shell Shock » ou obusite et de l'expérience traumatisante de la Première Guerre mondiale. *Adam's Breed* (1926) de Radclyffe Hall a quant à lui, été éclipsé par le scandale de la publication de *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) et le procès qui suivit tant et si bien qu'il compte parmi les romans oubliés du début du vingtième siècle. Cet article tente de montrer que ces romans qui portent sur l'état de l'Angleterre sont des « State of England novels » mais d'une nouvelle sorte. Sous couvert de s'intéresser à l'expérience traumatisante de la Première Guerre, les romans de West et Hall analysent leur propre société. Tout en adoptant une technique narrative différente de celle du roman victorien dit « Condition of England novel », tout en s'inspirant du « roman sur l'état de l'Angleterre » d'E. M. Forster (ou en le critiquant), tout en s'éloignant du type de satire pratiqué par Holtby (qu'elles rejoignent pourtant dans une certaine mesure), ces romancières offrent, depuis leur propre arrière-plan social et leur point de vue privilégié, leur vision de la richesse et de la pauvreté, des classes sociales, de la condition des femmes ou des immigrants. Dans l'ensemble, elles repensent le rôle de la guerre et des femmes tout en évaluant l'état de l'Angleterre et en mettant à nu les mécanismes de la société anglaise de leur temps. Il s'agit ici de relire, voire de réévaluer, ces romans et de montrer comment, de manière à la fois originale et comparable, ils réinventent le genre du « Condition or State of England novel » : références intertextuelles, utopies et diverses formes d'indirection se conjuguent pour dessiner les contours d'une anatomie originale de la nation anglaise.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** roman sur l'état de l'Angleterre, après guerre, utopie, classe sociale, pauvreté, condition des femmes

**Keywords:** condition of England novel, State of England novel, post World War One, utopia, social class, poverty, condition of women

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