

Nature, Immunity, Community: Sarah Hall's Fiction

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Survival looms large in Sarah Hall's works, where it assumes a hovering, spectral presence. In her dystopian evocation of Northern England, *The Carhullan Army*, she plunges the readers into a post-apocalyptic world in which urban organisation has broken down, large tracts of the country being flooded. The first-person narrator does not linger on the evocation of the catastrophe, as she is more interested in revealing the utopian experiment taking place in the eponymous farm, in some hardly reachable part of the Lake District, when she joins in the life of a female community working on the land and practicing strict autarchy. In her third novel, the climate crisis testifying to the effects of the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene or other forms of exploitation and deprivation is evoked metaleptically, through the effects it has on the population. The reader is only gratified with glimpses of the recent social collapse: "My father's generation seemed to die out quickly, though their lives had been lived in prosperity. The health system cracked apart. Epidemics swept through the quarters in every town and city. There were new viruses too aggressive to treat. Those who did not fall ill seemed just to fade away." (Hall 2007, 37) This is one of the rare allusions to epidemics in the corpus, which does not mean that Hall is not concerned with the issue. Quite on the contrary.

Criticism on Hall's work has underlined her concern with landscape (Walezak 2018, 2019), with the environmental crisis (Smith), with eco-feminism (Walezak 2019), and has envisaged her work through the generic prism, addressing the presence of pastoral and

new/post-pastoral (Liley, Walezak 2019), dystopia (Robinson, Walezak 2019) and insisting on the post-apocalyptic dimension of her third novel. Still, the apocalypse is given pride of place in *Haweswater*, her first novel, which explores the last years and months of a rural community in the Lake District as the building of a huge reservoir is planned then performed prior to the flooding of the valley and the eviction of its occupants, re-writing the secular trope of the flood that dominates the whole of the prologue (Hall 2002, ix–xiv) and makes Hall’s first and third novels fall within the sub-genre of what Astrid Bracke has termed “flood fictions” (Bracke). Furthermore the environmental concern appears regularly in her more recent novel, *The Wolf Border*, which addresses the issue of re-wilding through the introduction of extinct species while echoing anxieties as to growing evidence to climate change. To do so, it revisits the image of temperate weather as the soul of Englishness (*pace* Pevsner) to consider extremes of heat (197) and cold, in images heralding the recent lockdown due to the Covid-19 crisis: “All over the country airports have closed, schools, hospital are running skeleton crews; the economy is haemorrhaging” (297). Exposure to climate violence and the ensuing conditions of survival is regularly thematised her fiction, which has led Walezak to remark on her “focus on survival and survivalist strategies” (2018).

Now, even if she is not explicitly concerned with the evocation of contagious disease, I would argue that the issue of immunity is at the heart of her preoccupations. In fact, when addressing contagion, one has to confront immunity, posited as the horizon of any sanitary crisis and the guarantee of a return to balance and safety. The immunity of the individual and that of the community are eminently at stake in biopolitical apparatuses, their purpose being to provide protection or exemption from the virus. In *Immunitas*, Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito reminds us that, in Ancient Rome, he who was immune was exempt from returning gifts, he benefited from a form of autonomy, *immunitas* implying exemption or privilege (“Introduction,” n.p.). This entails that dealing with immunity, contagion and things viral

always implies the community, its inside and its outside. And precisely, this is what the virus, bringing about the need for a vaccine, does: it leads us to reconsider the limits between the inside and the outside. In other terms, the vaccine's efficiency relies on the homeopathic principle of the *pharmakon* that consists in preventively injecting into a body a fraction of the disease so as to protect the individual from contamination ("IV. Biopolitics," n.p.). In Esposito's terms, immunity resides in defending a subject or a group from evil "through its preliminary internalization" ("Introduction," n.p.), thereby problematising the frontier between self and other, inside and outside, and casting light on the nature and uses of the immunity crisis.

What I want to turn my attention to here is the evolution at the heart of Hall's production from her first novel to her latest as regards the issue of immunity in relation to community. As already indicated, her novels concentrate on rural communities. Hall has become the writer of the Lake District and, more specifically, she zooms in on one specific, isolated community, i.e. the village of Mardale in *Haweswater*, the Carhullan farm in *The Carhullan Army* and the Annerdale Estate in *The Wolf Border*. In each case, she paints a community living in harmony with a potentially hostile environment, very much defined by its reliance on nature and landscape, and fairly cut off from the wider world. A very potent sense of cultural identity gets into the evocation of each of the singular places that are connected through their northern location and through the recurrent words and practices that subtly stitch one novel to the other. And in each one of the novels, the reader is presented with a crisis of inclusion—or at least intrusion—into the community, and in the way in which this redefines the relationship between the interior and the exterior.

In *Haweswater*, the Mardale community, with its self-reliant practice of pastoral activities is an air-tight unit. Some of its inhabitants did leave the valley at one point in the past, if only to contribute their mite to the defense of the nation, during WW1. But most of them have come

to look like the landscape, as suggested by the paintings produced by the local artist that are also portraits or, in the narrator's words, "vast amalgams of environment and humanity" (Hall 202, 185). And it is precisely the painter, Paul Level, who meets the intruder, Jack Liggett, for the first time. The latter comes to the valley in a brand-new car, an emissary from the Manchester City Waterworks entrusted with the mission of announcing to the locals that their village and way of life is going to be sacrificed for the welfare of the majority. From the beginning, the intruder is associated with radical exteriority. He is compared to "an exotic bird" (42) or "a peacock" (56), too garish in the dun and dark landscapes of the valley. Still, after being rejected by the female protagonist, Janet, who represents in many ways the traditional values of the community, the two of them madly fall in love, the novel veering into a dark type of romance (Walezak 2018), as Liggett ultimately dies while climbing a nearby mountain, singing his love to Janet and to the mountain at the same time (Hall 2002, 203), in a powerful moment of becoming-mountain—to put things in Deleuzian terms. The fact that the novel should turn into tragedy as Janet dies while trying to damage the dam wall with explosives—a form of suicide that her brother Isaac perfects as he chooses never to return from a dive into the eponymous water—echoes in individual terms the sacrifice and death of the community, their fields and landscapes. In *Haweswater*, it seems as if the introduction of the contagious item brought about the illusion of an immunizing function before wreaking destruction. As indicated by Esposito, there is always an element of risk in trying to inject a vaccine, in so far as immunization implies that the system reacts to and appropriates the foreign element, negating its negating effects: "the immunitary logic is based more on a non-negation, on the negation of a negation, than on an affirmation" (Esposito "Introduction", n.p.). The risk taken in Hall's first novel brings about the collapse of the community that is poisoned through the failed implant of the endogenous element as an exotic bird. In *Haweswater*, the crisis does not allow for any creative outcome and brings about collapse.

Things are somewhat different in *The Carhullan Army*, where the graft or implant fails to be rejected. This is only too normal as Sister, the narrator and protagonist, escapes from her post-apocalyptic urban world: some sort of dystopian evocation of a society in which the state of exception has become the norm, depriving citizens of their rights and happiness. Her desertion leads her to the embrace of the female community that has been leading a watertight, autonomous life for several decades, opting for exteriority to the system as an existential, ethical and political statement. When Sister arrives in the vicinity of the farm, exhausted after a long trek through what is presented as the wilderness, she is considered as an intruder and severely castigated. Still, she soon becomes integrated into the group and trains as a soldier to defend the “alternative society” that women have built and are intent on developing (Hall 2007, 55). To achieve such a degree of integration, women have to die to their former selves (“She was dead. I was alive.” (94)). In Hall’s third novel, the immunization process works because the external element is not so much an enemy as an ally, which makes the *pharmakon* a fairly powerful one: the poison that is injected only has the appearance of a poison and it fortifies the community, so that the last pages of the novel evoke the Carhullan army of women launching an attack on the city of Rith (the ghostly, dystopian avatar of Penrith) so as to try and redeem the life of the nation, inoculating it with a disease that will either kill it or fortify it in turn. The outcome remains a moot point as the novel is made up of Sister’s narrative that is transmitted to posterity without any allusion to the result of the civil war that the last stages of the novel record the beginning of.

The Wolf Border is much clearer in its immunitary economy. It is concerned with the contentious re-introduction of the grey wolf into the Lake District. This takes place in a huge personal estate in which a special zone, complete with reputedly inviolable fence, is meant to welcome the pair of transplants and their first litter. Once again, the novel is concerned with the presentation of a community of landscape, history and culture, in which an airtight zone is

delimited by a seemingly inviolable fence. Here, the story of the injection of the foreign into the common is dramatised through a narrative of rewilding that brings together popular interest in archetypal fears and concern for biodiversity. Interestingly the wolves, as the emblematic representation of fearsome exteriority, soon become part and parcel of the land(scape): “She is the true grey, true to the name; she is tawny as the landscape, and utterly congruent.” (Hall 2015, 152) In different terms, they have become part of the *community*, as indicated through recurrent commentaries on their commonality: “They should exist here as anywhere, and in so doing recreate their common selves.” (285), the main protagonist insists, before averring that “[t]hey are no longer aliens: they never were.” (333). What *The Wolf Border* presents, then, is an efficient immunitary strategy that strengthens the community since, in the last chapters of the novel, the pack of wolves are seen to escape into Scotland, there to bolster up the biodiversity of the land, the final word of the novel being “*Fàilte*,” or “welcome.” I would argue that what is at work in the upbeat tone of the concluding scenes is a strong sense of the immunitary benefits to be derived from the operation as the *pharmakon* acts in its double, paradoxical way, i.e. as both pathogenic and curative principle. What we see at work here is no longer a strict distinction between inside and outside, self and non-self, but a community that “coincides with its own alteration,” which transforms immunity into a process that involves an open system (Esposito “Common Immunity”, n.p.).

I would then argue that, by returning to the figure of the community and its invasion or infiltration, what Hall does is peddle and adapt the figure of immunization that she ultimately considers as a creative, strengthening principle that makes the community come to fruition by introjecting (more than incorporating) and external, potentially dangerous element. By soliciting the immunity register, she gives visibility not only to the reactive dimension of immunity but also to its creative potential. She ultimately shows how it is a matter of openness and exposure, miles away from rejection, which contributes to enriching the concept of

hospitality. In Esposito's words, with *immunitas* the community "is exposed to the need of its own exposure" (Esposito "Common Immunity," n.p.). This means that Hall takes up this model of opening, exposure and obtuseness to make ethical and political points about her preference for the open over the closed, the exposed over the self-protected, the many over the single. This provides a model of community that is porous and rejects purity in favour of diversity—including, of course, *biodiversity*. By returning to the figure of immunity, she provides a constructive vision of the crisis as that which allows for meeting and dialogue, hospitality and new directions in considering the figure of the virus or the foreign body, or the intruder.

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