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Brexlit: Redefining Borders. An Introduction[1]

1. Re-Reading Brexit: New Political and Cultural Scenarios

Brexit has often been framed as a singular political event: the 2016 referendum, a moment of rupture in the constitutional and geopolitical history of the United Kingdom. However, from a literary and cultural standpoint, Brexit resists such narrative closure. It appears instead as a prolonged process of meaning-making, which persists through competing interpretations, symbolic struggles, and affective investments. To re-read Brexit in the present day, therefore, demands more than a mere revisiting of the circumstances of the referendum; it requires an examination of the cultural narratives, images, and imaginaries through which Brexit has been articulated, contested, and normalised. Literature and the arts play a crucial role in this process, not merely reflecting political change but actively shaping the frameworks through which it is understood.

The present issue of *Anglistica AION* is predicated on the assumption that Brexit constitutes a cultural and imaginative crisis as much as a political one. The referendum revealed profound divisions within British society – between nations and regions, social classes, generations, and ideological positions – while concurrently reactivating established discourses of sovereignty, belonging, and national exceptionalism. These discourses did not emerge abruptly in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Instead, they are informed by a more extensive cultural repository, wherein the nation has been repeatedly conceptualised as both imperilled and redeemable. Literary and cultural texts offer a privileged vantage point from which to trace these continuities and ruptures, illuminating how political identities are formed not only through policy and institutions, but also through stories, metaphors, and affective attachments.

A productive framework for understanding these dynamics can be found in Stuart Hall's analysis of Thatcherism. In the late 1980s, Hall identified the success of conservative hegemony in its ability to address "the fears, the anxieties, the lost identities, of a people", emphasising the importance of "think[ing] about politics in images".[2] Thatcherism's significance, Hall argued, extended beyond the realm of mere economic policy. It mobilised a powerful symbolic repertoire that spoke to Britain as an "imagined community"[3] and addressed "our collective fantasies", operating at the level of the social imaginary, while "the left forlornly trie[d] to drag the conversation round to 'our policies'".[4] In this reading, politics was not won solely through rational persuasion, but rather through the capacity to produce emotionally resonant narratives that could reorganise common sense.

Furthermore, Hall's notion of the "Great Moving Right Show"[5] remains strikingly relevant to the cultural logic underpinning Brexit. Despite the differences in historical context, a notable similarity is evident in the strategies employed to construct political consent. The discourse surrounding Brexit –

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[1] The introduction was co-authored as follows: Paragraph 1 by Alessandra Ruggiero; Paragraph 2 by Lucia Esposito; Paragraph 3 by Virginie Roche-Tiengo.

[2] Stuart Hall, "Gramsci and Us", in S. Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988), 167.

[3] See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983).

[4] Hall, "Gramsci", Ibidem.

[5] See Stuart Hall, "The Great Moving Right Show", *Marxism Today* (January 1979), 14-20.

particularly in its populist and nationalist iterations – has been characterised by a pronounced emphasis on emotionally charged images and narratives: the recovery of sovereignty, the fantasy of regained control, and the promise of a coherent national identity under threat from external forces. As with the Thatcherite moment, these narratives function not simply as rhetorical embellishments, but as structuring devices that shape the very nature of political imagination itself.

At the core of this symbolic economy lies a utopian – or, more precisely, 'retrotopian' – vision of the nation. As Zygmunt Bauman has suggested, retrotopia designates a backward-looking orientation in which idealised versions of the past replace future-oriented political projects.[6] In the context of Brexit, slogans such as 'Take Back Control' or the implicit call to 'Make Britain Great Again' crystallise this turn towards nostalgia. Select myths of imperial greatness and global influence are mobilised, often stripped of their historical complexities and violences, while simultaneously invoking images of a recovered splendid isolation. The issue of withdrawal from the European Union is thus reframed not as loss or contraction, but as restoration and liberation. These imaginaries have proven particularly effective in articulating anti-European and anti-migrant sentiments, translating diffuse anxieties into emotionally compelling narratives of national renewal.

Brexit, therefore, can be interpreted as the culmination of a long-term ideological trajectory, wherein post-imperial nostalgia, neoliberal restructuring, and media-driven populism have converged. This temporal juncture is characterised by the re-emergence of unresolved questions pertaining to British identity, its relationship with imperialism, Europe, and multiculturalism, which are manifesting with renewed intensity. It is widely acknowledged that both literature and the performing arts have the capacity to engender empathy and cultivate a sense of community,[7] and that they have been demonstrated to also actively "engage with emergent political realities".[8] The articles contained within this issue are unified by the shared assumption that literary and cultural texts can address the impact of Brexit on the lives, thoughts, and feelings of British and Irish society. Literature and the performing arts offer a critical lens through which these processes can be examined, precisely because they are attuned to contradiction, ambiguity, and affect. Where political discourse frequently simplifies, cultural texts tend to embrace complexity; while populist narratives assure clarity, literature reveals uncertainty and loss. Far from being passive reflections of political change, these works actively engage with the public sphere by producing alternative narratives, challenging dominant imaginaries, and articulating experiences that are marginalised within mainstream discourse. It is therefore crucial to acknowledge the pivotal role that writers, playwrights, poets and artists play as public intellectuals, serving as conduits between personal experience and collective history.

Recent political developments in the United Kingdom have further complicated the cultural and narrative landscape in which Brexit continues to resonate. In the 2024 general election, Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party secured a decisive parliamentary majority, marking the end of nearly a decade of Conservative rule and establishing a new government at the centre of debates about the UK's future direction. The victory of the Labour party was widely interpreted as a response to the prevailing public dissatisfaction with the Conservatives and the broader political instability of the time. Following what many commentators described as a significant electoral rebound, Starmer was elected Prime Minister. This leadership transition has catalysed a resurgence in public discourse surrounding the UK's relationship with the European Union and the enduring implications of Brexit. Notwithstanding the fact that Starmer has repeatedly dismissed the prospect of rejoining the EU, the single market, or the

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[6] See Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

[7] See Martha C. Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism", in G. Wallace Brown and David Held, eds, *The Cosmopolitanism Reader* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 155-162.

[8] Kristian Shaw, "Brexlit", in Robert Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 16.

customs union, his administration has delineated its approach as a pragmatic 'reset' in UK-EU relations, with a focus on trade, security, and mobility, as opposed to a complete reversal of the 2016 referendum's outcome.[9] In this context, the government has emphasised targeted improvements to bilateral arrangements and sought to reduce post-Brexit trade frictions. These efforts have drawn both support and criticism from a range of political perspectives, including from those who oppose closer EU ties.

Despite the formal conclusion of the Brexit process, recent parliamentary activity and public debate demonstrate that Brexit remains a potent cultural and political touchstone in British life. In late 2025, the House of Commons narrowly passed a symbolic motion in favour of the UK rejoining a customs union with the European Union, won on a tied vote decided by the deputy speaker's casting vote.[10] These discourses are frequently depicted in media portrayals as a form of cultural contestation surrounding the legacy and significance of Brexit. Right-leaning news outlets have accused the government led by Starmer of acting against the results of the referendum and of secretly seeking to mitigate the consequences of Brexit, even though official government rhetoric continues to affirm the UK's sovereign freedoms outside of the EU.[11]

The present political context indicates that the negotiations concerning Brexit are not a simple 'move back' towards Europe, nor a straightforward consolidation of the original trajectory of Brexit. Rather, it is a more arduous process of determining the present implications of Brexit. The ongoing symbolic battleground over customs union debates illustrates how Brexit continues to function as a site of narrative contestation, one that animates questions about national identity, economic future, sovereignty, and belonging. Literary and cultural texts have been shown to facilitate understanding of the affective registers through which such political contestations are lived, felt, and interpreted, by means of magnifying, satirising, or reimagining these debates.

In this context, Brexit cannot be considered as having a definitive and unambiguous meaning. Instead, its cultural afterlife is inextricably linked to the evolving dynamics of contemporary politics. The ongoing debates over trade, sovereignty, and European cooperation – themselves refracted through competing media representations and public imaginaries – reflect the very processes through which communities continue to make sense of political change and negotiate the boundaries of national identity. Literature and the arts continue to play a pivotal role in this process, serving as

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[9] See Tamsin Paternoster, "No re-joining but renewed ties: Would a Labour election win bring UK and EU closer together?", *Euronews* (26 June 2024), *www.euronews.com*.

[10] Although the motion has no immediate legislative force, it reflects cross-party concern about the economic difficulties associated with post-Brexit trade arrangements and tensions within the governing Labour Party and beyond about the future of UK-EU relations. For examples from the media coverage of the news, see Andrew Sparrow, "Davey claims 'historic victory' for Lib Dems after tokenistic vote in favour of customs union with EU – as it happened", *The Guardian* (9 December 2025), *www.theguardian.com*; "EU customs union motion passes, with backing of 13 Labour MPs, after David Lammy comments", Sky News (9 December 2025), *news.sky.com*. Prominent Labour figures, including Deputy Prime Minister David Lammy, have publicly suggested that closer economic alignment with the EU – or even re-entry into the customs union – could support growth, a position that has generated both support and criticism across the political spectrum and intensified discussion about the limits of the government's Brexit strategy. See George Parker, Peter Foster and Andy Bounds, "Return to EU customs union would 'unravel' UK trade deals, Starmer warns", *Financial Times* (10 December 2025), *www.ft.com*.

[11] For example, *The Telegraph* has published commentary framing closer EU engagement as an unforgivable breach of the 2016 vote. See Iain Duncan Smith, "This is Starmer's most unforgivable Brexit betrayal to date", *The Telegraph* (17 July 2025), *www.telegraph.co.uk*. Meanwhile, polling suggests that many voters – including substantial numbers of Labour supporters – would prefer closer ties with the EU to policies focused on austerity or isolation, underscoring how Brexit remains a deeply emotive fault line in British politics. Recent YouGov data show that a majority of Britons now support closer EU-UK cooperation and even rejoining the EU under certain terms, while only a minority would support a more distant relationship, indicating significant public appetite for rethinking post-Brexit arrangements. See Matthew Smith, "Britons back closer relationship with Europe as UK and EU reset relations", *YouGov* (20 May 2025), *yougov.co.uk*; Estelle Nilsson-Julien and Mert Can Yilmaz, "'Bregretful': Majority of UK citizens today would vote to stay in the EU, new poll reveals", *Euronews* (27 June 2025), *www.euronews.com*.

conduits for articulating ambivalence, representing contested histories, and envisioning alternative futures in a post-Brexit Britain.

2. Fictional Response to Brexit

Critical debates have also raised broader questions about how literature can respond to rapid historical change and engage with political and social rupture in imaginative ways, through the use of metaphors, myths, emotional registers. For some, fiction has always served this purpose. In her essay "Mathews and Misrepresentation", Canadian writer Margaret Atwood – globally known for her socio-political and eco-critical dystopias[12] – highlights the 'inescapable' link between literary authors and the social world:

> Far from thinking of writers as totally isolated individuals, I see them as inescapably connected with their society. The nature of the connection will vary – the writer may unconsciously *reflect the society*, he may consciously *examine it* and *project ways of changing it*; and the connection between writer and society will increase in intensity as the society (rather than, for instance, the writer's love-life or his meditations on roses) becomes the "subject" of the writer.[13]

As a politically and socially engaged writer, and a staunch defender of human rights, Atwood has repeatedly emphasised the importance for literary authors to be involved in their own time as well as to use literature to examine society and effect change. Atwood's position is that writers possess a "moral responsibility", or else a "social responsibility"[14] akin to that of an "eyewitness".[15] It is imperative that the accounts presented are truthful, and that readers are enabled to perceive with clarity – through the "windowpane" of the prose[16] – the events that transpired, or are unfolding, during a specific historical period.

Of even greater significance, however, is the use of writing as a medium to persuade readers to adopt a stance on events and, potentially, to embrace an alternative ethical perspective – one that entails relinquishing indifference towards those who endure the consequences of injustice, political persecution or discrimination of any nature. Literature accomplishes this feat to a considerable extent due to its remarkable capacity to depict characters that facilitate our understanding and empathy towards individuals who can be very distant or divergent from our own social and cultural milieu. As Atwood elucidated in an interview, fiction enables us to understand other people, helping us to step beyond the confines of our own perspective and direct our attention outward: "If writing novels – and reading them – have any redeeming social value, it's probably that they force you to imagine what it's like to be somebody else. Which, increasingly, is something we all need to know".[17]

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[12] Among them, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and the 'Maddaddam' trilogy (2003-2013).
[13] Margaret Atwood, "Mathews and Misrepresentation" [1973], in *Second Words: Selected Critical Prose* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2018 [1982]), 148 (my emphasis).
[14] Margaret Atwood, *On Writers and Writing* (Virago, London, 2015 [2002]), 90.
[15] Ibid., 104.
[16] George Orwell, "Why I Write" [1946], in *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1968), 13.
[17] Margaret Atwood, "Writing the Male Character" [1982], in *Second Words*, 430.

The corpus of works that are, more or less explicitly, linked to Brexit – a genre that Kristian Shaw has aptly defined "Brexlit" with a portmanteau[18] – in one way or another pursue these socially and ethically grounded objectives by making the most of the emotional and empathetic power of stories. Brexlit represents an attempt to shed light on the events that preceded or followed the 2016 referendum that led to Britain's exit from the European Union and on the effects of Brexit's policies and discourses on societal and individual relationships. In essence, its objectives are political, albeit not in the strict sense of militancy and activism. Rather, they encompass individual actions, social interactions, and collective perspectives. Indeed, at the core of a significant number of Brexit-related narratives is the concept of power and the manner of its distribution and exercise within society. Even more meaningful, however, is the focus on the behaviour of individuals and communities and on the extent to which this behaviour, especially in the context of the recently implemented anti-immigrant policies, limits or guarantees freedom for others[19]. The objective of enhancing awareness of one's own and others' actions and attitudes in the new scenarios consequently results in Brexlit's pronounced ethical aspiration to engender a form of individual and social betterment that can be regarded as well as moral enhancement.

The novels and other kinds of Brexit narratives that are characterised by this social and moral intent generally contain an open critique of both the separation from the European Union and the ideological and social fracture within the country. These phenomena are predominantly regarded as factors contributing to national isolation and societal fragmentation, resulting in significant redefinitions of boundaries both within and beyond the confines of British territory. One of the earliest post-Brexit novels to explicitly address the referendum's cultural aftermath is Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), which, while not overtly thematising Brexit, portrays the social and emotional repercussions of the Leave vote, encapsulating a sense of disorientation and cultural disintegration. Following Smith, a significant number of post-Brexit novels have emerged that explicitly criticise the societal fragmentation that the vote has exposed. For instance, *The Cut* (2017), by Anthony Cartwright, commissioned as a literary reflection on the moment, explores the causes and consequences of the divide from different perspectives in narrating the story of two characters from markedly different class backgrounds, a working-class man from a small market town and a documentary film maker from London. Similarly, in Lionel Shriver's satirical story *Should We Stay or Should We Go* (2021), against the backdrop of other themes such as ageing, a couple discusses Brexit from opposing views, enabling a comprehensive examination of the dilemma concerning the decision between remaining or departing.

However, the theme of the United Kingdom's separation from the European Union is a topic that was extensively discussed in literature also prior to the referendum, and not only within the UK. It is noteworthy to recall that, in the period preceding the vote, *The Guardian* invited prominent authors

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[18] Brexlit includes, in Shaw's words, all those works that "directly respond, or imaginatively allude, to Britain's exit from the EU, or engage with the subsequent sociocultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain's withdrawal". Kristian Shaw, "Introduction: The European Question", in *Brexlit: British Literature and the European Project* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 4. In fact, in the case of certain novels not referenced by the contributors, the Brexit referendum and anxieties form only a backdrop against which other events are narrated. For instance, in John Le Carré's espionage novel *Agent Running in the Field* (2019), the focus is on UK-US relations in the aftermath of the vote.

[19] The notions of ethics and freedom, as conceived by Emmanuel Levinas, have been further illuminated through the lens of studies examining ethnic and cultural otherness. In accordance with this conception, the total freedom of individuals (spontaneity) is questioned by the recognition of the Other, by their irreducibility to the Self and by their own rights to freedom. In the philosophical framework proposed by Levinas, the foundational dilemma in politics is "reconciling my freedom with the freedom of others". Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* [1961], trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague, Boston, London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), 83. On the use of Levinas' ideas in postcolonial theory, see John Drabinski, *Levinas and the Postcolonial: Race, Nation, Other* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P., 2011).

from EU countries to write letters to Britain, elucidating their rationale for the country's continued membership of the European Union. The majority of these letters – in some cases comprising passages from previously published or forthcoming novels, stories or essays – emphasised the necessity for the UK Government to deliberate on the potential adverse consequences of the separation. Italian writer Elena Ferrante, while acknowledging the critical issues facing the European Union, particularly its complex bureaucratic machinery, invited the United Kingdom to recognise the importance of shared reflection and action, using a botanical metaphor that has been widely employed, more often in the opposite sense, in the context of identity politics: "We don't need roots now: they make plants of us, splendid, yes, but bound to the ground, and nowadays everything is more mobile than ever, shifting quickly from one shape to the next. A broad, true identity must open itself up to all identities and absorb the best in them".[20] We are reminded of John Donne's famous appeal to human beings in his own particularly conflicted period, the early seventeenth century, not to be isolated islands unto themselves, for, as he wrote, "Every man is a piece of the continent, / A part of the main. / If a clod be washed away by the sea, / Europe is the less, / As well as if a promontory were: / As well as if a manor of thy friend's / Or of thine own were".[21] In this cosmopolitan passage *ante litteram*, Donne uses the metaphor of Europe as a land to which each British person should feel attached, to explore the universal human need to feel part of the human race. He puts forward a plea to avoid becoming a victim of a sterile need for a separate and unsupportive identity, a sentiment that is also echoed in the 'letter' to Britain of Irish writer Anne Enright, addressed to a "grand old lady, in her nostalgia and wounded pride":

> Don't isolate yourself. It must be so tempting to shut the doors and pull the curtains, keep the money under the mattress until the value fades out of the old notes, and think about the past. Which was great, if a little bit unfair. But the world has changed, since Britain was last alone. Don't go. You will not thrive, and we want you to thrive. *You are still family to us all*.[22]

The reference to the family and its values of cohesion, in contrast to the dynamics of separation officially implemented by the referendum, is perhaps not coincidentally also at the centre of some post-Brexit state-of-the-nation novels, such as Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2019) and Nick Hornby's *State of the Union: A Marriage in Ten Parts* (2019), in which, as Aureliana Natale's article in this issue clearly highlights, divorce becomes not only an *ad hoc* theme but also a metaphorical concept of particular social and political significance, meant to expose the crisis of Englishness, among other things. The theme of family division, however, does not only reflect the international dynamics underlying Britain's separation from the EU, but, as mentioned above, also internal dynamics, relating both to the rift between Remain and Leave supporters and to the new fault line that has divided British citizens from foreigners and migrants with renewed force. However, it should be noted that these disunions were already present within the fabric of society. As Shaw pertinently observes, "the referendum was not responsible for dividing the UK, but merely revealed the inherent

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[20] The letter *The Guardian* reported as Elena Ferrante's was a passage from the then forthcoming book *Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey* (New York and London: Europa Editions, 2016). See "Dear Britain: Elena Ferrante, Slavoj Žižek and other European writers on Brexit", *The Guardian* (4 June 2016), *www.the guardian.co.uk*. Meaningfully, the catalogue of the novel's publishing house (Europa Editions) is defined as "reflecting the founders' belief that dialogue between nations and cultures is of vital importance and that this exchange is facilitated by literature chosen not only for its ability to entertain and fascinate but also to inform and enlighten", *www.europaeditions.co.uk*.

[21] John Donne's "No Man Is an Island" is not, strictly speaking, a poem; rather, it is an extract from the seventeenth "Meditation" included in the 1623 collection *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1923), 98.

[22] The quote is from Anne Enright, *The Green Road* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2015). "Dear Britain", *www.the guardian.co.uk* (my emphasis).

fissures".[23] The metaphorical depiction of foreigners as vampires or other dangerous and disturbing creatures, as posited by Federica Perazzini in her contribution, is a central tenet of the genre that has been termed "Brexit Gothic". This genre, as Perazzini's research demonstrates, traces its origins to a collective imagery that predates the pivotal vote. In novels such as Maggie Gee's *The White Family* (2002), which deals with the internal dynamics of a family dominated by a nationalist and nostalgic patriarch, we observe the evolution of that monstrous 'othering' that would also characterise much of the post-Leave xenophobic discourse.

It is noteworthy that a number of post-Brexit novels have been observed to draw attention to the fact that policies characterised by xenophobia have resulted in a reiteration, perhaps with even greater insistence than in the past, of the projection of non-human characteristics onto 'others'. This is intended to denote ethnic and cultural inferiority in a racist context. In Jasper Fforde's novel *The Constant Rabbit* (2020), for example, which is analysed in this issue by Lucia Esposito, the author employs satire and allegory to facilitate the reach of his message to readers. In the novel, the 'others' are represented as rabbits, a species with a marked reproductive capacity that, as Fforde suggests, threatens the integrity of the native race and their supremacy on British soil. In such narratives, the delineation of boundaries within the nation serves to reinforce the divide between 'us' and 'them'; a divide that often becomes an insurmountable barrier, which is not only metaphorical but also physical, as demonstrated by the contributions of Vincenzo Maggitti and Michela Compagnoni. The two scholars focus on two dystopian novels, respectively John Lanchester's *The Wall* (1919) and Ali Smith's *Gliff* (2024), in which a dividing line (between spaces, cultures, people) and a concrete wall become fundamental elements of separation and discrimination in a state of control and surveillance, resulting from a nearly totalitarian exercise of power over the lives of the excluded.

Dystopian literature has become a pervasive genre in Brexit-related discourse, though its conventional role as a cautionary tale against the potential deterioration of precarious or hazardous circumstances appears to be waning.[24] This shift can be attributed to the diminution of the temporal distance between the author's present and the imagined future generally depicted in the dystopian work. Furthermore, there seems to be a reduction in the fictional element in comparison to the real one: many of Brexlit's dystopian, or pseudo-dystopian, narratives do not portray a really imaginary future, but rather events that have already occurred or are just about to occur, albeit in a version exaggerated or distorted by the dystopian lens. However, in both *Gliff* and *The Wall*, as well as in other novels not considered in this issue, the existence of areas and people who show signs of opposition allows us to define these narratives rather as 'critical dystopias': representations of a society that "holds out hope that the dystopia can be overcome",[25] and, with dystopia, also the myopic and authoritarian government that brought it about.

The political actions of those who instigated the vote and perpetuate societal division are, in fact, the subject of numerous narratives that condemn Brexit. A notable example is A.L. Kennedy's *Alive in the Merciful Country* (2024), a politically charged novel set in a post-Brexit Britain. The text offers a scathing critique of authoritarianism and contemporary nationalist rhetoric, revealing the author's profound disquiet towards the latter. Yet, as demonstrated in Claudia Cao's article on Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach* (2019), satire can be employed as a more potent instrument in such cases. The biting force of irony, enhanced by the transgressive function of parody, is used not to assail the power block

[23] Shaw, *Brexlit*, viii.

[24] Lyman Tower Sargent defines 'dystopia' as a "non-existent society … that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived". Lyman Tower Sargent, "What Is a Utopia", *Morus – Utopia e Renascimento*, 2 (2005), 154.

[25] Ibid., 155-156.

through conventional political rhetoric; rather, it functions to deride authority by "uncrowning the hero", as articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin.[26] The grotesque portrayal of the protagonist, a cockroach that has suddenly taken the form of Britain's Prime Minister, and the theme of identity 'masking' serve actually to 'unmask' the counterfeits of the Brexit spectacle of power.

3. Brexit on Stage

The United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union in 2016 was a bolt from the blue and prompted an immediate and well-grounded response from playwrights across the UK and Ireland. British playwrights focused more on national identity and division using verbatim and documentary drama, whereas Irish and Northern Irish playwrights focused on borders and peace issues using symbolic and confrontational drama. Brexit was approached as a democratic crisis in Britain whereas it was perceived both as an existential threat and a spring of hope in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Sinéad McCoole, who has been interviewed for this issue by Virginie Roche-Tiengo and Alessandra Ruggiero, maintains that Britain is undergoing an identity crisis grounded in an uncritical view of empire as fundamentally positive, while Ireland is better positioned to take in these changes and reshape them according to its own historical experience and perspective.

Robert Spenser, Howard J. Booth and Anastasia Valassopoulos argued as well in *British Writing from Empire to Brexit*, that Brexit has proven to be one of the most democratically and politically seismic events, and its reverberations have been keenly felt on the theatrical stage. They add in their introduction that:

> When Samuel Beckett was asked by an interviewer, '*Alors Monsieur Beckett, vous êtes anglais*?' his celebrated answer was, '*Au contraire'*. The character of a once-colonised people should, in fact, be the opposite of the identity of the racialised, assimilationist, hierarchical, and barely democratic power that previously held them down.[27]

Brexit allowed playwrights to revisit long-standing questions of national identity in the UK with verbatim plays like *My Country; A Work in Progress* created by Carol Ann Duffy in 2017 at the National Theatre. It was one of the earliest major verbatim theatrical responses to Brexit based on interviews conducted across the UK in the aftermath of the referendum. In this play, the UK, personified as Britannia, is divided and faces competing narratives of national identity giving the floor to Leave and Remain voters. Verbatim theatre thus became a Swiftian mirror reflecting the contradictory desires for sovereignty and interdependence, documenting and dramatizing the emotional and volatile textures of the moment. Because, as Harry Derbyshire and Loveday Hodson argued in *Performing Injustice: Human Rights and Verbatim Theatre*:

> theatre is a medium that invites an imaginative rather than a practical response, the dramatic representation of human suffering allows for a sustained empathetic engagement with the issues explored and creates, therefore, a greater likelihood that audience members will contribute to debate within the public sphere and, indeed, will act upon their experience of the drama.[28]

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[26] See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971 [1965]).

[27] Robert Spenser, Howard J. Booth and Anastasia Valassopoulos, *British Writing from Empire to Brexit*: *Writing, Identity, and Nation* (New York: Routledge, 2025), 11.

[28] Harry Derbyshire and Loveday Hodson, "Performing Injustice: Human Rights and Verbatim Theatre", *Law and Humanities* 2.2 (2008), 192.

Brexit (2019) by Robert Khan and Tom Salinsky, which premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe before moving to the King's Head Theatre, is also a verbatim play which contributed to debate within the public sphere. Khan and Salinsky blend satire with rapid scene changes and documentary theatre with real political figures to expose the chaos and incompetence of the leading Brexiteers. The play's episodic structure mirrors the kaleidoscopic and fragmented nature of the Brexit process. Moreover, the use of politicians' speeches and interviews – like Theresa May's catchphrase "Brexit means Brexit" or David Cameron's sentence "I didn't expect to lose" – blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction, theatre and politics. *Brexit* shows how drama can question democracy itself, exposing the threats and dangers of leadership driven by mottos and witticisms rather than foresight and responsibility.

In Northern Ireland, many plays grappled with the complexity of belonging in a place where Britishness, Irishness, and hybrid identities intersect, such as *Cyprus Avenue* (2016) by David Ireland, *Hard Border* (2018) by Clare Dwyer Hogg, *Your Ma's a Hard Brexit* (2017) by Stacy Gregg or *Mayday* (2018) by Rosemary Jenkinson. Brexit threatened that delicate coexistence by forcing sharper lines around allegiances and citizenship. These dramatic works explored characters suspended between borders, policies, storytelling and personal histories. Theatre became a cryptic and distorting mirror reflecting the contradictory desires for stability and change. Brexit intensified many of these concerns, reopening questions that the Good Friday Agreement (1998) had, if not resolved, at least set into an effective balance. That is why Owen McCafferty's play, *Agreement*, produced by Lyric Theatre Belfast in 2023 to commemorate 25 years since the signing of the agreement, gave it a renewed significance after Brexit, which continued to threaten many of the political and social disposition established by the Good Friday Agreement. In *Agreement*, leaders understand the weight and the long-term consequences of their decisions. Brexit supporters and leaders, on the contrary, in Khan and Salinsky's play, *Brexit*, have a short-term political strategy, underestimating Brexit's impact on peace and stability in Northern Ireland. McCafferty's play demonstrates how peace is a tricky process rather than a fixed outcome, and serves as a warning that peace requires ongoing care and cooperation. As John Hume said when he delivered his Nobel Peace Prize lecture in Oslo, Norway in 1998, "It is now up to political leaders on all sides … to safeguard and cherish peace by establishing agreed structures for peace that will forever remove the underlying causes of violence and division on our island".[29]

The spectre of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic after Brexit became a potent symbol of political failure in theatrical explorations. Irish theatre, long attuned to questions of borders, identity, and sovereignty, has taken Brexit as a space where national anxieties could be voiced with emotional and imaginative clarity. *Cyprus Avenue* by David Ireland centres on Eric Miller, a violent Belfast loyalist and Brexit supporter, who is the embodiment of extreme nationalism that becomes a grotesque exaggeration of the Brexit rhetoric. This play exposes how Brexit discourse can intersect with sectarianism (Unionism vs nationalism) and misogyny (toxic masculinity and political radicalisation).

In post-Brexit Ireland, women playwrights like Marina Carr prove that walls – mental and physical – needed more than ever to be challenged, because Brexit reshaped political, social and cultural landscapes and mindscapes. Carr's drama, shaped by mythic patterns and rooted in fractured Irish stories and histories, offers a polymorphic and rich framework for interpreting the deeper cultural implication of Brexit on stage, specifically at the Abbey Theatre. Her plays from *By the Bog of Cats* (1998), *On Raftery's Hill* (2000) to *Audrey or Sorrows* (2024) or the diptych, *The Boy/ The God and His Daughter* (2025) are layered with trauma, memory and conflicts. They are haunted and haunting plays. Ghost are intruders, demanding recognition. They carry family secrets, old wrongs, taboos, and

[29] John Hume, *Nobel Prize Lecture* (10 December 1998), *www.nobelprize.org*.

unresolved griefs. Brexit as well has summoned threatening ghosts, fears of violence and borders, anxieties around the notion of identity and unresolved legacies of colonialism and competing nationalisms, which had been carefully negotiated through the Good Friday Agreement. McCoole argues in the interview that Brexit has revived long-standing Irish debates about identity, particularly the challenge of preserving a distinct national character despite deep cultural and historical ties with England. She explains that this process began with institutions like the Abbey Theatre, which foregrounded Irish voices for Irish audiences, and notes that today Ireland has achieved significant influence in the global cultural and dramatic sphere, confidently asserting an identity that is now widely recognized both domestically and abroad.

Brexit on the Abbey Stage is not simply a political topic but a means through which Ireland's deeper issues like trauma, dichotomies and belonging are explored. For women, in Ireland and Northern Ireland, the referendum and its aftermath reopened wounds and historical pressures surrounding body autonomy, borders and identity. The past has to be explored, and doors open by women, as McCoole wrote in her play, *Leaving the Ladies* (2019): "CONSTANCE: Let me open the door. After my time in prison you have no idea the joy of opening and closing doors! Ladies, it is time to leave the lavatory![30]. *Leaving the Ladies* is based on a true historical event which took place on 11 December 1917 in Dublin, in the lavatory beside the Round Room in the Mansion House on Dawson Street, the meeting of the most important and prominent women of the day, members of organisations such as *Cumann N mBan*, the Irish Women's Workers' Union and the Irish Citizen Army. In her play, McCoole intermingles historical figures (Constance de Markievicz or Dr Kathleen Lynn) with fictional characters from the rank and file of the *Cumann N mBan* organisation, university-educated women from Dublin and Galway, as well as male and female hecklers.

McCoole in the interview describes how writing *Leaving the Ladies* was shaped by her strong engagement with political processes, which she sees as inseparable from her historical understanding and literary practice, as each continually influences the others. She situates the play within the dual context of Brexit and the 1916 centenary commemorations in Ireland, arguing that, from an Irish perspective, the timing of Brexit is especially significant, as the 2016 referendum coincided with the centenary of a form of independence that remained incomplete due to the island's partition. In the aftermath of Brexit, particularly in discussions surrounding the idea of a shared island, public discourse has increasingly returned to the period around 1920, when Ireland was still politically unified.

Lynda Hart explores in *Making a Spectacle* the importance of women playwrights in a politicized environment and underlines how the stage can also become a site of hope and social change:

> drama is more public and social than the other literary arts. The woman playwright's voice reaches a community of spectators in a highly public space that has historically been regarded as a high subversive, politicized environment. The theatre is the sphere most removed from domesticity; thus, the woman who ventures to be heard in this space takes a greater risk that the woman poet or novelist, but it may also offer her greater potential for effecting social change.[31]

Some productions imagined alternative post-Brexit futures, drawing on the creativity that has always underpinned Irish theatre. The Abbey Theatre, in particular, has historically functioned as a paramount site for the questioning and articulation of political issues. As Virginie Roche-Tiengo's article highlights, the post-Brexit cultural shift and choice to stage the works of Molière, Brendan

30 Sinéad McCoole, *Leaving the Ladies* (Dublin: Harlen House, 2019), 50.
31 Lynda Hart, ed., *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 2.

Behan and Marina Carr align with contemporary global realities. Their works illuminate the human dimension of political upheaval, offering valuable insights into the cultural anxieties that surfaced around Brexit. Molière's comedy of hypocrisy, *Tartuffe* (1669), adapted by Frank McGuinness in 2024 exposes how societies cling to illusions, which is echoed in the ideological and divisive posturing that shaped Brexit debates. Brendan Behan's sharp satire and the absurdities of political authority and confinement, in the 2024 production of The *Quare Fellow* (1956), highlight the contradiction at the heart of Britain's struggle over sovereignty, freedom and identity. Whereas Marina Carr's ghosts in *Audrey or Sorrow* (2024) mirror the emotional and haunting rifts opened by Brexit across communities and families. The works of Molière, Behan and Carr remind us that crises unfold under the same human flaws, denial first, longing and then self-mythologizing.

Brexit, shaped by fear, pride, myth, and competing and divisive narratives, can be understood as the search for identity and meaning in times of profound change, as well as the struggle between truth and lies. But Brexit, as a contemporary rupture marks a significant date in the calendar of Irish and British history, intertwining comic and tragic forces. While being disruptive, it also opened up new possibilities and contributed to a renewed flourishing of Irish culture that has brought about enduring change. Brexit has utterly changed Britain, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, creating an opportunity to redefine notions of identity, self-mythologizing and diversity to enrich and question its peoples.