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Rewriting, Reversing, Resizing: Brexit Propaganda and Parodic Satire in Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach*

Abstract: Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach* (2019) can be defined as a "parodic satire which aims at something outside the text, but which employs parody as a vehicle to achieve its satiric or corrective end" (Hutcheon 1985: 62). After an introductory discussion of Brexiteers' recurring rhetorical choices and the values conveyed through their campaign, this article analyses McEwan's work through the dual perspective of investigation outlined by Linda Hutcheon. First, it examines the formal elements and textual features that contribute to the creation of the parodic effect – particularly the grotesque portrayal of the protagonist and the theme of identity masking, which, along with a focus on "material bodily images" (Bakhtin 1984), are traditionally tropes of parodic laughter. At the same time, the article adopts a pragmatic approach to decode McEwan's satirical intentions, suggested by the allusions to the Brexit Party's ideology, its communicative strategies, and the contradictions of its propaganda.

Keywords: *McEwan*, *The Cockroach*, *Brexlit*, *satire*, *parody*

1. Introduction

Ian McEwan's novella *The Cockroach*[1] revisits some of the themes and narrative strategies which have characterised his work from the outset. From his earliest short story collections to his novels centred on historical themes, Ian McEwan has consistently explored several key issues, including the enigmas and opacities of the human mind and collective history; the human tendency towards simplification through division "with which human beings often attempt to deal with historical incomprehensibilities"[2] and with the uncertainties of the future; the centrality of inscrutable and dysfunctional individuals, who break the law, who harm the community for self-gratifying social reasons. These issues are necessarily pre-eminent in the treatment of the historical periods on which McEwan has focused part of his production, such as the two World Wars, Nazism, Thatcherism, and, more recently, Brexit.

Among the most recurring narrative strategies in these works – as Eluned Summers-Bremner observes – are the use of surrealist elements aimed at amplifying historical decay and regression, as well as the choice of a disorienting narrative and a focus on the protagonists that make reader identification impossible:[3] these characters, particularly in McEwan's early works, are the product of their environment, "that the characters' relative opacity and unlikability seem to offset and exaggerate

[1] Ian McEwan, *The Cockroach* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2019). Quotations from the novel refer to this edition and will henceforth be included in parentheses in the text.

[2] Eluned Summers-Bremner, *Ian McEwan: Sex, Death, and History* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2014), ix.

[3] Ibid., x. See also David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 10 *et passim*; Lynn Wells, "Moral Dilemmas", in Dominic Head, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ian McEwan* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2019), 29-44; Claudia Cao, "Letteratura e catarsi: l'eredità modernista e l'estetica dello shock nella produzione di Ian McEwan", in Giuseppe Carrara and Laura Neri, eds., *Con i buoni sentimenti si fanno brutti libri? Etiche, estetiche e problemi della rappresentazione* (Milano: Ledizioni, 2022), 140; Claudia Cao, *I contro-spazi della narrativa di Ian McEwan: teatri, carceri, giardini e altri luoghi* (Roma: Aracne, 2022), 31 *et passim*.

or present in a manner showcased for judgment" (x). In *The Cockroach* these elements re-emerge, intensified by the urgency and novelty of the events portrayed, as well as by the satirical form employed to critique the protagonists of Brexit. Fiction and surrealism ultimately prevail over the real world to highlight some of the central aspects in McEwan's reading of political events: the absurdity, unnaturalness, and self-destructive nature of Brexit.

The novella fits into the strand of political satire, a genre which had long been considered minor and marginal, but which was undoubtedly revitalised by Brexit. As a state-of-the-art survey published in 2001 illustrates,[4] fascination for political satire was reawakened after the Second World War: the fall of the Berlin Wall, for instance, had been one of the themes at the centre of this revival of the genre. The same continuity of models with the past observed by the 2001 survey is still valid in the case of *The Cockroach*: it contains classic elements such as caricatural figures living in a distorted world, which is usually presented as a form of the absurd and the grotesque, and the author himself has stated that the model he looked to was Jonathan Swift, one of the all-time masters of satire.[5]

The Cockroach falls among those forms of satire that enjoy a dual status: from the very incipit it reveals its parodic intent by referring to Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*[6] as a hypotext, but at the same time the target it addresses is "extramural" (i.e. extratextual)[7] and it alludes, without ever making explicit mention, to the political choices that led to the UK's exit from the European Union. For the purpose of this analysis, we can use Linda Hutcheon's definition of "parodic satire" as a work that "aims at something outside the text, but ... employs parody as a vehicle to achieve its satiric or corrective end" (62). In fact, Brexit is not explicitly present in McEwan's novella; its stand-in is the implementation of an economic reform not coincidentally named 'Reversalism':

> Let the money flow be reversed and the entire economic system, even the nation itself, will be purified, purged of absurdities, waste and injustice. At the end of a working week, an employee hands over money to the company for all the hours that she has toiled. But when she goes to the shops, she is generously compensated at retail rates for every item she carries away. She is forbidden by law to hoard cash. The money she deposits in her bank at the end of a hard day in the shopping mall attracts high negative interest rates. Before her savings are whittled away to nothing, she is therefore wise to go out and find, or train for, a more expensive job. The better, and therefore more costly, the job she finds for herself, the harder she must shop to pay for it. The economy is stimulated, there are more skilled workers, everyone gains. (25-26)

The aim of the protagonist of *The Cockroach*, an insect which transforms into the human Prime Minister Jim Sams – a clear parodic counterpart of Boris Johnson – is to get Parliament to approve a new economic system that aims to reverse the flow of money: workers will pay their employers in order to be able to work, but they will earn the required funds by going shopping and being paid by the shops they patronise.

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[4] See Luis Alberto Lázaro, "Political Satire in Contemporary British Fiction: The State of the Art", in Annette Gomis, ed., *First International Conference on English Studies: Past, Present and Future* (Almeria: University of Almeria, 2001), 571. For an overview of twentieth-century English fictional satire, see also James English, "Twentieth-century Satire: The Poetics and Politics of Negativity", in Robert L. Caserio and Clement Hawes, eds., *The Cambridge History of the English Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2012), 856-871, and Valentine Cunningham, "Twentieth-Century Fictional Satire", in Ruben Quintero, ed., *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern* (Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell, 2007), 400-433.

[5] See Fintan O'Toole, "*The Cockroach* by Ian McEwan review — A Brexit farce with legs", *The Guardian* (7 October 2019), *www.theguardian.com*; Kuğu Tekin and Zeynep Rana Turgut, "Towards an Uncertain Future: Brexit Satirised in Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach*", *Rumelide Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 31 (2022), 1475-1476.

[6] Franz Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* (Leipzig: Kurt Wolff, 1915).

[7] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 86.

Although at first glance the title and incipit of the novella reveal a parodic homage to the Kafkaesque classic, as far as content and style are concerned, McEwan is inspired by one of the greatest references in political satire of all time, Swift's *A Modest Proposal*:[8] in Jim Sams's presentation of Reversalism, "the ruling class's insensitivity and indifference towards the suffering of ... people"[9] resonates. Like Swift, McEwan also uses satire to point out the political incompetence of the government, the abuse of power, the mismanagement of public funds, and the irrationality of the economic plan.

McEwan's choice to make use of irony, parodic reversal, and satire is certainly not an isolated one[10] and has its reasons in the discursive structures of the Brexiteers' own propaganda. As Simon Weaver's study has illustrated,[11] it was precisely the inconsistencies and contradictions of the pro-Leave propaganda that encouraged the use of irony and comedy in pro-Remain campaign. Irony, mockery, and comedy are indeed rhetorical devices that are consistent with the ambiguities of populist discourse and have therefore been widely used by both factions.

In order to understand McEwan's rhetorical and content choices in both mocking the rhetoric of the Brexit supporters and in their parodic representation, it may be useful to start from the six characteristics of populism illustrated by Simon Weaver:

- Populism as hostile to representative politics;
- Populists identifying themselves with an idealised heartland within the community they favour;
- Populism as an ideology lacking core values;
- Populism as a powerful reaction to a sense of extreme crisis;
- Populism as containing fundamental dilemmas that make it self-limiting;
- Populism as a chameleon, adopting the colours of its environment.[12]

It is not difficult to identify in this summary some of the discursive and structural traits of pro-Brexit propaganda.[13] Populism, as is widely recognized, thrives in contexts of real or perceived crisis, gaining momentum through the widespread distrust of political institutions and government policies. Populist propaganda helps to fuel this by extending it to a distrust of elites and experts *tout court*. Promoting this distrust also means spreading hostility towards representative politics, towards "the system" against which populism proposes itself as an alternative in the name of trust in the wisdom of ordinary people who have no voice.

However, the us-vs-them dichotomy goes beyond the divide between ordinary people and the establishment, also defining as 'others' all those outside the "idealised heartland"[14] that populists intend to represent. This often leads to an identification of the outsider as the enemy responsible for

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[8] Jonathan Swift, *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick* (Dublin: Harding, 1729).

[9] Tekin and Turgut, "Uncertain Future", 1476.

[10] A similar experiment to McEwan's *The Cockroach* was conducted, for example, by Lucien Young and Leavis Carroll's *Alice in Brexitland* (London: Ebury Press, 2017). However, satirical elements are also prevalent in other novels about Brexit, even in those that are not overtly parodic. It is noteworthy that satirical tones are also present in John Sutherland's reinterpretation of English literature, *The Good Brexiteer's Guide to English Lit* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018).

[11] Simon Weaver, *The Rhetoric of Brexit Humour: Comedy, Populism and the EU Referendum* (London and New York: Routledge, 2022).

[12] See Weaver, *Rhetoric*, 4. Weaver's proposal is based on Paul Taggart, *Populism* (Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open U.P., 2000).

[13] See Weaver, *Rhetoric*, 5-7. Weaver divides the six points into two groups: the first three are defined "conscious, discursive characteristics that concern the expression of populism", and the last three as "grammatical characteristics that concern the functional adaptability of populism" (Ibid., 4).

[14] Ibid., 6.

the status quo, alongside a nostalgia for an idealised past. The call to take back "control of borders, money and laws"[15] is the simplest response to the challenge of confronting a present in which the effects of capitalism and globalisation are more difficult to manage, compared to the sense of order and control that characterised the post-World War II decades. This sense of crisis in many countries has led to what Zygmunt Bauman calls a "retrotopic"[16] attitude, a utopian vision of the past dictated by the inability to cope with the complexity of the present and the uncertainties of the future.

The absence of a solid and coherent ideology gives rise to the chameleon-like nature of populist leaders, often labelled as "tricksters"[17] due to their ability to manipulate truths and circumstances, shaping a target for the public's anger and frustration – today further amplified by the rapid spread of fake news via social media. These discursive and expressive aspects are reflected in certain "grammatical or structural 'containers' that shape the emergence of populism"[18] such as tautologies, dilemmas, hyperboles, inversions, and neologisms. These are tools which have the effect of revealing the lack of solid arguments at the basis of political projects and proposals, along with the will to interrupt dialogue and confrontation with the opposition (tautology), to simplify complex situations and issues (dilemmas), to amplify the effects and emotions provoked by the discourse (hyperboles).

Focusing more specifically on the context of Brexit, it is easy to see the extent to which, in the British case, hostility towards representative politics has also manifested itself as an aversion to the "supranational forms of cosmopolitan democracy"[19] represented by the EU. Indeed, the referendum and the Leavers' propaganda gave voice to thirty years of Euroscepticism,[20] and to the discontent sparked by the Maastricht and Schengen Treaties, particularly regarding open borders, the rise of immigration, and financial crisis, especially after 2008. The aversion to experts – eloquently captured by Michael Gove's famous phrase "the British have had enough of experts"[21] – is, in this case, a reaction to the economic crisis and the perceived failures of left-wing governments aligned with the European Union: it has its roots in the frustration generated since the 1970s by an exclusively neoliberal conception of progress, which equates development with the expansion of individual ownership.[22] Neo-liberal policies are, in fact, one of the key factors which have exacerbated inequalities and social discrimination. It is within these communities, marginalised and silenced by inequality, that Brexit supporters identify the "idealised heartland".[23] The sense of social crisis was fuelled by the Leavers who also shifted the blame for the failures of domestic government onto the EU.[24]

In this us-vs-them dichotomy, the concept of the border plays a central role, acquiring multiple symbolic and geopolitical meanings. The possibility of mutual identification and recognition within

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15 See "EU Exit: Taking back control of our borders, money and laws while protecting our economy, security and Union", document presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister by Command of Her Majesty, November 2018, *www.gov.uk*.

16 Zygmunt Bauman, *Retrotopia* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

17 Weaver, *Rhetoric*, 9 *et passim*.

18 Ibid., 7.

19 Kristian Shaw, "Brexlit", in Robert Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 15.

20 Euroscepticism was widespread before the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, and one of its leading figures in the 1980s was Margaret Thatcher. See Kristian Shaw, *Brexlit: British Literature and the European Project* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 13.

21 See "Gove: Britons 'Have Had Enough of Experts'", *www.youtube.com*: "in an interview with Faisal Islam of Sky News on June 3, 2016, Michael Gove, the UK's justice secretary and a leader of the campaign to leave the Europe Union, said that the British people 'have had enough of experts'".

22 See Michael Gardiner, "Brexit and the Aesthetics of Anachronism", in Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature*, 106-111.

23 Weaver, *Rhetoric*, 6 *et passim*.

24 See Shaw, *Brexlit*, 5.

this "imagined community"[25] is legitimised by framing otherness as a threat from an unspecified and ill-defined European Union, be it embodied by technocrats in Brussels or by migrants.

The ambiguities and discursive vagueness, along with the manipulation of data, are also reflected in the ambiguity of the neologism "Brexit" itself, in the indefiniteness of the propaganda for Leave, its promised benefits, and the absence of clear economic, political, and social plans for its implementation. This indefiniteness is clearly expressed by Theresa May's famous tautology ("Brexit means Brexit"[26]) when asked what Brexit meant. In the case of Brexit, historical factors have also reinforced the sense of superiority of this "imagined community", alongside its desire for justice and revenge against the EU: these include the UK's glorious imperial past and the memory of the "exceptionalism" of the UK's "particular standing alone and apart"[27] during the 1939-1945 war.

To examine the narrative and rhetorical strategies employed in McEwan's parodic satire in *The Cockroach*, this analysis will adopt the dual perspective of investigation proposed by Hutcheon. On the one hand, the formal aspects and textual clues that contribute to the parodic effect will be examined: the intertextual reference to Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, the subversion of the hypotext, the grotesque elements characterising the protagonist, and the theme of the masked identity – elements that, alongside the emphasis on the "material bodily images",[28] are traditionally tropes of parodic laughter. At the same time a pragmatic approach will be adopted with the aim of decoding McEwan's satirical intentions, suggested in particular by the allusions to the Brexit Party's ideology, its communicative strategies, and the inner contradictions of its propaganda.

2. Parody, Irony, and the Grotesque Body

Central to the construction of the parodic effect is, first of all, the relationship with the Kafkaesque hypotext, *The Metamorphosis*, implicitly recalled by numerous parallelisms in the incipit of the novella[29] and throughout the first chapter. Everything from the title and the opening pages suggests the intent of an ironic reversal and re-scaling of Kafka's text, beginning with the choice to depict the metamorphosis of an insect into a man instead of vice versa. The third-person narrator indeed emphasises the inversion when the protagonist Jim Sams begins to become aware of his new features: "He was beginning to understand that by *a grotesque reversal* his vulnerable flesh now lay outside his skeleton, which was therefore wholly invisible to him" (2, my emphasis).

Referring to the dialectic between higher and lower elements implied by the focus on the material aspects of the body, we can recognise its first appearance in the axiological relationship between the cockroach and a Prime Minister. On a spatial level, this dynamic is reflected in the description of the peculiar itinerary that leads the protagonist Jim Sams to the highest floors of 10 Downing Street "by the underground car park. ... keeping to the gutter ... until he reached the edge of the terrifying crossing in Parliament Square" (3).

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

[26] Thomas Docherty, "Brexit: Thinking and Resistance", in Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature*, 182; Weaver, *Rhetoric*, 130 *et passim*.

[27] Docherty, "Brexit", 183.

[28] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1984 [1965]), *passim*. The analysis of parodic elements in the following paragraphs primarily draws on Bakhtinian reflections on carnivalesque parody and the grotesque body: the allegorical meanings of spatial relations in terms of the inversion between high and low and of hierarchical structures; the selection of certain typical motifs of the grotesque image, such as "the very material bodily lower stratum (food, wine, the genital force, the organs of the body)" (62); the use of exaggeration in caricature; and the function of masking.

[29] "That morning, Jim Sams, clever but by no means profound, woke from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into a gigantic creature" (1).

McEwan's focus on material bodily images is also evident in the attention to somatic details, which immediately underline the parallels with the opening pages of the hypotext. However, while these details in Kafka's work serve to emphasise the disorientation of Gregor Samsa who becomes the personification of otherness, in the case of *The Cockroach*, the primary effect is that of an ironic diminishment and amplification of the grotesque features of the protagonist. In fact, the focus on altered proportions and motor difficulties recurs here, emphasising a radical change that, ironically, does not affect the brain and the mind, with the inevitable ironic effect typical of parodic mocking ethos: the protagonist even finds comfort in noting that "his brain, his mind, was much as it had always been. He remained, after all, his essential self" (13-14).

The third aspect related to the bodily stratum of the grotesque, a recurring point of emphasis, concerns food, taste and – by extension – the digestive system: "his tongue lay squat and wet in his mouth – revolting, especially when it moved of its own accord to explore the vast cavern of his mouth and, he noted with muted alarm, slide across an immensity of teeth", followed by the "light breeze that blew intermittently across it, bearing a not unattractive odour of decomposing food and grain alcohol, he accepted as his breath" (1). And then: "Rather than letting his tongue hang out beyond his lips, where it dripped from time to time onto his chest, he found it was more comfortably housed within the oozing confines of his mouth. Horrible" (4). In addition, the narrative lingers on his last meal and the forced repression of his desire to maintain the eating habits of his previous life: "But in the grey shadow cast by his saucer, visible only to him, was a dying bluebottle. … With some effort, Jim wrenched his gaze away while he listened. … When a bluebottle has been dead for more than ten minutes it tastes impossibly bitter. Barely alive or just deceased, it has a cheese flavour" (13).

McEwan's rhetorical use of amplification, his emphasis on details, and the choice of adjectives such as "revolting" and "horrible" work together to create an effect of distancing and estrangement from the highest representative of the British people – indeed, placing the Prime Minister much lower down in the lowest bodily stratum *par excellence*. This is the motif of excrement, whose parodic effect is here amplified most as it makes its first appearance as one of Jim Sams' areas of expertise during his previous life as a cockroach, since he had "regarded himself as something of a connoisseur" (5), excrement being one of his favourite foods.

> What he knew for certain was that he reached at last an obstacle that towered over him, a small mountain of dung, still warm and faintly steaming. Any other time, he would have rejoiced. He regarded himself as something of a connoisseur. He knew how to live well. This particular consignment he could instantly place. Who could mistake that nutty aroma, with hints of petroleum, banana skin and saddle soap. The Horse Guards! But what a mistake, to have eaten between meals. The margherita had left him with no appetite for excrement, however fresh or distinguished, nor any inclination, given his gathering exhaustion, to clamber all the way over it. He crouched in the mountain's shadow … He set about scaling the vertical granite wall of the kerb in order to circumvent the heap and descend on its far side. (5)

The reversal of the common relationship between sensory perceptions and their aesthetic evaluation – according to which the correct direction of transformation of substances starts in the mouth and ends with the anus, while the reversal of this direction evokes disgust[30] – contributes to the parodic effect.

To understand the satirical aims of McEwan's work, one needs to consider the Brexit Party's communicative strategies in order to decode the emphasis on the protagonist's bodily elements and physiological needs from an extratextual perspective. In this regard, the centrality acquired by the

[30] See Gianfranco Marrone, "Senso e forma del cibo. Sulla semiotica dell'alimentazione", *EIC. Rivista dell'Associazione Italiana di Studi Semiotici*, 4 (2015), 5-6.

discourse on food in the discussions on Brexit should be considered, due to the impact that the issue of food can generate "in the greatest number of people, as food lies at the very mundane heart of everyday life, or 'lifestyle'".[31] This is particularly relevant when considering the anti-elitist intentions at the centre of the communicative strategies adopted by Boris Johnson in building his consensus. Indeed, communication scholars who have analysed the use of social media by the Brexiteers or, before that, by Donald Trump, have identified the centrality of metaphorical or even literal references to taste, food, and to the digestive system in the forms of the belly and the gut as key elements in consensus building. On the one hand, Prime Minister Boris Johnson himself, despite being a leading exponent of the elitist social class most hated by Brexit voters, became an emblem of anti-elitism. During his campaign and tenure, references to elements such as drinks and food became focal motifs in the construction of his image as an ordinary man through social media. As Thomas Docherty notes,[32] the Brexiteers, like Trump before them, used slang language, junk food, and beers "to secure affiliation of 'the people' by being authentic".[33] If, as Gianfranco Marrone states, food is a language which is commonly adopted "to communicate with others, interpret the world ... represent social hierarchies",[34] and construct individual and collective identity, it can therefore be asserted – also in this cultural and identifying meaning – that each man is what he eats.[35] Therefore, if read in the light of Johnson's communicative strategies, it is possible to understand the parodic and satirical scope of such statements with reference to the episodes mentioned in McEwan's work, where the lowering of the Prime Minister in relation to the food chain reaches such a level as to place him hierarchically in one of the lowest ranks of the animal species themselves.

> What he knew for certain was that he reached at last an obstacle that towered over him, a small mountain of dung, still warm and faintly steaming. Any other time, he would have rejoiced. He regarded himself as something of a connoisseur. He knew how to live well. This particular consignment he could instantly place. Who could mistake that nutty aroma, with hints of petroleum, banana skin and saddle soap. The Horse Guards! But what a mistake, to have eaten between meals. (5)

The satirical effect is ultimately intensified as the narrative moves from the initial reference to coprophagy to 'cannibalism' in the final scene. After abandoning the bodies of the ministers, the cockroaches return to the gutters, losing the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on the way, someone who was destined to become a delectable banquet for the remaining members of the cabinet.[36]

By extension, the echoing of the constant reference to the somatic and more physiological and instinctual needs is also the leading role assigned to the "collective pheromonal unconscious of his kind" which allows the protagonist to have "an instinctive understanding of his direction of travel" (7). Its function in McEwan's satire is reinforced by references to that "blind collective obedience" (32), which allows us to again identify the Brexiteers' communication strategies and ideology as another key target of McEwan's work. The narrator clarifies the meaning of these references to the material bodily images when he identifies the driving force behind the actions of Jim and his cabinet in "simple

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[31] Muzna Rahman, "Consuming Brexit: Alimentary Discourses and the Racial Politics of Brexit", *Open Arts Journal*, 8 (Summer 2020), 73.
[32] Docherty, "Brexit", 101.
[33] Rahman, "Consuming Brexit", 73.
[34] Marrone, "Senso e forma del cibo", 3 (my translation).
[35] See Warren Belasco, *Food: The Key Concepts* (New York and Oxford: Berg, 2008), 1: "Food identifies who we are, where we came from, and what we want to be".
[36] See McEwan, *Cockroach*, 100.

and exciting values like blood and soil" (21). In a similar vein, he defines the protagonists of this mission as "impelled towards a goal that lifted beyond mere reason to embrace a mystical sense of nation, of an understanding as simple and as simply good and true as religious faith" (21). Not only do these words make a clear reference to the key tenets of Brexit propaganda – the sense of belonging to an "idealised heartland within the community"[37] – but they also target the main communication strategies of the Brexiteers, who famously privileged emotional involvement more than reason and sought to lean on the "gut instinct" of voters, encouraging the primacy of their baser needs and instincts.[38] This is the second target of McEwan's satire which highlights the discursive strategies of pro-Brexit propaganda in order to unmask its typically populist argumentative tools.

The very choice of the term "Reversalism" serves as evidence of this: besides emphasising in a meta-textual sense the parodic intentions of *The Cockroach*, the etymological reference to the verb "to reverse" recalls the function of neologisms in masking the ambiguity and indefiniteness of the new economic project. A confirmation of the unfoundedness and complete lack of legitimacy of Reversalism within the economic literature is the distorted use of the term "Revengelism" (56) by Archie Tupper, a thinly veiled counterpart of Donald Trump. Tupper's misuse, apart from clearly alluding to that desire for 'revenge' against the EU, has two effects: on the one hand, it mocks and ridicules the very financial plan he will soon publicly endorse; on the other, it highlights his superficial understanding of a plan that will determine Europe's financial and political future.[39]

Equally significant in terms of rhetorical choices is the moment of the presentation of Reversalism to the House of Commons. In this episode, Jim Sams, a few hours after his transformation from insect to human, announces his Cabinet's intentions: McEwan's satire reproduces the hyperbole typical of pro-Brexit propaganda in envisioning the future of the country after the implementation of the new economic plan:

> … our mission will be to deliver Reversalism for the purpose of uniting and re-energising our great country and not only *making it great again*, but making it *the greatest place on earth*. By 2050 it is more than possible, and less than impossible, that the UK will be *the greatest and most prosperous economy in Europe*. We will lie at the centre of a new network of reverse-flow trade deals. We will be *the best on the planet in all fields*. We will be the earth's home of the electric airplane. We will lead the world in not wrecking our precious planet. That same world will follow our shining example and every nation will reverse its money flow in order not to be left behind…. (45-46, my emphasis)

However, what underlines the lack of solid arguments behind the slogans which make up this presentation is Jim Sams' inability, just days later, to answer the German Chancellor's simple and direct question *Warum*? ('Why?'): "'Why are you doing this? Why, to what end, are you tearing your nation apart? ...'. Jim's mind went blank. … Because. That, ultimately, was the only answer: *because*'" (86-87). In this answer, it is possible to recognise a clear reference to Brexiteers' use of tautologies as proof of the indefiniteness of the outcomes and motivations behind Sams' political project.

The rhetorical device that most frequently recurs in McEwan's satire is hyperbole which is used for various purposes, in addition to ridiculing the rhetoric about the future of the British people after the implementation of Reversalism.[40] One of the most evident examples is the manipulation of episodes

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[37] Weaver, *Rhetoric*, 4.

[38] Confirmation can be also found in a headline in a "patriotic newspaper" which reads "Who Put the Fire in Jim's Belly?". McEwan, *Cockroach*, 54.

[39] For further context, also consider the narrator's overview of the pseudo-historical origins of 'Reversalism'. Ibid., 25-31.

[40] Another example is the sentence "The country was about to be set free from a loathsome servitude" (Ibid., 22) in relation to the exit from the EU.

that could impact public opinion, stir nationalist sentiments, or provoke a desire for revenge against the EU. A striking example of the latter is Jim Sams' deliberate instrumentalisation of the accident in which two British fishermen lose their lives on a fishing boat operating without authorisation in French waters. Despite the British PM's awareness of the clear circumstances surrounding the incident – poor visibility due to fog, the fishing boat's absence from the radar system, and the lack of authorisation –, he intentionally chooses to consider the accident "a despicable assault" (40): "Then Sams read out the names of the dead men, whom he described as 'English heroes'. He too expressed deepest condolences to the bereaved families and said that he was 'disturbed' by this tragic incident and was 'not wholly satisfied' with the explanations given by the ambassador earlier" (52). "Patriotic journalists" (54) echo him and praise the PM's resolve "facing down the French and speaking up for 'our lost boys"'(Ibid.). As this quote exemplifies, hyperbole returns on several occasions also with a satirical function regarding the realm of media and journalism. For example, following the protests after the PM's speech in the House of Commons, it is reported that:

> someone threw 'an incendiary device'. It landed harmlessly on the damp grass by some laurels under a window…. It was a milk bottle containing an inch or so of lighter fluid. It was reported as a petrol bomb…. The so-called bomb, deplorable as it was, had been examined and was a firework, in fact, 'a damp squib', and likely nothing more than a joke in extremely poor taste. (51-52)

The caricatured portrayal of Tupper also relies on rhetorical choices, particularly the common use of dilemmas in populist rhetoric.[41] As Weaver affirms (9), one of the clearest tendencies in populist argumentative structures is the simplification of complex situations or issues. In *The Cockroach*, it is evident that the ridicule of Trumpian rhetoric and his use of social media is intended to highlight the lack of critical analysis of his stance on the crisis with France: "'Tiny Sylvie Larousse sinking English ships. BAD!'. It was poetry that smoothly combined density of meaning with fleet-footed liberation from detail" (9).

Also contributing to this is the conventional use of hyperbole to amplify the emotional impact on the reader and move public opinion: "the fisherman's boat became a ship, the ship became ships; no tedious mention of the dead. The final judgement was childlike and pure, memorable and monosyllabically correct. And the parting flourish of those caps, that laconic exclamation mark!" (Ibid.). As the irony in the previous quotations demonstrates, McEwan's satire targets not only the formal level of discursive structures – neologisms, hyperboles, tautologies – which are frequently exposed as hollow, but also the content level, revealing the lack of objective foundations behind the arguments put forward by Brexit supporters.

3. Masking, Concealing, Reversing

Another target of McEwan's satire are the contradictions within pro-Brexit propaganda. Central to this is the theme of masquerade and identity concealment, which closely ties in with the motif of the human-insect metamorphosis. To understand the effects of his satire with reference to this theme, it is essential to consider why McEwan chose a cockroach as the focal point of his political critique. The choice of the cockroach invites several interpretations, beginning with the most immediate one, linked to the disgust it usually evokes in humans. However, one of the most plausible explanations that can be derived from the text is the ability of this species to "act instinctively and simultaneously, always as

[41] Weaver, *Rhetoric*, 8: "The characteristic of the self-limiting dilemmas of populism outlined by Taggart (2000: 4) is a tendency for the simplification of complex situations".

a whole, according to a common decision-making mechanism",[42] repeatedly referred to in *The Cockroach* as the "pheromonal unconscious" (7).

Moreover, a further element etymologically associated with the cockroach – *Blattodea* in Latin – is darkness, the gloomy environments in which these creatures tend to nest. By extension, this darkness mirrors the context in which Johnson's parliamentary group operated: amidst alleged illicit funding to the US,[43] the blackmailing of opponents, and the manipulation of information, the group functioned in opacity, concealing the true interests behind the Brexit deal and the methods used to manage public opinion. Added to this is the state of poverty and degradation in which this species usually thrives, and McEwan's novel alludes to this in order to denounce the masochism of the economic project: only a 'social' category that can grow, expand, and empower itself in misery could have devised such a damaging plan of economic isolation for British citizens.

At a first level of reading, McEwan seems to simply adopt the *topos* of the metamorphosis with the intention of suggesting that Brexit can be considered a self-destructive and detrimental solution on an economic and social level exclusively from the human perspective: as the protagonist himself explains in the last pages, it is very advantageous for the blattodea species that proliferates in conditions of "poverty, filth, squalor" and "human ruin" (100).

> Our kind is at least three hundred million years old. Merely forty years ago, in this city, we were a marginalised group, despised, objects of scorn or derision. At best, we were ignored. At worst, loathed. But we kept to our principles, and very slowly at first, but with gathering momentum, our ideas have taken hold. Our core belief remained steadfast: we always acted in our own best interests. As our Latin name, blattodea, suggests, we are creatures that shun the light. We understand and love the dark. In recent times, these past two hundred thousand years, we have lived alongside humans and have learned their particular taste for that darkness, to which they are not as fully committed as we are. But whenever it is predominant in them, so we have flourished. Where they have embraced poverty, filth, squalor, we have grown in strength. And by tortuous means, and much experiment and failure, we have come to know the preconditions for such human ruin. (97-98)

At the same time, the theme of the concealment of the protagonist's real identity introduces another pivotal issue in McEwan's critique of the intrinsic contradictions in the communicative strategies of the Leave Party and behind Brexiteers' cultural beliefs. The constant references to collective spirit and pheromonal instinct insistently recall the principle of belonging, of national identity, of Englishness, of which the Brexiteers have proclaimed themselves the defenders in contrast to the invasion of the Other, the foreigner (be they immigrants or European governmental elite), whose threat is amplified by its invisibility and all-pervasiveness.

> When Jim had looked into the eyes of Benedict St John, the foreign secretary, he had come against the blank unyielding wall of a human retina and could go no further. Impenetrable. Nothing there. Merely human. A fake. A collaborator. An enemy of the people. … But here were the rest, and he recognised them instantly through their transparent, superficial human form. A band of brothers and sisters. The metamorphosed radical Cabinet. As they sat round the table, they gave no indication of who they really were, and what they all knew. How eerily they resembled humans! (21)

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[42] See Tekin and Turgut, "Uncertain Future", 1476.

[43] A clear reference to illicit funding is found on page 56: "Getting Tupper on board needed forethought, nice treats. Jim was on his fourth pages of notes. *Problem: AT not drinker/state visit softener/banquet with HM gold carriage flunkeys fanfares address parliament etc/Most Nob Order of Garter plus Vic Cross plus hon. knighthd/memship White's/gift Hyde Park as priv golf course.* But the American president was a serious man of big tastes, with his own moral certitudes, by background not trained up to value the subtle ribbons-and-medals allure of the honours system. What were White's or Hyde Park to one who owned more expensive clubs and bigger courses? Who cared for 'Sir' when one was 'Mr President' for life?" (emphasis in the text).

The motif of disguise in McEwan's parodic satire clearly shows how the same representatives of the English government become the embodiment of the inner contradictions of their cultural beliefs: the cockroach-men protagonists of McEwan's work themselves become the emblem of otherness, embodying the associated invisibility and manipulation of truth since their human appearance conceals their real nature. McEwan's scornful irony in this case alludes to those cardinal ideals of the Brexiteers, such as being "'one of us'" (54) as well as the memory of a past of greatness, but it also reverses them, as the cockroach possesses no memory of that collective past which, on the contrary, he aims to erase.

> What also bound this brave group was the certainty of deprivation and tears to come, though, to their regret, they would not be their own. … There are always those who hesitate by an open cage door. Let them cower in elective captivity, slaves to a corrupt and discredited order, their only comfort their graphs and pie-charts, their arid rationality, their pitiful timidity. (22)

To better understand this reversal, one needs to recall the racially motivated use that has often been made of the insect metaphor: think, for example, of the expression "swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life"[44] adopted by David Cameron to describe migrants from continental Europe.[45] The choice of the swarm of cockroaches to head the government in this novella is therefore emblematic of McEwan's own strategies in this parodic satire: in addition to the ironic lowering effect, it contains a critical allusion to Brexit propaganda and ideology, as Robert Eaglestone explains. The characteristics of certainty and pride, thanks to which British people can claim "'we' know who 'we' are [and] if you don't share this feeling, you are not 'one of us' not rooted in the same past",[46] here find their clearest reversal in the masking of the real identity of the government members and their complete alienation from the human species *tout court*. At the same time, the theme of concealment and disguise, combined with the insistence on "the collective spirit"[47] of the blattodea species, seems instead to recall all those collectivities which, as Michael Gardiner reminds us,[48] have been erased because of the rise of Neoliberalism and whose desires have been channelled by the propaganda for Brexit.

Moreover, the connotations assumed by the economic plan of Reversalism in McEwan's work are interesting because they contain various temporal, spatial, historical, and national intersections that can convey much about the politics of Brexit. The economic theory of Reversalism is central to understanding the narrative strategies adopted by McEwan: its reference to 'reverse' reminds us of another key feature of the ideology behind Brexit, namely the tendency towards retrotopia, well illustrated by Bauman. If it is true, as Gardiner states, that the Leave Party's ideology has always been considered "backward ... [and] unprogressive" (106), as opposed to the liberal conception of progress and development, then behind the theory of Reversalism lies "the 'restorative' variety of nostalgia" suggested by Bauman,[49] in relation to which "progress and retrogression changed places" (6). This is

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44 Rahman, "Consuming Brexit", 76.

45 See "Calais crisis: Cameron condemned for 'dehumanising' description of migrants", *The Guardian* (20 July 2015), *www.theguardian.com*: "'you have got a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain because Britain has got jobs, it's got a growing economy, it's an incredible place to live'".

46 Robert Eaglestone, "Cruel Nostalgia and the Memory of the Second World War", in Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature*, 97.

47 McEwan, *Cockroach*, 6.

48 Gardiner, "Anachronism", 106.

49 Bauman, *Retrotopia*, 3.

clearly a "back to the future" (9) as Bauman puts it, which finds its highest expression in the "back" that appears in the Brexiteers' slogan *take back control*.[50]

In McEwan's work it is therefore significant that the opponents of Reversalism are defined as "Clockwise", referring to the temporal linearity of progress contrasted by the Brexiteers, who have a grim vision of progress and the future since they are "uncertain and … un-trustworthy",[51] with respect to which the "road back, to the past, won't miss the chance of turning into a trail of cleansing from the damages committed by futures, whenever they turned into a present".[52]

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the analysis of *The Cockroach* as a satirical parody has allowed the metaphorical function and the allusions to Brexit ideology embedded within certain key elements of parodic laughter to be uncovered, paying particular attention to the material bodily lower stratum of the grotesque image. Inversions, masking, and exaggeration have been interpreted not only in terms of their parodic function in the caricatured portrayal of Brexit protagonists but also considering the rhetorical strategies and populist ideology that shaped pro-Brexit propaganda itself. Thus, McEwan's parodic choices have made it possible to examine the primary target of his satire: namely, the ideological incoherence, rhetorical inconsistency, and structural fragility of the Brexit project, together with the strategic manipulation of discourse by its advocates. Most notably, the neologism 'Reversalism' – which, in the novella, replaces any explicit reference to Brexit – has permitted not only the examination of McEwan's satirical-parodic inversions, but also the investigation of the backward-looking ideology at the heart of the Brexit project. McEwan uses 'Reversalism' to denounce the logic of retrotopia and restorative nostalgia underpinning Brexit and revealing how its ideology suggests not a progressive political vision, but rather a fearful retreat into an imagined past.

[50] See Docherty, "Brexit", 182.
[51] Bauman, *Retrotopia*, 6.
[52] Ibid.