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Jasper Fforde's Rabxit: Allegory and Satire as Weapons of Mass Instruction

Abstract: In his allegorical tale, *The Constant Rabbit* (2020), Jasper Fforde highlights the detrimental effects of Brexit on social cohesion and human relationships. Set in a quintessentially English village, the story follows a family of anthropomorphic rabbits that suddenly become the target of 'leporiphobic' intolerance. However, as the story is told from the perspective "of the discriminators rather than the discriminatees" (Harper-Fforde 2020), it forces readers to see their own prejudices and complicity reflected in the mirror of satire, encouraging them to imagine ways to effect positive change. Assuming that literature can "play a crucial role in our thought about how we live as individuals and as communities" (Eaglestone 2018), the novel uses the empathetic power of narrative and the educational potential of allegory and satire to promote more ethical and altruistic citizenship.

Keywords: *Jasper Fforde*, *Brexit*, *Allegory*, *Satire*, *Ethics*, *Empathy*

1. *Docere, delectare, movere* in times of crisis

Among those novels that, in Kristian Shaw's words, "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"[1] Jasper Fforde's *The Constant Rabbit* (2020) is certainly a topical example. Although written in a light-hearted and entertaining tone, the novel contains a strong ethical and political message on Brexit – a powerful lesson in tolerance, anti-racism and anti-xenophobia[2] – which has renovated my long-standing faith in literature and its power to open minds and awaken consciences.

As cognitive psychology teaches us, reading fiction allows us to learn about the changes and problems in the life of individuals who may differ greatly from us in terms of place, culture, and mentality, in a protected space of simulation.[3] This safe space enables us to empathise more deeply with their motivations, reflections, aspirations, and emotions, to the extent that we can feel compassion for their suffering and, at the same time, learn something about our own lives, personalities and behaviours.[4] Furthermore, as Italo Calvino emphasised in one of his Norton Lectures in 1984,[5] literature can only preserve its function and longevity by overcoming all kinds of boundaries and

[1] Kristian Shaw, "Introduction: The European Question", in K. Shaw, *Brexlit: British Literature and the European Project* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 4.

[2] In an interview, Fforde explained that during and after the vote his views "changed very radically over his nation". Hence, his need to write about Brexit, alluding at the same time to "a lot of modern politics, even US politics, Trumpian politics". Rachael Harper, "An Interview with Jasper Fforde on *The Constant Rabbit*", *SciFiNow* (2 July 2020), *www.scifinow.co.uk*.

[3] On literary simulation, see Keith Oatley's "Why Fiction May Be Twice as True as Fact: Fiction as Cognitive and Emotional Simulation", *Review of General Psychology*, 3 (1999), 101-117, and "Emotional Intelligence and the Intelligence of Emotions", *Psychological Inquiry*, 15.3 (2004), 216-222.

[4] Among others, see Keith Oatley et al., "Exploring the Link between Reading Fiction and Empathy", *Communications*, 34 (2009), 407-428; D.R. Johnson, "Transportation into a Story Increases Empathy, Prosocial Behavior, and Perceptual Bias toward Fearful Expressions", *Personality and Individual Differences*, 52 (2012), 150-155.

[5] Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1988).

barriers. By pursuing "immeasurable goals", it can offer itself as "a method of knowledge and, above all, as a network of connections between the events, the people and the things of the world", capable of providing "a manifold and multifaceted vision" of reality.[6]

In telling the story of the (re)construction of a wall (first metaphorical, then physical) between British people and immigrants during the Brexit period, *The Constant Rabbit* sets itself the same ambitious goals described above. It recounts the events of the intimate and social lives of beings belonging to different backgrounds, cultures, and species, seeking to persuade readers to put themselves in the characters' shoes and understand how important it is to feel part of a large interconnected community. Indeed, the text emphasises the psychological and emotional enrichment that can be gained from such an experience, given the variety of perspectives, practices and feelings that a multifarious community can offer. With the aim of promoting a more open and altruistic attitude, the novel is thus entirely consistent with the key role of literature as understood by Robert Eaglestone in his volume on Brexit:

> Literature and the study of literature encompass reason but also take emotions (personal, communal, subjective, in all their complexity) and ideas about value seriously as forms of knowledge and meaning. Literature and its study play a crucial role in our thought about how we live as individuals and as communities because of its deep involvement with personal and communal identity and because it broadens and reflects on our ability to think, feel and argue.[7]

Indeed, what I have always appreciated about Fforde, whose works I have explored several times in relation to other aspects and themes,[8] is his firm belief in the immortality of stories[9] and in the power of literature to improve our lives, particularly our relationships with others, by enabling us to understand ourselves better. As Michele Cometa argues, "studying fiction, in all its forms, means having more or less direct access to the functioning and structure of the human mind and, with it, also to consciousness and the Self".[10] In fact, storytelling and storymaking seem to be so integral to our cognitive structures, and even our DNA, that *homo sapiens* might be renamed *homo narrans*.[11]

Jasper Fforde stands out, however, for his tenacious desire to educate readers while entertaining them. He is the author of a series of hilarious yet erudite novels devoted to literary classics – such as the series starring the literary detective Thursday Next – as well as other police, dystopian, and fantasy stories aimed primarily at young adults. These stories feature such a dense network of intertextual references that they could be described as "silly book[s] for smart people", as a journalist from *The Independent* suggested,[12] or rather, in Jostein Gripsrud's view, as pop products for a "double access

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[6] Calvino, *Six Memos*. Quotations respectively from pages 112, 105 and 112.

[7] Robert Eaglestone, "Introduction: Brexit and Literature", in Robert Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 2.

[8] See, for instance, "'Welcome to the Jasper Fforde Website'. L'autore, il lettore e i classici nella rete cross-mediale della cultura 2.0", in Michele Stanco, ed., *La letteratura dal punto di vista degli scrittori* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2017), 133-145.

[9] In Fforde's words: "Being told stories is one of Mankind's most enduring fascinations and technology might change the ways in which we are told them … but not the need". Claire White, "A Conversation with Jasper Fforde", *Writers Write* (2 February 2002), *www.writerswrite.com*.

[10] Michele Cometa, *Perché le storie ci aiutano a vivere. La letteratura necessaria* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2017), 25 (my translation). Literary Darwinism and Literary Cognitivism, in particular, emphasise how stories have always existed in our minds, both as models inspired by life experiences and as abstractions created by the imagination to give order and meaning to reality and more effectively memorise information that is fundamental to our survival.

[11] See Jonathan Gottshall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2013).

[12] In his "Review" of Fforde's *The Eyre Affair* (10 August 2001, *www.independent.co.uk*), Charles Shaar Murray highlighted also "the incongruous juxtaposition of low comedy and high erudition" that characterizes Fforde's postmodern style.

audience".[13] Although his preferred genre of novels is described on the author's website as "a joyful blend of Comedy-SF-Thriller-Crime-Satire",[14] in an interview Fforde provided three other counter-labels that ironically highlight the scholarly ambition sometimes attributed to him: "'Swiss Army knife', fulfilling any need you can think of"; "infernal nonsense"; and "deconstructional post-modernism, which doesn't mean anything at all but sounds vaguely academic".[15]

However, *The Constant Rabbit* marks a departure from Fforde's established genre and narrative choices. Many reviewers agree that the writer has moved away from his usual style, given the novel's focus on the political, social, and interethnic issues at the heart of the Brexit debate. A *Guardian* journalist even describes it as "Jasper Fforde's most chilling and realistic book yet".[16] In fact, even though the story is "about discrimination … fear, and fragility, privilege, and unconscious complicity"[17] and has clear ethical aims, the writer has chosen allegory and satire rather than realism and has not abandoned his fantastical vein or his signature comic tone. As he points out on his website: "The most favourable outcome for me is that you laugh when you are reading this book, and frown a little when you have finished – and that together, eventually, as part of a much larger and broader and more principled coalition, we can start to loosen some bricks in that wall" (Ibid.).

This article will explore how the author seeks to achieve his educational, entertaining and moving objectives (the Ciceronian *docere*, *delectare*, *movere*) to promote social and moral improvement, a theme common to all those novels that are so firmly rooted in their historical and political moment that they cannot avoid "having to do with ownership, authority, power, and the imposition of force".[18]

2. Orwellian Allegory and the Clash of Civilisations

The Constant Rabbit tells the story of rabbits that became anthropomorphised in 1965 due to a peculiar "Event" that occurred at a time "when integration into society was still seen as guiding policy rather than the pipe-dream of idealistic liberals".[19] Unfortunately, however, their coexistence with humans has become increasingly problematic over the last twenty years (circa 2000-2020), due to the rise of the UK Anti-Rabbit Party (UKARP) and its leader Nigel Smethwick – names that clearly echo UKIP, the Eurosceptic and nationalist UK Independence Party, and its leader from 2010 to 2016, Nigel Farage.

Since their arrival in the British Isles, humans have forced rabbits to live in provincial towns that have ended up being populated mainly by their own communities. Now, they are planning to evict them through a "Rabxit campaign" (113), a quasi-anagram of the Brexit anti-immigration campaign, after moving them to a MegaWarren in Wales. Surrounded by high fences, walls and gates and equipped with CCTV cameras and a railway terminal, the MegaWarren makes the rabbits' new home look more like a concentration camp. However, the ultimate goal of the Rabxit campaign is not to give them a 'new home', but to 'rehome' them, clearly alluding to 'remigration'. In recent years, this term

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[13] A cultivated audience capable of appreciating popular artefacts. See Jostein Gripsrud, "High Culture Revisited", *Cultural Studies*, III.2 (1989), 194-207.

[14] See Fforde's website: *www.jasperfforde.com*.

[15] Cit. in Juliette Wells, "An Eyre-Less Affair? Jasper Fforde's Seeming Elision of Jane", in Margarete Rubik and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann, eds., *A Breath of Fresh Eyre: Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of Jane Eyre* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 199.

[16] Elizabeth Flux, "Interview: Jasper Fforde on rabbits, racism and writing fiction 'to slightly improve a flawed world'", *The Guardian* (17 July 2020), *www.theguardian.com*.

[17] This is what Fforde writes about his book's intent. See *www.jasperfforde.com*.

[18] Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge MA: Harvard U.P., 1983), 83.

[19] Jasper Fforde, *The Constant Rabbit* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2020), 7. Further references to the novel appear in parentheses.

has become synonymous with the aim of some far-right groups, particularly those belonging to the European Identity Movement, to return non-white immigrants and their descendants to their place of origin. In fact, remigration is a euphemism for forced expulsion or mass deportation.[20]

At a certain point, before the final steps are implemented, rabbits – who are sometimes referred to as "bunnies", a term reminiscent of the derogatory 'pakis' – are no longer permitted to roam freely across British territory. Instead, they are forced to live in enclosed colonies. Among the approximately 100,000 who are allowed to settle without restrictions are Major Rabbit and Constance Rabbit, also known as Connie, the female protagonist of the novel. They have recently moved with their children to the village of Much Hemlock, whose very name seems to allude to its geographical and cultural isolation. This quintessentially English village is one of those historic rural places in central England that are "very keen on having garden fetes and the best-kept village awards"[21] and are inhabited by wealthy conservative professionals. As Shaw reminds us, these people, together with the inhabitants of Wales, were perhaps the deciding factor in the Brexit referendum.[22] In the novel, they are described as being imbued with right-wing sentiments and a morbid attachment to local traditions. They are also portrayed as being generally intolerant of foreigners, lefties, environmentalists, vegetarians, and women who talk too much (15-16).[23] Peter Knox and his daughter Pippa are the Rabbits' neighbours. Peter is the novel's male protagonist and narrator. He does not have the same difficulties as other residents in maintaining good neighbourly relations with the Rabbits, despite his years of work for the Rabbit Compliance Task Force (RabCoT) as a Rabbit Spotter – identifying potential criminals among specimens that almost no one in Britain can distinguish from one another. In fact, following the classic racist stereotype that emphasises the distinction between 'us' and 'them', the claim is that 'them', i.e. all those who are different from 'us', are all the same.

As Fforde explained, the choice of rabbits was influenced by the conflictual relationship that the British have always had with these prolific animals.[24] The fantastical element, however, draws its intertextual inspiration from Beatrix Potter's 1902 book *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, which is also said in the novel to have provided the rabbits with a "blueprint" for their transformation during the Event (16). It is no coincidence that some of the same names recur from Potter's story, such as Cottontail and Peter (the latter is human here, but sympathises with rabbits). Nevertheless, Fforde employs the idea of talking animals to craft a political allegory that narrowly focuses on contemporary reality. In this respect, the book is rather reminiscent of George Orwell's 1945 satirical fable *Animal Farm*. We find not only the same motif of the humanisation of animals, but also some of the most xenophobic slogans from that story. For example, in *Animal Farm* TwoLegsGood replaced the previous commandment, FourLegsGood TwoLegsBad, when the adoption of the 'human way' became increasingly evident. In Fforde's novel, 2LG (an acronym for TwoLegsGood) is the name of the most chauvinistic and violent group of the story, as well as the most opposed to the 'Rabbit Way', which is much more rational and peaceful than the 'Human Way'. The 2LG do not hesitate to wear pig masks when perpetrating their violent, reactionary crimes of intolerance. One of their slogans is "Run, rabbit, run, rabbit, run, run, run, here comes a farmer with a gun gun gun" (228), which clearly refers to the war-time song *Run,*

[20] For a detailed discussion of the problem, see the 2019 ISD (Institute for Strategic Dialogue) report written by Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner, "The Great Replacement': The Violent Consequences of Mainstreamed Extremism", *www.isdglobal.org*.

[21] Fforde's words in Harper, "Interview".

[22] Shaw, "Introduction", 23.

[23] In the Acknowledgements, however, Fforde apologises to the residents of Herefordshire "who have battled tirelessly to attack inequality in this world and feel they might have been in some small measure maligned. I had to set the book somewhere" (307).

[24] In the author's words: "the rabbits actually became a very good proxy for a demonised minority 'other'. … We have this love-hate relationship with rabbits. [There's the] sexualisation because of the 'breeding like rabbits', yet at the same time we exterminate them as pests in their literal hundreds of millions". Harper, "Interview".

rabbit, run written by Noel Gay and Ralph Butler in 1939. This could indeed be seen as an ironic reference made to poke fun at the 2LG: the song became a popular anthem after the music-hall comedy duo Flanagan & Allen changed the lyrics to "Run, Adolf, run" to mock the ineffectiveness of the *Luftwaffe* and Hitler's supremacist acts; notably, only one rabbit was reportedly killed in the first air raid that Germany launched on Britain on 13 November 1939.[25] However, it seems that the Orwellian 2LG have forgotten the reworking of the song aimed at satirising a man whose ultra-nationalism actually mirrors theirs.[26]

In 1946, in "Why I Write", Orwell wrote that *Animal Farm* – born to describe the other political extremism that was horrifying him, Stalin's authoritarian involution – was the first book in which he had nevertheless tried, with full awareness of what he was doing, to "fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole",[27] that is, to harmonise militant commitment and aesthetic integrity. According to Ian McEwan, even now, "in our troubled times", these two components constitute "the north and south, the axis of orientation that writers confront".[28] In his 2021 lecture on Orwell, the author reflects on the real possibilities for a contemporary writer to continue occupying his comfortable position "inside the whale" – the title of Orwell's famous 1940 essay – while remaining indifferent to political contingencies and the burning issues of the moment, such as Brexit and the climate crisis. These latter seem to have radically changed conditions in the belly of the whale, whose "rotting flesh is flapping open to a turbulent world of omnipresent broadband and vanishing solitude, to a too-successful clever-stupid species fouling its own nest". Despite being aware that "moral or political urgency can throttle the life out of a novel", and that explicitly telling a reader what to think "could easily destroy the delicate fabric of a fiction", bringing it to aesthetic failure, McEwan believes that the crisis is too urgent to ignore. He cites Orwell's astonishing ability to produce deeply politically engaged books while still managing to preserve a space for empathetic imagination through his depiction of the characters' experiences and emotions. *Animal Farm*, says McEwan, is "liberated by its pessimism to make its point about revolution *and* human nature. Realism is tossed to the winds in favour of allegory" (my emphasis).[29]

Written in response to the same sense of urgency, *The Constant Rabbit* is, like *Animal Farm*, a political allegory engaged in an ethical battle. A few years ago, the writer José Saramago gave a lecture at Roma Tre University entitled "Dall'allegoria come genere all'allegoria come necessità" (From allegory as a genre to allegory as a necessity), in which he stated his belief that, in times of crisis such as ours, it is necessary to look beyond traditional realism and revive seemingly obsolete genres such as allegory in order to address contemporary concerns. He argued that the novel should be transformed from a simple narrative device into a space for reflection – a tool that does not merely reflect reality as it is, but rather, through "the veils of allegory", distorts and interrogates it; a mirror "that is a little flat, a little convex, a little concave", yet capable of making the truth "more visible".[30] This seems to be "the most effective rhetorical device for making the reader understand much more

[25] However, it is possible that the news was only disseminated for propaganda purposes and that the rabbit had actually been purchased from a butcher's shop. See Daniel Bennet, "A bomb, a song, a rabbit – the first WW2 bombs to fall on British soil", *BBC News* (17 November 2019), *www.bbc.com*.

[26] Another possible reference is to the 1993 song by Sheryl Crow, *Run, Baby, Run*. Dedicated to Aldous Huxley – another prominent author in the utopian-dystopian genre, whose works include the counter-cultural utopia *Island* (1962), – the song dealt with the failure of the ideals of social justice, freedom and community of the 1960s.

[27] George Orwell, "Why I Write" [1946], in *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 6.

[28] Ian McEwan, "Politics and the Imagination: Reflections on George Orwell's *Inside the Whale*" (2021), *www.ianmcewan.com*.

[29] McEwan, "Politics and the Imagination". All quotations are from this text.

[30] José Saramago, *Lezioni italiane* (Roma: La Nuova Frontiera, 2022), 150-151 (my translation).

than would be possible through a sequence of simple descriptions, the effect of which, paradoxically, is to intensify the feeling of reality".[31]

It is worth recalling, however, that the appreciation of allegory as a strategic didactic tool has deep roots in the British literary and philosophical tradition. As early as 1595, Philip Sidney highlighted in his *Defence of Poesie* how we are more encouraged to learn all knowledge – "Logicke, Rhetoricke, Philosophie, naturall and morall" – if it is presented to us "under the vaile of Fables", that is, in an allegorical and figurative style.[32] Some years later, in 1609, the philosopher Francis Bacon expressed his preferences for 'parabolic' poetry when in *Of the Wisdom of the Ancients* (*De Sapientia Veterum*, 1609), he decided to rewrite thirty-nine myths from antiquity. He believed that these stories, being allegorical, could help him to convey the new model of empirical knowledge he was promoting in a more acceptable and smooth way.[33]

This idea of making new, complex or difficult-to-digest concepts more accessible by presenting them in the form of familiar, older images appears to have influenced Fforde's writing too. He reflects the critical reality of Brexit through the mask of an allegorical story that draws on the popularity of Potter's beloved characters. Indeed, as the author explained to Elizabeth Flux, his novel "is kind of about one thing but it's about another".[34] Specifically,

> it's about anthropomorphised rabbits living in the UK … But it's [also] about otherism and discrimination. It's about complicity. It's about someone coming to terms with their leporiphobia [fear of rabbits], and how somebody perhaps thought they were a good guy and then had to re-examine themselves and their country and their government in the light of *what was invisible to them but is now seemingly obvious*.[35]

With Britain's exit from the European Community, and its harmful consequences on the lives and civil coexistence of immigrants with British citizens, it has not been possible to avoid the worst (the "now seemingly obvious") perhaps also due to a lack of awareness among those who could have prevented it by joining the more prudent voices who opposed the growing authoritarian drift.[36] What was "invisible" to those who did not want to pay attention, or who were unaware of their complicity in a certain way of seeing things and people before events forced them to open their eyes, had already been there for decades, ready to be reborn from embers that had never gone out. It is enough to say that Brexit and the Euroscepticism of Cameron and Farage, with their paranoid, xenophobic images centred on swarms of people invading England, stem from imperialist nostalgia and the myth of splendid British isolation. This attitude dates back to Powellism in the 1960s and Thatcherism in the 1980s. In particular, it refers to Enoch Powell's famous 1968 speech about the "rivers of blood" that would be caused by increasingly riotous migrants,[37] and to Margaret Thatcher's emphasis on the uncontrolled influx of migrants.[38]

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[31] Giorgio De Marchis, "Le parole italiane di José Saramago", in ibid., 19 (my translation).

[32] Philip Sidney, *Defence of Poesie*, ed. Risa Stephanie Bear (Eugene: Renascence Edition, University of Oregon), *https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/*.

[33] Francis Bacon, *Of the Wisdom of the Ancients* (1609), in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, Vol. 6, ed. James Spedding et al., (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2013), 687-764.

[34] Flux, "Interview".

[35] Fforde in Flux, "Interview", my emphasis.

[36] In the novel, Connie points out to Peter the price to be paid for indifference and disengagement: "if you let people – foxes, politicians, media outlets, platforms, whatever – get away with unacceptable behaviour, then it emboldens them and others to greater and more extreme conduct" (171).

[37] Enoch Powell, "Rivers of Blood" [20 April 1968], *The Telegraph* (6 November 2007), *www.telegraph.co.uk*.

[38] In a 1978 TV interview for Granada *World in Action*, Thatcher stated that the British were afraid that their country "might be rather swamped by people with a different culture", *www.margaretthatcher.org*.

In *The Constant Rabbit*, this paranoid discourse is often voiced by the village's most conservative characters, such as Mr Mallet. The man does not hesitate to use banal and biased rhetoric aimed at arousing fear about rabbits' extraordinary fertility and their alleged plot to take over the UK and force the Rabbit Way on the population through a strategy called "LitterBombing". The latter is strikingly similar to the Great Replacement, a far-right conspiracy theory originated by the French author Renaud Camus and subsequently disseminated worldwide. This theory posits that white populations are being supplanted by non-white individuals, particularly Muslims, through migration, violence, and higher birth rates, and this is regarded by many as "one of the gravest threats to European populations".[39] A concerned Mr Mallet says in the novel:

> Once you let a single family in, then the outward spiral begins. Other rabbits of less scrupulous morals move in – and following them, the criminal element. … Let one family in and pretty soon they'll all be here, filling up the schools, attempting to convert us all to their uniquely aggressive form of veganism, undermining our worthy and utterly logical religion with their depraved and nonsensical faith … Once they've established themselves, ... their friends and relatives start to swarm in. … House prices will tumble, and we'll be strangers in our own community. … A plague. (57-58)

Alongside Nigel Smethwick, Mr Foxe, the head of the RabCoT Division, which hunts and persecutes rabbits, is one of the main perpetrators of this harmful propaganda based on white supremacy and aimed at instilling fear and hate in people: "They want to make Britain into a rabbit nation, with their laws, their heathen god, their aggressive veganism … This sceptr'd isle, this green and pleasant land is reserved for humans and a few foxes, not for a plague of vermin… They're planning on outnumbering us" (217). It is also specified that, thanks to a series of laws against the construction of underground dens – and, by extension, any kind of 'criminal' underground protest movement – the "new laws naturally increased rabbit arrest and incarceration rates, … duly blamed on increased cunicular criminality" (20).

In 1972, the sociologist Stanley Cohen coined the term "moral panic" to describe this type of political and social reaction, whereby an episode, person or community is suddenly defined as a threat to the values and interests of society, especially by the media and institutions.[40] In a volume written by several scholars in 1978, *Policing the Crisis*,[41] this concept was revisited to emphasise how the moral panic that erupted in England in the 1970s, and the ensuing creation of scapegoats for the riots in the city suburbs, had very little to do with the actions actually carried out by migrants, who were instead constantly criminalised by newspapers, television and politics.[42] From this point of view, it was a ploy to divert the population's attention from a series of deeply rooted problems and concerns in Britain at the time. These were primarily linked to the collapse of the Empire, the economic crisis (recession and unemployment), and the transformation of consensual culture into an increasingly authoritarian one. As it was implied, when those in power try to divert attention from critical problems, these are somehow removed, and fears are made more controllable by shifting, projecting, transferring them onto other things and people, and condensing them into powerful images of a threatening and invasive otherness. In *Resistance through Rituals* (1976), Stuart Hall, John Clarke, Tony Jefferson and Brian

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[39] Elisa Orofino and William Allchorn, "Introduction: Why Do We Need a Handbook on Non-violent Forms of Extremism?", in Elisa Orofino and William Allchorn, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Non-Violent Extremism: Groups, Perspectives and New Debates* (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 31.

[40] Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003 [1972]), 1.

[41] Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1978).

[42] In the novel, a protest that would be described by anyone else as a "super non-violent silent protest" is dubbed a "riot" by the UKARP and the Compliance Taskforce (117).

Roberts wrote that displacement is a typical feature of political and social crises, during which the dominant culture seeks and finds scapegoats to populate its nightmares.[43]

However, it is precisely to counteract the use and harmful effects of smear campaigns as weapons of 'mass distraction' that allegory and satire can contribute, through their long-recognised moral and educational function, as weapons of 'mass instruction'.

3. Brexit in the mirror of satire

Considering the way in which Fforde accurately retraces and analyses the socio-political reasons and discursive modalities of Brexit, as well as the failure of a multispecies/multicultural approach, the novel would resemble a sociological treatise with an overly explicit instructive content if allegory and satire did not intervene to distort the reflection of this otherwise faithful mirror of the times, and to enhance its persuasive power through empathy. In fact, the purpose of Fforde's satirical humour, as with all political allegories, is not to distance the reader from reality, but rather to strengthen the emotional impact of the text's message. Consider, for instance, the comical yet powerfully allusive exchange – meant to debunk and ridicule the absurdity of race-based conspiracy theories – between an intolerant village woman and the protagonist, Peter, when news spreads that a new family of rabbits is set to move to Much Hemlock:

> Mrs Griswold beckoned me closer and hissed: *'They're coming!'* in a particular unsubtle manner. I looked out of the window to see whether the danger was imminent, but there was nothing to be seen. I concluded that the implied sense of threat was vague and intangible. The most dangerous kind to my mind. 'Who?' – *'Them'*, she added no more helpfully. – 'Vegans?' – 'No, not vegans', she said eyes opening wide, 'worse than that.' – 'Foreigners?' I asked. ... – 'Worse'. – 'Vegan foreigners… who are also socialist?' – 'No', she said, lowering her voice, *'rabbits!'*. (52-53)

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Fforde said that it is often easier to generate empathy, and more palatable to get messages across, through silliness and satire. He is not interested in being "soap boxy" because his primary goal is to entertain. However, he added, "[t]here's this thing with authors which is so grand and so pompous … that when you're writing fiction you're trying to slightly improve a flawed world".[44] Unlike parody, satire always has a social and moral purpose, because it is directed at society, to show its flaws and push it to reform itself.[45]

In this respect, Fforde's satire owes much to the masterful example set by Jonathan Swift. In the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), the talking horses that inhabit Houyhnhnm Land are portrayed as far superior to humans: they are wise, rational, just, virtuous and supportive, unlike the Yahoos, who embody the baser instincts of human nature. The narrator explains that he decided to write the novel "to make men wiser and better" and that his "sole intention was the PUBLIC GOOD", because, he asked himself, "who can read of the virtues I have mentioned in the glorious *Houyhnhnms*, without being ashamed of his own Vices, when he considers himself as the reasoning, governing Animal of his country?".[46] He had realised too late that his mission would be impossible. In a letter to his cousin Simpson, apparently written seven months after the novel's publication, he complained

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[43] Stuart Hall et al., "Subcultures, Cultures and Class: A Theoretical Overview", in Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds. *Resistance through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1976), 74.
[44] Fforde in Flux, "Interview".
[45] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody. The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 43.
[46] Jonathan Swift, *Gullivers' Travels* (London: Penguin, 2003 [1726]), 267.

about the ineffectiveness of his story: "the Yahoos were a Species of Animals utterly incapable of Amendment by Precepts or Examples … Behold, after above six Months Warning, I cannot learn that my Book hath produced one single Effect according to mine Intentions".[47] Hence the decision to abandon his "visionary" project, although it is clear that by "visionary" he meant "satirical",[48] given that, as Swift had written in "The preface of the author to *The Battle of the Books*", it is rare for the targets of satire (which in the case of *Gulliver's Travels* are the English and human beings in general) to recognise themselves in the mirror held up to them: "Satyr is a sort of Glass, wherein Beholders do generally discover every body's Face but their Own; which is the chief Reason for that kind of Reception it meets in the World, and that so very few are offended with it".[49]

In *The Constant Rabbit*, rabbits, with their goodness, virtue and rationality, their egalitarian and orderly social system, and even their attention to nature and environmental sustainability, represent, like Swift's Houyhnhnms, an inverted mirror of human beings; a utopian and satirical reflection that completely reverses the Orientalist process of 'othering', whereby non-Westerners have been traditionally seen as a negative reflection of Westerners.[50] In the novel, humans are very much like Swift's Yahoos. They are blinded by hatred and intolerance of diversity in any form, as well as delusional beliefs of supremacy over any other species. Furthermore, they lose sight of their good intentions by diluting their urgency with endless, useless chatter that never leads to a solution.[51]

The worst thing, however, is that humans are unable to recognise their own flaws and faults. Ever since rabbits became similar to them, albeit better in every way[52], they have never felt any shame. By simply shying away from that positive reflection, they have nullified the original intention behind the Event, which was to inspire them to improve by providing a model of virtue and harmony that they could imitate and replicate as best they could. One of the rabbits reveals to Peter that their anthropomorphisation was, in fact, a satirical experiment. He even explains, acting as the author's spokesperson, that satire is "meant to highlight faults in a humorous way in order to achieve betterment", or, at least, "a small puff in the right moral direction … Perhaps that's what satire does – not change things wholesale but nudge the collective consciousness in a direction that favours justice and equality" (238). However, the rabbits' experiment failed miserably, as their spiritual leader, Bunty, admits in the end. It did not make humans empathise with the rabbits enough to make them side with them, and the rabbits, whose presence should have at the very least given humans "pause for reflection" (300), have now decided to revert to being animals and leave before they are deported or imprisoned.

One of the few characters who gradually begin to feel ashamed when they see their reflection in the mirror of satire is the protagonist, Peter. Since the story is ingeniously narrated in the first person,

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[47] Swift, *Gulliver*, 6.

[48] "I should never have attempted so absurd a Project as that of reforming the *Yahoo* Race in this Kingdom, but I have now done with all such visionary Schemes for ever". Swift, *Gulliver*, 8.

[49] Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub, To which is added The Battle of the Books and The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit Guthkelch*, eds. A.C.L. Guthkelch and David Nichol Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958 [1920]), 215.

[50] See Edward Said's seminal study *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin, 1978).

[51] Ironically, 'constant rabbiting', which is typical of human beings, not rabbits, is the source of the book's title: "that endless well-meaning chatter that makes we privileged feel good about ourselves, but never lead to meaningful change". See *www.jasperfforde.com*.

[52] Once again, in Fforde's human-like rabbits we observe the reversal of a derogatory image, that of non-Westerners as "mimic men": hybrid characters who were the outcome, in Homi Bhabha's words, "of a flawed colonial mimesis in which to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English", or "almost the same but not quite". Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 86-87. Mimicry was in fact an explicit goal of imperial policy. In his "Minute on Education" (1835), Lord Macaulay criticised the Eastern education system and suggested creating a class of people with English tastes, opinions, and morals. By doing so, however, the Empire inadvertently allowed the colonised (albeit an educated elite) to appropriate tools for their own cultural and political emancipation.

from his personal point of view as "someone who is complicit within a discriminating society. … from the human side of the discriminators rather than the discriminatees",[53] when he sees the rabbits being persecuted unjustly, he begins to reflect on his apathy and silent complicity with the dominant ideology. Until then, he had always considered himself "centrist, to be honest. Apolitical, in fact" (15) and, above all, not responsible for what was happening:

> Although I'd never consciously discriminated against rabbits … or considered myself leporiphobic in the least – I was. As a young man I'd laughed at and told anti-rabbit jokes and I never once challenged leporiphobic views when I heard them. And although I'd disapproved of encroaching anti-rabbit legislation I'd done nothing as their rights were slowly eroded. My words and thoughts had never progressed to positive actions. No rallies, no angry letters, no funds to RabSAg, nothing. … what I truly felt was a sense of deep and inexcusable shame. (191)

The simple fact that someone like Peter decides at some point to take action and save thousands of rabbits from the clutches of UKARP and 2LG gives rabbits hope that some humans can be "repaired" (295). Furthermore, as Connie points out, "incremental change comes from incremental action … enough people challenging the problem can make a difference" (301-302). Therefore, they do not dismiss the possibility of attempting the satirical experiment again in the future, once human beings are ready to recognise and embrace the best parts of themselves. "Not yet", says Bunty, but "it may happen, we live in hope" (300). Although Connie stresses how impossible it has been for them to live among people who "run a twenty-first-century world on Paleolithic thoughts and sentiments" – and how "the hate, the fear, the greed" that dominate humans make no sense, especially since they should "have a very clear idea about how to behave" (300) – it is significant that the words "repair" and "hope" are prominent at the end of the novel.

In 2018, the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum wrote *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis* to analyse her visceral reaction to events in her own country following Donald Trump's election, and also to better understand the widespread fear "mingled with anger, blame, and envy"[54] which she saw connected with the populist and sovereignist movement that was exploiting (and fomenting) social polarisation. In the book, Nussbaum endorses the idea that people's fears, mainly stemming from job and economic insecurity, often manifest as hostility towards marginalised groups, particularly migrants: "Immigrants blame the new political regime for the instability of their lives. Dominant groups blame immigrants for the instability of 'all our' lives".[55] However, she remains hopeful. She emphasises, in times of social division, the importance of striving to see others, even those who are culturally very different, as people with whom we can empathise, rather than as enemies to be fought. She also puts forward five main practices to move from fear to hope: the arts; critical dialogue – to be developed especially in schools and universities; the activities of religious groups or participatory citizenship in promoting respect for others; knowledge and debate about justice; and a compulsory civil service programme for young people to encourage interaction with individuals of different ages, social backgrounds, and ethnicities.

The call for hope and personal commitment to social improvement that we find in the final part of Fforde's book closely echoes the dominant theme in the final part of Nussbaum's study. Although with a metatextual joke the narrator declares – as Swift's narrator did – the failure of the rabbits' (and Fforde's) satirical project, the emphasis is actually placed on its effectiveness: if not on everyone, at

[53] Fforde's words in Harper, "Interview".

[54] Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Monarchy of Fear. A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis* (New York: Simon&Schuster, 2018), 14.

[55] Nussbaum, *Fear*, 57.

least on those who, like Peter, admit their faults and recognise themselves among those beholders who, as Swift wrote, "do generally discover every body's Face but their Own" in the mirror of satire. "Sometimes it takes a non-human to say what it is to be a good human", Peter reflects towards the end. "In the ultimate hypocrisy, Smethwick and UKARP and 2LG and all the others that accused the rabbits of unsustainable overpopulation should have turned the accusations on themselves. The rabbits weren't the rabbits – *we were*" (301, my emphasis).

Furthermore, Peter becomes fully aware of his crucial role as narrator. Despite being invited to join the rabbits in their escape, he does not because he feels he has a moral duty to stay and tell future generations about the Event and its aftermath. "Someone has to tell this story" (302), he tells Connie, showing his faith in the emancipatory and even subversive power of storytelling in imagining alternative worlds and projects[56] – including utopian ones, such as that of the rabbits – and in offering itself as an invitation to resistance and trust in the future.[57] The words in the epigraph to the "Aftermath" section of the novel, referring to the publication of Peter's book, *Event Rabbits*, in 2028, are revealing in this regard: "as the years went by, the possibility of another event filled the imagination of all those who understood the quiet simplicity of the Rabbit Way. With each full moon, there is hope of another. We watch and we wait" (305).

In an article dedicated to memory and nostalgia, Gayle Greene writes about the proactive impulse of storytelling, describing how narrative "re-collects, re-members, repeats … in order for there to be an escape from repetition, in order for there to be change or progress".[58] Unlike nostalgia, the narrative reconstruction of past events is based on memory, whose purpose is to "look back in order to move forward and transform disabling fictions to enabling fictions" (298). For this reason, literature can be considered a tool for change as well as a means of moral and even general education. *The Constant Rabbit*, in particular, seems particularly well-suited to reaching, informing and stimulating even an audience that can be less attentive and engaged,[59] given its accurate reconstruction of the political climate and events before and after the Brexit referendum in an entertaining and moving guise.

Indeed, as mentioned at the outset, Fforde has always declared his love for literature and its transformative potential, especially when it comes to life through reading and readers.[60] Therefore, it is no surprise that the author opens *The Constant Rabbit*, seemingly so distant from his saga dedicated to literary classics (the Thursday Next series), with a chapter entitled "Speed Librarying", in which he satirises the UKARP government's 'Rural Library Strategic Group Vision Action Group' and their harmful policies regarding staff reductions in provincial libraries: one librarian for twelve libraries in the county, resulting in only six minutes of opening time twice a week for each library. The application of this rule (only a satirical exaggeration of a real trend) forces Peter and other inhabitants of Much Hemlock to hold a *Buchblitz* every two weeks to allow the whole community to borrow and return as many books as they wish.

Notably, these books include texts such as *Rabbit and Rabbitability* (a rewriting of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*) and other novels that emerged from the 'Rabbit Literature Retelling Project' of the early 1980s and escaped UKARP censorship. These are books that rabbits cherish, yet do not read to themselves because, as the narrator explains, "they saw books more as a performance than a solitary

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56 For an ample discussion of the awakening power of literature, see Carla Benedetti, *La letteratura ci salverà dall'estinzione* (Torino: Einaudi, 2021).

57 The novel could also be viewed as a 'critical dystopia' (albeit set more or less in the same years in which Fforde wrote it), due to the presence of a resistance group within it and to its openness to hope and change. See Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder: Westview Press 2000).

58 Gayle Greene, "Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory", *Signs*, 16.2 (1991), 291.

59 Fforde's fans are very diverse, but young adults certainly make up a significant portion of his readership.

60 See *www.jasperfforde.com*.

occupation", as something that "could be shared with others" (9). Not only do rabbits once again triumph over humans in their marked sense of community and sharing, but they also seem to have retained a conception of literature and books as something alive and dynamic. It is their vision that most faithfully reflects the words in the epigraph to the first chapter, which ironically describe the exact opposite of the current opinions: "Somebody once said that the library is actually the dominant life form on the planet. Humans simply exist as the reproductive means to achieve libraries" (1).

In this regard, and in conclusion, Lola Young's words in the preface to Eaglestone's text are worth mentioning. Noting how twentieth-century dystopias do not seem to have taught us much, especially with regard to our complicity with the system when we do not act with the necessary "robustness to address the situation", Young writes: "There's a role for literature – so adept at humanising big questions and creating emotional and cultural landscapes – in metaphorically poking us all in the ribs and urging us to start thinking critically and becoming politically active again".[61] These words seem to fit perfectly with the empathy-provoking scope of Fforde's novel, as well as with the writer's enduring faith in the ability of stories to stimulate salvific reflection by turning the tables, not least thanks to his joyful, carnivalesque irony.

[61] Lola Young, "Preface", in Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature*, xvii-xviii.