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John Lanchester's *The Wall*.
Dystopian Variations on the Literary Theme of Utopia

Abstract: This essay focuses on the relationship between utopia and dystopia in a recent British novel that deals with Brexit as an unnamed theme, albeit some of its preconditions can be easily identified in the fear of immigration generating the defensive device to which the title of the novel (*The Wall*, by John Lanchester, 2019) refers. Starting from Louis Marin's semiotic analysis (*Utopiques*) of More's *Utopia*, and recognizing in the paradoxical and imaginatively productive interplay between history and fiction a tool to evaluate the recent novel as a different kind of dystopia, the article develops several trajectories in the text (historically, linguistically, theatrically) that converge in conceptual and narrative blurring of the borders conventionally structured between the literary genres.

Keywords: *'The Wall'*, *John Lanchester*, *Brexit*, *utopia*, *dystopia*, *Shakespeare*

1. Introduction

Introducing us to the Wall, Joseph Kavanagh, the main character and first-person narrator of John Lanchester's homonymous novel, resorts to poetry. *The Wall*[1] is a climate fiction novel, set in a near-future world ravaged by rising sea levels and extreme weather. Lanchester imagines UK's response – constructing a massive concrete barrier and enforcing lethal border control, the so-called "Defendants",[2] among whom is the protagonist of the novel – as a reflection of climate-induced isolationism. Only poetry, though, seems to be able to provide a literary frame for the atemporal consistency of the barrier's dimension; and only through the outlines of concrete poetry will the reader be able to reach a coherent vision of its entity.

The choice of the genre of concrete poetry does embody – as will be discussed later – a double-edged kind of resistance to the object of narration, and allows us to reconsider the issue of the ideological threat of invasion by those whom the novel defines as the "Others". The word 'invasion' is already part of the conventional ready-made lexicon of keywords translating the social and economic anxiety mainly responsible for Brexit, whose entity lurks through the pages of Lanchester's novel, though not making it an ordinary item of the literary output sprouted from its aftermath (the newly-

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[1] John Lanchester, *The Wall* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019). Quotations all refer to this edition; references will henceforth be included in the text.

[2] The Defendants (soldiers serving the state on the Wall for two years) make up the social structure represented in the novel together with the Breeders, i.e. Defendants who ask for a switch in the social ladder so as to get involved in the re-peopling system, whose name echoes livestock more than parenting.

coined "Brexlit").[3] For the concept of the capitalized Others, we must observe that in *The Wall* they are implicitly racialised, though not explicitly described in ethnic terms. As a matter of fact, the UK has a long history of racialized "othering," especially in relation to immigration from former colonies.[4] *The Wall* reflects this by depicting the Others as faceless, voiceless intruders, echoing how migrants – particularly from Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East – are often dehumanized in British political and cultural discourse. In a transatlantic perspective, that *The Wall* requires aesthetically to be adopted – as my analysis will show in the following pages – we can also consider this socially marginalizing phenomenon according to the long-term study conducted by Tony Morrison about the notion of "otherizing", whose output, as the Afro-American novelist writes, ranges "well beyond American habits of race".[5]

By choosing concrete poetry as a literary medium for such a significant task, Lanchester imbues his writing with a slant on the meaningful political connections that have characterized its practice, mostly in England and Scotland, where, as Thomas Greg debates, concrete poetry was taken up simultaneously, its key period of political engagement spanning the 1950s to the 1970s, and "the style became inextricably bound up with questions of nationalism and national identity".[6] In the interplay between sound, word, and image, ideas were reflected of an anti-hierarchical system of artistic signs, that could be interpreted as well in a social context of the counter cultures' activity and impingement on post-war decades.

Besides, by making the Wall an entity not easily translatable into narrative expression, Lanchester draws dramatic attention to language and literary issues; and he does so by refocusing the dystopian novel, after Brexit has further reduced the chronological gap between the present of dystopian texts and the foreseen catastrophes in the narration of a doomed future – which used to be a theoretical benchmark for the definition of the genre in the global literary field. In Lanchester's novel, therefore, the Wall becomes also a relevant point in the spatial dimension as an alternative to the chronological leap into the future that dystopian discourse has traditionally privileged. The reader's perception is already estranged by the fact that, after a beginning moulded in more conventional ways of presenting the character, despite the content being marked with dystopian signs, the second chapter is solely focused on the Wall and in a completely different literary attitude. Prose cannot lead to an understanding of the main features of the Wall, i.e. its stability and lack of remarkable variations. In fact, the main obstacle in writing a narrative to make the reader see the Wall, is that "it's not a story, it's an image which is fixed-with-variations" (15). On the one hand, it visually translates the awfully weird thought of a wall circumscribing the UK in an almost perfect coincidence with its geographical

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[3] After claiming that "*The Wall* can be read as a literal Brexit", Raffaella Baccolini and Chiara Xausa specify that "British literature had already begun to imagine rebordering processes and to turn immigrant and refugees into subaltern subjects long before Brexit was even a possibility". Raffaella Baccolini and Chiara Xausa, "Narrating Differences through Space: John Lanchester's *The Wall*", *Rilune*, 18 (2024), 68-69. Kristian Shaw coined the term "brexlit" in *Brexit: British Literature and the European Project* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). On the way Brexit has intensified debates around Englishness and national identity, see also Dulcie Everitt, *BrexLit: The Problem of Englishness in Pre- and Post-Brexit Referendum Literature*, (Alresford: John Hunt Publishing, 2021), which combines historical, political, and literary analysis.

[4] An important contribution to the study of this history is the article by Sandra Vlasta and Dave Gunning, "From Commonwealth Literature to Black and Asian British Writers: The Long History of Migration and Literature in the United Kingdom", in Wiebke Sievers and Sandra Vasta, eds., *Immigrant and Ethnic-Minority Writers since 1945* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2018), 429-462.

[5] The focus on 'othering' in many of Morrison's essays stems from the absence of Afro-American writers from the literary canon that she denounces already in 1988, in her Tanner Lectures, accusing "scholars of 'lobotomizing' literary history and criticism in order to free them of black presence". See Nell Irvin Painter, "Long Divisions", *The New Republic* (11 October 2017), *www.newrepublic.com*.

[6] Thomas Greg, *Border Blurs: Concrete Poetry in England and Scotland* (Liverpool: Liverpool U.P., 2019), 2. As Greg argues, the movement reactivated early 20th-century modernist impulses while engaging with contemporary sociopolitical issues, making it both formally radical and politically resonant.

borders, projecting an outcome of ekphrastic possibilities in the texture of the novel; on the other hand, it sets up a verbal blueprint of the Wall that will be conjured up in other places of the text when its presence comes to the foreground of the plot.

2. Utopia and the Wall: An (Im)possible Dialogue?

With its anti-fictional description of the Wall, that draws from a literary subsidiary genre of poetic forms to make it visible, Lanchester's novel tackles a semiotic issue that also Thomas More's *Utopia* is entangled in, as the imaginary island depicted in the frontispiece of the text is presented as the object that will justify all the processes that make up textual representation. The same happens for the Wall, since the first four chapters of the novel revolve around its description, whose architectural severity frames and includes as well all the duties that are performed by the Defendants to protect its borders. Like More's *Utopia*, the Wall is something always present in the gaze of the viewer: "Of course you've seen it before, in real life, and in pictures, maybe even in your dreams" (5). And its representation aims to be complete and detailed, covering all its possible aspects: "The Wall is ten thousand kilometres long ... It is three metres wide at the top ... On the seaside it is usually five metres high; on the land the side the height varies according to the terrain" (14). To this portrait also other signifiers contribute, such as cold on the Wall, which is defined according to two different types. So the Wall, whose capital letter properly states its personification, is a character in itself right from the start. And its presentation shows the limits of prose, which stops short of any insight into the way you feel on the Wall. In this light, the Wall reflects the idea of utopic description: "It is because descriptive discourse constructs a representation in *Utopia* that it is exhaustive and lacks any residue".[7]

Lanchester oversteps even that measure in his search for a coherent tool to help the reader visualize this (only) textual object, aspiring, like *Utopia*, to render it simultaneously content and image in the text. The writer, thus, combines specimens of poetry shaped through the arrangement of printed words following the concrete poetic principle of composition, which shows itself as a metaphorical piling up of layers of bricks to obtain a wall, reaching its climax already in the first poem, where the word "concrete" is repeated five times on each of the six-line stanzas. The lack of linguistic resources to define and analyse reality echoes a broader dystopian tradition where language reflects emotional detachment, authoritarian control, and the erosion of meaning, aligning *The Wall* with such canonical texts as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Owing to the limited lexical range to describe the Wall, the poetic works entail an ironic reflection on the dullness numbing all the young men and women enrolled to defend its borders. So, the 'concrete' version of the Wall simultaneously becomes a resourceful literary way to visualize it as something that stands out of the narrative/descriptive word-flow, and a writer's surrender to the linguistic shortage deriving from any simply descriptive attempt in prose. Morin comes to help again in highlighting this paradox:

> This is the paradox of utopia as a *literary genre*: how can a text carry with it a figure, an almost *iconic* representation? How can it stage a historic contradiction by dissimulating, or more precisely, by playing it out in fiction? How, on the level of these larger literary units that are narratives and descriptions, can the letter, the printed type, be figured or figural? In other words, what new game is at work here in the text – yet another spatial game, by means of a metaphor that is not one of critical discourse about books but that is performed on the very letter of the text?[8]

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[7] Louis Marin, *Utopics: Spatial Play* [1973], trans. Robert A. Vollrath (Atlantic Heights, NJ: Humanities Press, 1984), 53.
[8] Marin, *Utopics*, 61, my emphasis.

Louis Marin's theory of utopian textuality, particularly his notion of the "spatial game" performed on the "very letter of the text", offers a compelling lens through which we can read *The Wall*. Lanchester's novel enacts a kind of spatial figuration not only through its central architectural symbol – the Wall itself – but also through its linguistic austerity and narrative repetition. The phrase "It's cold on the Wall", repeated at the novel's opening and close, becomes a typographic and semantic marker of stasis, enclosure, and affective flattening. In Marin's terms, the novel stages its contradictions – between safety and exclusion, identity and anonymity – not through overt ideological exposition but through the spatial and figural play of its language and structure.

How does *The Wall* play out in fiction the historic contradiction of a walled island? In the threatened arrival of Others. That is what happens in contrast to the narrator's reflection on how the constant prospect of action on the Wall is regularly denied. Defendants have been made aware that any possible action would imply troubles: "The only things that can happen are bad things. So you want nothing to happen" (43). The desire that nothing happens, which means that narrative would be stuck in the Wall, is immediately counterbalanced by a secret hope for an event to take place: "but wouldn't it be interesting if something did happen, if they came, if you had to fight for your life, if you had to do that thing you dread and train for, have nightmares about but maybe just are a tiny bit curious about too, and you have to kill or be killed?" (Ibid.).

Quite predictably within this suspended time, this 'something' happens in a dream, within the framework of an ekphrastic description. As a kind of poetry that shapes its printing in an effort to visualize its content, concrete poetry can be said to have a liminal connection with the rhetorical device of ekphrasis, in this specific case, ekphrastic fear: "And the utopian figures of the image and its textual rendering as transparent windows onto reality are supplanted by the notion of the image as a deceitful illusion, a magical technique that threatens to fixate the poet and the listeners."[9]

The fear and the knowledge of seeing the Wall as a fixed element in the landscape is raised in readers more effectively by the intermedial texture of the novel, that imbues the representation with the fear of witnessing this transition for real, a type of dystopian portrait that dovetails the political agenda in the Western world with more than a metaphorical trend. This characterizing intermedial texture reveals more thoroughly itself in a passage where the ekphrastic fear is triggered by a vision that hunts the narrator while he is on his first shift on the Wall. When all is quiet around him, Kavanagh gets more sensitive to the surrounding stillness, and starts hearing sounds that become patterns in his perception. This fearful mix of "whispering or singing or voices muttering not-quite-words" (39) takes on a more cinematic turn as Kavanagh starts interpreting the imaginary sounds as performed by a sinister choir of hooded figures that embody the Others, in what he describes as a hypnagogic moment – "the liminal in-betweenness consciousness just when you're falling asleep" (39) – typical of the spectator attitude in the Freudian interpretation of film audience. When he recalls that experience, Kavanagh gives full range to the ekphrastic fear as he remembers thinking that the figures "had leapt out of my imagination and were here on the Wall with us" (40).

The fearful threat of being overwhelmed by the Others will become reality later on in the story, and in a different setting, in Scotland, where some Defendants, Kavanagh included (he is randomly assigned to a section in Scotland, not by choice but as part of the national conscription system), are transferred as their squad "is considered to have done its fair share of the hard work of defending our frontiers" (141), the Captain says after announcing the news. The narrator goes back to concrete poetry again, as to confirm that nothing really changes within the Wall's perimeter: concrete/water/wind/sky, the words shrinking as a visual metaphor of the vanishing of any possible meaning of a different

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[9] William J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: Chicago U.P., 1994), 156.

thought about the Wall. Once in Scotland, an environment replete with nationalistic issues, where border-like questions are purposefully echoed in the re-use of concrete poetry, Kavanagh will change into one of the Others as a consequence of failing to stop people attempting to get over the Wall. With Hifa, the Defendant that shares with him the plan to become a Breeder, and other mates of the same squad, he gets arrested and locked up in a windowless barracks room on whose walls he figures to see damp patches turn into maps of an island, small, then big, and then a continent. The same process is reversible when the rain stops, bringing the narrator to make a comparison with a pastime: "A parlour-game version of the Change" (169). Besides the ironic stance of setting a parlour game in a prison-like barracks room – those games having been actually very popular among upper and middle classes in the United Kingdom and in the US in the Victorian Age – there is more at stake in the structure of feeling that the association brings forth. In the visual explanation of the aggravating climate crisis, which in the novel is called simply the Change, through changeable images on the wall, Lanchester succeeds in visually connecting the ecological upheaval with the Wall fortification on the erased shores of the British Isles and the Brexit's aftermath. Once again visualization is the main vehicle of awareness, this time enhancing a *mise en abyme,* where the small island is framed within the big one and then inside a continent, as to infer the repetition on a vast, transatlantic scale of the same pattern of walled isolation which the Western world has come to choose by misinterpreting utopia. The sudden awareness of Kavanagh after decoding the changeable lines as a philosophical 'world-image' reveals the ambiguous character of insularism between safety and entrapment, reflecting its paradoxical interpretation both as utopian or dystopian feature.[10]

Actually, the composite, abstract image outlining on the barrack walls can be as well remindful of the description of the island of *Utopia* as presented by More at the beginning of book II, "two hundred miles across in the middle part, where it is widest, and nowhere much narrower than this except towards the two ends, where it gradually tapers".[11] An island circumscribed by a larger section that makes it look similar to a crescent moon. An island whose similarity with the British Isles "was emphasized by Erasmus, who indicated that it was More's intention to base some of his designs upon his homeland",[12] albeit located by More himself in the New World. This is how the geographical and societal descriptions of the island are delivered through the mouth of Raphael Hythlodaeus, "a Portuguese traveler who had supposedly sailed with Amerigo Vespucci on his last three voyages to the New World".[13]

Besides geographical coincidences, a more relevant connection with a historical phenomenon can be also traced back in More's *Utopia.* This kind of nation-wide *closure* of a public territory ordered by the state, that is described in the first section of Lanchester's novel (entitled "The Wall" and consisting of the first twelve chapters), recalls the very procedure that has historically presided over the birth and stabilization of capitalism in England: the 'enclosure'. Its hideous consequences on British population are discussed in Book 1 of *Utopia*, when the travelling philosopher, talking about his experience and judgement of countries not well governed, among which he includes England, refers to an argument he had at dinner with an English lawyer who was surprised at the always increasing number of thieves in the country. Raphael's answer is a well-wrought out condemnation of enclosures:

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[10] "Indeed, anti-utopia has operated from the start in dialectic relationship with the form and content of Utopia; a dialectic, however, which has seen the final demise of one of the contenders ... In fact, the whole of the anti-utopian tradition can be read as a continuous retelling and rewriting of the archetype represented by More's *Utopia*". Vita Fortunati, "Utopia as a Literary Genre", in *Dictionary of Literary Utopias*, eds. Vita Fortunati and Raymond Trousson (Paris: Champion, 2000), 637. *The Wall* shows that the process is still in the making and the genre is more Protean and multifaceted than ever.

[11] Thomas More, *Utopia* [1516], ed. George M. Logan et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1995), 109.

[12] Bryan R. Goodey, "Mapping *Utopia*: A Comment on the Geography of Sir Thomas More", *Geographical Review*, 60.1 (January 1970), 19.

[13] Ibid., 16.

> As if forests and parks had swallowed up too little of the land, those worthy countrymen turn the best inhabited places into solitudes; for when an insatiable wretch, who is a plague to his country, resolves to enclose many thousand acres of ground, the owners, as well as tenants, are turned out of their possessions by trick or by main force, or, being wearied out by ill usage, they are forced to sell them ... And they must sell, almost for nothing, their household stuff, which could not bring them much money, even though they might stay for a buyer. When that little money is at an end (for it will be soon spent), what is left for them to do but either to steal, and so to be hanged (God knows how justly!), or to go about and beg?[14]

Born as a device to restructure the open-field system, the model was politically accepted and its evil connotation conceptually erased, so far that it gave rise to a sort of internal colonialism, either articulated as a state policy or "figured as an articulation of dissent at being subject to the imposition of seemingly distant and arbitrary state power".[15] What model of society is then the Wall protecting against any possible contamination and corruption from the outside? The Utopian perspective, visually and culturally fostered by the overlapping of natural borders with the Wall's perimeter, and by the threat of the sea, is gradually erased in the accurate analysis of its context. From this viewpoint, the land and its inhabitants, contained by the Wall, reveal to be a literary experiment of the perfect realization of such an internal colonialism as it has never been accounted for in the narration of the enclosure story; a story, as Carl J. Griffin states, full of gaps, where "politics of enclosure in the very era of parliamentary enclosure (and in the age of enclosure by dispossession overseas that became known as settler colonialism) remains remarkably little studied, the study of enclosure itself in many ways *enclosed* " (101, my emphasis).

This process was historically made possible through a committed degradation of the common people, the English 'commoner' in medieval terms, whose status was equalled to that of the savage in the colonies by using racial explanation and language apt to define the labourer as a racial 'other'. Focusing on the social structure of society in *The Wall*, we find this ideological pursuit paralleled in the division of people into specific categories of Defendants and Breeders. Moreover, the possibility of being rejected as an Other in case of any personal flaw in the defence of the walled borders highlights the racially degrading threat used by those in power as to the interchangeable status of the UK citizens.

3. Language Matters

Before being otherized, Kavanagh has a close encounter with a Help, a definition used in the novel for those Others who turned into 'normalized' slaves. Wondering what kind of journey they made as 'Others' to cross the border and get to England, he shows himself eager to know how the climatic watershed of his generation has been named in other cultures. Maybe unconsciously, the character is also questioning his own privileged status as a Defendant and predicting the fall 'off' the Wall of his own doomed persona:

> What happened to the world, we have a name for it, we call it the Change. But what I've been wondering is what other people call it, if there's a word for the same thing, or it's just something that happened. I hope you don't mind me asking, but is there a word for the Change, what we call the Change, in your language? (80-81)

The answer he receives by the Help is textually worded in a phonetic-like reproduction ("Coo-ee-shee-a"), that testifies to the unknown identity of the language. By using his communicator (a sort of post-Change mobile), after several unsuccessful tries, Kavanagh will find out that its meaning, in Swahili (*Kuishia)*, is "the ending" (82). The word sounds sinister as it adversely marks the first attempt at a transcultural exchange in the novel, foreshadowing a possibly negative turn in the plot once the Defendants will have resumed their places on the Wall. Since both crises are intertwined, "with climate change driving language endangerment",[16] the word 'ending' is an even more traumatic sign, involving the prospect of a definite deadline for imagining new possible futures, and not only on the 'other' side of the world. And the fact that its ultimate meaning is uttered in a colonial language has further consequences rightly as far as the subaltern relation of the Others to the Western World is concerned. Swahili is a *lingua franca* in the history of Africa and African languages and its spreading was fostered by the colonial enterprises, as demonstrated by Johannes Fabian who, according to Edward Said, "shows that European scholars, missionaries, soldiers, travellers, and administrators in Central Africa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century used Swahili as a mode of extending their domination over African territories and people".[17] If Lanchester belonged to an immigrant and ethnic-minority, we could rightly say that once again the Empire is writing back. Nevertheless, *The Wall* can be reasonably rated among an increasing output of migration narratives written by authors without migration experiences of their own.[18] This brings me to consider the linguistic exchange between Kavanagh and the Help as a feasible tool for referring, not only metaphorically, to the relevance of a "transnational social space",[19] that actually paves the way to a narrative twist meant to reshuffle the characters' positions within the frame of the migration discourse. Thus, the translation of the word acts as a foreseer of Kavanagh's further awareness of the absolute liability of a reversal of situation from the only apparently safe side of the Wall.

3.1 *War matters*

In a social dimension where trans-generational relations have been frozen by the unfathomable gap of the service on the Wall, which drew a line of *terra nullius* between sons and parents, the left chances for comradeship and union are represented by the temporary leave of Defendants, when the usage of time is not subdued to the schedule of alternate shifts on the Wall. The joyful experience of travelling home for the leave is described in total earnestness by the narrator, who highlights their lack of respect for other passengers: "We were loud, we were rude, we didn't care what anyone else thought or what they needed – this was our train" (50); which compensates for the gloomy experience of staying home with absent-minded and detached parents.[20] Looking more closely at their mode of sharing happiness during the journey, mostly drinking and singing, the climax is reached when they start "the all time Defender classic" (52) whose scant lyrics are reported in the text, just after defining it not so much a song as a chant or dirge:

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[16] Julia C. Fine et al., "Climate & Language: An Entangled Crisis", *Daedalus*, 152.3 (August 2023), 85.

[17] Edward Said's foreword to Johannes Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power: The Appropriation of Swahili in the Former Belgian Congo 1880-1938* (Berkley and Los Angeles: California U.P., 1986), vii.

[18] Although, in an interview with Lisa Allardice ("John Lanchester: 'Walls were coming down around the world – now they are springing up'", *The Guardian*, 11 January 2019, *www.theguardian.com*), Lanchester has defined himself a "well-disguised semi-immigrant" (African-born father and Irish mother), his standpoint is that of a white British writer.

[19] This theoretical approach is outlined in an article by Markus Hartner and Ralf Schneider, "British Novels of Migration and the Construction of Transnational Mental Spaces", *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 63.4 (2015), 411-432.

[20] "Lanchester's society is unable to deal with generational guilt, and the older generation is still able to watch nostalgically a program about surfing while their children must risk their lives guarding a country where 'there isn't a single beach left, anywhere in the world'". Baccolini and Xausa, "Narrating Differences", 76.

We're on the Wall because
We're on the Wall because
We're on the Wall because
We're on the Wall because [stamp three times, pause for three beats]
We're on the Wall ... (52)

With a little variation, the words are remindful of *We're here because we're here*, a song of World War One, that was used in 2016 as a modern theatrical memorial, when thousands of actors performed a pacific 'invasion' of soldiers, dressed in their historical attire, in stations, places of public transport and shopping centres throughout the UK.[21] This musical link to a poetic and performative device creates another form of disruptive comment on the absurdity of war in relation to a 'border' war whose patriotic defensive aim is set against the anti-historical frame of keeping the immigrants away from the borders they have the civic rights to cross. The Defendants sing it on the train because they are trapped in a rhetorical scheme of contrasting the invaders' arrival on their coast, but the hypnotic effect on their perception is a clear sign of the illogical claim of their service under a collective social trance. In the trajectory of the theme of loss of language through which I am perusing the text, this song adds an important component to the critical discourse, as the song is a substitute for dialogue and a claim for a different kind of story. Moreover, when defined more as a 'dirge', its foretelling death for the Defendants, as the most likely destiny of their service, is furtherly intertwined with the 2016 performance, where soldiers, being dead, could not speak to passers-by and their only social transaction was to hand out silently a visiting card with the name of the fallen and the date of death written on it.

Though a visually similar layout to the examples of concrete poetry that the narrator has shaped, in search for a better definition of the Wall, the lyrics of the war song reveal a deeper language crisis in war matters through the incompleteness of their clause. In the unfinished sentence there is a deafening echo of the meaninglessness of their duty on the Wall, whose awareness on the narrator's side brings to a bitter comment: "Loss, loss, there was just so much loss, in what had happened to us, in what the Captain had done, in what we had done to the world, in what we had done to each other and in what was happening to us" (172).

4. Happy Ending

Marin's above mentioned "historic contradiction", which is inherent in the conceptual idea of Utopia as a possible, alternative world, geographically presented within the historical frame of a malfunctioning one, can be now more purposefully expanded to include Brexit as a ghost-frame in *The Wall*, whereas the fictional adventures narrated about Defendant Kavanagh are definable under the debated but actually prolific dimension of "critical dystopias", introduced by Tom Moylan. In most of his critical theory, Moylan records a side-effect of academic studies on the genre of utopia. Their prejudicial pessimistic position on utopia's relevance in a literary system replete with dystopian texts has the cultural power of "delivering an inopportune underestimation of many dystopian outcomes – especially critical dystopian thought experiments exploring utopian enclaves and offering open endings to be resolved by readers – and missing the political impact that formal innovations can produce in readers".[22]

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[21] *We're Here Because We're Here* was an artwork in the form of an event, devised by Jeremy Deller, that occurred across the United Kingdom on 1 July 2016, the 100th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, which it commemorated.
[22] Tom Moylan, "The Necessity of Hope in Dystopian Times: A Critical Reflection", *Utopian Studies*, 31.1 (2020), 182.

As I am going to discuss in a more detailed fashion, *The Wall* is a novel often oscillating between utopia and dystopia, starting from the very site of the title whose menacing and uncomfortable space seems to darken the Defendants' existence on one side, though capable on the other, when they are arrested and forced to leave it because of their flaw in its defence, to resume a symbolic function of homeland.

Inside the barracks room where they are confined, the 'parlour-game' develops an earnest endeavour to understand the dynamics of the breach on the Wall. The scope of the argument, whose pivotal moment is centred on the unique circumstances of the breach, blurs the borders between theory and practice that usually applies to such matters ("when it's someone else, it's theory; when it's you, it's practice", 171), so much that the core of their talking on the topic takes on an abstract mode. The breach was made possible by the conspiracy of Defendants with Others, resulting in the fall of any dualistic opposition between the two categories, that the narrator translates in a visual simile: "It was like standing in front of a white-on-white painting and hearing the person next to you say that it was black-on-black" (170). This important transition in the philosophical and semiotic attitude of the narrator becomes crucial to his own becoming Other in the very next twist of plot. It introduces and accompanies as well a complex transition in the genre of the novel, where the thin line between dystopia and utopia is crossed on both sides for several times. In this regard, the frequent and recurring use of the word 'hope'[23] after leaving the Wall demands attention and works as a meaningful tool for the record of this literary inconstancy. In fact, the word marks a critical focus on the 'genre', being initially used to define an irresistible aspiration to get back under the "big safe all-embracing blanket of life behind the Wall" (172).

In his adventurous sea travels after being expelled from the Wall, and thrown out of its comfortably dystopian country,[24] Kavanagh starts perceiving a different perspective already at the moment of being put to sea on board a lifeboat, when the moving ship appears to him "like a floating cathedral in the pitch black of the ocean" (185). The image, vividly reminiscent of the ship in Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1856), where it "appeared like a white-washed monastery after a thunderstorm",[25] is filled with the same ambiguity of a world that cannot be read as black or white anymore.

When the ex-Defendants meet the floating community, living off the coast of an unapproachable island that was made of vertical stone, inhabited by people who "spoke a shared language which was not English" (206), Kavanagh's head gets filled with all kinds of alternative futures which now he is liable to consider as possible, even the one of being killed by merciless pirates. This ending is actually envisioned by the writer who stages a terrible attack by pirates whose only survivors will be Joseph and Hifa. If the floating community doesn't happen to be the 'utopian enclave' supposedly cherished by the reader (and by the writer), another utopic space is going to show up in the shape of a dismantled

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[23] Gregory Claeys well explains the late tendency in dystopian novels of "insisting on the necessity for happy endings, imagining deviant rebels who beat the system, implausibly rescuing their central characters, and providing 'hope' in the persistence of utopian enclaves, the birth of children and the like". Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History. A Study of Modern Despotism, Its Antecedentes, and Its Literary Diffractions* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2017), 489.

[24] As Ewa Rychter writes, "Britain in *The Wall* embodies the belief that although there is little merit in the way in which powerful countries structure the reality, manage the world economy and organize relations with postcolonial states, it is the only available and feasible way". Ewa Rychter, "Testing the Limits: Boundaries and Fault Lines of Dystopia in John Lanchester's *The Wall*", *Polilog. Studia Neofilologiczne*, 12 (2022), 294.

[25] Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*, in *The Piazza Tales* (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856), 113.

oil rig, an architectural symbol of the capitalistic crisis of fuel sources, often narrated in dystopian literature.[26]

As soon as they realize what kind of structure it is, they also notice that it may be impossible to get onto it: "The main deck was high, seventy metres or so above the water" (248). Though the enclave does not look immediately utopian, the kind of images presenting to the narrator's mind to interpret it, follows a pattern from the natural (a cloud) to the artificial (too square to be a natural object), that Kavanagh attributes to sea life and its power of affecting the reality of ordinary things. This impression accompanies him all the way through their wandering adrift on the sea after leaving the Wall. The appearance of the oil rig is set in this altered perception and the exhaustion and fatigue of rowing the lifeboat adds to the distorted sensitivity of the two characters (though the reader sees only through Kavanagh's eyes). Albeit unquoted, the inaccessible structure of the oil rig has a compelling resemblance, for its imagery, to the "baseless fabric of this vision" in Act IV, Scene I of *The Tempest*.[27] Not only *The Tempest*, but the whole of Shakespeare is materially conjured up through the finding of a paperback book of his collected plays, a postmodern reduction to commodity of the national symbol, often connected to the ideological discourse on borders that English literature has been weaving into the body politic of the country, most significantly from Shakespeare onward.[28]

Certainly, in the re-definition of UK borders fictitiously enacted in *The Wall* a crucial role is played on British communal imagination by the totems of heroic, romantic and nationalist accounts of British history. The novel, though, is centred on a geographical absence, i.e. of shores and beaches, which is a consequence of the climate change. Also in *The Tempest*, beaches are not the main setting and the action of the play is structured between the sea and the main land, like in *The Wall*. This 'absence' implies that there is no liminal and demarcating space between "the sea, which represents death, nature, chaos and the island, which represents life, culture, order".[29] The lack of shores as the point of entrance is a constant pattern in the novel, repeated in all the three settings: the British Isles, the floating community and the oil rig. This shared feature definitely contributes to blur the edges between utopia and dystopia so much that Kavanagh's deformed and nightmarish perception of reality when at sea ("life before this was real, but the sea was a dream, a delirium. An afterlife", 218), turns out be a rhetorical device used to subvert the conventional semantic architecture whereby "the fluidity of the sea is a metaphor for the characters' disillusionment with concrete borders as potential markers of security".[30]

In this light, the oil rig, having commercially dismissed its connection with colonial imperialism and capitalism, offers the two shipwrecked Defendants a space of renewal, filtered through the encounter made possible by a ladder magically appearing to let them reach the entrance hallway. When the only inhabitant of the rig shows up, no words are spoken and, instead of language, he sets up theatricals using a cardboard box and pieces of paper. After an initial bewilderment, Kavanagh realizes

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[26] *Oil!* by Upton Sinclair (1927), *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975) by Edward Abbey, and *Solar* (2010) by Ian McEwan stand as some of the most influential and critically recognized contributions to the genre; Heidi C. M. Scott, *Fuel: An Ecocritical History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018) is a foundational work in the energy humanities. A chapter of my book *The Great Report: Incursioni tra giornalismo e letteratura* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2017) is focused on a quite recent British novel, dealing with oil within a fictional journalistic inquiry: "L'inchiostro e il petrolio. Il Great Report in *Satin Island* di Tom McCarthy", 77-97.

[27] William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, in Stephen Greenblatt, ed., *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 3095.

[28] According to Kirsten Sandrock, whose critical essay can be taken as paramount of a certain recent scholar trajectory, "the book serves as a reminder of a past that is no longer available to the figures who are outcast from their home society. Shakespeare's collected works come to embody a relic of a state of Britishness that is coming to an end". Kirsten Sandrock, "Border Temporalities, Climate Mobility, and Shakespeare in John Lanchester's *The Wall*", *Journal of Modern Literature*, 43.3 (Spring 2020), 175.

[29] Christoph Singer, *Sea Change: The Shore from Shakespeare to Banville* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014), 135.

[30] Sandrock, "Border Temporalities", 177.

what the hermit's intent is: "he had created a version of theatre or television for himself and he moved around the pieces to tell stories" (271). There is enough textual evidence, both in the definition of the hermit and in the description of his tricks, to see in the character a postmodern version of Prospero: it is the hermit's decision to drop the ladder for the two Defendants, inadvertently disregarding their legal sentence to death, and also to avoid any kind of intervention for other disliked visitors who passed by the rig, as he represents by moving the pieces of paper in and out of the box.

The use of a system of signs symbolically related to theatre, such as the game of shifting pieces of papers in the cardboard box, is the reworking of Shakespeare's idea of theatre and performance as a new vehicle to express meaning and create a new storytelling. The paperback edition of the Bard's works, then, takes on a different meaning, not anymore a surrogate for English nationalism but the token of a continuous search for the stage's spatial redefinition. Here the abstract, utopic space of humanistic ideas can find a new place, stripping down Shakespeare's idea of theatre to its abstract core to find in *The Tempest* the pioneering piece – though textually unacknowledged – whence the new utopia comes, surfacing again from the layers of capitalized market commodity that the paperback book has become.

A theatre-shaped form of discourse was also employed by More to make his book more credible and self-asserting. The text is originated by an image whose existence, both real and imaginary, is retrieved and presented through the staging of a dialogue between More, Raphael and Peter. Raphael, being the only one to have seen and visited Utopia, intertwines his voice of criticism towards the British institution with his voice of illustrator of Utopia in relation to their costumes and practices. In this second function, he "produces in Utopia the anecdotes and narrative illustrations that constituted the latent reversed history within the real history".[31] For being a novel where dialogue is pragmatically set aside in favour of a descriptive choice that symbolically struggles with the action-ridden plot, *The Wall* has also bits of conversation whose function is to shed light on some insightful ripples of cultural depth. Another apparently nationalist reference to British literary heritage is William Wordsworth, whose name occurs when six Defendants, including Kavanagh and Hifa, decide to have a trip together to the Lake District. The reasons for the destination seem to confirm the nationalist charm of a poetical territorial pride, sounding as captions from a touristic leaflet: "with attractive landscape; with nice pubs; with good walking but not too strenuous" (68). Wordsworth's name, besides, appears on the cover of a paperback copy of selected poems, pulled out of his bag by Hughes to show his plan of going to college and become a university teacher after the end of his service on the Wall. The inability on Kavanagh's side to answer about his future prospects, however, starts the unfolding of an inner debate in his mind between his aspiration to become a member of the elite – and thus have the privilege to drive one of the beautiful planes he had been spotting from the ground since he was a child – and his recent realization, after spending time with the other Defendants: "I was more like the other Defendants than I was unlike them" (74). The implicit theatrical attitude in the representation of this inner monologue is aimed again to a reshuffling of utopian and dystopian categories of thought.

Kavanagh also displays a double voice in the novel, showing simultaneously a critical view of Britain and its walled policy and a nostalgic feeling for the lost safety, facing the perils of the sea. But it is in the sea, actually, that his incentive to hope finds relief when he and Hifa see the representation of their access to the oil rig as a stage for a newly-imagined Utopia, and act as a theatre chorus in appreciating the utopian enclave of a possible future community.

The final invitation to re-start the story from the beginning – "It's cold on the Wall" – endows the text with a mythical dimension which lies beneath the dystopian narrative. The cardboard box theatre

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[31] Marin, *Utopics*, 73.

combines Shakespeare's innovative strategies used in *The Tempest*, which rewrote the canon,[32] with the experimental forms in the most recent dystopian texts, recognizing, at the same time, the novel's civic and political value as a utopia within a dystopia. In this way, *The Wall* transcends its dystopian scaffolding to become a palimpsest of literary and political imagination. By looping its narrative and invoking theatrical forms that echo Shakespeare's radical reconfigurations, Lanchester not only critiques the ecological and geopolitical anxieties of our time but also gestures toward the possibility of renewal. The novel's recursive structure and symbolic staging invite readers to confront the coldness of isolation while imagining the warmth of collective re-enchantment – a utopia glimpsed through the cracks of dystopia.

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[32] "The placement of *The Tempest* in Shakespeare's oeuvre is as puzzling as the location of Prospero's island on the map of the world old or new". Marcell Gellért, "'The Baseless Fabric of This Vision': The Poetics of Space in *The Tempest*", *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica*, 4.1 (2012), 36.