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Brexlit: Redefining Borders

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Brexlit: Redefining Borders. An Introduction[1]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[4] Hall, "Gramsci", Ibidem.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Fictional Response to Brexit

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[23] Shaw, *Brexlit*, viii.

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

[25] Ibid., 155-156.

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

3. Brexit on Stage

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Disuniting the Nation, Disuniting the Family

AURELIANA NATALE

Narratives of Separation.
Literary Depictions of Brexit Through the Divorce Metaphor

Abstract: Throughout English history, major political and social ruptures have been framed through the metaphor of divorce. This metaphor has gained renewed prominence in representations of Brexit, circulating in journalistic and bureaucratic discourse (Buckledee 2018; Koller et al, 2019) as well as in fiction and television. Literary narratives often portray Brexit as a marital breakdown marked by loss, betrayal, and identity renegotiation, foregrounding its psychological and cultural dimensions beyond political or economic analysis (Milizia and Spinzi 2020). By examining texts such as Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2019) and Nick Hornby's *State of the Union: A Marriage in Ten Parts* (2019), this research explores how the divorce metaphor conveys the emotional and social consequences of the UK's separation from the EU. It argues that these works participate in a broader literary tradition that uses intimate relationships to articulate national crises and historical turning points (Eaglestone 2018; Shaw 2021).

Keywords: *Brexit*, *divorce metaphor*, *Brexlit*, *Middle England*, *Jonathan Coe*

1. The Rhetoric of Brexit

The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union – or more precisely, the discourse surrounding this event – has served as fertile ground for linguistic innovation and rhetorical strategy. Notably, the term that has come to universally define this event, "Brexit", is itself a neologism coined specifically for the occasion. Formed through a blend of 'Britain' and 'Exit', this single word encapsulates one of the most politically, economically, and socially intricate processes in international history over the past century. Such linguistic condensation inevitably risks oversimplification but it simultaneously possesses significant communicative power.

At least until the outcome of the June 2016 referendum, discourse on Brexit was primarily framed as a debate between its proponents and opponents. As a result, lexical choices and rhetorical strategies functioned not merely as descriptive and informative tools but also as performative instruments. Within this context, metaphor emerged as a pervasive rhetorical device in the public debate on Brexit, owing to its well-documented communicative and persuasive efficacy. Jonathan Charteris-Black, who has devoted a monograph to the subject, explicitly underscores this point: "Metaphors have dominated thought about 'Brexit' in the deliberations of politicians and media discussions, and they have influenced the private reflections of individuals".[1]

Moreover, as Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Blending Theory have long demonstrated, certain forms of metaphorical language possess the ability to shape public perception of events. In particular, CMT, developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson,[2] posits that metaphors are not merely rhetorical embellishments but structures that change the way we understand and reason about experience. This phenomenon becomes especially evident in contexts such as the Brexit referendum

[1] Jonathan Charteris-Black, *Metaphors of Brexit: No Cherries on the Cake?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 1.
[2] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

where a binary choice must be framed, narrated, and ultimately swayed. It is thus likely no coincidence that the referendum campaign witnessed a shift in political language – especially among pro-Brexit politicians – from a predominantly institutional register to one increasingly hybridized with the lexicon and syntax of media and social media.

This change in political language could also be seen in the metaphors employed. A notable example was the growing focus on the idea of control. Supporters of the Leave campaign argued that the United Kingdom had ceded excessive sovereignty to Brussels and that leaving the European Union would allow the country to 'take back control'. This loss of control was frequently conveyed through the metaphor of a car driven by an external entity, relegating the UK to the backseat. Similarly, the EU's free movement policies were often criticised through expressions like 'flocking' and 'swarming' thus evoking natural disasters such as floodgates and animal invasions which of course carry negative connotations.

These examples clearly demonstrate how metaphor functioned as a strategic tool in shaping the Brexit discourse, enhancing its expressiveness and, consequently, its persuasive impact. This was achieved by rendering complex and abstract concepts – such as treaties, national sovereignty, and international jurisdictions – into simple, concrete images suited for brief and immediate communication, capable of eliciting strong reactions. Notably, this use of metaphor redefines its traditional role as conceived in classical rhetoric. In fact, in ancient rhetorical theory, metaphor was a device that could embellish the message and even introduce an element of surprise by offering an unexpected perspective on something familiar. In the Brexit discourse, as seen, metaphor has a very different function. It does not embellish or estrange the message but makes it more comprehensible and accessible for pragmatic ends: to persuade, and ultimately to mobilize people.

This also explains why so many war metaphors appeared in the Brexit debate. Framing an issue in terms of war inherently serves as a call to action against a perceived common adversary. Moreover, within the specific cultural and historical context of the United Kingdom, the use of war-related imagery evokes a collective memory deeply shaped by the major conflicts of the twentieth century. As Robert Eaglestone, who has examined Brexit discourse through the lens of affect theory, observes:

> The War is a kind of signifier for a rooted Britishness or even Englishness: interwoven with Empire and race, certainly, and different perhaps in the four nations of the UK, but also a marker of nationality. It stands also for bearing up to hard times, keeping calm and crying on and as a way of overcoming ('Britain can take it!'). … This affective-memory of the War, then, is a geological layer running under British cultural life: mostly unseen, it emerges in outcrops and shapes the surface of the land above it.[3]

The primary historical reference, as expected, is to the World Wars – particularly the Second World War – during which the British people's highest virtues – unity, resilience, sacrifice, and pride – were believed to have played a decisive role in securing the final victory. From this perspective, framing Brexit in terms of war allowed, according to Eaglestone, for an appeal to a historical period marked by "a sense of national unity, deep comradeship across classes and, within the UK, national identities, when 'none was for a party' and 'all were for the state'" (97). More broadly, however, it is not solely the war metaphor itself that fulfils an emotional function, but rather the entire semantic field of warfare, which provides a vast reservoir of metaphorical imagery accessible to both sides of the debate. As Charteris-Black observes: "Supporters of Leave found evidence of 'collaborators,'

[3] Robert Eaglestone, "Cruel Nostalgia and the Memory of the Second World War", in Robert Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (London: Routledge, 2018), 97.

'saboteurs,' or 'traitors' who were committing 'treason,' while the Remain 'side' referred to their opponents as 'wolves in sheep's clothing'".[4]

However, the use of metaphors in the Brexit discourse – and, consequently, the selection of specific metaphorical frameworks – was not confined exclusively to the political debate in its strictest sense, namely, the speeches delivered by political figures and their supporters during the referendum campaign. As a matter of fact metaphorical language related to Brexit extends beyond the political sphere. It can be found in the broader public debate – particularly in media discourse – and, perhaps even more significantly, in institutional communication and narrative. As expected, the tone, complexity, and function of metaphors vary considerably across these different contexts, as do their intended purposes. Beyond political rallies, interviews, and online propaganda, metaphor assumes a less polarizing and mobilizing role, instead shifting toward an explanatory or reflective function. In such cases, the objective is no longer to emotionally charge the discourse to influence outcomes but rather to interpret the event through an alternative linguistic framework whether to foster discussion or even to satirize its nature. In the specific case of Brexit, one metaphor has been particularly instrumental in fulfilling this role, to the extent that its ubiquity renders it a defining feature of the discourse. As a cognitive mechanism, it facilitates both internal coherence within individual texts (intratextual coherence) and continuity across multiple texts (intertextual coherence).[5] This metaphor, as may already be apparent, is that of divorce.

2. Metaphors of Separation

The divorce metaphor is, unsurprisingly, intrinsically linked to the marriage metaphor, to the extent that it is appropriate to speak of a "marriage and divorce frame".[6] This framing of Brexit extends beyond the immediate context of the 2016 referendum, both temporally and conceptually. Indeed, the very structure of the European Union lends itself to metaphorical discourse centred on the image of a family, one that nations can join through marriage and leave through divorce. Sanja Berberović and Mersina Mujagić identify family as one of the most prominent conceptual metaphors employed in EU discourse to frame "the unity of the EU, as well as the complicated relationships between the member states, and their relationship with the EU institutions".[7] Theoretically, then, the marriage and divorce frame could be applied to any EU member state. However, even beyond the specific case of Brexit, it is difficult to deny that this frame is particularly well-suited to describing the UK-EU relationship, a relationship historically characterized by cycles of rapprochement and withdrawal, periods of strong alignment, and moments of tension and divergence. In this sense, the divorce metaphor serves, as Denise Milizia and Cinzia Giacinta Spinzi suggest, as "a mini-narrative or metaphor scenario that encapsulates the complex dynamics of nearly 45 years of fraught relations between the EU and the UK".[8] Expanding this perspective both chronologically and thematically, one might argue that the divorce metaphor functions as a broader narrative framework, capable of capturing not only Brexit but also other pivotal moments in British history. A particularly striking example of this is found in a sketch by the Irish comedy trio Foil Arms and Hog, which, in just a few lines, demonstrates the enduring efficacy of the divorce metaphor when viewed from a wider historical and geographical lens.

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[4] Charteris-Black, *Metaphors*, 1.

[5] Zoltan Kövecses, *Metaphor in Culture: Universality and Variation* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2005).

[6] Charteris-Black, *Metaphors*, 233.

[7] Sanja Berberović and Mersina Mujagić, "A Marriage of Convenience or an Amicable Divorce: Metaphorical Blends in the Debates on Brexit", *ExELL,* 5.1 (October 2017), 9.

[8] Denise Milizia and Cinzia Giacinta Spinzi, "When a Relationship Ends There Can Be No Turning Back: The Divorce Metaphor in the Brexit Discourse", *Lingue e Linguaggi*, 34 (2020), 158.

"Please baby you have to give me a second chance."
"I've already said no. It's over."
"You've never even given me a proper reason."
"You're too controlling."
"I ask your opinion before I do anything."
"You don't respect my boundaries."
"We both agreed on an open relationship."
"Look, I feel like I'm losing my identity."
"Now you're just blaming me for your personal problems."
"All I know is that I'm unhappy and I need to be on my own for a while."
"So are you off the market?"
"Well I might start a new relationship."
"Oh, just like this huh?"
"Yes, why not?"
"Well maybe you're just not as hot as you think you are, eh?"
"Well, there's that American guy."
"Ah! He is not interested, he is only into himself."
"Well! Then there's India!"
"Your ex-boyfriend seriously? That was a toxic relationship! All you did was take, take take…and you call ME controlling?"
"I'm leaving! I've put your stuff in boxes on the table".[9]

As one can easily guess, the two voices in the sketch stand for the European Union and the United Kingdom, with the former questioning the latter about its decision to leave. However, the conversation between the two ex-spouses extends beyond Europe, introducing other nations – such as the United States and India – depicted as former partners whose relationships with the UK were similarly severed. The sketch then continues with a quarrel about the custody of Northern Ireland and the emergence of Scotland, eager to assert its long-sought independence.

In this context, the divorce metaphor functions as a narrative mechanism that reflects patterns that can be seen both in personal and international relations: the attribution of blame, the search for justification, the planning of an exit strategy that works for everyone, the reconstruction of an identity that appears destabilized through its interaction with the other. These dynamics, as is clear, have recurred throughout the complex history of the United Kingdom, a history that, in many respects, has been shaped by and subsequently narrated through actual divorces.[10]

The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, formalized following the June 2016 referendum, thus represents merely the latest – and, for now, the most significant – turning point in this long and intricate historical trajectory to have been framed through the divorce metaphor. But how has this event been narrated? And by whom?

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[9] Foil Arms and Hog, "Brexit: The Divorce" (2018), *www.youtube.com*.

[10] One might consider the divorce of Henry VIII from Catherine of Aragon, which marked a rupture in Western Christianity and led to the establishment of the Anglican Church, or that of Edward VIII, which altered the line of succession to the British throne, or even the divorce between Charles and Diana, which marked the entry of the media into the history of the British monarchy. Historically, marriages, particularly in earlier periods, have served as strategic political instruments designed to unite noble houses, increase wealth, establish political balances between nations, and strengthen ruling parties or states. It is not coincidental, therefore, that the two most prominent monarchs named Elizabeth in English history – Elizabeth I and Elizabeth II – are both associated with significant matrimonial considerations. Elizabeth I's decision to remain unmarried, thereby avoiding political entanglements with foreign powers, contributed to the consolidation of a distinct British identity. In contrast, Elizabeth II, throughout her prolonged reign, endeavoured to associate the stability of the monarchy with the stability of the royal family, a relationship that was tested by a series of divorces within the family itself.

First and foremost, it is essential to clarify a temporal aspect: the presence and frequency of the divorce metaphor in Brexit discourse are predominantly concentrated in the period following the referendum outcome. The reason for this is readily apparent: framing Brexit in terms of divorce becomes both more meaningful and more effective once the separation has been formally set in motion. Although divorce is undoubtedly a process that unfolds over time, it only truly begins once a definitive decision has been made.

Thus, in most cases, the divorce metaphor in Brexit discourse is employed not to shape or influence the debate preceding the vote but rather to describe the decision *post factum* and the challenges that arise from that point onward. Its primary function is to narrate and analyse the choice ratified by the referendum – its motivations and its consequences – rather than to intervene in the discourse that preceded it. It is no coincidence that quantitative studies have identified the divorce metaphor primarily within traditional media, with its prevalence increasing in the weeks and months following June 23, 2016. Between 2016 and 2018, it is estimated that more than 3,000 newspaper articles incorporated the divorce metaphor in their headlines.[11] This trend is unsurprising, given that, as is well known, newspaper headlines must serve both as a concise summary of the underlying text and, more importantly, as a device to capture the reader's attention. In this regard, the divorce metaphor immediately activates a set of emotional associations linked to familiar personal dynamics: "Nowhere are our intuitions aroused more than when we are commenting on close friends who are getting divorced, and usually sides are taken, and moral judgments made as to the guilty party".[12]

Analysing the use of the divorce metaphor in traditional media reveals a landscape that is, as one might expect, far from uniform in meaning or intent. Milizia and Spinzi, who examined the metaphor's deployment across a corpus of newspapers and magazines with differing political orientations, conclude that "the DIVORCE metaphor has turned out to be malleable and moldable, according to the different perspectives and contexts: going through a separation can be a disaster and a tragedy, a humiliation, yet ending a marriage and taking a different path can be emotionally therapeutic".[13] Nevertheless, despite this apparent flexibility, their study identifies a prevailing tendency toward a negative connotation. In many cases, the divorce metaphor has been employed to highlight the more challenging and undesirable consequences of separation – both in practical and emotional terms – and has consequently appeared more frequently in pro-European newspapers. Within this framing, Brexit is often portrayed as an economically precarious divorce, given the disparity between the partners, or as a divorce characterized by tension and resentment, described as "stressful" and "riven by bad feelings on both sides".[14]

This predominantly negative interpretation is of course based on editorial choices but it is also, in some ways, inherent to the metaphor itself: divorce can be framed as a form of liberation or a reclamation of autonomy but it is more commonly associated with the breakdown of a relationship, an image that evokes emotions often far from positive. This may also explain why the metaphor appears significantly less frequently in the speeches of politicians directly involved in Brexit. Given its problematic and potentially painful undertones, the divorce metaphor is ill-suited to political rhetoric, which tends to maintain an optimistic and forward-looking tone. This is why then-Prime Minister Theresa May explicitly rejected it in an address to Parliament: "I prefer not to use the term of divorce

[11] Charteris-Black, *Metaphors*, 251.
[12] Ibid., 234.
[13] Milizia and Spinzi, "When a Relationship Ends There Can Be No Turning Back", 160.
[14] Ibid., 154.

from the European Union because very often when people get divorced they don't have a very good relationship afterwards".[15]

This rejection is particularly revealing of the metaphor's pervasiveness, an influence further confirmed by media discussions that, after having contributed significantly to its widespread adoption, later called for its abandonment due to overuse. As one BBC commentary observed, the metaphor had been "stretched to unsustainable lengths, with discussion about who gets to divide the music collection and keep the children and so on".[16] This trajectory is not uncommon; indeed, many metaphors lose their rhetorical force in direct proportion to their repetition, ultimately becoming what George Orwell termed "dying metaphors" that is "worn-out metaphors which have lost all evocative power and are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves".[17]

However, there is one domain in which the Brexit-divorce metaphor has retained a certain vitality despite the passage of time: fiction writing. Its continued relevance within the literary field is exemplified by the emergence of a specific literary genre dedicated to Brexit, commonly referred to as "Brexlit". As defined by Kristian Shaw, Brexlit encompasses "fictions that either directly respond or imaginatively allude to Britain's exit from the EU, or engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain's withdrawal".[18]

Almost ten years after the referendum, this body of work includes numerous narratives in which the divorce metaphor continues to resurface, underscoring its enduring capacity to frame and interpret the complexities of Brexit.

However, an essential distinction must be drawn at this juncture. Up to this point, the divorce metaphor has primarily functioned as a figure of speech, adhering to the somewhat reductive yet effective definition of a compressed simile*:* Brexit is like a divorce. In literary fiction, however, its role has changed and its meaning has grown. From a convenient analogy, the divorce metaphor has become an interpretative framework. Many novels and stories that fall under the label "Brexlit" depict relational tensions between characters – often culminating in actual divorce – whose underlying dynamics and motivations can be read as reflective of the broader sociopolitical forces that shaped Brexit itself.

In this context, the divorce metaphor becomes richer and more layered, moving beyond a simple comparison to take on an almost allegorical quality. It is no longer just a single image but a framework that gathers different narrative elements, turning the whole story into a kind of parallel interpretative space. A particularly illustrative example of this is *State of the Union: A Marriage in Ten Parts* (2019), a miniseries written by Nick Hornby and directed by Stephen Frears. As its title suggests, the work intertwines the political and social dimensions (*State of the Union*) with the emotional and personal (*A Marriage*), effectively using the intimate struggles of a couple as a lens through which to explore the complexities of Brexit. The story follows Tom and Louise, a married couple trying to save their relationship through therapy. But instead of showing the therapy sessions themselves, the series focuses on the brief moments before them, as they meet in a pub to talk about what went wrong and whether they can still repair what's left. Although Brexit is not the central theme of the story, it serves as an ever-present subtext. At times, it is explicitly invoked as a point of comparison: "When you think about it [therapy], it's like Brexit. There are going to be two years of talks before we even agree on

[15] Steven Pool, "Don't Say Divorce, Say Special Relationship: The Thorny Language of Brexit", *The Guardian* (7 April 2017), *www.theguardian.com*.
[16] James Landale, "Brexit Means What? Time for The Metaphors to Stop", BBC (2017), *www.bbc.com*.
[17] George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language", in G. Orwell, *Essays* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2002), 957.
[18] Kristian Shaw, "Brexlit", in Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature*, 15.

what the issues are".[19] More often, however, Brexit operates as a conceptual framework, subtly shaping the ways in which the couple's interactions can be interpreted.

During their pre-therapy encounters, Tom and Louise move back and forth between argument and reconciliation – between blame, regret, and brief flashes of connection. They keep asking themselves whether separation is inevitable or if there is still something left to save. At the heart of their crisis is a failure to communicate: neither of them can truly understand what the other wants or needs. This communicative impasse culminates in a moment of both comedic and symbolic significance: the discovery that they voted differently in the 2016 referendum. Louise, who supported Remain, sips a glass of Chardonnay – a drink evocative of a European sensibility – while Tom, who voted Leave, clings to his traditional English beer. In this charged juxtaposition, the couple's dynamic emerges as a microcosm of Brexit itself, offering a narrative vehicle through which its underlying tensions and contradictions can be explored.

It is thus impossible to draw a clear line between the personal and the political: the couple's intimate conversations in the foreground are inseparably linked to the broader socio-political landscape in the background. In its own way – each episode lasting a mere ten minutes – *State of the Union* exemplifies how fiction has adopted and materialized the Brexit-divorce metaphor, transforming it from a rhetorical device into a fully realized narrative structure. This, however, is not an isolated case. A closer examination of contemporary novels reveals even more intricate and problematic manifestations of this metaphor.

3. A Narrative of Separation: Jonathan Coe's *Middle England*

If in *State of the Union* the story unfolds around a pub table, where husband and wife discuss an impending divorce – while the one between the EU and the United Kingdom has already taken place – in Jonathan Coe's novel *Middle England*, the setting both expands and narrows at the same time. On one hand, *Middle England* weaves together multiple stories of multiple characters that take place before, during, and after Brexit, thus broadening and complicating the overall discourse. On the other hand, Coe focuses specifically on England – or perhaps more precisely, on a part of England – reducing Brexit to a more English than British issue. The title, in this regard, is emblematic on multiple levels. Middle England is a term that can have various meanings: geographical (the central region of England, where much of the novel is set), socio-economic (the middle class living in non-heavily urbanized areas), and electoral (a group of voters who are not firmly affiliated with a specific political party, whose vote can fluctuate significantly from one election to another, sometimes proving decisive). From the very title, then, Middle England seems to declare a specific interest in a particular part of England and to hint at an intention that is not only narrative but also, in some way, sociological. This is further confirmed by the structure of the text.

The novel is structured into three distinct sections – *Merrie England*, *Deep England*, and *Old England* – which together span nearly a decade, from April 2010 to September 2018. This period is characterized by profound shifts in English identity, explored through the experiences of the Trotter family – already the protagonists of Coe's earlier novels, *The Rotters' Club* (2001) and *The Closed Circle* (2004) – alongside their extended social and professional circles. By adopting a broad chronological framework and following a wide range of characters – varying in socio-economic status, political affiliations, and generational perspectives – Coe paints a vivid picture of English society in the second decade of the twenty-first century. In doing so, *Middle England* situates itself within the

[19] Nick Hornby, *State of the Union: A Marriage in Ten Parts* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 23.

tradition of the state-of-the-nation novel, a genre that explores the socio-political and cultural dynamics of its time.

At this juncture, it hardly needs to be stated that the most defining historical event within the novel's temporal scope – the one that most starkly exposes the ideological and cultural fractures of contemporary Britain – is Brexit. Through its multifaceted structure, *Middle England* enables Coe to depict how individuals of different backgrounds, ages, and social positions both contributed to and were shaped by the radical political transformations of recent years, of which Brexit emerges as both a symptom and a catalyst. A significant example of this dynamic appears in the scene set during the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics. That moment of national celebration, designed to showcase unity and pride, becomes, in Coe's hands, a sort of prism through which the characters reveal their divergent perceptions of British identity. Coe builds the scene thorough a series of shifting perspectives, offering a fragmented, almost cinematic portrayal of how individuals interpret the same event through the lens of their cultural backgrounds, political orientations, and social positions.

The novel's characters are watching the ceremony on television and each is deriving from it emotions and impressions that frequently stand in contrast to one another. Doug Anderton, a left-wing journalist with little affinity for nationalist sentiment, for instance, perceives "an emotion he hadn't experienced for years – had never really experienced at all, perhaps, having grown up in a household where all expressions of patriotism had been considered suspect: national pride. Yes, why not come straight out and admit it, at this moment he felt proud, proud to be British".[20]

Doug's unexpected sense of national pride is, in a way, shared by Sophie Potter, a young university researcher and advocate of multiculturalism, who initially watches the event with scepticism but gradually becomes enthralled by its grandeur and spectacle, capable of winning over even the Queen:

> the Queen of fucking England, to take part in a film for the Olympic opening ceremony, and in fact it was even better than that, because the next thing that happened was that she was following Bond out of the palace and they were getting into a helicopter together, and then the helicopter took off and it was filmed rising high above Buckingham Palace and high above London, and soon afterwards it was approaching the Olympic stadium and then you had the greatest joke of all, the greatest stroke of genius, because they made it look as though the Queen and James Bond were jumping out of the helicopter together and parachuting into the stadium. (133)

However, two characters don't share these positive reactions. Helena Coleman and Colin Trotter – both, notably, belonging to an older generation – express appreciation for the segments of the ceremony that celebrate rural and industrial England but react with unease and indignation to the inclusion of elements they perceive as incongruous with the nation's cultural identity. Helena Coleman, the mother-in-law of Sophie Potter, is initially enthralled by "scenes of rural life being acted out in the arena"; however, upon seeing Black actors portraying Victorian industrialists, she becomes exasperated: "Why did they have to do that? Why? Did people have no respect for history anymore?" (131). Similarly, Colin Trotter is irritated by references "to the arrival of HMS Windrush, and Britain's first Jamaican immigrants", prompting him to mutter about "the bloody political correctness brigade" (132). In doing so, Coleman and Trotter clearly embody the discontent of a segment of the country toward cosmopolitanism. The final perspective in this series of mental snapshots is entrusted to Benjamin Trotter, a writer who, in apparent contrast to the diverse reactions preceding his own, perceives in the spectacle an image of England as "a country at ease with itself". This impression arises from a convergence of collective unity and personal nostalgia:

[20] Jonathan Coe, *Middle England* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 132. Further quotations from the novel will henceforth be included in parentheses in the text.

> the thought that so many millions of disparate people had been united, drawn together by a television broadcast, made him think of his childhood again, and made him smile. All was well. And the river seemed to agree with him: the river that was the only thing still to disturb the silence, proceeding on its timeless course, bubbling and rippling tonight, merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily. (139)

The final words of this scene also serve as the closing lines of the novel's second section. They are drawn from the well-known mid-nineteenth-century English nursery rhyme *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*, whose naïve optimism momentarily misleads the reader into imagining that, along the Thames, the lives of the novel's protagonists might indeed flow "merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily". However, in the subsequent section, the narrative tone shifts markedly, particularly as the Brexit referendum approaches. The emotional bonds between various characters are tested, strained by ruptures and separations that underscore the deep metaphorical parallel between the dynamics of Brexit and those of a romantic relationship.

The most striking example of this parallel is the deterioration of the relationship between Sophie and Ian, Helena's son, a couple whose trajectory forms the central thread of the novel. The second section of the novel begins with a conversation between Sophie and her closest friend, Shoan, who, with a hint of mischief, expresses envy toward what he perceives as Sophie's stable and fulfilling relationship. Upon learning that she and Ian are about to embark on a cruise, Shoan cannot resist a sarcastic remark: "That's so romantic... just picturing the two of you together in your cabin, streaming across the Baltic. Like Kate Winslet and Leonardo Di Caprio... let's hope there are no icebergs" (147). The Titanic reference is a jest but it also carries a deeper meaning. The metaphor of the Titanic as a sinking ship has often been used in Brexit commentary,[21] to evoke images of national crisis and irreversible disaster. It is no coincidence, then, that the metaphor of the iceberg soon appears within Sophie and Ian's relationship, with Brexit itself serving as the impending collision. While on the cruise, Ian learns that he has been passed over for a promotion: the job he wanted has gone to his colleague, Naheed. The passengers around them react by expressing sympathy for Ian, their remarks echoing familiar grievances about fairness and belonging that sharply conflict with Sophie's own values and worldview:

> "We all know what it's like nowadays," said Mr Wilcox... This country. We all know the score. How it works. People like Ian don't get a fair crack of the whip any more."
> Sophie turned to look at Ian. Now, surely, he would intervene, protest, say something? But he didn't. And so, once again, she was the one who had to pursue the point.
> "When you say 'people like Ian', I suppose you mean white people?"
> Mr Wilcox, looking slightly embarrassed for the first time, glanced around at the other listeners, seeking support in their faces...
> "We don't look after our own any more, do we?" he said. "If you're from a minority – fine. Go to the front of the queue. Blacks, Asians, Muslims, gays: we can't do enough for them. But take a talented bloke like Ian here and it's another story".
> "Or maybe," said Sophie, "they just gave the job to the better candidate".
> She regretted saying it immediately. Ian was still silent, but she could tell he was smarting; and Mr Wilcox had pounced upon her misstep in no time.
> "I think you'd better decide," he said, "which is more important to you: supporting your husband, or being politically correct". (166)

[21] Charteris-Black, *Metaphors*, 8.

Ian remains silent, neither contesting nor confirming Mr. Wilcox's assumptions, and thus refrains from taking a clear stance whether in defence of or opposition to his wife. Over time, however, his dissatisfaction over the missed promotion intensifies. Gradually, and under the influence of his mother, he begins to perceive himself as a victim of discrimination within his own country, adopting Helena's nationalist and implicitly racialized worldview. It becomes evident, then, that Sophie and Ian will experience the socio-political climate of the Brexit referendum campaign in profoundly different ways, and that this deep ideological rift will inevitably take a toll on their relationship. Yet, it is particularly significant that the novel never depicts a direct confrontation between the spouses regarding the referendum. The probable friction on the issue runs subtly beneath the surface, in parallel with the couple's difficulties, like an ever-present but silent motif.

It is only in the final section of the novel, "Old England", that the parallel between Ian and Sophie's separation and the rupture between the UK and the EU is fully revealed. Sophie discloses that she and her husband had attempted "a very specific form of counselling, in fact. Post-Brexit counselling" (325). During one of these sessions, the couple is confronted with a question that exposes what had already been implicitly suggested: "Sophie, why are you so angry that Ian voted Leave? And Ian, why are you so angry that Sophie voted Remain?" (327). Sophie and Ian thus voted differently, and each of them resents the other for the political choice made. The explanations they provide for their feelings are particularly telling, illustrating the intersection between personal grievances and broader socio-political tensions. Sophie articulates her frustration as stemming from an unsettling realization about her husband's character: "I suppose because it made me think that, as a person, he's not as open as I thought he was. That his basic model for relationships comes down to antagonism and competition, not cooperation" (Ibid.). Ian, in turn, counters by criticizing Sophie's perceived lack of awareness: "It makes me think that she's very naive, that she lives in a bubble and can't see how other people around her might have a different opinion to hers. And this gives her a certain attitude. An attitude of moral superiority" (Ibid.).

The therapist, upon hearing their responses, expresses surprise that neither of them explicitly referenced politics, remarking, "as if the referendum wasn't about Europe at all" (Ibid.). Yet, the novel suggests that this omission is not accidental. Rather, it reflects the extent to which Brexit, beyond being a political event, was deeply entangled with personal and cultural identities. In Sophie and Ian's justifications, one can discern political sentiments that resonate far beyond their individual relationship echoing the emotions and divisions experienced by thousands of people across the country:

> Sophie's forthcoming divorce is presented as a metaphor of the national one, the divorce of the middle class from the educated élite caused by the politics of Brexit. The heterosexual couple, Sophie and Ian, embody British people who are having difficulty living together. This heterosexual couple appear to symbolise the difficult cohabitation of different social classes and evoke the disuniting of the country. Coe actually writes the story of two Englands that are no longer able to live together. Sophie and Ian represent these two different nations.[22]

Although Sophie and Ian's relationship serves as the central narrative thread in the novel and most explicitly embodies the metaphor of Brexit, theirs is not the only couple profoundly affected by the social and political upheaval surrounding the UK's departure from the EU. Indeed, every relationship depicted in the novel is, in some way, marked by discord, disillusionment, or separation. The prevalence of divorce is no coincidence; rather, it underscores the pervasive sense of rupture – both personal and national – brought about by Brexit. Benjamin, for instance, experiences a brief

[22] Imad Zrari, "*Middle England* by Jonathan Coe: a Brexit Novel or the Politics of Emotions", *L'Observatoire de la société britannique,* 25 (2020), 214.

resurgence of success following the publication of his novel and rekindles a romance with an old flame. However, the relationship never fully materializes, ultimately dissolving as Benjamin decides to leave England and move to France with his sister Lois, Sophie's mother, who too has finally decided to divorce: "Is now a good time to be moving to Europe?" she asked. "With Brexit and everything?" – "We've looked into that", said Benjamin. "As long as you move before 29 March next year, nothing changes" (402).

March 29, 2017, is the date when the UK, invoking Article 50, officially begins the process of leaving the European Union and it serves as a symbolic endpoint for Coe's novel. This date marks both a political and personal turning point since Sophie decides to seek out Ian, despite the pain of their separation and her growing disillusionment with academia. In a final attempt to reconcile, she chooses to reconnect with him, suggesting a lingering hope for renewal amidst fragmentation.

The novel's closing lines reveal that Sophie is expecting a child with Ian, with the due date set for March 29, 2018, exactly one year after Brexit's formal initiation. The child to come, referred to as "their beautiful Brexit baby" (421), becomes a potent symbol of an England still in the process of redefining itself. The paradox of its conception – born from division yet embodying a future yet to be written – mirrors the uncertainties of the nation's post-Brexit trajectory: a country, whose future is shaped by contradictory choices and conflicting hearts, that must find the best way to rebuild and redefine itself.

In both its structure and its language, Coe's novel – like Hornby's text – demonstrates how narrative discourse can transform the political sphere into the personal one, and consequently, how political language can be transfigured into emotional language. A separation between nations thus becomes both the cause and the mirror of a separation between individuals. A metaphor turns into a metaphorical story. This once again shows that cultural discourse does not merely replicate political reality but actively participates in its construction: the words of Coe, Hornby, and many others stand as a way of reimagining what it means to be together – or apart – in post-Brexit Britain.

FEDERICA PERAZZINI

Gothic Brexlit: Maggie Gee's New Monsters in *The White Family*

Abstract: Recent analyses, such as Kristian Shaw's (2018), suggest how Brexlit reflects Britain's shifting sense of community after 2016, revealing changing narratives surrounding British national identity, and the perceived Otherness of European migrants and post-colonial minorities. Scholars like David Foster Russell (2022) and Roger Luckhurst (2023) assert that the 'anxiety model' associated with Brexit-related imageries of social collapse and foreign subjugation finds its roots in the *fin de siècle* Imperial Gothic genre, which echoes Said's "rhetoric of blame" (1993) of absolving the Self while demonizing an Other. Gothic Brexlit, if such a thing exists, thus emerges not as a reactionary or subversive aesthetics per se, but as the flipping ideological construction of Otherness between pre- and post-referendum fiction: from portraying the EU as a Frankensteinian 'undesirable Other' to framing a civil-war-like dimension that involves the UK Leavers as a new form of monstrosity. However, long before the Brexit vote, Maggie Gee's *The White Family* (2002) anticipated this reversal of scapegoating dynamics blending Gothic, family saga, and Condition-of-England tropes to expose crises of Englishness, along with the prevailing climate of political disillusionment and social fragmentation in contemporary public discourse.

Keywords: *Brexit*, *Brexlit*, *Gothic*, *monsters*, *othering*, *trauma*

1. Gothic Brexit: A Tale of Othering

Nearly a decade after the United Kingdom's 2016 referendum to leave the European Union, the fallout of what many feel to have been a "troubling act of national self-harm"[1] continues to ripple through literature. In fact, a significant body of scholarly research and commentary by prominent writers, journalists, and academics has since sought to analyse and address what Zadie Smith described as the "deep fracture"[2] at the heart of contemporary British society. This break, blamed on neoliberal policies that gradually dismantled the Welfare State and caused decades of systemic inequalities, laid the groundwork for the stark societal divisions further polarized by Brexit. These include enduring disparities between northern and southern England, a widening disconnect between rural populations and London's elite — as well as between affluent and impoverished Londoners themselves — but, most tangibly, the escalating racialized contrasts among white, brown, and black communities. While Smith emphasizes the need to move beyond simplistic explanations of Brexit as a result of "dark and dangerous stupidity",[3] the ideological and discursive framework subtending the referendum might reveal an overlooked Gothic matrix. In fact, critics like Roger Luckhurst and David Foster Russell were among the first to point out how the Gothic modes of anxiety, social collapse, and foreign usurpation can be identified as an inceptive pattern in Brexit-themed fiction. Luckhurst, in particular, singled out three Gothic tropes used in the Brexit rhetoric: the melancholic pastoralism of the "Sunlit

[1] Kristian Shaw, *Brexlit: British Literature and the European Project* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 169.

[2] Zadie Smith, "Fences: A Brexit Diary", *The New York Review of Books* (18 August 2016), *www.nybooks.com*.

[3] The full quotation describes the Leave victory as "dark and dangerous stupidity, all the more pernicious for the way it is worn so lightly by its perpetrators and tolerated, sometimes even indulged, by the rest of us". Lyndsey Stonebridge, "The Banality of Brexit", in Robert Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 7.

Uplands"; the masochistic metaphor of "Self-Harm"; and the faux-medieval libertarian fantasies of Britain as a "Vassal State".[4] By contrast, Russell proposed "a more fruitful approach"[5] to understanding Brexit and its narratives, suggesting that they actually derive from the specific sensibility of the late Victorian and early Edwardian Imperial Gothic genre.

According to Patrick Brantlinger's seminal theorization in *Rule of Darkness*,[6] Imperial Gothic interprets *fin de siècle* anxieties regarding the fragility and transience of colonial systems. Positioned within the broader label of a "literature of crisis",[7] this genre engages in the decadent representation of imperial powers as simultaneously triumphant and inherently precarious, perpetually haunted by the atavistic threat of civilizational regression. This looming sense of deterioration emerges as the direct consequence of colonial rule driven by fears of racial hybridization, cultural contamination, and – most ominously – the potential collapse of social order instigated by the presence of "undesirable" Others.[8] In psycho-social terms, Othering refers to the practice through which individuals construct their own identities in relation to others.[9] This act of delineating others as distinct from one's hegemonic ideals helps to "reinforce and reproduce positions of domination and subordination".[10]

When applied to literary criticism, though, Othering processes have been a central focus of both Gothic and postcolonial scholarship. Drawing on Freud's psychoanalytical concept of the uncanny (*unheimlich*), the Gothic Other represents repressed fears and desires from within. In this view, the Other is not entirely external but reflects the darker aspects of the self, leading to recognition and alienation. Following this line of argument, Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*[11] further analyses how societies reject and 'monstrify' elements that threaten collective identities while correlating the uncanny Other with the Abject. For what concerns postcolonial criticism, instead, Edward Said's concept of 'Orientalism'[12] can certainly be considered as the foundational theory of Othering by Western societies that create an Other through cultural representations and discourses. Then, Homi Bhabha's problematization of Othering through the concept of mimicry[13] explains how colonizers simultaneously demand that colonized people imitate their culture while ensuring their uncanny attempts remain marked as different and inferior. Not by chance, in most novels ascribable to the Imperial Gothic genre, the colonized Other is presented as a racialized figure of irrational violence who is physically grotesque and morally degenerate. In this way, this dehumanized Other embodies the colonizer's ambivalent feelings of fear and desire toward the colonized subject. However, this tension between the opposing drives of revulsion and attraction embedded in the colonial gaze is

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[4] Roger Luckhurst, "Brexit Gothic", in Rebecca Duncan, ed., *The Edinburgh Companion to Globalgothic* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P., 2023), 322-336.

[5] David Foster Russell, "Imperial Gothic 2.0: Brexit, Brex-Lit, and Everyday Euroscepticism in British Popular Culture", *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 32.2 (2024), 350-367.

[6] Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830-1914* (New York: Cornell U.P., 1988).

[7] Anne Wright, *Literature of Crisis, 1910-22* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1984).

[8] Brantlinger identifies the main thematic threads of the Imperial Gothic genre in the themes of "individual regression or going native; an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism; and the diminution of opportunities for adventure and heroism in the modern world". Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness*, 253.

[9] Lois Weis, "Identity Formation and the Processes of 'Othering': Unraveling Sexual Threads", *Educational Foundations*, 9.1 (Winter 1995), 17-33.

[10] Joan Johnson et al., "Othering and being othered in the context of health care services", *Health Communication*, 16.2 (2004), 253.

[11] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1984).

[12] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin, 1978).

[13] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, 28 (Spring 1994), 125-133.

ultimately resolved in Imperial Gothic narratives by flattening out such complexities and suppressing any potential empathy towards the Other so as to legitimize their oppression.

For these and other reasons – thoroughly examined in Russell's already mentioned article[14] – the Imperial Gothic genre has gained renewed significance in contemporary British literature, particularly when associated with the narrative patterns and conventions of the Condition-of-England novel.[15] This intersection has given rise to the provocative classification of Brexit-themed fiction (Brexlit) as 'Imperial Gothic 2.0' which can reflect the shifting ideological reconfigurations of Otherness in pre- and post-referendum novels. In fact, while pre-referendum narratives predominantly casted the EU as the quintessential undesirable and demonized Other, post-referendum narratives pivot toward exploring a more introspective and localized dimension of monstrosity. England, and its specific demographic cohort of Leave voters, thus becomes the epicentre of a national identitarian crisis and the cradle of Brexit's new monsters.

Such is the case of Maggie Gee's *The White Family*:[16] a novel that eludes a strict Brexlit classification in chronological terms, but nonetheless anticipates many of the thematic concerns and narrative strategies now associated with this genre. In fact, as we will see, by giving voice to each member of an archetypal 'left-behind', working-class, English family, Gee delivers a blunt critique of the crumbling myth of British multiculturalism through the lens of the Gothic mode. Before delving into the analysis of the book, I will first examine how this mode was employed in the discursive construction of the Brexit campaign and in interpreting the alarming consequences of the final deal.

2. Trespassing Monsters: Figures of Abjection

Assuming that Brexlit replicates Othering modalities rooted in Gothic literary traditions, particularly within the subgenre of Imperial Gothic, the pervasive deployment of metaphors or allusions to vampirism, spectral entities, or different figurations of the abject emerges as a predictable rhetorical strategy in Brexit public discourse. In particular, the vampire metaphor has frequently transcended its original literary domain in order to be strategically reanimated within pro-Brexit propaganda so as to channel contemporary fears surrounding national sovereignty, cultural identity, and the perceived hazards of transnational migration. Satirical representations like Neil Tollfree's 2016 article, "Transylvania joining EU could see one million vampires in UK by 2020" humorously invoke Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and suggest that continued EU membership could expose Britain to an invasion of foreign "hellish creature[s]":

> It's just simple numbers, said Michael Gove. Transylvania has millions of vampires, and if we remain in the EU then we are putting out the welcome mat and Britain – which has been largely vampire-free since the 1800s – could be overrun with them. And that's just vampires; we haven't even started doing the maths on Frankensteins, werewolves, and Mummies. Simply put, the only way to guarantee that you and your family won't have your blood drained by a hellish creature of the night is to vote for Brexit.[17]

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[14] Russell, "Imperial Gothic 2.0".

[15] The Condition-of-England novel is a subgenre that originates as a response to the Industrial Revolution and is often linked to Victorian writers such as Dickens, Gaskell, or Trollope, who in their novels addressed social inequalities and advocated for reforms. After a decline during Modernism, it re-emerged in the 1950s in order to address post-war concerns about national identity, immigration, and the welfare state. By the late 20th and early 21st centuries it experienced another resurgence and tackled themes such as devolution, multiculturalism, and economic crises.

[16] Maggie Gee, *The White Family* (London: Telegram Books, 2002). Quotations from the novel refer to this edition and will henceforth be included in parentheses in the text.

[17] Neil Tollfree, "Transylvania joining EU could see one million vampires in UK by 2020", *NewsThump* (23 May 2016), *www.newsthump.com*.

This association between vampires, foreignness, and British political xenophobia surfaced in even more serious political discourses too. Nigel Farage, who was the UKIP leader and, ironically, also served as Member of the European Parliament, controversially claimed that "any normal and fair-minded person would have a perfect right to be concerned if a group of Romanian people suddenly moved in next door".[18] This exemplifies how immigrants, particularly those arriving from the Balkan route during the 2015 refugee crisis, were represented as parasitic entities draining national resources while disrupting the integrity of local communities.

But Farage didn't limit himself to conjuring vampires as the sole Brexit ideological construction of Otherness. Also zombies were figuratively resurrected in Farage's infamous *Breaking Point* poster, featuring a photograph of predominantly adult male Syrian and Afghan refugees, most with dark skin, advancing in a single file along the Slovenian-Croatian border. Unveiled during the final week of the referendum campaign, the sole visible white individual from the original photograph was conveniently obscured by a text box reading "Leave the European Union on 23rd June". This deliberate manipulation re-signified the visual narrative of the humanitarian migration crisis into the ultimate dystopian scenario of a zombie apocalypse that galvanized fears of a Muslim incursion and alleged ethnic substitution.

Similarly, while modern Europhiles admitted that national "democracy and politics ... are like walking dead in the sense that they can no longer govern",[19] Eurosceptics undermined the legitimacy of the EU by contending that it cannibalized their sovereignty through a faceless, phantasmagorical techno-bureaucracy, "neither living nor dead, present nor absent".[20] In this hauntological debate, the traditional British perception of the EU as a Frankensteinian geopolitical patchwork fostered a narrative that allocated the Continent as the ultimate site of abjection: a Gothic Other that threatens British identity but also guarantees its problematic exceptionality. This ambivalent dynamic of mutual alterity and estrangement reached its apex in 2016, at the aftermath of the referendum, when the Frankensteinian metaphor was eventually recycled by pro-Remain voices to depict Britain and the Brexit deal itself as an abomination.

Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole, for example, described the UK as "the body of Frankenstein's monster"[21] that can be re-animated only by the shocks of imagined threats such as foreign invasions. O'Toole further likened Brexiters to necromancers, doomed to "recoil in horror from the specter they themselves summoned" (94) while also employing a zombie imagery to reflect on the enduring legacy of empires: "Perhaps Empires don't end when you think they do .... Perhaps they have a final moment of zombie existence. [Brexit] may be the last stage of imperialism – having appropriated everything else from its colonies, the dead empire appropriates the pain of those it has oppressed" (21). A year later, MP Jeremy Corbyn invoked this same Frankensteinian metaphor to criticize Theresa May's Brexit deal, portraying it as an awkward, malformed bargain, ultimately unsatisfactory to all.[22]

As shown thus far, vampires, zombies, and Frankenstein initially operated as rhetorical devices aimed at foreign ethnic groups and, more prominently, the gargantuan political machinery of the European Union. The referendum, however, brought a profound fictional and emotional caesura that fundamentally shifted the locus of monstrosity inwards. Indeed, post-2016 novels reframe the EU as a

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[18] *itvNEWS* (17 May 2014), *www.itv.com*.

[19] Adelina Marini, "A European Union of Zombies", *euinside* (8 May 2014), *www.euinside.eu*.

[20] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 2006 [1993]), 63.

[21] Fintan O'Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (New York: Apollo, 2018), 39.

[22] Lizzy Buchan, "Brexit: Corbyn compares Theresa May's deal to 'Frankenstein's monster' amid ridicule over lorry test", *The Independent* (7 January 2019), *www.independent.co.uk*.

'desirable' Other, marking a departure from its earlier dystopian depictions. Considering the British academic and cultural establishment's alignment with the Remain front, it is unsurprising how Brussels, almost abruptly, ceased to play the Orwellian technocratic villain to become a repository of emotional affiliation, nostalgia, and regret. On the contrary, the new coordinates of Brexit's chronotope of fear will be relocated within the ostensibly authentic heart of the UK, populated by a distinctive class of 'Made in England' monsters. In fact, not only did England deliver the largest majority of Leave votes among the UK's constituent nations, but as the most populous nation, its decision outweighed the pro-Remain majorities in Scotland and Northern Ireland.[23] Ultimately, it is precisely this association between Leave voters and Englishness that underpins the post-referendum ideological shift in the Brexlit monstrified portrayal of Otherness.

Lingering in the homes of every genuinely English family, Leave voters are now reimagined as an unprecedented iteration of 'undesirable' Others and main culprits behind Brexit's socio-economic debacle. This inversion of the rhetoric of blame and Othering processes reflects the escalating, almost civil war-like tensions between Leavers and Remainers over the emotional implications of the referendum. In this view, the Brexit vote can be seen as a visceral act of retaliatory politics that enabled Leavers, who perceive themselves as marginalized and neglected, to destabilize the hegemonic narrative of the liberal, cosmopolitan, pro-Remain elites. Journalist and novelist James Meek explicitly addresses the "Brexit feeling" as a deeply embodied form of collective mourning, analogous to "learning that the mine or factory where you and your family have worked for generations is closing".[24] Meek further supports this simile by arguing that, for many Leavers, the referendum transcended political victory and became a mechanism for redistributing the emotional burden of loss and displacement: "for Leavers the merit of voting to leave the EU wasn't only in winning. It was in getting their opponents to feel like losers – to feel what they had felt, that deep unease at the shattering of their dreamscape. My bad feeling was somebody else's catharsis".[25]

Meek's conceptualization of the Brexit feeling as "somebody else's catharsis" or a "[p]sychic dislocation" is the ungraspable phantom at the core of Maggie Gee's *The White Family* (2002) as she incorporates the Eurosceptic storytelling horizon of the pre-referendum era with the post-referendum reversal of monstrification dynamics here discussed. Most intriguingly, through a seamless fusion of allegorical structures, Gothic Othering, and hallucinatory dimensions of psychological fragmentation, Gee's novel serves as a painful prophecy of the crises of contemporary English identity that came to define the Brexit momentum.

3. Monsters Within: Meet the Whites

Written out of "grief and shame" following the 1993 murder of Stephen Lawrence,[26] *The White Family* tells of an English family reunited around the patriarch, Alfred White, who is confined to a hospital bed following a medical crisis later revealed to be cancer. The narrative adopts the raw, realistic style typical of the Condition-of-England novel, with a Gothic sense of disorientation achieved through shifting focalizations and the use of free indirect discourses by unreliable narrators. By presenting

[23] Brexiteers won the referendum with a narrow margin of 51.9% against 48.1%, but in England alone the margin was 7%. This is of great relevance since England "is home to 84% of the UK's population [and, therefore, its Leave-vote] outweighed substantial Remain majorities in Scotland (62.0%-38.0%) and Northern Ireland (NI) (55.5%-44.6%)". Ailsa Henderson et al., "How Brexit was made in England", *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19.4 (2017), 631-646.

[24] James Meek, *Dreams of Leaving and Remaining: Fragments of a Nation* (London and New York: Verso, 2019), 112.

[25] Ibid.

[26] In the novel's preface, Maggie Gee candidly confesses: "I was motivated to write *The White Family* by my grief and shame about the 1993 murder of Stephen Lawrence, a black teenager with a brilliant future, at the hands of white racist thugs in South London" (xvi).

multiple perspectives and interweaving flashbacks, Gee reconstructs key moments in the family's history, from the wartime romance between Alfred and his wife May, to the abusive childhood endured by their children Darren, Shirley, and their youngest, Dirk. These experiences are marked by recurring misunderstandings that obstruct any meaningful dialogue and hinder mutual healing within the family who witnesses the collapse of England's perceived 'indigenous' identity as ideologically tied to the mythos of the original Anglo-Saxon settlers.

In this context, onomastics becomes a vital interpretive tool to unlock the layered meanings in Gee's novel. Alfred White's name, for instance, evokes the eponymous Anglo-Saxon ruler Alfred the Great who defended the kingdom against the Vikings and laid the foundation for English cultural memory and identity by commissioning the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. As Mine Özyurt Kiliç notes, "[t]he allegorical structure of the novel suggests a reading of Alfred's hospitalization as King Alfred's defeat in battle"[27] that establishes a thematic connection between Alfred White and England's cultural heritage. This connection is further reinforced by Alfred's homonymy with his wife's favourite poet, Lord Alfred Tennyson, whose verses and quotations provide a contrapuntal voice to the novel's narrative. According to Kiliç, references to Tennyson's words such as 'idyll' and 'ambergris', bring to mind Idylls of the King, thus allowing Gee to draw a parallel to another legendary monarch, King Arthur. This juxtaposition underscores the contrast between "King Arthur's failure to set up an ideal kingdom"[28] and Alfred White's inability to protect both the national space (epitomized by Albion Park) and the private space (his family) from those he perceives as invaders – namely black individuals and foreigners in general. In fact, for nearly fifty years Alfred worked as the park keeper, devoting himself to preserving Albion Park as one of the last remaining public spaces in Hillesden Hill "to which all paths led" (43). Just as Alfred serves as the central figure around whom his family revolves, Albion Park functions as a "thematic link between national identity, the sense of belonging, and the landscape"[29] binding all the characters' lives and thoughts within the novel's circular structure. Notably, Alfred's first and final appearances occur in the park, first when he faints after a heated argument with a black family[30] and then when he dies in the arms of his wife in a final act of public duty.

The ideal intactness of Albion Park serves as a repository of Victorian ancestry and an objective correlative for the contemporary state of England. The park is first described as a "thing of glory" adorned with "magnificent nottering fairy-tale [gates, crafted from] Victorian curlicues of iron-work [alongside a] solidly impressive Victorian pile, two-story, detached, with fine large windows [established] when the money from the empire was used for public works" (43). This description evokes an *ex-post facto* Victorian memento marked by national prosperity that encompasses British imperial values such as patriotism, communal sacrifice, and the civilizing imperative of the white man's burden. A burden and a duty that literally weighs on Alfred, who likens the neglect of the nation's moral character to the decline of the park, lamenting that, without him, "it [the park] goes back to jungle" (221). The use of the term jungle is purposely revealing as it conjures the typical anxieties of Imperial Gothic narratives, i.e. fears of cultural regression and "going native",[31] used to

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[27] Mine Özyurt Kiliç, *Maggie Gee: Writing the Condition-of-England Novel* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 130.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Kiliç, *Maggie Gee*, 129.

[30] In the opening scene, Alfred reproaches a young black girl retrieving her toy airplane from the park's grass. The girl's father confronts Alfred arguing that "This Park belongs to everyone", to which Alfred retorts, "[S]ame rules for everyone, as well. I'm just asking you lot to get off the grass" (14). Alfred's use of "you lot" and the following remark "English people know not to go on the grass" reveal how the interaction transcends the enforcement of park rules and reflects the entrenched privilege and exclusivity that define Alfred's worldview.

[31] Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness*, 253.

justify British rule. In his increasingly anachronistic role as park/nation-keeper, Alfred embodies English nostalgia, mourning "the good old days" when, in his view, racial homogeneity and social cohesion prevailed as "[t]here weren't any coloureds [and we] were all the same. We were all one. No one was rich. We stuck together" (222).

Yet, this communal vision of England that Alfred yearns for has all but vanished, and not because of the "flood" (192) of immigrants decried by populist tabloids such as *Spearhead*[32] which both Alfred and his son Dirk rely on for news. Instead, it is the result of the pervasive influence of Thatcherite ideals, famously encapsulated in the claim that there is no such thing as society, which have eroded public spaces and dismantled public services. This sense of disappearance is poignantly mirrored in the depiction of Alfred and May as frail figures shrunken by age and illness, just as the Hillesden community is shown to be "evaporat[ing]" (223) through a process of gentrification evident in the opening of new ethnic restaurants, cafés, and shops:

> There was a Sushi Bar – imagine it! – with narrow windows and queer blue light, and a girl peering out had half-moon eyes, but the boy she was with was very black. There were three Indian restaurants, side by side, which made you wonder how they could survive. The Star of the East, just fancy, in Hillesden! There were two shops advertising 'Cheap International Phone Calls', and another one selling those uncomfortable beds with wooden bases and thin flat mattresses .... Hillesden isn't dying. It's coming up. (178)

Kiliç highlights the dual character of this gentrification as both a result of economic recession and, at the same time, a form of reverse colonialism which "addresses the middle-class occupiers' need for luxury".[33] If Alfred, his wife May, and their youngest son Dirk remain constrained by the limited means of their working-class milieu, such is not the case for their older children, Darren and Shirley, who manage to improve their social status, the former through professional success in journalism, and the latter thanks to the inherited wealth from her late husband, Kojo. By embracing a bourgeois, quasi-radical chic lifestyle – characterized by ostentatious displays of cultural capital, such as a preference for organic foods and premium retail options – they distance themselves from the values and worldviews of their family of origin, enacting a form of individual gentrification.

However, the White siblings remain united in their shared inheritance of unresolved transgenerational trauma. These wounds clearly stem from Alfred's authoritarian, patriarchal rule, as well as May's ostrich-like, dismissive attitude as a mother, and burst out in various forms of psychological distress. In Darren's case, the manifestation takes the form of recurrent issues with alcoholism and anger management, particularly evident in his relationship with his third wife. His chronic inability to establish or maintain intimate familial connections is exemplified by his divorces and estrangement from his children. Despite his professional success in journalism, Darren's personal life remains deeply affected by the enduring influence of paternal dominance, resulting in a man whose attempts at intimacy are characterized by a passive-aggressive use of baby talk. Darren's profound sense of self-alienation is poignantly summarized in his confession of existential despair to his childhood friend Thomas (who plays a vital role towards the end): "I hate my life" (209).

Like her older brother, Shirley's emotional scars are rooted in her dysfunctional parents, but in her case intertwine with her infertility struggles. In fact, Shirley's childbearing trauma begins during her first year of college when she gets accidentally pregnant and her mother forces her to give the baby up

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[32] *Spearhead* is a fictional newspaper that constantly represents England as an invaded nation. According to *Spearhead*, English natives "shan't lose [this war against the immigrants, as] the future of England [hinges on their determination to defend the country] hold the pass [and, most importantly] dam the flood" (192).

[33] Kiliç, *Maggie Gee*, 132.

for adoption in order to avoid social stigma: "the neighbours would never let it drop" (338). This event leaves Shirley burdened with wrenching feelings of loss and guilt, which apparently lead to her subsequent failures to conceive. This deeply impacts her relationships with both her Ghanaian husband, Kojo, and current Jamaican partner, Elroy King. However, rather than a physiological condition, Shirley's infertility is a somatic expression of her psychological trauma derived from the sum of childhood abuses, spousal bereavement, and her younger brother's estrangement. Nonetheless, Shirley emerges as the sole character to materially reverse – and thus benefit from – the narrative device of the Imperial Gothic's inheritance plot which subtends the whole novel. This narratological device frequently incorporates Gothic elements such as the inheritance of decaying estates, hidden family secrets, or cursed legacies, to critique the instability and moral ambiguity of imperial authority and colonial exploitation.

This same focus on the inheritance plot, albeit in a nuanced form, also emerges as a crucial thematic node within Dirk's narrative arc, encapsulating his psychological deterioration driven by the perceived usurpation of his "legitimate expectations" in terms of property rights. Indeed, Dirk's already fragile psychological state is destabilized when Mr Dinesh Patei – whom Dirk derogatorily refers to as "the paki" (188) and who is presented as the embodiment of racial alterity – takes over the local newsagent's shop where Dirk used to work for the family friend and previous owner, George Millington. This acquisition would make Mr Patei Dirk's new employer, thereby shattering Dirk's pathological sense of proprietorial entitlement to the shop's succession, serving as a microcosmic representation of broader postcolonial anxieties surrounding displacement and dispossession within the white working class. As Dirk claims in a delusional interior monologue: "I'd rather die, or kill him. Kill them. Kill them, all ... Everything was falling around my ears. My dreams of the future. My expectations. My own legitimate expectations. That's what *Sparehead* says; we are losing our birthright, and suddenly it was all happening to me, beneath my very ears, in broad daylight" (190). Dirk's paranoid vision of being constantly under attack, invaded, surrounded by conspiring immigrants, whom he scapegoats for both his and England's misfortunes, fuels his longing for the homogenous homeland of Alfred's memories:

> My dad talks about it down the pub. How all the kids were normal then. Normal white. And there wasn't any crime. Not everyone beating the shit out of each other. Not everyone hating everyone else. There was brotherhood then. We were all English. Hillesden was a village, in those days. I sometimes think I was born out of my time. It's just my luck to be born now, with no opportunities for native English. And prejudice against us just because we're white. (186)

Although Dirk's reconstruction of his country's heroic past takes the form of what Arjun Appadurai terms a "nostalgia without memory",[34] it enables Dirk to legitimize his deep-seated sense of victimhood through a postcolonial revisionist rhetoric which frames the white population as a persecuted minority. This strongly echoes Enoch Powell's infamous tirades following the 1948 British Nationality Act[35], where he depicted the "ordinary man" – the quintessential English citizen – as disillusioned, fearful, and made "strangers in their own country".[36]

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[34] Introduced in his work *Modernity at Large*, "nostalgia without memory" refers to how contemporary consumer culture and media create sentimental attachments to idealized historical periods or ways of life that the individual never personally lived through. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

[35] By granting citizenship to its former colonies, the British Nationality Act initiated a massive wave of immigration, particularly from the Caribbean – most notably the Windrush Generation – and South Asia. While these new patterns of mobility enriched the nation's cultural diversity, they also exacerbated racial tensions, which subsequently influenced the development of restrictive residency and naturalization policies, such as the Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962 and 1968.

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

However, if Alfred's views are progressively contextualized as somehow justifiable within the framework of his generational identity – shaped by the imperial legacy and narrative of the Second World War – Dirk's vision of England takes on a different, and more sinister psychological significance. For him, England's white imagined community not only represents his father's most cherished legacy, but also an opportunity for positive validation. In fact, despite having endured Alfred's relentless outbursts and physical abuses, Dirk ends up idolizing him, seeking his impossible approval by fully identifying with him, particularly in his racist judgments against Shirley's black partners. Dirk's disdain is evident in his remarks about his sister's first husband, Kojo: "She can't love him .... I mean, he's not half-caste, or something like that. He's black as black. He's a fucking gorilla" (70). These comments closely parallel Alfred's own worldview, as seen in his ridicule of Shirley's new partner, Elroy, and his claim to Britishness: "'Elroy is English,' said Shirley. 'Well – British. Elroy is as British as me or you.' 'Oh yes?' said Alfred, now alarmingly red, blue eyes alight, clawing at the bedclothes. 'He's about as British as bananas is Elroy.'" (58).

And yet, Dirk's racism is more troubled than Alfred's also because it appears to mask some deeper, unresolved homosexual desires. This is subtly hinted at in the brief reference to the "strange magazine" May finds in Dirk's room, which contains "photographs of black men without any clothes" (75).[37] Dirk's repression of, or perhaps disgust toward, his own sexual orientation is central to understanding his ultimate descent into a delirium of persecutory thoughts as he resolves to kill the first black man he encounters in Albion Park, enacting what can be interpreted as a symbolic purging ritual. Devastated by his father's impending death and the loss of his job, Dirk exclaims, "[E]verything's going. Everything's gone. There's nothing left for me round here. Nothing left of what I had. Even Dad won't be in the Park anymore. No one will know us. We won't exist". (301) Dirk's escalating psychosis drives him to fatally misidentify his eventual victim, Winston King, as Dinesh Patei, thereby overlapping the unsuspecting Jamaican man with his two favourite obsessions: black men and the recurring theme of "invasion". In fact, Winston is none other than Elroy's brother (Shirley's brother-in-law) and can therefore be linked to Dirk's sense of intrusion within the private space of the White family. Meanwhile, as a black man walking through Albion Park, Winston symbolizes the immigrant "flood" overwhelming England. More significantly, though, Winston's portrayal as a closeted black homosexual deeply resonates with Dirk's internal turmoil, reflecting what he most loathes in and about himself. As a result, the act of Winston's murder represents Dirk's most grimly and intimate act of self-repudiation. Not by chance, the murder is imbued with overt sexual tension, primarily due to the setting of the crime, which happens at dawn, in the absence of witnesses, in the park's covered passage to the toilettes: "this place his dad could never sort out" (346), visited exclusively by gay men and drug addicts. What follows is an ambiguous narration of the events based on the intended polysemy of the exclamation "fuck you" in which Dirk's murderous intent conflates, just as plausibly, with the narrative of a sexual encounter in a dark room:

> The nigger had gone into the place Dirk hated. Time to be brave. Time to be a man. One hand in his jacket, Dirk followed him into the sharp, foul stink of the dark .... But something soft brushed against his shoulder, and he leapt round, swearing, knife in hand, and saw him clearly; he was black, pitch-black,

[37] Speculations regarding Dirk's sexual orientation emerge earlier in the novel, notably during his daydream about visiting South Africa. In this paragraph, the Victorian masculinity rite of passage associated with imperial exploration is reimagined through a homoerotic vision of a safari adventure culminating in a surreal pool-party, where black men are metaphorical prey for Dirk's desires: "One day he'd travel. He'd like to travel. To parts of the world where things were still all right.... He closed his eyes. Lions, tigers. Sort of pink blossoms, lots of them. Boogie-something. Boogie blossoms. And – swimming pools. And strong white men. Muscular. Toned. Working out in the sunlight. Short haircuts and – brick-hard buttocks. Press-ups flipping over into sit-ups, and fuck, they all had enormous hardons, and most of the men round the pool were black" (39).

> African black, as black as the toilets, and his face had a horrible, soft sort of look, like he was a girl, like he was in love, and fucking hell, he was touching his cock. I don't believe it, his great black cock. (347)

Here, Dirk's distorted sense of self and desire climaxes in a violent act of bodily penetration, metaphorically replacing sexual intercourse with the act of stabbing Winston: "He slipped the knife gently out of his jacket and hit the bastard in the middle of his chest, the blade sliding in surprisingly easily, sticking it, jerking it, forcing it in, holding it there, screaming with panic, '*Fuck you, fuck you!*'" (347).

Winston's murder in Albion Park closes the novel's circular structure as it constitutes a kind of reversal to Alfred's initial fainting after his dispute with the Black family. However, Alfred's reaction to Dirk's crime is not of rejoiced vengeance of the Whites, intended as a family synecdoche for a whole ethnicity. Rather, it has the bitter taste of failure, a profound betrayal of his life's work as the guardian of the park, and the nation it represents. For this reason, when May expresses her belief that it was Dirk who committed the crime, Alfred leaves the hospital while still in pyjamas, to denounce his own son to the authorities. He then returns to the park one last time to die in May's arms at the very spot where he had proposed to her after the war. This scene is glorified through an intertextual reference to Tennyson's 1855 poem *O that 'twere possible*: "O that 'twere possible / After long grief and pain / To find the arms of my true love / Round me once again!", [38] which merges with May's fading lyrical imagination: "Wind in the leaves / Among his people... / Here in the grass he was safe to sleep" (414) in a bittersweet elegy that pays an almost imperceptible tribute to Rupert Brooke's patriotic sonnet *The Soldier* (1915).

In the end, Alfred White – the devoted public servant and late Park Keeper – is actually granted the privilege of dying "at peace", much like Brook's soldier,[39] as he "slips away into the past, slipping away beneath the future" (414). He finds his final rest in the "rich earth" of Albion Park, now transformed into that "corner of [an increasingly] foreign [and unrecognizable] field" that remains, at least for Alfred, his "forever England." But as readers are tricked to mourn Alfred's passing as that of a national hero and symbol of English moral fibre, the legacy he leaves behind is far from redemptive. Instead, it is one of anger and hatred that keeps haunting broken individuals within a fractured nation on the brink of its final reckoning.

In this perspective, the structure of the novel's epilogue is particularly iconographic as Alfred White and Winston King's funerals take place on the same day: "side by side [in] a triumph of mismanagement" (417). Their processions, starkly contrasting in terms of ethnicity and size, march along opposite banks of the river toward the same cemetery. Overhead, a police helicopter monitors the crowds, struggling to discern "with no effing idea of which side is which" (417), while the tabloid press scrambles to capture statements and images, anticipating the onset of an epochal clash. Within this grand theatrical spectacle, each character fulfils their predetermined role, unable to actually grow or change the trajectory of their respective lives.

Darren White, described as "oddly fish-like", is lost and consumed by his own temper, brawling with a reporter from *The Sun*. Dirk, confined to prison under protective custody due to fears of lynching by Winston's mourners, is barred from attending his father's funeral. Meanwhile, May stands utterly alone – not only because Alfred's death has severed her last anchor to the world, but also because her daughter, Shirley, has made her choice: "I'm sorry, Mum" is all Shirley can offer as she

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[38] Alfred Tennyson, *Maud, and Other Poems* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1855), 88.

[39] The opening stanza of Brooke's poem reads: "If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England. There shall be / In that rich earth a richer dust concealed" and concludes with the line "In hearts at peace, under an English heaven." Rupert Brook, *1914 & Other Poems* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1915), 15.

turns to Elroy and his family, her partner and "his people", who have now become "her people, hers by choice" (417). Gee's novel thus compellingly explores the power of family ties, whether biological or elective, while emphasizing that the act of forging one's own path through agency transcends and even redefines the inherited legacies of our origins.

4. Against Redemption: Trauma and Identity Politics

Through its exploration of tainted inheritances, othering processes, and haunting interplay between macro- and microcosmic disintegration, *The White Family* gives voice to the structure of feeling associated with the 'left-behind' white working class – a sentiment that, fifteen years after the novel's publication, would shape the outcome of the Brexit referendum. More strikingly, Gee's novel employs the Gothic mode to problematize the theoretical notion of 'monstrification', proving how the nuclear family can produce its own unique horrors and abominations, not through supernatural forces, but through the normalization of hatred, prejudice, and violence. As these poisonous attitudes metastasize, transforming ordinary people like the Whites into moral monsters, the novel unsettles readers by evoking a disquieting empathy for its characters' vulnerabilities and histories, even as it refuses to condone their actions. Alfred White's bigotry and overt racism, for instance, are filtered through the lens of obsolescence and loss, thus defining him as a man desperately clinging to a vanishing world and identity. While Alfred's final heroic act of "public duty" (396) can be conveniently interpreted as a redemptive moment of accountability, this interpretation fails to acknowledge the superficiality of his realization. In fact, Alfred's self-important lamentations: "It's all my fault ... I am the Park Keeper. I am the Park Keeper. My fault, May. I left my post" (397), reveal a narcissistic attachment to an idealized, non-existent nation rather than a genuine reckoning with the toxic legacy he has passed on to his son. This misplaced loyalty is foreshadowed by May's early observation that "the Park matters more than us" (10), underscoring the hollowness of her husband's moral integrity. Yet, Alfred cannot be seen as the sole architect of his dysfunctional family. His wife's passive acceptance of patriarchal oppression renders her a disturbingly banal and insidiously complicit figure, whose silence enables the emotional and psychological damage inflicted on their children.

Amid this legacy of destruction, Shirley emerges as the novel's most profoundly positive figure. Indeed, by challenging Alfred and Dirk's anxieties of reverse colonialization resulting from the physical incursions of the 'Other' into the white English body (politic), Shirley stands out as a vital maternal force with Joycean undertones, akin to Molly Bloom's life-affirming presence in *Ulysses* (1922). She becomes a vector of hybridity, both through her interracial relationships and as a figurative universal womb, evoking humanity's shared origins beyond any illusory notion of racial purity. Indeed, Shirley's journey toward resolution culminates in a moment of unexpected catharsis: the birth of "unidentical twins, both olive-skinned, both curly-haired, but one much paler than the other" (415), conceived with both Elroy and Thomas during a single night. Her decision to embrace this pregnancy starkly contrasts with her earlier coerced adoption, symbolizing the resolution of her internal conflict and the assertion of her agency. Shirley's narrative arc thus serves as a counterpoint to the destructiveness of Alfred's legacy, offering a vision of hope and renewal grounded in acceptance, reconciliation, and the transformative potential of embracing change.

In this perspective, Gee's *The White Family* transcends its original temporal setting and offers a timeless critique of identity politics and how they can be weaponized both within the familiar framework and the broader community dimension of nationhood. In doing so, the novel anticipates the Brexlit genre and offers a cautionary tale of the monsters we risk creating when we fail to understand the complex interplay between personal trauma and national identity.

Satiric Reversals and Parodic Deformations

CLAUDIA CAO

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

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

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[14] Ibid., 6.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[18] Ibid., 7.

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

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

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

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

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

[24] See Shaw, *Brexlit*, 5.

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

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

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

2. Parody, Irony, and the Grotesque Body

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

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

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

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

[27] Docherty, "Brexit", 183.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[37] Weaver, *Rhetoric*, 4.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Masking, Concealing, Reversing

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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[44] Rahman, "Consuming Brexit", 76.

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

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

[47] McEwan, *Cockroach*, 6.

[48] Gardiner, "Anachronism", 106.

[49] Bauman, *Retrotopia*, 3.

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

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

4. Conclusion

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

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

LUCIA ESPOSITO

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.

Nightmarish Visions of Confinement

VINCENZO MAGGITTI

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-

[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 furtherly 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 *Brexlit: 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]

[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

[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)

[14] More, *Utopia*, 39-40.

[15] Carl J. Griffin, "Enclosure as Internal Colonisation: The Subaltern Commoner, *Terra Nullius* and the Settling of England's *Wastes*", *Transactios of the RHS*, 1 (2023), 101.

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

[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

[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.

[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.

MICHELA COMPAGNONI

Brave New Tempests.
Brexit and Shakespeare's Dystopian Afterlives in Ali Smith's *Gliff*

Abstract: In the wake of Brexit, a surge of dystopian fiction by British authors has grappled with the political and cultural ruptures left in its trail. Ali Smith's *Gliff* (2024) stands as a compelling recent addition to this post-Brexit corpus. Set in a near-future Britain governed by biometric surveillance and bureaucratic erasure, *Gliff* follows two non-binary siblings, Briar and Rose, who are categorised as "Unverifiables" after their mother refuses digital registration. One morning, a red line is painted around their house – a visible decree of exclusion – and their displacement begins. The novel probes a society stratified by data and language, where identity is state-sanctioned and deviation punished. By invoking Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), *Gliff* joins a tradition of science-fictional adaptations of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* that reworks the latter's interrogations of knowledge, power, surveillance, and freedom within the speculative imaginaries of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: *Ali Smith*, *'Gliff'*, *Shakespeare's 'The Tempest'*, *Brexit*, *dystopia*, *surveillance*

1. Introduction: Red Lines

A red line of paint drawn around a house, a simple boundary that overnight transforms a family's existence, marking them as "Unverifiables". This stark image lies at the heart of *Gliff* (2024) by Ali Smith.[1] The novel captures with unsettling clarity the rise of social and class divides, the pervasive fear of the Other, and the subordination enforced by surveillance in the contemporary post-Brexit Britain. As the first instalment of a projected diptych, *Gliff* stands as a compelling recent addition to the body of novels by British authors confronting the central questions of the referendum and its aftermath through dystopian modes. Its arrival coincides with a surge of speculative and dystopian fiction that has sought to grapple with the political and cultural ruptures left in its wake. In the wider body of work that has been termed "Brexlit"[2] and encompasses diverse subgenres, the dystopian mode has proved among the most prominent. Works such as Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* (2019), John Marrs' *The Passengers* (2019), and John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019) exemplify this turn, staging near-futures that are haunted both by technological acceleration and by political fracture.

Widely regarded as the writer who inaugurated Brexlit with *Autumn* (2016), published in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, Smith went on to develop the *Seasonal Quartet*, a sequence of state-of-the-nation novels that became foundational to the genre.[3] Across the four volumes, she explored many of the defining concerns of the Brexit era: immigration and hospitality, atavistic nationalism, pervasive xenophobia, populism, scrutiny, bureaucratic and technology-driven extremism, de-individualisation, and border policies. Eight years after the referendum, and four years after the

[1] Ali Smith, *Gliff* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2024). Further references to the novel appear in parentheses.
[2] Coined by Kristian Shaw in "Brexlit", in Robert Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 15-30.
[3] Shaw, "Brexlit", 21. Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* includes *Autumn* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016), *Winter* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017), *Spring* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019), and *Summer* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2020).

quartet's conclusion, *Gliff* marks a shift in register: Smith reframes her long-standing preoccupations through the speculative lens of dystopian fiction and places questions of identity and language at the centre of her vision.[4]

Set in a near-future Britain governed by biometric governance and bureaucratic erasure, the novel follows two siblings, Briar and Rose, who are classified as "Unverifiables" after their mother refuses to comply with digital authentication. The red line painted around their home is a decree of exclusion that marks both house and inhabitants for disappearance. Being thus marginalised, they are forced to flee under the care of Leif, their mother's partner, who soon departs leaving the children to fend for themselves. Narrated by Briar, a non-binary, precocious, and logomaniacal Smith avatar in their early teens,[5] the story traces the siblings' precarious movement through a society increasingly hostile to those who fall outside the sanctioned categories of verification. At first, they find shelter in an unfurnished safe house Leif stocks with tinned food. Just outside, Rose becomes absorbed in the horses grazing in a nearby field, and she names her favourite Gliff, which grows into a powerful symbol of hope, multiplicity, and resistance to conformity. Briar and Rose then squat in an abandoned school where they join a community of misfits resisting the regime. Halfway through the novel, a caesura opens: five years pass, and the narrative resumes in a bleaker, more technocratic Britain.[6] Briar is now a factory supervisor, overseeing labourers scarred and mutilated by battery acid, trapped in the machinery of the state.

This dystopian trajectory also opens onto a broader literary dialogue: each chapter set five years later begins with the words "Brave new world" (116) or variations such as "Brave new wold" (121) and "Brave new old" (207), which signal Briar's rebellion against a system founded on uniformity. Through these refrains, Smith inscribes her novel into conversation with Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), another vision of a society where identity is subordinated to state surveillance and bureaucratic legitimacy. However, in this article I would like to argue that Smith engages with Huxley not so much as a dystopian template as itself an adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.[7] Just like Huxley, Smith reworks some of the play's central concerns to probe the mechanisms of control that structure their respective presents. By repeatedly echoing the famous verse from *The Tempest* that underscores its thematic and narrative connection with Huxley, *Gliff* situates itself within a tradition of science-fictional and dystopian adaptations of Shakespeare's play that interrogate propaganda, control, and freedom, foregrounding exile, Othering, and truth manipulation.[8]

In examining how the novel's portrayal of totalitarianism, symbolic resistance, and linguistic domination constitutes an extreme response to the political and cultural climate of post-Brexit, post-truth Britain, I trace these concerns back to Shakespeare's Prospero. His power, grounded in illusionist devices and proto-scientific logic, anticipates a model of mastery already entwined with early modern rationality and statecraft. *The Tempest* itself reflects the broader transition from Aristotelian *scientia*, based on immutable principles, to modern science conceived as an empirical and experimental

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[4] This is Smith's first properly dystopian novel, out of a total of fourteen.

[5] From contextual clues, Briar is 13 and Rose 11 at the beginning of the novel; other examples of young characters include Brooke in *There But For The* (2011) and Florence in *Spring*.

[6] The narrative departs from strict linearity, making use of both analepsis and prolepsis.

[7] Both *Brave New World* and *Gliff* may be read as permutations of *The Tempest*, exemplifying forms of creative criticism that generate fresh insight into Shakespeare by testing how the plays might illuminate concerns deemed urgent in their respective times. For discussion of *Brave New World* and Shakespeare, see Lucia Esposito, "Degenerating *Tempests*: The Loss of the Ethical Power of Shakespeare's Emotions in *Brave New World*", *Prospero. Rivista di letterature e culture straniere*, 29 (2024), 81-107.

[8] To cite but two among many adaptations: *Forbidden Planet* (dir. Fred M. Wilcox, 1956) and Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy's HBO series *Westworld* (2016-2022).

discipline.[9] Scott Maisano has accordingly identified *The Tempest* as one of "the earliest works of scientific romance".[10] Read in this light, *Gliff* testifies once again to the enduring potential of Shakespeare's play, in which the early contours of today's ethical and political debates can already be discerned. Its sustained interrogations of knowledge, identity, and domination continue to shape the speculative imaginaries of the twenty-first century.

2. Prosperean State: The Machinery of Power

It is by now well established that the Brexit process brought the issues of monitoring and regulation into sharp relief, exposing how appeals to sovereignty and freedom were underpinned by mechanisms of control that increasingly shape contemporary political life.[11] The campaign itself exemplified how strategies of domination already permeated political discourse, operating not only through institutional frameworks but through media influence, targeted data manipulation, and emotional appeals to nationalism.[12] Against this background, *Gliff* emerges as an extreme fictional response, pushing to dystopian limits dynamics that were already central to the *Seasonal Quartet*.[13]

The society portrayed in *Gliff* is structured around a system that, in the second half of the novel, hardens into full-blown, Orwellian totalitarianism.[14] Citizens are monitored through the pervasive use of devices and state-appointed "educators" (83), wearable technologies akin to smart watches that automatically film everything and perform a wide range of functions, such as cataloguing every trace of data. They are also used to instruct children in place of schools, systematically replacing other sources of knowledge with official, centrally manipulated channels of information. This reinforces a culture of exclusion that reaches its peak in the segregation of the so-called "Unverifiables" and the compulsory re-education of adults and children in Retraining Centres (106). Cameras are ubiquitous,[15] and even the smallest acts of rebellion take the form of exploiting gaps in the system, seeking out the voids where cameras fail to see. As the narrative shifts forward, this dystopian regime culminates in the mechanised world of the factory, where Briar works as "Day Shift Superior, Pickled / Preserved Goods Delivery Level Area 135" (221), a direct echo of Huxley's Hatcheries and Conditioning Centres.[16]

The totalising surveillance and coercion depicted in *Gliff* finds its most powerful antecedent in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. As absolute master of his insular domain, Prospero enacts a fantasy of omnipotence rooted in usurpation and sorcery, physical and psychological violence, unsettling the early-seventeenth-century conception of divinely ordained authority.[17] Prospero's dream of unbounded dominion is staged in a magical theatre of cruelty extending over every element of the island and reinforced through his manipulation of illusion and memory, which ensures that subjection remains

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[9] See Elizabeth Spiller, "Shakespeare and the Making of Early Modern Science: Resituating Prospero's Art", *South Central Review*, 26.1-2 (2009), 24-41.

[10] Scott Maisano, "Shakespeare's Revolution: *The Tempest* as Scientific Romance", in Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, eds., The Tempest*: A Critical Reader* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2014), 166.

[11] See Philip Cunliffe et al., *Taking Control: Sovereignty and Democracy After Brexit* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023).

[12] See Steve Buckledee, *The Language of Brexit: How Britain Talked Its Way Out of the European Union* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

[13] See Tory Young, "What's to-day? Politics and Typography in Ali Smith's Decade", in Nick Bentley et al., eds., *The 2010s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024), 137-152.

[14] The second section of *Gliff* is pointedly entitled "Power" (145).

[15] The word 'camera' occurs eighteen times in the novel.

[16] Sites of human reproduction and social conditioning.

[17] See Jeffrey A. Rufo, "'He needs will be Absolute Milan': The Political Thought of *The Tempest*", in Vaughan and Mason Vaughan, eds., The Tempest*: A Critical Reader*, 137-164.

pervasive and inescapable. Although pivoting on the prominence of absolutist rule, the play famously foregrounds Caliban as a figure of resistance and disorder, thus not only interrogating the nature of control but also destabilising its very foundations.[18]

Shakespeare's portrayal of Prospero's overarching rule in *The Tempest* resurfaces in *Gliff*, where Smith reimagines these dynamics within a thoroughly panoptic world[19] in which the core fragilities exposed by the pre- and post-Brexit debate and policies have become a tangible and disquieting reality. In this world, the government itself assumes the role of a new Prospero: not embodied in a single figure but diffused through an omnipresent, all-seeing state apparatus that seeks to regulate every aspect of the citizens' lives. Central to this system is the exhaustive collection of personal data, carried out by agents who, in line with Michel Foucault's conception of biopower,[20] exercise surveillance at multiple, sometimes improbable levels of individual existence. One striking example is Colon, a local boy appointed by the government as a "Designated Data Collector slash Strangers" (88), who subjects Briar and Rose to a barrage of questions that lays bare the invasive logic of this regime (89-90). The siblings' refusal to provide answers crystallises their precarious condition as outcasts in a culture that has taken the hostile environment to dreadful extremes, although it remains unclear why they have been rendered 'Unverifiables'.[21] Like one of Prospero's spirits carrying out his master's orders, Colon shows how deeply state supervision is embedded in the fissures of society.

When Briar undergoes re-education and is remade into a servant of the state, like Winston Smith, the protagonist of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), this role aligns her/him with a contemporary Ariel: like Shakespeare's spirit, Briar fluctuates between genders and complies with whatever the system demands. As supervisor in the factory, Briar enforces class hierarchies, checks on employees, and submits to the pervasive gaze of the ever-watching cameras. Yet through the novel's first-person narration, readers gain access to Briar's thoughts and discover the depth of their loathing. Just as Prospero's spirits who "all do hate him / As rootedly as [Caliban]" (3.2.94-95),[22] Briar despises the system they now serve. Even so, survival requires submission to it, the bitter consequence of five years marked by violence, abuse of power, and forced ascent through the very hierarchy that destroyed their freedom.

In *Gliff*, five years after the siblings' displacement, the world has grown even bleaker and more technocratic. Here Smith aligns her dystopia with Huxley's techniques of subliminal sleep-teaching ('hypnopaedia') and the Bokanovsky Process of cloning, as well as with the many science-fictional adaptations of *The Tempest* that have imagined the fusion of control and futuristic technology. This logic is already discernible in Shakespeare's play, where Prospero's *art* is not merely magic but a composite practice of instruments and devices, straddling the intellectual disciplines of the Renaissance: alchemy, astrology, cartography, mathematics, and the magical arts in their broader sense, all mobilised as technologies of knowledge. At first glance, Prospero might appear as a relic, a stage magician out of place within the new scientific paradigm of the seventeenth century. Yet, as

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[18] Just to mention two classic studies: Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theater in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[19] See the notion of the subject as perfectly individualised and constantly visible, originating in early modern times but codified in the late eighteenth century by Jeremy Bentham (*Panopticon or The Inspection House*, 1791) and later developed by Michel Foucault in *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (1975).

[20] See, for instance, Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1: An Introduction* [1976], trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

[21] Colon's assignment to the "Strangers" sector, and his particular interest in Briar and Rose, provides an indication that the issue may be ethnically grounded, though this is not explicitly confirmed.

[22] All parenthetical references to the play are to William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, eds.Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (London: Arden Bloomsbury Shakespare, 2011).

Maisano observes, Prospero's vision of universal decay or dissolution (4.1.148-158) articulates "an alchemist-cum-atomist's theory of everything in which the audience … discovers that all perceptible entities … are composed of subtle, imperceptible, but nonetheless physical 'stuff'".[23] In this sense, Smith's "techno-saturated dystopia"[24] interrogates the fraught relationship between technological and scientific progress and individual autonomy in the same way as *The Tempest*.

Equally significant in bringing *Gliff*, a novel that brims with wordplay, into continuity with Shakespeare is its relentless focus on language as a site of ethical and political struggle. Already a defining feature of the *Seasonal Quartet* and of her writing more broadly, Smith's preoccupation with the instability of words highlights their capacity to clarify and connect but also to distort, divide, and dominate.[25] Shakespeare's *Tempest* similarly probes the dual nature of language: its ability to conjure truth and justice, and its potential to warp reality through misperception or manipulation.[26]

This preoccupation with the power of language naturally extends into the domain of narrative itself. In *The Tempest*, Prospero is the sole proprietor of the island's stories; all alternative accounts, and particularly Caliban's, are framed as rebellion and sedition. The complete deprivation of freedom and free will imposed on the island's creatures is reinforced through Prospero's masterful ability to manipulate memory, exemplified in Miranda's amnesia of her life before the island – a past that appears to her "far off, / And rather like a dream than an assurance / That my remembrance warrants" (1.2.44-45). At the same time, through his spirits, he continuously creates and re-creates the reality of the island, producing for the shipwrecked a shifting world that oscillates between rational wakefulness and dreamlike illusion, where events seem inexplicable precisely because they are authored by an unseen power.

In *Gliff* this logic re-emerges in the state's propaganda and erasures. Beyond the total domination of public discourse and information, the novel imagines a society in which truth-telling itself is now obsolete, a condition embodied in the futile attempts of Briar and Rose's mother to resist the system by denouncing the powerful conglomerate for which she works (see 74-81).[27] Along with the silencing of dissent, the systematic effacement of collective memory also renders the novel a dystopian metamorphosis of its Shakespearean antecedent. Through the siblings' light, almost playful filter, Smith depicts a world of cultural amnesia in which, for instance, Colon has no knowledge of pop icons familiar to the siblings (85). The loss is not trivial, but symptomatic of a society so stripped of communality that even the most basic forms of shared cultural knowledge have vanished.

This mechanism of erasure extends to the destruction of the very spaces where memory might endure. Where Prospero reshapes reality itself through his spectral illusions, *Gliff* translates this vision by filling the narrative with spectral sites of memory: theatres, libraries, museums, and state schools – the very fabric of the commonweal – that have been razed or repurposed for private use.[28] In their place, state-appointed 'educators' offer a digital surrogate of Prospero's home-entertainment system, where spirits appear to dance, sing, and perform before vanishing into thin air.[29] In extending

[23] Maisano, "Shakespeare's Revolution", 170.

[24] Nat Segnit, "Give Me Your Answer: Two Siblings Fend for Themselves in a Totalitarian State", *Times Literary Supplement* (15 November 2024), *www.the-tls.com*.

[25] See Monica Germanà and Emily Horton, "Introduction", in Monica Germanà and Emily Horton, eds., *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1-8; Ema Jelínková, "Introduction", in Ema Jelínková and Rachel Sumner, eds., *The Literary Art of Ali Smith: "All we are is Eyes"* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019), 9.

[26] See, among many others, Greenblatt, *Marvellous Possessions*. The same duality of language is also famously at stake in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*.

[27] See Paraic O'Donnell, "*Gliff* by Ali Smith review — Reading the Signs of Crisis", *The Guardian* (2 November 2024), *www.theguardian.com*.

[28] The novel opens with an emblematic image: an art museum converted into an exclusive hotel (4).

[29] Most famously staged during the banquet and masque scenes (stage directions, 3.3.17-52; 4.1.60-138).

Shakespeare's meditation on memory and reality into the terrain of cultural erasure and state propaganda, Smith evokes the discursive strategies of contemporary politics, where populist rhetoric and illusory promises sustain the fantasy of sovereignty while masking deeper complexities.

If *The Tempest* stages the exercise of universal and unchallenged power, it also sets against it the persistent attempts to resist that power. Threats to sovereignty notoriously permeate the play,[30] dramatising the fragile yet enduring presence of rebellion to confirm that even authority presented as absolute remains open to challenge. The first locus of rebellion with which *Gliff* takes up this paradigm of resistance is the community of misfits who take refuge in the abandoned school, a symbolic building whose precariousness becomes – as is often the case in Smith's works – a metaphor for the erosion of cultural memory and collective responsibility.[31] These individuals "were largely unverifiable because of words", because they had said something deemed illegal, inappropriate, or otherwise unacceptable (161-162). Among them is Oona, an elderly activist and the school's former librarian, who becomes a kind instruct in revolutionary praxis for Briar through symbolic acts that anchors resistance in the preservation of knowledge and memory (174-179).

Resistance in *Gliff* is communal as much as individual, extending across hidden networks – namely, a clandestine organisation named Campion that saves and shelters the 'Unverifiables' – that preserve the possibility of solidarity within a regime designed to annihilate it. Crucially, such visions of solidarity reflect a pattern that runs throughout Smith's work: the consistent imagining of alternative forms of community and kinship as the ground for survival, both personal and collective.[32] Against the politics of exclusion that culminated in the Brexit referendum and intensified in its aftermath, Smith reasserts the principle of hospitality, seldom rooted in blood ties but instead emerging through chosen communities of care, fragile yet hopeful spaces in which the possibility of renewal is sustained.

Briar's own rebellion begins with a chance encounter: meeting a factory-worker named Ayesha Falcon and, for the first time in five years, hearing Rose mentioned. Retrieving a Shakespearean romance trope,[33] Ayesha tells Briar "You are the image of your sister", which unleashes a torrent of reflection from Briar: nobody knows she ever existed anymore, since her name has "fallen off any data connected to me" (117). When the school is stormed and Briar is taken away, the siblings are separated for good. Briar never discovers Rose's fate, and so the mere suggestion that she might still be alive reignites a flame of hope that had lain dormant while survival was Briar's only aim.[34]

It is at this point that the phrase "Brave new world" (116), opening the chapter narrating older Briar's life in the factory, assumes the same ironic charge it bears in Shakespeare's play and Huxley's novel. From then on, each chapter begins with a variation on the phrase, and each variation marks a stage in Briar's growing resistance.[35] When the words become "Brave new wold" (121), the altered

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[30] Caliban against Prospero, Sebastian and Antonio against Alonso.

[31] In keeping with Smith's characteristic intertextual logic, libraries as emblems of care, hospitality, and shared cultural memory, as well as sites of resistance and guardians of stories and multiplicity, are also present, for instance, in the short story collection *Public Libraries and Other Stories* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2015) and in *Autumn* (2016).

[32] See Agnes Andewega and Dušan Janković, "'Always Try to Welcome People into the Home of Your Story'. Forms of Hospitality in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*", *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings*, 11.2 (2024), 1-18; Michela Compagnoni, "The Spirit(s) of Time: Navigating the Present Through Shakespeare's Romances in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*", *Critical Survey*, 37.2 (2025), 112-127.

[33] For a Shakespearean parallel, see *The Winter's Tale*, where Leontes remarks on Florizel's resemblance to his father: "did print your royal father off, / Conceiving you. Were I but twenty-one, / Your father's image is so hit in you, / His very air, that I should call you brother". William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. John Pitcher (London: Arden Bloomsbury Shakespeare, 2010), 5.1.124-127.

[34] Briar likewise never learns what happened to Leif, except that she was refused re-entry at border control and later appears with a date of death (196).

[35] Smith is well known for her witty use of wordplay (see Young, "What's To-Day", 141-142; Germanà and Horton, "Introduction", 1). Fittingly, the second novel of the diptych will be entitled *Glyph*, a homophone of *Gliff*.

spelling signals the metaphorical space that opens for Briar the moment they learn Rose may still exist. Later, "Rave new old" (224) points to the tactics Briar develops within the factory, exploiting the blind spots in surveillance to fight the system from within. "Raveno(us)" (233) marks the pivotal moment when Briar trades painkillers with Ayesha for information.[36] With "Aven(i)r" (246), the word tilts toward futurity, crystallising the decision to rebel: "my briar self is back, prickly and twined and opening in me like a bush covered in wild opening blossom" (248).

The sequence builds toward a crescendo – "Brave you world," "Brave now world," and "Bravo new world" (255, 258, 264) – which accompanies Briar's escape from the factory and their wanderings in the countryside. It culminates in the final transformation, "Brave new word" (266), when readers learn how Rose and Gliff escaped together, the horse's polysemous name and Rose's candid innocence standing as metaphors for resistance against the regime's drive to fixity. In a gesture that recalls Shakespeare's own play with language in *The Tempest*, where meaning continually slips, multiplies, and resists containment, with each new inflection of Shakespeare's line Smith stages the slow emergence of rebellion, showing how totalitarianism can be unravelled not in one single act but through a series of small resistances prising open a fracture in the system. In this process, Briar comes into focus as a Caliban-like figure: marked by exclusion, shaped by subjugation, yet ultimately embodying the possibility of defiance. This parallel extends beyond their resistance to encompass the very terms in which *Gliff* reimagines Shakespeare's treatment of the 'Unverifiable' subjects of the island.

3. Caliban's Heirs: The Unruly Power of the Unverifiables

At the heart of *Gliff*, displacement finds its first solace in the figure of the horse, which tellingly gives the title to the novel's first section (1), thus foregrounding it from the outset as a living repository of hope against the odds. In Rose's devotion to the animal destined for the slaughterhouse, the horse embodies a fragile but sustaining metaphor for how care for the vulnerable, the expendable, and the silenced may itself become an act of resistance in a world structured by exclusion.

From this emblem of care, the narrative expands toward broader models of community, alternative forms of belonging that recur throughout Smith's oeuvre and constitute a central aspiration for much Brexlit.[37] The group of misfits inhabiting the abandoned St Saccobanda School exemplifies such solidarities: individuals who, though they live together only for a short period and largely keep to themselves, nonetheless mark each other indelibly through the simple fact of sheltering and sharing space.[38] A parallel emerges in Ayesha's account of those saved by Campion and gathered in the dark cave, where Rose takes care of the group through storytelling (240-245), a practice that, as so often in Smith's work, turns narrative itself into a vehicle of survival and connection.

This emphasis on care is also embodied in Leif, whose decision to take responsibility for Briar and Rose sets the siblings' fate of abandonment in motion. He provides for them with real devotion, before departing to find their mother unencumbered by the bureaucratic burden of carrying minors to whom he has no official relation. As Rose reflects, "He's not our family…. That's what the people in the passport offices kept saying to us" (94). In a society that has taught them to trust only data and

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[36] This echoes *Brave New World*'s 'soma', the state-distributed drug used to pacify citizens but also circulated through clandestine exchanges and barter.

[37] See Kristian Shaw, *Brexlit: British Literature and the European Project* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 3; examples of such alternative models of belonging recur throughout the *Seasonal Quartet* as well as in *There But For The* (2011) and *Companion Piece* (2022).

[38] The group includes children and teenagers, a seventy-nine-year-old former librarian, a renowned philosopher and art historian, as well as other figures identified only by name and their roles in the school community (111; 154; 156-162).

numbers, Briar and Rose must learn instead to place their trust in Leif, and in the possibility of care that exceeds formal recognition, since – as Briar acknowledges – "Family can be more things than people say it is" (Ibid.).

The precarious bond between Leif and the children is itself dangerous precisely because it cannot be "verified", and in *Gliff*'s world the inability to compress an individual into a dossier of certified facts – purporting to capture the entirety of their personhood – renders them inherently suspect. This emphasis on the 'Unverifiables' speaks directly to the Brexit context, where anti-immigrant sentiment fuelled fierce opposition to open border policies, intensifying xenophobic resistance to immigration and transnational mobility more broadly.[39] The treatment of those pushed to the outer edges of society has always been a defining concern of Smith's work,[40] and *Gliff* makes it starkly visible through its catalogue of exclusions. The abandoned school, for instance, also shelters two small "feral looking," completely silent children who, as the novel explains, "had been marked unverifiable simply because nobody knew what had happened to their adults and it couldn't be proved who they were" (162). The arbitrariness of such designations underscores how people of any age may be rendered unverifiable not only for what they are or what they say, but also for what they are *not* or for what they refuse to do.

As in so much literature that confronts the issue of monstrosity in its broadest sense, what is at stake here is not only the fear of difference but, more pointedly, the fear of what cannot be classified and regulated.[41] In the panoptic world Smith depicts, this fear becomes institutionalised, and the state responds to those who resist categorisation by re-educating them so that they can be reintegrated into the social fabric, once they have come to comply fully with its rigid binaries. It is in this nexus of exclusion, fear, and resistance that *Gliff* finds its strongest echo of Shakespeare's Caliban, who stands as the paragon of monstrosity: deformed and incomprehensible, Caliban is *the* model of the excluded figure to which so much later literature has returned. The play stages Caliban as the monster *par excellence*, the foil against which all others appear angelic, as Prospero makes clear when, addressing Miranda, he declares: "Thou think'st there is no more such shapes as he, / Having seen but him and Caliban. Foolish wench, / To th' most of men, this is a Caliban, / And they to him are angels" (1.2.479-482).

To risk a deliberate simplification of a much-debated critical issue, Caliban is for Prospero not merely a servant but also a creature to be reshaped.[42] Like *Gliff*'s 'Unverifiables', he is subjected to a process of re-education, reshaped through the imposition of his master's customs and language, in an effort to integrate him into the surrogate of Western civilisation over which Prospero presides as absolute ruler. Yet Caliban can never be fully assimilated. What makes him most threatening is not a specific deformity but the fact that his deformity is never clearly defined, always left deliberately imprecise when, again and again, characters attempt to decode and classify Caliban's irreducible difference driven by the compulsion to determine the origin and nature of his monstrous body.[43] The same logic drives the society of *Gliff*, where the 'Unverifiables' are feared not for what they

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[39] See Maria Sobolewska and Robert Ford, *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2020).

[40] An exemplary case is Smith's participation in the *Refugee Tales* project, which brings together writers and asylum seekers to recount stories of displacement and detention: Ali Smith, "The Detainee's Tale", in David Herd and Anna Pincus, eds., *Refugee Tales* (Manchester: Comma Press, 2016), 15-26.

[41] I use 'monster' in a poststructuralist sense, as a liminal creature that resists definition and classification, subverting systems of norms. See Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975*, eds. Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Verso, 2003); and Jacques Derrida, *Points…: Interviews, 1974–1994*, ed. Elizabeth Weber, transs. Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1995), 386, where the monster is "not yet recognized" and "frightens because no anticipation had prepared one to identify this figure".

[42] See Julia Reinhard Lupton, "Creature Caliban", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 51 (2000), 1-23.

[43] See Michela Compagnoni, *I mostri di Shakespeare: figure del deforme e dell'informe* (Roma: Carocci, 2022), 34-35.

demonstrably are, but because they resist all attempts at categorisation, jeopardizing the stability of a system predicated on the utter subjugation of difference.

From here, *Gliff* shifts its interrogation of the 'Unverifiables' toward the broader problem of identity, raising in oblique form the question of where identity resides.[44] Certainly not in documents, as Rose insists, for "a passport doesn't prove we're us, she said. We prove a passport's it. We just are us" (97). In *Brave New World* the answer is unequivocal: identity lies in the caste into which one is born, reinforced by the conditioning imposed to keep each subject in place within that hierarchy. In *Gliff*, by contrast, identity is multiple, transient, and unstable, a condition both liberating and perilous in a system intent on overseeing and systematising.

The notion that identity is not singular but fluid is already at work in *The Tempest*, where characters repeatedly question one another's true nature, only to discover that identities shift as roles transform. This instability arises from the blurred boundaries between illusion and reality, as well as from the profound metamorphoses each character undergoes over the play's three hours on the island: like a Renaissance alchemical process, each figure is somehow purged and perfected, emerging reborn by the end of the play.[45] The "sea-change" (1.2.401) evoked in Ariel's song becomes the emblem of this transformation, as Prospero's shapeshifting spirits drive the characters through cycles of disorientation and renewal. *Gliff* revisits this Shakespearean vision in distorted form: here, subjects can be rendered "temporary", their very being reduced to whether or not their data can be verified, as if their inner selves existed only in the eyes of the system that monitors them.

In this respect, Briar stands as the novel's most emblematic figure of fluctuating identity, continuing Smith's sustained exploration of non-binary and gender-fluid characters across her fiction.[46] Their refusal to be confined to a single category carries not only the stigma of exclusion but also the possibility of liberation. By slipping between names, genders, and roles, Briar unsettles the very boundaries on which the state's taxonomic logic depends and opens a space of resistance within instability: when a fellow resident of the school asks "are you a boy or a girl," Briar's disarming reply – "Yes I am" (160) – captures this refusal of binary logic. The novel approaches the question with characteristic delicacy, presenting it not as a problem to be solved but as one of the many ways characters inhabit their being. It is only after Briar's capture that their sexual and gender identity becomes problematised both by the guards and at the level of the narrative itself.

This process of coercive identification reaches its most violent expression when Briar is taken into a room and ordered to undress (211-216). "What the fuck is it?" one guard asks, the pronoun *it* enacting an immediate dehumanisation. "Can't tell," another replies, before demanding, "Which are you, then, you little weirdo?" Humiliation follows as Briar's clothes are cut away, their hair shorn off, and their body searched, until, as Briar recalls, "they told me what they'd decided I was". Identity here is not discovered but imposed, reduced to an arbitrary verdict backed by force. Even the name by which Briar will live for the next five years is the product of misrecognition: asked who they are, Briar replies "Allendale," after the folk song[47] that inspired their mother in naming both siblings, but the guards mishear it as "Alan Dale". The act of renaming completes the process of erasure and re-inscription, violently overwriting selfhood with the stamp of state power.

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[44] The novel pays close attention to names, which shift as fluidly as identities themselves (see, for instance, page 86).

[45] See, among others, Peggy Muñoz Simonds, "My Charms Crack Not: The Alchemical Structure of *The Tempest*", *Comparative Drama*, 31.4 (1997-1998), 538-570; Michela Compagnoni, "Steel Caliban: A New Etymological and Alchemical Inquiry into *The Tempest*", *Shakespeare*, 21.1 (2025), 33-48.

[46] Examples include Smith's novels *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) and *How to Be Both* (2014), as well as the short story "Erosive", in *The Whole Story and Other Stories* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), 115-122.

[47] The reference is to the traditional Northumbrian folk song *The Bonnie Lad of Allendale* (anonymous, c. 19th century).

What demands attention here is the way the violence of Briar's forced exposure finds a striking parallel in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, where a comparable scene unfolds as Stephano and Trinculo first encounter Caliban in Act 2, Scene 2. Their exchange reads almost like a grotesque anatomy, an inquisitorial survey of his body that rehearses the classificatory zeal of Renaissance science: "What have we here, a man or a fish? Dead or alive?" Caliban becomes, in rapid succession, "a strange fish", "an islander that hath lately suffered by a / thunderbolt", "some monster of the isle", a "cat", a "mooncalf", a "puppy-headed monster" (2.2.27; 35-36; 64; 82; 105; 152-153). Like a specimen in an anatomical theatre – those sites of bodily scrutiny proliferating in Renaissance Europe[48] – Caliban is dissected through language, his identity suspended between human and non-human, natural and unnatural. Crucially, however, the inquiry never arrives at a definitive answer. Caliban remains undefined, an indeterminate figure whose refusal to be pinned down has allowed him, across centuries of adaptation, to become all possible versions of himself.

This scene's resonance with Briar's ordeal in *Gliff* is sharpened by the economic logic embedded in Shakespeare's play. Trinculo imagines the profit to be made from exhibiting such a creature: "Were I in England now … There would this monster make a man; any strange beast there makes a man" (2.2.27-31). Stephano echoes the impulse, envisioning Caliban as a gift for royalty: "If I can recover him and keep him tame, and get to Naples with him, he's a present for any emperor that ever trod on neat's leather … I will not take too much for him! He shall pay for him that hath him, and that soundly" (67-77). With telling similarity, the same urge to codify as inseparable from the urge to commodify resurfaces in *Gliff*, when the guards, after their long and humiliating inquiry into Briar's body, dismiss their indeterminacy with the chilling remark: "Good test case, though. Got the looks. Worth money" (214). In both texts, the refusal of definition becomes inextricable from the threat of objectification, laying bare how the drive to regiment and categorise bodies is bound to the impulse to exploit them.

4. Conclusion: Supera Bounders

From the same drive to define and demarcate arises one of the most resonant motifs in *Gliff*: the drawing of borders. The novel's third section, tellingly entitled "Lines" (219), foregrounds boundary-making as both literal and symbolic practice. Early on, Briar names the agents who paint the fatal red lines "supera bounders" (63), borrowing the phrase from the strange machine they operate, itself labelled "SUPERA BOUNDER" (54). The absurdity of the name, and the fact that the machine strikes Briar as "an invention made by an amateur for a joke" (54-55), underscores the banality of a simple sweep of paint with which lives are annulled as though existence itself could be erased by bureaucratic decree.

The glaring unawareness of those who perform such acts – like the "superabounder" who casually remarks, "Doing my job… What I'm paid to" (54) – is a paradigmatic case of bureaucratic inertia exemplifying Hannah Arendt's notion of the banality of evil, where wrongdoing arises from the ordinary functioning of bureaucracies once individuals cease to exercise judgment.[49] As Davide Del Bello observes, Shakespeare had already staged such dynamics in *The Tempest*, in which "evildoing … is ambiguously entangled with the systematic deployment and swift exercise of expedient

[48] Famous examples of anatomical theatres include that of the University of Padua, the first of its kind, built at the behest of the anatomist Girolamo Fabrici d'Acquapendente (1564), and that of the University of Leiden (1597).

[49] For a discussion of this issue in relation to Brexlit, see Lyndsey Stonebridge, "The Banality of Brexit", in Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature*, 7-14.

'instruction' (III.iii.85) meant to trigger specific results".[50] Prospero's repeated praise of Ariel and the spirits for the meticulous precision with which they execute his commands betrays a relish in procedural compliance, an echo of the bureaucratic inertia that Smith translates into a twenty-first-century equivalent.

An issue central to recent British debates and to Smith's post-referendum fiction,[51] in *Gliff* lines do not merely demarcate; they redefine. Like any border, they are conventions but nonetheless carry the arbitrary prerogative to determine the identity and belonging of places and those who inhabit them. The same holds in *The Tempest*, where spaces are provisional and unstable: the Duchy of Milan in Prospero's tale, the island in Caliban's claim to inheritance, and the reign of Naples in Antonio and Sebastian's plot.[52] Each is transformed – or made vulnerable to transformation – by usurpation, as violently and arbitrarily as a red line painted across the ground. Unlike in *Brave New World*, where the 'savages' are enclosed within the Reservation, in *Gliff* the line compels expulsion rather than confinement, forcing flight much as Prospero himself was once cast adrift.

To read Smith's novel through Shakespeare is thus to see how the line operates on two interwoven levels. On the one hand, it condenses the logic of dominance and surveillance. Prospero's omnipotent art, grounded in the manipulation of illusion and memory, finds a modern analogue in the technologies of cataloguing, monitoring, and erasure that structure Smith's state. The red line is the visible trace of an invisible system, marking the reach of a government that aspires to total control. On the other hand, the line exposes the instability of identity and belonging. In *The Tempest*, questions of who one is remain unsettled, shifting with each new configuration of power. *Gliff* reworks this legacy by showing how the category of the 'Unverifiable' emerges precisely from what cannot be contained or fixed. In both texts, the attempt to stabilise identity only reveals its inherent fluidity.

What, then, does it mean to live 'inside' or 'outside' the line? For Shakespeare's characters, as for Smith's, borders are never neutral: they are instruments of domination and also the conditions that make rebellion thinkable. Caliban, Ariel, and even Antonio plot to resist the sovereign power that seeks to define and bind them. Briar's own rebellion follows this trajectory, refusing the identities imposed on them and finally rewriting Prospero's "brave new world" into a series of subversive fractures by erasing data, including their own ("Now that I don't exist I finally exist again", 260).

Today, in a world increasingly preoccupied with borders and belonging, the image of the line carries an unsettling familiarity. Yet in its arbitrariness, the line also reveals its fragility. Just as Prospero's island dissolves into air and his sovereign magic into words, so too Smith suggests that systems of exclusion are not immutable. They can be undone and reimagined. For *Gliff* is steeped in Shakespearean tropes and echoes that extend far beyond *The Tempest*: the lost parents, children, and siblings; the rediscovered family members; the mixed and fluid identities; the magic and folklore; the dreams, storytelling, and voyage cast as a quest. These hallmarks of the romances reappear in Smith's novel not as nostalgic allusions but as invitations to envisage alternatives for possible futures of peace rooted in rebirth, reconciliation, and forgiveness.

In *Brave New World*, Shakespeare gives John the Savage the words to voice his deepest emotions; in *Gliff*, *The Tempest* still furnishes the language with which we confront power, rethink identity, and lay bare the workings of control. As Andrew James Hartley observes, millennial Shakespearean rewritings invite us to investigate "the way contemporary concerns extend and rewrite the

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[50] Davide Del Bello, "Things of Darkness: Enduring Evil in Shakespeare's Late Plays", *Memoria di Shakespeare*, 12, "Issues of Evil", ed. by Alessandra Marzola, forthcoming.

[51] Notable examples include *Spring* (2019), with its focus on an Immigration Removal Centre, and *Companion Piece* (2022), which engages with Covid-19 policies.

[52] See Orgel, *Illusion of Power*.

Shakespearean originals".[53] This is precisely what Smith achieves: her novel testifies to the vitality of Shakespeare's play as a living tool for navigating the fractures of our present.

[53] Andrew James Hartley, ed., *Shakespeare and Millennial Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2017), 10.

The Irish Response

VIRGINIE ROCHE-TIENGO

Brexlit: Embracing Change, New Beginnings at the Abbey Theatre

Abstract: Conjuring the representation of change, as well as its opposite counterpart, iteration, requires a kaleidoscopic approach to understanding the craving for change both on and offstage in post-Brexit Ireland. This includes examining its presence in the Abbey Theatre, long attuned to questions of borders, identity and sovereignty to explore a vanishing cultural identity overflown by an increasing process of globalization. We will first see how the representation of change and iteration partake in the shaping of a renewed national post-Brexit identity and focus on the new Irish exploration of Molière's work exemplified by the latest adaptation of *Tartuffe* by Frank McGuinness in 2023. Then we will explore the riveting mirror to life new production of *The Quare Fellow* in 2024, embracing change and continuing Brendan Behan's legacy of subversion. And finally, we will examine Marina Carr's ghost play, *Audrey or Sorrow* (2024) and show how performance and theatre are privileged places for the post-Brexit Irish society to act out the impact of a haunting history.

Keywords: *Brexit*, *Abbey Theatre*, *Molière*, *Frank McGuinness*, *Brendan Behan, Marina Carr*

The word "iteration" invites us to ponder over the notion of change and the act or process of passing something from one person to another, from one *topos* or one *logos* to another, from a haunted stage to another, and from one parochial memory to a boundless diasporic vision. The notion of iteration in Ireland prompts us to examine translations, borders, boundaries, limits, even hermeneutic crossings that lead to new experiences, new ways of considering, re-imagining and questioning the self and the world. For Michel Foucault, to write is thus "to show oneself, to project oneself into view, to make one's own face appear in the other's presence",[1] which also implies a close link between drama, ethics, poetics and politics. The theatre is "the place where a nation thinks in public in front of itself" according to Martin Esslin in *An Anatomy of Drama*.[2] And this quote is relevant when we think of the Abbey Theatre, the national theatre of Ireland. Brexit, though primarily a political and economic rupture has yielded powerful cultural and artistic responses, from the translation and adaptation of Molière's play, *Tartuffe* (1664), by Frank McGuinness in 2023 to the 2024 production of Brendan Behan's play, *The Quare Fellow* (1954) and Marina Carr's *Audrey or Sorrow* (2024). Brexit has become a polymorphic palimpsest, taken as both provocation and opportunity. Placing Molière, Behan and Carr in dialogue provides a fertile and thought-provoking framework for examining how the Abbey Theatre responded to Brexit through comedy, satire and tragedy and questioned the themes of truth, hypocrisy and deceitfulness, the contested memory of colonialism, death and political imprisonment with the haunted and haunting voices of history and shifting political landscapes.

1. A post-Brexit *Tartuffe* at the Abbey Theatre

The Abbey Theatre's Artistic Director Caitríona McLaughlin introduces the 2023 Abbey's adaptation of *Tartuffe* by Frank McGuinness as an opulent Irish retelling of a true classic. Molière enriched the

[1] Michel Foucault, "Self-Writing", in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, trans. Robert Hurley, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 216.
[2] Martin Esslin, *An Anatomy of Drama* (London: Temple Smith, 1978), 101.

human mind and McGuinness's new adaptation henceforth built bridges in a post-Brexit era where truth and falsity, decency and hypocrisy are intermingled and blurred. For McLaughlin: "Great comic writers go one step further: they encode the DNA of their own anarchic laughter into our present, a present that would be unrecognisable to them apart from a few salient details – the persistence of hypocrisy as a tool for social advancement, for example, and of saying one thing and meaning another".[3]

The comedy *Tartuffe* was premiered as a three-act play in May 1664 at the Palace of Versailles for King Louis XIV and banned because it was thought to attack the Catholic Clergy and more precisely St François de Sales' definition of a spiritual adviser. In his *Introduction à la vie dévote* (*Introduction to a Devout Life*, 1608), de Sales compared the spiritual adviser to an angel, a companion, a confessor, a guide on every human being's spiritual journey. Molière was accused of mocking Catholic devotion by the Archbishop of Paris, Paul Philippe Hardouin de Beaumont de Péréfixe, who influenced the king's decision to ban the play, and threatened excommunication against anyone who read, attended the play and/or supported the playwright. François de Sales' *Introduction à la vie dévote* was translated into Irish Gaelic in 1650 by Pilib Ó Raghallaigh as *An Bheatha Chrábhaidh.* The key to the appeal of the text in Ireland is, for Charles Dillon, "that it speaks directly to the reader, advising and counselling him on such diverse matters as attendance at mass and frequent communion, on the suitability of friendships and relationships, on the dangers of overindulgence in leisure, and in how to avoid and overcome temptation".[4]

The spiritual adviser is sanctified, capable of miracles and oracles. Dorine mocks this devout relationship between Orgon and Tartuffe. For Orgon, God speaks through Tartuffe because he is his religious teacher. Molière was accused of throwing into disarray the very foundation of the Catholic Church because he mocked the spiritual adviser's religious and sanctified guidance of souls. Hence, to avoid being accused of poisoning the souls, Molière rewrote *Tartuffe.* It was performed as a five-act play on Tuesday, 5 February 1669, in Paris at the Palais Royal Theatre. The title changed from *Tartuffe ou l'Hypocrite* in 1664 to *Tartuffe ou l'Imposteur* in 1669. Tartuffe became more of an imposter than a religious hypocrite, even though in the list of *dramatis personae*, Tartuffe is still described as "un faux dévot" ("a religious hypocrite") in the 1669 version.

McGuinness' new version of *Tartuffe* was first performed at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin on 3 March 2023. His play is based on the 1669 version. It is divided into five acts and is written in verse. In the list of *dramatis personae*, McGuinness chose to describe Tartuffe not as a religious hypocrite but as an imposter. He rewrote the list of characters, dividing it into three sections, the first one entitled "The Family" and starting with Orgon, minutely described as "son of Madame Pernelle, husband of Elmire, father of Mariane and Damis" contrary to Molière, who defined Orgon as Elmire's husband (*Mari d'Elmire*). It is extremely interesting to point out the fact that McGuinness used the heading "The Family" because, when *Tartuffe* was premiered at the Palais-Royal Theatre in 1669, the cast was made up of Molière's own family on stage. Orgon was played by Molière himself, Elmire, by his wife Mlle Molière (Armande Béjart), Dorine by Madeleine Béjart (Molière's first love and Armande's mother), and Mme Pernelle by Louis Béjart (Madeleine's brother). The second section is made up of characters who do not belong to the family *per se* but who are linked to the family either as servants or as suitors, Valere, Mariane's suitor, Tartuffe, the imposter and the two maids, Dorine and Filipote. The last section is linked to law and justice with an Arresting Officer and the ill-named Monsieur Loyal, who works for Tartuffe and embodies his disloyalty and ingratitude towards Orgon. Monsieur Loyal is

[3] Caitríona McLaughlin in the programme note to *Tartuffe*: *https://www.abbeytheatre.ie*.

[4] Charles Dillon, "*An Bheatha Chrábhaidh:* A 'Popular' Translation", *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal*, III.1 (2005), *www.journals.openedition.org*.

played by a woman, Amy Convoy, in the 2023 Abbey Theatre adaptation of *Tartuffe*. The question of changing gender identity and performance is also a molieresque feature, since in the *Tartuffe* premiere (1669) Madame Pernelle was played by a man, Louis Béjart.

The Abbey Theatre stage is haunted by Molière's performance. As McLaughlin stated mischievously "Molière probably didn't know he was inadvertently writing about twenty-first century Ireland, but Frank McGuinness certainly did".[5] Hence, the stage, the text, the production, and the body of the actors are haunted by Molière's ghost and theatrical transmission. As Marvin Carlson highlighted in *The Haunted Stage*, "the need continually to rehearse and renegotiate the relationship with memory and the past, is nowhere more specifically expressed in human culture than in theatrical performance".[6] "All theatre" for Carlson "is haunted by repetition"[7] and I would add by transmission, that is to say an Irish cultural and social activity deeply involved with memory and history. McGuinness kept the same names for his characters. He only erased the diacritical marks, the accents, the glyphs added to the letter 'e'. The 'é' with an acute accent for Cléante and the 'è' with a grave accent for Valère. Some French words are embedded in the text creating a feeling of foreign familiarity: from Act One, "ELMIRE *Ma belle mère*, why the haste ?"[8] to Act 5, "Monsieur LOYAL This house belongs to *Monsieur* Tartuffe" (82). Implicitly, the spectator is sent back to a seventeenth century France, and McGuinness' script becomes a paradoxical palimpsest of continuity and change. Transmission and transformation are woven together into fragments of the present and the absent, giving access to experience from different times and space in multiple layers of synchronicity. For McLaughlin, McGuinness "has channelled Molière's comic spirit, alacrity, bite and gameplay …, underscored with a lash of his Ulster tongue and held within the controlled strictures of rhyming couplets".[9] McGuinness has indeed imposed formal constraints on his version of *Tartuffe* and the use of Irish colloquialisms is mixed with elaborate metaphors. His rhyming couplets are filled with Hiberno-English expressions like "Great craic" (ACT 1, PERNELLE: The dirty chat that could turn your stomach / That's fare for all in the land of great craic, 18), "Fella" (ACT 2, DORINE: Take up this offer; you've found your fella. / Is he not divine? Is he not swell? 37), or "Eejit" (ACT 4, ELMIRE: Love can make eejits out of one and all, 64; ACT 5, ORGON: Look at my mother, the eejit in the hat. / If she pushes me further, I'll knock her flat, 79).

The action of the play takes place in a partitioned space. There is a large and colourful seventeenth century dining room with a banquet table covered with food and drink and a smaller room, mostly bare save for a charging phone or laptop and a ring light. There are numerous doors in both spaces, allowing eavesdropping and the comic entrance and exit of maids and suitors. This partitioned performing space is the archetypal representation of a divided geographical, physical, social and psychic Irish society. On one side we witness Tartuffe, the hypocrite, the devout spiritual advisor of Orgon, presenting a false and distorted image of himself to the world, and on the other, we face the hidden space of a psyche, the Freudian id, the subconscious part of Tartuffe's mind that is responsible for driving him towards guilty physical desires. In this smaller empty space, he flogs himself in front of a mobile phone camera, illuminated not by a Christian candle but by a twenty-first century ring light. The juxtaposition of these two partitioned spaces unveils the dichotomy between illusion and reality, faith and hypocrisy and makes us ponder over our abusive use of new technologies that put filters on our faces and life, dangerously developing our narcissistic tendencies and hiding our flaws

[5] Caitríona McLaughlin in the programme note to *Tartuffe. https://www.abbeytheatre.ie*
[6] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Harbor: Michigan U.P., 2011), 167.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Frank McGuinness, *Tartuffe* (London: Faber & Faber, 2023), 13. Further references to the play appear in parentheses.
[9] McLaughlin, *Tartuffe*.

and true self. Hence, when we attend McGuinness' version of *Tartuffe*, we stand for the King and Queen in Velazquez's painting *Las Meninas*, who are supposedly outside, yet their reflection in the back wall mirror also places them inside the pictorial space. To quote Michel Foucault:

> we are observing ourselves being observed by the painter and made visible to his eye by the same light that enables us to see him. And just as we are about to apprehend ourselves, transcribed by his hand as though in a mirror, we find that we can in fact apprehend nothing of that mirror but its lustreless back. The other side of a psyche.[10]

The use of technological device in the partitioned space is a warning. We will not be tartuffed by a man present in our home but worse by countless Tartuffes on our mobile phone in a looming post-Brexit Orwellian dystopia. Because in that space, the screen of our mobile phones and our laptops, the fight against religious hypocrisy, patriarchy and sexual oppression is more relevant than ever. Seventeenth century France and twenty-first century Ireland share the same issues. Molière and his Irish translators transcend time and space because they open a dialogue between their works. They echo one another and their palimpsest feature is a transtextual perfusion that enables the mixture of old and new dramatic blood. To translate is to enter a world of intimacy and privacy because the writer and the translator, like the observer and the observed in *Las Meninas*, are taking part in a ceaseless exchange of permutations. And as Steiner stated in *After Babel*, "the existence of art and literature and the reality of felt history in a community, depend on a never-ending, though very often unconscious art of internal translation".[11]

In transposing *Tartuffe* into a deregulation of all senses twenty-first century Ireland, McLoughlin harnesses the synesthetic potential of the theatre, bringing together sound, colour, and sensation creating in the audience a neurological condition whereby the stimulation of one sensory modality evokes, as well, a perception in an unstimulated modality. It starts with the stimulation of hearing. The play opens to Azealia Bank's *212*. Then there are songs such as *Slave 4 You* by Britney Spears assisting the transition from one scene to another and music ranging from techno to the Pet Shop Boys and Depeche Mode. Hence, the stimulation of hearing in McLoughlin staging of *Tartuffe* is not only due to the enunciation of speech and text by the actors on stage but also by sounds, noises, and music. Voices, loud music, and technological means, mobile phone device and laptop items create the synecdochic atmosphere of a feverish performance crossing spatial and temporal borders. The staging presents a transcendental vision of a language that brings together sounds, space and images. The stimulation of sight on stage is not only due to the colourful cacophony of Katie Davenport's costumes and set but also by lightning and strobe effects. Strobing images are intermingled with loud sounds, creating synaesthesia, *i.e.* a heightened stimulation of sight and hearing through rupture and deviation. Henceforth, McGuinness' script and McLaughlin's staging send us back to Molière, the playwright, the stage director, the poet and the actor who talked about the dichotomy between the text and the staging. Molière, in his introduction to *L'Amour médecin* (1666), stated: "It is well known that comedies are only made to be performed; and I advise the reading of this one only to those who have the eyes to discover in the reading all the play of the theatre".[12]

Moliere thus laid down a fundamental and maybe controversial principle: a good reading of the theatre is one that is done 'with the eyes of the theatre', one that succeeds in visualizing the performance, and thus in mentally reconstructing all the acting and ornaments of the theatre. A synesthetic reading of *Tartuffe* becomes the basis of a renewed deregulation of all the senses staging.

[10] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Book Edition, 1994), 5.
[11] George Steiner, *After Babel* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1975), 31.
[12] Molière, *Œuvres complètes*, éd. Georges Forestier et Claude Bourqui, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 603 (my translation).

Once the stage directions have been read, the setting immediately fades into the mental background. In the performance, on the other hand, the setting persists and exerts a continuous pressure on the spectator's perception and interpretation of the scene. The mental background can be forgotten, while the physical background is persistent.

McLaughlin's representation of change and iteration partook in the shaping of a renewed national post-Brexit identity in Ireland by staging Molière's play *Tartuffe* in 2023 at the Abbey Theatre to explore the diachronic theme of truth and falsity. At a time of political upheaval and uncertainties where liars and hypocrites roam the corridors of power, we will now explore the riveting mirror to life production of Brendan Behan's *The Quare Fellow* (1954) directed by Tom Creed at the Abbey Theatre in 2023, embracing change and continuing Behan's legacy of subversion.

2. The Post-Brexit Circle of Thanatos

The contemporary crisis of Brexit offers a provocative opportunity and subversive ways to consider how Ireland continues to negotiate its place in Europe between cultural memory and political change. Brendan Behan's voice from beyond the grave offers a Swiftian lens sharpened by satire, compassion and a deep suspicion of borders both literal and psychological in a post-Brexit Ireland. Behan in *The Hostage* (1958) has one of his characters, Pat, draw a stifling circle of death: "Now, I'm going to draw a circle round you, with this piece of chalk. Now you move outside that circle and you're a dead man. Watch him, Feargus. *He draws a circle round LESLIE WILLIAMS, and the VOLUNTEER points his gun at him*".[13] Behan exposes in this play the way in which ideological systems produce forms of confinement that restrict not only the bodies but also the imaginations. Brexit, with its emphasis on sovereignty, control and territorial reappropriation represents a contemporary reiteration of these dynamics of imprisonment. Behan draws an Irish thanatopolitical circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. In *The Hostage* or, recently, *The Quare Fellow* directed by Creed at the Abbey Theatre in 2024, death is inside and outside the circle, it is written on the margins. For Creed:

> As ... the offstage death of the quare fellow becomes inevitable, a kind of improvised wake spontaneously takes place in the prison yard. A few bottles of stout are opened, and songs both spiritual and secular are sung. What might we do to stave off suffering? How might we pay tribute to lives lost, however brutal or neglected? *The Quare Fellow* opens a space for us to be together, in joy and hardship, ... to reflect on past, present and future, and what we do to survive.[14]

Michael Pierse defined Ireland's 'thanatopolitics' as "the power over life and death and how the struggles of the marginal define the politics of the centre".[15] Theo Dorgan, in "Larkin through the Eyes of Writers", quoted Behan asking in Irish about socialist leader Jim Larkin's funeral, "Was it us in the Coffin?" and answering "No, we were not: we were on the street marching / Alive and grateful for the dead",[16] a clear echo to Padraig Pearse's "life springs from death". Hence,

> in unearthing the suppressed histories of the marginal, exposing the systematicity of the necropolitical, and challenging the normalcy of objective violence, Behan locates something emphatically alive in his

[13] Brendan Behan, *The Complete Plays* (London: Eyre Methuen Drama, 1991), 218.
[14] Tom Creed, *Notes on Survival* (November 2023), *www.abbeytheatre.ie*.
[15] Michael Pierse, ed., *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2017), 168.
[16] Theo Dorgan, "Larkin through the Eyes of Writers", in Donal Nevin, ed., *James Larkin-Lion of the Fold* (Dublin: Gill & MacMillan, 2006), 106.

> depiction of death, that glimmer of desire Ernst Bloch characterized as the inchoate prefiguration of a post-capitalist figure, an implicit 'dreaming ahead'.[17]

In Behan's work Pierse therefore unearthed "a leitmotif of the liminal, of the poverty that pushes working-class people to the threshold of death", calling "attention to structural oppression and to the 'necro-political'", the politics for Achille Mbembe, "of differentiating between valued and devalued bodies, of excluding some from life itself".[18] In Behan's play, *The Quare Fellow*, directed by Creed, we are trapped in the circle of Thanatos, a graveyard haunted by the dead, the Mountjoy Prison where female and non-binary actors play the part of male characters and exhibit a polyphony of accents and social classes. For Creed: "We draw on the whole tradition of cross-gender casting in the theatre, and a long history of male impersonation, from the trouser roles of baroque opera, and the music hall performances that Behan grew up with, up to contemporary drag kings".[19]

They loiter in jails and poor neighbourhoods and sing a post-Brexit apocalyptic threnody from beyond the grave to the tune of *The Auld Triangle*. But will the dead stifle the living? To quote Jacques Derrida, "we are still in the cemetery, the gravediggers are working hard, digging up skulls, trying to identify them, one by one, and Hamlet recalls that this one 'had a tongue' and it used to sing".[20] Art and language become the unique junction between the living and the dead, between the prison and the life outside its walls, crossing borders between France, the UK and Ireland by means of translations that convey forgotten traumas, injustice and murders through a contrasting set of truth and falsity. For Creed, the play is about survival and "and all the things we do to try to survive the systems in which we are required to operate, masking trauma with humour or alcohol, playing out different roles and relationships, carving out space for small acts of rebellion, kindness or solidarity".[21] Behan is still singing from beyond the grave and haunting Irish actors like Gabriel Byrne, who in *Walking with Ghosts*, *A Memoir*, published in 2020, remembered how he had met him when he was almost five years of age on a Dublin bus with his mother. Before getting off the bus, he wished the young Byrne long life to him and Byrne's mother added that Brendan was a famous writer on the wrong bus and that "God loved him, the creature".[22] If Byrne is walking with Behan's ghost in 2020, Derrida's notion of hauntology pervades and intertwines the life and works of Behan because the voices and the evanescent bodies of ghosts fracture linear conceptions of temporality. The ghost and Behan himself desynchronize memories of the past and offers "the furtive and ungraspable visibility of the invisible".[23]

In a post-Brexit era, it is interesting to highlight the fact that Behan risked jail-time to cross the UK to reach Paris where he met Boris Vian, who translated *The Quare Fellow* as *Le Client du Matin*, and that the Abbey Theatre decided to stage his play exactly a century after his birth. Because Behan as a wanderer in Paris crossed hermeneutic and haunted borders with internal reasons, i.e. a subjective literary motivational set, desires, beliefs of freedom, goals, wants as well as external reasons, determined by the socio-economic environment or the relation with this Parisian environment. Behan was perceived as a celestial tramp wandering in Paris because he embodied Victor Hugo's idea that the spirit is enriched by what it receives and the heart by what it gives. For actor and playwright Georges

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[17] Pierse, *A History*, 194.
[18] Ibid., 170.
[19] Creed, *Notes*.
[20] Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006 [Paris 1993]), 5.
[21] Creed, *Notes*.
[22] Gabriel Byrne, *Walking with Ghosts*: *A Memoir* (New York: Picador, 2020), 21-22.
[23] Derrida, *Spectres*, 5.

Wilson, who first directed *Le Client du matin* (*The Quare Fellow*) in France at the Théâtre de l'oeuvre in 1959 and *Un Otage* (*The Hostage*) at the Odéon, Théâtre de France in 1962 and at the Théâtre de la Madeleine in 1984, Behan, whom he met in Paris, was as generous as his plays because "he must have experienced real poverty. He wears nothing but a suit. We've never seen him change. Does he have a lot of money? I don't know. All I know is that he hands it out to the tramps, his mates".[24]

As a working-class Irish writer, he took possession of the French cultural capital. For Behan, Paris was haunted by Irish artists, poets, playwrights, revolutionaries, singers and priests, whose steps he followed. For Ulick O'Connor, Brendan "reminded himself too that he was now in the city where Irish revolutionaries traditionally spent their exile scheming for their return to their native land. Wolfe Tone, John O'Leary, James Stephens, and many others have spent a lot of their lives in Paris café making common cause with exiles from other countries".[25]

In Paris, Behan encountered the spectres of James Joyce and Oscar Wilde and "jumped in graves" like Seamus Heaney, "dithering, blathering".[26] In his poem "Gratitude to Joyce" (1949), Behan sees the spectre of Joyce in Paris and walks with him in the rue St. André des Arts, but the spectre also sees him and is led to praise him. Behan is not silenced by Joyce or daunted by him, but is defiant, asking to be treated as a peer. He was also haunted by Oscar Wilde, maybe the prime reason for his coming to Paris. He lingered in the street where Wilde passed away and lived in extreme poverty. In Paris, Behan wandered far into forbidden realms, in a linguistic and sexual *terra incognita*. He spoke French but he was said to be "an ungrammatical French speaker".[27] In Paris, Behan became the embodiment of what John Brannigan identifies in his chapter "Bohemian Behan" as "dissidence and the intellectual and sexual freedoms of expatriate life".[28] Because for Derrida: "a genius always resists and defies after the fashion of a spectral thing. The animated work becomes that thing, the thing that, like an elusive spectre, *engineers* a habitation without proper inhabiting, call it a *haunting*, of both memory and translation".[29]

Away from Ireland, Behan wrote in Gaelic and English, spoke French and found in Paris according to John Brannigan "an outlet for exploring the idea that sexuality and morality are social conventions".[30] Behan danced and sang for all the outcasts. His depiction of prostitutes and gay men in *The Hostage* or prisoners in *The Quare Fellow* returned Irish writing to the margins, what Pierse calls "his dance for all the outcasts" against what Foucault has termed "state racisms".[31] The 2024 production of *The Quare Fellow* at the Abbey Theatre is also a dance for all the post-Brexit outcasts. In Behan's work and life in Dublin and Paris, it is the beggar, the prostitute, or the petty thief (Lumpen for Marx) who represent the more general plight of the poor, occupying a threshold space: where according to Pierse "devalued lives expire at the edge of human society".[32] What Behan discovered in Paris was a way to give a voice to the disempowered. Behan's sensitivity to the marginal and the condemned offers a powerful counterpoint to the Brexit's rhetoric of hatred and intolerance. For

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[24] Georges Wilson answering Guy Verdot for the *Figaro littéraire* (10 février 1962), entitled *En attendant Behan* (my translation).
[25] Ulick O'Connor, *Brendan Behan* (London: Abacus, 1993), 136.
[26] Seamus Heaney, "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces", in *North* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 21-24.
[27] Ibid., 137.
[28] John Brannigan, "Bohemian Behan: Late Modernism, Sexual Politics, and the 'Great Awakening' of Brendan Behan", in John McCourt, ed., *Reading Brendan Behan* (Cork: Cork U.P., 2019), 52.
[29] Derrida, *Spectres*, 20.
[30] Brannigan, "Bohemian Behan", 59.
[31] Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France* 1975-76, eds. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana (New York: Picador, 2003), 191.
[32] Pierse, *A History*, 171.

Pierse, "In Irish working-class writing, necropolitics is repeatedly the site of a radical contestation that refuses silence, … that urges the 'social consecration' of the poor".[33] In Paris, Behan met intellectuals like Albert Camus who shared this vision. In the RTE Radio 1 documentary, *Brendan Behan in Paris*, produced by Dierdre McMahon we can hear Behan in a recorded archive praise Camus' Nobel Prize speech: "When Camus got the Nobel Prize, he said the duty of a writer is not to those in power but to those who are subject to them".[34] In French newspapers, Behan was celebrated or caricatured. Maurice Ciantar in *Paris Jour*, compared Behan to the Elizabethan playwrights. Robert Kanters for *L'Express* compared him to Sheridan, Wilde, Shaw, O'Casey, and Shakespeare. And Bertrand Poirot-Delpech in *Le Monde,* said that Behan offered *an* "Irish-style Shakespearean cocktail" which plunged "the mind and all the senses into the best of theatrical intoxication".[35]

The adaptation of Behan's play offers "splendid spectres" in a post-Brexit Ireland because for Steiner in *After Babel*, "[i]t is not the literal past, the 'facts' of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language. … we must never cease renewing those images; because once we do, we fossilize".[36] Because Creed stated that "[f]or this new production, we have tried to imagine spaces which vibrate between past and present, letting the play resonate with its own place and time and also across time and space to include other spaces in which people of all genders have been and still are incarcerated and institutionalised.[37]

Behan's drama comes with mastery to the threshold of changes where discourses of inclusion, gender identity and marginalisation need not exclude the past but are bound to reinterpret it. Behan's play about confinement, liberty, gender issues, truth and violence provokes reflection by bringing together Irish parochial anecdotes and universal heart-wrenching sufferings through mnesic and haunting voices.

3. Women as Post-Brexit Haunted and Haunting Voices

In her play *Audrey or Sorrow,* first performed at the Abbey Theatre on 23 February 2024 and directed by McLaughlin, Marina Carr also presents haunting voices, ghosts on stage before the appearance of living characters, creating an Artaudian language of ghostly blows and screams; hence echoing Antonin Artaud's ideas in *The Theatre and Its Double* that the stage should disclose a mythic world, peopled by "monsters of the primitive imagination seen through the primitive mind".[38] Brexit too has summoned ghosts, memories of the Troubles, border issues, dispossession, fear of re-militarisation and anxiety about identity. Marina Carr's characters suggest that such ghosts cannot be ignored. Ghostly possibilities are triggered by the eponymous Audrey, who first enters like an injured and innocent woman being victimised by her three repellent relatives: Purley, Mac and Grass "*hold Audrey and lay in to her with a tin foil. It is vicious. Blood everywhere. Screams and swoons. Audrey in pitch battle against the three. She succumbs. They stop exhausted. Music to underscore*".[39]

Then Audrey, the spectre mystifyingly transmutes into a vile and infamous monster role, a liar full of rage and hate and overbearing meanness who haunts her sister Maria. Audrey tries to blur the distinction between the world of the living and the world of the ghosts. Tormenting her sister and her

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[33] Ibid.
[34] *Brendan Behan in Paris* (2019) *www.rte.ie*.
[35] Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, *Le Monde* (19 February 1962) (my translation).
[36] Steiner, *After Babel*, 445.
[37] Creed, *Notes*.
[38] Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Victor Corti (London: Alma Classics, 2013), 67.
[39] Marina Carr, *Audrey or Sorrow* (London: Faber & Faber, 2024), 34. Further references to the play appear in parentheses.

nephews and niece, Audrey explains that "Ghosts often act like they're living. They get a bit mixed up" (56), and then adds that "Death doesn't last very long" (65). Audrey swaggers with sound and fury. The seductive nightmarish child becomes a fiendish ghost, harnessing the soul's dark energies in a breathtaking violence. To paraphrase Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot* (1953), Carr gives "birth astride of a grave" because *Audrey or Sorrow* exemplifies Peggy Phelan's powerful idea of the ontology of performance as disappearance.[40] Through the spectre of Audrey, spectators are put into a contagious state of trance. Following Derrida, we may add that Carr challenges the idea that performance vanishes through the theatrical act itself, the spectre becomes the theatrical self. For Rebecca Schneider:

> in the theatre as in the archive, it is only the spectre that can "see but not be seen": it is (also and already) the live body bearing the spectre across the space, the place, of its consignation. The spectre, by virtue of a coup de théâtre, can "see but not be seen" thanks to our embodied knowledge of how to attend to appearances: our collective and skilful forgetting of the actor – the fool or clown chasing trippingly the "question of the play" – who enables, gently, the manipulation of error (in the meantime between the dead and the live) that is an act of transmission, transmutation and transfer.[41]

Hence in *Audrey or Sorrow* the stage is haunted by grown-up ghosts, representing Maria and David's dead or unborn children, Mac, Grass and Purley. Dividing the world of the living and the dead, there is a stairway, or liminal portal between worlds. Darkness descends as a child's coffin is carried downstairs by David followed by Maria dressed in black, veil over her face. Buried at the heart of *Audrey or Sorrow* are the death of new-born children, just like in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and Brian Friel's play *Faith Healer* (1979). Indeed, in *Faith Healer*, the wandering triptych, Frank Grace and Teddy, offers a striking resemblance with Leopold Bloom, Molly and Stephen Dedalus, the Joycean triptych of *Ulysses*. The characters are haunted by the death of a child. In "Hades", as a child's coffin goes past him, Bloom thinks of his dead child, Rudy: "A dwarf's face, mauve and wrinkled like Little Rudy's was … Our. Little. Beggar. Baby. Meant nothing. Mistake of nature. If it's healthy it's from the mother. If not from the man".[42] Grace in *Faith Healer* thinks of her "black-face, macerated baby that's buried in a field in Kinlochbervie in Sutherland in the north of Scotland"[43] whereas for Teddy, the manager, it is a thing, "that little wet thing with the black face and the black body, a tiny little thing, no size at all … a boy it was" (363), but for Frank, it meant nothing, it never existed: "I would have liked to have a child but she was barren" (372). There is a taboo secret in *Audrey or Sorrow*, echoing Grace and Frank's divergent account in *Faith Healer.* In Carr's play, the coffin falls from the stairs in a Beckettian way. In *All That Fall* (1957), Beckett's first play for radio, Dan asks his wife if she has ever felt the desire to kill a child to "nip some young doom in the bud".[44] Beckett implies that Dan is in fact involved in the accident of a child falling from a carriage onto the line and under the wheels. Is Maria in *Audrey or Sorrow* a child killer like Dan in *All That Fall*? Were her children's deaths natural? Were they caused by the ghost of her dead sister, Audrey, fulfilling an ancient curse? Was her own mother a child killer?

In *Audrey or Sorrow*, Carr confronts the dangerous realm of transformation and forges a new identity in an encounter with eternity. The dead influence the living and determine who among the

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[40] See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[41] Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011), 110.

[42] James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 2000 [1922]), 119-120.

[43] Brian Friel, *Faith Healer*, in *Selected Plays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), 349.

[44] Samuel Beckett, *All That Fall* (London: Faber& Faber, 1957), 77.

unborn should visit the living. There is also a mediatory world or area of transition between worlds, what Wole Soyinka calls "the chthonic realm"[45], a place of really dark forces and dark spirits that serves as the staging ground for cosmic monsters. Through her ghosts as cosmic monsters, Carr captures the Artaudian notion of theatre as plague defined in *The Theatre and its Double* and glorifies the infectious nature of violent tragic passions as a redemptive force and the principle of creativity.[46] William Butler Yeats was hoping that the dead could manifest themselves to the living because for him, the principle of creativity derived from the world soul or *anima mundi*. Tragic art, for Yeats moves us by alluring us almost to the intensity of trance. This trance is allowed in Carr's play with the characters appearing on a haunted ground. For Ngamaru Raerino, "the power of the performance emanates from the ground, the literal ground on which the performances take place"[47] and it entails "the active participation of non-human entities (ancestors, rocks and earth) in the human performance act, with other non-humans (walls and floors) as intermediaries".[48] The stairway in *Audrey or Sorrow* leads to two haunted cots and two empty chairs. They become icons which are for Maragret Werry "objects that materially mediate the presence of a supernatural entity".[49] The cots and the chairs are the archival pieces of evidence that a child once lived upstairs. Carr uses vivid stage images, and ritual patterns to explore a dark, disturbing view of motherhood using Brechtian *Verfremdung* or alienation effects to allow the theatrical audience to reappropriate the process presented to them on the stage so that they can deconstruct the events. She exemplifies Brecht's idea that to alienate an event or a character simply means to take away from the event or character what is self-evident, familiar, obvious and to generate astonishment and curiosity about it.

Carr's drama is haunted by ghosts from *By the Bog of Cats* (1998) to *Audrey or Sorrow* in 2024. In an arborescent conceptualization of performance using the concept of the rhizome defined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, which is characterized by six principles: connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, a signifying rupture, cartography and decalcomania,[50] we can draw a parallel with Akimoto Matsuyo's concern with the issue of death. From *Mourning Clothes* (1949) to *Keison the Priest of Hitachi* (1964), Akimoto took up in play after play, the various solutions the Japanese had devised for conquering death. Carr's digging into the issue of death connects her plays to Thanatos and Greek gods but also in *Audrey or Sorrow* she throws her reference net further afield to include Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, *The Tibetan Book of The Dead*, Irish mythology, Catholic practices along with various cultural references to the Underworld from the Māori to the Japanese. *Audrey or Sorrow* ends in front of the sea with Maria diving into the dark and threatening waters. The sea becomes an amniotic fluid and a journey to the Isle of the dead, a clear reference to the last stage direction of Strindberg's play, *The Ghost Sonata* (1907): "*The room vanishes. Böcklin's painting The Isle of the Dead appears in the background; music, soft, tranquil, and pleasantly melancholy is heard from the island*".[51]

In a prologue written for the opening of his Intimate Theatre, Strindberg refers to the journey that mankind must undertake "from the isle of the Living to the Isle of the Dead" and Carr focuses on the

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[45] See Wole Soyinka*, Myth, Literature and the African World* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1976).

[46] Artaud, *Theatre*, 34.

[47] Ngamaru Raerino, cited by Margaret Werry in **"**Decolonising Theatre History: Ontological alterity, acting objects, and what Theatre Studies can learn from Museums", in Tracy C. Davis and Peter W. Marx, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance Historiography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 206.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2005), 1.

[51] August Strindberg, *The Ghost Sonata* (1907), *www.gutenberg.org*.

journey that mothers must undertake when their children die. The tragedy of Helen Alving, widow of Captain Alving, late Court Chamberlain, in Ibsen's play *Ghosts* (1881), is akin to Maria's fate in *Audrey or Sorrow*. They both feel haunted. Helen is unable to protect her son Osvald, a painter who has just arrived from Paris, just like Maria or her mother are unable to protect their children. But voices from an everlasting silence are loud.

Voices from beyond the grave are deafening in the aftermath of Brexit. Irish playwrights like McGuinness, Behan and Carr embody silenced traumas and unveil the burdens cast upon a language and a nation that have long been subject to colonisation and patriarchy. Directors like McLaughlin and Creed carve out space at the Abbey Theatre for open-mindedness, rebellion, empathy or solidarity because theatre is a privileged *topos* for the post-Brexit Irish society to act out the impact of a haunting history and to highlight uplifting changes. In post-Brexit Ireland, staging Molière's comedies, like *Tartuffe* (1664) at the Abbey Theatre in 2023 exposed the political hypocrisy and self-deception that shaped the Brexit narrative itself. Alongside the seventeenth century French playwright, Behan's play, *The Quare Fellow* highlights the issue of political imprisonment, i.e. the circle of Thanatos through a sharp satirical lens that reflects the tensions about sovereignty and belonging that resurfaced during the Brexit debate, especially in relation to Ireland, Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement (1998), while Carr's tragedies like *Audrey or Sorrow* (2024) capture fractured identities and haunted pasts. Taken together, the works of Molière, Behan and Carr reveal compelling historical continuities in how drama questions hypocrisy, identity, power and haunted past and provide the framework for understanding Brexit, not only as a political and momentous event but as a dramatic expression of enduring human conflicts. Through comedy, satire and tragedy, Molière, Behan and Carr reveal patterns of division, illusion and self-justification, and how moments of rupture expose both the vulnerability and the performative nature of discourse on national identity. Brexlit on stage reflects the Wildean concept of the impermanency of our human nature because to change is to survive. Permanency entails fossilisation and change gives birth to creativity and fiery life.

SINÉAD MCCOOLE in conversation with VIRGINIE ROCHE-TIENGO AND ALESSANDRA RUGGIERO

Meeting No Ordinary Woman. An Interview

Sinéad McCoole is no ordinary woman. She is truly a woman of parts and a changemaker. To use Mary McAleese's words, she is part of "a vast reservoir of female potential, talent, experience and knowledge, just waiting to change the face of the Earth".[1] We had the honour and the privilege to interview her in November 2025. Virginie had first met her in Toulouse in 2022 during an international conference on *Ireland and Human Rights, Idealism and Pragmatism, Discourse and Realities*. Sinéad's play, *Leaving the Ladies* (2019), published by Arlen House, Dublin, was staged for the first time in France, and Virginie was presenting a paper in connection with the play on human rights and women changemakers.

Sinéad has lived a thousand lives. Born in New York in 1968 to Irish parents, her family came back to Ireland in 1972 to live in Limerick. She is now a renowned historian of Irish History and Irish Art, a playwright, broadcaster and curator. She was the historical and curatorial Advisor of Ireland 2016 Centenary. One of her key achievements was the creation of the *100 Years of Women in Irish Politics and Public Life* exhibition for the commemoration of the centenary of women's suffrage (Vótáil100) first on show in Dublin Castle and 32 Kildare Street and all over Ireland in Limerick, Donegal, Roscommon, Tipperary and Wexford, welcoming 10,000 visitors for four years. She also created the Mná100 website, an online initiative of the Decade of Centenaries Commemorative Programme, highlighting and documenting the role and contribution of women during the Irish Revolutionary period, 1912-1923.

Her research interests range from Women in politics and public life 1900-2020 to Women's participation in the revolutionary period 1916-1923, focusing on those imprisoned and on women TDs, Senators and MEPs but also women who were the first to attain leadership roles in public life, and those who established groups such as Women Elect, Women's Aid, the Women's Political Association, the Women's Talent Bank. She is also interested in political party's literature relating to women and legislation and has scripted a 40-minute Film based on Pop Up Women's Museum.

She has written books on women in politics and public life from *Hazel: A Life of Lady Lavery* (1996) to *Guns and Chiffon: Women Revolutionaries and Kilmainham Gaol* (1997), *No Ordinary Women: Irish Female Activists in the Revolutionary Years 1900-1923* (2003), *Easter Widows* (2014), *Mná: Women of 1916* (2018), and *Mná na hÉireann, Irish Women MEPs Past and* Present (2023). She has in recent years written podcasts and plays, such as *Leaving the Ladies* (2019) and *Loving Wife* (2022), as a way of using the creative process to tell Irish women's stories to new audiences.

She is currently Head of Exhibitions, Learning and Programming at the National Library of Ireland. She has created exhibitions in Ireland and the US, films, radio programmes, catalogues and web pages. She is interested in the role of collectors, curators, and particular state collections, and examining exclusions, items deemed unimportant, while also looking more generally at gender orientated communications and gender specific language in the museum sector. She has also

[1] Mary McAleese, "Foreword", in Anne Chambers, *Grace O'Malley: The Biography of Ireland's Pirate Queen 1530-1603* (Dublin: Gill Books, 2019), VIII. McAleese was former President of Ireland.

developed a keen specialist knowledge on photographs from revolutionary period and her expertise in Irish visual culture has been sought by Collectors, RTÉ, Auctioneers, and Academics.

AR: We often consider political events like Brexit mainly in terms of treaties, borders, and economics. I'd like to explore with you how such a momentous change resonates in the realms of memory, identity, and cultural imagination. As a historian of Ireland's past and its collective memory, I'm interested in how you think Brexit might reshape not only national identity, but also the stories we tell – through history writing, theatre, fiction, and drama. To what extent might Brexit represent a turning point in how Ireland sees itself, and how its writers, playwrights, and novelists portray that self?

VRT: Absolutely, and as a historian and a playwright why would you see a connection between drama and Brexit?

SM: When we talk about drama and fiction writing – forms that hold a major place in the Irish literary tradition – I see them as deeply connected to education. At their core, they're about telling a story to an audience that wants to understand and learn. There's a certain openness in how people engage with drama for that reason. In the context of Brexit, what's crucial to grasp from an Irish point of view is the timing. The referendum happened in 2016, the same year we marked the centenary of our independence – an independence that was partial, because the island remained divided. One of the significant developments since Brexit, especially within the conversation about a 'shared island', is the way public narratives about Ireland are increasingly reaching back to the period around 1920, when the island was still united.

If you think about it, the last census before 1920 was an all-Ireland census. So, when Brexit happens a century later, our primary historical records from 100 years earlier all relate to a time when the island was still unified. That context is shaping the current conversation: people in Ireland are once again looking at the island as a whole, with all the complexities that raises around borders and identity. There's now a substantial amount of work being done on borders, border communities, and what it means to have a bordered identity.

A lot of recent research has also focused on family history – on which family stories get told and how they're told. In the political sense – political with a small "p" – there's a push to encourage people to talk about their familial connections across the island. This aligns with a long-standing tradition in Irish drama and fiction, where the family has often been the central unit, especially in stories about migration.

Much of our literature deals with loss – people leaving the island, generations scattered abroad. But now we're experiencing something very different: a sharp rise in people arriving in Ireland. Many are choosing Ireland instead of Britain, and that shift is beginning to influence our culture in profound ways.

There has been a noticeable shift in Ireland's relationship with the UK because Brexit has changed the political landscape in real time, and that shift is already influencing younger poets. Speaking from my perspective as a historian, I tend to see these developments through a longer lens. When I was writing *Leaving the Ladies*, I was deeply interested in the political processes of the period, and I've always found it difficult to separate my interest in politics from my understanding of history or from my literary work. For me, they inform one another.

What I try to do is find ways to express different histories without shying away from their complexity. One effective approach, I've found, is to make the historical complexity personal. A family's internal tensions can act as a metaphor for a political situation's wider complications.

In my play, I used the structure of a political meeting – the chair, the agenda, the debate – as a way to explore a breakdown in relationships. I blended formal political behaviour with people who were operating outside established political processes. This became a metaphor for how the State evolved after independence, especially as the political structures that emerged were gradually replaced by rural power and by the increasingly dominant role of the Catholic Church.

This shift had profound consequences, particularly for women who had been politically active during the revolutionary period – women who, in many cases, were unmarried or childless, which had allowed them the time and freedom to participate in public life. After independence, many of these women found themselves pushed to the margins as the new social order took shape. Sometimes the ambitions you have when you're young can't be realised later in life, because family responsibilities take over. That idea was central to what I explored in the play.

To finish on Brexit – and you can ask more about this if you'd like – the main thing I'm observing is a shift in how the Irish position themselves internationally. Increasingly, Irish people are identifying with others who were part of the wider British Empire, recognising a shared, complicated imperial history. At the same time, England is now having to reassess its own understanding of what "Great Britain" means. There's a growing awareness that the world has moved on, and that the historical role Britain once imagined for itself no longer aligns with contemporary global realities.

VRT: Absolutely.

AR: I've recently read that Keir Starmer is looking at ways for the UK to rejoin aspects of the EU customs union, which has sparked quite a debate. In your view, is the Irish border – the physical border itself – really the central issue that could make a difference in this process?

SMC: We've always had what's known as the Common Travel Area. The only time movement between Ireland and the UK was formally recorded was during the Second World War, when a permit system was introduced. That permit system – and this is shown clearly in the work of Dr Jennifer Redmond – reveals that the profile of people moving between the islands was very different from how it is often described or remembered. Once again, women's history in particular is not accurately reflected in popular narratives.

People often speak of walking between the two islands, and even at the height of the Troubles, travelling to Britain required no paperwork – it was something you barely thought about. The Common Travel Area just existed; it was taken for granted.

Now, however, that border is becoming more porous in a different sense: it's being talked about, problematised, and re-examined in ways it wasn't before. After the Good Friday Agreement and the uneasy peace that followed, one thing that was rarely acknowledged was how many farms and family lands were literally divided by the border. That physical, lived reality is only now coming back into the public conversation.

When the border was first drawn during the Treaty negotiations, it was mapped according to the topography rather than through any careful surveying or on-the-ground assessment. It wasn't measured in a scientific way, nor did people visit each area to understand the implications. As a result, some houses were literally cut in half, and many farms were split down the middle. People adapted as best they could – they found ways to work around the border. Trade continued in forms that effectively made the border functional, even when political tensions escalated and some areas became cut off. There were organisations and clubs that remained all-Ireland despite the border, while others split into separate Northern and Southern branches.

I remember on my first trip to England going into a post office and asking for a stamp for Ireland. The woman behind the counter asked, in a thick accent I could barely understand, "Southern or Northern?". I didn't know what she meant – because to me, Ireland was simply an island. And although it is an island that has been politically divided, the reality is that many in Britain didn't really think of part of it as belonging to the UK in any deep sense. There was constant movement between the islands; Irish people were familiar to them but often understood within a very particular class framework.

This is something we see worldwide: migrants and "others" are often perceived through a narrow lens shaped by assumptions about why they are in a particular country. Over time, we've also realised that the picture is far more complex. Many people – including myself – were born outside Ireland to Irish parents and later returned as citizens of another jurisdiction.

VRT: You are a daughter of the Irish diaspora. Your parents were both Irish, and you were born abroad.

SMC: Yes, I was born in New York.

AR: Of course, the US and the UK have traditionally been the main destinations for Irish emigrants, which made travelling along those routes much easier for the Irish. How do you think Brexit fits within the longer historical trajectory of Ireland–Britain relations: as a rupture or as part of an ongoing pattern of political realignment? And how do you see this being reflected – or resisted – in contemporary Irish fiction and drama?

SMC: Brexit represents both a social and political realignment. It is a rupture in the established political and commercial accommodations between the peoples of these islands. For example, the Northern Ireland peace agreement allows individuals to claim Irish citizenship, and many in Britain with Irish ancestry – often through a grandparent – are now reconsidering their identity and ethnicity through this new lens. Advances in DNA testing are reinforcing this awareness.

From a literary perspective, as both a historian and a playwright, I sense that contemporary literature is still in an early stage of grappling with these changes. We are only beginning to see the shaping of cultural narratives, perhaps ten years on. However, there are clear signs of a younger generation looking beyond the traditional Empire-focused narrative. In Ireland, for instance, emerging filmmakers are engaging with the Famine in ways unburdened by contemporary political concerns, and musicians are embracing the Irish language even when they are native English speakers.

What I would say about drawing straight lines, writing history, or telling stories is that theatre, drama, poetry, and language give you a kind of flexibility that traditional history books do not. They allow you to make inferences, suggest possibilities, and explore ideas that a strictly factual account cannot capture. History depends on sources – and sources depend on what survives – but much of our culture, particularly in Ireland, is rooted in oral history.

The Irish adopted English, but they made it their own. Irish-English developed into a distinct form of the language, different from the English spoken in England. This has interesting cultural consequences. For example, when people ask why certain bands are popular in Ireland, part of the answer lies in language: the musicians are singing in English, but with an Irish turn of phrase, or an Irish rhythm and cadence, that resonates in a uniquely Irish way.

The same dynamic applies to much of our contemporary theatre and creative work, particularly that produced by Irish people living outside Ireland. Take music, for example: Shane MacGowan and The Pogues, or the Gallagher brothers in Oasis – these are quintessentially Irish influences yet

expressed through a diasporic lens. They draw on the Irish oral tradition, just as earlier generations did in different forms.

Similarly, consider Martin McDonagh as a playwright. His work looks at Ireland in a way that feels almost like a Brexit reflection. He is somewhat disconnected, drawing on the past for influence, while portraying an Ireland that still exists, but only in pockets. His Ireland is real and familiar, presented in a form of dialogue that resonates with history and tradition, but it is not representative of the Ireland we see today – a multicultural, growing population. His stories are important, but they reflect a particular Ireland that is being played out elsewhere, rather than engaging fully with the contemporary lived experience of the island.

I see Brexit as changing not only the movement of people, but also how that movement is perceived and how newcomers engage with Irish culture. Some people come to Ireland, obtain Irish passports, and then move on again – often to areas or cities where they can find larger communities, more opportunities, or better infrastructure for their work and lifestyle.

Ireland's population is growing – projected to reach around 5.1 million – but by comparison with major UK cities, it is still relatively small. For someone moving here, it's not only an English-speaking country that is culturally different, but also a smaller, more limited environment. Many of these newcomers are highly educated and find that Ireland does not always offer the same access to international schools, specialised jobs, or broader professional opportunities that larger cities can provide. In that sense, Brexit is also reshaping education and professional mobility in Ireland. There's a noticeable shift in how people navigate the country and its institutions, reflecting broader changes in demographics, migration, and the expectations of highly skilled migrants.

AR: In what ways did Brexit reopen unresolved historical issues surrounding Partition and the symbolic as well as practical meaning of the border?

SMC: The border has always been a contested space, yet people managed to navigate it – even in cases where farms, or in one instance a house, were split between what was then the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland. For a century, communities quietly adapted to this reality. The divisions we see today are largely rooted in politics, the segregated education system, and class structures – factors that continue to shape society.

As we move toward the idea of a Shared Ireland, attention increasingly turns to the middle ground – the communities and families that have maintained connections across the border. Art and culture offer powerful ways to explore these differences. This exploration is supported by substantial investment in the arts in the south, which provides both resources and platforms. Historically, those who have driven social or political change – much like the leaders of the Rising – have often turned to the arts to reach audiences, voice grievances, and open dialogue, particularly through fiction and other creative forms.

VRT: And would you write specifically about Brexit? You wrote *Leaving the Ladies* in 2019, and you intermingled real figure, historical figure with fictional characters. Would you do that about Brexit, and current political issues? Would that influence your writing or your research? Would you focus more on a specific topic that would deal with that issue?

SMC: It's interesting you mention that, because part of my current work involves the National Library of Ireland, where I'm engaged in exhibitions, learning, and programming. I've been thinking a lot about how we've documented the "new Irish" over the past thirty years, since changes in emigration laws opened Ireland to EU migration. I'm trying to develop a deeper understanding of Ireland's

memory and cultural context, so we can design programs that attract people to the library – whether through drama, poetry, or the written word.

I haven't really focused on my creative side in the traditional artistic sense; my creativity has been about designing programming that makes the library more accessible. So, in a way, some of the reflections I've shared today come from trying to understand where we are now and asking the kinds of questions necessary to build audiences for a national cultural institution. It's a different kind of creativity from what I practiced in theatre, but it's informed by similar principles: connecting people to stories, history, and culture in meaningful ways.

For a long time, my focus has been on how women's stories are told and how those stories can be made visible. But often, it's theatre and artists who are witnessing change as it happens – they're recording it in real time. That immediacy gives their work an authenticity that I, trained as a historian, sometimes struggle to engage with. When I approach historical material, I am constantly evaluating its credibility: would people have said or done this at that time? Does it reflect the social norms and context of the period?

Younger artists, however, often take historical events and make them modern, blending fact and fiction in ways that can feel jarring to me. When I write about the past, I feel confident navigating it, knowing the sources I'm drawing on and understanding the context of the language and behaviour. Writing about the contemporary world is harder for me, because it requires capturing authentic voices in real time – a challenge I haven't fully explored.

Yet, what I am observing now, particularly in light of Brexit, is Ireland in transformation. One thing that stands out is a newfound confidence in the country. We are embracing the European Union in a way that feels less complicated than our historical relationship with England or America, where so many Irish people emigrated. It's remarkable to think that, for much of our history, we had limited direct contact with people across Europe, and now that dynamic is changing.

There has been a significant surge of interest in Ireland from across Europe, and through our national cultural institutions and networks, we've been reconnecting with cousins, friends, and cultural partners around the world. Many visitors come from countries like Italy, and in conversations at the library, I've discovered that some schools there teach Joyce.

What's emerging now is a shift in focus: it's less about Shakespeare and traditional English literature, and more about Irish writers such as Yeats, Joyce, Beckett, and others. Their English, while historically rooted, feels more modern and resonates strongly with international audiences. Brian Friel, for example, is strikingly international in his outlook; as Virginie could tell, speaking to his family and listening to their stories highlights the global dimensions of his work.

Even Yeats, whose background was English merchant stock, had a cosmopolitan perspective – he looked far beyond Ireland, even as far as Japan, in his thinking. This global perspective allows audiences to see that Ireland was not simply inward-looking or obsessed with its own past. As a result, the Irish characters and stories being highlighted today – especially in the wake of Brexit – are less about poverty, hardship, or the Troubles, and more about figures and narratives that can transcend national boundaries and speak to a wider, international audience.

VRT: And would you like your plays to be translated into Italian?

SMC: It would be a privilege, in the past, I would have thought my work focused on Ireland would not be of interest to those outside Ireland, or beyond our diaspora, but are increasingly we are transglobal, although Irish people over 40 were not particularly multilingual, that is changing. Own education system in 1970s and 1980s was narrow in focus. The assumption, historically, was that most Irish people would move to America or England, so our teaching of language or lack of, reflected that.

The shift you're noting – such as Italians reading Irish work – highlights how universal themes resonate beyond our borders. For example, *Leaving the Ladies* explores democracy, women's empowerment, and the gendered nature of political systems. These are themes that can speak to anyone, anywhere, without requiring detailed knowledge of Irish history.

If someone in Italy – or anywhere outside Ireland – is interested in reading about Irish experiences, it doesn't need to be through the detailed lens of our national history. What resonates are the broader, universal themes: the fact that Ireland has one of the more stable democracies in Europe, a legacy of neutrality after the Civil War, and an ongoing struggle with gender equality in politics. These questions reveal something about the national psyche and the persistent inequalities we face. What fascinates me is having someone from another place reflect on these themes and discuss them with me, offering a fresh perspective. They don't need to dive into the microscopic details of our complex history. This removes some of the complication and creates a more fluid dialogue focused on shared ideas and commonalities, rather than the 'mud and weeds' of history, where I often find myself immersed.

AR: You mentioned Joyce and how he taught in Italy, but we teach him as an English author. The same is true for writers like Oscar Wilde, Jonathan Swift, and George Bernard Shaw – they've been absorbed into the English literary canon. When I speak with students, I emphasise that they are Irish, yet their Irishness is often overlooked. Do you think there's a risk that the distinctly Irish identity of these authors is being dismissed, even as their work engages with broader, global themes in English literature? How important is the role of the Irish language when we speak about identity?

SMC: If you understand the cadence of the Irish language and the way Irish people speak, it becomes clear why language is so central to our culture. There has been a renewed interest in the Irish language in recent years, and many books have been written exploring its richness. One notable figure in this area was Manchán Magan, who unfortunately passed away recently in his fifties from cancer – a significant loss to the country.

Magan produced popular books that captured the essence of the Irish language and landscape. For example, Ninety-Nine Words for Rain (and One for Sun) and Thirty-Two Words for Field: Lost words of the Irish landscape explore the expressive depth of Irish vocabulary. One striking feature of the language is its wordiness: Irish speakers often use six, seven, or eight words where two might suffice in English. This linguistic richness is part of what makes Irish culture and expression so unique.

The reason Irish people speak in such a descriptive way is that they are always striving to capture as much detail as possible. As a result, Irish storytelling often moves in a circular fashion, with the listener waiting for the narrative to return to its starting point. Storytelling is central to how people speak and interact, and this style carries over when Irish people go abroad – they often cluster together, partly because they seek the familiar rhythms and patterns of Irish dialogue.

When people from other nationalities encounter this style, they often enjoy its conversational quality. It flows naturally, without rigid formality, and allows for nuance and playfulness in language. Writers like James Joyce take this even further, capturing the continuous flow of everyday speech in a way that is uniquely Irish, lending a distinctive rhythm and intimacy to the narrative.

I would also say that there's something about the mundane in Irish storytelling – how people can make a story out of seemingly nothing. This is connected to the social structure of Ireland. Having lived under colonial rule, there was a built-in level of non-compliance with authority, and one way people expressed themselves was through informal socializing rather than formal structures. This created a kind of unstructured freedom in how they approached life and storytelling.

There are regional differences as well. The East Coast, shaped over centuries by plantations, administration, and Viking settlements, developed differently from the West of Ireland, which often

operates on its own rhythm and clock. Even for Irish people, it can be challenging to enter certain social groupings, especially those centred around the Irish language. Access to these groups is limited, as they tend to accept only those with a high level of fluency, preserving a unique linguistic and cultural space.

When people talk about Ireland, tourists often say that the Irish are friendly. I would frame it differently: the Irish are curious. There's a subtle but important distinction. This curiosity comes from our colonial past – people instinctively want to "place" you, to understand who you are and why you're there, before deciding what to share. That instinct still shapes social interactions in many parts of the country.

This curiosity and attentiveness also play out in Irish drama and storytelling. Recently, I saw Barbara Bergin's newest play, *Dublin Gothic*, set in a Dublin tenement and spanning a hundred years. One reason it has been so lauded is the sheer number of characters on stage – over a hundred – and the interwoven narratives. Seeing it on one of the first production days, it captures the complexity of human interconnections: the stories and traumas of women passed down across generations, and the shifting realities of different eras. It's a remarkable example of how Irish drama can convey the richness and layered authenticity of everyday life.

As a historian, I appreciated the play from that perspective, but as an Irish person, I found it difficult to follow. I'm not sure how it would translate for a foreign audience. The accents were very heavy, particularly the inner-city Dublin speech, and some words were almost swallowed, making it hard to understand certain characters.

This habit of "swallowing" words has an interesting historical context. In the west of Ireland, people speak more from the throat, whereas Dubliners speak in this muted, swallowed way – a practice that originally helped people avoid being overheard by authorities. It's another form of subtle non-compliance embedded in language. I'm always intrigued by these habits and ask myself, "Why do people speak this way?"

My curiosity has always been heightened, partly because I was born outside Ireland and returned with my parents. I often felt like an observer – watching people who were closely related to me by blood, yet very different in behaviour and outlook. That perspective shaped how I understand social dynamics.

When something disrupts those dynamics – whether Brexit or other societal changes – it highlights the fact that we are an island nation. Unlike a country like Italy, where people can travel long distances by land, we are geographically constrained and have historically relied on boats and planes to connect with the wider world. Being islanders has shaped our culture, our interactions, and our adaptability.

The English haven't really experienced being islanders in the same way, especially since the advent of trains. It's quicker to reach Paris than it is to travel to Dublin, for example. In many ways, England embraced Europe – but on its own terms – whereas Ireland embraced Europe because it actively helped us modernize. The EU improved our laws, upgraded our infrastructure, and gave us access to more cultural and consumer products, which made us feel more European.

When I talk to my children, they identify as both Irish and European seamlessly. My son, for instance, had the opportunity to travel extensively across Europe. Unlike previous generations, who might have travelled primarily to family in America or England, the younger generation sees Europe as vibrant and full of possibilities. It's a shift in perspective that has really shaped how Ireland connects with the wider world.

AR: How do you think historically rooted identities in Northern Ireland have shaped not only political responses to Brexit but also their representation in contemporary cultural production?

SMC: Brexit has brought the question of the island sharply back into focus. Europe, in many ways, had unified us: we became part of a larger grouping, while Britain now finds itself isolated. This moment has encouraged the Irish to reconnect with what, in my youth, was referred to simply as 'the continent' – then, in the 1980s, it felt very distant. Many of us were not linguistically equipped, due to our education system, and our economic and social connections tended to North America, England, and Scotland – centres of emigration.

Joining the EEC in 1973 transformed Ireland: our laws, our rights, and our infrastructure were all reshaped. Over the past fifty years, it has been overwhelmingly positive – a unifying force, albeit sometimes an overarching one. Yet when the Brexit vote came, Northern Ireland chose to remain in the EU, sparking another layer of division.

Culturally and socially, it has raised questions of identity. It has allowed the Irish to feel confident as Europeans, not merely as an island on the edge of Europe. The growing number of Europeans living in Ireland has contributed to a more multicultural, mobile, and educated population, proud to be both Irish and European. At the same time, divisions have emerged.

In Northern Ireland, poets and playwrights have flourished during the peace process, often drawing on narratives of the Troubles. Yet the decades following that conflict remain marked by a lingering silence, and these voices continue to negotiate the tension between memory and cultural expression.

AR: Today, we increasingly see archives preserving personal recordings and individual materials that help construct narratives and histories. Do you think Brexit-related cultural works – such as staged performances, community theatre, or other cultural productions – can play a role in documenting this period?

SMC: I think Brexit will always mark a significant date in the calendar of change. One of the ways this cultural shift is being recorded is through the opportunities it has created for Ireland to redefine itself. We are seeing a greater diversity of people coming to the country – bringing both expertise and, in many cases, arriving as refugees – which is enriching our society.

In contrast, Britain is experiencing a crisis of identity, rooted in a flawed narrative of empire as inherently successful or benevolent. Ireland, however, has the ability to absorb and reinterpret these changes in its own way. I've already observed this in the approaches of younger Irish filmmakers, who are including these new perspectives for the first time in Netflix dramas and other contemporary media.

Until recently, discussions of the Irish Famine were often muted. Previous generations were cautious about delving too deeply into its details, partly because of economic pressures and the fear that revealing certain stories might affect the livelihoods of the wider Irish community.

In terms of drama, this caution shaped how famine stories were portrayed and how Irish audiences engaged with them. Few famine-themed films have been well financed, so it has been difficult to capture the full catastrophic scale and human impact of the event. As a result, the magnitude of the Famine has often been underrepresented in cultural productions.

What I would add is that the Famine has been referenced in historical dramas set in later periods, such as The House of Guinness and other productions. There was even a film specifically about the Famine, in which the characters spoke both Irish and English, with English subtitles provided for audiences.

The way the Famine has been represented also informs how the Irish respond to other crises. For example, Ireland's strong sympathy for Palestine resonates with the historical experience of being trapped during the Famine – people were confined to a land without access to boats or the ability to leave. One question often asked is, "Why didn't the Irish leave?" The simple answer is that they didn't

have access to the beaches – they didn't own the means to escape. This sense of entrapment and resilience continues to shape cultural memory and empathy in Ireland.

When you understand the history of Ireland and the experience of separation, the narrative that emerged from Brexit becomes clearer – it was largely manufactured to achieve a particular form of freedom. As Irish people, we deeply understand the importance of autonomy, especially after one hundred years of striving for it. We recognize that when mistakes are made, we must take responsibility ourselves, rather than blaming others. Yet alongside those mistakes comes a strong sense of empowerment.

One hundred years on, Ireland has made significant strides in self-determination. After seven hundred years of being told we couldn't rule ourselves, we've managed to chart our own path and assert our independence with confidence.

Brexit also brings into focus questions about education and the way history is taught – particularly the "mythical" stories that glorify making money at the expense of other nations, through exploitation and plundering. There's little discussion about repatriating Irish cultural or historical materials from that period.

At the same time, we have to acknowledge that Ireland was deeply intertwined with England's history. For a long time, we were part of a Greater Britain, and in some ways, we were enforcers within that system. The challenge now is recognizing that history while choosing to take only the positive lessons from that imperial past – and leaving behind the negative legacies we don't want to perpetuate.

We have a long history and many difficult lessons to learn, and often the best way to explore them is through drama and poetry. That slight distance – what you might call a soft lens – has been used by the government for years to support and justify strong investment in the arts in Ireland. We see the arts as a core part of our identity, and as a way to work through challenges and past troubles by staging them, examining them, and then reflecting on what they mean.

VRT: And can you tell us more about the importance of women as narrators in your work?

SMC: Absolutely – I'm very invested in the idea of telling a story with women as narrators, because the narrative perspective matters deeply. Yet, even when I watch my own play, I often find myself drawn to the male characters. I give them strong, distinctive lines, and their way of speaking is engaging in a particular way.

When I've done scripting workshops or thought about how to make women's drama appealing to audiences, one recurring insight is that including a compelling male character within the dialogue often helps attract attention. Just as men might be drawn to a "Bond girl," women in all-female casts often look for characters who provide contrast or a point of difference. It's about creating dynamics within the story that resonate with everyone, regardless of gender.

While I've focused much of my writing on women's stories –and have spent a lot of time in archives uncovering them – ultimately, when you're writing, you often lose yourself in the story. You stop noticing individual characters or details; you're carried along entirely by the words and the narrative. I think that's an important part of storytelling.

Another point to consider in relation to Brexit is the question of Irish authors being labelled as "English" authors. For example, Sir Tom Stoppard passed away this week, and he's widely being called the greatest writer in the English language of our generation. Yet, he was born in Czechoslovakia and educated in Europe – not England. His mastery of English was shaped by his own culture and sensibilities, but because he lived and worked in England, he is claimed as an English

playwright. This highlights a tension around identity: sometimes a country will take the best from elsewhere and claim it, even when the origins and influences are more complex.

Whenever an Irish actor is introduced internationally, they often reply saying, "I'm Irish". Then immediately, people will add, "Oh, you're one of England's…" and the list goes on. But the actor insists, "No, I'm Irish".

So, in that sense, Brexit has reignited questions and issues around identity that the Irish have been negotiating for a long time – how to assert and maintain a distinct national identity even when closely intertwined with England culturally and historically.

We've always lived our lives very publicly through drama, poetry, and comedy, and as commentators – whether in sports, television, or other media – in England. In the past, we would often conceal our accents to blend in, to morph into what was expected. But now, it's completely acceptable to speak and sing in your own voice, with your own accent, without trying to imitate someone else.

This shift began with the Abbey Theatre, promoting Irish voices for Irish audiences, and a hundred years on, we're really making our mark. We're punching above our weight in the dramatic and cultural world, asserting a distinct and confident identity that's finally being recognized both at home and internationally.

AR: What about the relationship with Northern Ireland? You've spoken about the Republic of Ireland and its evolving relationship with Europe, but the border issue remains central and has always been crucial for the peace process – something that now seems potentially threatened. When I was in Dublin last year, I saw *Agreement* by Owen McCafferty at the Gate Theatre. The play doesn't mention Brexit directly, but it reflects on the Good Friday Agreement and the labour that went into reaching it. That moment now seems fragile. In your view, is it true that while the Republic of Ireland has made significant economic and social progress, Northern Ireland has not seen the same improvements?

SMC: I suppose the first thing to note about *Agreement* is that it was created in the context of a historic commemoration. It wouldn't surprise me if there was even specific funding provided to support the production. Beyond that, theatre provides a unique way to explore complex issues. Even people who claim they're "not political" can engage with these topics when they're presented on stage as a dramatic piece – it allows the ideas to be experienced and reflected upon in a way that traditional discussion often cannot.

There's an element of message-carrying in all of this. I think one of the key differences between the North and the South stems from a long-standing issue that has persisted since the foundation of the Northern state: a partitioned education system. There were no significant efforts to integrate different communities into a single schooling system.

At the same time, the class structure was closely tied to religion, which meant there were very few opportunities for people from different backgrounds to meet outside their neighbourhoods, schools, or religious communities. So, what we've been seeing is a continuation of these divisions, affecting how communities interact and perceive one another.

It doesn't matter what your politics are – on the island of Ireland, you're entitled to an Irish passport. And now you see people who might otherwise identify with Britain carrying an Irish passport simply because it gets them through queues in places like Spain. Personally, I find that a bit difficult, because for me a passport carries far more significance than just a convenient travel document.

That said, I also hold dual nationality, so I understand that the situation isn't always straightforward. People often have to trace their family background and look for relatives who were born in Ireland before the partition in order to claim citizenship. They're not claiming to be Irish in identity, but they're using their Irish heritage as a means of gaining mobility and access to Europe.

There's a certain irony in that. Historically, we were a very subdued and constrained people – when we left Ireland, we usually left on foot, with very little, and often with nothing at all. Now, generations later, people are leveraging that same heritage in ways we could hardly have imagined.

What I would say is that this really shows how the Irish have embraced their European footprint. The peace process has opened doors to far more people than we might have expected. I think that can only be a positive thing – people are beginning to see that peace has given them access to other places and opportunities.

The concept of a "shared island" is particularly interesting. Whoever coined that term captured a unique way of thinking about living into the future: lines and divisions may remain, but we have to find ways to coexist and live in harmony. There are examples from other parts of the world where this has been managed, and the Irish have a certain resilience in that regard.

Consider this: we've had a partition running through farms for over a hundred years, and for generations, people simply adapted without much discussion. I think that sums up a lot about the Irish approach – pragmatic, resilient, and focused on living alongside divisions rather than being defined by them.

There was a real subjugation of women in this country, both politically and socially, which I was very familiar with and which I explored in the play. But I would say that people made an accommodation with that subjugation in order to live in harmony.

So, when we talk about the Irish being very talkative and very good communicators, it's really about what they choose to talk about. So you'll often find that Irish people talk a lot but say very little. You've heard that said about us, of course. And even when you read it in theatre dialogue, it often becomes the source of the laugh.

There's an advertisement on television at the moment where a young man rings his father and asks, "How are you, Dad?". And the father replies, "Ah sure, you know yourself". That's a quintessentially Irish phrase. "You know yourself". In English, it doesn't really mean anything at all – but every Irish person knows exactly what it means. "You know yourself". You're saying to somebody: you know what I'm feeling, you know the situation – and the answer is "yourself". It's not English; it's an Irishism. And it comes straight out of the Irish language. In Irish you say, *Tá an t-ocras orm* (the hunger is on me), or *Tá an fhuacht orm* (the cold is on me). There's a physicality to it, a sense that emotion or experience sits on the person. And "you know yourself" carries that same sensibility: the meaning rests between the two speakers, not in the words themselves.

When you watch Irish drama or listen to Irish poetry, something of this rhythm – this cadence I mentioned earlier – comes through. It's the feeling carried inside the language, a sort of warmth that exists even when you're only hearing a handful of words. Take that advertisement, for example: the young man calls his father and asks, "How are you, Dad?" and the father replies, "Ah sure, you know yourself". The line on its own means almost nothing in English, but everything in Irish speech. There's something in the tone; in the way he says it. The son knows his father isn't well. He is checking in. And the father, as many Irish fathers would, tells him nothing. But in that little exchange – and in the silence around it – you hear the whole story. That is Irish dialogue: saying nothing, but meaning everything. And the audience, when they hear it, understands it instinctively. It is as much in the interaction as in the words themselves.

When you speak in, say, the United States, everything tends to be very literal. People often miss the multiple layers of meaning that a single word can carry. But when someone integrates into Ireland, they eventually begin to understand that it's not just the words themselves that matter – it's the tone, the context, and the interaction. That's when they start to grasp the rhythm of Irish life, the collective memory, and the way language is approached here. It's not simply communication; it's a reflection of history, culture, and identity.

I would say that Brexit has brought a flowering of Irish culture. It has changed us – not completely, but in a way that endures. As they say, "A terrible beauty is born," and in this case, it's change that lasts. I can see it most clearly when the English ask us about our history – I've experienced this several times, both in Ireland and in England. You notice the difference in perspective: the Irish will say "England," "Scotland," and "Wales," identifying the distinct countries on the island, whereas the English often say "Great Britain." Even my children are starting to use "Great Britain," but my generation is much more careful about the words we use to refer to those places. It's a subtle thing, but it speaks volumes about identity and awareness.

AR: From a methodological standpoint, how might contemporary fiction, theatre, and other cultural materials serve as future historical sources for understanding Brexit's impact on Ireland?

SMC: Ireland has always maintained a cultural archive that shaped how its people engaged politically – both locally and nationally – to preserve the culture they valued. Often, political activists were also the collectors and custodians of that culture. Culture tends to be safeguarded when it feels threatened. So, the question arises: is Brexit a threat to Ireland?

I see it differently. Ireland has accepted and embraced the change, and we are navigating the world in new ways. How the literary and historical canon will interpret it remains unknown now. I suspect Brexit will serve as a touchpoint – a marker of a particular moment in time – similar to how female historians use 1990, when Mary Robinson's election redefined the presidency and her decision to welcome home the diaspora reshaped Ireland's national imagination.

Brexit has already changed Ireland, contributing to rapid population growth, and its effects will continue in my lifetime and beyond. It may even prompt a rewriting of Irish history, by someone who came to the country as a direct result of Brexit, such as EU students studying here.

Luigi C. Cazzato, *Palestina fra Oriente e Occidente. Anglosfera, ferite coloniali, re-esistenza decoloniale* (Milano: Meltemi, 2025), pp. 268, ISBN: 979-12-5615-271-1

Recensione di Sergio Borgia

Composto da dieci capitoli articolati in tre sezioni (più una quarta che funge da piccola appendice), scandite rispettivamente dalle parole-guida di Aimé Césaire, Joseph Conrad e Susan Abulhawa poste in esergo, il recente libro di Luigi Cazzato prova a coniugare le ragioni di uno studio intrapreso a partire dal 2016 (35) con quelle di una crudele attualità, a cui peraltro puntualmente richiamano tanto la prefazione a cura di Tomaso Montanari quanto la postfazione a firma di Nabil Bey Salameh.

Il volume prende le mosse da quello che vuole essere quasi un atto d'accusa, o meglio, un'amara, financo ironica constatazione concernente lo *status quaestionis* sulla storia del popolo palestinese secondo gli studi postcoloniali, di cui l'autore avverte una carenza, forse perché la Palestina "non è abbastanza post [nonostante sia] la terra [del loro] ispiratore Edward Said" (20). Al medesimo tempo, non vengono celati al lettore quelli che possono essere i limiti e i "rischi/disagi" (21) in cui s'incorre quando si prova, "dall'esterno", a descrivere "la cultura di un luogo" (*ibid.*).

Un ulteriore elemento di sfida riconosciuto in apertura del lavoro è dovuto, inoltre, proprio all'avvertita necessità di non obliare quanto accade nel presente, sebbene, forse, il modo migliore per rendere servizio alla contemporaneità, in quanto studiosi, consiste proprio nel tentativo di inquadrare anche i fatti recenti e recentissimi nel loro contesto di riferimento, agendo così sia "*ragionatamente*" sia "*emozionalmente*" (22), e pertanto senza sacrificare una parte fondamentale di ciò che rende anche il ricercatore un uomo e non un automa. L'invito esteso alla comunità dei lettori, quindi, è di "tornare a essere sensibili, tornare cioè a sentire e vedere" (35) che, nel caso in questione, il contesto "ha a che fare non solo col Mediterraneo contemporaneo, ma anche con l'intera storia della modernità occidentale" (33).

Nel secondo capitolo viene subito introdotta l'idea di 'anglosfera', qualificata come spazio di "relazioni di potere *prosperiano*" (48) "*agito … subìto … reagito*" e mediato dalla "lingua unica" dominante le comunicazioni interculturali, l'inglese, assurta a inizio Novecento, dopo una lunga serie di concatenazioni politico-culturali, al rango di "lingua franca" (44). In virtù di ciò, si offre del fenomeno una definizione più ampia come quel perimetro che include "non solo il mondo atlantico allargato alle ex-colonie di insediamento britanniche (Australia, Nuova Zelanda e Sudafrica), ma anche tutti quei popoli anglofoni che sono (stati) subalterni rispetto alle 'relazioni speciali' di cui parlava Churchill" (48), rendendolo dunque una vera e propria "'comunità immaginaria' *calibanesca*" (*ibid.*).

Viene poi lavorato il concetto palestinese di *sumud* nella sua dinamica e multiforme configurazione di attitudine resistentiva non-violenta all'occupazione israeliana; si afferma che il *sumud* non è solo teoria, ma una *praxis* volta a rinnovare l'esistenza tramite il conferimento di un nuovo significato alle azioni quotidiane dal momento in cui ad animarle si pone la risolutezza a perseverare nelle avversità, dando vita a un binomio che nel testo è riassunto nella formula "esistere per resistere" (53).

Si giunge infine a sintesi, delimitando l'oggetto della ricerca a quelle espressioni culturali e artistiche che il *sumud* può assumere nelle proposte "dei palestinesi *di* lingua inglese, o che *in* lingua inglese, in diverse parti dell'anglosfera, osano resistere all'oppressione avendo come audience il pianeta intero" (48).

La seconda parte del libro ha inizio con il tentativo di interpretare il legame risalente tra le due grandi potenze anglofone degli ultimi due secoli e la Palestina attraverso gli strumenti della critica postcoloniale e decoloniale: viene presentata, di conseguenza, tra nomi più noti (Balfour, Sykes, Churchill su tutti) e altri meno conosciuti, la *Weltanschauung* della classe dirigente britannica tra la seconda metà dell'Ottocento e la prima metà del Novecento, imperniata sulla *master narrative* imperiale che decanta la paternalistica missione civilizzatrice dell'uomo bianco e sta alla base della trasformazione del Medio Oriente dall'assetto ottomano alla conformazione geopolitica contemporanea, sancendo il passaggio dalla logica della "differenza imperiale" a quella della "differenza coloniale" (66), costituita da una sintassi verticale, una semantica compresa tra i poli della civiltà e della barbarie e da una pragmatica di dominio inappellabile poiché manifestazione più pura di

un divenire storico orientato a un costante e inarrestabile progresso; viene, inoltre, delineato l'avvicendamento al comando della regione, successivo alla Seconda Guerra Mondiale, tra la potenza mandataria di Sua Maestà e la talassocrazia democratica statunitense, con il costituirsi delle "relazioni speciali" (77) fra l'America e Israele, corroborate da una comunanza d'interessi che pare perdurare ancora oggi. L'opinione dell'autore è che il sionismo come dottrina politica abbia risentito profondamente delle ideologie dominanti del tempo in cui è stato elaborato, cosa che lo avrebbe reso tanto artefice quanto vittima di un "paradosso", vale a dire che, "nato come opposizione all'Europa razzista, ne ereditò le sue principali ideologie nefaste: nazionalismo, imperialismo e colonialismo" (63); ma è proprio ciò che avrebbe fatto sì che gli Stati anglosferici accogliessero con favore e appoggiato il progetto di costituzione di uno Stato ebraico in Palestina, in quanto "radicato in antiche tradizioni, bisogni fattuali e future speranze, di gran lunga più profondi ed importanti dei desideri e pregiudizi dei 700mila arabi che ora abitano quest'antica terra" (76; la formulazione è dovuta, in questo caso, a Balfour e risale al 1919).

Nel quarto capitolo la questione palestinese e i rapporti arabo-israeliani sono riletti attraverso la lente dell'opzione decoloniale. In particolare, l'operazione effettuata consiste nel legare, per analogia, le rispettive "catastrofi" patite dagli ebrei europei prima (la Shoah) e dai palestinesi poi (la Nakba) alla "*logica* della colonialità", sebbene essa rimanga spesso implicita giacché "nascosta dalla *retorica* della modernità" (82). Il fulcro dell'analisi offerta non risiede tanto negli accadimenti in sé, quanto nelle loro precondizioni socio-culturali, vale a dire nei processi di deumanizzazione e deculturazione (epistemicidio) che precedono e accompagnano gli atti di violenza dell'uomo sull'uomo in scenari di conflitti fra gruppi, fino ai casi estremi della pulizia etnica e del genocidio. L'esasperata condizione attuale, pertanto, sarebbe stata resa "possibile grazie ai lasciti europei" (64) deteriori che hanno contribuito a edificare una concezione del mondo basata su un nominalismo capace di conquistare le menti e rimodellare la realtà in maniera distorta (v. 96-100), ingenerando meccanismi di attribuzione diseguale di valore ai gruppi in sede teorica, che si traducono successivamente in pratiche di dominio potenzialmente genocidarie una volta integrate nell'immaginario collettivo delle popolazioni coinvolte.

Il quinto capitolo ruota intorno al fenomeno qualificato come "colonialità della semiosi". Lo spunto iniziale è in questo caso uno degli assunti basilari della semiotica di scuola peirceiana, ovverosia che "la realtà … certamente esiste" (108), ma è accessibile e, soprattutto, dicibile e interpretabile solo attraverso la mediazione segnica; il darsi incessante dei segni dà vita a una catena degli interpretanti potenzialmente infinita. Ancorandosi alle riflessioni di Stuart Hall sul nesso evento-rappresentazione, è posta la questione della persuasione, cioè "della battaglia per la costruzione del *senso* e del *consenso*" (*ibid.*). Tale concezione agonale dei processi di produzione del senso filtra la successiva rassegna di alcuni luoghi tratti dalla sfera giornalistica nazionale (ma anche internazionale) in cui sarebbero ravvisabili casi di distorsione (ad esempio, per inversione dei ruoli o omissione degli agenti) nella presentazione delle notizie in merito al conflitto in corso nella Striscia di Gaza, che l'autore non esita a definire genocidio (riprendendo nel testo, tra l'altro, la nozione di "genocidio incrementale" avanzata dallo storico Ilan Pappé "come termine corretto per descrivere la politica sionista di sistematica e quotidiana eliminazione dei palestinesi", 86-67). L'esame condotto sui testi selezionati perviene alla considerazione che "In Italia […] non si dirada per nulla la nebbia della *misinformazione* (la diffusione *inconsapevole* di notizie non vere) e della *disinformazione* (la diffusione *deliberata* di notizie non corrette)" (116). Sono, infine, descritti "due strumenti attraverso i quali i (pro)palestinesi, sfidando la colonialità della semiosi in versione digitale, colpiscono l'*immaginazione del mondo*: la creatività difensiva dell'*algospeak* e la creatività offensiva della memetica" (125).

Il sesto capitolo prosegue nella disamina dell'apparente discrasia tra "doni" della modernità e "furti" della colonialità (133), denunciando "un universalismo fasullo" (137) modellato su parametri fortemente connotati culturalmente e usato sempre più come arma immateriale per informare l'egemonia e legittimare il dominio di una parte del mondo sull'altra come pure l'autoconferimento di una sorta di "licenza di uccidere rimanendo impuniti" (133). Riprendendo una proposta del filosofo Richard Rorty, invece, viene esplorata la possibilità di incardinamento dei diritti umani su di una "*sympathy*" (141) "*mediata dall'arte*, la sola che sembra poter sciogliere quella sorta di ghiaccio che anestetizza il cuore anche davanti alle immagini più crude che scorrono sullo schermo dei notiziari" (144).

La terza e ultima parte del libro è una vera e propria raccolta di casi di studio di poetiche e pratiche decoloniali di re-esistenza in Palestina/Israele. Al di là del mezzo espressivo di volta in volta prescelto, ciò che accomuna questi tentativi artivistici di "denuncia [del]la complicità imperiale fra retorica della modernità e logica della colonialità" (153) è il loro radicamento sul terreno della "cultura popolare come il luogo della lotta per l'egemonia tra gruppi sociali dominanti e gruppi sociali subalterni" (150); il loro ancoraggio al "*border thinking*" come manifestazione di un pensiero (meridiano) alternativo a quello nordatlantico; il loro incedere per giustapposizione e commistione di forme ed embricamento e riorientamento dei contenuti. Si passa così, nel vasto "archivio [post-foucaultiano] dell'immaginazione transnazionale" (160) e multimediale, dalla "commutazione di codice" (156) in tonalità hip hop del gruppo israelo-palestinese Dam (155-157) alla "furiosa poesia parlata" di Rafeef Ziadah (161-175), dal *détournement* visuale di stampo brutalista di Amer Shomali, Wiz, Bansky e Mohammed al Hawajiri (187-194) al "futurismo pessimistico" antinazionalista e antistatualista sotteso al *The Nation Estate Project* di Larissa Sansour (194-200), per finire con delle considerazioni equanimi sui "graffiti/murales che appaiono sul muro [di separazione]" (210) (v. 205-224).

Si osserva allora come questa "nuova intellettualità organica" (158) trovi nella dimensione "'estetica di confine' o … 'estesica'" (203) il modo più efficace per coinvolgere e dar voce alle masse oppresse, silenziate e "invisibilizzate" (v. 144 e 160), sollecitando l'avanzamento di rivendicazioni collettive volte al conseguimento di un'autonomia condivisa di matrice potenzialmente "post-nazionale" (200-204), in un movimento ininterrotto di "produzione/condivisione/consumo" (160) che "ha a che fare con un contro-potere dell'enunciazione e l'acquisizione della possibilità di raccontare e, dunque, il potere (di far) sapere" (161).

L'autore non esprime certezze in merito alla piega che gli eventi futuri prenderanno né si esprime a favore di qualsivoglia panacea 'di carta'. Individua, tuttavia, un nucleo di questioni, solleva dei problemi e presenta delle argomentazioni. E ci ricorda, segnatamente, che la Palestina ci riguarda, ma non necessariamente ci guarda, specialmente se le voltiamo continuamente le spalle.

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Reviewed by Sergio Borgia

Made of ten chapters, in turn divided into three sections (plus a fourth one serving as a short appendix), and marked by the guiding words of Aimé Césaire, Joseph Conrad, and Susan Abulhawa chosen as epigraphs, Luigi Cazzato's *Palestina fra Oriente e Occidente. Anglosfera, ferite coloniali, re-esistenza decoloniale* ("Palestine between East and West. The Anglosphere, colonial wounds, decolonial re-existence") attempts to combine the scholarly reasons for a study undertaken since 2016 (35) with the timely passion imparted to him by the cruel reality of present times, which are also commented on in the preface written by Tomaso Montanari and the afterword authored by Nabil Bey Salameh.

The volume begins with what is intended to be almost an indictment, or rather, an ironic observation concerning the *status quaestionis* on the history of the Palestinian people from the perspective of postcolonial studies, which the author feels are deficient, perhaps because Palestine "is not enough post [despite being] the land [of their] inspirer Edward Said" ("non è abbastanza post [nonostante] la terra [del loro] ispiratore Edward Said", 20). At the same time, the reader is made aware of what may be the potential limitations and constitute "risks/disadvantages" ("rischi/disagi", 21) encountered when attempting to describe a foreign culture as an outsider.

Another challenge acknowledged right at the beginning of the book is due to the perceived need not to forget what is happening in the present, although, perhaps, the best way to serve the contemporary world, as scholars, is precisely to attempt to frame recent and even very recent events in their proper context, acting both rationally ("*ragionatamente*") and emotionally ("*emozionalmente*") (22), *i.e.* without sacrificing a fundamental part of what makes the researcher a human being and not an automaton. The invitation extended to the community of readers, therefore, is to be able to feel and see again ("tornare a essere sensibili, tornare cioè a sentire e vedere", 35).

The second chapter immediately introduces the idea of the 'Anglosphere', described as a space of "*Prosperian* power relations" ("relazioni di potere *prosperiano*", 48) "*acted … suffered … reacted*" ("*agito … subìto … reagito*") and mediated by the language dominating intercultural communications, English, which, after a long series of political and cultural developments, rose to the rank of "lingua franca" (44) at the beginning of the 20th century. By virtue of this, a broader definition of the phenomenon is offered as that perimeter which includes "not only the Atlantic world extended to the former British colonies (Australia, New Zealand and South Africa), but also all those English-speaking peoples who are (or were) subordinate to the "special relationship" referred to by Churchill" ("non solo il mondo atlantico allargato alle ex-colonie di insediamento britanniche (Australia, Nuova Zelanda e Sudafrica), ma anche tutti quei popoli anglofoni che sono (stati) subalterni rispetto alle 'relazioni speciali' di cui parlava Churchill", 48), thus making it a true "*Calibanian* 'imagined community'" ("'comunità immaginaria' *calibanesca*", *ibid*.).

The Palestinian concept of *sumud* is then explored in its dynamic and multifaceted configuration of non-violent resistance to Israeli occupation; it is stated that *sumud* is not just a theoretical stance, but a *praxis* aimed at renewing existence by giving new meaning to everyday actions from the moment they are animated by the determination to persevere in adversity, giving rise to a combination that is summarised in the formula "exist to resist" ("esistere per resistere", 53).

A synthesis is reached by limiting the object of the research to those cultural and artistic forms that *sumud* can take in the proposals "English-speaking Palestinians, or those who, in English, in various parts of the Anglosphere, dare to resist oppression and have the entire planet as their audience" ("dei palestinesi *di* lingua inglese, o che *in* lingua inglese, in diverse parti dell'anglosfera, osano resistere all'oppressione avendo come audience il pianeta intero", 48).

The second part of the book begins with an attempt to interpret the long-standing bond between the two great English-speaking powers of the last two centuries and the region named Palestine through the tools of postcolonial and decolonial criticism: consequently, by presenting both well-known names (Balfour, Sykes, Churchill above all) and other lesser-known figures, the worldview of the British

ruling class between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century is investigated, and it is shown how it centered on an imperial master narrative that, while extolling the paternalistic civilizing mission of the white man, underlay the transformation of the Middle East from the Ottoman order to its contemporary geopolitical constellation, thus sanctioning the transition from the logic of imperial difference to that of colonial difference (66), which consists of a vertical syntax, a semantics straddling the space in between the two poles of civilization and barbarism, and a pragmatics of unquestionable domination as the purest manifestation of an historical becoming oriented towards a constant and unstoppable progress. It is then depicted the change at the helm of the region from His Majesty's mandatory power to the democratic thalassocracy of the United States after World War II, with the establishment of "special relations" (77) between America and Israel, corroborated by an apparent commonality of interests that has now proven capable to endure the test of time for at least six decades. The author's opinion is that Zionism as a political doctrine was deeply influenced by the dominant ideologies of the time in which it was developed, which made it both the perpetrator and the victim of a 'paradox', namely that, "born in opposition to racist Europe, it inherited its main harmful ideologies: nationalism, imperialism and colonialism" ("nato come opposizione all'Europa razzista, ne ereditò le sue principali ideologie nefaste: nazionalismo, imperialismo e colonialismo", 63); but this is precisely what led the Anglosphere states to welcome and support the project to establish a Jewish state in Palestine, as – in the eloquent phrasing of Balfour cited in the text – it was "rooted in age-long traditions, in present needs, in future hopes of far profounder import than the desires and prejudices of the 700,000 Arabs who now [1919] inhabit that ancient land" (76).

In the fourth chapter, the Palestinian question and Arab-Israeli relations are reexamined through the lens of the decolonial option. In particular, the operation carried out consists in linking, by analogy, the respective 'catastrophes' suffered first by the European Jewry (the Shoah) and then by the Palestinian people (the Nakba) to the "*logic* of coloniality" ("*logica* della colonialità)", although this often remains implicit as it is "hidden by the *rhetoric* of modernity" ("nascosta dalla *retorica* della modernità") (82). The focus of the analysis offered here lies not so much in the events themselves as in their socio-cultural preconditions, namely the processes of dehumanization and deculturation (epistemicide) that precede and accompany acts of violence committed by humans against other humans in the context of intergroup conflicts, just up to the extreme cases of ethnic cleansing and genocide. The current, exasperated turn of events, therefore, could be said to have been made possible "thanks to European legacies" ("grazie ai lasciti europei", 64) that have contributed to building an idea of the world based on a peculiar strain of nominalism, capable of conquering minds and reshaping reality in a distorted way (see 96-100), generating mechanisms of unequal attribution of value to groups in theory, which subsequently translate into potentially genocidal practices of domination once integrated into the collective imagination of the populations involved in those processes.

The fifth chapter revolves around the object named "coloniality of semiosis" ("colonialità della semiosi"). The jumping-off point, in this case, is one of the basic assumptions of Peirce-derived semiotics, namely that "reality certainly exists" ("la realtà … certamente esiste", 108), but it is accessible and, above all, expressible and interpretable only through the mediation of signs; the incessant occurrence of signs gives rise to a potentially infinite chain of interpretants. Drawing on Stuart Hall's reflections on the event-representation nexus, the question of the role played by persuasion is raised, that is, "of the battle for *meaning* and *consensus*" ("della battaglia per la costruzione del *senso* e del *consenso*", *ibid*.). This agonistic conception of the processes of meaning production and consensus-building filters the subsequent review of some passages taken from the Italian (but also international) press, in which cases of distortion (e.g., by means of role reversal or omission of agents) can be identified in the presentation of news about the ongoing conflict in the Gaza Strip, which the author does not hesitate to define as genocide. The examination conducted on the selected texts leads to the conclusion that "[i]n Italy ... the fog of misinformation (the unwitting dissemination of false news) and disinformation (the deliberate dissemination of incorrect news) shows no sign of lifting" ("[i]n Italia … non si dirada per nulla la nebbia della *misinformazione* (la diffusione *inconsapevole* di notizie non vere) e della *disinformazione* (la diffusione *deliberata* di notizie non corrette)", 116). The remainder of the chapter describes "two tools through which (pro-)Palestinians, challenging the coloniality of semiosis (its digital version), strike the *imagination of the world*: the defensive creativity of *algospeak* and the offensive creativity of memetics" ("due strumenti attraverso i quali i (pro)palestinesi, sfidando la colonialità della semiosi in versione digitale,

colpiscono l'*immaginazione del mondo*: la creatività difensiva dell'*algospeak* e la creatività offensiva della memetica", 125).

The sixth chapter continues to examine the apparent discrepancy between the 'gifts' of modernity and the 'thefts' of coloniality (133), denouncing "a fake universalism" ("un universalismo fasullo", 137) modeled on strongly culturally connoted parameters and increasingly used as an immaterial weapon to inform hegemony and legitimize the domination of one part of the world over another, as well as the self-conferral of a sort of "licence to kill while remaining unpunished" ("licenza di uccidere rimanendo impuniti", 133). Taking up a proposal advanced by the American philosopher Richard Rorty, however, the possibility of basing human rights on a kind of sympathy mediated by the power of the arts is subsequently explored (see 141-144).

The third and final part of the book could be considered a collection of case studies of decolonial poetics and practices of re-existence in Palestine/Israel. Beyond the means of expression selected in each case, all these artivistic attempts to denounce "the imperial complicity between the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality" ("la complicità imperiale fra retorica della modernità e logica della colonialità", 153) share some commonalities: they are rooted in popular culture "as the site of the struggle for hegemony between dominant and subordinate social groups" ("come il luogo della lotta per l'egemonia tra gruppi sociali dominanti e gruppi sociali subalterni", 150); they are anchored in 'border thinking' as a manifestation of an alternative (meridian) way of thinking as opposed to the North Atlantic intellectual tradition; and their approach is based on the juxtaposition and mixing of forms and the interweaving and reorientation of content. Therefore, in the vast "archive of transnational imagination" ("archivio dell'immaginazione transnazionale", 160), we move from the "*code switching*" (156) present in the hip hop music of the Israeli-Palestinian group Dam (155-157) to the "cyberorature" of Rafeef Ziadah (161-175), from the brutalist visual *détournement* of Amer Shomali, Wiz, Bansky, and Mohammed al Hawajiri (187-194) to the anti-nationalist and anti-statist 'pessimistic future' underlying Larissa Sansour's *The Nation Estate Project* (194-200), ending with some rather impartial considerations on the "graffiti/murals appearing on the wall" ("graffiti/murales che appaiono sul muro", 210) (see 205-224).

Finally, remarks are offered on how this "nuova intellettualità organica" (158) seemingly finds in a dimension of "'estetica di confine' o … 'estesica'" (203) the most effective way to involve and give voice to the oppressed, silenced, and masses made invisible ("invisibilizzate") (see 144 and 160), urging the advancement of collective demands aimed at achieving a shared autonomy of a potentially post-national nature (200-204) in an uninterrupted movement of "produzione/condivisione/consumo" (160) that "has to do with a counter-power of enunciation and the acquisition of the possibility of narrating and, therefore, the power to (make) know(n)" ("ha a che fare con un contro-potere dell'enunciazione e l'acquisizione della possibilità di raccontare e, dunque, il potere (di far) sapere", 161).

In conclusion, the author does not express any certainty about the direction future events will take, nor does he declare himself in favor of any kind of oversimplified panacea. However, he identifies a core set of issues, he raises questions, he presents arguments. And he reminds us, in particular, that what happens in Palestine concerns us all, even if we keep turning our backs on it.

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