Brexit, Brexlit and the (Dis)United Kingdom: Responses to Brexit in post-referendum British novels

By Anthony Austin

Statement of originality

I certify that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work and that all

the assistance received in preparing this thesis and sources have been acknowledged.

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Introduction

One aspect of culture especially closely linked to national identity is literature … And so literature is an especially useful and appropriate way to address the political arguments about national identity which lie at the heart of Brexit.
– Robert Eaglestone (2018).

The United Kingdom's[1] decision to leave the European Union on 23 June 2016 – the so-called 'Brexit' referendum, in which 51.9% voted in favour of leaving the EU – represents one of the most significant events in recent British history. Brexit is a social, political and historical watershed. It marks a significant departure from the geopolitical trend towards integration and cooperation apparent both in its immediate European vicinity, and across the globe. At the European level, for instance, Britain's decision marks an unprecedented divergence from the continent's conscious commitment to an "ever-closer union"[2] as a way cultivating peace and prosperity following two world wars in the space of three decades. No other country has ever left the European coalition in all its iterations. At an international level, the UK's exit from Europe deviates from a broader global imperative towards integration and cooperation, represented not only by the EU, but other bodies such as the United Nations (founded in 1945) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (founded in 1961). Relative to its neighbours and many of its geopolitical allies, there is a sense that Britain is somehow different.

Recognising the anomalous nature of Britain's departure from the EU, several political scientists have sought to analyse the referendum through various demographic lenses – national identity, socioeconomic status, age, gender, race – in an attempt to understand voting patterns and

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[1] For the purposes of this thesis, the independent sovereign state officially called the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland will be metonymically referred to in equal measure as both the United Kingdom (UK) and Britain. This is not to elide or dismiss the nuanced semiotic differences that exist between these monikers, but for simplicity and ease of reading, and with recognition of the fact that these labels are widely accepted in academic circles (Shaw, 2021).

[2] The notion of an "ever-closer union" is an explicit aim of the EU, referred to in the preamble of the 1957 Treaty of Rome. The Treaty, which established the EU's predecessor, the European Economic Community, commences with the line: "Determined to lay the foundations of an ever-closer union among the peoples of Europe…". (Treaty of Rome, 1957).

behaviour, and ultimately, how Brexit came to be (Hobolt, 2016; Ashcroft & Bevir, 2016; Curtice, 2018; Heath & Richards, 2019). While these kinds of investigations are worthwhile, it is important to recognise that Brexit is not an event exclusive to the domain of political science: it is "an event in culture too" (Eaglestone, 2018, p. 1). Insofar as culture denotes a "signifying system" which mediates the experience of individuals within an identifiable group – comprising beliefs, customs, art forms, narratives, and so on – Brexit is an event in national culture (Anderson, 2020, p. 609). Brexit is a cultural upheaval which necessitates a reflection on who and what defines not only the UK nation-state in the contemporary moment, but its constituent nations of Wales, Northern Ireland, Scotland and England too.

In the years since the referendum, a new wave of creative production has emerged that attempts to grapple with the current social, cultural and political landscape of post-Brexit Britain. Kristian Shaw (2018) has coined the term "Brexlit" to describe this new feature of British culture, which involves fictions that either respond directly or imaginatively to Brexit, or else "engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain's withdrawal" (p. 18). While Shaw (2021) recognises that Brexlit includes a range of forms – poetry, theatre, news articles, and so on – it is the emergence of the 'Brexit novel' that is of significance here, especially if we accept that the element of culture to which Brexit is most strongly connected to is that of the nation. In his work on the origins of nationalism, Benedict Anderson (1983) argues that the development of print media was pivotal to the development and proliferation of nationalisms. Anderson (1983) posits that national identities consist of, and are formed by, the representation of shared narratives, which in turn produce "imagined communities" of nations. Anderson (1983) specifically identifies the narratives contained within works of literature as being "integral to the construction of imagined national communities" (cited in Shaw, 2021, p. 2). In essence, nations are produced through narrative. In lieu of the impossibility of all members of a nation meeting and knowing one another, it is narratives that do the work of presenting shared concepts, memories, customs and traditions that make otherwise disconnected individuals feel that

they belong to one and the same thing (Eaglestone, 2018). And the novel, as one of the primary modes through which shared stories are carried, is pivotal to the cultivation of national identities. For it is through novels that we figure out who we are and how we feel about ourselves in the world around us, and ultimately how we fit in (Self, 2020).

In keeping with Robert Eaglestone's (2018) belief that "literature is an especially useful and appropriate way to address the political arguments about national identity which lie at the heart of Brexit" (p. 1), analyses of Brexlit have commenced in earnest in the years since the Brexit referendum. Kristian Shaw (2018, 2021, 2022) has spearheaded this work, using close analyses of contemporary British fiction to demonstrate that the Euroscepticism of Brexit is not a new phenomenon, its seeds having been planted as early as the post-war period. Birte Heidemann (2020) uses British fiction as a lens through which to reveal the way that Brexit has made visible a long-held division between the urban and the rural in Britain. Dulcie Everitt (2021) identifies conceptions of Englishness as having played a key role in Brexit, and compares and contrasts the representations of Englishness in pre- and post-Brexit fiction. Dirk Wiemann (2021) affirms the novel's dialogical function, but expresses concern regarding the extent to which Brexit novels can offer a balanced representation of the UK's contemporary political divisions and put forward new models of meaning-making which can advance the healing process. This project is a continuation of this work, but it is more explicitly concerned with the way the fictions of the UK's constituent countries have engaged with Brexit. Treating Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland and England as distinct political entities, this thesis closely analyses a series of novels from authors of each region to shed light on the national divisions within Britain that Brexit brought to the fore, and which threatens the very future of the so-called "Disunited Kingdom" (Macwhirter, 2014). As such, it is a direct response to a question posed by Arianna Introna (2020): "What is the purpose of 'national' literature in a divided cultural landscape?" (p. 13). While recognising that Brexit involves fissures of other kinds, this thesis argues that it is the divisions between the constituent countries that are perhaps the most significant. Certainly, as it pertains to the political future of Britain, understandings of what it means

to be Northern Irish, Welsh, Scottish, and English, and indeed British, will undoubtedly play a pivotal

role in what happens in the years to come.

Placing Brexit in context

Eaglestone's (2018) contention that Brexit is a cultural event as well as a political one says something about the inextricable link between culture and politics. Culture is not produced in a vacuum. Rather, it is a reflection of the social, economic and political circumstances in which it is created – and indeed that in which it is consumed. In short, an artist's particular context is an important factor with respect to the meaning of a work. Before turning to a close reading of post-Brexit fiction, therefore, it is necessary to understand the context(s) in which both the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU emerged, and to which the novels discussed in the following chapters speak. Recognising that the results varied considerably between the constituent countries – with England (53.4%) and Wales (52.5%) both registering Leave majorities, and Scotland (62.0%) and Northern Ireland (55.8%) advocating to Remain – the following section provides a summary of some of the key themes and moments in the respective social and political histories of each country that pertain to Brexit.

Northern Ireland

Owing to a complex combination of history and ethno-religious demography, the Partition of Ireland in May 1921 brought into existence a politically divided Ireland: the Irish Free State (now the Republic of Ireland) in the South, comprising predominantly of Catholic Irish nationalists who desired a fully independent nation of Ireland on the Irish island;[3] and Northern Ireland in the North, encompassing the six counties of Antrim, Down, Armagh, Derry/Londonderry, Tyron and Fermanagh, and comprising primarily of Protestant unionists whose allegiances lay with Britain. In the decades following (Southern) Irish independence, this political division has crystallised into a broader ethno-

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[3] The "island of Ireland" and the "Irish island" are the default terms I employ to refer to the entire landmass encompassing both the nation-state of the Republic of Ireland and the constituent nation of Northern Ireland.

national and social rift on the island of Ireland. Conceptions of identity in both the North and the

South – described primarily in terms of religion (Catholic or Protestant) and national affiliation

(nationalist or unionist) – do not neatly align with the division associated with the political border.

Simply put: there are people in the North who may identify more with the identity and the way of

life more prevalent in the South, and vice versa.

The fact that the Irish border has been unable to placate the sociopolitical sentiments of

individuals in the North and South has caused a degree of tension between the Republic of Ireland

and the UK. From the late 1960s through to the late 1990s, this friction manifested itself in the most

bitter of ways, in a period of violence, hostility and paranoia typically dubbed 'the Troubles': a "low-

level war" fought between the British army and secret service, the Irish Republic's police force, and

numerous paramilitary organisations such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Ulster

Volunteer Force (UVF) (Hennessy, 2001, p. 48). The armed conflict was fought primarily for reasons

of national loyalty, with paramilitary forces in the South desiring to enforce a union on the island,

and their counterparts in the North violently resisting such an imperative. Over the course of nearly

three decades, the Troubles led to the deaths of more than 3,700 people – the majority of whom

were civilians – and almost fifty thousand casualties (Austin, 2019, p. 1).

In April 1998, the Troubles were formally concluded when then British Prime Minister, Tony

Blair, and his Irish counterpart, Bertie Ahern, signed a bilateral ceasefire agreement known as the

Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (the Agreement). When it came into effect in December 1999, the

Agreement set out several provisions relating to the governance of Northern Ireland, and the

country's relationship with both the Republic of Ireland and the UK. In effect, Northern Ireland

remained a part of the UK, but political structures[4] were put in place that gave the Republic a greater

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[4] Specifically, the principle of consent, which guarantees that political decisions regarding the unity (or not) of the North and South of Irelands are the exclusive domain only of the Republic and Northern Ireland; and the implementation of safeguards to ensure "cross-community" support for political decision-making – that is, political input from representatives of both nationalist and unionist parties. (The Belfast Agreement, 1998, p. 5).

voice in Northern affairs. Critically, the Agreement also entailed a commitment by both the North and South to facilitate ongoing peace on the island. While the Agreement makes only limited explicit reference to the European Union, "there is an assumption of Irish and UK membership of the Union forming the framework within which the Agreement is situated" (Murphy, 2021, p. 412). This assumption includes the joint commitment to upholding the European Convention on Human Rights, as well as the hundreds of millions of euros in funding the EU has committed to its Northern Ireland PEACE Program. While the path to peace remains a work in progress between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, the Agreement did play a pivotal part in nullifying the salience of the border to North-South politics, thereby "neutralis[ing] the toxicity which had previously attached to border politics in Ireland" (Murphy, 2021, p. 407). At the turn of the millennium, therefore, with both the North and South underscoring their commitment to cross-border relations through joint membership of the EU, the Irish border was no longer a symbol of sharp political division.

The result of the Brexit referendum in 2016, however, has dredged up the political wounds of Irish history, threatening not only to bring the peace process on the island of Ireland to a grinding halt, but potentially to undo it altogether. Despite a 55.8% majority of the Northern Irish population voting to remain in the EU, decisions made on the mainland – primarily by the English – have re-politicised the question of the Irish border, which now functions not only as the division between the nations on the island, but also as the border between the UK and the EU. What had for all intents and purposes become "an invisible and open border" following the signing of the Agreement "now risks regaining some of its 'hardness'" (Soares, 2016, pp. 838-839). From this perspective, Brexit effectively signifies a return to the past for Northern Ireland – and specifically, its 'Troubled' past, marked by friction, violence and hostility.

Wales

The result of the Brexit referendum in Wales represented a marked shift in the country's attitude to Europe. At the 1975 referendum on continued membership in the then European Economic Community, every region of Wales voted to remain a member. In contrast, at the Brexit referendum, the nation of Wales returned a Leave majority of 52.5%, slightly higher than the UK-wide vote of 51.9%. At first glance, the Welsh vote appears paradoxical, particularly considering the EU's role in facilitating the cultivation and protection of minority European nationalisms[5] and providing economic support, subsidies and funding to many regions in Wales.[6] Moya Jones (2017) draws attention to the fact that "the greatest number of Leave votes were registered in the very areas which have received the most EU support over the years" (p. 3). Such revelations led Richard Wyn Jones to ask in the referendum's immediate aftermath: "Why did Wales shoot itself in the foot?" (cited in Jones, 2017, p. 3).

One of the main theories that has emerged to attempt to explain Brexit voting patterns is the so-called 'left behind' hypothesis (Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Ford & Goodwin, 2017). This theory posits that the Brexit vote was largely driven by a sense of disenfranchisement felt by those that have been 'left behind' or forgotten by the geopolitical processes of globalisation – individuals identified by Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin (2014) as typically "older, white, male, less educated, economically insecure and feeling profoundly uncomfortable in an increasingly ethnically diverse and culturally heterogeneous society" (cited in Furlong, 2019, p. 2). In short: the argument holds that for these British individuals, Brexit represented a chance to exercise political agency for

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[5] For example, through the formalised protection of language as set out by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. Additionally, the European Union is typically viewed as having provided a mechanism for minority nationalisms to express themselves under the umbrella of Europeanness, without coming into conflict with competing nation-state identifications, as it has done for Scottish, Northern Irish and Welsh nationalisms within the United Kingdom.

[6] Between 2000 and 2020, Wales received approximately £4 billion from the EU's European Structural and Investment Fund for the development of economic initiatives in the country, including £2 billion in the period 2014-2020 (Welsh European Funding Office, 2018).

agency's sake; their vote was not dictated by a particular desire to leave the EU, but rather a pervasive feeling that their quality of life had not experienced any tangible improvement in decades, such that Brexit therefore presented no downside – things could not get any worse.

Welsh historian Martin Johnes's work regarding the rise and fall of the coal industry in Wales appears to affirm the validity of the left behind theory for an understanding of the Brexit vote in the country – at least in the post-industrial urban regions in the South and the Northeast. Not only has the steady closure of Welsh collieries contributed to a material decline in livelihoods and communities across many parts of the country, but the industry's decay is also emblematic of a perception that Wales is "rooted in the past rather than the present" by virtue of it "lacking in modern technologies and attitudes" (Johnes, 2015, p. 671). In essence, the legacy of coal in Wales, and particularly "the historic failure to replace and move beyond [it]", is indicative of the fact that the country is essentially incongruous with the post-industrial, reality of neoliberalism[7] that characterises countries not only in Europe, but across the West more broadly (Johnes, 2019).

Johnes's analyses of the 'left behind' nature of the post-industrial regions of urban Wales offers a partial answer to Wyn Jones's perplexed question regarding the "bizarrely self-defeating" Welsh vote insofar as it draws attention to the fact that EU funding in and of itself evidently did not prove motivation enough for these areas to retain a status quo which has not materially improved. However, a fuller understanding of the post-Brexit landscape in Wales must pay caution to oversimplistic understandings of exactly who the 'left behind' entails. As Jamie Furlong (2019) argues

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[7] Here, and for the purposes of this thesis, I define "neoliberalism" (and "neoliberal capitalism") as a political and economic ideology which first emerged in the UK and the US in the 1980s, under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan respectively – and which has subsequently spread across much of the globe. The ideological logic of neoliberalism holds that a (or better, 'the') free market is the best way to advocate for the human entrepreneurial spirit and, consequently, human progress. Additionally, individual economic freedom is paramount; market deregulation and privatisation are encouraged as much as possible, and conversely, the state's function should be limited only to the protection of 'the' free market. Neoliberalism regards the individual as the primary economic unit, and correspondingly defines an individual's status as directly related to their economic productivity. This idea is best summed up in the idiomatical attachment to having to 'earn a living' in which life is framed not as a right, but as a reward. (Thorsen & Lie, 2006; Venugopal, 2015; Monbiot, 2016). Following on from this definition, I define the "neoliberal project" as government policies which are premised on a commitment to neoliberalism.

in his account of the process of political-class dealignment in contemporary Britain, the rise of "an insecure 'class-in-the-making' … the 'precariat' – with distinctive relations of production characterised by casualisation, informalisation, agency labour, part-time labour, phoney self-employment and the new mass phenomenon crowd-labour" (pp. 2-3) – has complicated the understanding of the typical 'left behind' individual. That is, those feeling left behind need not be older, nor white, nor less educated, and that in fact there is a whole new younger demographic for whom there is a sense of having been left out of the neoliberal project, of having arrived at the dock too late, metaphorically speaking, after the ship had already set sail. These circumstances have contributed to an exodus of the younger generations in Wales – with some 117,000 citizens aged between 15 and 29 having left the country in the last decade, from the counties of Ynys Môn, Gwynedd, Ceredigion and Carmarthenshire alone (Roberts, 2019) – stripping the country not only of the human resources required for continued economic productivity, but crucially, for innovation and creativity too. The post-Brexit reality in Wales, therefore, is marked by a temporal dislocation, in which the country is both disconnected from its industrial past, and also broadly incapable of joining the future of neoliberal capitalism.

Scotland

One of the fundamental differences between Scotland and its Welsh and Northern Irish counterparts, with respect to the UK, is the fact that Scotland entered the union with its southern English neighbour consensually. The Acts of Union of 1706 and 1707, passed by the English and Scottish Parliaments, united the two kingdoms of England and Scotland into "One Kingdom by the Name of Great Britain,"[8] in effect establishing the modern UK. Despite its centre of parliament being transferred to Westminster in London upon the commencement of the Union, and its currency,

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[8]This line features in both England's *Union with Scotland Act 1706* (Article 1) and Scotland's *Union with England Act 1707* (Section 1).

taxation, sovereignty and trade merging with England's, Scotland "kept its independence with

respect to its legal and religious systems" (Johnson, 2020). This detail was crucial in allowing

Scotland to avoid becoming "swallowed up" by, and merely "another region" of, England (Johnson,

2020) – a fate which had befallen Wales some four centuries prior – and maintaining a conviction in

its own national legitimacy. This is not to gloss over the historically problematic relationship

between England and Scotland – with the pair having fought several wars against one another in the

preceding centuries, including two Wars of Scottish Independence – only to say that Scotland's

autonomy in 1707 is a fact which has continued to influence its sense of place within the UK.

The extent to which Scotland entered the Union because of a perceived commonality with

England, or rather because of its own financial vulnerability[9] and the economic advantages of

England's trade network, is obviously debatable (not forgetting motivations on the part of the

English too[10]). However, it is important to note that the Union has fostered a period of harmony

between the two countries, certainly from a military perspective,[11] and, by-and-large, from a social

perspective as well.

In contrast to the overarching history of British integration of the past three centuries,

scholars have observed a more recent "divergence of politics between Scotland and the rest of the

United Kingdom" (Thompson, 2019, p. 141). This divergence has been particularly pronounced since

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[9] In the late 1690s, the Company of Scotland Trading to Africa and the Indies (also known as the Scottish Darien Company), backed by the Kingdom of Scotland, tried to establish an overseas colony in present-day Panama. The colony, 'New Caledonia', was intended to offer the Scottish Kingdom a strategic trade route between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. The Darien scheme, as it has come to be known (named after the Gulf of Darién), was an unequivocal disaster. A large majority of the Scots died, while a blockade imposed on the colony by English colonies in the region at the behest of William of Orange (then king of both England and Scotland) served to confirm a sense of "indignation" within Scotland, and that their King considered England "the much richer and well thought-of kingdom" (Stirrat, 2010, p. 42).

[10] Christopher Whatley (2014) posits that the Union of 1707 was at least partly fuelled by "anxiety about the Scots' martial abilities" on the part of the English, and "the prospect that these might be utilised in alliance with … France, with whom England was [then] locked in war" (pp. 1-2).

[11] Noting that since their formal union in 1707, Scotland and England have not engaged in a single instance of military conflict, and have in fact been allies in two world wars and several other engagements. Their military alliance over the past three centuries is in stark contrast to the centuries preceding their union, in which they engaged in two wars of Scottish Independence (1296-1346); several battles associated with the Border Wars (1372-1448); and the Anglo-Scottish War (1650-1652).

the era of Margaret Thatcher's prime ministership in the 1980s. M. K. Thompson (2019) cites the former UK premier's attacks on the welfare state, her attitude to the working class (culminating in the miners' strikes of 1984-85) and her early implementation of the inequitable poll tax in Scotland in 1989 as salient examples of her government "abusing and disregarding Scotland" (p. 148). This perspective chimes with Scottish historian Tom Devine's claims that Scotland lost "nearly a third of its manufacturing capacity" between 1976 and 1987, and that Thatcher's prime ministership therefore created a "legacy of social dislocation" in the country (in Tharoor, 2014). The denigration of the industrial economy and the transition to a service-based economy under Thatcherite-imposed neoliberalism, which caused significant job loss in the country,[12] leads Blaha Samia (2020) to claim that Thatcher's economic policies displayed a "carelessness about Scotland's industrial heritage" (p. 20). Iain Macwhirter (2013) goes so far as to say that Thatcher's contempt for Scotland convinced the Scots that they lived in a "different country", and that her legacy casts "a shadow over Scottish political life" which continues to haunt the present moment.

The perceived disregard of Scotland by Thatcher gave rise to the notion within Scotland that the country was being governed non-consensually, and inspired its inclination towards, and affinity for, Europe. James Foley (2022) argues that Scotland's Europhilia "originate[d] with Thatcher's transformations in the British state", transformations which generated a sense of "democratic deficit" in Scotland (pp. 446-447). An analysis of Scottish voting behaviour pre- and post-Thatcher's reign confirms Foley's claims. For example, Aileen McHarg and James Mitchell (2017) observe that in the 1975 referendum on the UK's membership on the European Economic Community, the only two counting areas to record a vote against membership were both in Scotland; this is in stark contrast to the Brexit referendum of 2016, in which "each Scottish local authority area" voted to Remain a part of the European Union (p. 513).

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[12] Fraser and Sinfield (1987) record a nearly fivefold increase in the unemployment rate in Scotland between 1967 and 1986, rising from 3.6% to 15.6%.

In addition to stoking its Europhilia, the enduring legacy of Thatcher's "abuse and disregard" of Scotland has validated the support for increased Scottish sovereignty "as a way of prevent[ing] future abuses of power from an unelected government and enabl[ing] Scotland to carry on [its] political and cultural distinctiveness" (Thompson, 2019, p. 148). The success of the Scottish devolution referendum in 1997, which passed by an overwhelming 74% majority, is a testament to the extent of this support. Thompson (2019) also contends that the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence (the 'Indyref') had its roots in Thatcher's legacy (p. 141), and while the Indyref ultimately failed to bring about an independent Scotland (55% voted in favour to remain in the UK), historians often attribute the result to economic anxieties and uncertainty about eligibility for EU membership, rather than any dearth of support for the motion. Indeed, the referendum's very existence was (and is) unprecedented in the history of the United Kingdom: at no other time has one of the constituent countries offered their people the opportunity to depart the Union. That a significant portion of the population voted in favour of independence, despite the myriad uncertainties, is itself suggestive. Scottish novelist Andrew O'Hagan (2017) certainly reads the Indyref result this way, declaring in the aftermath: "I felt not that the Union had been saved, but that it was over."

As touched on already, Scotland voted convincingly to remain a member of the EU at the 2016 Brexit referendum. In the context of the 'Leave' Brexit result, therefore, it is no hyperbole to say that the twinned 'failures' of Indyref and Brexit represented, for many Scots, a catastrophic sequence of events. Given Scotland's profound Europhilia, it is certainly conceivable to imagine a different result in 2014 had the nation's citizens known what would befall them less than two years later; the renewed calls for a second Scottish independence referendum is evidence of the validity of the argument. Leader of the Scottish National Party and First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, posited the possibility of a second Indyref, when she said in the wake of Brexit:

> Scotland now faces the prospect of being dragged out of Europe against our will
> by a right-wing Tory government hell-bent on a hard Brexit, with catastrophic

consequences for jobs, livelihoods and living standards. That is nothing short of a democratic outrage – having our own parliament was meant to ensure such a thing could never happen again … Are we prepared to have our future selves shaped by governments we don't vote for – or is it better to decide our future for ourselves? (in Thompson, 2019, p. 152).

With her proclamation of Brexit as a "democratic outrage" for Scotland, Sturgeon's words bear an eerie resemblance to the sentiment regarding the era of Thatcher, in which Scotland was regarded as being "governed against its will" (Thompson, 2019, p. 142), and therefore tethers the post-Brexit moment in Scotland to the era of Thatcher. From this perspective, contemporary Scotland can be understood as trapped in a kind of cyclical history of misfortune, its political preferences overruled again by those of Westminster.

England

Two seemingly contradictory claims have emerged in recent political science investigations into the relationship between England and the UK, and how this relationship intersects with the politics of Brexit. The first concerns the claim that "Brexit was made in England", a school of thought that holds that the political weight of England within the UK – accounting for 83% of the population (The World Bank, 2022a; Office for National Statistics, 2022a) and approximately two-thirds of the gross domestic product (Office for National Statistics, 2022b) – effectively made the voting patterns in the other constituent countries a moot point (Henderson et al., 2017, p. 1). The "made in England" argument also points to survey data to assert that identification with Englishness positively correlated to voting Leave at the Brexit referendum as further evidence for its English origins (Henderson et al., 2017; Heath & Richards, 2019). The second is the contention that "Englishness has become nothing, that the English do not exist and that they may never be reinvented" (Aughey, 2010, p. 508). This line of argument is intimately bound to England's hegemonic position within the UK, and the associated blurring of the distinction between England and Britain – what Dulcie Everitt (2021) calls their "coterminous" nature (p. 14). It is also connected to England's imperial legacy as

the key proponents of the British Empire, and the "crisis of identity" the end of empire is said to have initiated for the English (Bryne, 2007, p. 140). While conscious of the fact that caution needs to be paid to the equation between England, the English and Englishness, it appears paradoxical that a country and a people so riddled with anxiety as to fear their own demise could be, for all intents and purposes, the sole architects of the most profound demonstration of political agency in recent British memory. If Aisla Henderson and her colleagues (2017) are correct, and the UK's decision to leave the European Union was indeed one made in England, and rooted in an English identity, then it appears odd that an act of such gravity could emanate from a place that "has become nothing" and a people who "do not exist". As a result, the questions that emerge are: who and what is England and Englishness?

Tom Nairn characterised English nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s as "warped and regressive", as "pathologically incapable of incubating anything approximating to a 'normal' nationalism", and containing the forces by which "Britain might well be pulled apart" (cited in Wellings & Kenny, 2019, p. 848). To paraphrase, English nationalism throughout the twentieth century did not mature like others around the world – that is, by means of opposition to another group, such as the many postcolonial nationalisms which emerged in the latter part of the century.[13] Rather, England's involvement in the transnational histories of imperialism, global conflict and globalisation meant that the country and its people "were in the unique position of not being required to think about a collective sense of self, in the way that [other nations] were compelled to do by the operations of the global political economy" (Wellings & Kenny, 2019, p. 855). England and Englishness were, in a sense, a baseline, or perhaps more aptly, a benchmark; they were defined less by what they were, and more by what they were not. It is in this vein that Arthur Aughey's (2010) anxious description of Englishness as an invisible nothingness resonates.

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[13] For example, the swathes of independence movements in Africa, the Caribbean, Asia and the South Pacific from the 1940s onwards, including (but far from limited to) India (1947), Sudan (1956), Malaysia (1957), Jamaica (1962), Lesotho (1966) and Fiji (1970).

While Nairn ultimately shifted his attitudes to Englishness, going on to observe a kind of post-imperial, civic nationalism which contained the potential for democratic transition and national renewal, it is his earlier definition of a regressive English nationalism which haunts the twenty-first century, helping to establish the "intellectual parameters for the ways in which assertions of English democratic right would be viewed in liberal circles" through to the present day (Wellings & Kenny, 2019, p. 848). The sense of Englishness as pathological, as "unusually backward looking, unusually conservative" (Alex Niven, cited in Novara Media, 2020) and out of step with contemporary nationalisms, has fostered a degree of unease about expressions of Englishness and its capacity to exist harmoniously with Britishness and the UK.

In the political domain of the early twenty-first century, anxieties about a politicised Englishness were thwarted by a conscious promotion of Britishness, in particular by former Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown and his Government's 'British way', which encompassed, among other things, "the creation of a British youth national community service; a British Day; the reclamation of the Union flag 'as a flag for Britain' … [and] the introduction of a biometric British national identity card" (Lee, 2010, p. 88) – all which sought to subsume Englishness under Britishness, thus denying the political expression of Englishness (Aughey, 2010, p. 513). Considered against the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish devolutions of the decade preceding Brown's Prime Ministerial term, is it any wonder that the English appear to have become increasingly aggrieved at their national situation in the years preceding the Brexit referendum? Or that Everitt (2021) notes the emergence of "paranoia and protectionist rhetoric" in English nationalism in recent years, inspired by the anxiety that England's perceived synonymity with the UK is putting it at a political disadvantage?

The 'take back control' rhetoric espoused by politicians such as Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson and other key Leave proponents played right into these anxieties regarding the decline of Englishness and feelings of disenfranchisement. It served up a platform, or to paraphrase Nairn again, extended "the invitation card", for people to arrest this decline (cited in Wellings & Kenny,

2019, p. 854) – or to at least feel as though they could – in the form of a reclamation of political agency from the EU bureaucrats in Brussels. It tapped into the frustrations of those that felt their Englishness could not be celebrated in the way that Scottishness could for Scots, or Welshness for Welsh; who felt it was being forcibly curbed, stifled, and subsumed under "the internationalism … symbolised by 'Britishness'" (Barnett, 2014, cited in Wellings and Kenny, 2019, p. 861).

Whether one accepts the "made in England" theory or not, it is obvious that Brexit is inherently not a solely English phenomenon. As Everitt (2021) suggests, it has added fuel to the fire of "insurgent nationalisms within the UK" – most obviously in Scotland – which must serve as a "wake-up call for England"; the country must either "follow suit and reassert a viable and cohesive version of its own identity" or else "be prepared to lose its last glimmer of exceptionalism on the international stage" (p. 19).

A note on the selected texts

In terms of setting the parameters for this project, there are two considerations that it is worth offering a few words on by way of rationale: the question of the authors' national identities, and that of what defines a work of Brexlit.

In the globalised world of the twenty-first century, notions of national identity have become more complex and varied. Increasingly, individuals have come to adopt a sense of identity in plural form. For example, one may feel attachment to the nation-state in which they live, but also to another they, or their ancestors, may have originated from; one may also identify with particular geographical regions at different scales, from the hyper local (a suburb, a village, a town), to the multinational (for example, European, Latin American, West Indian, Scandinavian). And these identities are almost always never mutually exclusive, but exist in "nested" form, each assuming a different significance depending on the context (Herb & Kaplan, 1999). In the British context, a nation-state comprising four constituent countries with their own unique and long-established national identities and cultures, the complexity of national identity is especially so. One only needs to look at the way British censuses ask respondents about their national identity to see this. The 2011 Office for National Statistics Census in England and Wales, for example, employed a "tick all that apply" response logic to the question "how would you describe your national identity?", and listed "English", "Welsh", "Scottish", "Northern Irish", "British" and "Other, write in" as options.

This project separates the primary works with which it deals into four categories being those of the four constituent countries of the UK. With a consideration for the complexity of national identities in the British context, an explanation is needed as to how authors were attributed to different countries. The selection of Anna Burns's *Milkman* as a choice text for the Northern Irish chapter was straightforward. Burns was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the novel is set in Belfast, and engages explicitly with (Northern) Irish history and politics. Regarding the Welsh chapter, Rachel Trezise's *Easy Meat* was an uncomplicated choice, with Trezise born in Rhondda, Wales, and her

novel set in the Southern Welsh valleys. Niall Griffiths's was less the case. Griffiths was born and raised in Liverpool, England, however he has been a long-time resident of Aberystwyth in Wales, where the majority of his novel *Broken Ghost* is set. As such, a case can be made that the work is a Welsh one. Ali Smith and Sarah Moss were chosen as the Scottish authors. Smith was born and raised in Inverness, Scotland, and later studied at the University of Aberdeen. While her novel *Autumn* is set in London, my analysis makes the case that there is a particular Scottishness about its content. Like Smith, Moss was born in Scotland, and her novel *Summerwater* is set in the Scottish Trossachs, hence its selection. As for the English chapter, Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach* and Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* made for obvious representatives, considering both were born in, and continue to live in, England. Moreover, both works are set almost exclusively in England. Deborah Levy, born in South Africa, was a more difficult choice, however the fact that she has lived in London since the age of five, and *The Man Who Saw Everything* is set primarily in London, meant a case could be made for its inclusion.

As for what defines Brexlit, this project adopts a more stringent and straightforward definition than that employed by Kristian Shaw, who regards even fictions published prior to the referendum as eligible for the label. All the novels in this thesis were published after the Brexit referendum: that is, after 23 June 2016. In fact, problems arose at the other end of the spectrum. If one can mark the referendum date as a 'natural' beginning for Brexlit, can they similarly mark its end on 31 January 2020, when the UK formally exited the EU? This work does not, and instead regards Brexlit as an ongoing category of fiction like the Brexit process itself which, while officially over, is likely to reverberate across Britain for years to come. In actual fact, the problem I faced was when to stop reading? For the sake of concluding the reading and commencing the writing, a decision was made at *Easy Meat*, published in 2021.

A note on the thesis's structure

Heeding to the notion that Brexit is an event in national culture, the analysis of Brexlit that

follows is divided into four chapters, one pertaining to each of the UK's four constituent countries.

The first chapter concerns Northern Ireland, and a close reading of Anna Burns's novel *Milkman*.

With a recognition of the particularly traumatic nature of Northern Ireland's recent history, this

section notes the prevalence of the Troubles as a plot device and argues that the circumstances of

Brexit in Northern Ireland are ripe for the repetition of the country's traumatic past. I employ Mark

Fisher's theorisation of hauntology as a critical framework to highlight the way *Milkman* reflects

Brexit as portending the cancellation of a peaceful future on the Irish island. This chapter also

addresses the psychological notion of *jamais vu* – the "never seen" – and elements of

psychogeography, to trace the ways in which Northern Irish fiction confronts the trauma evoked by

Brexit. The second chapter's focus is on Wales: specifically, on Rachel Trezise's novel *Easy Meat*, and

Niall Griffiths's *Broken Ghost*. Noting political science explanations of Wales's Leave majority as

rooted in a sense of the nation as having been 'left behind' by global neoliberal capitalism, Fisher

again provides a theoretical paradigm for mapping this idea in these two novels. Close readings of

each illuminates the way that present-day Wales is plagued by what Fisher calls capitalist realism:

the internalisation of a sense of malaise regarding the future, and a related sense of impotence and

apathy, are the marks of these works. The third chapter addresses the post-Brexit landscape of

Scotland and engages with Ali Smith's *Autumn* and Sarah Moss's *Summerwater*. Working from the

idea that Brexit, for Scotland, marks a crisis of sovereignty – with the country pulled out of Europe

against its will – I analyse how these two novels reflect the trauma of Brexit. I draw on Timotheus

Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker's (2010a) theorisation of metamodernism – a structure of

feeling marked primarily by informed naivety and a conscious commitment to hope against logic – to

suggest that unlike the Welsh fictions, and to a lesser extent, *Milkman*, Scottish post-Brexit fiction is

more overtly committed to articulating a tangible future for the nation. Finally, the fourth chapter

engages with Brexit as it is borne out in the works of Jonathan Coe's *Middle England*, Ian McEwan's

The Cockroach and Deborah Levy's *The Man Who Saw Everything*. My close readings are informed by

a consideration of the fact that, in contrast to the reclamation of control supposedly signified by

Brexit, conceptions of Englishness and the future of the English nation are marked by uncertainty in

the contemporary moment. Drawing on Ben Anderson and his co-authors' (2020) work on "modes of

uncertainty", the chapter identifies two specific modes as evident in these novels: comedy as

comfort, at work in both *Middle England* and *The Cockroach*, and the notion of a failed present,

represented in *The Man Who Saw Everything*. I address the extent to which each may offer the

English nation a way of reconciling itself with present circumstances.

Stoking Troubled Flames: Brexit and the return of traumatic history in Anna Burns's *Milkman*

> *Irish history is often defined as a 'traumatic paradigm', with history presenting 'a nightmarish burden of uncanny familiarity, repeating the same dreary pattern . . . over and over again, as in a neurosis or a nightmare'.*
> – Joep Leerssen (1998), cited in Stefanie Lehner (2014).

Anna Burns's Booker Prize-winning novel *Milkman* is a recent work of Northern Irish fiction that tethers the sociopolitical aftermath of Brexit to the Troubles through its exploration of individual and collective trauma. In returning to the Troubles, *Milkman* joins a litany of other post-Brexit Northern Irish texts that have similarly used the recent Irish conflict as a narrative feature. For example, Michael Hughes's *Country* (2018), a reworking of Homer's *Iliad*, uses a Troubles narrative to reveal the individual capacity for violence and brutality in the name of loyalty; Wendy Erskine's short story collection *Sweet Home* (2019), uses the Troubles as an affective backdrop, conditioning the everyday lives of its myriad protagonists; and Cindy Brandner couples individual grief and collective trauma associated with the conflict in her novel *Where Butterflies Dream* (2020) to interrogate how contemporary Northern Irish society reckons with the search for hope and happiness. As foregrounded in the introduction, the pervasiveness of the Troubles in post-Brexit Northern Irish fiction can be explained with consideration of two related effects of Brexit on the island of Ireland. Firstly, Brexit entails a re-politicisation of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland stemming from its new status as a border between the UK and the EU. The border's resignification as a 'hard' border presents a challenge to the peace process heralded by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and signals a renewed threat – and actuality[14] – of political violence and hostility. Secondly, the nature of trauma itself, in which "the response to an event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth, 1991, p. 181), means that attempts at psychological reconciliation can occur

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[14] April 2021 saw riots in Belfast associated with post-Brexit politics, described as "the worst violence in Northern Ireland in more than a decade" (Ferguson & Booth, 2021).

years and even decades later. With its re-politicised border, the post-Brexit Northern Irish present

bears the hallmarks of Ireland's Troubled past, and as such, the current moment marks a kind of

Freudian "returning" of Northern Ireland's unresolved traumatic history (Caruth, 1991). The motif of

the Troubles in contemporary Northern Irish fiction thus speaks to the nation's traumatic memory

which "refuses to be buried in silence and oblivion", and attempts at resolution (Lehner, 2014, p.

276).

The psychosocial effects of the re-evocation of the border issue on the Irish island during

and after the Brexit referendum campaign, including those brought on by the associated sense of

history repeating itself, can be understood with Mark Fisher's theorisation of "hauntology" in mind.

Observing a "cultural impasse" in contemporary Britain which emerged in the mid-1990s, Fisher's

conception of hauntology describes spectral influences from both the past and the future which

condition psychosocial behaviour and cultural production. He argues that contemporary society is

haunted both by "that which is (in actuality is) *no longer*, but which is still effective as a virtuality

(the traumatic 'compulsion to repeat', a structure that repeats, a fatal pattern)" as well as by "that

which (in actuality) has *not yet* happened, but which is *already* effective in the virtual (an attractor,

an anticipation shaping current behaviour)" (Fisher, 2012, p. 19; emphasis in original). While Fisher

observes hauntology as a British-wide cultural and affective phenomenon, it carries a particular

significance in post-Brexit Northern Ireland due to the specifically traumatic nature of the country's

past. Stefanie Lehner (2014), leaning on the work of Joep Leerssen, notes that (Northern) Irish

history operates in a "traumatic paradigm" in which history presents "a nightmarish burden of

uncanny familiarity, repeating the same dreary pattern … over and over again" (p. 273). While the

traumatic past is "no longer", at least formally, it still weighs on the present by virtue of its

unresolved status which demands a kind of repetition for the purposes of resolution. Moreover, the

departure from the Agreement peace process symbolised by Brexit signals for Northern Ireland a

"cancellation of the future" which ultimately condemns the country to an anti-future in which it

"remain[s] trapped in the twentieth century" (Fisher, 2014, p. 8) – that is, a future that is marked not by a sense of the new, but by the hallmarks of the past.

The presence of the Troubles as a sociopolitical backdrop in *Milkman* is a necessary part of working through past traumas, and reanimating the path to future peace. Burns establishes her concern with attending to historical trauma from the novel's outset. Her unnamed protagonist – referred to in equal parts as "middle sister" and "maybe-girlfriend" – engages in a process of retro-introspection, of after-the-fact self-analysis, in which she attempts to make sense of her experience of being stalked by an older man known only as "Milkman". Burns makes it clear to her reader from the very first chapter of the novel that middle sister's journey of reconciliation relates to events from a distant past: "I didn't have those thoughts until later, and I don't mean an hour later. I mean twenty years later."[15] Such belatedness resonates with both Cathy Caruth's (1991) articulation of the "delayed" nature of traumatic experience, as well as Marcela Santos Brigida's and Davi Pinho's (2021) contention that *Milkman* "sheds light over an aspect of the experience of those who lived through [Northern Irish] trauma, that is, the belatedness of a haunting event" (p. 438). Additionally, the way in which middle sister's present is still affected by the trauma of her past is demonstrative of the spectral quality of Fisher's hauntology in which what is "no longer" is still "effective as a virtuality".

The delayed onset of middle sister's experience of trauma is manifested in her narrative voice, which consistently and delicately treads the precipice between past and present as it recounts the present effects of past horrors. One pertinent example can be seen in a passage early in the novel, in which middle sister reflects on her perception of her "maybe-boyfriend's" socially (un)acceptable status:

> All the same, I did feel worried that maybe-boyfriend in some male way was
> refusing to fit in. Again, this confused me for was I saying then, that I *was*
> ashamed of him, that mainstream boys, the ones who did fit in, the ones who

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[15] From Burns, A. (2018). *Milkman*. Faber & Faber. p. 6.

wanted to beat up Julie Covington for singing 'Only Women Bleed' which they thought was a song about periods; boys too, who if they had an interest in you, would blame you for this interest in you – was I saying I preferred to be going on dates with the likes of them? Whenever I pondered this, which I didn't like to do for again it exposed to me my irreconcilables, those uncontrollable irrationalities, I felt uneasy … So I nodded at the sunset, at this horizon, which made no sense, all the while taken up with these contradictory sentiments, with maybe-boyfriend beside me, with all these odd people, also gazing upon the sunset, around me.[16]

Marked by excessively long clauses which subtly alternate between past and present analysis – such as, in this case, middle sister's switch from her definitive claim that she "did feel worried" to the hesitant uncertainty of "was I saying I preferred to be going on dates with the likes of them?", and then finally to observations of her surrounds – this passage is emblematic of the fluid style of Burns's prose in the novel. *Milkman* is largely devoid of clear punctuation to delineate the narrator's temporal zones (mirroring her subversion of the novel's spatial zones, more on which shortly). Instead, the text is marked by exceedingly long and intensely descriptive sentences, which bring the reader into the protagonist's thoughts, and seemingly arbitrary chapter divisions that do not correspond to conventional divisions of narrative temporality. The result is a narrative voice which employs not a continuous present tense, but a "continuous past", thereby occupying the novel in a kind of liminal metaphorical space – both temporally and psychically – which resonates with the character of Northern Ireland itself, a hybrid territory, a political compromise: "a place that never was, and never can be, that at the same time defines and circumscribes the lives and identities of those born within the six counties still subject to Westminster rule" (Malone, 2021, pp. 5-11).

The liminality of Burns's narrative voice is enhanced by *Milkman*'s inverted temporal structure in which the chronological conclusion is foregrounded. Burns prefaces middle sister's journey of self (re)discovery, in the very first lines of the novel, with the knowledge that the threat once posed by her stalker has since been thwarted: "The day that Somebody McSomebody put a gun to my breast and called me a cat and threatened to shoot me was the same day the milkman

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[16] Burns, 2018, p. 76.

died."[17] With the conclusion offered from the beginning, the novel's plot is stripped of its narrative power, with the capacity to surprise rescinded as the reader progresses through the text comfortable in the certainty of the stalker's death. In doing so, Burns renders *Milkman*'s emphasis far more strongly on the narrative experience as opposed to the storyline. So not only does Burns obfuscate conventional narrative temporality by overlaying the protagonist's past on top of her present, she also compounds this distorted sense of time by structuring her novel as one that in some respects operates in reverse, working from the effect to the cause, "mov[ing] backwards towards the future" (Brigida & Pinho, 2021, p. 439). Thus, in its folded presentation of time, *Milkman* is a hauntological novel; psychologically, middle sister "remain[s] trapped in the twentieth century", and she must reconcile the belated onset of past traumas if she is any hope of embracing a brighter, more inspired and meaningful life in the future.

The liminality that characterises *Milkman* extends also to the psychology of the novel's characters, by means of a mental process known as *jamais vu*. Deriving from the French for the "never seen", *jamais vu* is a neurological condition which is often considered the psychological antithesis to *déjà vu*. It describes a kind of deliberate forgetfulness or memory lapse, or an intense feeling that a situation is "novel and strange" despite the "objective realisation that [it has] indeed been previously experienced" (Burwell & Templer, 2017, p. 1194). Burns offers her reader an example of *jamais vu* when her narrator provides the context for her status as 'maybe-girlfriend':

> There was that other reason of reservation, of us having perhaps as much
> intimacy and fragility of relationship as either of us could bear. And this was
> what happened. I would suggest closeness as a way of forwarding our
> relationship and it would backfire and I'd forget I'd suggested closeness and
> he'd have to remind me when I next suggested closeness. Then the boot
> would be on the other foot and he'd suffer a misfiring of neurons and go and
> suggest closeness himself. Constantly we were having memory lapses, episodes
> of a kind of jamais vu. We wouldn't remember we'd remembered, and would

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[17] Burns, 2018, p. 1.

> have to remind each other of our forgetfulness and of how closeness didn't
> work for us given the state of delicacy our maybe-relationship was in.[18]

Maybe-girlfriend (middle sister) and her maybe-boyfriend counterpart are perturbed by the promise

of the safety and happiness to be found in their mutual love for one another. These feelings are so

foreign to them, to the extent that intimacy is metaphorically depicted as a weight which "bear[s]"

down on them. Rather than embrace intimacy, therefore, or even entertain the potential for it, they

instead recoil, electing deliberately to have a "misfiring of neurons" and forget suggestions of

closeness and of moving forward. Such a distancing from beacons of hope and happiness is

illustrative of how *jamais vu* operates as a psychological "defence mechanism" (Drong, 2020, p. 178).

The stability to be found in middle sister and maybe-boyfriend's reciprocal love is incongruous with

the spectre of trauma which haunts the pair. Despite the objective reality of their positive feelings

for one another, they instead deliberately choose to see the situation as "novel and strange". As

such, they choose to disconnect themselves from the possibility of, and hope for, a happy future

together – from a positivity that the narrator broadly calls "shiny"[19] things.

The use of *jamais vu* as psychological defence against that which is conventionally deemed

positive also takes place in middle sister's French language classroom. The teacher, astonished at her

class's inability to comprehend the spectrum of the sky's shades at sunset, implores her class to

open their eyes (and their minds) and move beyond their reductive vocabulary. As middle sister

relays to the reader, however, it is not that she and her peers don't notice that the sky is more than

just "blue (the day sky), black (the night sky) and white (clouds)",[20] it is that to accept the beauty of a

sky at sunset involves making oneself vulnerable to the pain associated with a lack of pleasure:

> It was the convention not to admit it, not to accept detail for this type of
> detail would mean choice and choice would mean responsibility and what if
> we failed in our responsibility? … Worse, what if it was nice, whatever it was,
> and we liked it, got used to it, were cheered up by it, came to rely upon it,
> only for it to go away, or to be wrenched away, never to come back again?

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[18] Burns, 2018, p. 43.
[19] Burns, 2018, p. 93.
[20] Burns, 2018, p. 70.

> Better not to have had it in the first place was the prevailing feeling, and that was why blue was the colour for our sky to be.[21]

Again, as with her relationship with maybe-boyfriend, the narrator employs deliberate memory lapses – *jamais vu* – as a form of psychological defence. Here, middle sister (and her classmates) chooses to suppress her inner knowledge of the fact that, aside from monochromatic shades of blue, black and white, the sky can also be "a mix of pink and lemon with a glow of mauve behind it".[22] By engaging in a process of conscious forgetfulness, middle sister embodies the liminal mental space of post-Brexit Northern Irish society, caught between wanting to depart from the trauma of the Troubles renewed by Brexit, but crippled by them, and thus not capable of embracing, nor even articulating, anything else.

The notion of *jamais vu*, with its emphasis on the deliberate nature of forgetting, bears a striking resemblance both to Sigmund Freud's (1915) conception of "motivated forgetting" or "repression" as a means of defence against trauma, as well as to George Orwell's postulation of 'doublethink' in his canonical novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully-constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them."[23] Middle sister and the community of *Milkman* live in a perpetual state of mental contradiction, wanting something better, but knowing at the same time it is hopelessly unlikely; it is the necessary mode of survival in a world in which "gunplay or bombs, stand-off or riots" are as commonplace as "rain or shine".[24] Without suggesting that the current state of politics in Northern Ireland bears any similarities to the brutal regime of The Party in Orwell's novel, Burns's employment of a kind of 'doublethink' does speak to a degree of societal and individual stricture caused by a sociopolitical context defined by "a fatalistic helplessness that assumes nothing will ever

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[21] Burns, 2018, pp. 70-71.
[22] Burns, 2018, p. 73.
[23] From Orwell, G. (2000). *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Penguin Books. pp. 40-41.
[24] Burns, 2018, p. 5.

change" (Davis, 2020, p. 10). Brexit has bound Northern Ireland in a temporal straitjacket. As a nation, it is formally disconnected from its past, as suggested by the Agreement's rhetoric which, with its repeated insistence on embracing a "fresh start", contains a "deliberate injunction to move on" from the Troubles, (Lehner, 2014, p. 274). Moreover, Northern Ireland is psychologically disconnected from the future by virtue of the cancellation of the peaceful future symbolised by the Agreement. Consequently, it is caught in an incessantly traumatic present haunted by the "living ghosts of the Troubles", deprived of the capacity for exorcism (Graham, 2017).

In addition to the novel's non-linear structure and its presentation of *jamais vu*, the hauntological illustration of time in *Milkman* is also evident in middle sister's characterisation as someone who spends most of her time with her "back turned in the nineteenth century, even the eighteenth century, sometimes the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries".[25] Burns's protagonist's deliberate retreat from the present-day is most pronounced in her commitment to the apparently unacceptable act of "reading-while-walking". Like *jamais vu*, middle sister's reading-while-walking is an attempt to escape her objective reality; however, this time, rather than seeking the "novel and strange", it is a retreat to the psychological "safety of the scroll and papyrus of earlier centuries".[26] The narrator detaches herself from her temporal present by immersing herself in the world of pre-twentieth-century literature, including that of Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819) – significantly, two texts which problematise the English claim to hegemonic dominance within the United Kingdom (as touched on in the introduction, and which will be discussed in the final chapter). In her return to the past, middle sister's temporal existence is folded, with the pre-twentieth century layered on top of her twentieth-century narrative, and her twenty-first-century retro-introspection. In this way, Burns's protagonist further embodies *Milkman*'s

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[25] Burns, 2018, p. 112.
[26] Burns, 2018, p. 113.

illustration of the anti-future of post-Brexit Northern Ireland, through the implicit suggestion that safety and comfort is necessarily the domain of the distant past.

The hauntological quality of *Milkman* extends beyond its representation of temporality to the various examples of tensions of space which pervade the novel, and which Fisher (2012) contends is the complementary facet of hauntology (p. 19). In the first instance, this is readily apparent through the constant description of places vis-à-vis their relation to the "territorial boundaries"[27] which prescribe the zones of acceptable existence for the characters in the novel – "my area", "his area", "over the road", "over the border", "over the water". While the setting of *Milkman* is never explicitly named, it is these divisive signifiers that contribute to most critics reading it as Belfast: "a city of complex and pernicious divisions" with its paradoxically named 'peace walls' and subterranean zoning (Patterson, 2019, p. 138). In the second instance, it is evident in the supernatural representation of places in the novel. While endowing them with very matter-of-fact titles such as the "parks & reservoirs", the "ten-minute area" and the "usual place", Burns's linguistic style adds depth and intensity to these spaces. The "ten-minute area", for example, the name given to a dilapidated part of the city which takes ten minutes to walk through, is a space teeming with historical superstition:

> She said she didn't know, but that always that ten-minute area had been a strange, eerie, grey place, that even in her mother's day, in her grandmother's day, in antebellum days – had there been any – still it had been an eerie, grey place, a place attempting perhaps to transcend some dark, evil happening without managing to transcend it and instead succumbing to it, giving in to it, coming to want it, to wallow in need for it, dragging down too, she said, neighbouring places along with it when who knows? – she shrugged – there mayn't have been anything evil that happened in it in the first place.[28]

Likewise, the "usual place" is described as "the renouncers' plot of the graveyard just up from the ten-minute area, also known as 'the no-town cemetery', 'the no-time cemetery', 'the busy cemetery'

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[27] Burns, 2018, p. 42.
[28] Burns, 2018, p. 84.

or just simply the usual place".[29] As previously noted, extended clauses of these kinds are a defining

feature of Burns's prose in *Milkman*, and such linguistic saturation serves to render these spaces

multi-dimensional and palimpsestic, simultaneously carrying the perceptions and beliefs of

generations past and present. In the case of the "ten-minute area", for example, the place becomes

not only the unsettlingly macabre space of middle sister's present and past narratives, but

simultaneously abounds with the similar sentiments held in "her mother's day, in her grandmother's

day [and] in antebellum days".

The unnaturalness of space in *Milkman*, and of the ten-minute area in particular, is further

evident in a passage in the novel in which middle sister attempts to bury the head of a cat which had

been "bombed to death by Nazis".[30] Owing to her inability to tolerate the death and destruction that

pervades her surroundings, middle sister, after finding the cat's decapitated head on the street,

determines to take it to the usual place to afford it a proper burial. While walking through the ten-

minute area, Burns's protagonist is confronted by her stalker, Milkman. The sudden appearance of

the spectre here endows the ten-minute area with more mysticism. Rather than being simply a place

"to get from A to B",[31] it becomes a space "for dark arts, for witchcraft stories, sorcery stories,

bogeymen rumours, human-sacrifice rumours [and] scary tales about upside-down crucifixes".[32] As

Milkman lectures middle sister about passing through this area, the protagonist stands, unnoticed,

"holding the head of a cat".[33] That the stalker fails to address the severed animal head in middle

sister's grip is suggestive not only of the unremarkable nature of death in Northern Ireland, owing to

its ubiquity during the Troubles, but is evidence of the narrator's summation of the ten-minute area

as a space "not for normal things".[34] In her presentation of space in this way, Burns renders the

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[29] Burns, 2018, p. 213.
[30] Burns, 2018, p. 137.
[31] Burns, 2018, p. 137.
[32] Burns, 2018, p. 136.
[33] Burns, 2018, p. 137.
[34] Burns, 2018, p. 137.

cityscape of the novel as haunted and other-worldly, a supernatural space in which the impossible

becomes possible.

The divided geography of the city in *Milkman* complicates the characters' occupation of

space, as individuals are required to constantly make assessments as to the social and political

legitimacy of their various movements within its "intricately coiled, overly secretive, hyper-gossipy,

puritanical yet indecent, totalitarian district[s]".[35] In the case of middle sister, her occupation of

space is riddled with anxiety, due not only to the divisiveness of the "paranoid", "knife-edge times"[36]

of her narrative, but also to the ever-present spectre of her stalker, Milkman, who haunts her as she

walks, threatening to appear – and often suddenly materialising, as he does in the aforementioned

cat burial scene – at any turn. As such, middle sister's relationship with city and urban public space is

"peripheral", and primarily one of distractedness, most evident in the act of reading-while-walking

(Brigida & Pinho, 2021, p. 445). Middle sister's third brother-in-law (another example of the novel's

nomenclature) cautions her against occupying public space in such a way, contending that, in a

country so invested in surface-level, "topsoil" signifiers, such a display of physical disengagement is

akin to taking a stroll "amongst the lions and the tigers".[37] By her own admission, in addition to a

temporal back-turning, middle sister's reading-while-walking is an intentional means of

disconnecting from her physical reality: "I knew that by reading while I walked I was losing touch in a

crucial sense with communal up-to-dateness … [but] knowledge didn't guarantee power, safety or

relief and often for some it meant the opposite of power, safety and relief … Purposely not wanting

to know therefore, was exactly what my reading-while-walking was about."[38] By replacing her

physical surroundings with the fictional worlds of historical literature, middle sister inadvertently

challenges the political signification of space in Belfast by presenting an alternative existence within

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[35] Burns, 2018, p. 173.
[36] Burns, 2018, p. 27.
[37] Burns, 2018, p. 58.
[38] Burns, 2018, p. 65.

it. Rather than be dictated to by its divisions, Burns's protagonist passes through the city in a manner that deliberately flouts its established boundaries.

Brigida and Pinho (2021) contend that middle sister's act of reading-while-walking constitutes an act of "*flânerie*" – of aimless, idle behaviour (p. 442). Rooted in the character of Charles Baudelaire's Parisian *flaneur*, the "stroller of the city who took the position of a passive and detached observer of urban phenomena" (Richardson, 2015, p. 3), the notion of *flânerie* is intimately bound to psychogeography, and particularly the Situationist International version which emerged in mid-twentieth-century Paris. Broadly understood, psychogeography was, and still is, primarily an avant-garde practice which endeavours to map the effects of the urban environment on human behaviour as a means for transcending "established boundaries", be they metaphoric or physical (Richardson, 2015, p. 2). It is also a practice which attempts to shed light on "the hidden and the neglected", and thereby propagate a "revolutionary demand for change" (Coverley, 2012, pp. 113-117). As discussed, middle sister's *flânerie* is certainly a means by which the established boundaries of Belfast are overcome, as her reading-while-walking becomes a means by which can pass through the city with a deliberate disregard for its traditional paths. Additionally, middle sister's retreat into the fiction of earlier epochs is not only a disavowal of the narrative's traumatic present(s), it is also symbolic of Burns's own efforts to unearth the voices of the past: specifically, those voices of "her mother's day", "her grandmother's day" and "antebellum days" which have been buried not only by the inevitable progression of time, but also political imperatives to leave the past behind.

Finally, middle sister's reading-while-walking needs to be understood as embodying the novel's "radical demand for change". Reading-while-walking's aimless quality can be read as a direct challenge to the logic of neoliberalist capitalism, in which every waking moment must be geared towards economic utility and individual enhancement. In her deliberate disengagement from her society, middle sister rejects these conventional neoliberal principles of the globalised Western world. Instead, she approaches space and time with a sense of independence and emancipation,

freed from the capitalist demand for incessant productivity. Such an approach intimates Burns's rejection of the very principles that have underscored political attempts at peacemaking on the island of Ireland – and which became one of the key areas of concern in Downing Street's negotiation of the EU Withdrawal Act, first drafted in February 2017, and signed in January 2019 – that is, the belief that economic progress in the North promises "a 'cure' and 'recovery' and the healing of old wounds", with consumer capitalism offering "a means for analgesic amnesia" (Lehner, 2014, p. 277). As I have argued elsewhere, the logic of neoliberal capitalism neatly intersects with Fisher's conception of hauntology, particularly as it pertains to the capacity to conceive of new and different futures.[39] Burns's hauntological treatment of space and time in *Milkman*, therefore, is part of a broader challenge to the sociopolitical status quo of Brexit which has resigned Northern Ireland to an anti-future of renewed violence and trauma. It is an attempt to wrestle the landscape back from the grip of the neoliberal orthodoxy and its attempts "to reconfigure Northern Irish society and the country's public spaces into a shape compliant to the logic (and process of disavowed mourning) of Western Capitalism and globalisation" (Brigida & Pinho, 2021, p. 439).

Bearing witness to traumatic stories is imperative to the healing process (Lehner, 2014). In the case of Northern Ireland, where politics past and present has sought to leave the ghosts of the nation's traumatic history firmly in the past, artistic works, including works of prose fiction such as *Milkman*, are central to the representation and articulation of wounded voices and stories. This is even more the case in the current post-Brexit moment, in which the re-politicisation of the Irish border simultaneously evokes the traumas of past conflict and presents the potential for renewed violence and hostility. Burns deliberately engages with the legacy of the Troubles in *Milkman* as a

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[39] Neoliberalism's omnipresent and perpetual nature – and the absence of competing political ideologies that may symbolise possible alternatives – marks the "end of history" in the vein of espoused by Francis Fukuyama (1989). Neoliberalism can therefore be understood as affectively conditioning a society that struggles to conceive of a new and different future. See Austin, A. (2019). Reclaiming the Future: Searching for a way out of our perpetual present. *Sydney eScholarship Repository*. https://hdl.handle.net/2123/21208.

means for cultivating a space for its traumatic stories, and thereby enabling her reader to engage in the process of bearing witness to the voices of the wounded.

Through her novel's hauntological quality, Burns disrupts conventional understandings of time and space. Burns is wise enough to observe that the maintenance of the status quo that underscored the political peace process – and that continues to dominate post-Brexit politics – will only lead to the preservation of trauma, as time continues to fold back on itself, being forever caught in the paranoia of the Troubles. Her hauntological novel thus presents a Northern Irish counter-nation that is both freed from its pernicious divisions and that provides adequate space for its traumatic memories – one which recognises that the path to peace on the Irish island will not be achieved by diplomats in Westminster or Brussels, but via an adequate consideration of its wounds, past and present. Ultimately, *Milkman* is a novel rooted in experience, rather than events. As such, it is one which privileges the "primary" locus of trauma (Malone, 2021, p. 7), allowing its reader to bear witness to the tribulations which haunt its protagonist, and thereby participate in a process of empathy and healing. Of course, *Milkman* is not in and of itself the solution, but as evidenced in the novel's final words, it is a start: "I inhaled the early evening light and realised this was softening, what others might term a little softening. Then, landing on the pavement in the direction of the parks & reservoirs, I exhaled this light and for a moment, just a moment, I almost nearly laughed."[40]

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[40] Burns, 2018, p. 348.

"There is only the past": Rachel Trezise's *Easy Meat*, Niall Griffiths's *Broken Ghost* and post-Brexit Wales as having been 'left behind' in the past

There is no present in Wales,
And no future;
There is only the past.

— R. S. Thomas, (1955).

In their discussion of the decline of the British state in the wake of "the torturous Brexit process", Jason Cowley and Katy Shaw (2019) contend that "unresolved tensions from the deep past – the balance of power in Europe, the Irish Question, the English Question, Scottish independence – have returned to haunt the present moment" (p. 21). Two things are striking about this assertion. Firstly, their analysis of post-Brexit Britain as haunted by its "deep past" resonates with notions of hauntology discussed in the previous chapter. Second is the glaring absence of a mention of Wales. While likely unintentional, Cowley and Shaw's omission of Wales is implicitly suggestive of the country's contemporary plight as having been left out of, or left behind by, discussions of the British future after Brexit. The internalisation of Wales as having been left out of, omitted from, or forgotten by the post-industrial future of both the UK and Europe more broadly, and its relationship with the country's 'Leave' vote at the 2016 referendum, is discussed in detail in the introduction to this thesis.

Since at least the 1980s, "the decline of the present" has been a key characteristic of Welsh fiction, stemming from Wales's complex and uneasy relationship with England and "the trauma of colonisation" in its past (Wallace, 2019, p. 570). Post-Brexit Welsh fiction continues this trend in its portrayal of an empty present marked by individual and societal precarity and insecurity. However, it is the corollarial absences of hope and certainty regarding the future in these works which mark a divergence from the fiction of the late twentieth century. As with *Milkman,* the pervasive theme of a hopeless, uncertain or "cancelled future" in the vein of Mark Fisher's conception of hauntology is

evident in several recent works of fiction by Welsh authors. For example, Alys Conran's novel *Pigeon* (2016) examines a sense of perpetual temporality through the incarceration of its eponymous protagonist; Ruth Jones's novel *Never Greener* (2019) offers the narrative of an old fractured relationship which comes to haunt the lives of its participants; and both Rachel Trezise's *Easy Meat* (2021) and Niall Griffiths's *Broken Ghost* (2019) demonstrate the inert and hopeless circumstances of their protagonists who, weighed down by their incessant quest to make ends meet, are unable to move beyond the present and express a tangible vision for the future. This chapter's focus is on these latter two texts, and on the way their narratives speak to R. S. Thomas's (1955) suggestion that "There is no present in Wales, / And no future; / There is only the past". Diverging from Thomas, however, the contention here is that Wales is not frozen in the past, but rather in a perpetual present "in which life continues, but has somehow stopped" (Fisher, 2014, p. 6).

Mark Fisher's (2009) theorisation of "capitalist realism" – defined as "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (p. 2; emphasis in original) – is pivotal to an understanding of the representation of Wales in these two novels. It sits neatly alongside his understanding of hauntology and its explanation of how the loss of the future stems from the way in which "capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable" (Fisher, 2009, p. 8). As touched on, the sense of having been left behind in Wales stems from a conception of the nation as out-of-step with contemporary global capitalism, and it is felt most strongly by those who experience economic and social desperation resulting from a lack of job prospects. The narratives of *Easy Meat* and *Broken Ghost* speak to a sense of the absence of an alternative vision in Wales, particularly as Brexit portends a reality in which Wales may be left isolated a result of the collapsing UK union.

From the first page of her novel, Trezise establishes the southern Welsh valleys world of her protagonist, Caleb Jenkins, as one marred by a sense of lassitude and lethargy. This atmosphere resembles the kind Mark Fisher (2009) noted as characteristic of contemporary youth culture: of a

reliance on the "soft narcosis [of] the comfort food oblivion of PlayStation, all-night TV and marijuana" as a source of distraction from the harsh realities modern life (p. 23):

> The sound of gunshots came and went, barely penetrating Caleb's sleep. Steadily he began to register them, and – beneath them – heavy breathing, menacing but familiar. A stench of weed had saturated the tiny bedroom, he could taste it behind his nostrils and feel it coating his tongue … He opened his eyes to his younger brother sprawled on the bed opposite, a video game frozen on the TV screen.[41]

A context of critical work shortages and zero-hours contracts – "zero fucking hours!"[42] – constricts Caleb and his younger brother Mason to the "tiny bedroom" they share, big enough (or money enough) for just one bed. The cramped setting is metaphorically redolent of the psychosocial claustrophobia that underscores the novel's plot. Unable to find work, Mason resigns himself to soulless hours spent "playing Call of Duty"[43] and smoking "special Kush".[44] Caleb, meanwhile, spends his days as "a frog in a pot of slowly boiling water",[45] a slaughterhouse worker at Cleflock making barely enough money from his gruesome work to pay the bills, let alone pursue any form of hedonism. In response to this pervasive sense of suffocating inertia, *Easy Meat* is a novel which takes stock of the situation in the Welsh valleys in the aftermath of Brexit, seeking to understand how an act of such apparent self-deprecation happened in the first instance, and what is left to salvage in the aftermath.

Griffiths's *Broken Ghost* is a world inhabited by three figures incongruent with "the small-minded viciousness of post-austerity welfare policy, and the 'bright new Brexit Britain'" (Tonkin, 2018): "a slut and a junkie and a thug".[46] Emma is a single-mother on the brink of being ejected from her rented flat who, left perpetually unsatiated by a lack of prospects – both romantic and career – turns to anonymous promiscuity in a bid just to "get out and fuckin *do* something … feel

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[41] From Trezise, R. (2021). *Easy Meat*. Parthian. p. 1.
[42] Trezise, 2021, p. 3.
[43] Trezise, 2021, p. 2.
[44] Trezise, 2021, p. 1.
[45] Trezise, 2021, p. 112.
[46] From Griffiths, N. (2020). *Broken Ghost*. Vintage. p. 294.

something".[47] Cowley is an unqualified tradesman and a violent thug who supplements his insufficient and inconsistent income with purses he wins from organised fights. Adam is a recovering heroin addict on a journey of sober self-(re)discovery who can't shake the feeling that, without the intoxication of drugs, "the deepening of the colours from green to blue to black",[48] he is nothing other than a lonely inhabitant of the bleak canvas that is the contemporary Aberystwyth of the novel's setting.

Like Trezise, Griffiths establishes a feeling of claustrophobia early on in his novel. This is evident in a chapter in which Adam describes an evening at the pub with his friends:

> The noise from the pub is a background blur and I can make out no individual
> words or voice or even types of sound. It's just here, around me. This beer garden,
> beer yard, beer square or whatever it is has become a bit too small. Too small
> for the three of us. I know that there's blue sky above me probably beginning to
> get a bit less blue now but that doesn't seem to be enough at the moment.[49]

While Griffiths substitutes the Jenkins' weed-saturated tiny bedroom for the "beer square [that's] become too small" and alcohol for marijuana, the effect is the same: he establishes a confined space in which the individuals are merely reduced to the "background blur" of life, robbed of the power to change their circumstances. Against a political context of individual disenfranchisement, *Broken Ghost* is an exploration of "the need to feel alive, to seek ritual amongst mainstream monotony, to reach, with glee, that place of sensuality and hedonism which so terrifies the agents of social control" (Griffiths, 2017). In its emphasis on the spiritual and the natural world, and in its polyphonic structure, Griffiths seeks to replace the contemporary focus on the individual with a reminder of humanity's collective, present existence.

As *Easy Meat*'s Caleb heads out for work on the morning of 23 June 2016 – significantly, the date of the Brexit referendum – Trezise offers the reader the image of him standing on the landing

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[47] Griffiths, 2020, p. 156.
[48] Griffiths, 2020, p. 255.
[49] Griffiths, 2020, p. 15.

of the staircase, "gritting his teeth, full of an aggressive energy he didn't know where to put".[50] Here, the protagonist embodies the general mood of large swathes of the British population, including those of the Welsh valleys, who were plagued by feelings of "dissatisfaction with the economic and political settlement … [and of being] left behind" (M. Johnes, personal communication, November 10, 2021). Crucially, despite the political vote seeming to offer a vehicle through which to channel this "aggressive energy", Caleb's attention instead turns to the past, to memories of "family holidays in Tenerife … eating dinner at the Empire Steak House on the Avenida de Las Américas".[51] Caleb's response is therefore not directed towards the cultivation of a brighter and more hospitable future; rather, it is to turn back to the past, one in which his family seemingly had the time and the money to enjoy the luxury of a modest holiday – and one which ironically plays on British Euroscepticism symbolised by the English-speaking 'expat' enclave stereotype of Tenerife. Like Burns's *Milkman*, *Easy Meat* presents a narrative present that is haunted by its past. It is not, however, a traumatic past that haunts Caleb and the characters of Trezise's novel, but the spectre of the soon-to-be-lost liberalism denoted by free movement within the EU, as well as that of the bleakness of "sadness and anger [and a] lack of agency for ordinary people" (Moore, 2021).

Other than Tenerife on the Spanish Canary Islands, references to the European continent are virtually absent from Trezise's novel, excepting the chorus of mostly Polish colleagues who work with Caleb at the slaughterhouse who pass their shifts by singing folk songs in their native tongue, "their language burbling like birdsong: familiar but unfathomable".[52] Aside from the occasional bureaucratic lectures from factory overlord Morris – the embodiment of the ubiquitous Orwellian manager that demands self-effacing, by-the-book compliance under the haunting threat of authorial oversight – the slaughterhouse is a cacophony of foreign tongues, through which Caleb "weave[s] … like a ghost".[53]

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[50] Trezise, 2021, p. 4.
[51] Trezise, 2021, pp. 4-5.
[52] Trezise, 2021, p. 73.
[53] Trezise, 2021, p. 47.

> '*Czekać!*' Jan reached his arm around Caleb's shoulder while Maciej rounded in
> on him from the other side, Caleb shackled to the spot. Jan took his own boning
> knife from inside his caddy and twisted it back and fore in the bright light, blade
> blunt as a hammer. '*Czy ty widźiź?*' he said.[54]

In this passage, as elsewhere in the novel, Trezise leaves the non-English dialogue untranslated,

"plunging the [English-speaking] reader into … Caleb's alienation from his colleagues" (Moore, 2021).

Here, the isolation renders Caleb inert, "shackled to the spot", metaphorically illustrative of a loss of

agency. Later in the passage, Trezise portrays a sense of collaborative solidarity between the Poles at

the slaughterhouse, when Lucasz describes to Caleb his working relationship with Jan: "It's fine.

Between us we can get along. He does the boning. I do the saw."[55] Ironically, Caleb is "frozen out"[56]

of the community at the slaughterhouse by virtue of his Welshness.

Trezise's decision to include swathes of Polish in *Easy Meat* evokes the novel's context of

significant Polish migration into Wales.[57] Thus, the slaughterhouse can be understood as a

microcosm for the changing ethnic profile of the Welsh valleys. Dylan Moore's (2021) suggestion

that Caleb feels alienated in this context speaks to a sense of unease that chimes with the complex

intersection of anti-immigrant sentiments and fears over employment scarcity that informs classic

'left behind' theory. Later in the novel, however, Trezise portrays her young protagonist defending

his Polish colleagues from the unsympathetic barbarism of their boss. Following a workplace incident

in which a Polish woman, Wozniak, "sliced part of her left index finger performing [a] given task",[58]

Morris files a managerial report in which he describes the poor quality of the knife guard as

"unnecessary details" and Wozniak's wound as "superficial".[59] Caleb's Polish colleagues, attempting

to discern the validity of Morris's report, call on Caleb to help translate its contents. "'This,' [Lucasz]

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[54] Trezise, 2021, p. 24.
[55] Trezise, 2021, p. 32.
[56] Trezise, 2021, p. 32.
[57] The 2021 British Census identified Poland as the leading contributor of non-UK residents living in Wales, and comprising nearly 12% of all foreign-born residents in the country (Llywodraeth Cymru | Welsh Government, 2022).
[58] Trezise, 2021, p. 80.
[59] Trezise, 2021, p. 81.

said, pointing to the sloping 'superficial' at the start of the third sentence. 'What does this mean?",

to which Caleb replies, "Not serious … not dangerous. A little graze."[60] In revealing the truth of his

boss, Morris's report, Caleb enacts a form of cross-cultural solidarity with his Polish peers. The act

serves to reorient an understanding of who is responsible for feelings of having been left behind by

global capitalism in contemporary Wales. In this case, Trezise suggests that the stereotypical notion

of 'immigrants' as having stolen employment opportunities form 'natives' is misleading, and that

actually it is the faceless, "pervasive atmosphere" of neoliberal capitalist system itself that is to

blame (Fisher, 2009, p. 16), one against which small acts of protest "won't make any difference …

not in the long run".[61] *Easy Meat*'s humanist representation of immigrant workers goes some way to

challenging conventional understandings of the 'left behind' Briton, revealing that there is more than

just the racially white variety of sociopolitical disenfranchisement in contemporary Wales.

Pent-up energy lacking an outlet, a symptom of capitalist realism's "libidinal function"

(Fisher, 2009, p. 62), is also a hallmark of *Broken Ghost*, expressed in equal measure by the novel's

three protagonists. Emma speaks of her days being plagued by "the usual feeling" – a feeling which,

conversely, is "more the *absence* of feeling – a kind of emptiness. No colour. As if I've been drained

of everything".[62] In her struggle to make ends meet, Emma relies on prescription antidepressants to

keep the "stinking black fucking thing"[63] of depression at bay; her lonely method of coping is a

provocative symbol of the deep malaise and the "mental health plague" endemic to the "inherently

dysfunctional" societies of capitalism (Fisher, 2009, p. 19).

Adam's exasperation with the political landscape climaxes when he learns of the funding

cuts to the Rhoserchan rehabilitation centre where he overcame his heroin addiction. He laments his

inability to "keep a pure heart" as a born-again sober man in the face of a world "governed by an

infatuation with money, obsessed with money to the point that people with money enough to

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[60] Trezise, 2021, p. 81.
[61] Trezise, 2021, p. 81.
[62] Griffiths, 2020, p. 35.
[63] Griffiths, 2020, p. 35.

support them through a thousand generations are encouraged to make more, always more?"[64] The

use of a rhetorical question here – a persuasive stylistic device in the novel – signifies the vacuumed

nature of Adam's frustrations, bound to remain unresolved by the inhumaneness of contemporary

Britain neoliberal capitalist ideology.

The most evocative of Griffiths's protagonists, however, is Cowley, whose colourful and

heavily accented outbursts stem from a glaring sense of underappreciation for his talents and his

heritage:

> And, ese days, land-a fuckin Poles and Liths an Lats, cabbage-suckers, mun,
> thousands of-a cunts all swarmin in. An how can I not be fuckin pissed off by iss
> cos, see, *I* can lay bricks, *I* can put slates on someone's fuckin roof, do a bit-a
> chippyin, bit-a sparkin, bit-a fuckin plumbin even, but all em east Europeans have
> them jobs now. No room for-a natives, fuck no … Not for long, tho, not for long,
> now we've said tara to fuckin Ewrop. Doubt anythin'll change, tho – stuck like this
> it is. Or fuckin *I* am, me, labourin for a minimum wage.[65]

In this passage, Griffiths provides a voice for the anti-migrant sentiment that underscored significant

parts of the Leave vote. However, it is imperative to recognise that Cowley's attitudes are not rooted

in xenophobia, but are rather symptomatic of the sense of worthlessness that globalised capitalism's

demand for job competition fosters. Cowley's emphasis on the first-person pronoun "I", indicated

textually by Griffiths's use of italics, symbolises the protagonist's attempt to salvage a degree of self-

worth in the face of his increasingly alienating economic and political context. As the passage

concludes, though, it is evident that all is futile: despite Brexit, things will remain the same. As such,

the present in *Broken Ghost* is transformed into a perpetual, all-encompassing phenomenon,

rendering the past an inaccessible nursery of imagined nostalgic pride, and the future cancelled. The

status quo of the globalised neoliberal capitalist system is maintained, those left out or left behind

consigned to wallow in its wreckage.

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[64] Griffiths, 2020, p. 55.
[65] Griffiths, 2020, p. 86.

As touched on, in contrast to the views espoused by Cowley in Griffiths's novel, Trezise carves out a space for cross-cultural tolerance and solidarity in *Easy Meat*. For the most part, this is done through the inclusion of voices neglected by the mainstream referendum discourse. The characters of Caleb's co-workers are afforded a degree of depth, and offered a chance to remind the novel's protagonist – and the reader – of a shared history of cooperation, one symbolic of the EU's initial *raison d'être*. Mykolas, a Latvian Cleflock employee, remarks at one point to Caleb, "Latvia raised fifty thousand pounds for you in the UK miner's strike. '84, '85. We sent it in solidarity to pay for your food. Toys for the *bērni* at Christmas … Now you're going to vote to leave EU."[66] That Trezise makes explicit reference to the strikes of the mid-1980s is significant. By doing so, she establishes an historical parallel between this period of seismic political instability and the contemporary moment of Brexit, one which illuminates the disparity between the British and their European counterparts' treatment of one another. While the lifestyle of her protagonist and his family is hardly depicted as something to desire, Trezise makes abundantly clear that she does not believe Britain turning its back on its European comrades is the solution.

So where, or what, then? *Easy Meat* is a novel virtually devoid of any sense of hope. Between "the mortgage and the minimum payment on the card [and] the fuel he needed to get to work and back", Caleb is trapped in a "vicious cycle" of work, credit, life and debt which has him "trying to walk on a tightrope without bending his knees".[67] The cyclical image here is redolent of the inert sense of temporality in contemporary Wales, and the perpetual present which marks its psyche. In the case of Caleb, so precarious is his situation that his zero-hours contract is all that separates him and his family from homelessness – a symbol of a lack of agency in the modern-day world. Caleb does find a small glimmer of hope, however, in the athletic heroics of his past.

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[66] Trezise, 2021, pp. 36-37.
[67] Trezise, 2021, pp. 11-12.

As a former local triathlon winner and Ironman finisher, Caleb recalls the time he was briefly

thrust into the British limelight, acquiring the status of "a *celebutant* for a couple of weeks,

interviewed on BT Sport and BBC Wales … and [making] the sports pages of the *South Wales Echo*".[68]

For someone of humble origins and an absence of opportunities, Caleb's brief celebrity status

significantly alters his life. In the short term, it lands him a job on the reality television program

Made in Wales, about a group of "twenty-somethings from every *Abercwmnowhere* in post-

industrial south Wales, bodybuilders with the IQ of crayons, ballooned on steroids, and Pinot Grigio-

soaked Beyoncé wannabes".[69] In the long term, however, it leads to his ostracisation from his peers

and his community, their former pride and revere for Caleb collapsing into cynicism, constricting him

to a life on the periphery; "Caleb stopped going out in public, stopped running altogether".[70]

Carolyn Hitt identifies the depiction of "celebrity culture" as one of the novel's key concerns

(cited in Parthian Books, 2021). Hitt suggests that the "empty promises" offered by momentary

flirtations with celebrity status can be interpreted as emblematic, and perhaps even an extension of,

the emptiness of contemporary society (cited in Parthian Books, 2021).[71] Certainly, in Caleb's case it

propels him on a boom-and-bust cycle redolent of his "fundamentally and irreducibly bi-polar"

capitalist context, "periodically lurching between hyped-up mania … and depressive come-down"

(Fisher, 2009, p. 35); it is the manic highs and lows of meeting Savannah and unexpectedly becoming

a father, and then just as suddenly having that stolen away from him as he learns it was just a sick

ruse. Against this emptiness, Caleb, throughout the novel, continually wills himself to go for a run

when he gets home that evening, a motif which symbolises his desire to reclaim individual agency. In

the face of such an uninspiring present, Caleb returns to his past as a source of refuge. "All he had to

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[68] Trezise, 2021, p. 15.
[69] Trezise, 2021, p. 16.
[70] Trezise, 2021, p. 17.
[71] Out of the scope of this project, but one wonders whether the proliferation of endless versions of reality television in contemporary society offers a kind of catharsis on the part of the viewer via the (illusory) distance it creates between them and the object of their gaze. Whether that by engaging in reality television only in the form of spectating, the viewer somehow cleanses themselves of the ironically empty reality that these programs portray.

do was get up off his weed-smoking arse and start running. If he could just cross that [triathlon] finish line in Swansea, he knew everything would fall into place".[72] Caleb posits a rediscovering of the essence of his former self as the key to coping with the heartlessness of the world around him.

In one of the final sequences of the novel, Caleb, exhausted from a day at the slaughterhouse, finally embarks on the much-anticipated run. Far from the cathartic release Trezise promises in the early stages of *Easy Meat*, however, the run captures the gulf between Caleb's present and past selves:

> He had to relearn it all, build strength and stamina from the ground. He was breaking a sweat, his heart opening and closing like a closed shackle padlock, *cush-cush cush-cush cush-cush*, pulse knocking against his flesh like a pinball along a chicane. There was something else as well, a prickly feeling in his legs like chicken pox on the inside. With every step the itching got worse, the taste of blood in the back of his throat. It was supposed to hurt though, wasn't it? No pain, no gain. No pressure, no diamonds.[73]

Dragging himself along the Rhosybol pavement, Caleb's ageing body suffers. His use of a couple of clichés – "no pain, no gain", "no pressure no diamonds" – is interesting; on the one hand, there is a sense of acceptance that it may take some time and effort to recapture his former athletic self, however against the backdrop of his utterly desperate circumstances, it reads as Trezise's subtle criticism of the reality in which so many presently suffer in contemporary Britain, particularly in places like the "no-man's land" of "the once-thriving" Welsh valleys (Howells, 2021, p. 608). The accepted logic of pain and suffering as a prerequisite for quality of life under the prevailing neoliberal capitalist orthodoxy is pulled back a little by Caleb's rhetorical question, which prompts the reader to consider the same question: "it was supposed to hurt though, wasn't it?"

Further in the run, the brief possibility of hope that the act of exercise portends is closed off completely by Trezise. Caleb encounters a former classmate of his, Sioned, who has returned to town (after having left to study dance in at the University of Roehampton in London) to open a cake

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[72] Trezise, 2021, p. 18.
[73] Trezise, 2021, p. 104.

shop on the very site of Caleb's family's old carpet shop. Presented with the tangible reality of the closure of the past, Caleb's sense of hope is destroyed: "Couldn't she see he wanted *this* shop? He wanted his old life. He wanted everything back to normal. Now his little pipe dream was wrecked because of her."[74] The scene is one of dispossession, mirroring the kind occurring all over Wales, as the "somewheres" like Caleb – those "rooted in a particular locality that have been left behind by neoliberalism" – are priced out of their origins by the cosmopolitan "nowheres" embodied by Sioned (D. Williams, personal communication, November 18, 2021). Ultimately, Trezise demonstrates the futility of desires to return to the past. Through her protagonist, she highlights how the inevitable recognition of the disparity between former glories and current precarity can only be destructive.

Broken Ghost also promises a liberation from the contemporary post-Brexit inertia in the form of the supernatural Brocken spectre from which the novel takes its name. This spectre tethers Griffiths's protagonists' narratives to one another. After all witnessing "this *glow*, like, this *glow* in the air" on a ridge in the west Wales countryside, Emma, Adam and Cowley each attest to having experienced something momentous and transformative. Adam, the ex-junkie, likens the feeling to "a smack hit";[75] for Emma, "it was like everything went away, *everything* … it was like there was this great big bubble around me";[76] and the violent Cowley speaks of becoming "a mellow man"[77] in the aftermath of the glow. As the novel progresses, however, Griffiths demonstrates that in the capitalist realist context of a life saturated by incessant obligations and responsibilities, such transcendent experiences are bound to wither and expire. Griffiths captures this idea in one of Emma's chapters, in which her newfound sense of meditative spirituality – "so calm and peaceful"[78] and "there's no 'so what' here anymore … not since the woman floating in the glow"[79] – quickly vanishes as she is pulled by the eternal banality of capital exchange, walking to Lidl to get the few

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[74] Trezise, 2021, p. 110.
[75] Griffiths, 2020, p. 6.
[76] Griffiths, 2020, p. 3.
[77] Griffiths, 2020, p. 25.
[78] Griffiths, 2020, p. 39.
[79] Griffiths, 2020, p. 40.

supplies she needs to live. This passage is evidence of Gareth Kent's (2019) contention that *Broken Ghost* "signals that total escapism is not possible … from the stark realities of our urban milieu".

Like *Easy Meat*, Griffiths's narrative is driven by a desire to return to something in the past. Following Emma's online blog post about the spectre on the hillside, the three protagonists determine to return to the place in the Welsh countryside in the hope of witnessing the glow again, and absorbing its transcendent beauty, of finding "meaning or God" or some other beacon of hope (Warner, 2019). They are driven by a sense of disenfranchisement with the perpetual desperation of their lives, and they quickly find themselves joined by hundreds, possibly thousands, of others, indicating the pervasiveness of the sentiments expressed by the trio.

Stylistically, Griffiths converges his narrative's polyphonic structure in the final hillside sequence, as his three protagonists re-meet and engage with one another, and validate each other's experiences of profundity. It is in the final chapters of the novel's "Cysllt" section (Welsh for "link" or "contact"), in the unity of the previously fragmented narratives, that *Broken Ghost* captures Yeşilbaş Emre's (2020) belief in polyphony's capacity to represent the coexistence of "equally valid" voices and perspectives (p. 74). The author brings together a sea of voices on the hillside, briefly casting aspersions aside and privileging the beauty of shared existence on Earth. As with Burns's *Milkman*, there is an emphasis on experience, particularly that of the hopefulness embodied by the social restoration of the hillside commune:

> This is – this is – up here is a glimpse into how life could, *should* be. I sense
> no anger. There is no violence simmering underneath the surface. It's kind of
> – fuck how can I say this – kind of like, up here, everybody is living how
> they're supposed to live.[80]

Emma's words here are imbued with hope, seeming to have finally found an alternative existence to her numbing reality, one that may afford her the chance to prosper and be free from the incessant productive demands of neoliberal capitalism. Yet, as the conclusion of the novel symbolises, these

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[80] Griffiths, 2020, p. 311.

cracks in the capitalist façade are doomed to be quashed – quickly and violently. Police forces are dispatched to the hillside to drive out the commune's inhabitants. They are beaten with batons, and "kettled into the lake, now a slick of blood that hands reach through"[81] and then "it's finished … whatever it was; what was happening here is done, now. All over. Ended."[82] Such an abrupt closure of the brief hope heralded by the commune on the hillside leaves the reader "with an unfed hunger, a longing, a howling sense of loss" (Tonkins, 2019). In a sense, it can be seen to crystallise what Fisher (2016) describes as the 1960s' relationship with the present: "the decade haunts not because of some unrecoverable and unrepeatable confluence of factors, but because the potentials it materialised and began to democratise – the prospect of a life freed from drudgery – has to be continually suppressed".

The post-Brexit Welsh fictions of Trezise's *Easy Meat* and Griffiths's *Broken Ghost* embody the 'left behind' theory of Brexit in the sense that they are characterised by a sense of the "decline of the [Welsh] present". While the texts lend some weight towards the theory explaining the Welsh Leave vote, they expand upon the conventional understanding of the left behind in contemporary Wales: the older, white, less-educated generation who feel that the processes of global neoliberal capitalism have carved a future devoid of a place for them. Through the desperate circumstances of their protagonists, the novels reveal that "left behindedness" does not discriminate by age, gender or ethnic background (Furlong, 2019, p. 3). Additionally, not only do the novels confirm the belief in the "decline of the present", but more importantly also, through the characters' repeated failures to transform their circumstances, in Fisher's notion of the "cancellation of the future". In this sense, they partly affirm the words of R. S. Thomas which opened this chapter. Deprived of hope in the present and in the future, these characters necessarily return to the past in the hope of salvaging

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[81] Griffiths, 2020, p. 355.
[82] Griffiths, 2020, p. 356.

some former glory. These attempts, however, are inevitably futile, owing to the past's very inaccessibility, and are thus doomed to fail.

As the post-Brexit future starts to take shape, it remains to be seen whether the grievances of the 'left behind' in all their varieties will be afforded due consideration in moulding the new formation of the "bright new Brexit Britain". While the fictions of Trezise and Griffiths are marked by a capitalist realist conviction in the futility of the future, a characteristic which inherently holds out little hope for change moving forward, their works serve a crucial function in elucidating the complexity of the current sociopolitical climate. Ultimately, by providing a voice for the disenfranchised, it may at least add their plights to the political decision-making table.

"But there are roses, there are still roses": Searching for silver linings in Scottish fiction after Brexit

Scotland now faces the prospect of being dragged out of Europe against our will by a right-wing Tory government hell-bent on a hard Brexit, with catastrophic consequences for jobs, livelihoods and living standards. That is nothing short of a democratic outrage.
— Nicola Sturgeon (2017) cited in M. K. Thompson (2019).

The cumulative effect of the 2014 Scottish Indyref and the 2016 Brexit vote has led commentators, such as Daniel M. Knight (2017), to characterise the post-Brexit moment in Scotland as one defined by anxiety and uncertainty. Knight (2017) contends that the shock within Scotland at the outcomes of the two votes, particularly with respect to Brexit, has triggered a sense of temporal "suspension" in the nation in which the "once-unyielding version of Scotland's future" – of a cosmopolitanism based on social liberalism and progress, and an ever-closer integration with the European continent "the birthright of a whole generation" – "is now past, or at least on hold" (p. 238). This sense of Scotland being denied its desired future because of Brexit, and a subsequent feeling of suspended time, resonates with the hauntological loss of the future experienced in contemporary Northern Ireland, and discussed in the chapter of this thesis devoted to Northern Irish fiction. As Scotland and Northern Ireland both registered Remain majorities at the Brexit referendum, it is perhaps unsurprising to observe similar psychosocial effects in both countries. In contrast to the situation in Northern Ireland, however, in which the Brexit's cancellation of the promise of a peaceful future has demanded a return to the past, in Scotland, in has evinced the notion of "*reconstituted futures* filled with new anxieties, expectations and speculations" (Knight, 2017, p. 238; emphasis mine). From this perspective, then, a distinction needs to be made between Northern Ireland and Scotland; where the former has returned to the past in search for answers, necessitated by the specifically traumatic nature of its historical memory, the latter remains temporally orientated to the future, unwavering in its determination to maintain its status as a cosmopolitan European nation.

With respect to what the reconstituted future involves in present-day Scotland, Knight (2017) observes the "postreferendum vibe" as containing "speculation, expectation, anticipation, potentiality, hope and their flip sides of resignation, apathy, exhaustion" (p. 239). If we heed to novelist Andrew O'Hagan's (2017) conviction that Scottish literature has been characterised by a capacity to "entertain opposites to its own certainties, dealing in the places where extremes meet and contradictions come alive" – typified by the great Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson, who embodied such a conception in his canonical novella *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* – then the "vibe" described by Knight (2017) appears to be a ready-made wellspring for Scottish writers. By extension, one could expect that the responses to Brexit in Scottish literature have been vast and extensive. It is curious, therefore, that despite Introna's (2020) conviction in Scottish literature's capacity to "exert an active influence" on the development of Scotland's sovereign and political control of its destiny, that she argues that "Brexit has drawn no explicit dramatisation as an event relevant to Scotland in Scottish writing" (pp. 2-4). Perhaps relative to the wealth of twenty-first-century fiction pertaining to Scottish nationalism, geared towards the Indyref and "prefigur[ing] the … idealistic society worthy of the struggle for independence" (Hames, 2022) – James Robertson's *And the Land Lay Still* (2010) and *365 Stories* (2014), Craig Smith's *The Mile* (2014) and Campbell Hart's *Referendum* (2014), for example – a case could be made for an element of fatigue among Scottish writers, exhausted and overwhelmed by the prospect of having to pick themselves up off the proverbial canvas and pivot in the direction of "reconstituted futures". But to claim that Scottish authors have been silent on the topic of Brexit is simply untrue. As this chapter will demonstrate, fictional works from Scottish-born writers such as Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016) – commonly touted as the first 'Brexit novel' – and Sarah Moss's *Summerwater* (2020) engage with the consequences of Brexit for Scotland. These novels join others, such as O'Hagan's own novel *Mayflies* (2020) and Douglas Stuart's *Young Mungo* (2022), in post-Brexit Scottish fiction's attempt to "replenish the imagination", "open a space of fresh possibility", and ultimately, to reconstitute a new future for Scotland (O'Hagan, 2017).

In their attempts to revitalise the Scottish predicament in the wake of Brexit, to write the national future anew, *Autumn* and *Summerwater* depart from the postmodernism described by Frederic Jameson (2014), defined as the cultural logic of late capitalist society, characterised by the inherent "failure of the new" resulting from the belief that the permutations of creativity have been exhausted (p. 168). They also diverge from the literary postmodernism described by Matthias Stephan (2019), which "operates without a search for answers" (p. 7). Rather, the two novels' commitment to the future in spite of its apparent failure in the context of Brexit can be understood as a kind of "informed naivety" which characterises the structure of feeling of metamodernism (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010a, p. 5). Drawing on the work of Raymond Williams (2015), who coined the term "structure of feeling" to describe the "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt" by individuals and society (p. 23), Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker (2010a) coin the term "metamodernism" to define a new structure of feeling which underscores the present moment. The metamodernist structure of feeling departs from postmodernism primarily by way of its renewed commitment to the utility of idealistic grand narratives, which Andrew Corsa (2018) suggests is a possible antidote to the contemporary crises of humanity that will require a coordinated human effort (pp. 241-242). Metamodernism does not denote, however, a return to the unabashed belief in grand narratives of modernism, but rather one which approaches them with an informed scepticism learned from postmodernism. As such, the metamodernist structure of feeling is characterised by an "oscillation between the modern and the postmodern":

> If … the modern outlook vis-à-vis idealism and ideals could be characterised as fanatic and/or naïve, and the postmodern mindset as apathetic and/or sceptic, the current generation's attitudes … can be conceived of as a kind of informed naivety, a pragmatic idealism … Inspired by a modern naivety yet informed by postmodern scepticism, the metamodern discourse consciously commits itself to an impossible possibility … [the metamodern discourse] oscillates between the modern and the postmodern. It oscillates between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naivety and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity. (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010a, pp. 5-6).

In short, metamodernism defines a new dawn in global society and culture, one which consciously refuses to wallow in the pervasive pastiche of postmodernism, and instead commits itself to change, to the creation of something new and different. Vermeulen and van den Akker's (2010a) conception of metamodernism bears a striking resemblance to Knight's (2017) description of the "postreferendum vibe" in Scotland as characterised by "speculation, expectation, anticipation, potentiality, hope and their flip sides of resignation, apathy, exhaustion". It is for this reason that a metamodernist framework proves instructive for an understanding of the ways in which Scottish writing is embarking on the journey of writing to life a new future for the country.

Inspired by a quick turnaround on a previous novel, the inspiration for Ali Smith's *Autumn* – the first of what is now a seasonal quartet of novels – was an attempt to produce a work of fiction that could as closely emulate the present moment as possible, creating a space "where time and the novel meet" (Smith, 2019). Regarded as a "state of the nation" novel (Anderson, 2016), *Autumn* is set in the immediate aftermath of Brexit, "just over a week since the vote,"[83] and examines the unlikely friendship between Daniel Gluck, a near-dead centenarian, and Elisabeth Demand, a 32-year-old junior lecturer, a relationship which becomes a proxy for Smith's broader examination of division.

"It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Again."[84] From the novel's very first line, Smith, riffing on Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, establishes an atmosphere of pessimism, misery and despair, one which draws on the "despondency and resignation that dominated Remainers" in the wake of Brexit (Mulalić, 2020, p. 44). Her substitution of her predecessor's "the best of times" for the repeated refrain, "the worst of times", is symbolically suggestive of the compounding nature of Brexit on the 2014 Indyref, thus evoking the notion of the historical cycle of Scottish misfortune touched on in the introduction to the thesis. Additionally, the truncated "again"

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[83] From Smith, A. (2017). *Autumn*. Penguin Books. p. 53.
[84] Smith, 2017, p. 3.

illustrates the sense of a lost (Scottish) future. While on the surface, the despair and melancholy

appear unambiguous, the pages that follow endow the opening lines with an ironical hue, as the

narrative shifts to a lyrical description of the dying Daniel, washed ashore on a sandy beach

dreamscape, with the sand singing a "sand-song" in his ear:

> I'm ground so small, but in the end I'm all, I'm softer if I'm underneath you
> when you fall, in sun I glitter, wind heaps me over litter, put a message in a
> bottle, throw the bottle in the sea, the bottle's made of me, I'm the hardest
> grain to harvest.[85]

Such a lyrical personification of death, one which Daniel actually "thanks" at one stage in the

chapter, subverts the typical association of death with melancholy and despair. The tragic tone of

the opening lines is immediately undercut, with the worst time of them all, the end of life, framed so

positively. Further into the chapter, the dreaming Daniel becomes hungry, despite his diminishing

physical health: "Can you be hungry *and* dead? Course you can, all those hungry ghosts eating

people's hearts and minds."[86] The paradoxical co-existence of death and desire here is symptomatic

of the metamodernist commitment to impossible possibility, and oscillation between naivety and

knowingness. Knowing, of course, that to be hungry and dead is empirically impossible, Smith

challenges the reader to set aside their prejudicial convictions, and instead entertain such an

impossibility. The narrative of *Autumn*, and specifically the relationship between its two

protagonists, is in many ways an extended meditation on this question, one which metaphorically

signifies the contemporary Scottish plight: in the context of Brexit, can they be both British and

European?

Like Smith in *Autumn*, Sarah Moss opens her novel *Summerwater* with a sense of

melancholy: "Dawn. There's no sunrise, no birdsong."[87] Here, the promise of new beginnings

symbolised by the "dawn" is subverted, as the truncated reference to time, and the emphasis on

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[85] Smith, 2017, pp. 3-4.
[86] Smith, 2017, p. 6.
[87] From Moss, S. (2020). *Summerwater*. Picador. p. 1.

what is absent – the light of the new day, and the sound of natural life – instead conjures a sense of dark lifelessness which foreshadows the novel's presentation of a bleak future. While *Summerwater* contains no explicit reference to Brexit, the atmosphere established at the novel's outset is redolent of the political backdrop of the narrative – a Remain perspective in any case – and is evidence of Moss's own admission that she "was thinking about Brexit while [she] was writing [*Summerwater*]" (cited in Widyaratna & Moss, 2020).

Drawing both its title and its interrogation of the social fabric from Sir William Watson's poem *The Ballad of Semmerwater*,[88] *Summerwater* presents a polyphonic account of the novel's characters' attempts to pass the time during a single, rain-sodden summer's day in the Trossachs, north of Glasgow. Leaning on the work of Arran Gare, who contends that a renewed commitment to polyphonic grand narratives is necessary for humanity to confront global crises of eco-catastrophe and the demise of politics, Corsa (2018) contends that polyphony lends itself to the overarching paradigm of metamodernism: "those who are paradigmatically metamodern would embrace a polyphonic grand narrative … giving all peoples due recognition as equals, engaging in dialogue with them, carefully considering their perspectives and alternative narratives, and changing and improving their own narrative in response" (p. 262). It is the capacity for metamodernist grand narratives to engage with a multiplicity of perspectives genuinely and respectfully – in contrast to the totalising narratives of modernity, and the "incredulity towards metanarratives" of postmodernity (Lyotard, 1984, cited in Stephan, 2019, p. 5) – that enables metamodernism to confront and overcome crises. Thus, the polyphonic style of the novel is crucial to Moss's purpose, which Lennie Goodings suggests is to address the question: "for all our dividedness and suspicion, can we still be a community in an emergency?" (cited in edbookfest, 2020).

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[88] Watson's poem recounts the story of a hungry travelling "beggar" who receives differing treatment from the different echelons of the community in which he finds himself. After being "cast … forth unfed" by Semmerwater's royal representatives, and instead fed by the presumably less well-off "hersman", he inflicts a curse on the city which drowns the "king's tower and queen's bower", condemning them to death. (Watson & Spender, 1905).

Published in 2020, the claustrophobic quality of *Summerwater*, with the incessant downpour confining the characters largely to the confines of their chalets, has drawn obvious parallels to the lockdowns brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. And there would certainly be merit to reading the rain as symbolic of a pandemic-like "emergency" situation, with its ancillary sense of enforced isolation. However, the examination of the dynamic between the individual and the community in *Summerwater*, which is made possible by its polyphonic structure, may also be read as a response to Thatcherite neoliberalism's insistence on the individual as the primary economic unit, and Thatcher's (1987) (in)famous belief that "there is no such thing as society" (p. 30). From this perspective, the metaphoric emergency confronting the novel's characters is not a pandemic, but the sense of division which contributed significantly to the Brexit result, and which continues to plague post-Brexit Britain. Rather than being beset by the "immense fragmentation and privatisation" Jameson (2014) intimates is characteristic of postmodernism (p. 167), however, the unity of Moss's disparate cast at the conclusion of *Summerwater* is demonstrative of their commitment to community: their coordinated efforts enable three lives to be saved from a burning chalet – tragically, however, one is lost.

Following the opening one-page 'nature' chapter – a recurring feature of the novel which functions as a means by which to remind the audience of the enduring natural world, and hence a subtle challenge to human egocentrism – the narrative of Moss's human protagonists commences with that of Justine, a middle-aged, running-obsessed mother who appears to be going through the motions of lower-middle-class life. Despite being on holidays, Justine is anything but relaxed, and marked by a "sense of confinement" with her attention frequently turning to the economic cost of the trip, which is only negatively compounded by the miserable weather (Morrison, 2020). "Who could afford to travel now?"[89] she asks, evoking the austerity of contemporary Britain and its toll on the everyday family. And further into the chapter:

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[89] Moss, 2020, p. 4.

> She must check the bank balance, next time there's internet … And isn't the car
> needing its MOT before the end of the month? They can always just not drive it
> for a couple of weeks till the salaries come in, done that before, her on her bike
> and Steve on the bus, it's a luxury anyway, really, the car, they should maybe sell
> it while it's still worth something.[90]

Moss emphasises the financial precarity of Justine's situation. These thoughts plague Justine while she is out on a run in the rain, and the physical act of running, which for Justine is meant to offer salvation from the claustrophobic strictures of the chalet, and of family life more generally, is transformed here into an anti-meditative experience: the initial question concerning the car's MOT setting off a chain reaction in Justine's mind of possible futures underscored by frugality, which instead cripples her with anxiety. Moss extends this sense of anxiety to the reader, when they learn of Justine's heart condition: "But what's another person supposed to do if her heart stops?"[91] The haunting possibility of death foreshadows the novel's eventual devastating conclusion of the death of a young girl named Violetta, and is more broadly suggestive of the anxious uncertainty Knight (2017), among others, observes in post-Brexit Scotland.

Owing to a shared context of British neoliberal austerity – the governmental fiscal program of the 2010s which aimed to reduce national debt resulting from the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 by cutting public expenditure – the financial suffocation Justine experiences in the first chapter of Moss's *Summerwater* also emerges in Smith's novel, primarily in the figure of her primary protagonist, Elisabeth Demand:

> It is a Wednesday, just past midsummer. Elisabeth Demand – thirty-two-years
> old, no-fixed-hours casual contractor junior lecturer at a university in London,
> living the dream, her mother says, and she is, if the dream means having no job
> security and almost everything being too expensive to do and that you're still
> in the same rented flat you had when you were a student over a decade ago.[92]

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[90] Moss, 2020, p. 11.
[91] Moss, 2020, p. 23.
[92] Smith, 2017, p. 15.

For Elisabeth, whose zero-hours livelihood is symptomatic of the legacy of Thatcherite economics,[93]

living in London is prohibitively expensive, and it is certainly not hard to imagine her fretting over the

same financial concerns as Justine while on a holiday. In this passage, Smith juxtaposes the sense of

promise carried by the "midsummer" atmosphere and Elisabeth's relative youth with the blunt

reality of her protagonist's circumstances – having been literally trapped in the same rental

accommodation for a decade due to a dearth of opportunities for career and financial progression.

The narrator's ironical assertion that Elisabeth is "living the dream" imbues the passage with a sense

of the "cancelled future", the unrealised utopia, of the twenty-first century that characterises Mark

Fisher's conceptions of both hauntology and capitalist realism (discussed in greater length in the

preceding chapters). Therefore, it appears that *Autumn* is in keeping with other post-Brexit British

novels like *Milkman*, *Easy Meat* and *Broken Ghost*, in its commitment to walking the well-trodden

path of "cynicism about politics" and the "sense of drift and doom" that Mahlon Brewster Smith

(1994) posits as characteristic of the postmodern psychological condition, or the structure of feeling

of postmodernism (p. 406).

A sense of cynicism and hopelessness surfaces early in the text, in a bizarre exchange

between Elisabeth and a clerk at her local post office, where she attempts to complete a new

passport application. After waiting "an hour and forty five minutes"[94] for a service which supposedly

"makes things quicker",[95] Elisabeth is finally called to one of the booths, only to be told by the post

office employee that her application cannot proceed because "[her] face is the wrong size":[96]

> What size is my face meant to be? Elisabeth says.
> The correct size for a face in the photograph submitted, the man says, is

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[93] The Institute for Employment Rights (2014) cites two January 2014 reports from the UK's Office for National Statistics, which demonstrate that "real wages have been falling since Thatcher's era in the 1980s". Of course, Thatcher did not preside over the continuation of the downward trend in the years following her prime ministership, however Oliver James (2015) suggests that it is the result of the neoliberal economic project that Thatcher initiated which has promoted this trend. James (2015) argues that the economic policies brought to the UK by Thatcher, and which have been pursued by following governments, have resulted in the rich becoming richer, while the "real wages of the majority [have] either decreased or remained static". (p. 2).
[94] Smith, 2017, p. 17.
[95] Smith, 2017, p. 15.
[96] Smith, 2017, p. 24.

>between 29 millimetres and 34 millimetres. Yours falls short by 5 millimetres.
>Why does my face need to be a certain size? Elisabeth says.
>Because it's what is stipulated … Obviously I can't process the form without
>the correct stipulation, he says.[97]

That the clerk "obviously" cannot process the form, unironically fretting over Elisabeth's 5 millimetre facial indiscretion, highlights the absurd level of bureaucracy in present-day Britain, one redolent of Fisher's (2009) articulation of the contemporary capitalist service sector experience as "a system that is unresponsive, impersonal, centreless, abstract and fragmentary", and which cannot genuinely solve problems, but only foster a "building rage that must remain impotent" (p. 64). Catherine Bernard (2019) contends that the profound sense of impotence and disenfranchisement evident in scenes such as the passport application fiasco has its roots in "the liberalism first implemented by the successive Thatcher governments". Lejla Mulalić (2020) also reads the passport fiasco politically: "The image of the head, separated from the body in the photograph, invites comparison with the dismemberment of the body politic (i.e. the State) through the divisive referendum" (p. 45). With these perspectives in mind, and in the context of Thatcher's legacy in Scotland, Elisabeth's attempts to overcome the bureaucratic challenges in this scene can be read as a proxy narrative for Scotland. Elisabeth attempts to rise above the absurdity of her struggles to get a new passport are a metaphor for Scotland's attempt to reconcile itself with the twinned crises of the Indyref and Brexit, which have left the country similarly disenfranchised and impotent, as well as the country's attempts to 'take back control' by (re)asserting a degree of agency.

Impotence defines the narrative of Claire in *Summerwater*, a former business professional-cum-unhappily married housewife and mother of two whose relatively uneventful existence embodies Leo Robson's (2021) contention that *Summerwater* is littered with people "sighing over the present". "Mummy, says Izzie, mummy, mummy, look. Mummy? Mummy, look. Mummy?" … She had been wondering how many times Izzie would say 'Mummy' if she didn't reply, but it seems

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[97] Smith, 2017, pp. 24-25.

that Izzie can say Mummy more times than Claire can listen to it."[98] The chapter opens with the image of a child's persistent nagging of her mother. Izzie's refrain, "Mummy", elicits no dialogical response from Claire. Instead, Moss offers only the internal monologue of her attempted avoidance, with Claire appearing to be more interested in "dealing with this brown muck behind the taps that's been bothering [her] all week".[99] This image sets the tone for the rest of the chapter, in which Claire, despite being on holiday, exudes a palpable sense of restless, claustrophobic frustration. At one point, she remarks that it "might be preferable" to be out in the horrible rain rather than be confined to the "small cabin".[100] Claire's physical suffocation is a metaphor for her status in life, as she laments the loss of her former self – "Does that woman still exist, the one who wore dry-clean-only clothes and put together presentations?"[101] – and the stifling nature of family life. Later in the chapter, she daydreams about the possible freedoms of divorced life:

> Wouldn't she be an amazing mother, wouldn't she be patient and creative
> and selfless, if she had to keep it up for no more than five days in a row? If
> she had every other weekend to herself, to do whatever she wanted from
> dawn to dusk, to sleep late and go swimming and get the house properly
> clean? Can I have a red boat, says Izzie, can I have a red boat to go to the
> islands? Claire strokes her hair.[102]

The sequence of rhetorical questions briefly suggests the liberal possibilities of an alternative life. They are, however, quickly shut down as Moss transitions from Claire's existential pondering to Izzie's own bidding for a release from the claustrophobic cottage. By interrupting Claire's emancipatory thought process with (another round of) the nagging demands of her younger daughter, represented formally by the absence of quotations or even a line break to distinguish the narrative voices, Moss highlights the way that motherhood acts as a barrier to Claire's freedom.[103]

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[98] Moss, 2020, p. 99.
[99] Moss, 2020, p. 99.
[100] Moss, 2020, p. 100.
[101] Moss, 2020, p. 104.
[102] Moss, 2020, pp. 100-101.
[103] The figure of the immature child restricting the freedom of its mother can be read as a metaphor for the politically immature nation of England depriving the more mature Scotland of its right to full autonomy. The notion of England's political immaturity is touched on in the introduction to the thesis, and taken up in more detail in the next chapter.

She does not answer her daughter, instead stroking her hair, her voicelessness compounding the representation of her sense of impotence.

As the chapter progresses, Claire briefly retreats into her dreamscape, as her husband Jon offers to take the children out for an hour to give his wife some time alone. "But you'd like an hour to yourself, wouldn't you?"[104] Claire's behaviour over the next hour, an "ocean of time" in which she can do "anything at all to please herself",[105] is demonstrative both of the "claustrophobic" narrative style which Emma Hogan (2020) contends characterises *Summerwater* as well as the psychic life of the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject as explained by Christina Scharff (2016). Granted a reprieve from her familial obligations to her husband and children, Claire can initially think of nothing to do other than to clean – "if she's just going to stand here she might as well get on with the cleaning".[106] Here (as elsewhere), Moss's use of an intimate third-person perspective brings the audience into a position of proximity vis-à-vis the protagonist, establishing a sense of surveillance which reinforces the claustrophobic pathetic fallacy of the novel's rain-drenched setting. The use of third-person also formally mirrors Scharff's (2016) claim that entrepreneurial subjects inherently view themselves as an enterprise, thus "establish[ing] a distance to its self" for the purposes of self-improvement through work and activity; it mimics this distance, Moss inviting the reader to intimately understand Claire's anxiety regarding time, plagued by an internalised (neoliberal) compulsion "to mak[e] the best use of it" (p. 112). This attitude to time continues as Claire falls into a repeated cycle of idea and inaction. She plans to have a bath with a scented candle, but abandons the idea when she realises attempting to find the candle is a futile endeavour – "a waste of the hour Jon's giving her, to look for a lost object".[107] She then realises she needs a tampon but has none, so decides to fashion a make-shift pad out of Izzie's nappies, only to remember that "she's just wasted about another two minutes

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[104] Moss, 2020, p. 107.
[105] Moss, 2020, p. 109.
[106] Moss, 2020, p. 110.
[107] Moss, 2020, p. 111.

of her hour".[108] Afterwards, she embarks on a similar train of thought regarding shaving her nipples and underarms, and having a cup of tea and a biscuit, before eventually abandoning her free time altogether and heading out after Jon and the children. Her complete inability to be idle, to relax and enjoy the "ocean of time" Jon affords her, instead bound to use it as an opportunity for 'progress', is demonstrative of a sense of impotence with respect to freedom. From the perspective of Brexit, Claire's characterisation in this chapter is suggestive of the contemporary political landscape in Scotland, which is plagued by a similar crisis of sovereign agency (or lack thereof). The sense of oscillation here, between the desire for relaxation and its inevitable rejection, between hope and apathy, also speaks to the metamodern structure of feeling which defines not only the characters in *Summerwater*, but the context of the author too.

In contrast to Claire and Justine, *Autumn*'s Elisabeth Demand demonstrates an ability to overcome the social suffocation which appears to plague her in the ridiculous exchange in the post office. Indeed, Eva Simková (2020) suggests that Elisabeth lives "a considerably free and happy life" in the novel (p. 268). Inverting capitalism's idiomatical equation of time and money, the financially poor Elisabeth enjoys the luxury of being time rich, a fact which allows her to foster both her relationship with Daniel Gluck, and embark on her postdoctoral thesis project: an exploration of the life of 1960s female pop artist, Pauline Boty. These two facets of the novel are central to Smith's overarching purpose of attempting to overcome the seismic sociopolitical fractures which seem to be tearing Britain apart in the aftermath of Brexit.

Before addressing these elements in more detail, it is necessary to understand the divisive social latticework of *Autumn*. Smith admits that she began writing *Autumn* before the 2016 referendum, but that the framework of her first draft was so ripe with "divisions and borders and identities" that it was not only easy, but necessary, in fact, to thread Brexit into the text (Anderson, 2016). In contrast to Moss's *Summerwater*, Brexit is a far more explicit presence in *Autumn*. From

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[108] Moss, 2020, p. 112.

the myriad references to barriers of all kinds – notably emphasised in a farcical scene involving the "enclos[ure of] a piece of land that's got nothing in it but furze, sandy flats, tufts of long grass, scrappy trees, little clumps of wildflower" with "a fence three metres high with a roll of razorwire" and "security cameras on posts all along it"[109] – to a cottage door branded with xenophobic vandalism, "the words GO and HOME",[110] and the soundbites of radio talk show hosts, there is little doubt that the world of *Autumn* is a "ravaged landscape"[111] grappling with the seismic shock of Brexit.

Small excerpts from news articles, radio broadcasts and the general public on the street appear throughout the novel, providing the contextual framework for Elisabeth and Daniel's friendship: "This isn't Europe … Go back to Europe"[112] crowds shout on the street; "*We've been rhetorically and practically encourage ourselves not to integrate … since Thatcher taught us to be selfish and not just to think but to believe that there's no such thing as society*"[113] declares one radio spokesperson; "Someone killed an MP",[114] Elisabeth tells Daniel in one of her visits, a reference to the murder of British Labour politician Jo Cox and to the politics of far-right extremism which contributed to it. And later in the novel, Elisabeth recalls more "shouting in the street" in the week immediately following Brexit:

> Rule Britannia, a bunch of thugs had been sing-shouting in the street at the weekend past Elisabeth's flat. Britannia rules the waves. First we'll get the Poles. And then we'll get the Muslims. Then we'll get the gyppos, then the gays. *You lot are on the run and we're coming after you*, a right-wing spokesman had shouted at a female MP on a panel on Radio 4 earlier that same Saturday. The chair of the panel didn't berate, or comment on, or even acknowledge the threat that the man had just made.[115]

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[109] Smith, 2017, p. 55.
[110] Smith, 2017, p. 53.
[111] Smith, 2017, p. 37.
[112] Smith, 2017, p. 130.
[113] Smith, 2017, pp. 111-112; emphasis in original.
[114] Smith, 2017, p. 38.
[115] Smith, 2017, p. 197.

While Smith's narrative voice in *Autumn* is undoubtedly "anti-Brexit" (Mulalić, 2020, p. 47), she does include a space – albeit small – for the pro-Leave sentiments embodied by politicians like Nigel Farage, such as those "shouted" by the "right-wing spokesman" referenced above. In this respect, Smith's novel bears a similarity to Trezise's *Easy Meat*, which in the figure of slaughterhouse manager Morris, also demonstrates a disregard for "the Poles". As a gay man of German-Jewish descent, Daniel is in some ways an embodiment of everything the pro-Brexit Rule Britannia "thugs" detest. From this perspective, therefore, Elisabeth's unfaltering dedication to her dying former neighbour is symbolic of Smith's pro-Remain, pro-European attempt to "reaffirm the bond between Britain and Europe" (Mulalić, 2020, p. 47).

Elisabeth and Daniel's friendship begins on "a Tuesday evening in April in 1993"[116] when an eight-year-old Elisabeth is tasked with writing a school assignment on a neighbour. An exercise in empathy and understanding, the young Elisabeth pens a "lovely" piece entitled "A Portrait In Words Of Our Next Door Neighbour",[117] which her mother Wendy takes over to Daniel, inaugurating the protagonists' decades-long connection. The title of Elisabeth's piece evokes James Joyce's classic modernist novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* first published at virtually the same time the fictional Daniel Gluck was born. Like Joyce's protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, Smith's Daniel Gluck is also heavily fixated on the arts. In the words of Wendy, Daniel's house teems with "arty art",[118] and this passion obviously influences his younger neighbour's own interests. Further parallels can be drawn between Daniel Gluck and Stephan Dedalus, such as their connection to the European continent – Gluck's German ancestral roots as well as his former life in France, and Dedalus's decision to move to mainland Europe to inspire his artistic expression – and their signification as vehicles of the struggle for autonomy. Smith's evocation of Joyce, therefore, and specifically the

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[116] Smith, 2017, p. 43.
[117] Smith, 2017, p. 48.
[118] Smith, 2017, p. 44.

figure of Stephen Dedalus,[119] may be understood as an attempt to revitalise the modernist proclivity for creativity and experimentation – and ultimately for hope. Thus understood, the relationship between Elisabeth and Daniel in *Autumn* is a personification of the metamodern oscillation between the modern, embodied by Daniel, and the postmodern, contained in Elisabeth's circumstances.

While the narrative voice of *Autumn* frames parts of Elisabeth's character in terms of Brewster Smith's (1994) articulation of the psychology of postmodernism, touched on earlier, particularly in the expressions of cynicism and doom regarding her lack of career opportunities, Simková (2020) suggests that Elisabeth is better understood as "a personification of metamodernism" in the sense that she is "idealistic and romantic in her approach to freedom and life" (p. 268). Vermeulen and van den Akker (2010a) contend that one of the ways metamodernism expresses itself is in "an emergent neoromantic sensibility" that is concerned both with "re-signification of the commonplace with significance, the ordinary with mystery, the familiar with the seemliness of the unfamiliar, and the finite with the semblance of the infinite", as well as the "opening up of new lands in situ of the old one" (p. 12). In short, signifiers of the "commonplace" are newly romanticised by virtue of being (re-)endowed with infinite and mysterious significance. Moreover, they contend that a neoromantic sensibility is pivotal to imagining the future in the sense that "it presents us with the impossible possibility of another here-and-now" (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010b). Both Elisabeth's friendship with Daniel and her postdoctoral exploration of the life of Pauline Boty can be understood as expressions of a neoromantic sensibility in the sense that they both inherently involve a tension between the infiniteness of death and the finiteness of life. Moreover, with respect to Boty, Elisabeth's overarching purpose with her postdoctoral thesis is the

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[119] Joyce named his protagonist after the Greek mythological figure Daedalus, who according to the ancient myth, assisted his son Icarus to escape King Minos's prison by arming him with wings and allowing him to be the master of his own destiny. In the post-Brexit context of *Autumn*, the evocation of Daedalus can be understood as representative of the desire to reclaim a sense of political agency. This has particular relevance to the current "governed against their own will" plight of Scotland, with Scotland assuming the role of the Icarus character in the reincarnated Brexit tale, seeking to be the master of their own destiny in their attempt to escape the Minos-like political prison of their post-Brexit British isolation.

"opening up" of a kind of new appreciation for "the only British female Pop artist"[120] whose existence has faded from national memory.

Despite Elisabeth's research into the figure of Pauline Boty comprising only a relatively minor narrative in *Autumn*, Smith herself places huge symbolic importance on the artist's inclusion in the novel:

> I'm so unbelievably happy to have her kick-ass presence, her grace, her boundary-cancelling creativity and energy, that sheer joyous vitality, in a book so much about the divisions, locally, nationally and internationally, that we're facing both literally and rhetorically right now. (cited in Anderson, 2016).

Boty first enters the novel via Daniel, in the form of a game he used to play with a younger Elisabeth – "every story tells a picture" – in which he describes one of "The Wimbledon Bardot's"[121] artworks for Elisabeth and has her "see it in the imagination".[122] Daniel guides the young Elisabeth through a rich description of the collage: its background a "rich dark blue … much darker than sky", a "cut-out black and white lady wearing a swimsuit, cut from a newspaper" superimposed on the blue, and the "pink lacy stuff … [the] actual material, real lace, stuck on to the picture in a couple of places".[123] The rich and textural quality of the work's description inspires a clear enthusiasm in the young Elisabeth, who describes its effect on her imagination as "like it would be if I was taking drugs".[124] In contrast to the earlier scene in the post office, in which the impossibly slow service seemed to make time stand still, here "time flies".[125] The juxtaposition of the immobile, suffocating permanence of the present-day neoliberal structure and the hastiness of the artistic and imaginative is demonstrative of neoromanticism's "negotiation between the infinite and the finite". Smith appears to posit art's ability to dislocate the individual from their temporal circumstances as an antidote to the psychological apathy and inertia of contemporary Britain.

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[120] Smith, 2017, p. 239.
[121] Smith, 2017, p. 75.
[122] Smith, 2017, p. 72.
[123] Smith, 2017, p. 73.
[124] Smith, 2017, p. 75.
[125] Smith, 2017, p. 76.

Her introduction to the life and work of Pauline Boty instils in Elisabeth a sense of renewed purpose, as she determines her postdoctoral dissertation on Boty to write the "footnote [of] British Pop Art history"[126] back into existence. Elisabeth seeks to salvage Boty's works and her legacy from the jaws of history, which have been largely "taken away and … destroyed",[127] drowned under the male domination of the British Pop Art scene. Smith's reincarnation of Boty through her novel's female protagonist is again evidence of her neoromantic temporal oscillation between the permanent and the temporary. Despite her death, Boty becomes a source of renewal for Elisabeth, a fact which speaks to Marie-Odile Pittin-Hédon's (2018) contention that artists play a critical role in "(re)constructing the future" (p. 3). Elisabeth's future is no longer on hold, but reopened with the hope of fresh possibility, personified by the "creativity and energy [and] sheer joyous vitality" of Boty. *Autumn*'s parting image for the reader reinforces this notion of a renewed future: "But there are roses, there are still roses. In the damp and the cold, on a bush that looks done, there's a wide-open rose, still. Look at the colour of it."[128] Even in the most unlikely of circumstances, life – and a beautiful one at that – still prospers. From a post-Brexit Scottish vantage, Smith holds her novel's metamodern neoromantic emphasis up as a potential path forward for the country (and for the UK more broadly), as a means of reconciling the temporary pain inflicted upon Scotland with the spectre of its permanent dislocation from Europe, and ultimately, as a means for holding out hope even in times of supposed despair.

A metamodern neoromantic sensibility is also a defining feature of Moss's *Summerwater*, evident in her fixation with the mundane banalities of everyday life and her attempt to endow "the commonplace with significance" (Vermeulen & van den Akker, 2010a, p. 12), as well as her emphasis on the natural world. Moss has herself admitted that the customs of ordinary life are an important and necessary facet of the novel as it is "where the majority of people spend the majority of their

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[126] Smith, 2017, p. 150.
[127] Smith, 2017, p. 227.
[128] Smith, 2017, p. 260.

lives" (cited in Widyaratna & Moss, 2020). Internalised ruminations on trivial concerns abound the

novel, perhaps no more so than in the chapter dedicated to Milly, a recently engaged young woman

who, along with her fiancé Josh, have recently traded the city for the "collective … way of life that

recognises people's dependence on each other and the land"[129] supposedly promised by small rural

communities. The chapter focuses on Milly and Josh's determination to achieve a simultaneous

sexual orgasm, which also becomes a convenient way for the pair to pass at least some of the rain-

sodden day. Rather than an ethereal meditation on emotional and physical desire and intimacy,

however, Milly's chapter can aptly be described as sporadic, as her attention constantly oscillates

between "being in the moment"[130] and the concerns of everyday life, from her desire for "a cup of

tea and a bacon bap"[131] through to the geopolitical backdrop of division and violence:

> Well, not now don't think about the Holocaust, obviously this is not the moment
> for thinking about the Holocaust. Or any other atrocity, European genocide isn't
> more important than anyone else's. The Middle Passage. The Cultural Revolution.
> The Khmer Rouge. Oh dear. Is that good, he says, and she says mm … anyway, the
> here and now. A little being in the moment, hmm, you can't expect a man to give
> you an orgasm if you keep thinking about particulates and genocides.[132]

The coexistence of sexual intimacy and the internal dialogue regarding the geopolitics of genocide,

and Milly's corresponding diminished capacity to attain individual desire, is suggestive of the

collapse of the boundary between public and private life, as the atrocities of the "Holocaust", "The

Middle Passage" and "The Cultural Revolution" come to uncritically occupy the same space as love

and sex. It also speaks to the distractedness associated with the contemporary age of information

technology. While ultimately the sex act lacks the climax Milly desires, it is the salvation promised by

life's staples – a cup of tea and a bacon bap – that Moss privileges in this chapter. "Milly … puts a

couple of teabags from the tartan caddy into the teapot, pours the water, watches steam roll and

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[129] Moss, 2020, p. 62.
[130] Moss, 2020, p. 56.
[131] Moss, 2020, p. 50.
[132] Moss, 2020, pp. 55-56.

plume."[133] The gracious movement of the steam contrasts with the "ostentatious rain"[134] outside, transforming the chalet into a sanctuary from the misery beyond its walls, and the mundane routine a refuge from the political turmoil of the present.

In *Summerwater*, Moss creates a space for the presence of the natural world, in the form of thirteen mostly one-page vignettes, each named with a direct connection to nature (*the sounds of blood and air*, and *engines above the clouds* and *the weight of water*, for example). In contrast to the Romantic emphasis on the restorative power of nature, however, Moss characterises the natural world in her novel as a "threatening force" (Hansen, 2021). The pervasive, plot-defining quality of the rainfall in the novel, "better at obscenity than any human voice",[135] may be understood as a metaphor for contemporary anxieties regarding climate change, which are haunted by the potential for catastrophic weather events. *Summerwater* can be clearly read as a reinvocation of Watson's *The Ballad of Semmerwater*, which tells the story of a village drowned by a flooding lake – "a lost city in Semmerwater, Deep asleep till Doom" (Watson & Spender, 1905) – saving only one household who offered a beggar food and drink. Like her predecessor, Moss's novel is didactic, a cautionary tale of the consequences for divided hostility and selfishness – a quality that resonates profoundly in its post-Brexit context.

In the *beginning to drown* vignette, Moss's personification of the landscape endows it with a fragile quality. "The sky has turned a yellowish shade of grey, the colour of bandages, or thickened skin on old white feet."[136] The ground threatens to burst, unable to "hold so much water in one day", creating a foreboding atmosphere which reaches a crescendo in the vignette's final, standalone line: "There will be deaths by morning."[137] In *flights begin*, Moss juxtaposes the "outbreak of life" of the rousing of bats with the bleak reality that "there is nothing to eat", again

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[133] Moss, 2020, p. 61.
[134] Moss, 2020, p. 60.
[135] Moss, 2020, p. 82.
[136] Moss, 2020, p. 77.
[137] Moss, 2020, p. 77.

evoking the threat of climate change and its associated forecast of biophysical devastation. Returning to Goodings's question of the novel, then – "for all our dividedness and suspicion, can we still be a community in an emergency?" – the literal crisis confronting characters in *Summerwater* is of the natural world, which rears its head in the novel's harrowing final chapter.

Xenophobic tensions have simmered beneath the plot's surface for nearly two hundred pages by the time the reader gets to Jack's narrative. Earlier in the novel, Jack's sister, Iola, has an unsettling confrontation with the similarly-aged Violetta Shivchenko, a young girl of Ukrainian descent (though variously described as Romanian, Bulgarian and Polish – an act of 'Othering' which elides the social, political and cultural differences between the distinct nations of Eastern Europe and chimes with the xenophobic attitudes that characterised the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and other factions of the Leave campaign), whose family are from Govanhill in Glasgow:

> So, where are you really from, Violetta Shit-chenko? Somewhere people scream
> and yell like baboons all night and keep everyone awake with their so-called
> music? Somewhere people don't know how to behave? … You're supposed to
> have left, you know, people like you, did you not get the message?[138]

The jingoistic epithets hurtled at Violetta are sobering, particularly given Lola's tender age (still too young for "the big swing"[139]), and speak to the imperial legacy of the belief in British superiority. An explanation, of sorts, is offered in the novel's penultimate chapter, where Moss illustrates the clear influence of Lola's father Steve's anti-immigrant philosophy. "He's not being racist. Even though they weren't meant to be here anymore, it's no odds to him that they're foreign. Romanian or what have you … They can stay up all night and deafen themselves if they want to but they should do it somewhere else, such as back where they came from."[140] In Jack's narrative, Steve and Lola's xenophobic rage spills over, as their intolerance of the Shivchenko's incessant partying forces their hand. "The state of this country. Come on, Lola, we'll show them how you handle yourself."[141] Given

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[138] Moss, 2020, pp. 74-75.
[139] Moss, 2020, p. 66.
[140] Moss, 2020, p. 175.
[141] Moss, 2020, p. 192.

the post-Brexit context of the novel, the final confrontation between the white Scottish 'nationals' and the Shivchenkos, the "Bloody Bulgarians", metonymically signifies the bordered anxieties that dominated the referendum discourse.

Jack is initially attracted by the promise of a party, offering an alternative and lively experience to the dreary, rain-filled week. "It feels good. The music goes through his bones, fills his head and pulses away the pain in his belly."[142] But just as the cracks of fulfilled desire, of joy and happiness seem to break through in the novel, they are quickly closed over, as the party gives way to the panic brought on by the smoke and flames of the "burning cabin".[143] There are screams and shouting in the ensuing panic, and a man with an axe emerging from the forest who smashes open windows to help the partiers escape. Standing outside, however, as the flames engulf the cottage, it dawns on the gathered crowd that a little girl – "Violetta, Jack said … her name's Violetta"[144] – remains trapped inside, the fire engines too far away to help. "And then the music did stop and then there came a human sound he never wants to hear again and will always be hearing, somewhere in his head, and he was right, Jack, you notice, when it stops."[145] Thus, with the novel's tragic conclusion – Violetta's death in the housefire – Moss demonstrates the catastrophic consequences of a world rife with division and suspicion. Despite the promise of "inclusiveness" inherently contained in *Summerwater*'s polyphonic style (Morrison, 2020), Moss clearly laments the situation in contemporary Britain. The death of Violetta at the hands of nature confirms the temporariness of the young girl's life, and of humanity more broadly, and the permanence of the natural world. In contrast to *Autumn*, therefore, the neoromantic quality of *Summerwater* is stained with dread and despair. In the current post-Brexit climate, it appears that Moss's answer to Goodings's question is a negative: we cannot be a community in an emergency.

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[142] Moss, 2020, p. 195.
[143] Moss, 2020, p. 197.
[144] Moss, 2020, p. 199.
[145] Moss, 2020, p. 200.

The twinned crises of the failed Scottish Indyref of 2014 and the Brexit vote of 2016 have thrust Scotland into a situation in which it is being "governed against [its] will". For the Scottish nation, which has tended to incline more to Europe than certainly its much larger southern counterpart, and arguably more so than Wales and Northern Ireland too, the severance of the ties to Europe portended by Brexit has brought on uncertainties and anxieties of epic proportions, pertaining primarily to the shape of the nation's future. There has been some talk of a second independence referendum, one which, if it should eventuate, is far more likely to gravitate towards "questions of national sovereignty rather than comparative economics" (Macwhirter, 2017). But for the time being, Scotland appears resigned to reconcile itself to a sociopolitical present that every voting region in the country opposed.

Despite the claims by some that Scottish fiction has been all but silent on the matter of Brexit, Ali Smith's *Autumn* and Sarah Moss's *Summerwater* are two pieces of contemporary fiction by Scottish-born authors that sift through the post-referendum sociopolitical rubble searching for silver linings. Both texts employ the strategies and styles of metamodernism – an oscillation between apathy and hope, and the neoromantic tension between the temporary and the permanent – in their attempts. Smith's novel, while undeniably despairing in the wake of Brexit, finds hope in the form of its primary protagonist, Elisabeth Demand, whose empathetic identification with her dying neighbour Daniel, and her passion for the creative arts is held up as an antidote to the pointlessness of postmodernity. On the other hand, while Moss's emphasis on the natural world and on the mundane banalities of everyday life is an attempt to tether the cast of *Summerwater* together with a common thread, it is no match for the abrasive social divisions which eventually blow the plot up in smoke.

That *Autumn* and *Summerwater*, considered collectively, fluctuate between the metamodern poles of hope and resignation is itself telling. With its refusal to heed to despair, metamodernism carries the promise of a path forward for Scotland. If Pittin-Hédon's (2018)

argument is correct, that artists do play an essential role in "(re)constructing the future" (p. 3), more works in the vein of Smith and Moss may help Scotland become the master of its own destiny once and for all.

"Modes of uncertainty": Coping with an uncertain Englishness in post-Brexit English fiction

> *In whichever direction they look, the English find themselves called upon to reflect upon their identity and to re-think their position in the world. The protective walls that shielded them from these questions are all coming down.*
> – Krishnan Kumar (2003) cited in Bryne (2007).

> *England is hard to understand: even the English don't understand it.*
> – Jason Cowley & Katy Shaw (2019).

England and Englishness are in a state of existential crisis, one that paradoxically seems to have both contributed to the Brexit referendum of 2016, and is being exacerbated by its outcome. Up until the era of postcolonialism in the second half of the twentieth century, England had not had a need to reflect on its identity as a nation. During the period of British imperialism from the seventeenth to the early-twentieth centuries, England, as the Empire's hegemonic nation, found itself in the "unique position of not being required to think about a collective sense of self, in the way that [other nations] were compelled to do by the operations of the global political economy" (Wellings & Kenny, 2019, p. 855). On the contrary, England actively sought to present itself as a "de-nationalised entity, capable of absorbing other localities tacitly and without accompanying democratic or romantic agitation" (Niven, 2019, p. 33). In other words, Englishness presented itself as a kind of invisible nothingness, defined not by what it was, but by what it was not: the 'uncivilised' cultural identities of the "sullen peoples" they sought to colonise (Kipling, 1899). As the Empire has declined in the post-World War Two era, however, the "protective walls" that shielded England from questions of national identity have been dismantled, exposing the hollowness of Englishness (Kumar, 2003, cited in Bryne, 2007, p. 140). Post-Empire national anxieties in England have been compounded since the period of British devolution in the late 1990s, and the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly in 1999. Cowley and Shaw (2019) identify a certain "confidence and assertiveness" that has emerged among

Scottish, Welsh and, to a lesser extent, Northern Irish nationalisms since the turn of the millennium;

they posit that this, combined with the reality of the so-called West Lothian Question,[146] has forced

upon the English "a reconsideration of who they are and what they want to be in this age of

upheaval" (p. 22).

The national fissures revealed by Brexit have generated a degree of uncertainty within the

UK, which extends to the very future of the union itself (Harris, 2014), and resonates with Tom

Nairn's prediction as far back as the 1970s that "Britain might well be pulled apart by the nationalist

forces contained within it" (cited in Wellings & Kenny, 2019, p. 850). In this context, the deficit of a

tangible sense of English national identity, particularly compared to its Scottish, Welsh and Northern

Irish counterparts, makes such uncertainty in England both more profound and more urgent. The

prospect of the breakup of the United Kingdom has the potential to leave England not only without a

formal national parliament with which to govern its affairs, but to divorce conceptions of Englishness

from the Britishness it has historically folded itself into. For the official collapse of Britain would

mark the end of the British "veiling" of Englishness, and the exposure of the latter's absence of

independent national signifiers (Henderson et al., 2017, p. 1). In short, Brexit threatens to pull the

British rug from beneath England's feet, so to speak, leaving it without a foundation upon which to

stand.

Uncertainties surrounding the future of England in post-Brexit UK have fostered a sense of

retrospection, as the nation attempts to discern a sense of itself. Correspondingly, many

commentators have identified nostalgia as a key characteristic of contemporary Englishness. Alex

Niven, for example, suggests that a "nostalgic, pastoral, feudal, mythopoeia", the ongoing romantic

attachment to the idyllic English countryside, underscores populist conceptions of Englishness in the

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[146] In essence, the West Lothian Question refers to the absence of an exclusively English parliament akin to the ones established in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland in the period of devolution in the 1990s. It questions whether Members of Parliament from the other constituent countries should be allowed to vote in Westminster on matters that relate only to England, with a recognition of the fact that English MPs cannot vote in the devolved assemblies and parliaments.

twenty-first century (cited in Novara Media, 2020). Additionally, Mark Easton (2018), drawing on YouGov survey results, contends that "there is more than a hint of nostalgia about people's sense of Englishness", with three times as many English residents believing that "England 'was better in the past' than believe its best years lie in the future". The 'take back control' rhetoric of the Brexit Leave campaign undoubtedly chimed with both this sense of nostalgia and the hollowness of Englishness exposed by the decline of Empire. As Anshuman Mondal (2018) contends, the "entirely emotive" arguments proffered by proponents of the Leave vote resonated with people from across the English socioeconomic spectrum – from working class voters in "the post-industrial wastelands" to the affluent, well-to-do voters in "the leafy Tory shires" – because it struck a chord with their common belief in an "imperially nostalgic nationalism" (p. 85). The referendum thus became a proxy for those who felt confused and anxious about what their Englishness meant to find a home in the myths of English imperial superiority, believing that leaving the EU would allow the nation to reclaim its former hegemonic status.

Based on interviews with dozens of people in England in the aftermath of Brexit, Ben Anderson, Helen Wilson, Peter Forman, Julia Heslop, Emma Ormerod and Gaja Maestri (2020) argue that the uncertainties emerging from the 2016 referendum are part of "a collective, affective, *condition* of intensified and normalised uncertainty" which includes anxieties regarding climate change and the structure of human labour in the context of ongoing advances in automated technologies (p. 5). They posit "generalised uncertainty" as "one amongst multiple contemporary 'structures of feeling'" in the UK and suggest that several "modes of uncertainty" have emerged as a way of "registering and responding to uncertainty in a manner that enables it to be lived with and in" (Anderson et al., 2020, pp. 5-6). Given the uncertainty regarding Englishness, particularly in the wake of Brexit, it is unsurprising to identify certain "modes of uncertainty" operating in the domain of English fiction in the years since the referendum. In keeping with David Martin Jones's (2019) suggestion that the fiction emanating from England "has frequently provided a more compelling insight into the 'condition of England' question than the polysyllabic howl of sociologists", this

chapter turns to three recent novels by English writers – Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018), Ian

McEwan's *The Cockroach* (2019) and Deborah Levy's *The Man Who Saw Everything* (2019) to

elucidate the relationship between Brexit and contemporary conceptions of Englishness. An analysis

of these texts reveals that there are at least two modes of uncertainty being enacted in the fiction of

the English nation. The works of Coe and McEwan speak to the notion of comedy as a comfort

mechanism, and the capacity for humour to assuage anxiety. Levy's novel, on the other hand, shares

hauntological characteristics observed in earlier chapters; her work is an attempt to exorcise the

spectre of England's post-imperial legacy of superiority as a necessary precondition for embracing its

future.

Given the unsettling nature of Brexit for many who voted Remain – 13 million citizens in

England (The Electoral Commission, 2016) – the humorous and comedic qualities of post-Brexit

English novels such as *Middle England* and *The Cockroach* appear to resonate with established

theories of humour as a coping mechanism. Freud (1905), for instance, contends that comedy works

as "a legitimate release of psychic energy", which allows a restoration of one's "psychic equilibrium"

(cited in Sigurdson, 2017, p. 405). Additionally, William A. Kahn (1989) states that "through humour,

people become psychologically *detached* from certain aspects of their immediate situations" (p. 49;

emphasis in original). With these perspectives on humour's function at the individual level in mind,

then, one can read the two novels as a means for their authors to cope personally with the anxieties

unleashed by Brexit. At a broader level, however, consideration needs to be given to the political

role that comedy plays, and particularly that of the satirical mode that both authors employ.

In the divisive context of Brexit, comedy offers a natural "mode of uncertainty" not only

because of its capacity for comfort, but because it also enables the attainment of a sense of

belonging and the materialisation of "a utopian image of a peaceable domain to come" (Eagleton,

2019, p. 136). Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai (2017) argue that comedy "helps us test or figure out

what it means to say 'us'" (p. 235). On the way in which comedy produces feelings of belonging,

James English (1994) notes that "comic practice is always on some level or in some measure an assertion of group against group, an effect and an event of struggle, a form of symbolic violence" (cited in Medhurst, 2007, p. 14). No form of comedy is objective; they are all predicated on the existence of in-groups and out-groups – the former being those who find humour, pleasure and meaning from the comedy, and the latter being those who do not. As such, comedy as a genre and practice is one bound to questions of identity, with its content constantly establishing the boundaries of who belongs where. Satire – defined by Matthew Hodgart (2017) as a literary work "in which vice, follies, stupidities and abuses … are held up to ridicule and contempt" (p. 7) – is a particularly adept subgenre for the interrogation of political identity. Satire is the most potent form of political literature, with the ability to "release powerful enough acids to break down the attitudes of the mind" (Hodgart, 2017, p. 33). In the political domain of Brexit, *Middle England* and *The Cockroach* employ satire as a means of engaging in a critique of the forms of Englishness espoused and implied by the rhetoric of the Leave campaign – the "warped and regressive" kinds of the ilk described by Tom Nairn.

Coe's *Middle England* follows the lives of a band of English characters in the period between the 2010 British General Election, which ended the 13-year reign of Labour, and the 2018 post-Brexit present of its publication. By the author's own admission, *Middle England* is an attempt to "convey a strong and specific sense of the texture of English public life" in the eight years the novel's plot spans (Coe, 2018). While Coe rejects the suggestion that the novel is a satirical comedy, other commentators view *Middle England* as a satire very much in keeping with Coe's reputation (Everitt, 2021; Self, 2020). Humorous moments litter the pages – from the playful examination of the mythopoeic iconography of England over a game of golf on its "green and pleasant land",[147] to the underwhelming reception that Benjamin Trotter's first novel receives: "a sales ranking of 743,926"[148] on Amazon – but they do so in such a way as not to distract from the novel's "fierce critique of

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[147] From Coe, J. (2019). *Middle England*. Penguin Books. p. 207.
[148] Coe, 2019, p. 173.

contemporary politics", inviting readers into the heart, the middle, of the English nation to embrace
"an England that has been ignored and made invisible" (Zrari, 2020).

In opening the novel at a funeral, the preeminent symbol of death, Coe establishes an
atmosphere of finality which permeates the text, and chimes with contemporary anxieties regarding
the decline of both material living standards, resulting from neoliberal policies of austerity, as well as
of Englishness. Set in April 2010, on the eve of British Labour's seismic defeat at the hands of the
David Cameron-led Conservatives, Coe inaugurates the plot with a twinned sense of finality – "the
funeral was over"[149] – as Benjamin Trotter and his father Colin depart the wake of their late mother
and wife respectively. They drive:

> through the heart of Middle England, more or less following the course of the
> River Severn, through the towns of Bridgnorth, Alveley, Quatt, Much Wenlock and
> Cressage, a placid, unmemorable journey where the only punctuation marks were
> petrol stations, pubs and garden centres, while brown heritage signs dangled the
> more distant temptations of wild life centres, National Trust houses and
> arboretums in front of the bored traveller.[150]

As they pass through the "unmemorable" landscape, Coe plays on Colin's penchant for cynicism,
with Colin grunt[ing] sceptically" at Benjamin's assertion that road speed cameras might actually be
more concerned with "prevent[ing] accidents" than fleecing road users of their money "every step of
the way"[151] – an exchange which gestures towards the generational divide that Brexit revealed to
the nation. Benjamin turns on the radio to stifle the faltering conversation, and is met by "the slow
movement of French composer Gabriel Fauré's Piano Trio" with its melody's "melancholy,
unassuming contours" a "fitting accompaniment" to "the gentle curves of the road, and even the
muted greens of the landscape through which it carrie[s the pair]."[152] Coe's characterisation of "the
heart of Middle England" in the novel's first pages – a place which is symbolically the heart of the
nation, and bound to the mythopoeic understanding of the idyllic English countryside (often in jest)

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[149] Coe, 2019, p. 3.
[150] Coe, 2019, pp. 3-4.
[151] Coe, 2019, p. 4.
[152] Coe, 2019, p. 4.

– rebuffs the definitions of Englishness espoused by the likes of George Orwell (1970) in which the "distinctive and recognisable" traits of English civilisation included "the rattle of pin-tables in the Soho pubs, the old maids biking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn morning … solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red-pillar boxes" (cited in Medhurst, 2007, pp. 40-41). Instead, the vibrant colours of the landscape and the jubilant rancour of the pubs are replaced in *Middle England* by the land's "melancholy, unassuming contours" and the sounds of Fauré. Through this substitution, and particularly his suggestion that the countryside is most eloquently represented by the sounds of a Frenchman – metonymically signifying England's long-standing tension with the European continent – Coe pokes fun at the "nostalgic, pastoral, feudal, mythopoeia" that underscores populist conceptions of Englishness in the twenty-first century (Alex Niven, cited in Novara Media, 2020). He highlights the fact that the attachment to the idyll English countryside is one no longer grounded in reality (if it ever was in the first place), but is instead an affinity for a nostalgic myth that has in actuality been overrun by the incessant urbanisation and cultural homogenisation associated with globalisation. It is with this in mind that Guillaume Clément (2021) contends that the Birmingham and West Midlands-oriented Middle England of Coe's novel, from where his characters originate – a place of "sociological and political diversity" – offers a "more complex picture" of the nation at present, one which moves beyond London and the "political sociology" which roots the notion of Middle England in "middle-class English voters who tend to express an attachment to a traditional view of English identity and conservative politics".

The allusion to George Orwell and other leading voices of a similarly mythopoeic English nationalism, like former Prime Ministers Stanley Baldwin and John Major,[153] in *Middle England*'s

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[153] In a speech to the Conservative Group for Europe in April 1993, Major evoked Orwell's earlier definition of Englishness when he declared: "Fifty years from now Britain will still be the country of long shadows on county grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers and … 'old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist'." The elision between Orwell's Englishness and Major's Britishness is symbolic of exactly the kind of synonymising that has contributed to the sense of hollowness in post-Empire conceptions of English nationalism. (Major, 1993).

opening chapter corrupts the glimmer associated with classic Englishness and lays bare the fallacy on

which it is grounded. As the novel progresses, however, Coe satirically juxtaposes the distance the

reader may initially hold from these conceptions of the nation, when he presents his characters'

responses to the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympic Games:

> At nine o'clock on the evening of Friday 27 July 2012:
> Sophie and Ian were sitting together on the sofa in their flat, watching the Olympic opening ceremony on television.
> Colin Trotter was alone at home in Rednal, sitting in his armchair, watching the Olympic opening ceremony on television.
> Helena Coleman was alone at home in Kernel Magna, sitting in her armchair, watching the opening ceremony on television.
> Phillip and Carol Chase, along with Phillip's son Patrick and his wife Mandy, were sitting in the living room of their house in King's Heath, a Chinese takeaway on their laps, watching the Olympic opening ceremony on television.
> Sohan Aditya was alone in his flat in Clapham, lying on the sofa, watching the Olympic opening ceremony on television and texting his friends about it.
> Christopher and Lois Potter, in the midst of their subdued walking holiday in the Lake District, were watching the Olympic opening ceremony on the television of their rented cottage.
> Doug Anderton, his daughter Coriander and his son Ranulph were all sitting in separate rooms of their house in Chelsea, watching the Olympic opening ceremony on different televisions.[154]

This passage contrasts the national diversity and complexity which Clément (2021) suggests Coe's

novel captures. Instead, it presents a sense of uniformity as the characters' individual differences

coalesce into a collective audience. Coe's use of refrain – "watching the opening ceremony on

television" – collapses the boundaries between ethnic origin, sexual orientation, socioeconomic

status, age and marital status, as the likes of Sohan (a Sri Lankan-born gay man), Doug (a white,

upper class, heterosexual father of two) and Colin (an elderly widower) share in the singular

experience of the ceremony. It also endows the moment with a harmonious rhythmic quality which

parallels the spectacle of the 'Isles of Wonder' ceremonial performance. The symmetrical illustration

of the characters, who are indiscriminately described as reclining in a sofa or armchair, glued to the

ceremony on television, extends Coe's portrayal of a collective identity, one which, despite its

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[154] Coe, 2019, p. 129.

polyphony, is marked by "a sense of national belonging that overrides individualism" (Everitt, 2021, p. 182). As the opening ceremony continues, Coe expands on the characters' responses to the Isles of Wonder performance, highlighting the emotions it inspires. They all regard the presentation with a sense of positivity and optimism, but none more so than left-wing *Guardian* journalist Doug Anderton, for whom the ceremony evokes "stirrings of 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 … at this moment he felt proud, proud to be British."[155] Although Doug's patriotic fervour here is identified as one attached to Britishness, the "relative dominance of icons of Englishness throughout the [Isles of Wonder] event" and in this chapter of the novel – the Glastonbury music festival, the Sex Pistols and Pink Floyd, Humphrey Jennings, *EastEnders* and the Thames – renders his response at least as much one to Englishness (Clément, 2021).

It is in the juxtaposition between the negation of the traditional English idyll in the novel's opening chapter, and the characters' patriotic response to the 2012 Olympic opening ceremony, that Coe displays *Middle England*'s satirical mastery. He illuminates the emotional grip that the "nostalgic image" of Danny Boyle's "Olympic extravaganza" continues to possess (Wright, 2012) while the national consciousness simultaneously denies its merit, dismissing it as historic, quaint and out-of-touch with the contemporary moment. In this manner, the reader, particularly the English reader, and especially the left-leaning Remain voter, becomes the object of Coe's comedy here, and is forced to laugh at themselves as they confront the ironical postulation of their sense of Englishness. More than a moment of light-heartedness, the comedic purpose of this juxtaposition can be understood as a form of what Julia Webber (2019) describes as comedy's capacity to "adjust our expectations for us" (p. 7). In this case, Coe necessitates his reader accept the fact that parochial

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[155] Coe, 2019, p. 132.

conceptions of Englishness still hold weight, and that to dismiss these views as regressive and backward-looking is to negate at least a part of England's contemporary iteration.

Other moments of satirical fun-poking are weaved throughout the novel, including a series of farcical exchanges between Doug and his Conservative political contact, Nigel (whose name is almost certainly a nod to former UKIP leader Nigel Farage), the most notable of which include Nigel's dismissal of Doug's question regarding the prospect of Trump's election, quipping that the journalist lives "in a fantasy world,"[156] and "astonishment" at Doug's revelation that the referendum to decide Britain's membership in the EU has attracted the portmanteau Brexit: "Supposing people vote for *what?* … I thought it was called Brixit … That's what we've been calling it … Dave and the whole team."[157] Nigel attempts to humanise the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, becoming simply "Dave", the everyday man, a gesture to the 'call me Dave'[158] façade Cameron himself sought to cultivate. The Brexit-Brixit confusion, however, highlights the absurdity of the former Prime Minister's status as an everyday man, and dramatises the profound disconnect between the political elite and the people they represent. Everitt (2021) suggests that Coe's satirical representation of the political class "provides an opportunity for the reader to relieve their frustration and pain through humour" (p. 190). Crucially, the humour here is one which only exacerbates the divide, with the reader becoming the 'in group', sharing in the laughter, and the politicians the 'out group', those subjected to satire's critique. Thus, Coe's comedy in this passage reflects the frustration with the political elite and the wide sense of disenfranchisement felt by many across England, and that exposed "Dave's" naivety in June 2016 – calling the EU membership referendum only as "a party political manoeuvre", never anticipating a Leave result would be returned (Shaw, 2022, p. 2).

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[156] Coe, 2019, p. 265.
[157] Coe, 2019, p. 265.
[158] Many political commentators, most notably Lord Michael Ashcroft and Isabel Oakeshott who co-authored a David Cameron biography entitled *Call Me Dave*, have described the former British Prime Minister as seeking to emulate a relaxed, everyday man façade akin to that of Tony Blair, who asked his first Cabinet in 1997 to call him Tony.

One of the overtly political narrative threads of *Middle England* concerns Sophie and Ian Potter, a married English couple whose relationship rides the political rollercoaster of the novel's triptych structure and embodies Coe's exploration of the fact that "politics can tear people apart".[159] In an early chapter from 'Merrie England', dated January 2011, Coe captures the pair's early romantic forays. "She had not slept with many men in her life; for Sophie it was a commitment as well as an adventure. Last night, and this morning, felt like a delicious tiptoe into the unknown."[160] As Ian sources breakfast ingredients, the "deliciousness" of Sophie's morning quickly gives way to disappointment as she works her way through Ian's home searching for clues as to his character: "What she found on his shelves was disappointing. A handful of sporting autobiographies, some reference books (also mainly to do with sport), some bestselling novels from a few years back, two or three road-safety manuals."[161] With her quick shift from excited optimism to disappointment, Sophie's sentiments towards Ian becomes a metaphor for the political period, at least for those on the left, as the advocation of a 'Cool Britannia' Britishness under the New Labour of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown is quashed under the return to a conservative populism under the Tories and David Cameron, a metaphor which becomes more apparent as the novel progresses and Ian's xenophobic political outlook emerges. Like his comedic treatment of the political class, Coe again imbues this sequence with a sense of humour as the Ian-type is framed as basic and lacking in sophistication – certainly when set against Sophie's "academic reflex"[162] – and thus the humour is reserved for those that Sophie represents; that is, according to Everitt (2021), the "many young voters who felt betrayed by the Leave outcome" (p. 194).

As the novel progresses into its second section, 'Deep England', the initial cracks evident in Sophie and Ian's differing bookshelf inventories have deepened significantly. In a chapter dated April 2016, the spectre of the Brexit referendum can be seen to be pulling the pair apart as Coe

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[159] Coe, 2019, p. 300.
[160] Coe, 2019, p. 52.
[161] Coe, 2019, p. 52.
[162] Coe, 2019, p. 52.

juxtaposes their different political outlooks. As they discuss setbacks each of them have sustained in

their careers over dinner – Ian overlooked for a job promotion by Naheed, an "Asian lady"[163] and

ethnic 'Other' in 'white' England, whose professional "knowledge and experience commanded

respect;"[164] Sophie faced with disciplinary action after being accused of a "huge microaggression"[165]

against one of her students – Ian becomes increasingly exasperated at Sophie's tolerant attitude:

> Will you *stop* being so bloody … PC about all of this!
> What you call respect for minorities basically means two fingers to the rest of us.
> OK, so protect your precious … transgender students from the horrible things
> people say about them. Swaddle them in cotton wool. What happens if you're
> white, and male, and straight, and middle class, hmm? People can say whatever
> the fuck they like about you then.[166]

While Coe provides a voice for the Leave perspective in the figure of Ian – a feature strikingly absent

from much post-Brexit British fiction – it is one that lacks sophistication and poise, much like Ian's

bookshelf contents. Instead, it is framed as aggressive, hostile, intolerant and self-pitying. Ultimately,

in the wake of the vote, Ian and Sophie's differences prove to grow even more incompatible, to the

point that the pair seek a unique and plainly absurd kind of therapy: "Post-Brexit counselling."[167] The

absurdism of Coe's therapeutic invention highlights the seismic personal rifts that a political

referendum about the UK's membership in the EU caused. When they attend their first session, Coe

reveals that the reason for Sophie and Ian's split is not because they had differing perspectives on

European membership, but rather because their voting patterns revealed themselves to be not who

each other thought they were. Coe captures the flawed nature of simplistic political approaches like

referendums, highlighting the ease with which their binaries are transposed onto other frameworks,

such as, in this case, the same-other binary of personal relationships. By highlighting the fallibility of

the referendum – what Zadie Smith (2016) calls "a very ineffective hammed for a thousand crooked

nails" – it is the British collective that becomes the target of Coe's absurdism, as they are forced to

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[163] Coe, 2019, p. 165.
[164] Coe, 2019, p. 39.
[165] Coe, 2019, p. 249.
[166] Coe, 2019, pp. 282-283.
[167] Coe, 2019, pp. 325.

reflect on their own approach to the referendum and their voting motivations. In revealing the fact

that Sophie and Ian "call[ed] it a day"[168] on their relationship after nine sessions, Coe appears to

mark the nation of *Middle England* as one left broken by the divisiveness of the Brexit referendum.

Unlike *Middle England*'s more humanising comedic style, which allows the reader to

empathise with its characters and in turn reflect on their own relationship with nationalism and

politics, McEwan's novel *The Cockroach* is an absurd and acerbic critique of the Brexit decision from

its very first sentence: "That morning, Jim Sams, clever but by no means profound, woke from

uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into a gigantic creature."[169] An inversion of Franz Kafka's

The Metamorphosis, *The Cockroach* brazenly puts forward a narrative in which the bodies of

incumbent British Prime Minister, Jim Sams, and all but one of his Cabinet, are inhabited by

cockroaches. In metamorphosising the Conservative Government, McEwan establishes the

framework from which he embarks on "an unapologetic condemnation of the government that

attempts to deliver the promise of the Brexit referendum" (Everitt, 2021, p. 200).

McEwan foregrounds the sense of disgust that his cockroach-cum-Prime Minister

protagonist experiences upon realising that it now inhabits a human body. The tongue of the Prime

Minister becomes "an organ, a slab of slippery meat, l[ying] squat and wet in his mouth;"[170] the

breath the "not unattractive odour of decomposing food and grain;"[171] and the head an annoying

and impractical extension "that must have weighed as much as five kilos."[172] The absurd description

of the human body, specifically the one belonging to Jim Sams, McEwan's fictional caricature of Boris

Johnson,[173] invites the reader to regard the British leader with abhorrence. This continues moments

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[168] Coe, 2019, p. 327.
[169] From McEwan, I. (2019). *The Cockroach*. Jonathan Cape. p. 1.
[170] McEwan, 2019, p. 1.
[171] McEwan, 2019, p. 2.
[172] McEwan, 2019, p. 2.
[173] McEwan has acknowledged that Jim Sams is modelled on Boris Johnson. Additionally, Sams's "because" refrain in a speech to parliament, discussed later in this chapter, is directly drawn from Boris Johnson's first speech to the House of Commons (Waterstones, 2019).

later, as McEwan gestures at the ease with which a cockroach could literally step into the role of

Prime Minister and handle its responsibilities:

> Prime Minister's Questions. How many of those he had crouched through, listening
> enthralled from behind the rotten wainscoting in the company of a few thousand
> select acquaintances? How familiar he was with the opposition leader's shouted
> questions, the brilliant non-sequitur replies, the festive jeers and the clever
> imitations of sheep … But was he adequately prepared? No less than anyone else,
> surely.[174]

McEwan's dehumanisation of, and disregard for, the figure of the Prime Minister sets the tone for

the rest of the novel, and specifically the reader's relationship with the author, as he invites his

audience to share in his condemnation of the political class, the "privately educated types [with a]

sense of entitlement".[175]

The main narrative arc of *The Cockroach* is the Sams Government's attempt to push through

the policy of Reversalism, a ludicrous inversion of the economic system in which individuals are paid

to consume, and must pay to work:

> 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 … 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.[176]

What is absurd about Reversalism – McEwan's mutant reincarnation of Brexit, and one that he

contends is "probably less stupid" than its real-world inspiration (cited in Waterstones, 2019) – is its

incongruity with the contemporary, globalised world of interconnected trade. Even if one could

accept for a moment the possibility of reversing the flow of money in society, the interdependency

of nations in the era of globalisation renders the project inherently flawed, a point which McEwan

elucidates when he reveals that a Reversalist Britain would have only the similarly-inclined St Kitts

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[174] McEwan, 2019, p. 10.
[175] McEwan, 2019, p. 15.
[176] McEwan, 2019, pp. 25-26.

and Nevis as a prospective trading partner – a tiny, dual-island nation with a gross domestic product less than 1% of the UK's (The World Bank, 2022b).

Not only is Reversalism itself a source of folly, but the means by which the Sams Government rationalises the policy and pursues its maintenance of power furthers McEwan's critique of Brexit politics. Midway through the novel, a Cabinet meeting is interrupted by a "developing situation"[177] – specifically, one in which a French frigate accidentally collides with a British boat that was "fishing illegally in French coastal waters".[178] "Naval data and other sources"[179] confirm the incident, and the resulting death of the six British crewmates onboard, as a tragic accident. Sams, however, refuses to accept this conclusion, and instead seizes the moment as an opportunity to demonstrate his patriotism. He declares the incident a "despicable assault",[180] demands that the coffins are brought home and insists that he is present at their return: "If the coffins are coming back together, and bloody well make sure they are, I intend to be there, quayside, airstrip, whatever."[181] In his paranoic condemnation of the French, Sams rebuffs the contemporary reality of France as "a very close ally"[182] and "a very good friend,"[183] and instead "position[s] himself behind a 'nationalist wave of manufactured anger fed by an irrational Twitter storm',"[184] harking back to traditional Anglo-French sentiments of mistrust and contempt. In doing so, McEwan exposes the regressive, Eurosceptic Englishness which plagues the Conservative politics of Brexit,[185] predicated on an out-dated conception of English nationalism grounded in an "opposition to European integration" (Wellings, 2010, p. 489).

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[177] McEwan, 2019, p. 38.
[178] McEwan, 2019, p. 38.
[179] McEwan, 2019, p. 39.
[180] McEwan, 2019, p. 40.
[181] McEwan, 2019, p. 40.
[182] McEwan, 2019, p. 40.
[183] McEwan, 2019, p. 53.
[184] McEwan, 2019, p. 53.
[185] For example, what Kristian Shaw (2022) describes as the "island mentality" (p. 3) plaguing English Conservative leaders, perhaps best captured by the rhetoric of (then future Prime Minister) Boris Johnson during the referendum campaign: "Napoleon, Hitler, various people tried [unifying Europe], and it ends tragically. The EU is an attempt to do this by different methods." (p. 16).

The most outrageous moment of *The Cockroach* is the exchange between Jim Sams and the German Chancellor, in which McEwan's cockroach-cum-Prime Minister attempts to justify his government's unflinching pursuit of Reversalism. Pressed on the policy's rationale, Sams simply responds: "Because. Because that's what we're doing. Because that's what we believe in. Because that's what we said we'd do. Because that's what people said they wanted. Because I've come to the rescue. Because. That, ultimately, was the only answer: *because*."[186] Sams's refrain, "because", metonymically signifies a lack of complexity or deep consideration behind the Reversalism policy. His inability to provide any reasoned, political justification whatsoever, instead characterises the man and the policy as simplistic and unintelligent. Everitt (2021) posits that with Sams serving as McEwan's makeshift Boris Johnson, the "because" refrain is reflective of the Remain position on Brexit as nothing but "a meaningless endeavour that has no clear advantages" in the sense that it demonstrates the incomprehensible nature of the Conservative position (p. 208). McEwan himself has revealed as much, contending "there are no economic arguments for [Brexit], there are no sovereignty arguments [and] the only reason we're leaving is because" (cited in Waterstones, 2019).

McEwan's satirical characterisation of politics and politicians in *The Cockroach* is a critique of the machinations of Brexiteers, and highlights their foolishness, oblivion, and dishonesty. As such, McEwan's comedy is one which plays right into the notion of humour as predicated on the existence of in- and out-groups. Those likely to feel at 'home' revelling in the comedic delight of *The Cockroach*'s plot are those that share McEwan's staunchly Remain perspective. Far from Coe's commitment to empathy, therefore, McEwan's critique of Brexit is more an exercise in exorcising his bitterness at what he regards as Brexit's malicious manipulation of public opinion and aggravation of social division in the country (Jiayi, 2022, p. 75). While Webber (2019) suggests that Brexit satires have emerged as a means of "presenting rationality and unmasking absurdity [and ultimately] to

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[186] McEwan, 2019, pp. 86-87.

'speak truth to power'" (p. 59), it does so only for those that already share in the convictions regarding what defines said rationality and absurdity.

While no doubt a source of humorous confirmation bias for those on the side of Remain who revel in McEwan's criticism of Brexit as it reinforces the boundaries of their in-group, *The Cockroach* does nothing to heal the Brexit wounds, instead exacerbating the social divisions captured so eloquently by Coe's *Middle England*. Both novels function as a "mode of uncertainty", particularly for Remainers, in the way they offer comfort for readers, attempting to make light out of seemingly dire circumstances. With respect to Englishness, however, the comedic approaches of the two authors diverge. While incorporating elements of absurdism, Coe's satire is subtler than McEwan's, and allows him to reveal to Remain voters that there is perhaps a sense of the deep-rooted, nostalgic yearning for the countryside idyll that characterises the apparently regressive and pathological conceptions of Englishness hiding somewhere inside of them. Coe leaves space for these sentiments to be accepted and integrated into a fuller sense of self. On the other hand, McEwan's text serves only to reassert the national divisions within England and the UK more broadly. Its treatment of the conception of the stereotypical Englishness said to underscore the Leave majority is one of intolerance and thus, while certainly capturing the sentiments of the moment (for some), does little in the way of providing hope for the future.

While comedy as a "mode of uncertainty" has characterised some of the responses to Brexit in English fiction, other works tend towards an examination of the psychosocial destruction that the referendum result portends. Notable examples include Sam Byers's dystopian novel *Perfidious Albion* (2018), which explores the rise of right-wing political party 'England Always', and the fermenting of fear, suspicion and hatred in a fictional near-future England; Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2017), which examines the ingrained prejudices of British citizens; and Amanda Craig's state-of-the-nation novel *The Lie of the Land* (2017), an attempt to counter the London-centric representation of Englishness and Britishness by putting forth a narrative which privileges the voices

of the countryside – specifically Devon – and which, like Coe's *Middle England*, uses a fractured

marriage to map the personal consequences of Brexit's political rupture. The varied nature of

responses to Brexit by English writers supports Anderson and colleagues' (2020) contention that

there are multiple modes of uncertainty operating in post-Brexit contemporary England.

Deborah Levy's *The Man Who Saw Everything*, first published in 2019, is emblematic of what

Anderson and his peers (2020) suggest is one of the more prominent modes of uncertainty that has

arisen in the wake of Brexit: "the sense of a failed present; a sense of decline, disconnection, and

stasis" which chimes with the representation of a futile present evident in Trezise's *Easy Meat* and

Griffiths's *Broken Ghost* (p. 10). The notion of a failed present is embodied by the text's protagonist,

Saul Adler, whose broken relationships and health complications are the cornerstones of the novel's

contemporary narrative. His past betrayal of his former love, Jennifer Moreau, haunts Saul's present,

as he continually agonises over things he could and should have done differently. Likewise, his ailing

physical health involves a spectral quality, albeit one temporally oriented in the future, with Saul's

death seeming to lurk around the corner. The illustration of a broken present in the novel is further

developed by its non-linear style, which bears similarities to Burns's *Milkman*. Oscillating between

the cleverly curated political backdrops of London 1988 and 2016, and East Berlin 1988 and 1989,

Levy constructs a temporal atmosphere in which "stable trajectories between past, present and

future fray and become fragile" (Anderson et al., 2020, p. 6). Through Saul's reflective narration,

Levy invites her reader into a hauntological present defined by the broken promises of its past and

the anxious uncertainty of its future. Saul's attempt to exorcise his haunted present can therefore be

understood as a mode of uncertainty, a search for order amidst the chaos of post-Brexit England.

Read politically, Levy's protagonist is representative of her own exploration of the failed present of

Englishness, and its relationship to the past and the future.

As with Burns's novel, *The Man Who Saw Everything*, with its non-linear representation of

"time and space [as] a little woozy" (Eberstadt, 2019) and its plethora of references to "spectres",

"ghosts" and "phantoms", lends itself to a reading that bears Fisher's (2014) theorisation of hauntology in mind, particularly his contention that the contemporary present "remain[s] trapped in the twentieth century" due to the "slow cancellation of the future" (p. 8). In the case of Levy's novel, Saul's temporal stasis, his inability to seize a bright future, is the product of his narcissism – his ironic characterisation as a man who "thought he saw everything [but] in fact saw almost nothing" (Smith, 2019). From a political standpoint, such a characterisation resembles the sense of self-importance and belief "in its own innate superiority" of imperial English nationalism (Medhurst, 2007, p. 44).

"It's always about you, isn't it?"[187] Levy foregrounds the narcissism of her protagonist, and the role it plays in his relationship's demise, in one of the novel's first scenes. Saul asks his then girlfriend, Jennifer, "if she would consider marrying [him],"[188] only for her to declare that it was over between them. Trying to reconcile himself to Jennifer's snub, which leaves him "shipwrecked amongst the empty oyster shells with their jagged sharp edges,"[189] the reader learns that the break-up is rooted in Saul's sheer disinterest in his girlfriend's passions: "Well, apart from anything else, you have never once asked me about my art."[190] Instead, Saul is much more at home as the subject of Jennifer's gaze, indulging in the knowledge of her attraction to him: "I knew that Jennifer was turned on by my body."[191] Saul's self-obsession makes it difficult for him to understand his rejection by Jennifer, and rather than seek to remedy the pain points she explicates, he instead engages in self-pity: "Frankly, what with the car accident and my first ever of marriage being rejected, it felt like I had been beaten up."[192] Saul's sense of self-pity is redolent of Fintan O'Toole's (2018) diagnosis of the contemporary English condition as suffering from a sort of collective narcissism, wallowing in the apparent injustices of a constant surrender to the ideologies of tolerance which underscore postcolonialism and the European project, without taking any accountability for its role in creating

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[187] From Levy, D. (2020). *The Man Who Saw Everything*. Penguin Books. p. 13.
[188] Levy, 2020, p. 12.
[189] Levy, 2020, p. 13.
[190] Levy, 2020, p. 13.
[191] Levy, 2020, p. 10.
[192] Levy, 2020, p. 23.

the conditions of injustice which necessitate them. Nor is Saul's lack of accountability only confined

to his relationship with Jennifer. In the novel's opening scene, Levy's protagonist is nearly involved in

a fatal accident: he fails to notice an oncoming car as he steps out on London's Abbey Road, instead

lurching onto the pedestrian crossing "without warning".[193] The car's driver, Wolfgang, politely

remonstrates Saul for his callous kerbside indecision, to which Saul recounts how he "smiled at

[Wolfgang's] careful reconstruction of history, blatantly told in his favour".[194] Again, Saul frames

himself as the victim of a reconstructed history, epitomising Fernanda Eberstadt's (2019) description

of the protagonist as "self-pitying".

The image of Saul attempting to cross London's famous Abbey Road is the novel's defining

motif and the structural anchor of its split-narrative form. Like the novel's opening section, Levy

commences the second half of *The Man Who Saw Everything* in the same manner, as Saul, again

steps onto the crossing on Abbey Road, the "famous zebra stripes" which The Beatles crossed "in

single file on 8 August 1969 for the record cover of *Abbey Road*".[195] Levy's second version of the

Abbey Road crossing mirrors her first almost verbatim, with Wolfgang again failing to stop and

colliding with Saul, who hesitated on the kerbside, "changed [his] mind and then … stepped right in

front of [Wolfgang's] car".[196] Significantly, however, the second rendition of the Abbey Road crossing

is not dated "September 1988", but instead "June 2016". This dating is evidence not only of the

nearly three decades of narrative time which have passed in the interim, but it tethers the novel

intimately to the Brexit context of its publication – for as the reader soon discovers, the precise date

of the accident is 24 June, the day after the referendum. When Wolfgang once again asks Saul how

old he is, Saul's response, that he is "twenty-eight" is not only demonstrably incorrect, but crucially,

it binds the two halves of the novel to corrupt the years between them. It is with this in mind that

Eberstadt (2019) contends that "time folds in on itself" in *The Man Who Saw Everything*. Saul's

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[193] Levy, 2020, p. 3.
[194] Levy, 2020, p. 3.
[195] Levy, 2020, p. 99.
[196] Levy, 2020, p. 99.

incoherent sense of time signified by his incorrect understanding of his age seems to mark him as

trapped in a temporal vortex, redolent of the sense of warped time that defines Fisher's hauntology;

Saul's future has apparently vanished, consigning him to suspension in a "preternaturally sharp

present" (Mundow, 2019). Levy thereby establishes the post-Brexit present of the novel's latter half

as one which is inherently haunted by the past. Saul's attempts to cross the road must therefore be

understood as emblematic of Levy's own efforts to explore and mend not only the "fissures between

past and present" – signalled throughout the novel by another motif, the *Man Overcomes Space and

Time* copper mural in East Berlin's Alexanderplatz – but between "Europe and England" too (Robson,

2019, p. 43).

Levy's concern with the Europe-England dichotomy is reflected formally in *The Man Who

Saw Everything* by the oscillation between London and East Berlin, and specifically the East Berlin of

1988 (which was then part of the communist German Democratic Republic) to which Saul travels as

part of his research into "cultural opposition to the rise of fascism in the 1930s".[197] The relationship

between Saul, the Londoner, and Walter Müller, his East German chaperone with whom he stays

while in the country, serves as the mechanism by which Levy comments on England's relationship

with the continent:

> I spent a lot of time laughing with Walter Müller. It was a relief to hang out with
> someone whose life was not about material gain. Walter was a master linguist. He
> taught Eastern European languages to East Germans who were heading off to
> work in other socialist countries, and he was fluent in the English language as well.
> I liked him as soon as I saw him waiting for me at Friedrichstraße station … There
> was a kind of energy in his body, a vitality that was relaxed but exciting.[198]

From the novel's first scene set in East Berlin, Levy casts a positive light on the country's citizens. In

doing so, she subtly gestures at the fact that an alternative political system, one not rooted in the

neoliberal pursuit of "material gain", may in fact foster a fuller appreciation of life. The pleasure Saul

derives from Walter is a far cry from the sense of self-pity which defines his time in London

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[197] Levy, 2020, p. 6.
[198] Levy, 2020, p. 35.

immediately prior, with Levy overtly affirming the worthiness of Anglo-European relationships, while

simultaneous lamenting the fact that they may now, in the context of Brexit, be consigned to history.

As the East German chapters continue, however, it becomes clear that Saul does not inspire the

same sense of joviality as his continental counterpart Walter and his sister, Luna, do for him – again,

a result of his narcissism. One example pertains to that of a tin of pineapple which Saul had

promised he would bring to the family from the West, a token not only of friendship, but also a

symbol of Britain's relative prosperity. Upon realising his forgetfulness, Saul apologises to Walter,

and offers a justification of sorts, although one that omits the crucial detail he includes for the

reader – that while shopping for the tinned pineapple, he had actually become "distracted by the

gentle hands of the man showing [him] the wedge of ripe Brie".[199] The material insignificance of the

tin of pineapple paradoxically emphasises the degree of Saul's narcissism, unable to think of others

for even the fleeting moment required to collect it from the supermarket. Saul's appalling behaviour

towards Walter escalates as the narrative continues. After a sexual encounter, the pair, "lying on the

floor on [their] backs, [Walter's] arm across [Saul's] chest,"[200] enjoy a tender moment, in which,

concerning Saul's Jewish ancestry, Walter declares that had they been friends during the era of Nazi

Germany, he would have done "everything [he] could to save [him]".[201] Later, Walter's loyalty

towards Saul goes even further, when he declares his love for him. In response, however, Saul

ultimately betrays Walter by sleeping with his sister – a scene which is only symbolised after the fact

– "I must have slept after all, because when I woke up I discovered more consciously that Luna and I

were naked and tangled up in bed together"[202] – and which speaks to his insatiable narcissistic

desires. Ultimately, through her protagonist, the "self-centred narcissist who carelessly upends

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[199] Levy, 2020, p. 47.
[200] Levy, 2020, p. 60.
[201] Levy, 2020, p. 60.
[202] Levy, 2020, p. 91.

other's lives" (McAlpin, 2019), Levy posits England's relationship with Europe as a one-sided affair, in which the former only takes from the latter, offering only betrayal in return.[203]

"I had gazed at my reflection in the wing mirror of his car and my reflection had fallen into me,"[204] recounts Saul, following his accident on the Abbey Road crossing in June 2016. With a fragment of the car mirror lodged inside of him, Levy establishes the second half of *The Man Who Saw Everything* as one concerned with her protagonist's introspection, offering him a salvation of sorts. As he clings to life in a hospital bed on the Euston Road, Saul is haunted by various spectres of his past, allowing him to come to understand the damage he has inflicted on those around him. Memories of his younger self's trip to the German Democratic Republic infiltrate Saul's semi-conscious state, spurred on by the name of his treating doctor, Rainer, who Saul is convinced is a "Stasi official in a white coat".[205] As the spectre of his time in East Berlin pervades his Euston Road present, Saul recognises the fact that he "was not in GDR time and space", but rather "floating somewhere above America".[206] Not only does Levy corrupt the linear construction of time in her novel: she also presents a complementary "crisis of space" in the hauntological sense (Fisher, 2012, p. 19), which supports her protagonist's capacity for self-reflection:

> One of the spectres that came to haunt me on the Euston Road was Luna Müller.
> She had no physical form, but I could feel that she was nearby. Maybe she was
> scared of wolves and jaguars and needed company … Despite the way we had
> parted, I felt endeared to her … I couldn't stop thinking about that.[207]

Here, Saul gently gestures at the sense of shame he feels regarding the way he left things with Luna when he left the GDR in 1988 – namely, that he asked her to keep their romance a secret, in a sense, silencing her sexual freedom and expression, and departing hastily without offering her the chance to come with him, despite her incessant desire to travel to Liverpool. The exorcism of Saul's shame

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[203] The dynamic between Saul and Walter could also be extended to the UKIP position during the Syrian refugee crisis, in the way that it allowed Europe (and Germany in particular) to absorb the humanitarian cost while simultaneously positioning immigration as a moral panic that threatened to destroy the nation.
[204] Levy, 2020, p. 100.
[205] Levy, 2020, p. 103.
[206] Levy, 2020, p. 110.
[207] Levy, 2020, p. 123.

regarding the Muller family continues in his salvaging of "a plastic bowl of tinned pineapple" given to him by one of the hospital nurses: "I saved it for Luna."[208] The evocation of the pineapple establishes a direct parallel between Saul's past and present. In contrast to his former self, whose narcissism prevented him from exhibiting the consideration required to bring pineapple to Luna in the GDR, here, despite his ailing physical state, Saul displays a sense of selflessness, and consideration for others.

Saul, haunted by the physical presence of Jennifer Moreau by his hospital bedside, and the "spectre of ylang-ylang [which] lingered in the air,"[209] a remnant of their former relationship, also reflects on the demise of his romance with Jennifer and the part he played in it. As with the Abbey Road crossing scene, Levy again re-stages a scene from the novel's first half in its second:

> When I asked Jennifer to marry me, I was looking through the bedroom door …
> Her flatmate Claudia had just come out of the sauna to turn off the boiling kettle
> in the kitchen. She was naked apart from a pink towel wrapped around her head.
> Her stomach was flat and tanned. I was looking at her when I asked Jennifer to
> marry me. I wanted to keep my options open, even as the words I was saying
> were supposed to close them.[210]

In her re-telling of Saul's failed proposal, Levy includes a crucial detail which is missing in the first version – that is, the protagonist's confession that he was not truly devoted to Jennifer, even at the very moment he was supposed to be expressing his eternal loyalty. There is a sense of catharsis, as Saul is at last able to take some accountability for his treatment of Jennifer. Levy goes even further with Saul's salvation as she offers the heartbreaking details of the death of his and Jennifer's child in 1993, while the pair were living in Cape Cod, Massachusetts. "It's like this, Saul Adler: I had a baby when I was twenty-four. Isaac was with me every day while I worked. We were happy. We loved each other. Many other people loved him too. He died in my arms and you were ten minutes away, but you were not there."[211] Again, Saul does not shy away from uncomfortable details, recalling that

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[208] Levy, 2020, p. 124.
[209] Levy, 2020, pp. 132-133.
[210] Levy, 2020, p. 135.
[211] Levy, 2020, p. 140.

the reason for his absence was infidelity, having spent the afternoon with "the phosphorescent, copper-haired woman" who lived next door, whose "soft hands … reach[ed] out to [him] under the big American sky".[212] In reflecting on this moment, Saul finally confronts his narcissism, admitting that "that day, when I betrayed Jennifer under the cherry tree I had discovered a terrible cruelty within myself".[213]

Sam Byers (2019) argues that "Saul's life … functions as a kind of psychoanalytic mirror of Europe, with events in the material world finding their emotional counterparts in his disordered memories". From this perspective, and with a consideration of *The Man Who Saw Everything*'s post-Brexit context, reading Saul's failed relationships as an embodiment of England's own failure to sustain a positive connection with the European continent offers an insight into the nature of their apparent incongruity. Saul's narcissism resembles the "untroubled arrogance" that characterises traditional conceptions of Englishness (Medhurst, 2007, p. 44), ones that rose to the fore in the lead up to, and have continued in the aftermath of, the Brexit referendum. Levy imbues her novel with the hauntological, thus necessitating a reconceptualisation of history, and forcing Saul – and by extension, contemporary England – to reckon with the demons of its past. Just as Saul confronts his narcissism and takes responsibility for the hurt he has inflicted on others, Levy seems to urge her country to do the same, to reflect on the role it has played in its strained relationship with Europe, and to take some ownership of its imperfections rather than lay the blame squarely on the bureaucrats of Brussels. *The Man Who Saw Everything* closes with Saul Adler once again attempting to cross the Abbey Road: "I knew as I took a step across the black-and-white stripes that I was walking across deep time, trying to put myself together again."[214] Like Saul, Levy implores her national readers to transcend "deep time", to hark back to the era in which "a new Europe [was]

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[212] Levy, 2020, p. 139.
[213] Levy, 2020, p. 141.
[214] Levy, 2020, p. 199.

forged [out of] the ruins of 1945, the rubble of smashed buildings".[215] It is the only way for the

nation to put itself together again, and to move forward into the future.

While varying in their approaches, the novels that have emerged in England in the wake of

the 2016 Brexit referendum are united in two ways. Firstly, they can all be understood as modes of

uncertainty, employing strategies to reconcile with the profound uncertainty that characterises

present-day English national identity. In the case of Coe's *Middle England* and McEwan's *The

Cockroach*, satirical comedy is used as both a coping mechanism, as well as a way to establish a

sense of belonging by critiquing the Brexit politicians. In Levy's *The Man Who Saw Everything*, it is a

process of introspection and a reckoning with the failures of the past that functions as a means of

trying to reclaim a brighter future. Secondly, all three novels share in their criticism of the renewed

evocations of traditional forms of Englishness, in the vein of that famously espoused by Orwell, that

have emerged in contemporary Britain, and which appear to have contributed significantly to the

Brexit vote. They share an affirmation of Nairn's belief in traditional notions of English nationalism as

inherently regressive and backward-looking, as rooted in a past incongruous with the contemporary

globalised present. To varying degrees, they bemoan this conception of Englishness and condemn its

insularity and intolerance.

Coe is no doubt critical of the xenophobic conservatism of right-wing Englishness, which is

embodied most prominently by the figure of Ian in *Middle England*, who he frames, frankly, as an

unsophisticated loser. Coe's comedic style, however, is empathetic, certainly when considered

against McEwan's in *The Cockroach*. While he sides with the sentiments of the Remain camp, he is

also conscious of the shortcomings of those who subscribe to a belief in a more open and tolerant

Englishness, exposing their deep attachment to the idyll of the English countryside, notably in the

characters' response to the 'Isles of Wonder' spectacle of the London Olympic Games opening

ceremony. On the other hand, McEwan's satirical depiction of the David Cameron-led Conservatives

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[215] Levy, 2020, p. 191.

is a scathing critique of right-wing, conservative British politics, rooted in the historical, backwardness of traditional Englishness. *The Cockroach* leaves no space for the Leave voice and renders its proponents the object of its humour. While the novel offers humour as a source of escape from the harsh reality of its political context, crucially, it does so only for those that share in McEwan's staunch support for the Remain argument. Thus, the novel merely exacerbates the fault lines revealed by the Brexit vote, rather than make any attempt to transcend them.

Levy's *The Man Who Saw Everything* offers a less overtly critical examination of the current political climate. As with Coe and McEwan, she is critical of traditional Englishness and the role it has played in severing the United Kingdom and Europe, which she represents through the narcissism of her protagonist, Saul Adler. Unlike her peers, however, Levy at least posits a way forward. *The Man Who Saw Everything*'s hauntological structure, with its presentation of folded time and corrupted space, allows the author to overlay the Brexit present on top of the past, thus enabling a sense of introspection and exorcism. Just as Saul can own up to his indiscretions, so too does Levy advocate for contemporary England's own reckoning with its past.

It is one thing to critique traditional notions of Englishness, and quite another to present what an alternative nationalism may look like, one that may genuinely embrace the present-day international community and ultimately, hold the British nation-state together. Nairn identified a "civic nationalism as containing the potential for democratic transition and renewal" (cited in Wellings & Kenny, 2019, p. 858), but for now, this kind of nationalism appears absent in contemporary English fiction. Whether novelists can expound an updated identity of this kind: only time will tell.

Conclusion

If writers leave the business of making pictures of the world to politicians, it will be one of history's great and most abject abdications.
– Salman Rushdie (1991).

Brexit – the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union after 47 years of membership, and in the process becoming the only country to ever do so – undoubtedly marks a political, social and economic cataclysm for Britain. If the process of leaving the EU was supposed to 'take back control', it does not appear that a control over political stability was included in its remit. While the Tories have held on to power in the six-and-a-half years between the Brexit referendum and the time of writing (December 2022), they have cycled through no less than five Prime Ministers. The unprecedented brevity of Liz Truss's reign – infamously failing to outlast a head of lettuce[216] – is symptomatic of a crisis of uncertainty which confronts British politics in the "bright new Brexit" era.

The future of the UK, however, is not the immediate concern of this project, so much as the future of British fiction. For, as Salman Rushdie (1991) suggests, where politicians fail in serving and sustaining the national consciousness, it is up to writers to pick up the baton, so to speak, and ensure the will of the nation continues to be represented. In the years since Brexit, a new wave of British fiction, dubbed "Brexlit", has emerged, seeking to cultivate a space in which the effects of the referendum can be not only revealed (particularly on a personal level), but worked through, and reconciled. The novels studied in this thesis are a testament to this. Each can be understood as engaging in the process of thinking about British life after Brexit. As such, they adhere to Eaglestone's (2018) sentiment regarding literature's focus on "how we live as individuals and

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[216] In October 2022, British tabloid *The Daily Star* gestured that after only weeks in the job, Truss's tenuous grip on power saw her time left as Prime Minister amount to "roughly the shelf-life of a lettuce" (Victor, 2022). A YouTube livestream was set up by *The Independent* on 14 October, with a head of lettuce adorning a blonde wig, and a framed picture of Truss. Truss announced her resignation less than a week later, on 20 October, the lettuce still in edible condition.

communities" (p. 2). Despite being formally over, Brexit – and by extension, Brexlit – is very much an ongoing phenomenon. Amidst the prevailing sense of uncertainty that marks the UK in the year 2022, the ideas expressed in works of Brexlit may offer us some clues and allow us to draw some tentative conclusions regarding what the future holds.

Viewed from a broader historical perspective, the idea of Brexit, and the re-politicisation of the border it entailed, seemed almost unbelievable from a Northern Irish perspective. Given the traumatic history of the Troubles on the island of Ireland, one could be forgiven for expressing bemusement, horror or disbelief at the political machinations of the Cameron Government at having tabled the prospect of Brexit in the first place. Certainly, the potential for renewed hostility on the Irish island has evoked the spectre of the Troubles in Northern Irish fiction, with many novelists continuing to return to the events of the late twentieth century. Anna Burns's *Milkman* is one such example. On first reading, the pervasiveness of the Troubles in Northern Irish fiction may be discerned as indicative of a kind of spectre which continues to haunt society. And this haunting has a dual temporality, being both the traumatic history which threatens to return, as well as the spectre of a peaceful future, which has apparently vanished with the border politics of Brexit. Paradoxically, however, the return to the Troubles in Northern Irish fiction is not indicative of the country being denied its path to peace, but in fact a necessary precondition for it. For trauma, bearing witness is a pivotal part of the healing process. Brexit has, in a sense, provided novelists with a framework for engaging in this witnessing – one which may foster stronger peace and unity on the Irish island, and perhaps even its reunification.

The situation in Wales bears some similarities to that of Northern Ireland, particularly from the perspective of uncertainty which characterises the post-Brexit future in each. The sense of uncertainty, however, appears stronger in Wales, and this is borne out in the Welsh Brexlit. While Burns's protagonist has a way of "moving backwards towards the future" via a reconciliation with past trauma, the lives of the protagonists of Rachel Trezise's *Easy Meat* and Niall Griffiths's *Broken*

Ghost are marked by a dislocation from both the past and the future. They inhabit spaces in which the material quality of life appears to be gradually declining, and with no hope of things changing. The failure of the country to replace its former industrial economy has consigned them to a life of perpetual precarity. From this perspective, they embody the notion of having been 'left behind' by the processes of global neoliberal capitalism. While both texts are marked by a lack of hope for the future, the representation of the 'left behind' voice plays an important role in explicating the grievances of many in the present-day UK, beyond the simplistic rhetoric of politicians.

For Scotland, Brexit was a catastrophic failure, one which added insult to injury following the failure of the 2014 Indyref. Despite the country registering a nearly two-thirds Remain majority, the country was forced to withdraw from the EU owing to the voting patterns of the rest of Britain – and against Scotland's long tradition of close identification with the European continent. It is for this reason that Brexit has been described as an example of Scotland being "governed against its will", one which bears a resemblance to the pre-devolution rhetoric of the 1990s. In contrast to the failure Brexit represents for Scotland, however, the country's fiction since the referendum appears to display a commitment to sustaining hope for the future. This is evident, to differing extents, in Ali Smith's novel *Autumn* and Sarah Moss's novel *Summerwater*. The former illustrates the meaning and happiness to be drawn from relationships with continental counterparts, and explicitly advocates for hope amidst a context rife with division; the latter privileges mundane human relationships, and cautions against the inability for people to come together to confront collective hardships. In their devotion to representing enduring hope, Scottish fiction will play a key role in ensuring Scotland continues to march towards its desired future.

England's relationship with Brexit is somewhat of a paradox. According to one theory of the 2016 referendum, the phenomenon of Brexit was "made in England". Certainly, in terms of numbers, with nearly nine tenths of Leave votes being registered in England, there is validity to the argument. Supposedly motivated by a nostalgic yearning for the country's former glory during the

period of imperialism, the 'take back control' rhetoric of the Leave campaign resonated profoundly in England, contributing to the country's 53.4% Leave majority. But far from restoring control and sovereignty, the fallout from Brexit has revealed a hollowness within conceptions of Englishness, and anxieties regarding the nation's capacity to take its place in the post-Brexit world. In parallel with this idea is the emergence of the so-called West Lothian Question, and the reality that, unlike its British counterparts, England is without a devolved parliament of its own. Should the UK disintegrate, what would happen to England? Such uncertainty regarding the future of England and Englishness has found expression in the novels of English authors, albeit in varied ways. Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* and Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach* remain faithful to a long-standing English tradition: comedy as an antidote to crisis. Their novels employ satire as a way of critiquing the reality of Brexit, while offering their readers solace from the despairing sociopolitical climate. On the other hand, Deborah Levy's *The Man Who Saw Everything* utilises another mode of uncertainty: an interrogation of a failed present. Like the fictions of Burns, Trezise and Griffiths, her novel portrays a present haunted by the loss of its future. And like *Milkman*, Levy's work regards a return to the past as a means of reclaiming the future. Rather than the former glory of empire, however, *The Man Who Saw Everything* is a challenge to the narcissism of Englishness, advocating instead for the nation to adopt the capacity for true empathy as a means of healing the divides of the contemporary moment.

Finally, a few concluding remarks and suggestions for further research are necessary. Firstly, the virtual absence of the Leave perspective in post-Brexit British fiction is worth noting. As John Self (2020) points out, "if there are any pro-Leave novels – ones that portray Brexit as a success, an unalloyed good thing and cause for celebration – they're well hidden". Perhaps it is a case of those on the side of Remain using their fictions as an outlet to grieve, and pro-Brexit authors not needing three hundred pages to advocate for something that has already come to fruition? Further investigation is required to understand why this is the case, and what the consequences may be. And secondly, while conceptions of national identity are intricately bound to the political and social reality of Brexit, there are, of course, many other factors at play – age, race, ethnic origin, gender, to

name only a few. Analyses of Brexlit through these demographic lenses would complement this

thesis, and ultimately provide a fuller picture of how the post-Brexit landscape in the UK bears out in

contemporary fiction.

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