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TITOLO TESI

Reading Brexit through BrexLit:
fictional responses to political crisis

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Abstract

Reading Brexit through BrexLit is a dissertation centred on the 2016 referendum on British exit from the European Union and on Brexit Literature ('BrexLit'). The thesis focuses on the relation between Englishness and the Leave vote, analysing themes and images at the core of the Brexit campaign in parallel with selected literary works published both before and after the political outcome, and on the impact of the referendum on literature itself.

After an introduction that serves as a framework, the work is divided into three different sections. The first one is dedicated to an analysis of Brexit from a political point of view, outlining global tendencies and British peculiarities that influenced the vote and explaining Brexit as an English (more than British) phenomenon. The second section moves from the political aspects of the study to the literary ones, showing that Brexit themes are to be found in contemporary fictions published before the referendum and focusing on two novels that are particularly concerned both with the structures of feeling at the core of the campaign and with English identity: *Speak for England* (2005) by James Hawes and *The White Family* (2002) by Maggie Gee. The third and last section introduces the reader to Brexit Literature ('BrexLit'), which is a new sub-genre that has flourished from the referendum onwards. The section looks at the main characteristics of the sub-genre, distinguishing between two main categories of BrexLit fictions: political and intimate novels. This section ends with the close reading of two BrexLit novels published in 2018, *Perfidious Albion* by Sam Byers and *Middle England* by Jonathan Coe, which are the most representative in relation to the two categories mentioned above and in the way they engage, as the novels of the previous section, with the structures of feeling exploited in Brexit discourse.

Hope is exactly that, that's all it is, a matter of how we deal with the negative acts towards human beings by other human beings in the world, remembering that they and we are all human, that nothing human is alien to us, the foul and the fair, and that most important of all we're here for a mere blink of the eyes, that's all.

Ali Smith, Autumn

Contents

Reading Brexit: An Introduction	1
Behind Brexit: Cultural and Political Framework	24
Brexit from a global perspective: the rise of nationalist and populist parties.....	24
Brexit from a European perspective: the end of the European dream?	32
The ‘Awkward Partner’: British Euroscepticism.....	39
Divided Kingdom: Brexit and English national identity	47
Before Brexit: Brexit Discourse and Contemporary Fiction	55
From Politics to Literature: The Nation and the Novel	55
Restoring a ‘Phantom Homeland’: The Brexit Dream in <i>Speak for England</i>	67
From Nostalgic Dreams to Paranoid Nightmares: <i>The White Family</i> under Siege	103
Beyond Brexit: BrexLit and English Identity	140
From Denial to (Nearly) Acceptance: Cultural Responses and <i>BrexLit</i>	140
Challenging Brexit Narrative: Brexit ‘Political’ Novels	146
Into a Leaver’s Mind: Brexit ‘Intimate’ Novels	165
Darkin <i>Versus</i> Trina: The Two Englands of <i>Perfidious Albion</i>	175
The Heart of Brexit is in <i>Middle England</i>	185
Conclusion	201
References	206

Reading Brexit: An Introduction

The day after the Brexit referendum, the British population woke up divided between two opposite impressions: day-dreaming or living a nightmare, with some Britons claiming victory and others campaigning for an immediate new referendum. Some of them were, in fact, bewildered, scared and angry at the results; some were, instead, flattered and confident. The then prime minister, leader of the Conservative party and pro-Remain supporter David Cameron resigned¹, considering Brexit a personal débâcle; also Nigel Farage, leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), resigned², having accomplished the very mission of his political career (withdrawal from the European Union); in Wales, prime minister Carwyn Jones from the Welsh Labour Party did not resign, but he defined himself «deeply disappointed»³ by the pro-Leave majority come out from the referendum; Nicola Sturgeon, Scottish prime minister and leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), described the Brexit scenario as «democratically unacceptable»⁴ for Scotland (in which the Remain-side had won) and threatened a new referendum on Scottish independence; in Northern Ireland, fears about a hard Brexit and ‘the border question’ with the Republic of Ireland started to flow, with Sinn Féin (a major party in both countries) asking for a ‘special designated status’ within the EU.⁵

On the other side of the English Channel, reactions to Brexit were also confused and marked by bewilderment. British writer Julian Barnes, writing for the *London Review of Books*, recalls that «[a]fter the Brexit vote, many of my European friends expressed disbelief and astonishment. It seemed to them that we had run mad in the noonday sun»⁶. And so it seemed to some European leaders: French prime minister François Hollande described Brexit as a

¹David Cameron’s full resignation speech in «David Cameron's full resignation speech: 'I'll go before the autumn' – video», *The Guardian*, 24 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/video/2016/jun/24/david-camersons-full-resignation-speech-i-will-go-before-the-autumn-video> (30 June 2018)

²Nigel Farage’s full resignation speech in «Nigel Farage resigns: The Ukip leader's resignation speech in full», *The Independent*, 4 July 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/nigel-farage-resignation-speech-brexit-ukip-leader-resigns-quits-read-in-full-a7118741.html> (30 June 2018)

³Jones, C., cit. in Porter, G., « EU Referendum: First Minister 'deeply disappointed' but calls on Wales to unite», *The Daily Post*, 24 June 2016, <https://www.dailypost.co.uk/news/north-wales-news/eu-referendum-first-minister-deeply-11519604> (30 June 2018)

⁴Sturgeon, N., cit. in Cooper, C., « Brexit: Scotland leaving EU is 'democratically unacceptable', says Nicola Sturgeon», *The Independent*, 24 June 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/brexit-scotland-leaving-eu-is-democratically-unacceptable-says-nicola-sturgeon-a7100691.html> (30 June 2018)

⁵President of Sinn Féin Gerry Adams asking for special status for Northern Ireland, in McDonald, H., «Gerry Adams: Brexit will be a disaster for the island of Ireland», *The Guardian*, 4 February 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/feb/04/gerry-adams-brexit-disaster-ireland> (30 June 2018)

⁶Barnes, J., «Diary: People Will Hate Us Again», *London Review of Books*, Vol.39, n°8, 20 April 2017, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v39/n08/julian-barnes/diary> (30 June 2018)

«painful choice» and «a tough test for Europe»; German prime minister Angela Merkel shared Hollande's statement, defining the vote results as «a blow to Europe and to the European unification process»; in Italy, prime minister Matteo Renzi remarked that «Europe is our future», while Spain called for a joint sovereignty over Gibraltar, where 'the border question' is an issue as prominent as in Northern Ireland.⁷ However, there was also contentment at the results, in particular from nationalist and populist parties: for instance, Marine Le Pen, leader of the *Front National*, claimed Brexit was a «[v]ictoire de la liberté»⁸ and called for an EU referendum in France too, as Geertz Wilders in Netherlands and Matteo Salvini in Italy⁹.

Then, was Brexit a victory or a *débâcle*? And, as writer Zadie Smith asks herself and her readers, «[w]hat was it really about? Immigration? Inequality? Historic xenophobia? Sovereignty? EU bureaucracy? Anti-neoliberal revolution? Class war?»¹⁰. Despite uneasiness and consternation of cultural elites and mainstream parties, what is certain is that the more Brexit is analysed, the less it seems possible to define it as an inexplicable outburst or an unforeseeable event. Rather, Brexit looks increasingly like a plausible outcome, connected to other events and tendencies outside the UK, but deeply rooted in British contemporary society. Firstly, Brexit appears to be, in fact, part of a global trend: as a manifestation of dissatisfaction with mainstream leaders and parties; as a cry of anger over growing inequality, low wages and insecurity; as a reaction to globalisation and the permeability of national borders. In this wider framework we could insert, for instance, Donald Trump's election (not by chance he will say «[t]hey call me Mr Brexit over there»¹¹), or Matteo Renzi's lost bet on Italy's constitutional referendum, which forced him to resign like David Cameron. Secondly, Brexit is also part of a European framework, not simply because the referendum was about European membership, but given that the European Union as a political and economic project is generally experiencing low levels of support, as well as resistance to any further action, regulation, proposal or enlargement. In the middle of this European crisis, walls are being erected inside and outside

⁷Batchelor, T., «Spain in EU stitch up on Gibraltar: Spanish minister asks EU NOT to negotiate with Britain», *The Express*, 29 September 2016, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/715900/Gibraltar-dispute-Spain-letter-EU-foreign-ministers-stance-Rock> (30 June 2018)

⁸Where not specified, the statements from the political leaders quoted above could all be found in *BBC News*, «Brexit: World reaction as UK votes to leave EU», 24 June 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36614643> (30 June 2018)

⁹Statements of Geertz Wilders and Matteo Salvini quoted in Torre, C., «Brexit, Salvini e Le Pen: "Ora tocca a noi"», *Il Giornale*, 24 June 2016, <http://www.ilgiornale.it/news/mondo/brexit-salvini-e-pen-ora-tocca-noi-1275516.html> (30 June 2018)

¹⁰Smith, Z., «Fences: a Brexit Diary», *The New York Review of Books*, 18 August 2016, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/08/18/fences-brexit-diary/> (30 June 2018)

¹¹Trump, D., cit. in Coe, J., «Is Donald Trump 'Mr Brexit?'», *The New York Times*, 27 January 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/opinion/sunday/is-donald-trump-mr-brexit.html> (30 June 2018)

the Continent, members are more and more divided according to interests (the Visegrad Group¹² is an example), and nationalism is rising again as it did in the infamous time window between the two World Wars. Thirdly, Brexit is also a product of British Euroscepticism and peculiarities, and it is in this framework that the referendum is disclosing most of its meanings. As Robert Eaglestone affirms,

Brexit is not only political, economic and administrative: perhaps most significantly it is an event in culture, too. Brexit grew from cultural beliefs, real or imaginary, about Europe and the UK; the arguments before, during and after the referendum were – and are – arguments about culture; its impact on the cultural life of these islands may last for generations.¹³

What Eaglestone outlines is that the Brexit debate on the country's future (which saw a Remain front supported by the government and, on the other side, a Leave front supported by Eurosceptic Tories, members of New Labour and UKIP) has been won on the cultural field, playing with British divisions, fears and desires. In fact, as Calhoun notices,

[f]or most people, voting for Brexit was expressive more than instrumental action. A Brexit vote expressed frustration, rage, resentment, and insult – as well as hope that a vanishing way of life could be saved and a proud national identity celebrated.¹⁴

This set of feelings, emotions and uncertainties was cunningly detected and exploited by Leave supporters. In the months preceding the vote, media and politicians strongly advocating for Brexit did fuel these feelings, describing a country swamped by Europeans, constantly robbed and tricked by the European Union, and even put in danger by the migrant influx and the obligations towards the free movement of people. The *Sun*, for example, even demanded British passports «be returned to their traditional blue covers as a ‘symbol of British independence’». ¹⁵ The exacerbation of the political debate had its backlashes, the most noteworthy of which was the murder of Labour MP Jo Cox, shot and stabbed multiple times for being a defender of immigration and the European Union.¹⁶ Her killing followed Brexiteers claims of «swarms»¹⁷ of immigrants ready to invade the UK after a Remain vote, and the

¹²Composed by Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia.

¹³Eaglestone, R., «Introduction: Brexit and Literature», in Eaglestone, R.(ed.), *Brexit and Literature. Critical and Cultural Responses*, Oxon & NY, Routledge, 2018, p.1

¹⁴Calhoun, C., «Nationalism, Populism and Brexit», in Outhwaite, W. (ed.), *Brexit: Sociological Responses*, London & New York, Anthem Press, 2017, p.58

¹⁵Earle, S., «Politics of Nostalgia», *Open Democracy*, 30 October 2016, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/samuel-earle/politics-of-nostalgia> (30 June 2018)

¹⁶Cobain, I. «Jo Cox killed in 'brutal, cowardly' and politically motivated murder, trial hears», *The Guardian*, 14 November 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/nov/14/jo-cox-killed-in-politically-motivated-murder-trial-thomas-mair-hears> (30 June 2018)

¹⁷The term ‘swarm’ was first used by David Cameron, talking about refugees and migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe. For this and other metaphors used to describe migrants see Sharatmadiari, D., «Swarms, floods and marauders: the toxic metaphors of the migration debate» *The Guardian*, 10 August 2015,

infamous UKIP's 'Breaking Point' anti-immigration poster. The poster shows coloured migrants crossing the Croatia-Slovenia border in 2015, with the white person in the first row covered by a box of text.¹⁸ Taking advantage of rhetorical devices playing with race and fear of the Other, the then UKIP leader Nigel Farage aimed at appealing to the most racist fringes of British population to erect its own political version of the Hungarian wall (built precisely along Hungary's borders with Croatia and Serbia).

Even after Jo Cox's murder, the Brexiteers' scaremongering and scapegoating related to immigrants went on. And, in addition, from the referendum results onwards the racist beast appears completely unleashed. An example is the stabbing of 21-year-old Bartosz Milewski, assaulted in a park in Donnington after being heard speaking Polish.¹⁹ Also related to the Brexit vote is the racist graffiti (like 'EU Rats go home now'²⁰) which, more often than not, target Eastern Europeans, and especially Polish immigrants who constitute the biggest European community on British soil. The Home Office has indeed reported an escalation in hate crimes, with a 41 per cent increase in July 2016 compared to the data of the previous year.²¹ These data, which report only the abuses denounced to the police, are easily explained if we consider that, from Brexiteers' point of view, Brexit means, first and foremost, immigrants' 'time to go' to *finally free* the country and its people. As Barnes again stresses, «it is as if the Brexit vote has given them permission to purify the country except when there is popular outcry and mass petition in a particular case».²²

This 'regained freedom' of the people and the country is exactly what the populist politician Nigel Farage has implied triumphantly celebrating the 23rd June 2016 as British own «Independence Day»²³ (as Eaglestone notes, the referendum day could not be called VE day, since that recalls a 'collective' – and European – victory)²⁴. This expression had been already

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/10/migration-debate-metaphors-swarms-floods-marauders-migrants> (30 June 2018)

¹⁸Stewart, H., Mason, R., «Nigel Farage's anti-migrant poster reported to police», in *The Guardian*, 16 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/16/nigel-farage-defends-ukip-breaking-point-poster-queue-of-migrants> (30 June 2018)

¹⁹Dearden, L., «Student stabbed in neck with smashed bottle 'for speaking Polish' in Telford», *The Independent*, 17 September 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/student-stabbed-in-neck-with-smashed-bottle-for-speaking-polish-bartosz-milewski-donnington-telford-a7313036.html> (30 June 2016)

²⁰Painted on a health centre in Torquay, 6 July 2016. For this and other information on racist graffiti and attacks in the aftermath of the Brexit vote, see «Post-Brexit Racism», *IRR News Team*, 7 July 2016, <http://www.irr.org.uk/news/post-brexit-racism/> (30 June 2018)

²¹On hate crimes data, see the Home Office's official statistics, 13 October 2016, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-2015-to-2016>, (30 June 2018)

²²Barnes, J., *Diary: People Will Hate Us Again* *cit.*

²³For Nigel Farage's speech after the Brexit results, see «EU Referendum: Farage declares 'independence day'», *BBC News*, 24 June 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36613295/eu-referendum-farage-declares-independence-day> (30 June 2018)

²⁴Cfr. Eaglestone, R., «Cruel Nostalgia and the Memory of the Second World War», in Eaglestone, R., *op cit.*

used by the Tory Iain Duncan Smith, who strongly affirmed that Brexit could give rise to «a new renaissance in Britain»²⁵. Farage's view on Brexit coincides with Smith's. According to him, in fact, Brexit mainly represents a double opportunity: people's chance to firmly declare their dissent about European integration, the consequences of globalization, and a certain vision of the country held by the established cultural and political elites; and the country's chance to break free from its European chains, aka European membership, considered a new imperialist force responsible for holding Britain back and preventing it to recover its path towards greatness. A greatness, by the way, that Brexiteers recover from a simplified and manipulated version of the past that forgets British exploitation, slavery and complicity in the racialisation of the world or in Hitler's rise.

In addition, as Anshuman Mondal stresses, the use of the word 'independence' by Nigel Farage

also enacts a reversal: Britain, for so long held to account by the forces of "political correctness" (i.e. anti-racist activists, multiculturalists and guilty liberals) for its imperial and colonial overlordship and the historical crimes perpetrated in its service, could now be positioned as itself a victim of a kind of colonial dependency and, at a (rhetorical) stroke, its colonial history could be at once evoked and obscured.²⁶

Talking about 'independence', indeed, means putting Britain on the same level with the USA, as well as with the other colonies that sought and won their independence from the British Empire. As outlined by Fintan O'Toole, the expression 'Independence Day' «sacralizes 23 June 2016 as [...] England's own Easter 1916. [...] The implication, even in the negative, was that the EU was the kind of colonizing power that other countries had typically had to overthrow in wars of independence»²⁷. In this narrative, Britain is thus depicted as a colony of the EU, which is represented as a European super-state imposing on the British. From this perspective, Brexit easily acquires the characteristics of an anti-colonial liberation movement, a rhetoric which is firmly rooted in the Brexit discourse, as shown recently by Boris Johnson's resignation statement, where the former foreign secretary criticises the then Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit plan declaring Britain «truly headed for the status of a colony»²⁸. As O'Toole stresses, «the hallucination of being a colony»²⁹ ends up in fuelling delusional thinking such as the idea

²⁵Iain Duncan Smith, cit. in Ross, T., «EU referendum: Iain Duncan Smith interview - Tory veteran says vote to leave on June 23 will make Britain great again», *The Telegraph*, 30 April 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/30/eu-referendum-iain-duncan-smith-interview--a-vote-to-leave-on-ju/> (30 September 2018)

²⁶Mondal, A.A., «Scratching the Post-Imperial Itch», in Eaglestone, R. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.82

²⁷O'Toole, F., *Heroic Failure*, London, Head of Zeus Ltd, p.81

²⁸Boris Johnson, cit. in «Britain headed for status of 'colony' to EU, Boris Johnson says in resignation statement», *RT*, 9 July 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/432420-britain-eu-colony-boris-johnson/> (30 June 2018)

²⁹O'Toole, F., *op. cit.*, p.92

of a European conspiracy against Britain, and of treacherous British representatives in cahoots with Europe, giving rise, ultimately, to a fierce sense of victimhood. Since the end of the British Empire, Britain's strategy to deal with its legacy has consistently been a defensive one linked with the victim-image, seeking to minimize the extent and brutal character of the imperial enterprise and to depict the British as its very victims: first, as captives of the imperial project (as Linda Colley defines them), and then as a population invaded by the colonized.³⁰ With the mother country Britain – the 'heart of the empire', the colonizer *par excellence* – paradoxically transformed into the submissive, colonized Other, the transference of the sense of victimhood to the British is completed. This sense of victimhood, as we will see later, affects not only the country, perceived as a 'victim of history' and of the European Union, but specifically England, which considers itself a victim of devolution – with the devolution process depicted as an act of internal colonialism, a reversal of the internal colonialism the English had actually perpetrated against Scottish, Welsh and Irish people, and an act of revenge for it. Correspondingly, this sense of victimisation then comes to apply to the white working class, which in turn sees itself as a victim of foreign immigration and ethnic minorities on British soil.

It is not by chance, then, that Farage's campaign was characterized by a continuous act of remembrance, with obsessive references to the Second World War and the British imperial past. These two key events in British history are undoubtedly at the core of British collective memory and still able to give and reinforce a collective sense of identity. For instance, episodes such as the Blitz or Dunkirk were constantly referred to, recalling a vision of community, a sense of belonging, and the image of a glorious, victorious past to be proud of in opposition to present day. The British post-war narrative, indeed, depicts WWII as the last victory, the peak of a greatness doomed to come to an end in the following decades. This explains why the former UKIP leader has recently described the country as the actual loser of the war³¹, defining it as the starting point of Britain's fall from being a world superpower to joining the European Economic Community. Relying on a long tradition of British Euroscepticism, Farage has used this interpretation of history during his pro-Leave campaign, detrimentally linking British misfortunes to the European project. This narrative, therefore, enacts another reversal at the core of the Leave discourse: «[t]he moment of greatest triumph - the defeat of the Nazis - can

³⁰For further analysis on the 'minimal impact thesis' and on the reversal colonisation of the Coloniser, see Colley, L., *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, USA, Yale University Press, 1992; Ward, S., *British Culture and the End of the Empire*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2011; Webster, W., *Englishness and Empire 1939-1965*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005.

³¹Peck, T., «If Nigel Farage thinks Britain, not Germany, lost the war and Brexit has 'restored national pride', who does that make him?», *The Independent*, 19 April 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/nigel-farage-brexit-nick-clegg-germany-ww2-britain-passport-anger-management-a8313136.html> (30 June 2018)

be reimagined as the moment of greatest humiliation - defeat by the Nazis»³² considering the EU none other than a prosecution of the Nazi project. As Fintan O'Toole points out,

The imagining of a German-dominated Europe through the evocation of Hitler was not an authentic popular prejudice against an old enemy. It was a way - albeit one that still seemed to have few real-world consequences - of thinking about the European Union itself, of summoning it into being as the ghastly ghost, not just of the Nazis but of the Nazis who had in reality won the war.³³

During the Brexit campaign Boris Johnson, another central figure on the Leave-side, has indeed compared the European dream of a more federal union to 'Hitler's plan', while Michael Gove, another pro-Brexit Conservative politician, has even associated pro-EU experts with Nazi scientists denigrating Albert Einstein's theories for his Jewishness.³⁴ A (maybe involuntary) Nazi reference was also the 'Breaking Point' poster itself, which resembles Nazi propaganda.³⁵ This way of imagining the European Union may seem a «dystopian fantasy», but it is, nonetheless, a deeply-rooted one, as shown by the fact, for instance, that already in 1989

the Bruges Group of anti-European Tories heard Professor Kenneth Minogue of the London School of Economics tell them that 'the European institutions were attempting to create a European Union, in the tradition of the mediaeval popes, Charlemagne, Napoleon, the Kaiser and Adolf Hitler'.³⁶

Episodes of the war were also referred to in order to recall a period characterized by great anxiety and fear of invasion, to which the British had responded with bravery, strength and union. As Robert Eaglestone writes,

[t]he War in memory stands for a time of *national anxiety*: a sense of fear, a moment in which the whole polity itself is in danger, 'all-out-war'. [...] As importantly, the War also stands for *defiance* against the enemy, against the odds, alone, and with that, a kind of *certainly* and *pride*: that 'we' know who 'we' are. This means it has a kind of 'meta' meaning too: if you don't share this feeling, you are not 'one of us' not rooted in the same past. [...] It stands also for *bearing up* to hard times, *keeping calm* and *carrying on* and as a way of overcoming ('Britain can take it!').

All these meanings make the memory of the war a powerful one, and as a matter of fact they were all at play in the Leave campaign, where Brexit was conceived as a way-out from a period marked by economic struggle and mass immigration ('national anxiety'), an act of liberation from the European 'colonial' yoke ('defiance against the enemy'), and a means to

³²O'Toole, F., *op. cit.*, p.30

³³*Ivi.*, pp.39-40.

³⁴Cfr. Johnson, B., Gove, M., cit. in, Rampen, J., «The 4 most unfortunate EU comparison made by Brexiters», *The New Statesman*, 19 January 2017, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/staggers/2017/01/4-most-unfortunate-nazi-eu-comparisons-made-brexiters> (30 June 2018)

³⁵Cfr. Stewart, H., Mason, R., *op. cit.*

³⁶O'Toole, F., *op. cit.*, p.34

recover British greatness (its identity, and therefore people's 'certainty and pride'). According to Brexiteers, leaving the European Union would have had its backlashes, but Britain could endure them and survive to be reborn ('bearing up', 'keeping calm' and 'carry on'). Furthermore, anyone against Brexit was considered by Leave campaigners an enemy of the country and ruled out from the community ('not one of us'). Moreover, drawing a parallel between present day and wartime allowed Brexiteers to exploit the 'invasion' theme not only in relation to the empire, but also to the Second World War, comparing the European migrants to invaders to fight against as the Nazis during the war. The purpose underneath this narrative clearly was to send «[t]he message to voters [...] that the referendum represents a defining moment in British history»³⁷, like the war itself. This register of war and invasion is, actually, nothing new in British politics, if we look at the rhetoric deployed by Conservative Enoch Powell against migration from the colonies and the joining of the European Economic Community, or at former prime minister Margaret Thatcher's speeches during the Falklands war.

As stated previously, the British imperial past was as central as the Second World War in the Leave discourse, since Brexit was partly constructed as an anti-colonial movement of liberation and also «fuelled by fantasies of 'Empire 2.0', a reconstructed global mercantilist trading empire in which the old white colonies will be reconnected to the mother country»³⁸. But the British Empire was also fundamental as a reminder of Britain's former leading role and greatness. 'Put the Great Back in Great Britain', one of the many nationalist slogans by Nigel Farage, is the very expression of the melancholic longing for Britain's glorious past. The appeal to 'make Britain great again' (a slogan first recorded in 1975, the year of another EU referendum)³⁹ was also popular under Thatcherism and even in the 2003 Iraq war. This reiteration of imperial past undoubtedly reveals the country's inability to accept the demise of its empire and deal with its legacy. According to Mondal,

This imperially nostalgic nationalism is the only thing that working class leavers in the post-industrial wastelands of 21st – century Britain and the well-to-do leavers in the leafy Tory shires have in common, and it is rooted in what Raymond Williams calls the “structure of feeling” produced by ideology, in this case the structure of feeling produced by imperial ideologies and imaginaries that have still not fully wound their way through the digestive tracts of the United Kingdom's body politic (William, 1977).⁴⁰

³⁷Buckledee, S., *The Language of Brexit*, Great Britain, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, p.122

³⁸O'Toole, F., *op. cit.*, p.3

³⁹The slogan was used in the 1975 referendum campaign by the National Front, see Strike, K., «Ephemera From The 1975 European Referendum», *Flashbak*, 23 June 2016, <https://flashbak.com/ephemera-from-the-1975-european-referendum-63088/> (30 June 2018)

⁴⁰Mondal, A. A., *op. cit.*, p.85

Quoting Raymond Williams's 'structure of feeling'⁴¹, Mondal refers to the diffuse set of values, perceptions and representations that characterises a people's culture in a certain time. As Robert Eaglestone stresses, «'Structures of feeling' are always 'feeling about' something»⁴² as shared moods and attitudes which *affect* our ideas, as well as actions and emotional reactions. Eaglestone relates Raymond Williams' conceptualisation to contemporary affect theory, which defines 'affect' as «the cultural atmosphere in which our emotions form»⁴³. According to Eaglestone,

Affect is crucial for the political world (as Aristotle realised) because while we are rational and calculative (we use logos), we are not *only* rational and calculative. As Laurent Berlant, one of the most influential affect theorists writes, 'a public's binding to the political is best achieved neither by policy nor ideology but the affect of feeling political together' (Berlant 224). Moods and affects are not fixed but relentlessly moving: events or political leaders can (through cues) shape or change them. Berlant again: our public spheres are 'affect worlds' and are 'constantly negotiated' by our interactions with each other, with the media, with the world (Berlant 226).⁴⁴

Lauren Berlant, quoted by Eaglestone, not only refers to the sociocultural approach⁴⁵, which considers knowledge a product of the interaction between the individual and the world (meaning other people and the context), but also to those theories that see individuals experiencing reality and embracing moral values through the emotional sphere.⁴⁶ Since moods and affects, as Eaglestone stresses, are not fixed, it follows that they can be manipulated. Directing the emotional sphere of the people would mean, therefore, being able to influence their vision of the world. Interestingly, Eaglestone defines collective memory as «one of the most – if not the most – affective social forces»⁴⁷, taking the form of shared memory on which the very existence of the community is based. A collective memory deployed to move the people and influence their vision of the world is, therefore, an affect-memory. Ultimately, when Mondal recognises the persistence of imperial ideologies in Leave discourse, the scholar is pointing exactly at the cunning exploitation of this structure of feeling to obtain people's 'affective support', a definition we will elaborate on when discussing the European Union.

⁴¹For further analysis on Raymond Williams's conceptualisation, see in particular Williams, R., *Culture and Society: 1780-1950*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1959, and Williams, R., *The Long Revolution*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1961

⁴²Eaglestone, «Cruel Nostalgia and the Memory of the Second World War» *cit.*, p.92

⁴³*Ivi*, p.93

⁴⁴*Ivi*, p.92

⁴⁵The reference here is to Lev Vygotsky's theories regarding the sociocultural approach to cognitive development.

⁴⁶See, for instance, Edmund Husserl's theories about the origins of values and the way we interpret reality.

⁴⁷Eaglestone, R., «Cruel Nostalgia and the Memory of the Second World War» *cit.*, p.96

Therefore, referring to glorifying episodes of British history and promising a recovery of greatness, the Leave campaigners, as J.K. Rowling claims, sold Brexit as «the courageous option» that would have led to the restoration of Britain’s glory: «[t]ake a leap of faith, they say. Step off the cliff and let the flag catch you! [...] they swear that everything will be glorious as long as we disregard the experts and listen to them»⁴⁸. The Harry Potter writer, a strenuous Remain supporter, is here criticising Leavers for leveraging on people’s inner emotions, attitudes and desires, neglecting facts and demonising experts. Neglecting facts is part of a strategy focused on affect. As Eaglestone underlines, «[a]ffect-memory does not check evidence, has no rules, no form of argument, no need to be consistent, or to be engineered into a full, explanatory account»⁴⁹: it relies on the power of the emotions it draws in, which does not need factual evidence. The experts are, therefore, prerogative of the counterparty, and their opinions were, indeed, the ingredients of the narrative at the basis of the Remain campaign. As stressed by Evans and Menon,

The ‘Stronger In’ strategy consisted of deploying a barrage of arguments about the economy, delivered by a coterie of national and international experts ranging from the Treasury, to the IMF, to representatives of major corporations, to President Obama.⁵⁰

Many of the contemptuous remarks against experts were, therefore, part of Leave strategy to undermine Remain arguments: for instance, the already quoted association made by Gove between pro-EU experts and Nazi scientists, his famous statement «people have had enough of experts»⁵¹, or Nigel Farage’s affirmation that independent experts could have been paid by the government or the EU⁵². Re-named by Brexiteers ‘Project Fear’, the Remain campaign indeed tried to generate fear for the unknown consequences of a Leave-victory predicting, for instance, that «leaving the EU would result in a £3 rise in the price of a packet of cigarettes» or warning «about the danger of war in Europe»⁵³. Focusing more on the ‘dreadful’ economic consequences of a potential withdrawal than on the worries of ‘the ordinary people’, Remainers left the cultural dimension of the debate in the hands of the Leave-side. As John Lanchester outlines,

[m]aking economic arguments to voters who feel oppressed by economics is risky: they’re quite likely to tell you to go fuck yourself. That in effect is what the electorate

⁴⁸Rowling, J. K., «On Monsters, Villains and the EU Referendum», *J.K. Rowling*, 30 June 2016, <https://www.jkrowling.com/opinions/monsters-villains-eu-referendum/> (30 June 2018)

⁴⁹Eaglestone, R., «Cruel nostalgia and the Memory of the Second World War» *cit.*, p.96

⁵⁰Evans, G., Menon, A., *Brexit and British Politics*, UK & USA, Polity Press, 2017, p.59

⁵¹Mance, H., «Britain has had enough of experts, says Gove», *Financial Times*, 3 June 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c> (30 June 2018)

⁵²*Ibidem*

⁵³Buckledee, S., *op. cit.*, p.113

did to the almost comic cavalcade of sages and bigshots who took the trouble to explain that Brexit would be ruinous folly: Obama, Lagarde, Carney, the IMF, the OECD, the ECB, and every commentator and pundit you can think of. The counter-argument wasn't really an argument but a very clever appeal to emotion, to the idea that the UK could 'Take back control'.⁵⁴

And here, put simply, lies the major difference between the two opposite sides: one tried to appeal to voters' rationality (depicting threatening post-Brexit scenarios), the other exploited the very national narratives of the country and its deep divisions, offering people a vague, but by no means less effective, hope. Consequently, the Brexit vote, more than a vote against Europe, was to a certain extent a way to reassert an image of Britain as a maker of history, and (which matters even more) a way of dealing with its identity crisis.

As we will discuss in more detail further on, talking about identity crisis in Britain is nothing new, insomuch as the issue has been at the forefront of any political or cultural debate since (again) WWII and the dismantlement of the empire. Soon after the war (especially after the 1948 British Nationality Act⁵⁵), Britain experienced an influx of the colonised, a migration that has been defined an *unexpected turn* and a reversal of the colonising process. These migrants, who were praised and celebrated during the war as *sons of empire* at the rescue of their 'mother country', started being stigmatised as a destabilising element intruding in and corrupting the country. The idea of the empire as a 'racial community of Britons' based on whiteness soon prevailed on the 'multiracial' ideal propagated during the war effort, especially after many colonies obtained their independence.⁵⁶ The continuous presence of the Other on the national soil undermined the homogeneous vision of the national community and reinforced 'race' and 'ethnicity' as national identity's criteria. Clearly, this vision of the community marked by whiteness and homogeneity was (and is) in contrast with the actual composition of British population and constantly challenged by the never-ending arrival of new migrants. But it is in this vision of the community that the Brexit discourse finds its roots, with its broadening of 'otherness' to different shades of white.

In order to better define the role that the death of the British Empire played in Britain's emerging identity crisis, some clarifications are necessary given that some scholars talk about a sort of 'collective indifference' in relation to its demise.⁵⁷ Thus, even though the empire was

⁵⁴Lanchester, J., «Brexit Blues», *London Review of Books*, Vol.38, n°15, 28 June 2016, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v38/n15/john-lanchester/brexit-blues> (30 June 2018)

⁵⁵With the *British Nationality Act*, all British subjects became British citizens of the United Kingdom, so that a citizen of a member of the British Commonwealth could move with no restrictions to any territory of the United Kingdom, Great Britain included.

⁵⁶Cfr. Webster, W., *op. cit.*

⁵⁷For instance, David Cannadine and Kenneth Morgan, both cited in Stuart Ward, *op. cit.*

a collective enterprise aimed at unifying (as a kind of ‘bonding activity’) the British Isles, the ones affected (or affected the most) by its dismantlement were certainly the English. While for the others (particularly the Scottish and Irish) the British Empire represented a way to escape racism and oppression by moving towards social liberation, for the English the imperial enterprise was more a means towards meaning and identity. Being the major ethnic group, the English, who avoided nationalistic celebrations in order to keep the kingdom together, nonetheless poured typical English traits into the definition of a unifying British identity (Britishness). Consequently, the dismantlement of the empire left the English not only without a ‘mission’ to rely on (the infamous *white man’s burden*), but also without a sense of themselves, caused by both the subsequent Britishness’ crisis and the undefined status of Englishness. The disruption of the empire also weakened ancient loyalties among British ‘peoples’ and the perception of a wider British community, giving rise to national revivals, demands for more autonomy and threats of secessions, both overseas and in the ‘mother country’. The devolution process of 1997, which granted devolved powers to Scottish, Irish and Welsh parliaments, is a product of these national revivals and could only increase the English perception of a loss in power and political representation. In the end, this diffuse feeling of loss, which has grown in (and marked) the last decades, is responsible for a search for identity addressed not to the future, but to nostalgic visions of the country.

Unsurprisingly, to be needed and effective, the kind of hope Brexiteers have offered as a response to present grievances must be seeded in a land turned towards nostalgia, since it feeds off cultural memories rather than futuristic visions. This is claimed also by Eaglestone, who defines Brexit a case of *cruel nostalgia*. The expression refers to Berlant’s influential work *Cruel Optimism*, where the scholar argues that optimism becomes cruel when it is directed to an object of desire that is damaging you. According to Eaglestone,

Brexit is – nearly – a very good example of ‘cruel optimism’. The ‘cues’ given by the Leave campaigns and by the Brexiteers in Theresa May’s government suggest broad sunlit uplands after the UK leaves the EU (£350 million for the NHS; world trade; ‘taking back control’): the reality already looks materially grim. (But the benefits of Brexit are often not seen as material; a YouGov poll, 1 August 2017, found that “Six in Ten Leave voters and a third of Remain voters say significant damage to the economy would be a price worth paying to get their way on Brexit”.) However, Brexit offers one crucial difference from the more American ‘structure of feeling’ Berlant analyses. Most affect theory deals with the present or (as in the case of cruel optimism) a focus on the future which ignores the detrimental effects in the present: but Brexit focusses on the past. Not cruel optimism, but *cruel nostalgia*.⁵⁸

⁵⁸Eaglestone, R., «Cruel Nostalgia and the Memory of the Second World War» *cit.*, pp.95-96

Brexit would, then, seem an example of ‘cruel optimism’, given Brexiteers’ representation of a bright future outside the EU despite experts’ analyses. Except that their goal is not that representation of the future, but a recovery of the past. In Britain’s case, nostalgia is not new (as anticipated talking about identity crisis), but rather characterised by the combination of a preceding nostalgic attitude with new tendencies. In a world that is speeding too fast, in which communities are more and more multicultural, multinational, multilingual and interconnected, nostalgia is indeed a growing global trend, to be considered both a «defence mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals»⁵⁹ as well as a yearning to belong. As Svetlana Boym writes, nostalgia represents «a utopian dimension» seeking to forget the present and its insurmountable problems but «no longer directed toward the future»⁶⁰, perceived as the source of new failures and miseries. For this reason, the utopian dimension is attributed to the past, which can be interpreted according to contemporary desires. As Zygmunt Bauman stresses, commenting on the ‘Angel of History’ drawn by Paul Klee and analysed by Walter Benjamin,

[i]t is now the future, whose time to be pillorized seems to have arrived after being first decried for its untrustworthiness and unmanageability, that is booked on the debit side. And it is now the past’s turn to be booked on the side of credit – a credit deserved (whether genuinely or putatively) by a site of still-free choice and investment of still-undiscredited hope.⁶¹

Since the past is considered stable and trustworthy, it is, therefore, to this past that expectations are now attached. Boym’s definition of nostalgia is, not by chance, complementary to that of Bauman’s ‘retrotopias’, described as «visions located in the lost/stolen/abandoned but undead past, instead of being tied to the not-yet-unborn and so inexistent future»⁶². As Samuel Earle acknowledges,

[f]aced with a neoliberal, globalised future that presents itself as non-negotiable, our only strategy seems to be to turn towards the past. Wages stagnate, home ownership plummets, pensions diminish and debt proliferates. So we retreat into safe, warm waters. Feelings of meaninglessness are escaped by memories that give meaning; the discontinuity between past and present is dissolved by re-packaging the past; and the ideal of political revolution is replaced by the alternative meaning of that word: turning in a circle.⁶³

In this age characterised by the divide between poor and rich, the deterritorialization of cultures and the triumph of individualism over concepts such as community and solidarity,

⁵⁹Boym, S., *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic Books, 2001, p.xiv

⁶⁰*Ibidem*

⁶¹Bauman, Z., *Retrotopia*, UK & USA, Polity Press, 2017, p.2

⁶²*Ivi*, p.5

⁶³Earle, S., *op. cit.*

Earle outlines the role of escape the past plays, offering secure meaning and means of identification. In fact, nowadays,

[n]o one feels like society is ‘theirs.’ Young people feel forgotten. The elderly feel isolated, pushed into care homes and cut off from society. Alienated by racism and a hostile political discourse, people of colour feel ignored. Alarmed by political correctness ‘gone mad’ as they see it, racists feel under threat.⁶⁴

Claiming that «[n]o one feels like society is ‘theirs’» means, ultimately, that nobody feels at home. Everyone feels displaced, surrounded by the unfamiliar, forced into a condition of eternal uncertainty. Feelings that could easily be associated with the migrant condition, which is, as Salman Rushdie outlines, a displacement both in space and time:

An old photograph in a cheap frame hangs on a wall of the room where I work. It’s a picture dating from 1946 of a house into which, at the time of its taking, I had not yet been born. The house is rather peculiar – a three-storeyed gabled affair with tiled roofs and round towers in two corners, each wearing a pointy tiled hat. ‘The past is a foreign country,’ goes the famous opening sentence of L. P. Hartley’s novel *The Go-Between*, ‘they do things differently there.’ But the photograph tells me to invert this idea; it reminds me that it’s my present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time.⁶⁵

Talking about a picture representing the family house in India, Rushdie ponders the famous quotation by L.P. Hartley’s novel *The Go Between* (1953), ‘the past is a foreign country, they do things differently there’, acknowledging how the sentence could be inverted to describe the reversal migrants experience: for them, the past represents familiarity and certainty, while the present is unknown and embodies everything foreign and incomprehensible. Similarly, nowadays, people look at the past as their home, opposed to a present reality perceived as so alien that could be defined a ‘foreign country’ on its own. Nostalgia is, therefore, a «mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility»⁶⁶ as well as the other half of the very condition of our age: alienation.

However, nostalgia in itself can do no harm, especially when it is a reflective kind of nostalgia which aims at thinking over the past and its irrevocability. It becomes dangerous only when ideas of the past «fertilize the idea of the present»⁶⁷: when it becomes a restorative nostalgia blended with projects of restoration. As Samuel Earle acknowledges, «Brexit and its nostalgic outpouring is part of a broader phenomenon that extends well beyond Britain»⁶⁸. Donald Trump’s ‘Make America Great Again’, Marine Le Pen’s desire to recall France’s

⁶⁴*Ibidem*

⁶⁵Rushdie, S., *Imaginary Homelands*, London, Granta & Penguin Books 1992, p.9

⁶⁶Boym, S., *op. cit.*, p.xvi

⁶⁷Rushdie, S., *op. cit.*, p.145

⁶⁸*Ibidem*

glorious past and Alternative für Deutschland's slogan 'Dare it, Germany' are all, ultimately, projects of restoration, which seek to re-establish borders, celebrate a proud nationalism, define an exclusive national identity and reaffirm a homogeneous idea of society. In short, they wish to go back in time, reinstating a past-time line that has been subjected to a rupture and recovering the imaginary homeland that their nostalgic vision depicts. This imaginary homeland is none other than one among many, and the one that suits better the purpose. 'Imaginary homeland', which refers to Salman Rushdie's essay *Imaginary Homelands* quoted above, is a definition that well describes the imaginary character and potential of the nation. From Benedict Anderson's conceptualisation, the nation always is an 'imagined community', since there is no direct contact with each and every member, and given that it is a social construct – an idea that people identify with and which will come to shape their collective identity.⁶⁹ To make the idea of the nation concrete, a narrative of identity needs to be created and deployed. This national narrative is composed by definite traits of the community, myths of origin, glorifying versions of history and invented traditions. In the end, a project of restoration is, therefore, a rejection of the present that is deeply rooted in a country's national narrative. But the past we return to «when dreaming our nostalgic dreams», as Bauman stresses, «is not the past 'as such' – not the past 'wie es ist eigentlich gewesen' ('as it genuinely was')»⁷⁰ but always an interpretation.

A country suffering from nostalgia and seeking to retreat into the past inevitably ends up rejecting difference. And this explains why the second enemy identified by the Leave campaign after Europe was represented by the immigrants. Whether coming from Europe or not, immigrants interfere with the nostalgic idyll. As Bauman outlines,

[a] neighbourhood filled by strangers is a visible, tangible sign of certainties evaporating, and the prospects of life – as well as the fate of pursuit of them – drifting out of control. Strangers stand for everything evasive, feeble, unstable and unforeseeable in life that poisons the daily bustle with premonitions of our own impotence and the sleepless nights filled with nightmarish forebodings.⁷¹

As anticipated before, strangers (foreigners, immigrants) challenge the homogeneity of the 'imagined community' and the idea of identity (collective and individual) as something stable and immutable. Therefore, restorative nostalgia ends up triggering the return to tribalism, which redraws the distinction between 'us' and "them", the 'native' and the 'foreigner', at the

⁶⁹Cfr. Anderson, B., *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London & New York, Verso, 1991

⁷⁰Bauman, Z., *op. cit.*, p.10

⁷¹Ivi, p.60

basis of how national identities are still conceived. In fact, identifying with an idea of the nation constituted by certain traits and characteristics implies the identification of an ‘Other’: one who embodies all of those attributes the nation seeks to reject. The identified ‘Other’, labelled as inferior and bridled in a web of stereotypes and simplifications, is placed in opposition to, and excluded from, the community in question. If the ultimate purpose of a tribe is, as Bruce Rosenblit argues, «to determine whom to support and whom to kill»⁷², it follows that the ultimate purpose of tribalism in contemporary societies is to determine who belongs to what and, based on that belonging, who *deserves* what: jobs, benefits, NHS coverage, asylum. In the Brexit case, this opposition between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ poor, which finds its roots in the Victorian age and is strongly linked to imperial hierarchies, inevitably increased hatred towards immigrants and exacerbated Britain’s own class divisions. As Zadie Smith writes,

[o]ne useful consequence of Brexit is to finally and openly reveal a deep fracture in British society that has been thirty years in the making. The gaps between north and south, between the social classes, between Londoners and everyone else, between rich Londoners and poor Londoners, and between white and brown and black are real and need to be confronted by all of us, not only those who voted Leave.⁷³

Social classes have always been fundamental in reinforcing the dichotomy that sees ‘us’ versus ‘them’ and in shaping British lives and society. Examples of this include the status still held by the monarchy (the royal family is considered at the top of the social class structure) and the division of the Parliament into two chambers, the House of Lords (representing the upper-class) and the House of Commons (representing the other classes), with the House of Lords’ members outnumbering those of the other chamber. Even though some have tried to disregard class (Margaret Thatcher dismissed the concept of class, labelling it a Communist concept), while others have tried to overcome class divisions (John Major talked about creating a classless society)⁷⁴, Britain still appears obsessed by this social categorisation, as the BBC’s idea of the ‘social class calculator’ shows. Launched in 2013 to evaluate the modern class system, the social class calculator’s findings pushed the sociologists teaming up with the BBC to declare the three-class system out of date and to theorise a new seven-class model. This model is divided into elite, established middle class, technical middle class, new affluent workers, traditional working class, emergent service workers and precariat.⁷⁵ The elites would appear to be

⁷²Rosenblit, B., *US Against Them: How Tribalism Affects the Way We Think*, Transcendent Publications 2008, pp.74-75, cit. in Bauman, Z., *op. cit.*, p.50

⁷³Smith, Z., *op. cit.*

⁷⁴Cfr. Cannadine, D., *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain*, Columbia University Press, 1998

⁷⁵Sociologist Mike Savage published the results of the BBC’s *Great Britain Class Survey* in his work *Social Class in the 21st Century*, UK, Penguin Books, 2015

concentrated in London and the South-East of England, which are the richest area of the UK, the most represented, and those often used to symbolise the country as a whole.⁷⁶

Further evidence suggests that class identity is still essential for understanding British phenomena and *in primis* Brexit. For instance, the connection between elites and the South-East reappears in Evans and Menon, when they outline that most people did not believe pro-Remain politicians were «necessarily» lying, but that they were «describing a reality from another planet (the prosperous South-East)»⁷⁷ in contrast to that of those areas suffocated by the economic crisis. Analyses published so far have also acknowledged that those who identify as working class were more likely to be opposed to immigration and, for this reason, to vote Leave. As reported by Evans and Menon,

Some 63% of the working class voted to Leave, compared with only 44% of the middle class. Even when the effects of age, region, race, religion, gender and housing are taken into account, there was still a ten-percentage point gap between the working class and the professional middle class. [...]

The gulf between the working class, and particularly the less highly educated, and other social groups when it comes to immigration is even greater than that over the traditional core issues of politics - inequality and redistribution.⁷⁸

Therefore, it is not surprising that the Leave vote has been stronger in those areas defined as working-class heartlands. In addition, Evans and Menon have also stressed that «[a]reas characterized as ‘white British working class’ were those more likely to leave the EU»⁷⁹. This is strictly related to Robbie Shilliam’s thesis⁸⁰, which claims that class has returned to public discourse in the form of a very racialised concept. As anticipated before, the white working class is more and more considering itself in need of protection from the competition represented by migrant workers. According to Shilliam, the white working class identifies with the idea of a native tribe and seeks to re-stress a racialised distinction between deserving and undeserving poor, whose roots are to be found in the division of labour over the British Empire. The connection between imperial hierarchies and the British class system is shown by the fact that the same characteristics assigned to the colonised were soon used in the mother country to define the lower strata of society. In Shilliam’s interpretation, the archetype of the underserving poor is the black slave, whose blackness (in opposition to whiteness) determined his/her

⁷⁶For further analysis on the matter, see Gardiner, M., *The Return of England in English Literature*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012

⁷⁷Evans, G., Menon, A., *op. cit.*, p.62

⁷⁸*Ivi*, p.83

⁷⁹*Ibidem*

⁸⁰Cfr. Shilliam, R., *The Deserving Poor: Colonial Genealogies from Abolition to Brexit*, Annual Lecture, Seminars 2017/2018, University of Portsmouth, 10 January 2018.

‘undeservingness’. The racialised distinction between white Anglo-Saxons and non-white subjects, undermined by the 1948 British Nationality Act, was indeed maintained in the labour discourse, with people of colour expected to get low wages and worse job conditions. As stressed by Paul Gilroy,

[t]he arrival of these incomers, even when they were protected by their tenure of formal citizenship, was [...] an act of invasive warfare. That structure of feeling governs the continuing antipathy towards all would-be settlers. Later groups of immigrants may not, of course, be connected with the history of empire and colony in any way whatsoever. However, they experience the misfortune of being caught up in a pattern of hostility and conflict that belongs emphatically to its lingering aftermath. Once they recognize the salience of racial categories to their perilous predicament, it should not be surprising if these people try to follow the well-trodden path pioneered by the most vulnerable and marginal members of the host community. They too will seek salvation by trying to embrace and inflate the ebbing privileges of whiteness. That racialized identification is presumably the best way to prove they are not really immigrants at all but somehow already belong to the home-space in ways that the black and brown people against whom they have to compete in the labour market will never be recognized as doing.⁸¹

But whiteness no longer guarantees protection from the category of ‘undeserving immigrant’ nor does it ensure that one will be able to integrate successfully or improve socially. Nowadays, the British white working class aims to extend the ‘undeserving’ category to different shades of white, viewing Anglo-Saxon whiteness as being distinct from and superior to the other shades. This is not so different from the category of ‘genetic diversity’ at the core of British National Party(BNP)’s discourse.⁸² Paradoxically, as John Holmood explains, the idea that migrant workers would deserve low wages and worse job conditions is what «draws in unskilled migrant workers, at the same time as it commits the UK to a low-productivity, low-investment economy»⁸³. Nonetheless, whiteness is central both to England’s national revival and to Brexit.

However, the working class could not be the one and only maker of Brexit. As Evans and Menon again stress,

[g]iven the relatively reduced size of the modern-day working class, substantial numbers of the middle classes had to vote Leave to ensure a result in favour of Brexit. The BES shows that the proportion of Leave voters doing routine and semi-routine jobs – the core of the working class – was only 21%. In contrast, the proportion of Leave voters from lower professional jobs alone was 27%, intermediate administrative posts and the like made up 23%, employers and the self-employed 11%. It was the often highly educated middle classes that provided the major source – some 59% in total – of the Brexit vote.⁸⁴

⁸¹Gilroy, P., *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture*, UK, Routledge, 2004, pp.110-111

⁸²Cfr. MacKlin, G., «All White on the Right», in Perryman, M. (ed.), *Imagined Nations: England After Britain*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 2008, pp.63-75

⁸³Holmood, J., «Exit from the Perspective of Entry», in Outhwaite, W. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.38

It derives that the major core of the Leave vote was composed by working class, by those who identify with working class' struggles even despite social advancement (a research by NatCen's Survey Centre has outlined that people «who sees society as divided between a large disadvantaged group and a small privileged elite 'feels more working class regardless of their actual class position'»⁸⁴), and also (in 'substantial numbers') by the middle classes, perceiving their lifestyles, income, social position and values in danger. No surprise, then, that the perceived clash between elites and 'the ordinary people', immigration and 'regaining control' have been very prominent issues in the Brexit campaign.

Based on what has been said so far, it is clear that «the seeds of Britain's decision were sown over a far longer period»⁸⁵ and that behind Brexit there is more at stake than simple membership in the European Union. Blended with the economic and political was one fundamental national concern: what does it mean to be British? This explains why reactions were so conflicting, the results so disarming and divisive, the difference among the amount of Yes and No votes so slight.⁸⁶ This also explains the conspicuous number of articles, interviews and studies that have been released in the immediate aftermath of the referendum. Among these, the first extended cultural responses to the actual vote have come from literature. Novels such as *Autumn* (2016) by Ali Smith, *The Cut* (2016) by Anthony Cartwright and *The Lie of the Land* (2017) by Amanda Craig, are only a few of the literary works that have already tackled Brexit, engaging with the themes at the core of the referendum and with the divisions it has disclosed. In particular, contemporary fictions that could be categorised as such have already been tagged 'BrexLit', a compound noun for Brexit and literature. According to Kristan Shaw,

[r]ather than engaging with the larger realities of European life, the first wave of post-Brexit fiction largely seems to be detailing the specific frailties and parochial trivialities of an insular and diminished small island – updated forms of state-of-the-nation novels that retain a narrow focus on British society and its isolation from the continent.⁸⁷

The fact that contemporary works targeting Brexit are not focusing on Europe or drawing a European framework, but depicting, instead, 'frailties' and 'parochial trivialities' of British narrow reality, would be another indicator of the connection between the referendum

⁸⁴Evans, G., Mellon, J., «Social Class. Identity, awareness and political attitudes: why are we still working class?», *NatCen Social Research*, http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39094/bsa33_social-class_v5.pdf (30 June 2018)

⁸⁵Evans, G., Menon, A., *op. cit.*, p.xiv

⁸⁶For the referendum results according to geography, see «Brexit. EU referendum results», *Financial Times*, 24 June 2016, <https://ig.ft.com/sites/elections/2016/uk/eu-referendum/> (30 June 2018)

⁸⁷ Shaw, K., «BrexLit», in Eaglestone, R. (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp.27-28

and British peculiarities. Furthermore, this ‘small island’ on which Brexit fictions are focused happens to be not Britain, but that big part of the country that is usually confused with it: England. All Brexit novels published till now are, without exclusion, set in England, which is, actually, the very Brexit nation of the United Kingdom. In fact, as the data shortly after the referendum results have shown, the small majority that has voted for Brexit is to be found in England («Wales, lacking any significant independent economy, did stick with England against Europe but brought a tiny number of votes»⁸⁸). This means that, of the four nations constituting the United Kingdom, only one was fiercely on the Leave-side. This England that mostly «voted against membership of the EU is the England of vanished industry in the North, rural poverty in the Southwest, and people clinging to middle-class lifestyles in the suburbs of once great cities that feel increasingly alien to them».⁸⁹ And even in England alone the vote was highly diversified, with the countryside pro-Leave and London pro-Remain, with the youth population voting for EU membership and the elderly voting against and with education as another powerful dividing factor.⁹⁰

England appears, therefore, to be the very main character of this ‘Brexit dream’, and this could not have been more expected. England, as we have said before, is the one that has been associated the most with identity issues and national revival, particularly after the devolution process and the birth of the so-called ‘English question’. Summing up, using Hassan’s words,

[t]here is a feeling of extrinsic events having an impact on England; there are the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish factors; there is the European dimension and the unfolding crisis of the euro; there is the impact of globalization and immigration; and there is the absence of the British Empire and the question of what comes after it. There is also a direct relationship between the systemic inequality across the UK and the increasing economic, social and political dominance of a selected part of England – London and the south-east. The UK is the fourth most unequal society in the developed world and according to Danny Dorling, on existing trends, may well become the most unequal – with London possibly becoming the most unequal city.⁹¹

Consequently, it should not be surprising that the major tendencies underneath Brexit (nostalgia, alienation, tribalism, the multiple divisions characterizing British contemporary society) were also at the very core of many contemporary novels written in the last decades

⁸⁸Calhoun, C., «Nationalism, Populism and Brexit» *cit.*, p.57

⁸⁹*Ibidem*

⁹⁰For tables on the vote results, see Moore, P., «How Britain Voted», *You Gov*, 27 June 2016, <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2016/06/27/how-britain-voted/> (28 June 2018)

⁹¹Hassan, G., «The Future of ‘the Global Kingdom’: Post-Unionism, Post-Nationalism and the Politics of Voice, Loyalty and Exit», in Westall C., Gardiner, M. (eds), *Literature of an Independent England: Revision of England, Englishness, and English Literature*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2013, p.35

precisely in the wake of such events as the devolution process, the European enlargement, the economic crash, as well as other global challenges ‘impacting on’ the country, such as the refugee crisis and the thread of Islamic terrorism.

These themes are central in novels that specifically focus on the immigrant perspective, as well as in the so-called ‘state of the nation novels’ or ‘Condition of England novels’. These novels usually seek to depict contemporary British (or rather English) society, challenging nostalgic and exclusive conceptions of national identity, and dealing with the most pressing issues: inequality, racism, the divide between the country and the city, the clash between ordinary people and the elites, the fragility of the United Kingdom itself. Again unsurprisingly, most of them refer in many ways to both war and imperial narrative. To name but a few, we are talking about novels such as *England, England* (1998) by Julian Barnes, *Speak for England* (2005) by James Hawes, *Divided Kingdom* (2005) by Rupert Thomson, *The White Family* (2002) by Maggie Gee, *Kingdom Come* (2006) by J.G. Ballard, *Small Island* (2004) by Andrea Levy, *The Road Home* (2007) by Rose Tremain, *Mr Rosenblum’s List* (2010) by Natasha Solomons, *A Week in December* (2009) by Sebastian Faulks, or more recently *The Casual Vacancy* (2012) by J.K. Rowling, *Capital* (2012) by John Lanchester, *Expo 58* (2013) and *Number 11* (2015) by Jonathan Coe, *Serious Sweet* (2016) by A. L. Kennedy, and many others.

In the end, it is on these very themes, national identity, nostalgia and tribalism that this study will focus, looking at contemporary fiction in relation to the Brexit campaign and Englishness and seeking to analyse thematic developments from pre-Brexit to post-Brexit novels. In the light of the above, it is evident that analysing contemporary fictions, both pre- and post-Brexit, could provide us with the opportunity of grasping the multiple meanings of the referendum, getting a better understanding of contemporary society, and, ultimately, considering the impact of the referendum on literature itself. As Salman Rushdie argues, re-proposing the metaphor linked to the biblical story of *Jonah and the Whale* previously used by George Orwell⁹²,

there is no whale. We live in a world without hiding places: the missiles have made sure of that. However much we may wish to return to the womb, we cannot be unborn. [...] What I am saying is that politics and literature, like sports and politics, do mix, are inextricably mixed, and that that mixture has consequences.⁹³

No author writes in a vacuum, without being influenced by the events of his time, by cultural biases or by his own political ideas. For this very reason, literature often represents a

⁹²The reference here is to Orwell, G., *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1940

⁹³Rushdie, S., *op. cit.*, pp.99-100

window on the reality it refers to. As Jago Morrison claims, literature «needs to be read as a product of the cultural conditions from which it emerges»⁹⁴ and, therefore, could be used as a field of analysis for culture and society. This is the case especially in Britain, where writers have been defined as the very first sociologists of the country. As Krishan Kumar underlines, «both literature and history were in England deeply involved with social and political issues» so that «they could in certain respects stand for a peculiarly English sociology – sociology by another name, perhaps, or sociology by stealth, or ‘implicit sociology’»⁹⁵. This idea of literature as an ‘implicit’ or «concealed sociology»⁹⁶ is repeated again by Kumar just a few pages further on, when he links the delay of the rise of English sociology to the very sociological approach of English literature: «the fact was that for the English their poets, novelists, and literary critics seemed to be doing a more than adequate job of analysis and criticism of the novel problems of nineteenth-century industrial society»⁹⁷, and this especially in the form of the novel, if one only thinks of writers such as Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy or Elizabeth Gaskell.

Moreover, it is important to recall that the English novel, and the representations of culture and character contained therein, has had a clear role in the construction of English national identity. As Patrick Parrinder outlines,

[f]irst of all, the nature of national identity and of its now rather unfashionable counterpart ‘national character has been consistently debated by English novelists across the centuries. Secondly, novels are the source of some of our most influential ideas and expressions of national identity. Works of art which are enjoyed and appreciated by subsequent generations play a key part in the transmission and dissemination of national images, memoirs, and myths. Thirdly, the fictional tradition adds a largely untapped body of evidence to historical enquiry into the origins and development of our inherited ideas about England and Englishness.⁹⁸

Thus, the novel has been a powerful mean for the creation and preservation of a national consciousness (returning to Anderson’s ‘imagined community’) from the beginning, and especially, as Parrinder outlines, in Britain, where the rise of this literary form is not by chance linked to the development of the British Empire. Moreover, not only has the novel been strictly entangled with national identity, but it has always been a privileged recipient of criticism and

⁹⁴Morrison, J., *Contemporary fiction*, London, Routledge, 2003, p.7, cit. in Bentley, N., Hubble, N., Wilson, L. (eds.), *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*, London, Bloomsbury Academy, 2015, p.28

⁹⁵Kumar, K., *The Idea of Englishness: English Culture, National Identity and Social Thought*, Farham, Surrey Ashgate, 2015, p.168

⁹⁶Cfr. Lepenies, W. (*Die Drei Kulturen* 1985), *Between Literature and Science: The Rise of Sociology*, Cambridge University Press, 1988, cit. in Kumar, K., *op. cit.*, p.184

⁹⁷Ivi, p.183

⁹⁸Parrinder, P., *Nation & Novel. The English Novel from its Origins to Present Day* (2006), New York, Oxford University Press, 2008, p.6

rewritings of the national narrative. The novel is therefore clearly a valuable tool for outlining the cultural and political considerations which shape British national identity

In conclusion, as we have said before, Brexit is a political outcome related to the European Union, but deeply intertwined with contemporary politics, economic issues, global tendencies, as well as with British Euroscepticism, history, culture and divisions. Therefore, an analysis which focuses on themes related to the referendum, albeit a literary study on contemporary fiction, would not be reliable and complete without giving, first, a brief account of the interconnection of these factors. Summarising what has been said before, the Brexit vote should be analysed starting from the conjunction of three phenomena, respectively of global, European and British reach: disillusionment with and alienation from mainstream political parties, leaders, and institutions; disillusionment with and alienation from the structures, practices and actors of the European Union and EU membership having never been considered a positive condition.⁹⁹ To this, we should add as a further factor British (English) unresolved identity issues.

⁹⁹Cfr. Susen, S., «No Exit From Brexit?», in Outhwaite, W. (ed.), *op. cit.*

Behind Brexit: Cultural and Political Framework

Brexit from a global perspective: the rise of nationalist and populist parties

Dissatisfaction with politics and the idea that traditional parties and their leaders are tricking the so-called ‘ordinary people’ is not something either strictly British or European, as was proven by Donald Trump’s victory at the American presidential elections in 2016. This phenomenon corresponds exactly to what Antonio Gramsci described as an *organic crisis*, meaning a loss of political hegemony by governing elites, which is caused by many citizens lacking trust in traditional parties and turning to what they perceive as anti-regime alternatives.¹⁰⁰ In terms of the present day, the so called ‘left behind’, which is to say the underemployed and the unemployed, would be the main characters of this ‘revolt’, scared by integration and mass immigration. Also named ‘rust-belt voters’ and usually identified as demographic with ‘the white working class’, the left behind would be those who express the most «a sentimental preference for the way things were», prevalent in «those non-metropolitan areas associated with industrial decline, diminishing economic opportunity and scepticism towards civic values»¹⁰¹. The loss of trust in traditional parties and leaders would be, therefore, directly connected to the multiple changes that have characterized the last decades and strongly affected contemporary societies. In fact, in this post-industrial era marked by globalization and transnational mobilities, the erosion of forms of employment labelled as ‘secure’, economic crises, inequality, the dismantlement of welfare systems, populations appear to be more than ever divided between poor and rich, powerless and empowered, the so-called winners and losers of globalization. This division between powerless and empowered people would have been fundamental in the Brexit case, where globalization was associated with the political processes of European integration. This was also Theresa May’s interpretation of the vote, considering that, after taking up the post as prime minister, she declared the Conservative Party ready to «stand up for the weak», «restore fairness» and work for those people «just about managing»¹⁰². Brexit, indeed, has been defined as a «manifestation of the disequilibrium of power and a cry of protest against it»¹⁰³, a disequilibrium that has grown deeper after the turn to neoliberalism, a turn, both in the UK and USA, that many European countries have followed suit, relying heavily on neoliberalist policies after the 2008 economic crisis. Paradoxically, neoliberalism’s

¹⁰⁰Cfr. Gramsci, A., *Quaderni dal carcere*, Einaudi Editore, 1975

¹⁰¹Kenny, M., «Back to the populist future?: understanding nostalgia in contemporary ideological discourse», *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 22, NO. 3, 2017, pp.256-273, p. 257

¹⁰²May, T., cit. in Evans, G., Menon, A., *op. cit.*, p.99

¹⁰³ Hearn J., «Vox Populi: Nationalism, Globalization and the Balance of Power in the Making of Brexit», in Outhwaite, W. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.26

consequences are none other than more deregulation and less social protection, which, instead of helping those more affected by the crash, have contributed to further impoverishment of the lower strata of society. This link between neoliberalism, dissatisfaction with politics and turn to populist and nationalist parties, has been well-explained by Craig Calhoun, who has stressed that:

[t]his is not a uniquely English set of frustrations and wishful thinking or political responses. Populism and nationalism are prominent around the world partly because since the 1970s inequality has grown sharply and the middle and working classes of once-prosperous countries have seen living standards stagnate and economic security disappear. At the same time, migration has increased globally – largely because of globalization itself as well as wars Western countries like the United States and the United Kingdom chose to fight in the Middle East. And the world quite simply looks scary. Nationalism flourishes precisely when people feel threatened by international forces. Populism flourishes when people feel betrayed by elites.¹⁰⁴

Leave voters seem to be governed exactly by these two key feelings: a general fear of the world outside of Britain and a distrust of the elites who govern their lives. This naturally leads to a desire to ‘take back control’, both of one’s own life and of the country itself.

A slogan particularly dear to Nigel Farage, ‘take back control’ gives the idea of something that has been lost, or stolen, and should be reclaimed *back*. In the case of Brexit, this reclaiming mostly regards, at a superficial level, regaining control of borders, lands, laws, from the interference of the EU, and, in doing so, giving back sovereignty to the nation. But the desire for reclamation refers to more than that: ultimately, it comes from the feeling that one’s own life is out of control and to the perception that the future is not going to bring anything good. It stems from the desire to return to a *safer*, and indeed more isolated, way of life, one which is perceived as being more manageable. Nowadays, issues such as terrorism or global warming require cooperation and supranational decision-making, while advance in the sectors of technology, communications and transport have created a world that simply seems to have no barriers, walls or borders able to keep the ‘Other’ out. As Eva Aldea stresses,

[s]tudies have shown how perceived lack of control over one’s life and surroundings correlates with more conservative attitudes and even ethnocentrism (Agroskin, 2010). Clearly economic situation, individual and communal, as well as education are central to a sense of control.¹⁰⁵

Turning to conservatism and ethnocentrism would be, therefore, an attempt to protect one’s self from the threat of growing immigration, which is perceived as the most significant

¹⁰⁴Calhoun C., «Nationalism, Populism and Brexit» *cit*, p.63

¹⁰⁵Aldea, E., «The Lost Nomad of Europe», in Eaglestone, R., *op. cit.*, p.156

risk to economic and national insecurity. Since both economic situation and education are factors commonly central to one's feeling of control, those that are more afflicted by the feeling of things slipping through their fingers tend to be the less educated: people that travel less and, consequently, have fewer opportunities for experiencing a positive encounter with the Other, as well as less job security following the arrival of migrant workers. This 'educational gradient', claimed by Labour MP Barry Sheerman commenting on Brexit, has been supported by a few research studies¹⁰⁶ as well as YouGov data¹⁰⁷. Evans and Menon, in particular, assert that

[n]o fewer than 72% of those with no educational qualifications voted to Leave, compared with only 35% of people with a university degree. There was a remarkable 30 percentage point gap between those with low versus those with high levels of education even when all other factors were taken into account.¹⁰⁸

However, not all the experts agree on education's impact and interpretation: age, access to education, specifics of the geographical area are only a few of the variables jeopardising this indicator. Focusing on age, for instance, it is interesting to note that «over 40% of the Leave vote was aged over 55»¹⁰⁹. The elderly, who are less likely to live in urban areas and have a university degree, seem to require the addition of another label next to the 'left behind' one: that of 'left out', «people whose views are out of step with dominant liberal political values»¹¹⁰ and do feel betrayed by traditional mainstream parties, which embrace, today, the same set of liberal values.

The presence of migrants on the national territory is an issue not only for the competitive force they represent, but also because they are the personification of everything labelled as 'alien', threatening the reassuring homogeneity of the community. Their presence is, indeed, another factor activating the fear of loss: the loss of the very cultural and ethnic identity of the community. From this perspective, nationalism and populism appear to these individuals, who do feel threatened, betrayed and abandoned, as the last defence against a reality they do not know how to cope with, and against political and cultural elites that, more often than not, demeaned their fears, desires and opinions. Nationalism, as Craig Calhoun acknowledges, is often «denigrated by proponents of transnational society who see the national and many other

¹⁰⁶See, for instance, Goodwin, M., Heath, O., «Brexit vote explained: poverty, low skills and lack of opportunities», *Joseph Rowntree Foundation*, 31 August 2016, <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/brexit-vote-explained-poverty-low-skills-and-lack-opportunities> (30 June 2018)

¹⁰⁷Weaver, M., «Facts support MP's claim that better-educated voted remain – pollster», *The Guardian*, 30 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/oct/30/facts-support-mps-claim-that-better-educated-voted-remain-pollster> (30 June 2018)

¹⁰⁸Evans, G., Menon, A., *op. cit.* p.84

¹⁰⁹*Ibidem*

¹¹⁰*Ibidem*

local solidarities as backward or outmoded, impositions of the past on the present».¹¹¹ What these cultural elites do not recognize is that nationalism is still fundamental in building collective identities and solidarities. As Shaw notes talking about the Brexit results,

[f]or many undecided voters it was difficult to perceive the benefits of a vague supranational identity when their national identity was much more tangible and intrinsically tied to their cultural memory and day-to-day lives. Such cosmopolitan citizenship seemed to be the purview of privileged elites alone.¹¹²

While Shaw sees European identity as something vague, not as visceral as the national one, he also argues that cosmopolitanism — as an ideology based on the vision of a single world community with shared ideals — seems to be a prerogative of the elites. This is the exact ideology that Theresa May, in a bold attempt at currying the so-called ordinary people's support (and that of the most nationalist members of her own party), has sharply criticized in the post-Brexit speech she delivered at the Tory party conference in 2016, saying that «if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere».¹¹³ As far as this statement is open to criticism, referring to new conceptions of citizenship and collective identities, it certainly conveys an understanding of what nationalism is about. Nationalism, basically, is the emotional attachment that permits the very existence of nations as social constructs. It is the recognition of being part of a community of individuals, sharing a common territory, language and culture. Therefore, it is not exogenous, but endogenous to democracy. A democracy is based on people that have agreed to walk together, to have a common political future and common institutions, not according to any rational arguments but moved by the belief of sharing a common identity. According to Ghia Nodia, we have experienced three waves of resurgent nationalism since the Second World War: firstly, the nationalist wars for independence against colonialism; secondly, the fall of the Soviet Union with the subsequent rebirth of Eastern European nations; thirdly, the contemporary global nationalist resurgence, visible in the appeal nationalist slogans such as 'Make America Great Again' and 'America First' had in the last American presidential elections. Brexit would be the «salient expression» of this third wave and a «heavy blow» for post-nationalist theory, since «Britain is not some developing country or even a new democracy. On the contrary, it is arguably the very cradle of modernity in general, and of modern

¹¹¹Calhoun, C., *Nations Matter: Culture, History, and the Cosmopolitan Dream*, London, Routledge, 2007, p.170

¹¹²Shaw, K., «BrexLit» *cit.*, p.24

¹¹³May, T., *Conference Speech*, 5 Ottobre 2016, in «Theresa May's conference speech in full», *The Telegraph*, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/05/theresa-mays-conference-speech-in-full/> (30 June 2018)

democracy in particular».¹¹⁴ This third wave, moreover, is clearly proven by the good performance of parties that carry on nationalist themes in many European countries.

Populism is an endogenous element of democracy as well, considering that, in order to be voted in as representatives, politicians always must convince the people that they are their best choice. They do that, inevitably, by trying to please the voters, focusing specifically on issues the electorate seems to care about the most. Nowadays, we are dealing with an inward evolution, since the term now defines political parties, movements and politicians that have taken this to the extreme, shaping completely their speeches and political ideas on what they consider to be the mood of the people. To do that, populists must be ready to easily shift from one stance to the other. It is not by chance, then, that, populists often embrace left-wing and right-wing elements. As McCarthy stresses, populism is

comfortably at home on the political left, fuelling dark narratives of exploitation, colonialism, mercantilism, and income equality when the establishment to be opposed is private wealth. It has found a home on the right, particularly in the era of Reagan and Thatcher, when the targeted establishment was the statist government and its incursions into the shrinking realm of individual liberty.¹¹⁵

Focusing especially on European populism on the right of the political spectrum, Michael Freeden has outlined three distinguishable core attributes of populist parties:

an inclination to conceive of society as a singular unitary body [...]; an appeal to the origination and integrity of a defining founding moment or natality, even if not articulated as such; and a visceral fear of imported change in law, customs and people.¹¹⁶

The first attribute refers to the idea of the ‘indivisibility’ of the people as a «bloc that cannot be disaggregated in any shape or form»¹¹⁷. According to populists, the people are a homogeneous body and should be preserved as such, and this, paradoxically, makes contemporary populism «incompatible with democracy» since «populism’s conception of the people as a homogeneous body is fictional and «generates a logic which disregards the idea of otherness [...] and aims at the suppression of diversity within society»¹¹⁸. This also explains why the agenda of European populist movements and parties is usually characterized by «the

¹¹⁴Nodia, G., «The End of the Postnational Illusion», *Journal of Democracy*, Vol.28, No.2, April 2017, pp.5-19, p.11

¹¹⁵McCarthy, A. C., «Populism Versus Populism», *The New Criterion*, February 2017, <https://newcriterion.com/issues/2017/2/populism-vi-populism-versus-populism> (30 June 2018)

¹¹⁶Freeden, M., «After the Brexit Referendum: revisiting populism as an ideology», *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol.22, No.1, 2017, pp.1-11, p.4

¹¹⁷*Ibidem*

¹¹⁸Abts, K., Rummens, S., «Populism Versus Democracy», *Political Studies*, vol.55, n°2, 1 June 2007, pp.405-424, cit. in Van Kessel, S., *Populist Parties in Europe: Agents of Discontent ?*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015, p.9

preservation of the status quo – or the status quo ante – as it was before mass migration, Europeanization and globalization started to challenge the nation states»¹¹⁹ introducing diversity.

Strictly connected to the preservation of the status quo and of the presumed homogeneity of the people is the second attribute Freedden identifies, which refers to populists' commitment to «an initiating moment of a society»¹²⁰. This idea of origin is fundamental in the imagination of a national community and – which is even more interesting –

implies the monopolistic ownership of the national timeline. Significantly, its main interest lies in reformulating sovereignty not merely as the spatial control over territory but as the appropriation of a temporal trajectory of 'we were here first', hence we are the ultimate deciders, the fons et origo of what matters and happens here, and hence also we always have precedence over immigrants, disregarding the fact that our ancestors were immigrants too.¹²¹

According to populists, being there from the alleged moment of origin gives people the right to choose, possess and, ultimately, even continue to exist on the national soil, excluding from these rights everyone who cannot claim a connection to that initial moment, *in primis* immigrants whose recent arrival testifies their unrelatedness to the origin of the nation and its community. The visceral fear of changes to the country's laws and customs therefore stems from changes to its national composition. Those not born here, or not fitting in with homogenous national identity, represent a threat to Britain's sense of self, resulting in hostility towards immigrants.

Freedden connects two other important features to right-wing populism, speed and emotion. Speed relates to the rapidness with which populists respond to current events, commonly in a way which lacks those filters (for instance internal ideological debate, a stable set of values and ideas) which apply to the responses of the traditional parties. The speed of impact is directly connected to the emotion populist leaders seek to leverage, in particular to those anxieties and fears that find no space in mainstream politics. As Scruton underlines, Nigel Farage, Marine LePen, Donald Trump, would have

one thing in common, which is their preparedness to allow a voice to passions that are neither acknowledged nor mentioned in the course of normal politics. And for this reason, they are not democrats but demagogues – not politicians who guide and

¹¹⁹Mral, B., Wodak, R., Khosravini, M., *Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, p.10

¹²⁰Freedden, M., *op. cit.*, p.1

¹²¹*Ibidem*

govern by appeal to arguments, but agitators who stir the unthinking feelings of the crowd.¹²²

What transforms a politician into a demagogue, according to Scruton, is giving space to people's inner worries and emotions, even to those that overstep what is considered civilised (and ethically acceptable) discourse. For this reason, populists consider themselves the true and only spokesmen of the people and appeal directly to them, bypassing regular political processes. This is evident in the Brexit case, where prominent figures of the Leave front declared themselves advocates of the people and defined the referendum results 'the will of the people', «conveniently ignoring that 62.5% of the electorate (Remainers, and those who abstained from participating) did not vote to leave the EU»¹²³. As Freedon underlines,

[m]ost populist references relating the people to democracy have a manipulative rhetoric effect, in which democracy is the abstract rule of the people en masse, without the liberal and intricate constitutional trappings that have come to be associated with European and North American democracies.¹²⁴

Therefore, 'people' would be a «stylized entity» used as a «weapon of argument»¹²⁵, that is to say a rhetorical instrument intended to gain recognition and recruit the 'ordinary people' for the party's own political agenda, as it claims to be their spokesman against common enemies. This populist figure of speech, 'the will of the people', has become so pervasive in Brexit discourse that it has been used both by Conservative and Labour MPs, who have ended up legitimatising the populist narrative. An example of the pervasiveness of it comes from the media too: «The Judges VS the People» or «Enemies of the People»¹²⁶ are only two of the many newspaper' and magazine' headlines that have circulated from the referendum onwards. These titles also hint at the populist narrative regarding the elites. According to populists, the elites are an element in opposition to the righteous and good people, alien forces on their own conspiring against the everyman. Related to this, populists are no more guided by the idea of an equality between the people and the elites, but 'by the belief that the people [...] are actually

¹²²Scruton, R., «Populism: VII: Representation & the People», *The New Criterion*, March 2017, <https://newcriterion.com/issues/2017/3/populism-vii-representation-the-people> (30 June 2018)

¹²³ Freedon, M., *op. cit.*, p.7

¹²⁴*Ibidem*

¹²⁵*Ibidem*

¹²⁶Headlines of the *The Telegraph* and *The Daily Mail* referring to three High Court judges and their judgement on the triggering of article 50. The articles in question are Dominiczak, P., Hope, C., McCann, K., «Judges vs the people: Government ministers resigned to losing appeal against High Court ruling», *The Telegraph*, 3 November 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/11/03/the-plot-to-stop-brex-it-the-judges-versus-the-people/> (30 June 2018); Slack, J., «Enemies of the people: Fury over 'out of touch' judges who have 'declared war on democracy' by defying 17.4m Brexit voters and who could trigger constitutional crisis», *Mail Online*, 3 November 2016, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3903436/Enemies-people-Fury-touch-judges-defied-17-4m-Brexit-voters-trigger-constitutional-crisis.html> (30 June 2018)

better than their rulers and better than the classes – the urban middle classes – associated with the ruling powers.¹²⁷ Moreover, as Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell explain, populists depict the elites in cahoots with «dangerous ‘others’» trying to deprive «(or attempting to deprive) the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity and voice.»¹²⁸ The elites are, then, accused of acting against people’s interests, protecting those responsible for their miseries: bankers, multinational corporations, international organisations, immigrants. Similarly, everyone who is pro-Eu is associated with the elites and considered a collaborator and a traitor of its own people. Consequently, the political debate ends up being framed in terms of ‘us’ versus ‘them’.¹²⁹ Interestingly, as O’ Toole stresses, «[t]he quisling theme was also endemic in the revolt against black and Asian migrants» when Enoch Powell was the populist politician arguing that «immigration was proof that a treacherous elite was selling out the victory of the war»¹³⁰.

Ultimately, the success of a populist party is related to the issue it represents. Van Kessel has underlined that populist parties generally tend to focus on four specific themes, which are culture and ethnicity, economic hardship, European integration and corruption. These issues can all be intertwined, some can be more prominent than others, or the party in question may focus on one specific issue: what matters most is the importance of that issue to a part of the electorate and the extent to which the established parties are considered ineffective in dealing with it, or whether they have attempted to bury it.¹³¹ This, according to Scruton, is exactly what could explain European nationalist renaissance and the populist rise, which would have been triggered by the inability of the establishment, both cultural and political, to deal with the identity issues provoked by the major changes of the last decades:

what happens when the issues closest to people’s hearts are neither discussed nor mentioned by their representatives, and when these issues are precisely issues of identity – of “who we are” and “what unites us”? This, it seems to me, is where we have got to in Western democracies, in the United States just as much as in Europe. And recent events in both continents would be less surprising if the media and the politicians had woken up earlier to the fact that Western democracies – all of them without exception – are suffering from a crisis of identity. The ‘we’ that is the foundation of trust and the *sine qua non* of representative government, has been jeopardized not only by the global economy and the rapid decline of indigenous ways of life, but also by the mass immigration of people with other languages, other

¹²⁷Shils, E., *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Policies*, The Free Press, 1956, p.101, cit. in Van Kessel, S., *op. cit.*, p.5

¹²⁸Albertazzi, D., McDonnell, D., *Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, 2008b, p.3, in Van Kessel, S., *op. cit.*, p.6

¹²⁹Cfr. De Vries, C., «Populism on the Rise?», 19 December 2016, University of Oxford, <http://www.ox.ac.uk/news-and-events/oxford-and-brexit/brexit-analysis/populism-rise> (28 June 2018)

¹³⁰O’Toole, F., *op. cit.*, p.91

¹³¹Cfr. Van Kessel, S., *op. cit.*

customs, other religions, other ways of life, and other and competing loyalties. Worse than this is the fact that ordinary people have been forbidden to complain about it publicly, forbidden even to begin the process of coming to terms with it by discussing what the costs and benefits might be.¹³²

The crisis Western democracies would be living, whose manifestations are the rise of nationalism and populism, is here related both to identity (the jeopardised ‘we’, which is now impossible to imagine as well as undermined by individualistic approaches) and the elites. The establishment is accused of ignoring the ‘ordinary’ people’s worries and fears and, at the same time, of tabooing them. This has created the distance between the elites and the people, and ultimately pushed the people to rely on anti-establishment alternatives, ready to embrace those issues ‘closest to their heart’, *in primis* the search for identity. Global economy, the decline of indigenous ways of life, mass immigration, the mixture of religions and cultures in one community, the broad convergence of traditional parties on neoliberal economic principles and on liberal values, are all factors that, in Scruton’s account, are pressing on both the national and the supranational, as well as on the corresponding identities. In the case of the European Union, the identity crisis investing the imagined (supranational) ‘we’, jeopardised by all these variables, is affecting none other than the very engagement of the people to the project of a united Europe.

Brexit from a European perspective: the end of the European dream?

The very formation of the first nucleus of the European Union was a response to what has been defined as the evils of nationalism. As Ghia Nodia stresses, «[t]he EU was deliberately designed to gradually weaken nation states and make them less relevant, eventually leading to some kind of federal Europe». For the founders of the first European community,

[t]he two world wars were the turning point. Their carnage made nationalism a dirty word. In their wake, the vision of a postnationalist world became widely seen as not only desirable, but feasible. The rise and disastrous fall of Fascism and Nazism dramatically discredited nationalism and legitimised the European Union.¹³³

The horrors perpetrated during the two World Wars, therefore, stimulated the birth of the European project, since the constitution of a European community was intended as an insurance against international antagonism. Nationalism was considered a major threat, while the formation of a European conglomerate was a ‘dream’ of peace, co-operation and prosperity. On the contrary, nowadays the European Union is considered less a dream and more a mixture

¹³²Scruton, R., *op. cit*

¹³³Nodia, G., *op. cit.*, p.9

of obligations and restrictions, and therefore is far beyond the era of ‘permissive consensus’ that has marked the project’s concrete realisation. And to make matters worse, nationalisms are spreading again throughout the Continent. So, what happened to public support towards the European Union?

Political support, as outlined by many scholars, is multi-faceted. For instance, the UK has always shown low support for the monetary union, and in fact did not embrace the ‘euro’ project, but, on the contrary, it has always been favourable to further enlargement (at least before the 2008 financial crash). Thus, political support could be directed towards different objects (in the EU case, for example, it could be directed towards the community or the institutional power structure) and it could be diffuse or specific, meaning support based on a general positive evaluation of the EU itself, or based on the positive evaluation of a concrete policy outcome. Moreover, the nature of support could be utilitarian or affective. An *affective* political support towards the EU refers to an emotional response, to a support rooted in the vision of a common past, in the dream of a united Europe and in the belief of a common identity. Instead, *utilitarian* support is policy-oriented, which means that it depends on analyses about costs and benefits of being a member of the EU.¹³⁴ Therefore, utilitarian support, using Goodwin and Milazzo’s terminology, is built on ‘economic arguments’, while the affective kind is built on ‘identity’ ones. For what concerns the ‘economic arguments’, factors influential in lowering or increasing support are both the actual economic situation and the very perception of the economic performance of one’s own country, since «individual level evaluations of the state of the national economy» appear to be «far more important than macroeconomic indicators».¹³⁵ For what concerns ‘identity arguments’, the most important element is the way national identity is constructed, together with attitudes towards immigration. In fact, citizens that are strongly attached to their nation and that consider immigrants a threat to the welfare and homogeneity of their country are more likely to oppose to European integration, resulting in their being less supportive of European institutions and international cooperation. On the contrary, those citizens whose national identity is not based on exclusiveness are more likely to give space to the development of a European identity that could positively influence EU support. As Goodwin and Milazzo underline,

It is not unusual for an individual to have a strong national attachment and yet be positively oriented to European integration. What matters is whether a person

¹³⁴Cfr. Easton D., «A Re-Assessment of the Concept of Political Support», *British Journal of Political Science*, vol.4, n°5, October 1975, pp.435-457

¹³⁵Armingeon, K., Ceka, B., «The Loss of Trust in the European Union during the great recession since 2007: the role of heuristics from the national political system», *European Union Politics*, vol.15(1), 6 August 2013, pp.82-107, p.97

conceives of her national identity as exclusive or inclusive of other territorial identities. Individuals with exclusive national identities are predisposed to Euroscepticism if they are cued to believe that love of their country and its institutions is incompatible with European integration.¹³⁶

Economic and identity arguments would be, ultimately, more or less effective according to the cultural background as well as social and economic conditions of a given individual. But economic and identity-related arguments, together with the specific circumstances of the individual, are not the only factors influencing EU support. Especially referring to trust and commitment to the European Union, Armingeon and Ceka have argued that people's opinions on the EU do not depend solely on EU policies, political philosophy or individual perception, but they would be strictly linked to the levels of support for national governments. To understand it better, it is fundamental to keep in mind the premises of the so-called 'cue theory', which states that citizens tend to rely on cues for issues they perceive as being far away from them or too complicated. These cues

could be ideological, deriving from an individual's position on left/right distributional conflict, or they could come from the media, intermediary institutions such as trade unions or churches, or from political parties. In fact, there is evidence for each of these. However, when one examines the content of such cues, it is clear that they engage identity as well as economic interest.¹³⁷

Concerning the EU, this means that citizens tend to rely on cues they receive from different sources, for instance newspapers, websites, religious leaders, union representatives and, in general, members of national elites. It follows that an appreciated national government that supports the EU would induce its citizens to do the same. This does not imply, of course, that all citizens rely on cues coming from national authorities they trust in, and in fact the analyses regarding cue theory have shown that the well-educated, such as students, managers, practitioners – those that Armingeon and Ceka define «more knowledgeable Europeans»¹³⁸ – tend to collect their information directly from the EU institutions and are more likely to trust the European Union.

Related to this, the two scholars have also argued that, while high levels of trust in national elites and governments correspond to trust in European institutions, low levels of support for the European Union reflect distrust of those elites and dissatisfaction with one's

¹³⁶Goodwin, M., Milazzo, C., *UKIP*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p.13

¹³⁷Hooghe, L., Marks, G., «A PostFunctional Theory of European Integration: From Permissive Consensus to Constraining Dissensus», in *British Journal of Political Science*, vol.39, 2008, pp.1-23, pp.10-11

¹³⁸Armingeon, K., Ceka, B., *op. cit.*, p.87

own government and its policies.¹³⁹ This hypothesis is corroborated by the analyses on European elections' results, which usually suggest the approval rating of national governments. An example is the 2014 European elections won by the United Kingdom Independence Party, one sign of the growing distrust in the British Conservative government. This also means that the two levels of government, the national and the supranational (meaning European), are so intertwined in the mind of the citizens that not only the national context is used to shape one's own evaluation of the European Union, but 'less knowledgeable' citizens happen to be unable to distinguish between national and EU policies, and are therefore more prone to blame and distrust the European Union itself for the economic and social conditions of their specific country. National policies that have been recently criticised are none other than the economic manoeuvres implemented to stem the 2008 economic crisis, which, as «neoliberal counter-revolutionary measures», are even in «apparent violation of the legal obligations of EU member states, and perhaps also EU institutions»¹⁴⁰ and therefore creating another crisis: one of legality. Eventually, the austerity policies applied by the EU itself in exchange for financial assistance, which have been perceived as an imposition (the Greek case is particularly poignant), have only worsened a public aversion towards the EU that was already present. Related to austerity and the economic crisis, Javier Solana underlines that

the EU's weaker economies faced skyrocketing unemployment, especially among young people, while its stronger economies felt pressure to 'show solidarity' by bailing out countries in distress. When the stronger economies provided those bailouts, they included demands for austerity that impeded the recipients' economic recovery. Few were satisfied, and many blamed European integration. [...] But, while the economic pain that many Europeans feel is certainly real, the nationalists' diagnosis of its source is false. The reality is that the EU can be criticized for the way it handled the crisis; but it cannot be blamed for the global economic imbalances that have fuelled economic strife since 2008. Those imbalances reflect a much broader phenomenon: globalization.¹⁴¹

The European Union has been, therefore, criticised for two reasons: on one side, for forcing more stable members to help the countries most affected by the 2008 crash; on the other side, for bonding this help to economic policies that have worsened their situation. The grudge held by both sides did facilitate the transformation of the EU into a scapegoat for the economic crisis.

¹³⁹This hypothesis was first supported by Martinuzzi and Stefanizzi (1995) and Haller (1999), both cit. in Armingeon, K., Ceka, B., *op. cit.*, p.88

¹⁴⁰Ewing, K., D., «The Death of Social Europe», in Birkinshaw, P., Biondi, A., *Britain Alone! The Implications and Consequences of United Kingdom Exit from the EU*, 2016, p.233

¹⁴¹Solana, J., «The EU has a dangerous case of nostalgia», *World Economic Forum*, 27 April 2016, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/04/javier-solana-the-eu-has-a-dangerous-case-of-nostalgia> (30 June 2018)

In conclusion, we could argue that cues by nationalist and populist politicians, dissatisfaction with national governments and opposition to national policies are directly connected to the EU's current unpopularity and could, therefore, be considered responsible for the sudden spread of distrust and disillusionment with the European project itself. But obviously, when there is an unexpected fall in support – particularly when it regards the diffuse and affective kind, which is supposed to be long-term and stable – this cannot be attributed to only one factor, especially an economic one, and certainly not only to factors that are national-specific. Reasons of the escalation in distrust towards the EU must be, therefore, multiple. Apart from national issues and the economic crisis, other factors that, according to Susen¹⁴², should be held accountable for the contemporary spread of Euroscepticism, would be the perception of a European Union slow to act and inadequate in its responses, as well as the challenges posed by the refugee and migrant crisis and the thread of international terrorism. The first factor is strictly related to the very way the EU has been shaped in the last decades and to the divisions regarding further integration. Nowadays, European member states appear unable to move forward towards the 'United States of Europe', and, at the same time, unable to come back to a 'less-closer' union. In fact, worries regarding loss of sovereignty and European interference (especially, as we know, in Britain) have determined the prevailing of an intergovernmental approach in EU structures and institutions. Consequently, as John McCormick explains, «[t]he cumulative interests of the member states dominate the EU decision-making process»¹⁴³, with the EU limited by the treaties the same national governments conceive. This was particularly visible after the 2008 economic crash and with the influx of refugees escaping from the war in Syria. As Auer states,

[b]oth the refugee crisis and the eurozone crisis, which were the backdrop to the British referendum, highlighted the paradox that no amount of rhetorical flourish about multilevel governance, democracy or Europe's experimental union can wish away: member states have ceded too much control to the supranational level to be able to set effective policies in important areas independently of each other and of the Union institutions. Yet, they retain enough initiative to resist compromise and thwart common solutions. As we have seen, the efforts of national and European leaders to deal with economic challenges and the unprecedented influx of migrants share certain features. These include the inability to agree on binding common policies, the unintended and unwanted elevation of Germany to the pre-eminent leadership position and a widespread populist backlash – particularly in those states in which a loss of sovereign control is most acutely perceived».¹⁴⁴

¹⁴²Cfr. Susen, S., *op. cit.*

¹⁴³McCormick, John, «Why Europe Works», in Dür, A., Zimmermann, H. (eds.) (2012), *Key Controversies in European Integration*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2016, p.18

¹⁴⁴Auer, S., «Brexit, Sovereignty and the End of an Ever Closer Union», in Outhwaite, W.(ed.), *op. cit.*, p.50

Secondly, the refugee and migrant crisis has certainly been fundamental in fuelling resentment towards the EU and undermining transnational loyalties. In fact, while some member states complain about the lack of solidarity and the little help they receive in saving, accommodating and sustaining refugees and migrants, others refuse to take their own share and consider the measure itself an EU attempt to interfere at the national level. Moreover, the crisis is challenging the very conception of the free movement of people, the pillar of the European Union (the others are free movement of goods, capital and service) notoriously at the centre of the Brexit campaign. Thus, national governments have put again on the table the question of national borders, with many countries building or threatening to build walls along their borders to prevent illegal immigrants entering their territory. In the UK, however, it was not fear of refugees that put under scrutiny the free movement of people, but fear of Europeans. As Freeden points out,

[t]he UK avoided similar sentiments of alarm simply by accepting a trifling number of refugees in the first place, so that their visibility was negligible (and in the case of the now dismantled Calais ‘jungle’ camps, forcibly keeping most of them out of British territory). [...] And the modes of movement across borders were dissimilar: Europeans from EU countries entered and exited the UK freely, while non-European migrants into the European mainland entered illegally or were subject – usually retroactively – to national quotas.¹⁴⁵

Therefore, claiming back control of national borders, Brexiteers were not influenced by the same factor as other European nations equally hostile to the free movement of people (the refugee and migrant crisis), but by European immigration, especially that of the Eastern Europeans.

International terrorism, on the other side, has increased fear and suspicion for the non-native in all of the Continent’s nation states as well as in the UK. The terrorist attacks of 9/11, in particular, have deeply influenced Europe, which, from then on, has undergone the rise of racist and xenophobic attitudes, as well as the development of new cleavages strictly linked to security agendas. These cleavages could be summarized in three major oppositions: ‘Capital vs Labour’, ‘Radical Cultural Pluralism’ vs ‘Neoliberal Techno-Conservatism’ and ‘Cosmopolitanism vs Nationalism’. Coming back to the referendum, a key issue in the negotiations between the Prime Minister David Cameron and the EU to avoid the Brexit vote was, together with Eastern European migration, none other than the European Convention of Human Rights, which is perceived as interfering precisely in national security matters. According to Delanty, the cleavage that has come out from Brexit is, unsurprisingly,

¹⁴⁵Freeden, M., *op. cit.*, p.1

“Nationcenteredness” vs “Cosmopolitan Pluralism”.¹⁴⁶ Especially in Britain, «the ‘War on Terror’ has doubled as a concern with protecting the nation’s integrity from pollution by ‘outsiders’»¹⁴⁷ and strengthened a vision of the country based on the dichotomy ‘us/them’ and a register based on a simplistic distinction between ‘good’ and ‘evil’.

All these factors, ultimately, seem to be equally responsible for the crisis of support the European Union is experiencing. To stem and solve this crisis, European institutions and pro-EU national elites are coming back to the origins of the project, which is to say to the themes of unity, peace and prosperity exploited in the early days of the first European organisation and related to the post-war narrative of catastrophe and renaissance. This would confirm Javier Solana’s thesis, which is to say that

[t]he European Union has a dangerous case of nostalgia. Not only is a yearning for the ‘good old days’ – before the Eu supposedly impinged on national sovereignty – fueling the rise of nationalist political parties; European leaders continue to try to apply yesterday’s solutions to today’s problems.¹⁴⁸

Resorting to the European narrative of catastrophe and renaissance is, undoubtedly, an old strategy to keep the Union together. According to this European narrative, after the Second World War the Continent would have experienced a period of exceptional peace, stability and solidarity, thanks to the very existence of a European community. Therefore, the maintenance today of the European Union would be not only desirable, but necessary to prevent the horrors of the war. This narrative had been previously put aside, as proven by the fact that «[t]he ‘permissive consensus’ towards European integration that existed amongst European electorates until the beginning of the 1990s was predicated on rising living standards and lowering costs rather than the memory of past conflicts».¹⁴⁹ But it has been drawn in again after fears of a more federal union started to spread, especially from the Maastricht Treaty onwards. The memory of the Holocaust, for instance, was extensively adopted to legitimise the next phase of European enlargement, a phase that worried more than one member of the Union.

Furthermore, the narrative of catastrophe and renaissance, which is a fully-fledged ‘EU myth of origin’, could not work to keep Britain in the European Union, since the British post-war narrative is completely opposite to the European one. As Wellings affirms,

¹⁴⁶Cfr. Delanty, G., «A Divided Nation in a Divided Europe: Emerging Cleavages and the Crisis of European Integration», in Outhwaite, W. (ed.), *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁷Malek, B., «Bhaji on the Beach: South Asian femininity at ‘home’ on the ‘English’ seaside», in Rogers, D., McLeod, J. (eds.), *The Revision of Englishness*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2004, p.122

¹⁴⁸Solana, J., *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁹Wellings, B., *English Nationalism and Euroscepticism: Losing the Peace*, Oxford & New York, Peter Lang, 2012, p.58

European unity demanded some sort of supra-national mythology that could accommodate the pre-existing states and nations of the European sub-continent. British nationalism was forged by war. European identity was constructed in opposition to it.¹⁵⁰

Since ‘British nationalism was forged by the war’, the very interpretation of the conflict differs from that of the other European countries, where the war did not forge their nationalism, but was, if anything, a product of it. ‘British’ war was not a ‘catastrophe’, but a glorious victory, a proof of British strength and endurance against the continental foes. On the contrary, the decades after the war, in which the European community has grown while British world influence has decreased, are considered a phase of constant decline, and consequently interpreted more as a slow death than a renaissance. This has contributed in giving a negative shade to European membership. In the UK, moreover, memories of the war are already exploited to reinforce the ties of kinship and trade among the members of the Commonwealth (that ‘wider community of Britons’ who actively participated in the Second World War to save Britain from a possible German invasion). Clearly, the same strategy could not be applied twice, both to European fellow members and to the Commonwealth.

Given that there is no British myth around European integration, the UK has always perceived the ‘European dream’ in economic terms and not as a cultural and political project. This has created a fracture between Britain and Europe and their corresponding narratives that became particularly visible during the Brexit campaign, where the war time was remembered as a kind of British ‘golden era’. This fracture has also been deepened by other factors, *in primis* by traditional British attitudes towards the Continent.

The ‘Awkward Partner’: British Euroscepticism

As implied earlier, «lack of enthusiasm for the political, let alone the cultural, dimensions underlying the European project, can be regarded as one of the primary reasons for the outcome of the 2016 UK referendum»¹⁵¹. This would lead us to include Brexit in a wider framework, that related to Euroscepticism and low EU support. But, as Tournier-Sol and Gifford underline in their introduction to *The UK Challenge to Europeanization*,

there is something very British about the concept of Euroscepticism. Its origins can be traced back to articles in the British newspaper, *The Times*, in 1985 and 1986 (Spiering 2004, p.127). It began to be used to refer to a particular section of the right

¹⁵⁰Ivi, p.46

¹⁵¹Susen, S., *op. cit.*, p.156

of the Conservative party that increasingly objected to the Delors project for a new move of integration, including the prospect of economic and monetary union.¹⁵²

Therefore, even if Euroscepticism is rapidly spreading throughout the Continent, it is indeed undeniable that Britain has never put its heart and soul into the European project and that its Euroscepticism has previous roots and distinct characteristics. This is strictly connected, as discussed earlier, to the fact that British perception of the European Union differs completely from the one of the other member states. While for the other European countries the birth of a European supranational entity was conceived as an opportunity of «national regeneration»,

[f]or Britain, and especially for England, things look very different. Membership of the European Union is perceived against a historical background of industrial supremacy, world empire, and victory in the Second World War. Entry into Europe therefore carries the character of a loss, if not outright humiliation, an admission that Britain is an ordinary nation, just like other nations. [...] Moreover, for over two centuries Europe in various guises has functioned as “the Other” of “this island race”.¹⁵³

As Kumar stresses, in addition to the narrative of decline, the Continent in the guise of the foreign invader, the Catholic enemy and the imperial opponent has always been fundamental in the formation of a British identity as the ‘Other’ put in opposition. Therefore, British mythology based on the notion of endurance against a Europe conceived as a continental foe should be dated way back before British post-war narrative, which would only have reinforced it. It follows, as Catharina Sørensen states, that British Euroscepticism is

closely tied to [Britain’s] perceived role as an independent actor of the world stage as well as to the impression of not forming part of the continent of Europe. Scepticism, thus, appears directed both towards the wording ‘European’ and ‘Union’ in the European Union.¹⁵⁴

This triumphalist view of national history in relation to the Continent, together with a vision of the economy defined by the free-market, liberalism and open seas commercial trading, is central to Britain’s constructed sense of self. It has also held Britain back from fully committing to the European Union, as it would prefer to be seen instead as an outside supporter and commercial partner. This vision of a United Kingdom as friendly supporter of Europe but separated from the Continent is particularly visible in Winston Churchill’s Zurich speech, just

¹⁵²Tournier Sol, K., Gifford, C., *The UK Challenge to Europeanization. The Persistence of British Euroscepticism*, UK, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p.2

¹⁵³Kumar, K., *op cit.*, p.70

¹⁵⁴Sørensen, C., «Danish and British Popular Euroscepticism Compared. A Sceptical Assessment of the Concept», Working Paper 2004/25, Copenhagen Danish Institute for International Studies, cit. in Baker, D., Schnapper, P., *Britain and the Crisis of the European Union*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2015, p.88

a year after the end of the Second World War. Churchill's importance as a key figure of British national narrative is demonstrated by the fact that both the Remain and Leave campaigns have either directly referenced him or used what Eaglestone describes as «Churchill's language»¹⁵⁵, as well as by the 2012 London Olympics games video *James Bond and The Queen 2012 London Performance*.¹⁵⁶ In this video, Queen Elizabeth the II is accompanied to the opening ceremony by actor Daniel Craig (the current incarnation of James Bond)¹⁵⁷. As they fly over London, a statue of Winston Churchill comes to life and waves at them, smiling. One of the many symbols of Britishness and British glory in the video, the statue that comes to life is also a symbol of the 'undead' character of the past and of the role the war still holds in the British imaginary. Turning now to the Zurich speech, it is relevant to stress that, while Churchill was ahead of his time in recognizing the need for a United States of Europe to maintain peace and freedom in the Continent (which are still today two key terms in the narrative of the European Union), on the other hand he was scrupulous in stressing that the British already had their equivalent of 'United States' (the British Commonwealth of Nations), together with a special relationship with the USA to preserve. The 'imperial preference' was reaffirmed in Churchill's doctrine of the three circles, in which Britain is even depicted as the necessary, connecting element among Europe, USA, Canada and British Empire, Commonwealth and Dominions:

The first circle for us is naturally the British Commonwealth and Empire, with all that that comprises. Then there is also the English-speaking World in which we, Canada, and the other British Dominions and the United States play so important a part. And finally there is United Europe. These three majestic circles are coexistent and if they are linked together there is no force or combination which could overthrow them or even challenge them. Now if you think of the three inter-linked circles you will see that we are the only country which has a great part in every one of them. We stand, in fact, at the very point of junction, and here in this Island at the centre of the seaways and perhaps of the airways also have the opportunity of joining them all together. If we rise to the occasion in the years that are to come it may be found that once again we hold the key to opening a safe and happy future to humanity, and will gain for ourselves gratitude and fame.¹⁵⁸

Britain's disengagement from any European community was also at the centre of Churchill's speech to the House of Common in 1953, when he declared that the British «are

¹⁵⁵Eaglestone, R., «Cruel Nostalgia and the Memory of the Second World War» *cit.*, p.100

¹⁵⁶For watching the 2012 Olympics video with Queen Elizabeth the II and Daniel Craig, see «James Bond and The Queen London 2012 Performance», *Youtube*, 27 July 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1AS-dCdYZbo> (1 July 2018)

¹⁵⁷See *Casino Royale* (2006), *Quantum of Solace* (2008), *Skyfall* (2012), *Spectre* (2015) and *Bond 25* (to be released in 2020)

¹⁵⁸Churchill, W., Conservative Party Mass Meeting, Llandudno, Wales, 19 October 1948, *cit.* in Davis, R., «WSC's "Three Majestic Circles"» *International Churchill Society*, Autumn 2013, <https://winstonchurchill.org/publications/finest-hour/finest-hour-160/articles-wsc-s-three-majestic-circles/> (30 June 2018)

with Europe, but not of it. We are linked but not combined. We are interested and associated but not absorbed. If Britain must choose between Europe and the open sea, she must always choose the open sea»¹⁵⁹. It is not surprising, then, that the British would ask for entry in the EEC only after the Suez crisis and the loss of many of its colonies. In fact,

[i]n an era when the nation-state was seen to be limited in its effectiveness, and with no other viable international political community on offer, Europe seemed to many politicians the only way to restore Britain's place on the world stage. However, the idea that Europe could restore British greatness was in itself an admission of national decline. 'Europe' became an expression of Britain's diminished place in the world.¹⁶⁰

And here we come back to that 'negative shade' assigned to European membership, considered a reminder of British decline. As the British joined the EEC only out of self-interest (improving its commercial opportunities and restoring its glory), and in the belief that the entry was a sort of defeat, their approach and support have always remained utilitarian. Seeking to take what could be taken and withdrawing from any agreement considered disadvantageous, the British have gained an on-going reputation as instrumental partners. Unsurprisingly, co-operation with Europe was always subject to certain conditions: *as long as* the co-operation was in the interest of the British Commonwealth, *as long as* the USA agreed with the matter into question, and *as long as* British sovereignty was not questioned. This is evident in the fact that any time there has been a proposed decision-making process or an operation which was purely European, Britain had withdrawn from it. A case in point is the Atomic Energy Community, in which the British did not participate because their representative could not subscribe to the principle of majority decision-making on substantive policy matters, as this would theoretically undermine British national sovereignty and potentially compromise Britain's special relationship with the USA.

The special relationship with the USA would continuously influence British politicians, from Margaret Thatcher to Tony Blair, contributing to maintaining a certain distance from the political dimension of the European project. But the major issue in the relation between Britain and the European Union, and therefore a constant source of Euroscepticism, would always be the question of sovereignty. This fierce defence of British sovereignty was especially prominent during the Brexit campaign, where the stress was on sovereignty regarding national security (the control of national borders) and sovereignty regarding economic policies (undermined by

¹⁵⁹Churchill, W., House of Commons, 1953, cit. in Danzig, J., «A revealing deception about Winston Churchill» *New Europeans.net*, 25 January 2015, <https://neweuropeans.net/article/604/revealing-deception-about-winston-churchill> (30 June 2018)

¹⁶⁰Wellings, B., *English Nationalism and Euroscepticism: Losing the Peace cit.*, p.117

European austerity politics after the 2008 financial crash). However, sovereignty has been at the forefront of the British debate about the EU since before Brexit, as well as before becoming protest-material in many other European countries. To explain this, we should consider how the concept of sovereignty has evolved in Britain, where sovereignty represents the only constitutional principle and lies not in the people, but in Parliament. According to Newman, this peculiarity regarding British sovereignty lying in Parliament should be connected to the «decisive battles against feudalism happened in England in the seventeenth century, before ideologies of democracy had fully flourished»¹⁶¹. The Crown-in-Parliament sovereignty, as it is usually called, emerged after the Political Compromise between the Crown and Parliament in 1688 and remained untouched by the union of the two crowns, Scottish and English, in 1707. The monarchy was «the visible symbol of Westminster sovereignty» and «ultimately became the focal point of official and popular allegiance, allowing national differences to be mediated through loyalty to the Crown»¹⁶². Thus, as Ben Wellings stresses,

[s]o as the British state developed as a multi-national, imperial enterprise after 1707, the notion of parliamentary sovereignty emerged as an ideology that was both suitable for the ‘unreflecting mass’ and permitted the legitimisation and exercise of sovereignty far beyond England’s borders.¹⁶³

Assigning sovereignty to Parliament and not to the people would have legitimised, therefore, the very British rule oversea. Briefly, according to the Crown-in-Parliament principle, the will of the people should be expressed through the will of the assembled parliamentary representatives, while Parliament should be considered the supreme legal authority – that is to say the only entity that has the right to create, change or end laws. According to this principle, while the members of Parliament have the authority to legislate, they do not possess the authority to transfer the power of Parliament, neither to a supranational institution or to a regional government (and this explains why also devolution is material for referenda). This limitation of sovereignty derives directly from John Locke’s *Second Treatise* and is considered a protection against major constitutional changes.¹⁶⁴ Membership in the European Union has clearly created a conflict, since it has introduced into the British system the principle of the supremacy of European law, which is, therefore, in neat opposition to Crown-in Parliament sovereignty.

¹⁶¹Newman, A., «A Political Imaginary for an English Left», in Perryman, M., *Imagined Nation. England After Britain*, Lawrence & Wishart, 2008, p.225

¹⁶²Wellings, B., *English Nationalism and Euroscepticism: Losing the Peace cit.*, p.39

¹⁶³*Ivi*, p.40

¹⁶⁴Cfr. Newman, A., *op. cit.*

Furthermore, European membership has also created a conflict between parliamentary and popular sovereignty. Parliamentary sovereignty was indeed undermined for the very first time by the 1975 referendum, called into action precisely for resolving the European issue regarding the joining of the EEC. Back then, seventeen million against eight voted to stay in the European Economic Community trusting mainstream parties and leaders, who were all sided with the EEC. As Butler and Kitzinger explain, this referendum was a distinct innovation in British constitutional practice, considering that popular sovereignty had never overcome Parliament in decision-making before, and that referenda are based on the idea of a sovereignty lying in the people, not in the institutions of the country. Moreover, this was also the very first time that the EU question was tied to the instrument of the referendum, a perception of a ‘special status’ assigned to the European project only reinforced by the decision of a ‘conscience vote’ in Parliament and Cabinet.¹⁶⁵

It is relevant to stress that underneath the decisional paralysis of the European Union there is precisely this British attitude to associate everything EU with popular sovereignty. It was, indeed, the UK to promote the idea that any further enlargement, or new EU legislation to be added to the national one, had to previously meet the approval of the national populations through the means of the referendum. The first reference to this in British politics is called the ‘referendum lock’ and is to be found in the Lib Dem manifesto of 1997, in which the party stresses the importance of holding a referendum for any constitutional issues and any transfer of power to European institutions. Since the only British constitutional principle is parliamentary sovereignty, considered under threat by the supranational character of the EU, it is clear how the referendum lock could be applied to any decision at the European level. The legal manifestation of the referendum lock is the European Union Act of 2011, which, as stressed by Birkinshaw and Varney, has «established a new form of self-embracing sovereignty in so far as Parliament has bound its future action on many Union initiatives to a popular referendum»¹⁶⁶. This means that the Act, which the British strongly hoped would *give back control* to their national parliament, paradoxically had the opposite effect, since

[i]t resulted in Parliamentary sovereignty being undermined by popular sovereignty. In seeking to ‘repatriate powers from Brussels’ and reassert Parliament’s authority in the face of the EU, [...] it merely shifted that role from the European Union to the people of Britain at a historical moment when Euroscepticism was running high, but

¹⁶⁵Cfr. Butler, D., Kitzinger, U. W., *The 1975 Referendum*, MacMillan Press, 1999

¹⁶⁶Birkinshaw, P., Varney, M., «Britain Alone Constitutionally: Brexit and Restitutio in Integrum», in Birkinshaw, P., Biondi, A. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.15

when the notion of the ‘British People’ as a category with a future was challenged by the growth of separate nationalisms in the UK.¹⁶⁷

Ultimately, the referendum lock demonstrates that, even after the 1975 referendum’s popular verdict in favour of remaining in the EEC, Euroscepticism, in the guise of opposition to any kind of European community and further integration, has only continued to grow, helped by British politicians and media. Quite central in the proliferation of ideas of a European conspiracy against British interests was, for instance, Margaret Thatcher’s strong opposition to the European Union, particularly after her change of heart concerning the Single European Act of 1986. In fact, Margaret Thatcher, who passionately fought in defence of British sovereignty, privileging an intergovernmental approach and opposing any supranational vision of Europe, was undeniably a supporter of the common market, an idea that in her opinion would have led to economic growth and benefits for all the European nations involved. Thatcher did not foresee, though, the consequences of the Act, meaning the establishment of a common currency, further integration and the beginning of a ‘more political’ union. It was the nightmarish prospect of a supranational and domineering EU that led her to declare the signing of the Single European Act a terrible error and which strengthened her negative views towards the European Union.¹⁶⁸

Euroscepticism and conspiracy theories have also been fuelled by the media, which could be considered partly responsible for the predominance of the European issue in British politics. As Wellings stresses,

[t]he British public were served up a diet of so-called ‘Euro-myths’ by the British press from the 1980s onwards. Most of these stories were simply untrue, but they were able to flourish in a political structure where member-state politicians could ‘blame Brussels’ for unpopular policies or directives and where the European Community itself was remote from its citizens. In a day-to-day sense Europe was largely experienced as a restraint on liberty and a surveyor of health and safety regulations that removed fun and freedom from the workplace¹⁶⁹

Ultimately, Euroscepticism has even ended up stimulating the birth of new political players, such as, for instance, Alan Sked’s Anti-Federalist League, James Goldsmith’s Referendum Party and the more famous United Kingdom Independence Party, better known as UKIP and founded by Alan Sked. Sked was later replaced by Nigel Farage, who fronted UKIP’s 2016 Leave campaign. These politicians are all *fundamental Eurosceptics*, that is to say

¹⁶⁷Wellings, B., «Beyond Awkwardness: England, the European Union and the End to Integration», in Tournier-Sol, K., Gifford, C., *op. cit.*, p.40

¹⁶⁸Cfr. Von Bismark, H., «Margaret Thatcher: the critical architect of European integration», *The UK in a Changing Europe*, 4 May 2016, <http://ukandeu.ac.uk/margaret-thatcher-the-critical-architect-of-european-integration> (1 July 2018)

¹⁶⁹Wellings, B., *English Nationalism and Euroscepticism: Losing the Peace cit.*, p.214

supporters of direct withdrawal from the EU. For the fundamental Eurosceptic, withdrawal from the EU means the return to inviolable parliamentary sovereignty. It is, therefore, a paradox that it is thanks to fundamental Eurosceptics that referenda have been gradually legitimised, constitutionalized and popularized, thereby undermining the authority of Parliament as well as the authority of law-makers. Fundamental Eurosceptics are opposed to *radical renegotiations*, whose requests are usually limited to revisions of European deals. David Cameron, for instance, is generally held to be one of those radical re-negotiator, as it was never his intention to opt out of the European Union. If anything, the former Prime Minister actually tried to change the way his own party viewed the EU, calling for the end of the politicization of the European issue. Therefore, his promise of a referendum on British membership (and his consequent Eurosceptic stance after 2013) probably had less to do with his political ideas and more with UKIP's rise in popularity among Conservative voters.

The rise of UKIP, as well as its stunning performance at the European elections in 2014, is strictly connected to the failures of both the Conservatives and the Labour party to understand their electorate, as well as the rise and potential of English nationalism. It should, therefore, be related to the phenomena previously described: lack of trust in traditional parties, the perceived divide between the so-called ordinary people and the established elites, the establishment's stigmatization and the neglecting of certain issues 'close to the voters' heart'. In the British case, an issue ignored by the establishment, but which nonetheless is a common source of fear for ordinary people, is immigration. An issue that, according to O'Toole, no mainstream politician has been able to address «[a]fter Enoch Powell destroyed his political career with the inflammatory racism of his 'rivers of blood' speech in April 1968»¹⁷⁰. From then on, O'Toole affirms, «the gradual marginalization of open racism» 'crippled' the debate on immigration facilitating the 'transference of blame' from the migrants to the EU:

'Brussels', as Richard Weight puts it, 'replaced Brixton as the whipping boy of British nationalists.' That the EU did indeed partly occupy the space where open racism had once flourished is evident in the large overlap between pro-Brexit and anti-immigrant sentiment. But this suggests that much of the animosity was never really about the EU itself - it was a sublimated or displaced rage at Them. The black and brown Other fused with the European Other.¹⁷¹

Nigel Farage, once he became leader of the UKIP party, succeeded not only in picking up the baton from Enoch Powell (whom he defined, unsurprisingly, as his political hero)¹⁷², but

¹⁷⁰O'Toole, F., *op. cit.*, p.17

¹⁷¹*Ibidem*

¹⁷²He did so in 2015 during an interview for Absolute Radio, cit. in Shilliam, R., *Race and the Undeserving Poor*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Agenda Publishing, 2018, p.153

also in linking the issue of immigration with fear of European integration, loss of sovereignty and the recovery of past greatness. Describing the English in a similar fashion to Powell (that is to say, as strangers in their own country) he succeeded in «aligning conservative Euroscepticism with a longstanding populist nationalism that held immigration responsible for the diminution of welfare provision and wages experienced by England’s “indigenous” workers»¹⁷³. And, more importantly, he made those feeling ignored, left-behind and left-out – economically and culturally speaking – feel as if they were being both listened to and represented. This helped UKIP in the Brexit debate. Steve Buckledee notes that

[a] tactical error by the Remain campaign was not to engage with people who expressed their concerns about the impact of immigration from the EU in rational, non-racist terms, and instead to adopt a self-righteous attitude in accusing all Leavers indiscriminately of racial prejudice.¹⁷⁴

While the Remain front ignored and even made a mockery of worries regarding European migration, UKIP embraced those concerns combining it with a «racialized melancholia»¹⁷⁵ at the core (as we will soon see) of English nationalism. It is not a coincidence that those areas in which UKIP has gained more and more supporters (Wales, Northern England, part of South-West England and Eastern and Southern English coasts), are also those most hit by de-industrialization and economic crisis. Just as crucially, these areas are also predominantly white and (excluding Wales) most likely to identify with Englishness.

Divided Kingdom: Brexit and English national identity

In the 1975 referendum, England provided the strongest support for European integration¹⁷⁶. Forty-one years later, England has maintained its decisive role, but they have taken the opposite stance: they are, now, the strongest supporter for leaving the European Union. As mentioned earlier, Brexiteers won the referendum with a narrow margin, 51,9% against 48,1%, but in England alone the margin was, instead, seven percent. This is of great relevance, since England «is home to 84% of the UK’s population» and therefore its Leave-vote

«outweighed substantial Remain majorities in Scotland (62.0%-38.0%) and Northern Ireland (NI) (55.5%-44.6%). Whilst Wales also had a Leave majority

¹⁷³Ivi, p.153

¹⁷⁴Buckledee, S., op. cit., p.106

¹⁷⁵Shilliam, R., *Race and the Undeserving Poor* cit., p.154

¹⁷⁶Henderson, A., Jeffery, C., Liñeira, R., Scully, R., Wincott, D., Wyn Jones, R., «England, Englishness and Brexit», *The Political Quarterly*, Vol 82 Issue 2, April-June 2016, pp.187-199, p.1

(52.5%-47.5%), with less than 5% of the UK's population, it did not play a decisive part in the overall outcome [...]. Brexit was made in England».¹⁷⁷

But Brexit was made in England not only in relation to the technicality just revealed: Brexit was made in England because «England's choice for Brexit was driven disproportionately by those prioritising English national identity»¹⁷⁸, meaning, as previously anticipated, by those who identified more with Englishness.

Identification with Englishness has exponentially increased during the last decades, in particular from the devolution onwards, to the extent that it represents a kind of 'English revolution'. According to the UK census' data of 2011,

[i]n England, fully 60 per cent of the population identified themselves as solely English. Remarkably, given that people could choose 'English' *and* 'British' if they wanted to, only 29 per cent of census participants in England identified themselves as feeling any sense of British national identity at all. In some parts of England, the embrace of an exclusively English identity is overwhelming: 70 per cent in the North East, 66 per cent in the North West, Yorkshire and the East Midlands. By contrast, only 37 per cent of Londoners chose 'English only' [...].

There are three considerations to draw from these data: firstly, regarding 'English *and* British identity', the data shows how the increase in identification with Englishness seems to correspond to an estrangement from Britishness, which would signal a correlation based on opposition between these two identities; secondly, the areas marked by the increase are also those most hit by the economic crisis; thirdly, these same areas showed a preference for Brexit in the referendum, which highlights a correlation between English identity and perceptions of Europe. This correlation started to emerge especially looking at the findings of the *Future of England Survey* (FoES), which does not considered Britain the unit of analysis, focusing, instead, on England. The very first data of the FoES, launched in 2011 showed that

[w]hile most eurosceptics focus on the apparent threat to Britain and Britishness posed by 'Brussels', those in England who felt more British than English were actually most positive in their attitudes towards the EU. By contrast, those with a strongly or exclusive English sense of their own national identity were the most (overwhelmingly) hostile. This finding was confirmed by the 2012 survey.¹⁷⁹

These analyses have confirmed a link between English nationalism and Euroscepticism also acknowledged by Ben Wellings in the title of his famous work *English Nationalism and*

¹⁷⁷Henderson, A., Jeffery, C., Wincott, D., Wyn Jones, R., «How Brexit Was Made in England», *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 2017, pp. 1-16, p.1

¹⁷⁸*Ibidem*

¹⁷⁹Henderson, A., Jeffery, C., Liñeira, R., Scully, R., Wincott, D., Wyn Jones, R., *op. cit.*, p.8

Euroscepticism: Losing the Peace.¹⁸⁰ Up until now, considerations regarding British Euroscepticism and the relationship between Britain and Europe have not taken account of a ‘detail’ which is, actually, quite crucial regarding attitudes towards the European Union: the fact that the United Kingdom is not properly a nation state but a union, that is to say a state in which the ‘national borders’ do not correspond to the borders that define the territory of the kingdom. In fact, the United Kingdom is constituted by four nations, which share a common past, a common ‘institutional’ collective identity (Britishness), but not a common national identity. This means that the European Union, as a supranational entity like the United Kingdom, is a project in direct competition to the British one, an argument particularly dear to British Eurosceptics. Nonetheless, in England it is Englishness, and not Britishness, which is ‘overwhelmingly hostile to the EU. This is extremely relevant, considering that identity-related arguments, as explained before, are particularly influential in increasing or lowering EU support, especially the exclusive or inclusive character of the national identity citizens embrace.

Further information relating to these findings came from the 2014 FoES, which also deployed parallel surveys in Scotland and Wales. According to Henderson who analysed the data,

[i]n Wales and Scotland, national identity (British or Scottish/Welsh) does not appear to structure attitudes on EU membership consistently. England is very different. The more strongly or exclusively English their sense of national identity, the more likely respondents were to think EU membership a bad thing and to want to leave the EU. The contrast between England and Scotland in these data is striking. If Euroscepticism is associated with English identifiers in England, it tends to be British identifiers who hold this attitude in Scotland. [...] in England, British-only identifiers are slightly more Eurosceptic than the previous (more British than English) category. This may lend some support to Ormston’s subsequent finding that stronger feeling of both Britishness and Englishness each have an impact on attitudes to EU membership.¹⁸¹

Therefore, while national identities do not appear to be a predictable factor in Wales and Scotland, the same cannot be said for England, where the data has shown an undeniable link between a strong Englishness and the likeliness to oppose to the EU. Moreover, data have also shown that both Englishness and exclusive Britishness (the category of British-only identifiers) are indicators of a Eurosceptic attitude. Basing their conclusions on these and other findings, Henderson and the other contributors of ‘England, Englishness and Brexit’¹⁸² have affirmed that there is evidence that «exclusive identities, whether British or English/Scottish/Welsh, may

¹⁸⁰Wellings, B., *English Nationalism and Euroscepticism: Losing the Peace cit.*

¹⁸¹Henderson, A., Jeffery, C., Liñeira, R., Scully, R., Wincott, D., Wyn Jones, R., *op. cit.*, pp.9-10

¹⁸²*Ibidem*

push towards Euroscepticism»¹⁸³. Nonetheless, as they acknowledge, it is Englishness, more than any of the other identities making up the UK, that is most linked to Euroscepticism and to representations of the Continent as ‘the Other’. This statement is also supported by several studies conducted in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, which, with some distinctions, stress the significance of Englishness. One of the most recent analyses on the Brexit results comes from Henderson, Jeffery, Wincott and Wyn Jones, who co-signed a study entitled ‘How Brexit was made in England’¹⁸⁴, published in the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*. This study focuses on national identity variables and their effects, using FoES data and including variables used by other post-referendum analyses, such as age, education and class (which have led Goodwin and Heath¹⁸⁵ to argue the ‘left-behind’ thesis), and others connected to nostalgia, immigration, and traditional British attitudes. The results have given, in the scholars’ words, «limited support»¹⁸⁶ to the ‘left-behind’ thesis (with social variables seeming less influential than expected) and are of great interest in relation to national identities and attitudes towards immigration. Among the variables regarding immigration, attitudes towards the effect of immigration on public service and the economy seems to be the most relevant, putting first what they define ‘material circumstances’ over ‘cultural aversion’. Identity variables, on the other hand,

suggest that English and British identity influence Brexit vote intention in different ways. English identifiers are significantly more likely to say they will vote Leave and the effect is unchanged in the fully specified model. Feeling British is initially a predictor of support for Remain, but the addition of subsequent variables dilutes this effect. In short, English identity and British identity do not exert the same level of influence on attitudes to EU membership, nor do they work in the same direction.¹⁸⁷

According to the results, therefore, Britishness would not be an indicator of a Leave attitude, while the connection between voting Leave and Englishness would be striking and even untouched by the addition of other variables. More surprisingly, nostalgia and perception of England as a distinct national identity have not emerged as attitudes influencing the vote. This has led scholars to downplay their significance, as well as that of cultural dimensions in relation to immigration.

Reducing the impact of nostalgia, the perception of being a distinct national community, and the cultural dimensions influencing attitudes towards immigrant, could be very

¹⁸³*Ivi*, p.11

¹⁸⁴Henderson, A., Jeffery, C., Wincott, D., Wyn Jones, R., *op. cit.*

¹⁸⁵Goodwin, M., Heath, O., *op. cit.*

¹⁸⁶Henderson, A., Jeffery, C., Wincott, D., Wyn Jones, R., *op. cit.*, p.11

¹⁸⁷*Ibidem*

counterproductive, considering that analyses such as this one, despite their merits, are always based on people's perceptions and could, therefore, leave out factors that are mostly unconscious. As Robert Eaglestone writes, «moods are moods about *something*. They have a hard-to-pin-down history, form and shape and cannot be easily analysed (in a survey) but they are still there and potent. Indeed, they carry meaning or consequences on their own».¹⁸⁸ The very significance of Englishness, in fact, could not find a plausible explanation without relating these findings to previous historical and cultural analyses in relation to Europe, which have stressed that

[i]t is England, not “Britain”, that has the greatest difficulty in coming to terms with Europe, and the greater European integration currently under way. The Irish, the Scottish, even the Welsh have always had a different view of Europe from the English. It is far easier for them to contemplate a new relation with Europe than it is for the English.¹⁸⁹

Thus, even if it certainly remains valid that Britain has shaped its image in opposition to a European Other represented as ‘the continental foe’, a specification here is needed. During British history, Europe was undoubtedly the evil conqueror, the Catholic entity, the imperial competitor, but with relevant distinctions: it was not the Catholic enemy for Scotland and Ireland, since for a great part of their history both areas were largely Catholic and striving to preserve or recover their independence from the ‘English’ conqueror; and it was not an entity in opposition to Wales either, which, at least before its annexation by the English, had relevant cultural contacts with the European continent. This explains Kumar's affirmation that

[I]ike the countries of Central and Eastern Europe seeking to escape the embrace of the Russian bear, “Europe” for the so-called Celtic nations of the British Isles represents a way of escaping the longstanding hitches of the imperial power in the Isles, England.¹⁹⁰

It was England, therefore, as the colonizer and founder of the United Kingdom, to shape (and still detain) this image of Europe, and it is, first and foremost, in the light of this consideration that the data should be read. Even the weight of the ‘material circumstances’ on attitudes towards immigration has a cultural dimension, considering that it is strictly linked to the socio-cultural category of the undeserving poor and to the rise of tribalism. Moreover, even if nostalgia has appeared largely absent, it certainly was relevant, as many scholars previously mentioned have stressed, in the Brexit discourse, where it has been used to depict an image of

¹⁸⁸Eaglestone, R., «Cruel Nostalgia and the memory of the Second World War» *cit.*, p.95

¹⁸⁹Kumar, K., *op. cit.*, p.71

¹⁹⁰*Ivi*, p.76

the country rooted in an English (more than British) imaginary, and therefore at the core of English nationalism. As Shilliam reports, a «melancholic racialized nationalism» was probably at the very basis of the white working class' Leave-vote more than «class interest» since «[...] “imagined communities” delineated by national and ethnic belonging were more influential to referendum voters than tangible connections to local communities»¹⁹¹.

Furthermore, the perception of being a distinct (and neglected) national community cannot be ruled out too, since it is deeply intertwined with the English call for an institutional recognition of England after devolution and for self-government, which is perceived as being undermined both by the devolutionary measures and the EU. The neglect of England in the devolution process is at the centre of the so-called ‘West-Lothian Question’, coined by Enoch Powell after the constituency of the then MP for West Lothian, Tam Dalyell, who raised it for the first time in Parliament. Known also as ‘English Votes for English Laws’, the West-Lothian Question aimed at exposing the contradiction of representatives from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland voting on English matters while English representatives could not vote on exclusively Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish issues after the creation of the devolved assemblies. This could happen because, as Colin Copus outlines, England has been denied «even the faintest recognition of nationhood by the British state and has been prevented from choosing its own governing arrangements, or whether or not it wishes to remain in the UK». ¹⁹²On one hand, in fact, British mainstream politics decided to deal with nationalisms in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, accommodating it through devolution arrangements; on the other,

[n]o such accommodation was made with English nationalism. On the contrary, prominent politicians in the three parties have spoken out vociferously and often insultingly against the English, in ways they have not about Scottish and Welsh nationalism. Some examples include Jack Straw’s and William Hague’s comments about the dangerous and violent nature of English nationalism (and the English) (BBC Radio 4, 9 January 2000); or David Cameron’s repeated comments about ‘sour little Englanders’ and the ‘ignorance of the English about their Celtic neighbours’ at the Conservative Party Conference in 2006.¹⁹³

The neglect of England’s people, the stigmatization of English nationalism, the open and ignored question of English self-government are rooted in old habits inherited from the

¹⁹¹Shilliam is here referring to a study of recent data from the UK Household Longitudinal survey by SurrIDGE *et al.* (2017), cit. in Shilliam, R., *Race and the Undeserving Poor. cit.*, p.161

¹⁹²Copus, C., «Englishness and Local Government: Reflecting a Nation’s Past or Merely an Administrative Convenience», in Aughey, A., Berberich, C. (eds), *These Englands: A Conversation on National Identity*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2011, p.207

¹⁹³Ivi, p.210

formation of the United Kingdom. As Colin Copus suggests, the development of Britain as an imperial power did not rely

on the supremacy of parliament to prevent Scottish, Welsh and Irish localism fraying the Union. Far from it, rather, the success of Britain as a supranational state rested on subjugating England and Englishness to the British project and in preventing English distinctiveness maintaining itself and emerging from under the cloak of the British project.¹⁹⁴

But these mechanisms sooner or later do cause backlashes. As underlined by O'Toole, «[j]ust one in five English people now consented to their current form of governance». Not having the chance, quoting Outhwaite, to vote to «withdraw from London or neoliberalism or globalization»¹⁹⁵, the English could still vote against what years of populism, Euroscepticism and nationalism have depicted as a symbol of all the powers conspiring against its interests and of the deceiving and dangerous 'Other' *par excellence*: Europe. As O' Toole has affirmed, «[t]he long history of displacing onto the European Union the unresolved anxieties of England made possible a deft transference: if you can't secede from Britain, secede from Europe»¹⁹⁶.

The transference was also made possible by a crucial misconception: that the EU would be the most influential layer of government, and therefore the primal culprit (together with the treacherous national elites) of everything wrong in English lives. It follows that Brexit could be interpret as an 'act of displacement':

[d]eeply disaffected with Westminster and Whitehall, England-without-London unleashed its fury on Brussels and Strasbourg. Unable to name the 'us' of England, it was offered the chance to name the 'them' of the EU (and implicitly the real and imagined migrants that somehow embodied it) and took it.¹⁹⁷

At a loss in a world in constant change, in a nation that does not look familiar anymore, frightened by the future, the English would have decided to retrieve a sense of self and nationhood by drawing (again) a line of demarcation between themselves and the Continent and withdrawing from the EU.

The stress on the cultural dimension underneath Brexit does not want to suggest that the other dimensions, for instance the economic factors, are of less relevance. It is not coincidental that those areas of England which most favoured Brexit were in the north-east, areas that have also been the most affected by immigration (especially the Polish one), de-industrialisation and the collapse of the labour movement. The same situation can be observed in Wales, and this

¹⁹⁴Ivi, p.196

¹⁹⁵Outhwaite, W. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.68

¹⁹⁶O'Toole, F., *op. cit.*, p.191

¹⁹⁷Ivi, pp.191-192

would explain its slight majority in favour of leaving the EU despite the substantial funds the Welsh receive from Europe. But, of course, immigration, de-industrialisation, neoliberalism, globalisation, devolution, are not 'caused' by the European Union. Therefore, Brexiteers would never have obtained their 'Independence Day' without leveraging on prior, powerful structures of feeling able to affect the vote. It is here that cultural and literary analyses find their place and value and that ours begins.

Before Brexit: Brexit Discourse and Contemporary Fiction

From Politics to Literature: The Nation and the Novel

When several spokesmen for the Remain front started campaigning, they all seemed to have something in common: a strategy based on facts, numbers and statistics, usually regarding the economic consequences of a withdrawal from the European Union. However, as Charlie Cooper wrote in *The Independent* a few weeks before the vote,

[i]n this feverish post-truth atmosphere, facts and reason go out the window as effective political arguments. Many voters simply don't trust anything anyone says on the EU anymore. The eventual winner in this referendum therefore won't be the side with the best facts, it will be the one with the best story to tell.¹⁹⁸

As the definition of post-truth states, «objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief»¹⁹⁹; or, using Lauren Berlant's words, «a public binding to the political is best achieved neither by policy nor ideology but the affect of feeling political together»²⁰⁰. Moods and attitudes which influence voters' intentions are not fixed, as Robert Eaglestone underlines, but can be 'shaped', or better 'directed', as they are «“constantly negotiated” by our interactions with each other, with the media, with the world (Berlant 2006)»²⁰¹.

This does not mean that facts do not count at all. They do, as long as they serve the story. It is the story, in the end, that is fundamental in effectively communicating any message. Thus, human understanding of the present, recording of the past and imagining of the future, are all made possible through storytelling: it is our means, as J.K. Rowling writes, «to make sense of the world»²⁰², to comprehend and retain information. And this is how it works in politics too, where stories are deployed to make sense of the present and to make up visions of the future that could appeal to the voters. Consequently, when the polls began to show that the strategy based on 'objective facts' was not working (people, as Gove made explicit, 'have had enough of experts'), Remainers tried to re-direct public opinion referring, instead, to glorious moments in British history and by depicting dreadful scenarios of a Europe dragged (again) into war by nationalisms. In short, the pro-EU campaigners tried to compete with Leavers on the same level: the art of storytelling. But it was, as the saying goes, too little, too late: the new

¹⁹⁸Cooper, C., «David Cameron is no Europhile: and that's why his opponents tell a more convincing story», *The Independent*, 6 June 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/brexit-eu-referendum-david-cameron-is-no-europhile-tell-a-convincing-story-a7067686.html> (7 July 2019)

¹⁹⁹The definition is found in Buckledee, S., *op. cit.*, p.151

²⁰⁰Berlant, L., *Cruel Optimism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011, p.224

²⁰¹Eaglestone, R., «Cruel Nostalgia and the Memory of the Second World War» *cit.*, p.94

²⁰²Rowling, J.K., *op. cit.*

narrative hinted at ‘a past greatness never lost’, maintained an element of fear, but had no ‘beliefs’ or ‘desires’ to build on: no vision. «At a time of great uncertainty and insecurity», Cooper points out, «an electorate want to hear a story about how voting to Remain could make their lives better – not just how it could ensure their lives don’t get worse»²⁰³, that is to say, not a report or a reliable analysis, but rather a fairy-tale to believe in. As Jorn Precht, professor of storytelling and scriptwriter, explains,

[t]here are certain ingredients to a story. One is a catastrophe or disaster of some kind. We, the heroes of our stories, are in some kind of mortal danger. And then there's a sort of resurrection and we fight back from the crisis. If we look at typical populist stories, then we see that the evocation of a crisis or decline is always there. It's one of the basic elements of populist argumentation structures. Others are, for example, the notion of common people versus the elite and that the people have a kind of common sense underlying their judgments. And then populists also have conspiracy theories regarding the evil intrigues of the elites. And the discourse becomes very moralized.²⁰⁴

These elements, as we know, were all at play in the storytelling enacted by the Leave campaign: mortal dangers (Europeanization, mass immigration, loss of sovereignty); the heroes (the people and their true spokesmen); the enemies (the EU, the elites, Remain voters) conspiring against the heroes; and lastly, the resurrection (make Britain great again by voting Leave). Ultimately, the Leave storytelling struck the right note owing to the fact that the sort of resurrection it offered was constructed after the very identification of people’s fears and urges, which means that it was a ‘happily ever after’ ingrained – and therefore extremely powerful – in the structures of feeling of the nation. A cultural imaginary, as we have seen, strictly related to English national identity and history.

As Sarah Upstone writes,

[r]ather than focusing our attention on immediate socio-political contexts, cultural imaginaries ask us to consider how places and communities have been represented over time and to ask how attitudes to national and international identities and alliances exist as a result of a long process of representation.²⁰⁵

Upstone is here acknowledging the essential link that exists among culture, national identity and its representation in cultural products. Culture, as Eaglestone writes, is indeed «at the heart of national identity»²⁰⁶ given that the nation, as an idea, is a product of culture. Following Benedict Anderson’s conceptualisation, the nation is none other than an ‘imagined

²⁰³Cooper, C., *op. cit.*

²⁰⁴Interview to John Precht, in Rasper, A., «Understanding the populist narrative», *DW*, 28 October 2018, <https://p.dw.com/p/37AiC>, (7 July 2019)

²⁰⁵Upstone, S., «Do Novels Tell Us How to Vote?», in Eaglestone, R. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.47

²⁰⁶Eaglestone, R., «Introduction: Brexit and Literature» *cit.*, p.1

community’, meaning a social construct a group of people identify with and from which they shape a collective identity.²⁰⁷ Quoting Parrinder,

[t]he nation, that is, is not a material entity like a country or a state. It is an invisible and (at least partly) theoretical construction which elicits powerful emotional and imaginative identifications. Patriotism or love of country, according to this argument, may imply an attachment to real things, but nationalism is loyalty to an idea.²⁰⁸

To make the idea of the nation concrete and ‘emotional and imaginative identifications’ possible, a narrative of identity needs to be created and deployed. It is therefore through an act of ‘repetitive narration’, as Homi Bhabha writes, that a nation comes to life: through a set of representations that are repeated across time and conveyed by many means.²⁰⁹ National narratives that ‘write’ and ‘re-write’ the nation are composed by definite traits of the community, myths of origin, glorifying versions of history, invented traditions: they are, consequently, rooted in the culture of the group they refer to.

Literary works are privileged means in relation to representation of the nation and construction of its national narratives, since they focus on the understanding of both the individual and the community, making possible the imagining of the nation as a whole. As Christine Berberich points out, «[l]iterature thus assumes a mythopoeic function: it helps create and perpetuate myths old and new alike and so contributes to cementing a notion of community, belonging and (national) identity»²¹⁰. Here the word ‘myth’ is used according to its interpretation by cultural historians, that is to say ‘myths’ as «images that are commonly recognized and understood»²¹¹ and that recall a ‘horizon of references’ with the power of impacting on people’s imagination and affecting their emotional sphere. There are many myths that are at the core of English literature and may be considered, on their own, markers of nationality: for instance, the myth of Robyn Hood or the myth of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.²¹² A ‘new’ myth that cements – and summons - notions of community, belonging and national identity is, as we have seen, the Second World War itself, which, as the «memory of the country at war against foes who are simply, tidily, and uncomplicatedly evil», has recently acquired, quoting Paul Gilroy, «the status of an ethnic myth»²¹³, becoming in

²⁰⁷Cfr. Anderson, B., *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London & New York, Verso, 1991

²⁰⁸Parrinder, P., *op. cit.*, p.14

²⁰⁹Cfr. Bhabha, H. (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, London & New York, Routledge, 1999

²¹⁰Berberich, C., «Bursting the Bubble», *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, Vol,51 No.2, 2015, pp.158-169, p.159

²¹¹*Ivi*, p.160

²¹²For further analysis on the two myths mentioned, see Knight, S., *The Politics of Myth*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 2015

²¹³Gilroy, P., *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture. cit.*, p.97

different ways – according to which nation of the UK is taken into consideration – a «signifier for a rooted Britishness or even Englishness»²¹⁴.

A literary genre that is particularly involved with national identity is the novel, whose development, incidentally, coincides with that of the nation-state as a form of government. For this reason, Franco Moretti has even described the novel as «the symbolic form of the nation-state»²¹⁵. Thus, the act of reading a novel, even though fictions are produced by an individual (the author) and addressed to another individual (the reader) to be read in isolation, enables the imagining of a community of readers speaking the same language and performing the same action at the same time. The imagination of a community of readers, in its turn, ensures the possibility of imagining another community: a national one to belong to. As Parrinder stresses,

[w]ith the rise of the novel came a shift in the literary idea of nationhood. In *The Making of English National Identity* (2003) Krishan Kumar adopts the distinction, first put forward in 1907 by Friedrich Meinecke, between the ‘political’ and the ‘cultural’ nation. The political nation is the nation as defined by John of Gaunt. It is, in Kumar’s words, ‘the “state-nation”, rather than, strictly speaking, the “nation-state”’. It is a nation formed, in many cases, “from the top down”, as in France, Spain and Britain where centralizing monarchies accomplished the main work of national-building as the necessary complement to their state-making.’ The cultural nation is, according to Kumar, the ‘nation-state proper’; it is a concept in which the state arises from the nation rather than vice versa. It is the idea of the cultural nation, not the political nation, that inspires cultural nationalism and popular independence movements.²¹⁶

While the political nation stands for the state and the ruling elite, the cultural nation represents, instead, the very idea of the nation bonding the community, which makes the formation and survival of a state possible. It is the cultural nation that the novel portrays, addresses and reflects upon, even contributing to create the conditions for the formation of the political nation. This is easy to acknowledge looking at the process of decolonization, where literature has been fundamental in creating national myths and instilling a sense of belonging that fuelled the fight for independence.²¹⁷ The novel, therefore, can legitimately be described as an influential source of ideas of nationhood and national belonging, as well as «a vehicle for national myth and [...] the principal artistic expression of postcolonial nationhood»²¹⁸.

The identified connection between the novel and the nation has also let «[c]ultural historians often assume that there is a direct relationship between the state of literary art and

²¹⁴Eaglestone, R., «Cruel Nostalgia and the Memory of the Second World War» *cit.*, p.97

²¹⁵Cit. in Parrinder, P., *op. cit.*, p.14

²¹⁶Ivi, p.17

²¹⁷For further analysis, see Albertazzi, S., *La Letteratura Postcoloniale. Dall’Impero alla World Literature*, Roma, Carocci, 2013

²¹⁸Parrinder, P., *op. cit.*, p.3

the state of the nation, so that literary change becomes a metaphor for national resurgence or national decline»²¹⁹. Let's think, for instance, of the development of modernist literature and its relation not only to new theories and discoveries in other fields (among many, psychoanalysis), but also to the horrors of the First World War and the state of the nation in that period. This is particularly true of the English novel, where the preponderance of discourse around national identity, with consequent representations of traditional and alternative views on Englishness, is directly connected to historical moments of decline and resurgence of the perception of the English as a 'nation'. On this matter, Parrinder acknowledges that

[c]ritics of eighteenth-century English fiction such as Hazlitt and Scott were, perhaps, the first to identify and describe the 'cast of nationality' in the English novel. The development of the form from the earliest times to the twenty-first century has been intimately linked to changes in national consciousness in successive epochs.²²⁰

Not by chance, analysing the work of novelists from Defoe onwards, it is possible to identify, sometimes in the foreground, sometimes in the background, the presence of an ongoing conversation about Englishness, with a distinction between radical (alternative) and conservative (traditional) definitions: «the radical definition is fluid, hospitable, and welcoming to immigrants while the conservative definition is static, defensive, and xenophobic to a greater or lesser extent»²²¹. The term 'conversation' is used intentionally, to recall Aughey and Berberich's definition of Englishness as

a conversation, an imaginative rather than a purely functional engagement, with the country's history, culture and society, where what is conversed about, explicitly or implicitly, is the meaning of England itself.²²²

The debate on the meaning of England is strictly related, as stressed before, to the development of the First and Second British Empire (the UK itself and the empire overseas) and the construction of a bonding, inclusive identity that could overcome national belonging: Britishness. This collective identity, born to create a sense of supranational community, could (more or less) easily coexist with Scottishness, Welshness and Northern Irishness, considering that an individual can identify with more than one collective identity at a time (a Scot may feel British and European at the same time, with no conflict among the three identifications). The same 'smooth' process of multiple identifications is not to be found among the English. As we

²¹⁹*Ivi*, p.2

²²⁰*Ivi*, p.6

²²¹*Ivi*, p.19

²²²Aughey, A., Berberich, C. (eds), «Introduction: these Englands – a conversation on national identity», in Aughey, A., Berberich, C., *op. cit.*, p.2

have seen, the label of ‘Otherness’ attached to Europe in the construction of the English identity is one of the elements that, consequently, makes the construction of a European English identity so difficult, while the fabrication of Britishness through the incessant *pouring* of English traits and the simultaneous silencing of any expression of English nationalism is what has made the relation between the two identities so confusing and conflict-ridden. According to Michael Gardiner, «[t]his is why English has always been a field defined by *loss*, since it was founded on an always precedent system of values in which the national was said to be represented while it was actually being estranged»²²³. This sense of loss has also been fuelled, as anticipated, by the demise of the British Empire and the devolution process, causing an English outcry against alleged imbalance of power and distribution of resources. Furthermore, the English question of identity has also been worsened by massive immigration, the formation of global cities and the depopulation and impoverishment of rural areas – all elements that make the reality of contemporary England very different from the conservative cultural imaginary linked to the country and its people. The imaginary in question depicts a rural, pastoral and exclusive white England that, through a long-established literary tradition, has been opposed to the racially complex empire and transformed into a fully-fledged myth still celebrated today. To confirm this, as Berberich highlights,

one has only to think of calendars featuring picturesquely thatched cottages clustered around village greens; marketing campaigns by the tourist board; or period drama with, traditionally, rural and upper-class settings. The heritage industry in particular thrives on presentations of England as a country idyll unspoiled by “modernity”. This image of an England of rolling hills, empty but for flocks of contented sheep, is one to which millions of people all over the world, fed on a diet of classic literature and TV adaptations, still subscribe; the “real”, 21-st century England, a modern, multicultural nation with buzzing urban centres where the majority of the population actually live and where chicken tikka masala has long since replaced fish’n’chips as the most popular “English” food, is excluded.²²⁴

Although this England of pastoral idylls and upper-class settings is, nowadays, none other than a myth such as the Robin Hood legend, it remains, nonetheless, extremely alive through its constant repositioning: in television shows and films (*Downton Abbey* is but one of the most recent examples); in websites and travel guides marketing the country for tourist purposes; and, of course, in literary works, where the image of the English rural idyll has taken on the characteristics of a *tópos* in its own right. This vision of the nation survives thanks to ceaseless representation, to its ‘repetitive narration’ in different cultural products. And it is

²²³Gardiner, M., *op. cit.*, p.7

²²⁴Berberich, C., «Bursting the Bubble» *cit.*, p.159

again representation through narration that enables its rejection and encourages its rewriting. One has only to think of novels such as Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and Natasha Solomons' *Mr Rosenblum's List* (2010), to come to this conclusion.

It follows that, in order to understand the current English identity crisis and the structures of feeling involved in Brexit discourse, there is no better object of analysis than contemporary fiction, which continuously engages with cultural imaginaries and social and political anxieties. It is hardly a coincidence that literature has recently experienced the emergence of new structures of feeling regarding anxiety for the future, failure of knowledge and a problematised relationship with time²²⁵, considering that we are living in a historical moment that is characterized by precariousness and that populist storytelling, as Perch stresses, «seems mainly to work [precisely] with two feelings — one is nostalgia, and the other [...] is fear of the unknown»²²⁶. If anything, this should be considered a confirmation of the fact that contemporary fiction (and literature in general) should be read as a product of the cultural conditions of the time and that these conditions, in turn, can be traced in literature. As Parrinder writes, literary works can indeed give us «an inside view of a society or nation, just as [they give us] access to personal experiences very different from our own»²²⁷.

Referring specifically to Brexit, Petra Rau has affirmed that the analysis of fiction may be considered a

(homeopathic) archaeology aimed at retrieving a measure of complexity from the banality of populist arguments and rash commentaries: this debacular 'now' has had a long run-up and a number of equally catastrophic predecessors.²²⁸

According to Rau, analysing the novels written before the referendum would allow the reader to go beyond 'the banality' of the Brexit populist narrative and understand the 'complexity' underneath the European bogeyman (the EU as institution and the European migrant as its physical manifestation): on the one hand, economic and political issues such as social inequality, terrorism, the economic crisis, the migration and refugee crisis; on the other hand, the structures of feeling exploited by Brexiteers related to nostalgia (wartime and empire) and tribalism (racial and social class hierarchies). The 'debacular' now, as Rau defines it, did not pop up out of nowhere, and traces of the populist narrative can be found in literary works

²²⁵For further analysis see Bentley, N., Hubble, N., Wilson, L. (eds), *op. cit.*; Hubble, N., Tew, P., *London in Contemporary British Fiction: The City Beyond the City*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016; Rogers, D., McLeod, J. (eds.), *op. cit.*

²²⁶Interview to John Precht, in Rasper, A., *op. cit.*

²²⁷Parrinder, P., *op. cit.*, p.1

²²⁸Rau, P., «Autumn After the Referendum» in Eaglestone, R. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.33

published before the referendum, re-reading them at the light of the vote and political analyses. Concerning this, Kristian Shaw has highlighted the

history of Eurosceptic British fiction (relating specifically to the EU) dating back to the United Kingdom's first attempt at joining the European Economic Community (EEC), as authors addressed Britain's loss of political sovereignty and diminished post-war role on the world stage from a dominant player to a disempowered European member state.²²⁹

Shaw is referring to the existence of an established trend of Europhobic fiction that developed after the joining of the EEC in the 70s and revolves around the idea of the EU as a totalitarian super-state ruled by the Germans. Novels that belong to the subgenre are, for instance, Len Deighton's *SS-GB* (1978), Robert Harris' *Fatherland* (1992), C.J. Sansom's *Dominion* (2012), or John King's *The Liberal Politics of Adolf Hitler* (2016), which is one of the latest additions to the subgenre. These novels are all dystopian fantasies, counter-factual fictions that re-imagine the country either as being invaded by the Germans and forced to resist, or already defeated by the evil Germans and transformed in a small European province. Deighton's *SS-GB* is a thriller set in 1941, right after a successful German invasion, with a Britain defeated by the Germans, Winston Churchill executed by an SS firing squad, and many bureaucrats and members of Parliament ready to align with German politics²³⁰; Harris, in a fashion similar to Philip Roth's 2004 novel *The Plot Against America*, creates an alternative story that is set in 1964 in Germany, with the Greater German Reich flourishing and Britain having a marginal role even in the narrative, appearing through casual references to the country and its people. Sheer's *Resistance*, by contrast, is set in a remote valley in Wales and sees a British resistance movement come alive after the D-Day has failed and Germans have invaded Southern Britain. Finally, Samson's *Dominion* depicts a Britain where Churchill is leader of an underground resistance while British collaborators with the Nazi regime are governing the country.²³¹

John King's *The Liberal Politics of Adolf Hitler* is one of the most interesting examples of this subgenre. Written during the Brexit campaign by a self-proclaimed Brexiteer, it is based on the ideas and images the author expressed during the campaign, especially in *The Left Wing Case for Leaving the EU*, an essay for *The New Stateman* where he defines the EU undemocratic

²²⁹Shaw, K., «BrexLit». *cit.*, p.18

²³⁰Interestingly, the novel has been adapted for television by the BBC in 2017, just in the aftermath of the Brexit vote.

²³¹For further analysis on the novels in relation to Brexit, see O'Toole, F., *op. cit.*

and distant from the people, as well as a tool for multinational companies.²³² The novel is set in a future where the European nations as we know them have mingled in the alleged final stage of the EU project: the United States of Europe. The super-state is strongly centralised, with its politics based on doublespeak, appropriation, manipulation and the erasure of pre-existing national cultures, and effective surveillance tools to keep track of and suffocate the many resistance movements that are spreading in the Continent. One of these resistance movements is to be found in Britain, with members trying to infiltrate the ranks of the totalitarian system. Leaving aside the thriller-ish spy-plot as well as the most trivial details of the novel, *The Liberal politics of Adolf Hitler* is full of alternative versions of the Second World War and its protagonists and clearly refers more than once to the British post-war narrative of decline and to the theme of the treacherous elites conspiring against common people.

Although the novels in question, given their engagement with Euroscepticism and the post-war narrative of decline, could be rightly defined as pre-Brexit fiction, they will not be further objects of this analysis. As was stressed previously, the principle focus of this study is on the emotive strategies employed in the Brexit campaign and how Englishness is constructed, both historically and in the present. Though these novels may reference these concepts in passing – King’s novel discusses the difference between Englishness and Britishness – these references are fleeting.

Another subgenre that has been immediately connected to Brexit, being particularly entangled with social and political anxieties related to Brexit discourse, is the State of the Nation or the Condition of England novel. The latter definition clearly linked the subgenre to its Victorian precursors and to the ‘Condition of England Question’. Going back to 1839, the ‘Condition of England Question’ may be defined as a warning to the establishment, raised by the Scottish writer, philosopher and social commentator Thomas Carlyle about the condition of the English working class during the Industrial Revolution. The subgenre can also be found under many other labels, for instance ‘social novel’, ‘social problem novel’, ‘social protest novel’ or ‘working-class novel’, clearly all references to its main thematic concern: social issues, especially class conflicts. Novels that can be considered representative of this subgenre are Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855) or Dickens’ *Hard Times* (1854) A common feature of this kind of fiction, as Michael Ross stresses, is that

²³²Cfr. King, J., «The Left Wing Case for Leaving the EU», *The New Statesman*, 11 June 2015 <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/06/john-king-left-wing-case-leaving-eu> (7 July 2019)

[w]hatever the authors' explicit allegiances, their novels, broadly speaking, project a liberal vision, manifesting a compassionate concern with the lives not only of the most privileged but also of the most oppressed members of British society.²³³

The birth of the Condition of England novel was clearly triggered by the grievances of the lower strata of society following the Industrial Revolution and the changes in working conditions and was inspired by the idea of literature having a social role (quoting again Kumar, literature as 'implicit sociology'). After social reforms and improvement of working class' conditions, and with the imperial conquest coming into the foreground, the subgenre started to be put aside, especially after the Great War and the development of Modernism. The Condition of England novel, then, re-emerged again in the 1950s, when novelists revived it to analyse British social and cultural conditions after the Second World War. These post-war novelists, interestingly,

mostly discussed Englishness and the problems of the English, which was both a revision of the sense of national identity that the two wars fostered and a response to the question of who was 'British' caused by immigration, specifically by the Empire Windrush immigration in 1948. They also represented the establishment of the welfare state and increased education access in Britain.²³⁴

This has clearly connected the genre not only with themes related to social class conflict, but especially with the state of England – the shrinking expectations, the sense of loss and the question of identity that were equally at the core of Brexit. Not by chance, a great number of state-of-the-nation novels were written in the years following Thatcherism (directly dealing with its legacy) and at the turn of the 21st century, with Caroline Lusin even claiming that «the Condition of England novel has reached a second peak after its Victorian heyday»²³⁵. No wonder this literary form flourished in the period in question, which has been characterised by devolution, the questioning of the multicultural paradigm, terrorist attacks, the prominence of the immigration issue (connected to the entry of Eastern European countries in the EU and to the migrant and refugee crisis), the economic crisis and the consequent austerity policies. As Justin Cartwright outlines

[w]hen nations are undergoing some form of stress, be it financial or ethical or even military, state of the nation novels tend to be more numerous; they come in many

²³³Ross, M. L., «On a Darling Planet: Ian McEwan's *Saturday* and the Condition of England», *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 54.1, 2008, pp. 75–96, p.75

²³⁴Kiliç, M. Ö., *Maggie Gee: Writing the Condition-of-England Novel*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013, p.10

²³⁵Lusin, C., «The Condition of England Novel in the 21st Century: Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) and Jonathan Coe's *Number 11, Or Tales That Witness Madness* (2015)» in Nünning, V, Nünning, A., *The British Novel in the Twenty-First Century*, Wvt Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2018, p.247

guises, but they have one thing in particular, that they provide a commentary or a judgment on the times.²³⁶

Many of the novels that have been published from devolution onwards are, in fact, fictions that, in different ways deal with the current state of the nation: examples are Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and *NW* (2012), Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), Rupert Thomson's *Divided Kingdom* (2005), James Ballard's *Kingdom Come* (2006), Chris Cleave's *The Other Hand* (2008) and Martin Amis' *Lionel Asbo: State of England* (2012). These novels, which use a dystopic or more realistic approach, convey the native or/and the migrant point of view and reflect upon the tendencies, events and issues that are at the core of contemporary national reality.

Among the Condition of England novels published in the last decades, the writer Alex Preston has even identified a sort of 'sub-category' that he has connected with a specific author, Anthony Trollope, and in particular with his novel *The Way We Live Now* (1875), written after his return from Australia and denouncing the greed of the national financial world through the now archetypal character of the banker Augustus Melmotte. According to Preston, the revival of Trollope's model would be due to the similarities between the Victorian period in which he wrote and ours which, «[w]ith our robber-baron bankers, our financial panics, our privileged political elite and our disenfranchised migrant workers»²³⁷, would perfectly resemble Trollope's times. Preston identifies several key elements in *The Way We Live Now*: engagement with contemporary themes, a focus on the financial elite with the depiction of shady bankers detached from people's ordinary lives, multiple viewpoints and a London setting. These are all elements he also finds in Justin Cartwright's *Other People's Money* (1994), Amanda Craig's *Hearts and Minds* (2009), Sebastian Faulks' *A Week in December* (2009) and John Lanchester's *Capital* (2012), which he consequently defines as neo-Trollopian. While Craig's *Hearts and Minds*, along with *The Road Home* (2007) by Rose Tremain and *Two Caravans* (2007) by Marina Lewycka, focuses more on economic issues related to immigration and the exploitation of migrant labourers, Cartwright's, Faulks's and Lanchester's novels are, instead, more centred on economic issues related to the housing crisis and the gentrification process, the impoverishment of working and middle classes, and the consequent class conflict between the lower strata of society and the well-off national elites. Sebastian Faulks's *A Week in December* and John Lanchester's *Capital*, in particular, are very similar: in the way they depict the world

²³⁶Cartwright, J., «Justin Cartwright's top 10 state of the nation novels», *The Guardian*, 9 March 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/mar/09/justin-cartwright-state-of-nation-novels> (7 July 2019)

²³⁷Preston, A., «The way we live now? Follow the money trail back to Anthony Trollope...», *The Guardian*, 12 February 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/feb/12/trollope-state-nation-london-novel> (7 July 2019)

of high finance through the respective characters of John Veals and Roger Yount; in the way they use the techniques of shifting viewpoints to put in contrast the different realities of their characters and to give voice to the marginalised (both legal and illegal immigrants, asylum seekers, members of the older generation perceived to be left-out and ethnic minorities); in the way they both focus on the difficulty of being Muslim and British/English after the terrorist attacks and the war on terror.

Another Condition of England novel that portrays some of these characteristics is Jonathan Coe's *Number 11*, which was published in 2015 and is one of the most affected by contemporary events related to Brexit (the war in Iraq and Afghanistan; the terrorist attacks; the economic crisis; the 'outbreak' of the migrant and refugee crises, growing inequality and distrust towards the establishment). The novel is especially marked by a sense of insecurity and vulnerability, emphasised by the choice of a Gothic atmosphere. Focusing on the concept of 'truth' as something easily manipulated by the media and politicians, and on the rigid structures of class that deeply divide contemporary society, the novel convey the image of a nation haunted by the ghostly presence of immigrants and 'undeserving' poor, trapped by greedy and self-centred elites in a state of intended 'invisibility'.

Given the themes they focus on, especially the issue of (Eastern European) immigration and the economic cleavage, many of these novels have been defined in the aftermath of the referendum pre-Brexit fictions. However, even if they are undoubtedly important for understanding the condition of England and the economic concerns underneath the Brexit outcome, they engage only occasionally with the structures of feeling related to nostalgia (wartime and empire) and tribalism (racial and social class hierarchies) and, especially, with the question of English identity. For the same reason, other novels that could have been selected for further reading for their link to thematic concerns at the core of Brexit, for instance *Everything I Found On The Beach* (2011) by the Welsh author Cynan Jones, have been put aside because of their non-English setting or because less focused on the perspective of an exclusive English identity.

Given that the primal concern of this literary analysis, also for reason of space and time, is not to give a comprehensive account of all the novels that could be labelled as pre-Brexit fiction and of the interaction among them, a further selection has been carried out. Ultimately, the novels selected for close reading are *Speak for England* (2005) by James Hawes and *The White Family* (2002) by Maggie Gee, which have emerged as the most representative pre-Brexit fictions according to the following selection criteria: being set in England; being characterized by a focus on a perception of events driven by Englishness; engaging with the economic issues

and the structures of feeling regarding nostalgia and racial and class hierarchies at the core of Leave narrative. Published in 2005, *Speak for England* is a novel that, after the Brexit results, has been immediately labelled as Brexit fiction as the proud author, James Hawes, remarks on Twitter²³⁸. A classic state-of-the-nation novel with a dystopian ‘what if’ scenario, *Speak for England* has anticipated, like Julian Barnes’ novel *England, England*, a withdrawal from the European Union. In addition to this, the novel engages with the widespread and harmful nostalgia for the Empire and with the overwhelming national narrative of decline, as well as being centred on themes such as the housing crisis, the role of the media, the manipulation of reality, the ‘treacherous’ political class and the question of identity, both on an individual and national level. Despite being published well before Brexit, *The White Family* is also a Condition of England novel that focuses on the same tendencies at the core of the 2016 referendum: fear of immigration; distrust towards the elites; nostalgia for a past in which everything seemed easier and the nation appeared to be constituted by a homogeneous body; the rising of a white working-class consciousness fuelled by English mass media (in this case, the newspaper *Spearhead*); and, in the end, an idea of Englishness that rotates around a white, male, heterosexual ideal and – most importantly – the exclusion of anything Other.

Restoring a ‘Phantom Homeland’: The Brexit Dream in *Speak for England*

If Brexit is, as argued previously, a dreamlike narrative of redemption and resurrection, the basis of its imaginings are to be found in this assumption: that England is a nation haunted by nostalgia and that any vision of ‘the Brexit dream’ could not miss – and messed up with – this crucial ingredient.

Nostalgia has been described as «the incurable modern condition itself»²³⁹. The word was first used in the medical dissertation of Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer²⁴⁰ to define «the sad mood originating from the desire for return to one’s native land», which was responsible for «“erroneous representation” that caused the afflicted to lose touch with the present»²⁴¹. At the beginning, people diagnosed with nostalgia were displaced subjects, for instance soldiers serving abroad, economic migrants, refugees. But rapid industrialization, different rhythms of

²³⁸The reference is to James Hawes’s Twitter account, where he has posted a quotation in which it is stressed that his novel has been able to predict Brexit. The quotation Hawes refers to may be found online in Cohen, N., «The Shortest History of Germany review – probing an enigma at the heart of Europe», *The Guardian*, 24 April 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/apr/24/the-shortest-history-of-germany-review-james-hawes-mystery-heart-of-europe> (7 July 2019)

²³⁹Boym, S., *op. cit.*, p.xiii

²⁴⁰ Johannes Hofer, *Dissertatio medica de nostalgia*, Basel, 1688, cit. in Boym, S., *op. cit.*, p.3

²⁴¹*Ibidem*

work, new discoveries (radio, phone, television) and now de-industrialisation, globalisation and internet, have disrupted prior ways of life and upset people's perception of present and future. Consequently, nostalgia has ceased to be an illness related to longing for a physical place but it has become, instead, a longing for a previous 'time'. Bauman points out how difficult it is to understand this passage if we do not take into consideration the changing conception of time. According to Bauman,

nostalgia spreads now that our "space of experience", using Koselleck's definitions, does not fit the new "horizon of expectations". What does it mean? When Time started haunting us, with clocks, schedules, its strict division in past, present and future, it has also been connected with the idea of progress, born in the age of political and industrial revolution (nineteenth century). Time was something escaping us, something we had to grasp to use it to progress, to enrich our lives. Time started being money. To understand the new temporality, and in particular how past and future begin to be internalizing (considering, as Kant said, space as an outer experience and time as an inner one), Koselleck introduces those two definitions above, with the first, space of experience, being concerned with our assimilation of the past, and the second, horizon of expectations, with our imagining of the future. In it, progress became a marker of global time and central to the evaluation of everything, and it has not to be perceived as only a temporal progression, but also as a spatial expansion, contributing to a new understanding of time and space that made the division into local and universal possible.²⁴²

If progress is considered a point of reference to evaluate life and life expectations, it follows that its negative perception influences, in many ways, both our 'horizon of expectations'(our imagining of the future) and our 'space of experience' (the way we look back at our past), causing on one hand fear of the unknown, and on the other an intense nostalgia. Fear of the unknown is indeed triggered by deluded expectations and the deep-seated certainty that nothing good awaits in the future. Since the future is conceived as being «worse than the present» or at least «more of the same», there should be

no wonder that, when seeking genuinely meaningful ideas, we turn, nostalgically, to the buried (prematurely?) grand ideas of the past. We are allowed to conclude that the vision of a 'better life' has disentangled itself from its made-in-Heaven marriage to the future.²⁴³

Divorced from the future, Bauman argues, visions of a 'better life' have nowhere to go except for the 'good old days' which, differently from the days to be, are already known and therefore reliable and trustworthy. Thus, the ordinary people

are not the ones who control the present from which the future will germinate and sprout – and for that reason [...] entertain little, if any, hope of controlling that future;

²⁴²Bauman, Z., *Retrotopia*, p.11

²⁴³Ivi, pp.128-129

in the course of its formation we seem to be doomed to remain pawns on someone else's chessboard and in someone else's – yet someone unknown and unknowable – game. What a relief, therefore, to return from that mysterious, recondite, unfriendly, alienated and alienating world, densely sprinkled with traps and ambushed, to the familiar, cosy and homely, sometimes wobbly but consolingly unobstructed and passable, world of memory.²⁴⁴

Longing for «continuity in a fragmented world»²⁴⁵, and for belonging in a society deeply marked by individualism, 'the world of memory' becomes a consoling element that contrasts the scary conception of time's irreversibility, the 'predictability' of the future as a forthcoming catastrophe, and the alienating character of contemporary life. For the nostalgic, words such as 'before', 'yesterday' and 'in the past', undergo a metamorphosis, becoming evocative expressions for an alleged 'golden era': a place to hide from the present. This promised land situated in the past is supposed to be a place where everything is easy and bright; where people can feel secure and trust the establishment to do what is best for them; where alienation, loneliness, displacement and vulnerability have no space to grow; where the nation is something to be proud of and there is still a recognizable, reassuring and uncontroversial national community to belong to.

Though common to many countries, inside and outside Europe, these feelings are particularly embedded in the English character, considering that anxiety for the future and a yearning for the 'best days' are, in England, strictly linked to the end of the Second World War, the demise of the British Empire, the Suez Crisis and the precariousness of the United Kingdom. Furthermore, these feelings are constantly renovated – and strengthened - every time the diminished role of the country is 'exposed' causing a clash between the national narratives of greatness and the reality of the present day. These features clearly distinguish English nostalgia and anxiety from those held by other countries. As Arthur Aughey stresses, this English particularity

can be traced to the assumption that Englishness has been of universal, not just local, significance (unlike the identities of Scotland and Wales). But there is now a double English tragedy: although the sense of world-historical significance has been lost, the inheritance of that way of thinking remains a crippling political and cultural defect [...].²⁴⁶

Undoubtedly, this change in England's status from being a dominant world power to becoming a member of the EU and a satellite country of the USA has created a question of

²⁴⁴Ivi, p.61

²⁴⁵Boym, S., *op cit.*, p.xiv

²⁴⁶Aughey, A., «Englishness as class: A re-examination», *Ethnicities* 12(4), 2012, pp.394–408, p.396

identity that «cuts right across political, class and gender divides and unites all kinds of people in England in a sense of loss»²⁴⁷. It is this sense of loss, ultimately, that is responsible for the location and search of identity in the ‘memorable’ past, and that paves the way to projects of restoration. Restoration, as Boym writes,

is a word that signifies a return to the original stasis. According to restorative nostalgia, the past is not to be considered a duration, but a snapshot, something happened but immutable. It has to be preserved in its original image, remaining forever young without showing any signs of disruption.²⁴⁸

But the ‘original image’ the narrative that nostalgia depicts is not as original as many pretend. The ‘snapshot’ a project of restoration selects and proposes is always a memory transformed, manipulated, adapted to the current ‘taste’, from which any unpleasant or contradictory feature is excluded. It is by undergoing this process of manipulation and fabrication that, ultimately, the past becomes a political tool. And here, as Berberich writes referring to national myths, «lies [the] danger: for what is recognized so popularly, and so easily, is also, often, accepted unquestioningly»²⁴⁹ and, just as easily, transformed into ideology.

When the past becomes a political tool, we are no more dealing with what could seem, at the beginning, an example of harmless nostalgia. As Boym acknowledges, «[w]hen nostalgia turns political, romance is connected to nation building and native songs are purified. The official memory of the nation-state does not tolerate useless nostalgia, nostalgia for its own sake»²⁵⁰. Nostalgia for its own sake is, if anything, the reflective kind identified by Boym, which differs from restorative nostalgia since it is a simple act of meditation on the past and its irrevocability. As Boym explains, the

[t]wo kinds of nostalgia are not absolute types, but rather tendencies, ways of giving shape and meaning to longing. Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance. The first category of nostalgics do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth. This kind of nostalgia characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the antimodern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories. Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another space and another time.²⁵¹

²⁴⁷Cit. in Berberich, C., «Bursting the Bubble» *cit.*, p.161

²⁴⁸Boym, S., *op. cit.*, p.14

²⁴⁹Berberich, C., «Bursting the Bubble» *cit.*, p.160

²⁵⁰Boym, S., *op. cit.*, p.14

²⁵¹Ivi, p.41

What has happened in Brexit England is precisely a dangerous transition from harmless to harmful nostalgia, from reflective to restorative one. Thus, nostalgia has long stopped being an innocent recalling and or – at least - a celebration of the national past to become a tool for «a politically motivated manipulation of the image of England that is highly exclusive and that needs to be challenged»²⁵². It is exactly this image of England that Brexiteers have put at the core of their narrative and on which they have built their own project of restoration.

Many contemporary novelists have engaged with English tendencies towards nostalgia, among them Kazuo Ishiguro and Julian Barnes, whose novels, *The Remains of the Day* (1989) and *England, England* (1998), alert us to the dangers of an uncritical manipulation of the past for one's own purposes. Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* reflects precisely upon that mythical England at the core of the heritage industry. Choosing a typical upper-class setting (the country estate), the author presents the point of view of an aging butler, Mr Stevens, who is soon revealed to be an unreliable narrator due to misremembered and biased interpretations of the events he reflects upon. Set in the 1950s, the dying days of the empire and of Britain's role as a superpower, the novel follows Mr Stevens in a trip around England that is also a trip into the past. Little by little, memories unfold with the reader forced to investigate and distinguish between what is tinted by nostalgia and illusion, what has been purposely manipulated or obscured, and the reality of what really happened. In this way, the novel subtly refers to the abuse and manipulation of the past for commercial means and, especially, for political ones. The past comes to be depicted not only as an interpretation opposing *the real thing*, in a very postmodernist attitude, but as *the* interpretation that suits better the purposes of the narrator. The same mechanisms are also at the core of the *England, England* project, the theme park the tycoon Jack Pittman decides to create on the Isle of Wight and that is based on the manipulation of English history, the repositioning of its myths and invention of new traditions. Published in 1998, *England, England* is a novel that reflects, among many other themes, on individual and collective identity. To do so, the novelist writes in parallel about the nation and the life of Martha Cochrane, the main character of the novel, whose childhood, adulthood and old age represent three different stages of England: rural, industrial and post-industrial. Writing the novel, Barnes has focused on some tendencies that, according to him, «are implicit in contemporary Britain», such as the «complete dominance of the free market» and «the tendency

²⁵²Berberich, C., «Bursting the Bubble» *cit.*, p.160

of the country to sell and parody itself»²⁵³. Selling the country is exactly what the lawyer Jerry Cabot suggests to Sir Jack Pittman:

It's a question of placing the product correctly, that's all. [...] You – we – England – my client – is – are – a nation of great age, great history, great accumulated wisdom. Social and cultural history – stacks of it, reams of it – eminently marketable, never more so than in the current climate. Shakespeare, Queen Victoria, Industrial Revolution, gardening, that sort of thing. If I may coin, no, copyright, a phrase, *we are already what others may hope to become*. This isn't self-pity, this is the strength of our position, our glory, our product placement. We are the new pioneers. We must sell our past to other nations as their future!²⁵⁴

The passage certainly refers, ironically, to Tony Blair's attempt at *rebranding* Britain, and it is a perfect example of the act of manipulation. The author is here hinting at the British post-war narrative of national decline which, as stressed before, fuelled the «loss of faith»²⁵⁵ the nation is still experiencing, the idea of a lost greatness never to be recovered. But Jerry Cabot describes it differently: in his opinion, the country's greatness has never been lost since it is still traceable in its past, and that past, after being recovered, replicated and restored, can even be sold to others as the goal to achieve. Even if the replica of England the theme park represents is addressed to tourists, it is easy to translate it to the world of politics and consider *England, England* a vision of the country that could be sold to voters. In the same fashion of political projects, to be sold, the replica must be palatable, to meet and satisfy the needs and the expectations of its buyers. To establish what people want, Sir Jack orders his employees to conduct some surveys, choosing from the founding what he considers to be acceptable and ruling out what doesn't align with his own image of the country, manipulating history and repositioning national myths according to contemporary values. The fantasy world *England, England* stages becomes so powerful that the actors start believing in it, making the fantasy their actual reality. This is, as Kazuo Ishiguro commented, the risk inherent in the business of nostalgia: that people may actually 'buy' (tourists) or 'believe' (voters) in the misleading narration of the country. Ultimately, the complete blur between reality and fiction started inside the project ends up involving the country itself, with Sir Jack's replica substituting the original and forcing England (which has «stop[ped] believing in things»²⁵⁶) to change its name to avoid being confused with the theme park. The nostalgic dream has become an inhabitable, physical

²⁵³Interview with Julian Barnes, in Guppy, S., «Julian Barnes, The Art of Fiction No.165», *The Paris Review*, 157, Winter 2000, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/562/julian-barnes-the-art-of-fiction-no-165-julian-barnes> (7 July 2019)

²⁵⁴Barnes, J., *England, England* (1998), London, Vintage Books, 2012, pp.39-40

²⁵⁵Ivi, p.237

²⁵⁶*Ibidem*

reality which ultimately eclipses the complex original. As Svetlana Boym writes, '[n]ostalgia (from *nostos* – return home, and *algia* – longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed'²⁵⁷ and this can lead, still quoting Boym, 'to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. In extreme cases it can create a phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill'.²⁵⁸

A phantom homeland like Sir Jack's theme park is the perfect definition for both the nation coming out of Brexit narrative and the Colony depicted in James Hawes' novel *Speak for England* (2005), which is, as anticipated, one of the first pre-Brexit novels labelled as 'Brexit fiction' and the very literary manifestation of the nostalgic Brexit dream. In the novel, the main character Brian Marley – stuck in what he considers a mediocre life (a teacher of English as a Foreign Language, divorced and broke) – agrees to participate in a TV program about surviving in an inhospitable jungle in Papua New Guinea in order to become rich and make his son proud. He wins the contest, but a crash between two of the production company's helicopters destroys his dreams of fame and money. Forced, this time, to survive for real, he climbs a vertical cliff and collapses. When he wakes up, he is surrounded by people and questioned about his Englishness by the Headmaster, the leader of the Colony, who tries to determine – and this seems crucial for his survival there – if Brian is an Englishman.

Brian Marley should be, indeed, a representation of a typical Englishman, or at least this is what the authors of the TV program hoped for, as Brian had been placed in opposition to other participants from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. As his friend, who is also the producer of the programme, explains to him when offering the job,

[...]to be honest you're so, well, so bloody English, Brian. We've got our regulation chatty Welshman and bolshie Scotsman and charming bloody Colleen and plain-speaking Northern git already so we don't want any more of *those*. We need someone else from real *England*.²⁵⁹

In the passage, there is a neat acknowledgement of the United Kingdom as a state composed by distinct nations, a distinction exemplified by the clashing personalities of the participants. The producers affirm to be done with that, meaning that they need no one else of 'those' *types*: they have already found who they considered to be true representatives of those areas of the UK and are now looking for what is still missing: a true representative of what England means to them. Brian appears, to his friend, the obvious choice, since he is a «forty-

²⁵⁷Boym, S., *op. cit.*, p.xiii

²⁵⁸*Ivi*, pp.xv-xvi

²⁵⁹Hawes, J., *Speak for England* (2005), London, Vintage Books, 2006, p.89

odd-year-old English teacher, not in terribly good shape»²⁶⁰ whose qualities and attributes make him so *unmistakably* English. This is exactly how Brian is usually perceived and categorized by anyone coming in his way: the old lady selling poppies at the entrance of the tube; the Argentinian student he has a crush on, Consuela; even the colonists themselves, who, after checking *The Peoples of Mankind* and questioning him about « name, rank, and all that sort of thing»²⁶¹, come to the conclusion that probably he really is an Englishman.

According to Brian, «[o]f course the old lady had picked on him»: because «she had seen a normal, decent poppy-buying Englishman who wore this sort of thing without thinking about it»²⁶², because he perfectly fits in that idea of Englishness, as in the one the classics of English literature convey for Consuela. Brian's Englishness, as he himself articulates it, seems to be a matter of appearance, posture, choice of clothes, ways of behaving, even accent. But when you base your assumptions only on people's outward look and manners, you often end up misjudging them. As Brian comments, both the old lady and Consuela look at him as the typical 'decent poppy-buying Englishman' because they do not know

that his jacket was second-hand and the whole get-up was actually just his wretched quasi-uniform, the rig of all established Teachers of English as a Foreign Language from Bournemouth to Bangkok. They could not tell that he was only still in England because he was now a part-time single father with a three-year-old son and, since he could not abandon his son, he could no longer do what your normal TEFLer does whenever things get too tough or too real, i.e. flee to some new foreign country where he can play the English card again. Nothing showed that he was not, in fact, a happy, easygoing Englishman who was working at the London English School in Piccadilly simply because he loved teaching people his beloved English language, but a wretched failure who could think of no other way to pay the bills.²⁶³

The colonists make the same mistake categorising Brian as an upper-class Englishman, a mistake they soon realise once back in England. As one of them remarks, «a chap can seem perfectly clubbable east of Suez, but when you get home you realise he isn't really the thing after all»²⁶⁴, meaning that Brian does not own those attributes that makes one a proper Englishman.

It follows that this 'real England' he should represent is actually one that deserts him, for two main reasons: because it is an England in which he constantly feels inadequate and unsuitable, given that he belongs to those ruled out from «the golden age [...] of safe and steady

²⁶⁰*Ibidem*

²⁶¹*Ivi*, p.117

²⁶²*Ivi*, pp.40-41

²⁶³*Ivi*, p.41

²⁶⁴*Ivi*, p.277

job»²⁶⁵ and constantly worrying about their future options; and because it is an England that does not fit the representation of the country embedded in his cultural imaginary, an alien place that makes him feel as a foreigner in his own country. Thus, Berberich points out that

the England [Brian] sees around him is one devoid of meaning; a country punctuated by noise, pushy behaviour, dirt, and ‘without much hope’ (Hawes 2005:97), with ‘heartless urban centres, pedestrianised to death, chewing-gum splotches march[ing] as far as the eye can bear, unscrubbable witnesses, like scene-of-crime stains of grey, lifeless blood on greasy concrete slabs’ (98). It is a far cry from the evocation of rural England perpetuated by and sold to the rest of the world in period drama and coffee table books.²⁶⁶

Berberich also highlights that Brian’s job makes his sense of displacement even worse, considering that his profession includes teaching English lifestyle and culture: in one word, teaching Englishness. But his national identity only opens troubling questions: what is England? What does it mean to be English? His sense of loss and the perception he has of being a ‘wretched failure’ mirror the national loss of faith and the taint of failure that would be marking the nation, after the dismantlement of its empire and the internal dismantlement of the kingdom after the devolution process. These feelings inevitably instil in Brian a longing for «*an England where at last he could be truly at home*»²⁶⁷, where he would not need to ‘sound the thing’, but he could be the thing itself: a true Englishman, whatever this means.

Confused about his identity, no wonder that « Marley seems to lack a *voice*»²⁶⁸, to be lost in multiple representations of himself that, ultimately, are none other than masks he wears according to the occasion. This is particularly evident soon after the helicopters’ crash, when Brian, certain that he is going to die, decides to use the little camera the program gave him to send a video-message to his son. The problem he encounters in recording the video-message is precisely that he has no idea of what his real voice sounds like, only what it does not:

[n]ot the mad military voice that had been ordering him around, of course. That was not how we wanted his son to remember him. That was not really him.
But then, what was?
The ridiculous, falsely enthusiastic, carefree voice he used to his boss at work? No. That was a blatant lie. What, then? The accent he put on in tough pubs when he was trying to disguise how middle class he really was? The chipper tone he assumed when reassuring his mother vaguely that everything was going to *work out* somehow despite his apparently complete failure in life? The ludicrous, shameful, sub-Oxbridge drawl he had learned to use at college and still fell into with his old college friends? The would-be semi-transatlantic twang that always began to infect him after a few days spent with Americans? The risible faux-Irish throatiness that he affected

²⁶⁵Ivi, p.79

²⁶⁶Berberich, C., «England, Devolution and Fictional Kingdoms», in Westall, C., Gardiner, M. (eds), *op. cit.*, p.166

²⁶⁷Hawes, J., *op. cit.*, p.9

²⁶⁸Berberich, C., «England, Devolution and Fictional Kingdoms» *cit.*, p.165

when he sang folk songs in allegedly authentic theme pubs to impress his foreign women? The bizarrely, unreal Spanish-influenced rhythms he had started falling into when talking to Consuela Martinez?

Which? How? Who?

Marley's body stood frozen before the soaring rock face, but his mind staggered with internal vertigo as he stared into the endless, meaningless blackness of his own self.

Where his voice should have been, where *he* should have been, there was nothing but a dizzying void.²⁶⁹

With the battery of the camera running out, facing death, wanting to leave something to his son (an explanation, a last love message, a legacy), and forced to choose in the blink of an eye between «digital immortality or eternal silence», Brian pathetically struggles to find an «authentic tone of himself»²⁷⁰, as if this authenticity, its nude self, is nothing but a void, something that probably does not even exist, a 'who' without answer lost in the many characters he has learned to perform.

The question of identity is immediately shifted from the individual level to the national one when Brian links his difficulty in tracing his true self to the equally undefined character of Englishness:

Christ, if only he was Irish. They knew how they sounded. Or Scots. No problem for them. Welsh, whatever. Anyone who knew exactly what they were supposed to sound like and just did it without thinking. Someone who knew exactly who they were. A Geordie, a Scouser, even a Brummie for fuck's sake, there, see, *for fuck's sake*, that was not how *he* spoke, that was something to do with Ireland or Australia or something, that was someone else, that was learned, taken on, taken up, borrowed.²⁷¹

According to Brian, everything he says is something learned, borrowed, taken on from somebody else, which is actually the way any identity is shaped: through processes of identification that imply the acts of borrowing, mirroring, modifying, till a defined sense of self – though always ready to assume new characteristics – appears. But in his case, as Brian stresses, these mechanisms did not seem to have been applied to a defined self: rather, they serve as a means to hide the empty container his national identity appears to be, slowly scattered in a British identity and now retrieved in a past and with characteristics that do not align with his reality. This distinguishes his situation from that of a Scottish or a Welshman (whose national identities, in contrast with Englishness, have continued to flourish and have been celebrated both during and after the empire), who can count on those collective identities as a point of reference.

²⁶⁹Hawes, J., *op. cit.*, pp.19-20

²⁷⁰*Ivi*, p.20

²⁷¹*Ivi*, pp.20-21

Even though he knows that, among the many voices he can assume, the ‘military one’ is not the ‘real thing’ he is looking for, it is precisely the military voice, in the end, that helps him survive, ordering him to «[k]eep the line straight», put his «[t]rousers up and let’s show the buggers how an Englishman dies»²⁷², «pick up that damn camera and [...] say no more about it»²⁷³. The military voice, which has prevented Brian from abandoning the show and accompanied him step by step in the hellish jungle, is the voice of a «battle-hardened officer», a man sure of himself, used to rule, trained to do the job and get on with it. This is a ‘role model’ that has nothing to do with Brian’s personality, marked, if anything, by doubting and longing; nonetheless, it is a very familiar one to him, since it is deeply rooted in the national narratives of greatness related to the empire and the Second World War and, consequently, in English culture. Not by chance, Brian associates the voice to that of an officer, linking it to the image of the English military hero. This imaginary is one Brian is very familiar with, through works such as *Best of Breed* and the *Eagle* annuals and the myth of his father, a Navy veteran that abandoned his family for another woman.

Best of Breed is a coffee table book, a personal idea of the Senior Editor of the *Intelligencer*, which consists of already published obituaries of military men. Opposite any obituary,

[w]ith its formal wartime portrait on glossy paper, appeared a historical photograph of the fight, or at least the theatre of action, in which the late man had gained his most notable decoration, together with photographs and brief biographies of comrades who had not survived, all placed in context by maps and scholarly notes about the course and significance of the battle in question.²⁷⁴

Soon a best-seller, the volume clearly represents, with its wartime portraits and photographs of the places in which the war was actually fought, a celebration of a ‘glorious’ time put in comparison with the average present day. Not by chance, the title is *Best of Breed*, meaning that the generation that fought in the war is portrayed as the very personification of what a man and his country should be (and, as implied, what neither of them are anymore). The idea of the publication is indeed directly linked to the sense of loss of faith, trust and belonging that the Senior Editor himself feels, due to the many changes the country has gone through and that are exemplified by the hellish image of the M25:

I saw it the other day from a pal of mine’s little aeroplane. I looked, do you see, just *looked*, at all those poor buggers spending their lives driving round and round like bloody lemmings, permanently half knackered and *bloody well* fed up, decent,

²⁷²*Ivi*, p.3

²⁷³*Ivi*, p.4

²⁷⁴*Ivi*, p.64

normal chaps and girls who never wanted much really except orders they could understand, mortgaged up to the eyeballs, worried sick about their kids and schools and pensions and just about ready to grab hold of someone in Westminster by the balls and ask them exactly what the *hell's* going on. *Those* are our men and women. *Our* tribe.²⁷⁵

The publication should convey a lost sense of pride, identity and belonging, but here lies a paradox since the 'tribe' the Senior Editor identifies is clearly not the one he belongs to. Thus, he remembers looking at 'those poor buggers' from 'a pal of mine's little aeroplane' and is able to recognise the general experience of alienation, displacement and anger, but these emotions are clearly not his. The physical distance between the airplane and the M25 is the same distance that exists between *those* men and women's reality and the Senior Editor's one: he is, in fact, a member of the elite, one of the privileged few who can look at their Hell and remain untouched by it. Tellingly, when Brian happens to read *Best of Breed* in his friend's bathroom, the volume does not strike him in a positive way. Brian is in every respect one of those 'poor buggers' and a member of the 'tribe' the volume seems to be addressing: accustomed to the M25, 'fed up' and 'worried sick' about his future and that of his son and with a mortgage for a flat in Acton «which was now, in the *ongoing downturn* (as the Chancellor of the Exchequer still insisted on calling it) worth scarcely what he had paid for it last year»²⁷⁶. Given the clash between the volume's representation of the past and his reality, the obituaries seem to be mocking him and somehow forcing him to imagine his own obituary, one that would highlight, in opposition to those of the military heroes, his lack of «moral fibre»²⁷⁷: after all, «[w]hat exactly had he managed, pray, with his life, with this one, unrepeatably shot at existence? What attacks on anything had he ever pressed home in style? What hostile forces had he ever thrown back in confusion?»²⁷⁸. Instead of a sense of pride, the publication ends up fuelling Brian with a sense of shame, playing a major role in his decision to participate in his friend's TV program.

The various 'theatres of action' to which *Best of Breed* refers in its obituaries are just the same as those featured in the comics Brian read as a kid, the *Eagle* annuals. Going through the account of the Battle of El Alamein in *Best of Breed*, in fact, Brian suddenly realises that

[h]e knew the story. He had heard it before, years ago, so long ago it was as if he had always known it. He closed his eyes in disbelief as the cover of a *Victor For Boys* comic (*every week, only 6d*) flashed up before his eyes, telling him, aged perhaps six or seven, of the glorious Defence of Outpost Snipe. No, it was impossible. He turned

²⁷⁵*Ivi*, p.65

²⁷⁶*Ivi*, pp.42-43

²⁷⁷*Ivi*, p.85

²⁷⁸*Ivi*, p.84

back a thick, glossy page in the weighty book. [...] He was right, Outpost Snipe it was. What the hell was this? Why was his head filled with names and battles from twenty years before his birth? [...] Almost all of them struck some deep, soft-tolling bell of boyhood memory inside him.²⁷⁹

As the passage shows, even if Brian was not alive during the war (he was born, as he himself stressed, twenty years after), he has vivid memories of it, as if he had, somehow, taken part in the war. It is through the act of repetitive narration that the war Brian has never experienced has become a memory on its own. In the *Eagle* annuals published during Brian's boyhood, the war imagery was endlessly replicated through action figures, stories based on key episodes of the war, and references to well-known protagonists of the war scenario (*in primis* to Winston Churchill). Reflecting upon his youth, Brian acknowledges that «[t]here were several of these images locked away in his mind from those years», especially images of the good «grinning British soldiers»²⁸⁰ killing the evil Germans which promoted a biased representation of the war based on a simplified distinction between good and evil.

The biased representation of the war the *Eagle* annuals stage is also the same kind of representation other cultures put in opposition with the national one receive. This is exactly what Brian tries to explain to his own mother when he discovered she is passing on his old *Eagle* annuals to his son, hinting that

he would probably get Social Services calling round to see him if his ex-wife and the kindergarten teachers found Tommy telling them about stories in *Daddy's book* about redskins being wiped out by cowboys, turbaned tribesmen being routed by Maxim guns, Boy Scouts defeating the evil schemes of slant-eyed Malaysian terrorists, entertaining black people called Mambo and Jambo who spoke pidgin English and chirpy commandos mowing down buck-toothed rice-noshers (*Banzai! Arrgh!*), square-headed sausage-eaters (*Achtung donner und blitzen! Urgh!*) or out-of-work ice-cream salesmen (*Mamma mia! Aieee!*).²⁸¹

But his attempt is like «water off a duck's back»²⁸². For his mother, born and bred in an imperial nation and consequently accustomed to this kind of narrative, the toys she has kept are more suitable than the violent videogames and the American toys in fashion, especially the *Eagle* annuals, whose «level of the language is, of course, so much better than in those dreadful modern comics»²⁸³. The attachment of Brian's mother to the objects of his childhood is a nostalgic one, which mirrors the same nostalgic feeling she has for a time where the Labour Government and State organisations were something to rely on: the time Britain won the war.

²⁷⁹*Ivi*, p.83

²⁸⁰*Ivi*, p.56

²⁸¹*Ivi*, p.58

²⁸²*Ibidem*

²⁸³*Ivi*, p.57

That is why it is so important to her that her apartment is situated «near the BBC»²⁸⁴, considering the BBC a kind of «fighting force»²⁸⁵ as one of those State organisations that infused the public with a sense of identity during the war, contributing to the national narrative and unifying the people in the war effort.

Given the way the *Eagle* annuals depict people from other cultures (stereotyping them and establishing racial hierarchies), Brian knows that they should not be on his son's reading list; equally, he does not want his son to remember him through the military voice that follows the *Eagle*'s model. Nonetheless, he cannot help it. The *Eagle* annuals are, in spite of everything, something he still has fondness for and would like to re-read: they are «relics from the past» which are «somehow far more real than whatever he had been doing for the past thirty-five years» that «seemed to have no substance compared to this»²⁸⁶. The same could be said of the photograph of Brian's father, which the mother shows to anyone coming to visit her:

This photograph was in black and white, framed, and showed a Naval unit marching self-consciously, with shouldered rifles and curious white ankle leggings, across the flight deck of an aircraft carrier. The picture was titled, in fading letters of handwritten, once-black ink, *Green Division, HMS Eagle Malta, Coronation Day 1953. God Bless the Queen*. Mrs Marley kept it hanging in a prominent position near to her better pieces of china, well away from the various expensively framed photographs of her son posing before well-known cultural artefacts from several continents. Whenever she had a visitor whom she suspected of social condescension to a woman who had only reached Executive Officer Grade 4 by her retirement and who lived in a mere flat in Shepherd's Bush (however near to the BBC), she would skilfully bring the conversation around to this photograph. The visitor would then in the nature of things peer politely at it and ask which one was her son's father, to which Mrs Marley would reply, as if absently, in gay triumph:

- Which one? The one in the front with the bloody sword, of course.²⁸⁷

The only physical evidence Brian has of his father, whom he will later go to find in Australia only to be utterly disappointed, the photograph is a dear memory and one that represents the father and husband as a hero and not for what he really is: a runaway from his own responsibilities. It is the 'hero' the mother wants to show to the exterior world, personified by the visitors, because this is the representation that makes her and her son shine the most. Therefore, this is also the representation that acquires more 'substance' than reality itself.

As his father's photograph, the 'fake' military voice rising from the void Brian's self seems to be is, ultimately, the one that gains substance as the most useful in those

²⁸⁴Ivi, p.43

²⁸⁵The reference is to J.B. Priestley's description of the BBC as a fighting force alongside the Raf or the Navy, cit. in Gardiner, M., *op. cit.*, p.39

²⁸⁶Hawes, J., *op. cit.*, pp.55-56

²⁸⁷Ivi, p.48

circumstances, meaning that embracing the model and behaving as the English soldier and coloniser of the imperial narrative of greatness he is not is the only way-out he can think of. Thus, the «right tactics» Brian adopts to survive in «a place utterly hostile to human life, let alone civilisation»²⁸⁸ are none other than the same adopted by the English ‘bringing civilisation to the darkest corners of the world’ during the imperial era: the very English motto ‘keep calm and carry on’, the military discipline, the commitment to the mission.

The parallel between Brian’s program and the imperial mission also allows another comparison that takes us back to the question of identity. As the English exploit their imperial mission to cement a sense of collective identity that could keep the British Union together, the author implies, Brian’s travelling to Papua New Guinea is equally a mission towards identity, a way to put together the pieces that constitute his individual and national identity. As Berberich writes,

Marley cannot reconcile his ideal image of the England of his childhood with the reality of everyday life around him. His decision to take part in the reality TV show set in the jungle of Papua New Guinea is his attempt to get closer to England and himself by getting away. Rather than trying to find out what England means to him, he believes that going far away to gain fame and fortune on a TV show will enable him to simply buy the trappings of a stereotypically English lifestyle - the house in the country, the Aga in the kitchen, the children in private school - and, with it, a sense of belonging.²⁸⁹

This ‘identity mission’ seems to be accomplished when he stumbles into the Colony, a kind of «Eagle adventure»²⁹⁰ and a simulacrum of that England lost in the past and therefore impossible to recover. Still in a state of confusion and sickness, Brian hears sounds that he immediately associates with a leather ball, bats, pads: the game of cricket. One of the most famous symbols of Englishness, cricket is, even though Brian never played it, a central part of his cultural imaginary. When the cricket ball slides up to him, Brian picks it up

[w]ithout thinking, almost more surprised that he could sit up than that he should have been hit on the ear, here, by a cricket ball, [...] and was thus holding it, looking at it dumbly, when a tall, lithe, tanned, blond, blue-eyed youth of perhaps fourteen came bounding through the bushes, dressed in long, once-khaki shorts and a white cotton shirt, both heavily repaired. When he saw Marley he stopped dead and stared. Before the amazed young man could speak, Marley upon some instinct tossed the cricket ball to him; he caught it with a neat and pure reflex, his eyes still fixed on Marley.

- Well held, croaked Marley.

- I say, are you English?

²⁸⁸Ivi, p.7

²⁸⁹Berberich, C., «England, Devolution and Fictional Kingdoms» *cit.*, p.166

²⁹⁰«The Digested Read: Speak for England by James Hawes», *The Guardian*, 24 January 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2005/jan/24/digestedread.theeditorpressreview7> (7 July 2019)

- English? Of course I'm bloody English, said Marley.²⁹¹

Unsurprisingly, challenged by a stranger and finding himself abroad, Brian has no hesitation in declaring himself 'bloody English', using his friend's exact words. It is the encounter with what we label as 'Other', as Hawes knows well, that plays a major role in building identities, both individual and collective ones. After exclaiming these words, Brian passes out and wakes up later in what appears to be «[h]ome, at last»²⁹²: there are some commodities (a bed, a blanket, a roof on his head), the Union Jack and the Australian flags waving next to each other and the *Eagle* on a bookshelf.

From a certain point of view, the Colony really is 'home', considering that it represents a perfect replica of the England Brian could not retrieve from his present reality: the imperial ideal of the nation. That was exactly the England the colonists had left behind when their plane crashed: a nation which had just won the war, with an Empire still going on, and influence and interests everywhere. Thinking that their crash was the start of the Third World War and that nobody was going to rescue them any sooner, the survivors have adapted to the place and, at the same time, shaped it as the mother country replicating the colonial enterprise in many aspects, even the 'darkest' ones. Thus, Brian will soon discover that the Colony is not a peaceful place and that the colonists' periodic 'hunt' does not involve animals but a local tribe, whose heads are impaled on the Gate that delimits the territory of the Colony.

According to the Headmaster,

all this stuff here at the Gate doesn't mean we've gone to the dogs and become a gang of damn headhunters. It just means that there were things we had to do to get by, so we did them, but we shut up about them and we kept it from the women and children.²⁹³

What the national narrative of greatness about the empire hides is exactly what the Headmaster, who shows Brian the heads of the locals prior to being rescued and safely returned to England, wants to hide from the British public: the crimes that the colonial enterprise perpetrated. In creating his own version of England, the Headmaster has chosen what he wanted to be part of it: the «*droit de seigneur*», the «first bash to see if a girl's good stock» in pure medieval style²⁹⁴; the most glorious episodes of English history taught to the young ones; and the myth of the superiority of the white man, with everything that this implies and justifies (the conquest of land, the killing, the slavery). As the Headmaster sees it, he has done nothing

²⁹¹Hawes, J., *op. cit.*, p.28

²⁹²*Ivi*, p.105

²⁹³*Ivi*, p.236

²⁹⁴*Ivi*, p.229

wrong: the heads are Miyanmin, who as fellow head-hunters prey every three years on another tribe, the Altbalmin. Killing the Miyanmin keeps them at bay and, at the same time, obtains the gratitude of the Altbalmin and with that the products of their farming. When Brian comments that this means that the colonists are actually living off the natives, the Headmaster stresses that they are soldiers and therefore belong to a totally «different caste»²⁹⁵ compared to the natives, sketching a hierarchy which is both racial and cultural. The natives' inferior status is also underlined when both the Headmaster and Georgina – the girl known as George that helps Brian recover and becomes thereafter a sort of girlfriend to him – point out that the natives cannot write, which means, for them, that the natives have no history and no sense of themselves as a community. This directly connects them to the many historical accounts written by European colonists about the cultures they were encountering, which stress the lack of literacy among the natives and consider this a sign of their inferiority.

According to the Headmaster, the hierarchy established in the Colony and embedded in the British Empire itself is not even something to think about: it is a hard-fact, due to the superior intelligence, morale and abilities of the colonists. Consequently, Brian should respect this as a natural fact and «behave like a white man» should: picking up one of the stakes himself and burning the evidence, instead of being like one of those «[b]loody misty-eyed do-gooders at home banging on about England's Mission who never had the foggiest idea what has to be done out in the Colonies just to keep things ticking over»²⁹⁶. If Brian wants to be one of the colonists, and therefore a real Englishman according to the model they represent, he must look up and not look away because

if you're going to have an Empire, if you want to send chaps out overseas to set the locals straight, if you think we really ought to occasionally knock sense into undesirable murdering lunatics and stop fellows burning their sisters when they get widowed and eating each other and all that sort of thing, well, then you can't expect your chaps to do it without getting their hands a bit dirty, going a bit native occasionally. If you don't want all that, well and good, we can all sit quietly at home like a bunch of fat-arsed Swedes, smoking our pipes and playing golf and not caring a damn about who's invading whom where and who's burning his sister and why.²⁹⁷

In the Headmaster's opinion, 'going a bit native'²⁹⁸, the common fear that characterises many literary works produced during the imperial era, is an acceptable compromise to build and maintain an empire, a compromise that, due to its necessity, does not taint the greatness of

²⁹⁵*Ivi*, p.240

²⁹⁶*Ivi*, p.229

²⁹⁷*Ivi*, p.241

²⁹⁸The expression 'going a bit native' is also an explicit reference to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) linking Hawes' novel to Conrad's criticism of imperialism.

the enterprise. But the same fact that he is ready to kill Brian if he does not oblige, if he threatens to bleat something out, could mean that deep down he acknowledges the contradiction, from which the sense of guilt about the empire generates, between what ‘going a bit native’ implies and what ‘a mission of civilisation’ should mean.

However, during the forty-five years of life in the Colony, the Headmaster’s vision about the natives and how the Colony itself should ‘work’ went unquestioned: the general consent of the first survivors makes the Headmaster’s ideas, as well as his representation of England, something accepted, easily adopted, and finally transforms it into something approaching an ideology or, given the reverence with which it is regarded, even a ‘religion’. Not by chance the colonists have a book which sounds a lot like a Bible. In this book they not only write everything that has happened to them, detailing every event in the community down to the smallest detail, but they also learn all of the information they need, and especially everything they should know about England taken from the information recorded and passed down by the first colonists. This explains why, «even though there’s only half a dozen of us left who have ever seen it»²⁹⁹, England is still depicted as the mother country to come back to, more real than Papua New Guinea where the majority of them have been born and raised. Using Appadurai’s conceptualisation, these colonists, who have never been in England but long for it, suffer from a ‘nostalgia without memory’³⁰⁰: even though they do not have any experience of England, they have built a representation of it in their collective cultural memory, and it is this representation that feeds their nostalgic sentiment. This is the same mechanism we find in contemporary nostalgia among young people, where there is no memory for the time itself – the past never lived as in Brian’s case referring to the wartime – but there is a nostalgia, not at all less powerful, for the past as described, which, being narrated, depicted, described, has been transformed in an actual memory.

An exemplary case of nostalgia without memory is represented by George, whose fascination with Brian is due to the fact that he seems like a «wounded soldier», a «real Englishman, from home»³⁰¹. The desire to get in touch with a land that appears, more than a real country, a fabled kingdom, leads George to seduce Brian, whom she defines as ‘new stock’ from the ‘old country’, her kind of precious relic of England. Interestingly, while having sex with him, George starts ‘chanting’ out loud, as in a chorus, the names of the English places she has learned from the Book:

²⁹⁹Hawes, J., *op. cit.*, p.155

³⁰⁰Cfr. Appadurai, A., *Modernity at Large*, London, University of Minnesota Press, 1996

³⁰¹Hawes, J., *op. cit.*, p.149

_ Trafalgar Square, she murmured, as if intoning some great and secret mystery, _
 Horse Guards, Whitehall, the House of Parliament.
 [...]
 _ New stock, she panted. _ From the old country.
 _ George, oh George.
 From England. Oh, Hadrian's wall and Offa's Dyke, Ullswater, Long Mynd,
 Simmon's Yat.
 _ Oh, George.
 Marley did not listen and did not care. As she recited the book-read names of
 England, her chant to her unknown homeland, he simply chorused her name again
 and again, like a prayer.
 [...] _ White City, Shepherd's Bush, Holland Park, England, oh England! Oh!³⁰²

Her «litany»³⁰³, as Aughey and Berberich define it, is an act of listing that aims at getting close to England in the same way listing is usually adopted to give a definition of English identity. The attempt George makes to relate to England is in contrast with Brian's inability to do it. While George chants the places of England, Brian indeed ignores her, he thinks he does not 'care' about it, preferring to repeat, instead, her name which, paradoxically, being also the name of the English patron, identifies George as the personification of the traditional version of Englishness the Colony reproduces. The book-read knowledge George has of England and her willingness to get a sense of the nation itself is, if anything, similar to the attitude of Brian's pupil Consuela Martinez, who has come to England with a vision of the country deeply rooted in English literature and wants to visit only the places those books describe. For Consuela, the reality of present England, so different from the bookish one, contrasts to the preconceived ideas she has on the country, ideas she does not want to revise. That explains why she prefers to stay in her room, reading other books that talk about England, because she does not want the sounds of modern London and its challenging present day to «disturb her dreams» of England. Consuela's English dreams are put in contrast, and in this way labelled as childish fantasies, with her father's vision of England, the Air Colonel Achilleo Martinez, who fought against the English and defines them as «pirates and barbarians» who have learned to behave, fooled the world, and «always managed to end up on the winning side»³⁰⁴. The Air Colonel represents the point of view of an outsider, untainted by the English national narrative of greatness that has been instilled in his daughter through the biased representation of the English in literature.

Back in the Colony, dreams of the mother country and nostalgia for a homeland never known are summoned not only by the Book. Thus, the young colonists also attend history

³⁰²*Ivi*, pp.149-150-151

³⁰³Aughey, A., Berberich, C., «Introduction: these Englands – a conversation on national identity» *cit.*, p.6

³⁰⁴Hawes, J., *op. cit.*, p.99

lessons which, in a similar fashion to the ‘chants of history’ Martha learns at school in Barnes’ novel *England, England*, are a fully-fledged indoctrination about England and being English:

Now, boys, can you tell our new friend what is England’s mission? All together now.

_To civilise to protect the weak to spread freedom sir.

_Very good. And no one did more for that great cause than Horatio Nelson. [...] Who can tell our visitor the date of the Battle of Trafalgar?

_It was 1805, said Marley, taken unawares by a small, scuttling byte of memory which wriggled past his block and through the gate.

_Splendid! cried the history teacher.

_Nelson’s flagship was the *Victory* and he died at the moment of triumph, shot by a French musket ball. His last signal was ‘England expects every man to do his duty’ and his last words were ‘Thank God I have done my duty’. Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt, I’ll _

_No, no, there, you see, boys. *That* is what we need to know of England.³⁰⁵

According to the history teacher, Mr Givvens, what Marley says about Horatio Nelson, and especially the quotes about doing one’s own duty, is exactly what the boys must know about England. The account the boys received on the nation they should long for is one that has at its core the imperial rhetoric (‘to civilise’ and ‘to spread the freedom’ is the England’s mission in the world) and one from which everything considered useless or less gratifying is simply expunged (‘that’ is what they need to know imply that other things do not need to be known, for instance the ‘sins’ committed on the way). Interestingly, this is the same account of England Marley has received in the mother country and that problematises his feelings towards it. Brian has been told – and is told again in the Colony – that

[p]roper Englishmen do not scrabble about for insights into what the hell it is all about, this thing we call our so-called self. No, no, no. True Englishmen avoid all that. They know who they are. Oh yes. Simple. They are Englishmen. And as Englishmen, they have blonde girlfriends who do not make emotional demands on them and look great and sleep easily and cook on Agas and understand that men are different and so are never *disappointed* and do not make you feel guilty. Englishmen do not *do* guilt. They do not doubt their place on earth, their right to saunter across it, having *fun*.³⁰⁶

The only way to be an Englishman, and not a ‘wretched failure’ to be ashamed of, seems to come from finally accepting and complying with this narrative: the millions he has won, being the last standing of the TV program’s contestants, should guarantee him the right social status; his new girlfriend, not born in England but raised in an atmosphere of Englishness, seems the perfect match; and he would no longer need to doubt himself, as not only has his life begun to take shape, but he has also reconnected with his identity as an Englishman. Specifically, he

³⁰⁵*Ivi*, p.157

³⁰⁶*Ivi*, p.169

has reconnected to an idealised, imperial view of the English as a people who ‘do not doubt their place on earth’ and ‘do not do guilt’. He can’t wait, now that he feels he can be «really and truly *English*»³⁰⁷, to come back home in an England that, through the hyperreality of the Colony, has finally acquired in his eyes both meaning and greatness.

In the end, Brian is not the only one who struggles with present England, finding it difficult to come to terms with the clash between the country’s constructed, mythical identity and its reality. Given that the England the colonists have reconstructed in Papua New Guinea is a «fabled land, far removed from the rather disillusioning reality of the early twenty-first century»³⁰⁸, the encounter with the actual reality, first through Brian’s account, then ‘physically landing in it’ after their rescue, is significantly unsettling. Gardiner stresses that « [a]s soon as Marley begins to regain his memory, the lost colonists probe him for news of the condition of England [...] leading to a long comic section during which he has to explain a history which sounds strange in his own mouth»³⁰⁹, and this because it is a tale of decline, divisions and disappointment that does not align with the official image of England they have. As Brian tells them, Labour is now the party governing the country, but those ‘socialists’ – as the colonists define them – are very different from the ones they recall from the 50s, since they seem to «hate the *unions*»³¹⁰ and like millionaires, private businesses and denationalisation instead. He then goes on to explain that there was also a woman Prime Minister that seems actually «quite a girl»³¹¹ to them; that there was a war in Iraq, for which he is able to provide no explanation; that the industry sector and the National Service no longer exist; and that England has even joined the European Union. The Headmaster comments that it «[s]ounds like England needs us»³¹² to remind people about what the country should be.

Back in England, the confusion the colonists experience is exemplified by George’s difficulty in understanding how to speak ‘proper English’, since what Brian considers ‘proper’ contrasts with the racial and social hierarchies behind George’s way of speaking and relating to the world. Thus, Brian is used to pronouncing the word ‘garage’ as ‘garridge’, while the teachers in the Colony taught George to pronounce it ‘garaaj’, using a French, and therefore upper-class, pronunciation. When George asks him to tell her which of the two pronunciations is the one ‘real people’ must use, she specifies that ‘real people’ are «people who matter», to be distinguished from «cooks and nannies and so on», who probably have their own way of

³⁰⁷*Ivi*, p.170

³⁰⁸Aughey, A., Berberich, C., «Introduction: these Englands – a conversation on national identity» *cit.*, p.6

³⁰⁹Gardiner, M., *op. cit.*, p.148

³¹⁰Hawes, J., *op. cit.*, p.204

³¹¹*Ivi*, p.183

³¹²*Ivi*, p.210

speaking but – as «dirty smelly people who don't talk properly» – do not count among the 'real' proper English. Speaking properly, says George, is the only way to avoid being mistaken for a «social climber or a Jamaican nigger»³¹³, which takes us back to Brian's dwelling on the accent he used when speaking with his Oxford friends in order to disguise his middle-class origins. Another word that troubles George is 'nigger', which Brian tells her should not be used after she exclaims that an inspector «was a nigger, can you believe that?» and that he had «the nerve to question»³¹⁴ them during their passport control. As George sees it, the inspector's questioning is an offense since their whiteness – and this is what George is implying – clearly marks them as English and superior in contrast to the inspector, whose blackness would mark him, instead, as the inferior Other. Later on, in a restaurant full of «countless tables of the laughing rich» and «hordes of servile waiters» (as Brian defines it), George asks him again to explain the question about «*garridges* and *niggers*», because

everyone here says *garaaj* and when I was talking about our Colony and how we dealt with the locals, I did let *nigger* slip out once or twice but no one seemed to notice. In fact, I'm sure Drogo said it too. It's very complicated, isn't it?³¹⁵

It is not a contradiction that Brian's indications are immediately challenged. The people George gets in touch with are not from Brian's environment. They are, as the author hints, from an upper-class, Conservative background, with a vision of England strongly rooted in the imperial past and therefore embedded in the racial hierarchy related to that period. Consequently, Englishness comes to be depicted as an upper-class attribute impossible to acquire for the other social classes, as shown by the fact that Brian immediately loses his 'value' when the colonists get that he is, if he wins the contest, no more than 'new money'.

Being surrounded by luxury things, with people that mirror her preconceived idea of the English, completely changes George's state of mind. As she tells Brian,

when we were driving along on that autobahn thing, and then through all those wretched places, what were they called? Southhall and Ealing and Acton and Shepherd's Bush. Well, I must admit I felt a bit funny. You know, as if England wasn't at all like the books after all. Actually, I know it sounds funny, but I got rather *depressed*. But then it got better, I started to recognise things from the pictures, Marble Arch and Buckingham Palace and things like that [...] And now we're here and, well, everything is like in the books after all, isn't it? I mean, as far as I can see, things are pretty much the same.³¹⁶

³¹³*Ivi*, p.257

³¹⁴*Ivi*, p.269

³¹⁵*Ivi*, p.275

³¹⁶*Ibidem*

A sign of modernity, driving along the M25 is again associated with a depressing experience, as it is watching from the car glass and seeing an England that has nothing to do with its glorious representation. George's state of estrangement echoes the estrangement of the ordinary English people, forced to put up with a reality they do not comprehend and that struggle to recognise as their own. George's bewilderment disappears only when familiar symbols, images and manners come into view and the surroundings, both in terms of the physical places and the social environment, start meeting her expectations.

What makes George feels better is, paradoxically, what makes Brian question England and the meaning of being English again. If 'things are pretty much the same' means that words like 'nigger' are considered acceptable and that an insurmountable gap of wealth, perception and representation persists between the upper-class and the other classes, the 'real people' and those who 'do not count', England is clearly not a home to return to, but a nightmare to escape from:

[w]here to? To a normal bloody country, that was where. To anywhere he could get by in the language, and that meant pretty well anywhere in Europe, to any place where people judged you by what you said, not by the accent you said it in. Yes, true, it would mean he would be foreign for ever, but no more foreign than he was here, in his supposed homeland. [...] His son would grow up able to speak English, of course, like every educated person in Europe, but he would grow up to *be*, to be *thinking* in, French, Spanish, Italian, German, Dutch. Anything but English.³¹⁷

I think, therefore I am. Or, rephrasing the colonists' way of telling it, if you think the thing, you are the thing. Thinking in a different language than English would prevent Brian's son Tommy from making his father's mistake, that is to say worrying so much about how to be English that he had forgotten to simply be. As he had confessed in the video-message to his son that was never sent,

[i]t's England that's wrong with me, Tommy. England. When I was a boy, Mum, your gran, I bet she won't admit it now but she used to say: England will never be free until there are oak trees growing in the ruins of Buckingham Palace. Ask her. I dunno. Maybe when you get this everything will be different. Oh shit, Christ, sorry, sorry, just couldn't breathe then for a sec. Tommy, Tommy, little Tommy, maybe it's just me and the stuff they still filled our heads with when we were kids, maybe you'll be fine and England will just be a normal bloody country and everyone will forget all that balls about it mattering how you talk and us being better than everyone else in the world, Christ, that would be good! Maybe that'll be your England. But I dunno, Tommy. Sometimes I think England is just too far gone. If I'd made it back I would have tried to get you away, so you wouldn't have to have that round your neck. We could've . . . ah, ooops, oh Christ, shit, sorry, ugh, hmmm, hard to get up. No, wait, don't go. I'm still here, wait a sec. Ohhhh God. Yeah, look, listen, Tommy, if I'm going to get this to you I'd better go now, before . . . you know. Sorry again, and goodbye. Just don't forget to live, that's all. I was so busy being English I nearly

³¹⁷Ivi, pp.277-278

did. Hey, so at least I got somewhere, in the end, even if it was only here! Bye, Tommy. Love you.³¹⁸

In the video-message, Brian recognises how harmful ‘the stuff they still filled our heads’ is, the narrative of national identity that the English are subjected to. England needs to become ‘a normal bloody country’ living in the present, and maybe this will be possible only, as Brian’s mother used to say, when ‘oak trees’ will be ‘growing in the ruins of Buckingham Palace’: when the English would awake and make their own revolution from below.

A sort of revolutionary act in the wake of ‘the empire strikes back’ theme is, in the end, what appears to be the election won by the Headmaster against the Britain-centred New Labour Prime Minister, after only three weeks of campaigning based on nothing else than «common sense and decency»³¹⁹, references to England’s former greatness (with a continuous conflation between England and Britain) and the importance of traditions and manners. Referring to common sense is, as said before, a typical strategy adopted by populist politicians, especially English ones given that, as Ingle stresses,

George Gissing, one-time socialist and always a passionate supporter of the working class noted in the 1880s that the English were not much moved by concepts, even by ideals such as the ‘Rights of Man’. But ‘if you talk to them (long enough) about the rights of the shopman, or the ploughman ... they will lend ear, and, when the facts of any such case have been examined, they will find a way of dealing with them. This characteristic of theirs they call common sense’ (Gissing, 1903:130).³²⁰

Not by chance, ‘common sense’ and the reference to ‘ordinary people’, their lives and worries can be found in many real politicians’ speeches, and especially those of Enoch Powell. According to Berberich, the Headmaster’s campaign is also «an ironic repetition of Thatcherite ideology»:

in an interview with the *Daily Mail* in 1988, Margaret Thatcher had railed against the ‘permissiveness, selfish and uncaring’ that had ‘proliferated under the guise of new sexual freedom [in the 1960s and 1970s]’ when ‘aggressive verbal hostility, presented as a refreshing lack of subservience, replaced courtesy and good manners. Instant gratification became the philosophy of the young [...] [and] speculation replaced dogged hard work’ (quoted in Sinfield 1989:296).³²¹

Reading the Headmaster’s speech, it is indeed easy to note the similarities:

I am afraid I must say those words. The sixties. The seventies, dear God. The drip of hopelessness. The creeping malaise that strips the heart. The despair of betterment.

³¹⁸*Ivi*, p.317

³¹⁹*Ivi*, p.289

³²⁰Ingle, S., «Conservatives and Englishness: a conversation between party and nation», in Aughey, A., Berberich, C. (eds.), *op. cit.*, p.121

³²¹Berberich, C., «England, Devolution and Fictional Kingdoms» *cit.*, p.171

The waking up each day to find that those in power have allowed yet another value to go lost, yet another idiocy to be embraced, yet another corruption to go unpunished, yet another, and yet another, and yet another *question to be fudged*. And now, here we are, it is the third millennium, and still it goes on, and on.³²²

Apart from the references to the 60s and 70s as years in which decency and manners have been forgotten, the Headmaster's speech is very contemporary and it is possible to find similarities also with the Brexit discourse: the 'drip of hopelessness' corresponds to the 'people having enough' narrative and both derives from an unsettling present and a scary perception of the days to be; the 'creeping malaise that strips the heart' is the nostalgia for the days gone; the 'despair of betterment' is the desperate and vain attempt to improve one's own situation in a society in which social mobility seems an impossible goal; the 'unpunished corruption' of those in power is the populist theme of the people versus the elite and the 'question to be fudged' is the question of identity, and especially the English one.

According to the Headmaster,

[w]e were indeed the lucky ones, because we were allowed to keep our belief. Our belief in honesty and decency. Our belief in ourselves. Our belief in England. And we have kept it. And we keep it still. And we know that in your hearts of hearts, you [...] share that belief. Come with us. Believe, with us. And with God's help, together, for England's sake, *let us sort things out*.³²³

With the simple slogan 'let us sort things out', the Headmaster focuses his campaign on what England is longing for even today: hope. In his opinion, the colonists have been, ultimately, the lucky ones because, untouched by the events and changes of the last decades, they have managed to keep their faith in the nation. Asking people to believe in England, in its greatness and chance of being recovered in its glory, is an appeal to their affective support, which leverages the power of the cultural imaginary and the sense of greatness that is still attached to the nation.

In a rainy day very similar to the one of the Brexit referendum, «[e]ighty-three per cent of all eligible voters over the age of forty turned out [...] in every English county south of Chester»³²⁴ and voted for the Headmaster for no identifiable economic or political reason:

[p]erhaps it was the fact that the Chancellor's ongoing downturn in the property market was still going on down; perhaps it was because the Headmaster was the first Prime Ministerial candidate since Churchill who could be photographed addressing Guardsmen in some foreign hotspot, from the turret of a tank, without appearing ridiculous; or perhaps England was simply bored and fed up and ready for change, as it had been in 1945 and 1979 and 1997.³²⁵

³²²Hawes, J., *op. cit.*, p.292

³²³*Ivi*, pp.292-293

³²⁴*Ivi*, p.293

³²⁵*Ivi*, p.290

The age of the voters is quite important, considering that also in the Brexit referendum age has been a factor in voting Leave. Being around forty means being in a phase of life in which one is likely to re-consider their choices, possibilities and expectations. These people are those more inclined to be ‘bored and fed up’ not only with the government, but also with their lives, and to be looking for a change. Thus, the Headmaster is the first candidate in years that does not seem, like the others, to say «whatever they think people want them to think»³²⁶ but to be really listening to people’s actual fears and needs, as he acknowledges himself: «I keep finding it quite extraordinary, the way people react to us. It’s as if no one’s actually been *listening* to what people *want* for years, in England»³²⁷ Furthermore, the Headmaster is also described as a candidate that mirrors that idea of English leader personified by Winston Churchill: a leader of the people, for the people and with the people. Whatever the reason, the English thought they had finally found their true representative: an Englishman who has not lost faith in the nation and fully belongs not only to the real England as it exists in the disappointing present, but to the England depicted in the national narrative.

A true representative, or better spokesman, for England is what the title itself was hinting at and looking for from the beginning. ‘Speak for England’, as Berberich affirms, is an « implied question – ‘who is there to speak up for England at a time of dissolution and devolution?’ »³²⁸. Firstly, the implied question in the title aims at reminding another one, which resonated in the House of Commons in 1939, certainly a similar time of political dissolution and anxiety. Thus, Conservative politician Leo Amery shouted exactly the words ‘Speak for England!’ to Labour MP Arthur Greenwood when he announced, in the absence of Labour Party leader Clement Attlee, that he was going to speak for Labour. The event famously occurred when the then Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain addressed the House but did not declare war on Germany, although Hitler had just invaded Poland. Consequently, Amery’s remark directly implied the accusation that Chamberlain was not speaking for the country (England was here used as a synecdoche for Britain) and avoiding reacting to Nazism. The words ‘Speak for England’ resonated again during devolution and especially after the Scottish Independence referendum, when many commentators thought it was time, now, to let England speak, meaning to finally give the English the chance to make a decision about their future in the British Union. Actually,

³²⁶*Ivi*, p.245

³²⁷*Ivi*, p.309

³²⁸Berberich, C., «England, Devolution and Fictional Kingdoms» *cit.*, p.165

David Cameron himself stressed this parallel saying, after the Scottish results were released, that England's voice was still to be heard:

I have long believed that a crucial part missing from this national discussion is England. We have heard the voice of Scotland - and now the millions of voices of England must also be heard. The question of English votes for English laws - the so-called West Lothian question - requires a decisive answer.³²⁹

As is now known, that never happened. No referendum was approved regarding the matter and all the tension about the English question, political analyses show, passed on to the EU referendum, when, unsurprisingly, the question of 'who will speak for England' (again, England as a synecdoche) has reappeared, as is widely known, on one of the front pages of the *Daily Mail*. Although the *Daily Mail* asserted that the title was not designed to suggest any parallels between the Nazis and the EU, the hint is undeniable. The *Mail* invoked the comparison in order to highlight the correlation between 1939 and the present day, regarding both as two equal moments in history when the country has found itself at a «crossroad» and the people had to make up their minds about «what sort of country they want to live in and bequeath to those who come after [...]»³³⁰.

The question of 'who will speak for England' and the act of *j'accuse* it represents versus a political class trying to contrast and hide the rise of English nationalism under the carpet is unsurprisingly central in the novel. Thus, among the many interesting characters and sub-plots composing it, we also find

the three most powerful men in Britain, all of whom had spent their entire adult lives zealously plotting and planning and climbing various more or less greasy poles in order to be here now, were turning their vast experience to the vexed question of Monetary Union.³³¹

Referring to the Monetary Union, the novel immediately takes us to a certain time, making it easy to recognise the political entourage it takes inspiration from: talks about the Monetary Union are to be found in the years when Labour was governing the country with Tony Blair as Prime Minister and Gordon Brown in the role of Chancellor of the Exchequer (1997-2007). In that time, Blair fervently believed Britain should have entered the Monetary Union and that it was against the country's interests, and therefore a betrayal, not to do so.

³²⁹For David Cameron's speech, see «In full: David Cameron's statement on the UK's future», 19 September 2014, *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-29271765> (7 July 2019)

³³⁰The quoted article is «DAILY MAIL COMMENT: who WILL speak for England?», *Daily Mail*, 4 February 2016, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-3430870/DAILY-MAIL-COMMENT-speak-England.html> (7 July 2019)

³³¹Hawes, J., *op. cit.*, p.59

Consequently, he commissioned five economic tests on the euro by June 2003. The economic tests Brown eventually pursued found out that it would not have been in the UK's interest to join the union, considering the different economic situations of the countries involved. Therefore, the referendum was never implemented. The fact that Hawes is targeting New Labour is clearly demonstrated by the Prime Minister character pointing out, full of doubts, that calling out a referendum regarding the Monetary Union seems « y'know, a *Tory* policy», a contradiction that is immediately put aside by his Best Friend («currently without Portfolio again»³³²) and his Press Secretary who had proposed the plan: «[i]t'll dish them completely» affirms the first, «not that the pair wee saps need fixing ony more than they're fixing themsel's»³³³ continues the second with a Scottish accent, both referring to Conservatives. Furthermore, the Prime Minister being Tony Blair is also suggested by the song 'Crazy' that he would be trying to play on his guitar while thinking about the referendum plan, considering that 'crazy' is the exact word Blair is said to have used to define the decision of standing aside from the economic union.³³⁴ Another reference to Tony Blair is the suggestion his Press Secretary gives him later about one of his speeches, to «gie it the auld *People's Princess* treatment, boss»³³⁵, which recalls the expression Tony Blair used to refer to Diana Spencer in the speech he delivered after her sudden death.

In Hawes' fictional version of the events, despite the given reassurances, the Prime Minister still thinks it is «a *bloody* big step»³³⁶ to hold a referendum straight after Christmas, a referendum he is not sure about («[b]ut I mean, well, I was just thinking, would we really *win* a referendum?»³³⁷). Here Hawes seems to have really predicted the future, considering the many allegations regarding David Cameron's decision to promise a referendum on the European Union in 2015. Many analyses have outlined that the promise was probably more a 'sweetener' for Eurosceptics among his party members and voters than a real intention, and that it was a bet he was sure not to place: he believed that the referendum promise would have been held back by the Liberal Democrats, as happened in 2010 during the time of the Conservative coalition government. But in 2015 there was no hung parliament and no coalition government to form: Conservatives won an outright majority and Cameron had no justifications to stand back. In the end, Hawes' Prime Minister, like Cameron, calls out the referendum, with his two collaborators

³³²*Ivi*, pp.59-60

³³³*Ivi*, p.60

³³⁴Reference of it can be found in Bet, M., «How Tony Blair Almost Made Britain SCRAP the Pound in Favour of the EURO», *Daily Express*, 3 April 2019, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1109300/brexit-news-euro-eurozone-crisis-pound-growth-economy-tony-blair-gordon-brown-spt> (7 July 2019)

³³⁵Hawes, J., *op. cit.*, pp.60-61

³³⁶*Ivi*, p.60

³³⁷*Ibidem*

stressing convincingly that they will win it, since«[t]he Scots and the Welsh and the Northern Irish will all vote For because they all think they'll get enormous EU subsidies»³³⁸. Furthermore, they know that they

don't have to worry about winning in England, because whatever happens in England won't matter anyway. When the results come in, we'll break the vote down country by country. Three countries to one in favour. Then we point out that Lisbet is Queen of *several nations bound together by indissoluble links of history and rhubarb* and all that stuff. She loves that sort of thing, believe me, and she'll say it on the telly if we ask her. That'll shut the yellow press up. Can't be seen to be going against dear old Lisbet. Then we simply explain that Britain as a whole clearly voted for Monetary Union. And you do that speech I gave you about *How Can England the Champion of Freedom Ride Roughshod over the Democratic Wishes of Our Fellow British Nations?*, you know the one.

_Oh yes. I was practising it just the other day actually.³³⁹

Whatever happens in England, as Hawes outlines, won't matter anyway, which is, more than just a sentence, a deeply rooted certainty that was confirmed, for many English, by the devolution arrangements. In contrast to what happened in the 2016 referendum, where English votes were fundamental to the Brexit victory, the Best Friend and the Press Secretary have come up with a good plan to bypass the English obstacle: 'break the vote down country by country', being sure that, contrary to the English, the Scots, the Welsh and the Northern Irish will certainly vote in favour of the Monetary Union as «[t]hey know how well the Irish have done out of it and [we] will give the Nats a free hand to remind them»³⁴⁰. Winning the referendum is essential not because the Monetary Union will benefit the UK, but because it will give «more power to people like us»³⁴¹: power, control, wealth, is, ultimately, the real interest of the elite, already opposed, as would happen roughly ten years later, to the people. Thus, the Best Friend and the Press Secretary do not believe that huge EU subsidies will be coming in after a yes-vote, considering that

[t]he Irish only got so much because of the Germans and the French liking them. The Germans like the Irish because they're the only country that doesn't go around dropping hints about *invasions* whenever the Germans get fed up with paying for everything and the French like the Irish because they think liking the Irish will annoy *us*. No, no, the French want all the subsidies to go to Poland and those places now, to make sure they toe the line. the Welsh and Scots won't get a thing. but they don't realise it, of course.³⁴²

³³⁸*Ibidem*

³³⁹*Ivi*, pp.60-61

³⁴⁰*Ivi*, p.60

³⁴¹*Ivi*, p.61

³⁴²*Ivi*, p.60

Nonetheless, they will feed this belief and exploit any information ('give the Nats a free hand') and any useful narratives or feelings in their favour to get people's affective support towards the referendum. The Prime Minister's collaborators have no doubt that people will accept the results if they remind them that the UK is formed by 'several nations bound together', and are ready to manipulate even the Queen, who, as the personification of the Monarchy, is a living symbol of that conjoining. This strategy aims at silencing both the 'yellow press' and England, which they will describe as 'the Champion of Freedom' to prevent the English from rising up against the 'democratic' approach chosen for counting the votes. This definition cunningly recalls the British Empire and exploits its very national narrative based on the concept of a necessary civilising mission and the myth of the white man's burden. Consequently, when the referendum results are finally out and the Prime Minister comments that the majority of England is, undoubtedly, against the Monetary Union, the Press Secretary immediately answers «[a]ye aye, aye, but what about in *Britain*, boss? Heh heh!»³⁴³, reminding him that the trick, from the Union of the Two Crowns onwards, is «plug *British British British*» and «just dinnae mention *England*», since «British British British, that's our buzzword, remember»³⁴⁴. In other words, Hawes' characters are playing with the same mechanisms that have kept the English at bay from the beginning of the British Union and that are at the very basis of the constitution of the United Kingdom and the construction of Britishness. Furthermore, the fact that the reminder not to mention England comes, as Berberich notes, «in a broad Scottish accent is rather telling for the position of England in the British union overall, and reflects Gardiner's argument that, historically, Scotland, and specifically its elite, has been important for creating a British identity»³⁴⁵.

In the passages quoted previously the author also depicts British widespread Euroscepticism, strengthened by a vision of the Continent still embedded in war and post-war time: the French are 'the frogs' always conspiring against Britain, the Germans are forever marked by the stigma of the Second World War, and Eastern Europe (Poland and '*those places*') are represented as Said's Orientalised East or faraway colonies «scared shiteless by the Russkis» and not trusting «the Jerries»³⁴⁶ either. However, as outlined before, Euroscepticism is an English more than British characteristic and that explains why it is England's viewpoint that most worries the Prime Minister: the English are the ones more opposed to the European

³⁴³*Ivi*, p.100

³⁴⁴This is what the Press Secretary suggests the Prime Minister to do for his appearance in the *TV program Brit Pluck 2: The Rescue Mission*, *ivi*, pp.171-172

³⁴⁵Berberich, C., «England, Devolution and Fictional Kingdoms» *cit.*, p.169

³⁴⁶Hawes, J., *op. cit.*, p.61

Union, the ones that identify Europe as the Other in opposition, and the ones most worried about losing national sovereignty, since the English Parliament is, for them, a marker of nationality in itself.

The national glorification of war and the persistence of warlike thinking even in peacetime is also demonstrated by the USA's constant presence in the talks of the three 'powerful' politicians and by its influence in their decisions. One of the things the Prime Minister is deeply worried about is if his Best Friend is «*absolutely* sure the Americans are for it»³⁴⁷ and if «the Americans *will* let us keep Trident», an operational system of submarines armed with American missiles which, according to the Prime Minister, is necessary as a deterrent and also something that still makes the country «the Top of the Table in Europe»³⁴⁸. But the Best Friend clears it too: «[t]hey know we'll always be their best friends, [...] [t]hey want us running Europe for them»³⁴⁹. This statement obviously recalls the friendship between Clinton and Blair, and then Bush and Blair, as well as the one between Donald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, and, first and foremost, it refers to Winston Churchill's idea of a 'special relationship' with the USA and his doctrine of the three circles representing the UK as a kind of bridge connecting the American and European continents. The references to Churchill continue later: the secrecy of the Prime Minister's communications with the Trident captains makes him feel «a bit like Churchill, really», and the comparison, in parallel, even makes him consider it acceptable to ask the Americans before using Trident, since «even Churchill relied on the Americans, secretly, from right at the start, didn't he?»³⁵⁰. As in the Brexit campaign, were there were plenty of references to the famous political leader, Churchill is a symbol of the country's unity and strength and referring to him reinforces that vision of the country and of the world that he incarnates, a vision dated back to the Second World War and the imperial era.

Unsurprisingly, considering that the Headmaster's vision of England and the world have the same roots, Euroscepticism is central in his campaign as Americanism in his post-Europe plan for England. During the campaign, following typical populist narratives, the Headmaster points at alleged enemies preventing the nation from recovering its greatness: one enemy clearly is represented by the self-absorbed political class against which he is competing; the other is none other than the European Union. As the Headmaster declares, parodying, this time, Enoch Powell's populist style,

³⁴⁷*Ivi*, p.61

³⁴⁸*Ivi*, p.62

³⁴⁹*Ivi*, p.61

³⁵⁰*Ivi*, p.62

England is indeed in danger, mortal danger, not of defeat merely, but of extinction itself! Our Parliament, the Mother of Freedom, soon to be merely a subordinate talking-shop, our forces, the finest in the world, to be instructed by a cabal of so-called generals from Luxembourg and Belgium, our once-proud youth, whose grandfathers defeated the dark legions of the Nazi SS or smashed twenty times their own number of the Communist hordes at the Imjin River, intoxicating itself, week in, week out, into swinish, drugged oblivion in order to escape the grey vista of an aimless future.³⁵¹

According to the Headmaster, England is indeed in ‘mortal danger’ because the European Union, personified by the ‘generals from Luxembourg and Belgium’, threatens the ‘Mother of Freedom’ itself, meaning parliamentary sovereignty. Furthermore, the subjugation of England to the EU authority would be even more shameful considering that the English had been the ones to defeat ‘the dark legions of the Nazi SS’ that now, as implied, are again threatening the nation: «the dream of a Continental Europe [...] dominating all the world» was, as the Headmaster acknowledges, «[t]he dream of Philip II of Spain, of King Louis of France, of Napoleon Bonaparte, of Kaiser Bill, of Adolf Hitler, of Joseph Stalin», a nightmare the colonists had believed all along that «England was once more fighting [...] with her loyal cousins and powerful allies, the old Commonwealth, and the United States of America»³⁵². But the truth is that, instead of fighting, the English preferred to succumb and forget their duty, at least until now. As argued before, both arguments, loss of parliamentary sovereignty and the depiction of a Nazi EU, were also at the core of Brexiteers’ opposition to the European Union and their presence in the novel, however brief, acknowledge their deep roots in the English imaginary about Europe. As already stressed, the image of the European Union as a Nazi super-state is directly connected to the ‘post-war fantasy’ of the Nazi having won the war³⁵³, a fantasy linked to the English narrative of decline and to the inverse economic rise of Germany from unification onwards.

After becoming Prime Minister and having formed a National Government ready to control any aspects of the country’s life, especially education and sexuality (with repression of anything else than heterosexual behaviour), one of the first moves from the Headmaster regarding international politics is, consequently, withdrawing from the European Union, which leads to the immediate break-up of the United Kingdom. Thus,

[i]t had been England only which had withdrawn, for when the Welsh and Scots Nationalists and their allies had mounted a constitutional objection to the UK’s withdrawal (backed, of course, by the French), the National Government in London had unilaterally declared Wales and Scotland to be independent, Ireland to be

³⁵¹*Ivi*, p.292

³⁵²*Ivi*, p.291

³⁵³Cfr. O’Toole, F., *op. cit.*

reunited and itself henceforth to be simply the Government of England, Anguilla, Bermuda, the British Antarctic Territory, the British Indian Ocean Territory, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, the Falkland Islands and Dependencies (South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands), Gibraltar, Monserrat, Pitcairn, Henderson, the Ducie and Oeno Islands, St Helena and Dependencies (Ascension and Tristan da Cunha), and the Turks and Caicos Islands. The British Commonwealth had been dissolved, but most present members had already applied to join the new English Language Community.³⁵⁴

The idea of a sort of ‘English Language Community’ is not far away from the hints regarding strengthening ties with the USA and other English-speaking countries after the Brexit vote as an alternative to the European Union. Another similarity with present-day reality is the change from the dark-red cover of the European passport to the new English ID, which resembles the old blue passports *The Sun* has agitated for during the 2016 campaign:

The new English ID card was rather more than a mere card. It was a substantial affair, deliberately large, dark blue and leather-bound, in order, so Home Secretary Devereux had declared, *to give a chap a sense of pride again when he feels it sitting there in his pocket. As it shall henceforth do at all times in all public places.* This ID card was not only larger than the red EU passports, but was soon to replace them entirely, for England had withdrawn from the EU ten days before.³⁵⁵

The change from a European passport to an English one is not dictated by the withdrawal, but by the desire to ‘give a chap a sense of pride again’, to make people feel English once more and proud of their national identity. Another means to instil a sense of pride and belonging are the Neighbourhood Foot Reserve patrols, whose members are «stout and fit mortgage-holders over twenty-six, as the Law required them to be» who get some advantages from patrolling (lower car-insurance premiums and higher values to their homes if theirs is a registered NFR area) but are generally unpaid if not in «respect among their fellows»³⁵⁶ which is what most of them were missing: the feeling of being part of something and doing something important, useful, with one’s own life.

Interestingly, Brian does not even try to join the NFR and also forgets to apply for the new English ID card, so that, when the Neighbourhood Foot Reserve patrols of his mother’s area stopped him, they end up questioning him:

_ You don’t look like a illegal or a bomber.
_ Ha ha ha.
_ Not finking of running off to the EU, were you, sir?
_ Ha ha ha.
_ God, no, laughed Marley overloudly.
_ Not Welsh or Scots, are you, sir?

³⁵⁴Hawes, J., *op. cit.*, p.302

³⁵⁵*Ivi*, pp.301-302

³⁵⁶*Ivi*, p.300

_No, God.

_It's just, some Taffs and Jocks want to hang on to their old UK EU passports. Dunno why. Fink they can appeal to the European Court of Human Rights or somefink.

_Ha ha ha.

_No, no, said Marley, _ I just, you know, haven't, got round to swapping it yet. I'm English. Completely English. I've been meaning to get an ID card, I'll do it tomorrow.³⁵⁷

Ironically, Brian again affirms to be English, even 'completely' English in a situation where he believes himself in danger. But the fact that he still does not have his own English ID, a dear symbol, for the patrols, of a proud national identity, seems to declare the contrary and let them wonder if Brian is doing 'his bit' for the country, an expression that comes directly from one of the new National Government's slogans.

It is exactly 'his bit' that the Headmaster comes to ask Brian, offering him a job (Second Secretary to the Committee for the Special Relationship) and a wife (George is pregnant and her good name must be protected) to force him to fully become «*one of us*»³⁵⁸ and not to bleat about what was happening in the Colony, ready to become a tourist destination (the *England, England* of Hawes' novel). After Brian's decision to sign for the job – or rather, to trade his freedom for the Englishman's dream – the Headmaster explains to him what the Committee for the Special Relationship is, which is already quite a telling name. In the Headmaster's plan, now that England is leaving the EU the nation will find its proper 'place in the world' becoming part of the USA:

We'll be called *Old England*, you see. [...] We'll be the biggest single State in the Union, so we'll get at least as many Senators and what have you as New York and California, and then they'll have to chuck money at us before every election, which is pretty well all the time, the way they run things over there. I know it sounds a bit iffy at first, Marley, but I mean to say, it's not as if we ever do anything much anyway without checking it out with them first, as things stand, is it? [...] You see, Marley, if you think about it, you'll find we'll be a damn sight freer and have a lot more clout as a state in America than in a United Europe. And this way, at least we'll be dealing with our own sort in our own language, not with the ruddy Frogs through wop interpreters. In fact, I think that this whole EU business was a pretty narrow squeak, don't you? 1805 and 1940 all over again, rather. So yes, we're going the whole hog with the Americans now. Just as Winston always wanted it, really. The Scots and Welsh will be desperate to follow suit, of course, and very welcome as far as I'm concerned provided they toe the line. Good chaps, so long as they don't forget who's in charge when push comes to shove.³⁵⁹

In the passage above, the Headmaster again compares the EU to Napoleon and Hitler's plans, implying that the European Union was actually 'chaining' the country and reducing her

³⁵⁷*Ivi*, p.301

³⁵⁸*Ivi*, p.311

³⁵⁹*Ivi*, pp.319-320

influence. Freedom and influence are, instead, only to be gained from a hypothetical union with the United States that, differently from the ‘Frogs’ and the other Europeans, are ‘our own sort’ and speak the same language. The Headmaster defines this union as exactly what ‘Winston always wanted’, referring again to Churchill’s idea of a special relationship with the Americans, and does not rule out the option of Scots and Welsh coming on board, ‘so long as they don’t forget who’s in charge’: so long as they do respect the natural superiority of the English and their role as rulers. The Headmaster has also already thought about all the details: the Queen will maintain her symbolical role; the English would get American ‘gadgets’ and « the same immigration and asylum laws as the Yanks, which is to say, taking none of the buggers at all as far as I can tell»³⁶⁰; and the Americans, on the other hand, will «like the notion of another thirty-odd million white-skinned, English-speaking voters. Might help them to *win America back*, the President said»³⁶¹. Immigration too was, as we know, a prominent topic in the Brexit referendum and, from the Windrush arrival onwards, generally a tough one to deal with, especially in England where whiteness is considered an essential attribute of Englishness. Having the same laws as the USA and no longer having to oblige the Dublin Convention would mean not only less economic migrants (especially European ones free to move in an England part of the EU), but also less refugees, and since the novel was published before the migrant and refugee crisis reached its peak, this reference to opposition towards asylum seekers dated it well before the crisis and the spread of a similar opposition in the other European countries. Also of relevance to the present is the slogan which the American President would have used with the Headmaster, ‘win America back’, which implies the question ‘back from whom?’ and already conveys the growing hostility towards immigrants and ethnic minorities that Donald Trump has capitalised on more than ten years later.

According to the Headmaster, it will be like «the good old days», meaning «the whole tribe pulling together again»³⁶², and it will not be difficult to convince people: in the end, democratic politics is just treating people «the way we used to treat the locals in the Empire: nothing too complicated, put on a bit of a show, never let them see you blink»³⁶³ and if it does not work, let just do like this «Thatcher woman»³⁶⁴ and declare a war to distract the attention. The colonists’ rule is finally revealed for what it really is: a big show, a pretence of ‘listening’ and ‘caring’ about the ‘poor buggers’ or, using a more contemporary terminology, ‘the ordinary

³⁶⁰*Ivi*, p.321

³⁶¹*Ivi*, pp.320-321

³⁶²*Ivi*, p.321

³⁶³*Ivi*, p.326

³⁶⁴*Ivi*, p.327

people’, only to carry on their own purposes, exactly as they did in the Colony with the natives. There is no much difference, ultimately, between the Labour Prime Minister and the Headmaster taking his place, apart from the ‘version’ of national identity they decide to ‘brand’:

the one borrowing from Blair’s Cool Britannia, the other a dubious retrenching to a Powellite and Thatcherite mindset - are shown to be deeply flawed. One prioritises a marketable Britain at the expense of England; the other one sees nothing but a white, upper-middle-class Englishness rooted in the past. Both run the risk of turning the country into a theme park, designed around mythical markers of national identity geared towards tourists³⁶⁵

Thus, from the Colony to the mother country, the colonists’ ultimate purpose is now not surviving but transforming ‘real England’ into something more in line with its traditional representation: an exclusive Anglo-Saxon nation based on an idea of Englishness where whiteness, heterosexuality and an upper-class status are the desired characteristics. As Brian’s mother tells his son, trying to make him open his own eyes, the Headmaster is

just another bloody-minded old upper-class bugger with a heart as black as Newgate’s knocker. I’ve always said that what this country needs is a proper bourgeois revolution at last. Karl Marx was right about that, though of course he was quite wrong about everything else.³⁶⁶

While the Headmaster depicts his government as an expression of popular will, Brian’s mother outlines, in contrast, that he is only ‘another bloody-minded old upper-class bugger’ pretending to be part of ‘the people’ and to be endorsing their vision of what England should be, but actually manipulating while carrying out his own plan for the country. Brian’s mother is here acknowledging that «the ideological content of the nation is always part of a contested process, reflecting the different class interest of those who identify with it»³⁶⁷, and consequently that the ‘bourgeois revolution’ that she thinks could really ‘save’ the country is clearly not this ‘upper-class’ pastiche. In a similar fashion to the Headmaster, Nigel Farage, Boris Johnson, Michael Gove and many other Brexiteers whose «backgrounds and the policies [...] place them clearly within the establishment»³⁶⁸ have described the Brexit vote as «proof of a populist will cast by the unfairly excluded and forgotten»³⁶⁹, referring to those ‘poor buggers’ who they especially identify with the ‘white working class’. But, as the Ashcroft polls (2016) referenced by Shilliam show, while it is true that 41 per cent of the Leave vote came from C2DE voters

³⁶⁵Berberich, C., «England, Devolution and Fictional Kingdoms» *cit.*, p. 172

³⁶⁶Hawes, J., *op. cit.*, p.330

³⁶⁷Newman, A, *op. cit.*, p.232

³⁶⁸Buckledee, S., *op. cit.*, p.63

³⁶⁹Shilliam, R., *Race and the Undeserving Poor cit.*, p.174

(working class), 59 per cent of it was cast by ABC1, voters from the same economic class as Farage and Johnson themselves, who certainly are not ordinary people. What C2DE and ABC1 voters have in common are not, clearly, economic or political interests, but the appeal the image of the country at the core of both the Headmaster's and the Brexiteers' campaigns has on them.

It is indeed the very possibility of coming back to the image of a great, homogenous England to be proud of and to belong to, along with the reference to old values that, in the end, 'buy' the people, convincing them to believe in the Headmaster's project: the same nostalgic dream that has guided the Brexit vote. As Brian affirms at the end of the novel, there is nothing as powerful as the past,

because the past is all we know, the future is always obscured by cloud, we hack our way through it towards nowhere we know, and whenever we tire of the endless exploration, as well we might, whenever life seems absurdly short and the horizon no closer than when we set out all those years ago, it is the past that is always lying in wait for us, tempting us with the infallible promise of the trusted, the explored, the warm and the safe, the only real home we shall ever have. Waiting to tuck us up tight.³⁷⁰

Hawes's ending offers no answer to the question of identity except for this: when we look for identity in the past and let it win, what we obtain is a familiar image that is, ultimately, pretty much of the same thing we had before. An image that, lying in the past and generated from the events of the past, has nothing in common with present realities and, instead of offering solutions, ends up being another unsettling element. Thus, being always a 'selective' image with a defined political agenda, it can never represent the nation as a whole. In the Brexit case as in Hawes' novel, escaping in the past and trying to restore it in present day following the 'snapshot' selected according to one's own political agenda and 'taste' ultimately triggers a return to tribalism, strengthening both racial and social hierarchies linked to the selected past and drawing even more deeply the line between 'our tribe' and 'your tribe', 'our lot' and 'your lot', 'us' and 'them'.

From Nostalgic Dreams to Paranoid Nightmares: *The White Family under Siege*

Like the Headmaster's appeal, that of the Brexiteers' is «entirely emotive» and especially rooted in the «hymns of nostalgia peddled by the nationalist right». The «imperially nostalgic nationalism»³⁷¹ at the core of Hawes' text and the Brexit narrative would be the only element underpinning the choices of C2DE and ABC1 voters, and it is important to notice that «[t]he

³⁷⁰Hawes, J., *op. cit.*, p.335

³⁷¹Mondal, A.A., *op. cit.*, p.85

principal ingredient in this structure of feeling is race»³⁷². This has already been hinted in *Speak for England*, in which the mark of inferiority, assigned both to the natives in Papua New Guinea and to the black inspector in the mother country, comes directly from the racial hierarchy embedded in the imperial narrative of identity.

According to Mondal, affirming that race is at the centre of the nostalgic dream shaped by the Brexiteers does not imply that Leave voters were all, necessarily, racists; rather, that «racialized imaginaries»³⁷³ linked to the imperial era have played a central role in the Brexit campaign, influencing (consciously or not) people's vote. The strategies to recall these 'racialised imaginaries' during the campaign were multiple. One was the release of the 'Breaking Point' poster by Farage's party, which reproduces, not by chance, a photograph representing African and Middle Eastern refugees. The poster aimed at emphasizing the race-factor, both to trigger traditional fears regarding a possible invasion and to reinforce fantasies about a colonisation already under way. Another strategy was the rhetoric adopted by the right-wing press, which referred to migrants and refugees using a traditional «highly emotive language» in relation to the issue, «in particular metaphors of natural phenomena capable of causing enormous damage - flood, *tidal wave*, even *tsunami* - or terms from the semantic fields of military operations - *invasion*, *army of immigrants* - and great numbers - *hordes*, *swarms* and the like»³⁷⁴. In particular, the lexicon linked to war and invasion was typical of Conservative politician Enoch Powell's speeches on immigration and was very present in British politics during the referendum. Another politician who exploited Powell's martial register and emphasised the issue of immigration was none other than the Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who famously claimed that

[if] we went on as we are then, by the end of the century, there would be four million people of the new Commonwealth or Pakistan here. Now, that is an awful lot and I think it means that people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture.³⁷⁵

The word 'swamped' has been repeated other times in the context of immigration, for instance by Defence Secretary Michael Fallon in 2014 under David Cameron's first mandate. In both cases, Conservative politicians advertised their opposition to immigration in order to win the votes of those ordinary people who felt themselves to be 'under attack'. Unsurprisingly, the word has also been frequently used by the press, both in the leadup to Brexit and in the years

³⁷²Ivi, p.86

³⁷³*Ibidem*

³⁷⁴Buckledee, S., *op. cit.*, p.98

³⁷⁵Burns, G., «TV Interview for *Granada World in Action* ("rather swamped")», *Granada Transcript*, 27 January 1978, in *the Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103485> (15 July 2019)

following the referendum results. In the end, even the most famous slogan of the campaign, ‘take back control’, exploited well-known racial imaginaries, playing with the fear that «behind every Pole was a Muslim and/or African waiting to invade the heartlands»³⁷⁶. The erroneous association between European and non-European migrants, found also in Hawes’ novel when the Headmaster talks about the benefits of being part of the USA in relation to immigration laws, is in both cases misleading because it implies an EU responsibility in non-European immigration, while the free movement of citizens only applies to Europeans, leaving UK laws still responsible for immigration from other countries.

Recalling the ‘racial imaginaries’ of the imperial era is a way to implicitly refer to the racial hierarchy developed alongside the British Empire, and consequently to racialize, in a negative way, European immigrants. As Mondal highlights, «[o]ne should not be distracted by the fact that anti-EU immigration sentiment appears to be principally directed at obtrusively *white* migrants from eastern Europe»³⁷⁷ since pointing at the whiteness of European immigrants to dismiss accusations regarding a racialization of the issue is just a «cast-iron alibi»³⁷⁸. Thus, even though the immigrants physically representing the EU on British soil are actually ‘white’, their negative racialization through the imperial racial hierarchy should not be ruled out for a significant historical reason: the only whiteness that has always mattered in this structure of feeling is the Anglo-Saxon one. An example of this is the way the Irish were viewed, having been labelled as chimpanzees and defined as more disturbing than the Black and Asian Colonised precisely for their whiteness; or the racial epithets forced upon Southern European migrants, which are still used today; or again, when many Poles settled in the UK after WWII, they were perceived as being «too “Eastern”, incapable of undertaking high quality work, partial to “dubious” methods of earning their living, and unable to properly assimilate into British society», with the women coming from the Polish countryside particularly criticised for their «uncleanliness» and «propensity to “drift into undesirable ways of life”»³⁷⁹.

It follows that whiteness alone is not enough to place immigrants on the same level of the racial hierarchy as the native English and that any white migrant can be racialised in either a positive or negative way, depending on the circumstances. In the Polish case, for instance, although some pundits were against their immigration – the Royal Commission appointed to

³⁷⁶Shilliam, R., *Race and the Undeserving Poor cit.*, p.163

³⁷⁷Mondal, A. A., *op. cit.*, p.86

³⁷⁸*Ibidem*

³⁷⁹Shilliam, R., *Race and the Undeserving Poor. cit.*, p.86

address the lack of workers during post-war reconstruction, encouraged their recruitment³⁸⁰, considering them preferable to migrants coming from the Commonwealth and even emphasizing alleged commonalities between the ‘European Volunteer Workers’ and the British population to ease their integration in British society. As Shilliam points out, their «deserving nature was adjudicated according to the degree that they were racialized as compatible or incompatible with the English genus – in terms of their characteristics and genes»³⁸¹ – and, it could be argued, that they were also considered a lesser evil: after all, a bunch of *white* Poles was better than an *army* of black migrants, and it is, in the end, this comparison that contributed to their positive racialisation. But when the line to stress is between white Anglo-Saxon and other shades of white, the racialisation is easily turned to negative to re-establish, on the basis of the racial hierarchy, who is deserving of housing accommodation, benefits, bursaries – due to belonging to the designated group – and who is not because ‘racially’ different.

This kind of discourse, originally the basis for the far right’s opposition to the recent influx of Eastern European migrants³⁸², has been easily appropriated by the Brexiteers, who have presented Brexit as a way to re-establish the distinction between the deserving Anglo-Saxon and the undeserving Other (black or white). Along with the skin colour, religion has also been exploited for the negative racialization of immigrants, given that the Poles, the major Eastern European minority in the UK, are generally Catholic; that the migrants and refugees from Africa and Middle East are usually Muslims; and that «other “white” (racially speaking) peoples at the margins of Europe, most notably the Turks, immediately invoke a repository of anti-Muslim antipathies»³⁸³. The Leave campaign has cunningly exploited this repository, insinuating more than once that

the EU would soon be “swamped” by nearly 80 million Muslims when (not if) Turkey joined, thereby bringing into play a cluster of associations surrounding “terrorism”, violence, fanaticism, barbarism and so on that all play their part in the kind of othering on which racialized imaginaries feed and thrive (Erlanger, 2016).³⁸⁴

Given the roots of this narrative in the imperial racial hierarchy, it is quite obvious that the ‘kind of othering’ the Brexiteers have applied to negatively connote European migrants has been taken directly from the representation of the colonial Other, and especially from its

³⁸⁰An example is the *Polish Resettlement Act* offering citizenship to Polish soldiers that had fought the Nazi and were still on British soil. For further information, see «UK Public General Acts», *legislation.gov.uk*, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/10-11/19/contents> (15 July 2019)

³⁸¹Shilliam, R., *Race and the Undeserving Poor cit.*, p.160

³⁸²Cfr. Huq, R., «Cultural Landscape After New Labour», in Perryman, M. (ed.), *op. cit.*

³⁸³Mondal, A. A., *op. cit.*, p.86

³⁸³*Ibidem*

³⁸⁴*Ivi.*, p.87

representation in post-war immigration debates, where, as the European migrant, the Colonised is to be found in the mother country and depicted as an alien and unsettling presence invading – following a kind of revenge plot – the nation.

A consequence of the imperial enterprise, immigration from the colonies and ex-colonies of the British Empire during the post-war decades saw great numbers of non-white people landing (and settling) in Britain, many of whom had even fought for the mother country during the Second World War. In the beginning, this immigration was even made easier by British authorities through the passing of the 1948 *British Nationality Act*, which granted British citizenship to any citizen of the Commonwealth. But after the arrival of many immigrants of Asian and African descent, which contrasted with the existing post-imperial image of a *racial community of Britons* – built around a shared whiteness and featuring *white* Australians, Canadians and New Zealanders³⁸⁵ – their presence in the mother country became immediately problematic as it clashed with the white image of the national community. On paper, at least, there should have been no formal difference between those colonials and the aforementioned white immigrants. All should have been welcomed and assimilated. This, however, did not correspond with their reality. In the same way, immigration from Eastern Europe was not initially obstructed – as demonstrated by the fact that the UK was one of the few countries which did not put a limit on the number of immigrants from the area – and only after the numbers of those arriving started vastly exceeding their expectations did fears of invasion and colonization become an issue. Fears of invasion, racial contamination and racial degeneration have their roots precisely in the post-war period and in the immigration of the colonised. Thus, already in 1947, Eva Hubback suggested the possibility that the white indigenous population would have soon been outnumbered and substituted by the newcomers. Hostility and panic even led to the institution of a Royal Commission on Population to deal with the matter.³⁸⁶ It is in this light that we should consider the subsequent 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act, which permitted entry into the UK only to Commonwealth citizens to whom the British government had issued an employment voucher. In the end, to re-establish the racial hierarchy of the colonies and integrate a deserving/undeserving distinction that could grant more privileges to the Anglo-Saxon group, «an informal colour bar that ran the length of society, and especially through work and welfare» was adopted. This informal colour bar enabled the «“white working

³⁸⁵For further analysis on the matter, see Ward S., *op. cit.*, and Webster, W., *op. cit.*

³⁸⁶Cfr. Robbins, K., *Great Britain. Identities, Institutions and the Idea of Britishness*, London & New York, Longman, 1998

class” to gain traction as a constituency»³⁸⁷ and allowed discriminations according to race to flourish. As Shilliam stresses,

[t]hose who contributed to this re-racialization of the deserving/undeserving distinction included Conservative and Labour politicians as well as trade unions. Their policies and rhetoric moulded the “white working class” into a viable constituency. This constituency defined itself [...] in the opposition between deserving whites and undeserving Black and Asian Commonwealth immigrants.³⁸⁸

Workers who were racialised as ‘white’ were, therefore, more likely to get well-paid and secure jobs, while Black and Asian workers were destined to work low-wage and more precarious ones. As Paul Thomas observes, the daily reality for these immigrants in UK

was racial discrimination and prejudice, with outbursts of violence such as the 1958 Notting Hill and Nottingham riots (Solomos, 2003). In the face of rising racial tension, the 1964-70 Labour government accepted that assimilation had not worked and ushered in the policy of ‘multiculturalism’ whereby ethnic diversity was tolerated and a partial anti-discrimination legal framework provided. Whilst representing progress, much of the popular discourse continued to see ethnic minorities as ‘alien’, ‘others’, with media and police racism making it difficult to be black *and* British (Gilroy, 2002).³⁸⁹

The racial tension was and is particularly acute in England, considering that this is where the majority of migrants settled. As Perryman reminds, the significant ethnic diversity that characterises England’s larger cities, with white English as the largest ethnic group, means that «[t]o a much greater extent than arguments over Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish identity debates about Englishness are dominated by the question of race»³⁹⁰. As race is crucial to the question of English identity, it should not come as a surprise that ethnic minorities in England, as many analyses show, find it more difficult to identify with an English identity than, for instance, ethnic minorities in Scotland find it to engage with a Scottish identity. For migrants, Englishness represents a white identity from which, because of their skin colour, they are inevitably excluded. This perception derives directly from the ‘indigenous’ idea of Englishness: a white collective identity developed in opposition to the multiracial character Britishness has acquired with the enlargement of the Commonwealth and the spread of multiculturalism. According to Shilliam, after British entry in the EEC and the Commonwealth starting to be composed by white and non-white members, the nation

was [...] defined by the prospect of either European incorporation and/or affiliation with an independent *and* multi-coloured Commonwealth. A poll taken in September

³⁸⁷Shilliam, R., *Race and the Undeserving Poor cit.*, p.92

³⁸⁸*Ivi*, p.81

³⁸⁹Thomas, P., «All White? Englishness, ‘Race’ and Ethnic identities», in Aughey, A., Berberich, C. (eds.), *op. cit.*, p.77

³⁹⁰Perryman, M., «Becoming England», in Perryman, M. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.29

1961 provides a sample of popular opinion in this quandary. When asked which international association was the most important, a significant majority (48%) identified the Commonwealth, while 19 per cent cleaved to the United States and only 18 per cent to Europe (May 2001: 90). But support for the Commonwealth was qualified by the racialized distinction made between the “old” members - white, Anglo-Saxon settler-colonies - and “new” members - previously non-white colonies and dependencies (Webster 2010:174). In the same year, another national poll indicated that 73 per cent of the public supported population controls for, specifically, “coloured colonial immigrants” (Small & Solomos 2006: 243). So much was the expansion of Commonwealth membership an issue that by this point in time Englishness was steadily being defined in opposition to the Commonwealth *per se* (Webster 2010: 152).³⁹¹

The polls quoted by Shilliam show the impact of race on perceptions of and attachment to the Commonwealth, whose new composition – which included many *non-white* members – made problematic the conception of the organisation as an enlarged Anglo-Saxon family. Moreover, they support Christine Berberich’s definition of Englishness as a recent concept developed in light of the end of empire, «devised and constructed in an attempt to demarcate the boundaries between England and all “others”»³⁹². This is the reason why Andrew Mycock talks about a ‘postcolonial’ Englishness, acknowledging «the centrality of ethnic and racial ideologies in shaping historical and contemporary formations of English culture and identity»³⁹³ and the impact of decolonization.

Fundamental in the construction of this postcolonial identity in opposition to the colonial Other has been the racist rhetoric that flourished from the 50s onwards in the bosom of the Conservative party. One of the most famous representatives of this kind of rhetoric is, as stressed before, Enoch Powell, who was one of the first to refer to the ‘ordinary man’ and to convey fears of invasion and subjugation at the hands of the Colonised. In his famous 1968 *Birmingham Speech*, written against the second anti-discriminatory *Race Relations Act* and re-named by the press the *Rivers of Blood* speech, Powell referred to conversations with and letters from his constituents, people he describes as ordinary fellow Englishmen, disappointed, scared and outnumbered in their own neighbourhoods. According to Powell, the never-ending arrival of migrants was responsible for «[t]he discrimination and the deprivation, the sense of alarm and of resentment» felt by those ordinary English people whose perception of being a «persecuted minority» and «strangers in their own country»³⁹⁴ was, in Powell’s opinion, rightly growing as jobs, hospital beds, housing and benefits were constantly going to the immigrants

³⁹¹Shilliam, R., *Race and the Undeserving Poor cit.*, pp.93-94

³⁹²Berberich, C., «Bursting the Bubble» *cit.*, p.162

³⁹³Mycock, A., «Understanding the Post British English Nation State», in Gardiner, M., Westall, c. (eds.), *op. cit.*, p.19

³⁹⁴Powell, E., *Rivers of Blood*, *The Telegraph*, 6 November 2007, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html> (15 July 2019)

over the native population. Mycock defines this English sense of victimhood a kind of ‘postcolonial revisionism’, with members of the previous imperial core considering themselves victims of the colonised. Powell’s anger, more than towards the alleged ‘invader’, was directed towards the political elite of his time, who had let the country «[heat] up its own funeral pyre» allowing – in an act that could only be, in his opinion, an expression of madness – «the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependants»³⁹⁵ to happen.

Through his political stance, Powell gave voice to that ‘white working-class constituency’ ready to become one of the main characters of the Brexit vote. These were «white workers who wished to defend the racialized division of labour against Commonwealth immigration, interests that were threatened to the extent that race equalities legislation targeted the integrity of informal colour bars»³⁹⁶, deleting the distinction between *deserving* (Anglo-Saxon white) and *undeserving* (the others) poor. This would be the perfect definition also for those white workers that, almost fifty years later, saw in Brexit a chance to protect their interests, having been threatened by the EU pillar of the free movement of people and the consequent competitive force represented by European migration. A Brexit vote to reject the EU and, most importantly, to reinforce the racial hierarchy in their favour would assuage all of their concerns. Rupa Huq has indeed linked this contemporary English sense of victimhood to Powellism, especially to Powell’s idea that «the working classes have been betrayed, forced against their will and without consultation to live in an alien and dangerous multi-racial environment»³⁹⁷. Unsurprisingly, looking at 1969 and 1970 surveys, Shilliam has noticed that «those respondents who most strongly perceived their socio-economic position to have declined since their childhood»³⁹⁸ and those with lower educational degrees were the ones most likely to feel left behind and to vote for Powell – the same characteristics that Ford and Goodwin’s research highlighted in relation to the ‘left behind’ thesis in Brexit. In both cases, the ‘left behind’ are white because it is the loss of the benefits that (Anglo-Saxon) whiteness granted that made them feel this way and, subsequently, vote for a restoration of the racial hierarchy. It follows that the rhetoric of the ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech would have perfectly fit in the Brexit campaign, considering that the issues raised by Powell were the same with only one difference: the whiteness of the present immigrants. Ultimately, the identification of the enemy in the figure of the migrant and the division of the working class between white constituency and non-white working-class members ended up damaging the very white workers Powell wanted to protect,

³⁹⁵*Ibidem*

³⁹⁶Shilliam, R., *Race and the Undeserving Poor cit.*, pp.102-103

³⁹⁷Huq, R., *op. cit.*, p.67

³⁹⁸Shilliam, R., *Race and the Undeserving Poor cit.*, p.156

preventing the class from achieving a common stance against the real enemy: neoliberalism in the form of deregulation of labour as the very factor making migrants a competitive force against indigenous workers.

According to Shilliam, the making, breaking and eventual re-making of the white working class as a constituency is – even if other factors have been involved – definitely an elite affair, meaning that this selected group was sketched out, drawn up, put aside, and again claimed ‘deserving’ by the then current political elite in order to be exploited for a precise political agenda. It is not by chance that the «re-entry of “class” into the political grammar of mainstream media and debate» is to be found in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, when polls suggested a diffuse sense of unfairness and victimhood «among the white members of the working class in contrast to positive discriminations purportedly enjoyed by Britain’s Black and minority ethnic populations»³⁹⁹, and especially following the 2011 uprising, in which the percentage of white people involved is quite telling. Not by chance, it is from then onwards that many politicians, from both sides, started referring more often to the ‘white working-class’, presented as a «forgotten indigenous constituency»⁴⁰⁰. The victims of deindustrialisation, immigration and social inequality, these people viewed themselves as being ‘left behind’ as they felt that the government had abandoned their concerns in order to focus on the needs of ethnic minorities and women. Connected to this, O’ Toole has affirmed that Brexit «came to the boil in the midst of a wider turmoil of far-right nationalism» which had as crucial ingredient «the transference of victimhood» describing the phenomenon, ironically, as a sort of «white man’s #MeToo movement. Not only am I not guilty, but I am in fact a victim»⁴⁰¹.

In the end, the most successful party in conveying English sense of victimhood has been UKIP, which is «not a worker’s party, but for those who looked backwards it was their party in so far as it articulated a racialized - rather than purely classed - grievance»⁴⁰². Thus, Farage has been able, as Powell before, to weaponize the white working-class, holding immigration responsible for the loss of social security (resulting, in actuality, from the government’s neoliberal policies) and for the gradual dismantlement of the welfare system (which actually stemmed from the government’s austerity policies), connecting racial imaginaries and class interest. Following again Powell’s footprints,

Farage confidently claimed that the Westminster elite, who were busy sacrificing public provisions on the altar of austerity, were also betraying the forgotten people of England by encouraging even more immigration. It did not so much matter that

³⁹⁹Ivi, p.2

⁴⁰⁰Ivi, p.6

⁴⁰¹O’ Toole, F., *op. cit.*, p.85

⁴⁰²Shilliam, R., *Race and the Undeserving Poor cit.*, p.154

these migrants were increasingly “white”. What mattered was that central and eastern Europeans were not white English.⁴⁰³

Considering how the class interests of the white working class are underpinned with race, it seems a natural consequence that a portrayal of the typical ‘left behind’ worker, perceiving himself as having been ‘victimised’ for being white and English, is to be found in the novel *The White Family* (2002) by Maggie Gee, which is a work of fiction that deals primarily with racism and racial hierarchies in contemporary Britain. The novel takes place in a Britain trying to re-shape its identity after the loss of empire, the joining of the European Union and the shift towards neoliberalism. This ‘re-shaping’ seems particularly difficult for the English, nostalgic for their glorious past and hostile towards Black and Asian migrants, who do not fit in the ideal image of the nation and are therefore the designated scapegoats for present grievances. Not by chance, the work has taken inspiration from the murder of a Black British teenager, Stephen Lawrence⁴⁰⁴, killed by a gang of white youths with for no other reason than his skin colour.⁴⁰⁵

The novel focuses on one single family, significantly called the Whites, who are gathered back together by the patriarch, Alfred, forced to lay in a hospital bed following a medical ‘event’ that is later discovered to be cancer. It is divided into four sections, which, apart from ‘the beginning’, represent places, ‘the shop’, ‘the park’ and ‘the church’, where – despite the generally segregated nature of British (English) society – encounters between black and white are more possible. Through multiple points of view and flashbacks, the history of the family is displayed: the love story between Alfred and his wife May, the abusive childhood experienced by their children (their sons Darren and Dirk and their daughter Shirley), their many misunderstandings precluding dialogue and reciprocal healing both in the family and in the society.

Central in the novel is Albion Park, which is a hundred years old, with gates that are «magnificent nottering fairy-tale things, Victorian curlicues of iron-work»⁴⁰⁶ and a «solidly impressive Victorian pile, two-storey, detached, with fine large windows»⁴⁰⁷. Besides being a stunning and peaceful place, the park is described as the very «focal point to which all paths led»⁴⁰⁸. This is a reference to the park standing for England itself, given the fact that, in the

⁴⁰³Ivi, pp.162-163

⁴⁰⁴This has been declared by the author in many interviews, for instance in Nasta, S., *Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk*, London & New York, Routledge, 2004, p.302

⁴⁰⁵For further information on the murder of Stephen Lawrence, see «Stephen Lawrence murder: A timeline of how the story unfolded», *BBC News*, 13 April 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-26465916> (15 July 2019)

⁴⁰⁶Gee, M., *The White Family* (2002), Telegram, 2008, p.37

⁴⁰⁷Ivi, p.48

⁴⁰⁸*Ibidem*

imperial narrative of identity, the nation is considered ‘the heart of the Empire’ to which any road, from any remote corner of the imperial possessions, should lead. Even its name, Albion Park, immediately recalls the myth of Albion and suggests the reading of the park as England. To protect and preserve this thing of beauty, the park and the England it represents, stands Alfred White, a park keeper with nearly fifty years of service. White’s name recalls the homonymous Anglo-Saxon King and contributes to create a «thematic link between national identity, the sense of belonging and landscape»⁴⁰⁹. This thematic link is reinforced by another homonymity, that between Alfred and Lord Alfred Tennyson, the favourite poet of Alfred’s wife May. According to Kiliç, the reference in the novel to Tennyson’s words such as ‘idyll’ and ‘ambergris’ especially recall Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* and allow Gee to evoke another legendary king, Arthur, and to juxtapose «King Arthur’s failure to set up an ideal kingdom with the image of failure and recession in contemporary Britain» that is at the core of her narrative.⁴¹⁰ Alfred, once a soldier in Palestine, is on a mission: holding «the fort»⁴¹¹ now that «the ideals are fading» and «the cash is nearly gone»⁴¹², as Thomas, a family friend, comments thinking about the park and the current state of the nation. Thus, the park was built «when the money from the empire was used for public works»⁴¹³, that is to say when the nation was flourishing, the British Empire was in its prime, and ‘the ideals’ (patriotism, sacrifice for the country, sense of community, the civilising mission, duty) were part of people’s everyday life: a creed to believe in. In a nation completely changed, Alfred appears to be the last recipient of these ideals as well as the representation of English nostalgia *par excellence*. Thus, he is constantly mourning for «[t]he good old days», when «[t]here weren’t any coloureds» and people «were all the same. We were all one. No one was rich. We stuck together»⁴¹⁴. The past over which Alfred lingers is, clearly, the wartime (when they all stuck together) and its aftermath, before the end of the Empire, the arrival of many non-white immigrants, and the spread of the very Thatcherite idea that society (‘we were all one’) does not actually exist. Alfred depicts this period as a perfect one, when the people were ‘all the same’, meaning that there was no racial difference (and this evokes the myth of a homogenous indigenous population); when it was still possible to hope in a «golden future»⁴¹⁵; when there was a sense of belonging and common

⁴⁰⁹Kiliç, M. O., *op. cit.*, p. 129

⁴¹⁰*Ivi*, p.131

⁴¹¹Gee, M., *op. cit.*, p.11

⁴¹²*Ivi*, p.51

⁴¹³*Ibidem*

⁴¹⁴*Ivi*, p.223

⁴¹⁵*Ivi*, p.224

destiny keeping the nation together. Alfred is stuck in the past, constantly wondering what went wrong, how could all their expectations be disappointed by the present:

Where did it go? What happened to our future, the one so many people suffered and died for? There was something wonderful we all meant to share, after going through so much together. But it just ... evaporated. That was it. The free orange juice, the milk, the ration-books, the things we had in the nineteen fifties. The National Health spectacles; they were free, little round wonky ones that sat on people's noses. Pale blue and pink ones for the kids. The National Health. It was for everybody. That was a miracle, we all thought so. Nit shampoo and aspirin when you needed them. And then they began to charge for prescriptions, pennies, at first, then just a few bob, and now they come asking for paper money, and most people just do without.⁴¹⁶

Very strong in Alfred is the feeling of societal betrayal coming from the perception that Britain has failed to live up to its obligations towards the people after the war. This has led to a feeling of disconnection from the present that could be compared to what he feels towards his cancer: something «he couldn't understand, something that happened behind his back, as if life went on, but he was left out»⁴¹⁷. Thus, winning the war should have meant, more than anything, enjoying the fruits of victory: 'welfare' in its double sense, wellbeing and welfare system. As O' Toole points out,

The creation of an institution like the National Health Service was a novel kind of conquest, a turning of British energy inwards to face the great enemies of squalor and disease. It was indeed a new world that was won, and one that made more positive difference to British lives than the grabbing of colonies had ever done.⁴¹⁸

Therefore, the slow dismantlement of the welfare system, started by Margaret Thatcher is one of the factors that has deeply interfered with a positive imagining of the future. Thus,

A welfare state is about the future - it gives young people a sense that they have one and older people the confidence not to fear their own. It created a positive trajectory - my kids' lives will be better than mine. But when the welfare states starts to slip away, it becomes part of the past. It is regarded nostalgically, as an aspect of a lost golden age. This shift in time is one of the key reasons why there could after the end of the Seventies be no future in England's dreaming. England began to be viewed in the rear-view mirror.⁴¹⁹

It is not by chance that one of the books Thomas, who is a librarian, has to get rid of to make room in the library is entitled *Into the Future with Hope: The Welfare-State in Post-War Britain*: the title hints at the present situation regarding the vision of a 'welfare-state' and marks the end of hopeful expectations about the future that had characterised the development of that

⁴¹⁶Ivi, pp.224-225

⁴¹⁷Ivi, p.330

⁴¹⁸O' Toole, F., *op. cit.*, p.19

⁴¹⁹*Ibidem*

national project. The link between a nostalgic attitude and the faults of the welfare system was well evident in Brexit, where arguments (true or false) about the NHS and benefits have been particularly powerful in affecting people's support. Moreover, the link between this issue (foreign pressure on the national welfare system) and the rise of English nationalism in its most xenophobic form is to be found way before Brexit, as demonstrated by the letters of Enoch Powell's supporters, who mostly speak of shortages of hospital beds and public housing and hold immigration responsible for the inadequacies of welfare provisions. It follows that the vision of the future that kept Alfred and his generation going during the war could be said to have slowly 'evaporated' in the years after: the composition of the nation has changed, with 'aliens' settling in and even acquiring the same rights of the indigenous population; the welfare system has been gradually weakened; the rhythms of life have changed and precariousness has become the only norm. This is what Alfred believes that happens, comparing again the nation to the park, when nobody looks after the country and its moral character: «it goes back to jungle»⁴²⁰. The term 'jungle' is not a casual choice: it evokes the empire, and especially the *civilising mission* and the *white man's burden*, narratives that legitimised the British rule through the mark of inferiority and barbarism assigned to the Colonised, spreading a redeeming vision of the country as a civilising force having the duty to 'upgrade' other populations and saving them from their own 'darkness'. Moreover, the term also conveys Alfred's opinion on what England is becoming due to the settlement of the Colonised: a colony on its own, transformed by the migrants in the 'jungle' the British Empire had tried to save them from, in an ironic reversal of destiny.

Although less negative, Alfred's wife May agrees with her husband's nostalgic views. Thus, while in the hospital and scared for her husband's conditions, May reminds herself that

she shouldn't be frightened of this place. It must be one of the last good places. May told herself, this is here for us. We fought the last war for places like this. Hospitals and parks and schools. Not concentration camps, like the other lot had. A hospital was a place to share. Where all could come in their hour of trouble. The light was harsh, but it shone for all. (Some of the bulbs were dead, she had noticed. Broken glass was replaced with hardboard.)⁴²¹

As with Alfred, May recalls the Second World War and defines 'schools', 'parks', 'hospitals' as 'good places' for which they have fought, putting them in comparison with the dreadful alternative of the Nazi concentration camps. But the dead bulbs and the hardboard gives the hospital a decayed look, conveying a general sense of decline. Interestingly, the local

⁴²⁰Gee, M., *op. cit.*, p.222

⁴²¹Ivi, p.24

hospital was built in the same period as the library and Albion Park, which are all, using May's own words, 'places to share', where people from different backgrounds can meet in order to feel part of a community. This is the reason why she is so proud of her husband being the park keeper, because the park is one of the last places where people can be together, a place, May thinks, that matters more than them, a statement that reinforces the idea of the park as a symbol of the nation.

From May's point of view, the park is the very heart of Hillesden Rise, where they live, and a refuge to escape to from a London that is getting «dirtier, and more frightening»⁴²² every day. It is evident that London represents modern England and, in particular, its multicultural aspect. Describing London as 'dirty' is a way to immediately put the city in contrast with the cleanliness and tidiness of Albion Park, implying the same parallel between the present reality and the nation's past. Also London's 'frightening' character put the Park in opposition to the city: while the park is an oasis to escape reality, London is a place where the foreignness of the present, due to the many changes that have characterised the last decades and revolutionised people's lives as well as the overwhelming presence of the Other, cannot be ignored.

The park is situated in the urban centre of Hillesden Rise (which is, probably, a reference to Willesden Rise, in the London area) where, May realises, «more than half the shops were boarded up, or had their fronts covered with aluminium shutters, which rattled coldly in the winter winds». After the war, when Alfred and May moved there, Hillesden Rise was their «El Dorado»; now that «[i]t was over», that time seems almost a lost fairy-tale, an irretrievable «[o]nce upon a time»⁴²³ clashing with the reality of failure and decay. May knows that this is not the way it looks for everyone: just walking back up the road, she notices that there is «a whole new world coming into existence» with «a half-caste youth setting up small tables»⁴²⁴ in a French café like the ones they have in Paris and other shops and restaurants far away from her usual reality:

There was a Sushi Bar - imagine it! - with narrow windows and queer blue light, and a girl peering out had half-moon eyes, but the boy she was with was very black. There were three Indian restaurants, side by side, which made you wonder how they could survive. The Star of the East, just fancy, in Hillesden! There were two shops advertising 'Cheap International Phone Calls', and another one selling those uncomfortable beds with wooden bases and thin flat mattresses. But lovely colours: bright blue, bright green, and as life and hope ran through May's veins she thought, If only Alfred were here, if only Alfred was home again. We'd come for a stroll, the two of us. May patted the bag with his whiskies for comfort.

⁴²²*Ivi*, pp.16-17

⁴²³*Ivi*, p.121

⁴²⁴*Ivi*, p.176

Hillesden isn't dying. It's coming up.⁴²⁵

While the first description of Hillesden Rise parallels Alfred and May's life conditions, their old age, their own economic situation, their outdated views and sense of displacement in this new England, the second description of the place mirrors the newcomers' life and unveils the gentrification of the area. As Kiliç highlights, «[w]hile shop closures resulting from the recession erase the culture of the lower classes, the opening of new businesses addresses the middle-class occupiers' need for luxury»⁴²⁶. Consequently, the process of gentrification makes evident social inequalities, increasing both social divisions and the sense of displacement the Whites, or better the Whites still entrapped in working class status, are experiencing. Thus, while Alfred, May and their son Dirk, who still lives with them, are definitely working class, Darren and Shirley, the elder ones, are now clinging to middle class status: Darren thanks to his profession (he is a journalist based in the USA), and Shirley thanks to the money inherited from her dead husband Kojo. Furthermore, one should not forget that gentrification is a form of colonialism on its own, which consequently strengthens the Whites' idea of a colonization of the nation through the settlement of ethnic minorities (references to them are the Internet Point with international phone calls, the ethnic restaurants, as well as the Asian girl and the Black boy visible through the window of the Sushi restaurant and the 'half-caste' waiter of the French café). May's outdated and offensive use of language – particularly her use of the phrases 'half-moon eyes' and 'half-caste youth' – highlights the antiquated way she has of looking at the world around her.

To restore order, preventing the people from going *native* and the country from completing its metamorphosis into a nightmarish colony dominated by the inferior Other, men like Alfred must keep a look out, «be tough»⁴²⁷, remain strong. According to Alfred, this is «how the British got their empire» and probably also the reason why they have lost it: «by going soft» and ending up, like the Romans when they lost their own empire, outnumbered by «great dark hordes pouring over the walls»⁴²⁸. According to Alfred, the generation of his son Darren and Darren's friend Thomas embodies this 'soft' character: «Darren and Thomas are boys, not men. They've never had a chance to find out what matters. Never been tested. Had it too easy.

⁴²⁵Ivi, p.178

⁴²⁶Kiliç, M. Ö, *op. cit.*, p.132

⁴²⁷Gee, M., *op. cit.*, p.222

⁴²⁸*Ibidem*

Nothing was easy for me and May»⁴²⁹. This is what his wife thinks too, as she reflects upon the new generation going to the post office in her neighbourhood:

The young ones seemed to view it as a cash dispenser, going in to collect their weekly wage, though all they were doing to earn it was breeding – May caught herself back. She disapproved of envy. But she and Alfred had always worked for their money, and she had cleaned floors when the kids were little, taking them with her, which was miserable in houses where they weren't allowed to make a noise. She didn't wish hardship on other people. But she sometimes wondered how Nimit felt, handing out thousands of the government's money, seeing the same faces year after year, when he, as he had once told her proudly, had 'tried to take nothing from this country' – he paid for the children to be born in private hospitals, sent them to expensive private schools. He put a lot in and took nothing out. Nimit served the community, didn't he, as she once pointed out to Alfred. 'I know you don't like him, but he's just like you. Both of you serve the community, Alfred.'⁴³⁰

Work, sacrifice and duty are the three pillars that have characterised May's life, which she puts in contrast with the present attitude ('all they were doing to earn it was breeding'). This kind of discourse seems to be modelled on Enoch Powell's rhetoric, or rather, on that part of it which was *against* the welfare system (except for the NHS that he considered, as his supporters did, a fundamental institution). Powell was indeed persuaded that the welfare system was responsible for the degeneration of the English character, given the fact that in his opinion it abrogates «the principle of self-help and orderly independence»⁴³¹ at the basis of English moral fibre. Self-help and orderly independence are indeed what May and Alfred are proud of, and what the young ones are supposed to be missing, relying on the 'government's money' to make ends meet. Ultimately, the elite in charge is held responsible for the current state of the nation, both for letting the 'dark hordes' in and for contributing to the degeneration of national character. Thus, as the Council has both cut their funding for the maintenance of Albion Park and limited the powers of the park keepers, in order to make them less off-putting to park visitors, national governments are viewed as having forgotten the old values of Conservative control, unwilling to enforce order «[f]or fear of upsetting the *coloured* people»⁴³² and ready to change the way they used to portray the nation to assuage them. Obviously, Alfred's belief in the imperial national narrative prevents him from engaging with any new narrative of identity including the 'coloured' people. This is fundamentally the reason why he does not like the postmaster Nimit even if, as May stresses multiple times, he is an immigrant who has served

⁴²⁹Ivi, p.247

⁴³⁰Ivi, p.140

⁴³¹Shilliam, R., *Race and the Undeserving Poor cit.*, p.99

⁴³²Gee, M., *op. cit.*, p.223

the community and taken nothing back: in his eyes, non-white people are always an unsettling presence and a constant reminder of national decline.

A first example of Alfred's attitude towards the Other is to be found at the very beginning of the novel, in what Kiliç defines as a «scene of dispute over place»⁴³³. While Alfred is patrolling the park, he catches a black girl walking on the flowerbed. Although her mother tries to explain to him that the girl was just looking for her brother's new plane, fallen just where the flowers are, Alfred seems not to listen, continuing to admonish her for walking on the flowerbed. When the father of the two children reaches them, both Alfred and Thomas, who arrived while Alfred was arguing with the mother, perceive him as 'threatening', being tall and obviously (Thomas realises this is the real reason behind his 'threatening' feature) black. After his wife tells him what happened, the black man informs Alfred, who is now looking pale, that «[t]his Park belongs to everyone»⁴³⁴. Enraged, as if touched on a sore point, Alfred replies that this is just his reason for rebuking them: «[s]ame rules for everyone, as well. I'm just asking you lot to get off the grass'»⁴³⁵. At his reply,

The woman's face changes. Is it rage, or glee? "“You lot”!" she shrieks. 'That's racist, innit!'

A pause. The two men avoid each other's eyes. The word lies between them like an unexploded bomb.⁴³⁶

Alfred is trying to persuade the family that the dispute between him and them is just a matter of rules and respecting them: that it is forbidden to walk on the grass and that he, in the capacity of park keeper, is only asking them to abide by the rules. But this is far too simple. As soon as the father of the child arrives on the scene, he immediately understands that there is a racial component to this scolding, feeling obliged to remind Alfred that 'the park belongs to everyone', that it is a place *of* the community *for* the community, which they have every right to be in, with or without Alfred's approval. Thus, the misunderstanding between Alfred and the family is clearly due to Alfred's racism, as the mother acknowledges when she recognises the segregating shade of Alfred's words 'your lot'. Not by chance, talking with Thomas he stresses that «English people know not to go on the grass» and this, added to the insincere «I'm not against them, don't get me wrong»⁴³⁷, only confirms the woman's impression: his attitude

⁴³³Kiliç, M. Ö., *op. cit.*, p.130

⁴³⁴Gee, M., *op. cit.*, p.13

⁴³⁵*Ibidem*

⁴³⁶*Ibidem*

⁴³⁷*Ivi*, p.14

unveils a desire to reject both their claim to the shared ownership of the park and their implied claim to be part of the community and have a bond with the land.

The same attitude is adopted by Alfred both towards the foreign birds that are included in the park and his daughter's non-white partners, first her husband Kojo and then, after his death, her boyfriend Elroy. According to Alfred, the foreign birds are «too bright», they do not «look right in an English park» and – most importantly, he does not trust them:

[t]hey put their heads down and look at me and I think they're going to rush me. So now I always use my broom. I open the door of their shelter at the back and the little ones fly up into the enclosure and then I get my broom and bash on the door and the big ones scuttle out pretty quick. You have to show them who's boss.' Something about Thomas's face stopped him. He felt less certain. He thought about it. Why did he hate those big yellow birds? At first it was only because they were foreign. But now it was worse, somehow worse. *I hate them because they're afraid of me.*⁴³⁸

The reason why Alfred does not like and trust the birds is because of their foreignness. Not that the other birds in the park are English, the budgies or the pheasants certainly are not, but in Alfred's opinion «[o]f course they're British. They've always been here. My mum and dad kept budgerigars. It's natural, having budgerigars»; while the yellow birds, never seen before, are clearly out of place and, as he sentences, they will «be goners»⁴³⁹ at the first touch of frost. But he is found to be mistaken: the birds are still there, as are the coloured people he similarly dislikes. The way he behaves, playing the tough man, showing the birds who the boss is, being aggressive, resembles how he behaves towards people he marks as foreigners: people he thinks are 'going to rush' him only because they are not white. When he sees Thomas' reaction about his behaviour towards the birds, Alfred is forced to think upon the reason why he dislikes them and, apart their foreignness, he also recognises that what he hates about them now is the fear they show of him. But this is none other than a consequence of his own doing. The bird's fear could be also a reference to the cautious behaviour characterising members of ethnic minorities who wish to avoid being considered as threatening and violent individuals.

The perception of ethnic minorities as the threatening Other has already been hinted at in the dispute between Alfred and the family in Albion Park, but it appears again in two other central episodes of the novel, one concerning Thomas and the other Alfred's wife. As noted previously, Thomas is a family friend. Having grown up in Hillesden Rise with the White's elder son Darren, he has published a book and is currently writing another one on Postmodernism and the loss of meaning while working as a librarian to pay the bills. At work,

⁴³⁸*Ivi*, p.242

⁴³⁹*Ivi*, p.47

a black youth approaches the Inquiry Desk when he is on duty. The young man has a familiar face, although Thomas is aware that he could be mistaken: «there were so many black students in the library. He sometimes thought the readers were mostly black, until he made himself count, one day. Funny how your mind played tricks on you»⁴⁴⁰. The fact that Thomas thinks that the readers ‘are mostly black’ until he counts them already shows his prejudices: it is his perception of the black readers as ‘something Other’ that makes him feel surrounded, outnumbered. Furthermore, not being sure if he has already seen the youth because ‘there were so many black students’ means that he does not really look at them. The same happens to May in the hospital, where the majority of the nurses are black and she realises she cannot distinguish one from the other. Now that he is really looking at him, Thomas describes the youth as being «memorable», with fine features, golden-brown eyes and a steady gaze. But then he

began to feel vaguely threatened, for W King, having reclaimed his notes, proceeded to eyeball Thomas closely as he read him a wish-list of titles, including two books by Eldridge Cleaver, and *One Hundred Years of Lynchings*. As the boy pronounced the titles, he had given a curious half-smile, half-laugh, at Thomas, and Thomas was aware of the boy’s height, and youth, and his long strong fingers, playing with a pen.⁴⁴¹

The reason why Thomas feels threatened is that he mistakes what we will later discover to be academic interest (and maybe homosexual attraction) for a desire to take revenge over the white men. His misconception immediately transforms the ‘memorable’ young man into a threatening black one, who could, as Thomas’ gaze on the boy’s ‘long strong fingers’ seems to suggest, easily strangle him. Yet, the element of threat in this scene does not come from the boy, but from Thomas’s imagination and his own latent prejudices.

The second episode occurs when May, going to the post office, wonders if she has forgotten the three hundred pounds in cash she is supposed to be carrying. After opening the bag in order to make sure, the contents begin to tumble onto the ground, including the bank notes. In her desperate attempt to catch the falling items, May also falls. While she is scrabbling for her things on the pavement,

she looked up to see an enormous black man looming out of the rain, panting, gasping, his golden eyes boring into hers, and she shrank back, covering the money with her skirt, as the pantherish face swooped down towards her.
‘Help,’ she cried feebly [...]⁴⁴²

⁴⁴⁰*Ivi*, p.36

⁴⁴¹*Ivi*, pp.36-37

⁴⁴²*Ivi*, p.142

Seeing a black man coming to her, May is convinced she is going to die and even prays to God to take care of her family. The man is described as ‘black’, which we know, from Thomas’ previous remark about the father in the park, is enough to label someone as a ‘threat’. He is also described as ‘enormous’, though this may be a matter of perspective (she is on the floor, he is standing) or she may also be influenced by fear. His ‘pantherish’ face is then also a reference to his exoticism and to May’s assumption that he is dangerous and predatory. Thus, she is already primed to expect an assault of some kind, likely resulting in the theft of her money. When May understands that the man is just a youth,

Relief and shame washed over her in hot waves, and her voice rushed on. ‘Are you local? I’ve lived here all my life. It’s not what it was, Hillesden Rise. I don’t mean because of the foreigners. I’m not saying you’re a foreigner - ‘
‘I’m not a foreigner. Now, are you OK? He was putting her brush back into her handbag, and her mirror, and her shamefully hair-clotted comb. [...]
‘What’s your name?’ she said, suddenly. [...]
‘Winston,’ he said. His smile was self-mocking. ‘That’s not a foreigner’s name, is it?’ But it looked as though it embarrassed him. She thought about Dirk, suddenly. *Maybe kids never liked the names we give them.*⁴⁴³

Her first reaction is clearly caused by her own biases: the boy is revealed to have «an intelligent, a humorous face, not frightening at all»⁴⁴⁴and, to cover her shame, May starts chatting about the foreigners she knows, such as Mr Varsani at the post office, or Shirley’s boyfriend Elroy. But she makes a second mistake, given that the youth is not a foreigner. As a kind of proof, he tells May his name, Winston, stressing that this is ‘not a foreigner’s name’, which is a reference to the name being the same as Churchill’s. According to May, he looks ‘embarrassed’ by his own name, which could be a true impression or, again, one filtered through her own biases. Thus, May thinks that «no English people called their sons Winston, though Winnie himself was English»⁴⁴⁵ and that the choice of this name, albeit apparently patriotic, is actually a sign of his foreignness.

Whether it is projected onto birds or people, foreignness always is a mark of distinction, a line between ‘us’ and ‘them’, a ‘seal of infamy’ that prevents full acceptance. It is foreignness indeed that makes inconceivable to Alfred any relationship with his daughter’s partners, although – to be accurate – only one of the two, Shirley’s husband Kojo, is foreign. A man of culture, Kojo is a rich Ghanaian Reader of Contemporary Literature, who acknowledges that the hostility he experiences in dealing with Shirley’s parents is due to their fear and ignorance: «‘It’s because they have no education,’ he said. ‘They’re afraid of us because they know nothing

⁴⁴³*Ivi*, pp.161-162

⁴⁴⁴*Ivi*, p.161

⁴⁴⁵*Ivi*, p.162

about us. I'll ask them out to Ghana as my guests, and then they will see another world'»⁴⁴⁶. As Shirley tells us, this never happened, not because of Kojo's early death, but because his parents would never have agreed. For Alfred, Kojo is nothing more than a «'performing monkey [...] in a suit'»⁴⁴⁷, less than a human being, as inferior as the imperial racial hierarchy defines Kojo to be. The same comparison is forced upon Elroy too, even though he is not foreign. Less confident and less rich than Kojo, with a job for the National Health Service (he is a Patient Care Officer), Elroy is from a Jamaican family, but born and bred in England. Nonetheless, his skin colour and his Caribbean ascent still make him foreign to Alfred. Thus, as Shirley comments on her father's 'event', describing it as a possible stroke and admitting she is making a hypothesis based on what she knows about medicine from Elroy, her father is quick to reply he does not care about anything she could have picked up from Elroy, since he only wants «'English medicine from English doctors'»⁴⁴⁸. Shirley's first response is to state that Elroy is, as a matter of fact, English, but then she corrects herself defining him «Well - British. Elroy is as British as me or you'»⁴⁴⁹. Rephrasing her reply, Shirley is acknowledging the discrepancy between Englishness and Britishness, and the impossibility for Elroy of being identified with Englishness: even though he was born in England, it remains a *white* identity from which he is inevitably excluded. Britishness, meanwhile, has been rebranded as a multiracial identity and represents the only collective identity between the two that he can identify and be identified with. This mirrors social analyses, which have highlighted that «some white people do not accept ethnic minorities as 'English'». According to Thomas,

The problem here is that experiences of multiculturalism in England are very uneven, with cities highly diverse, but many suburban and rural areas remaining largely monocultural. In significant part of urban areas, the experience is a duo cultural one, rather than multicultural, with segregated and suspicious working-class Asian and white communities not feeling that they have shared identities (Cantle, 2001).⁴⁵⁰

Both the segregating character of life in suburban areas, such as the fictional Hillesden Rise, or in rural areas (which are also usually almost exclusively 'white'), and the perception of Englishness as a *white* identity due to its re-shaping in opposition to the multicoloured Commonwealth and to the rebranding of Britishness as a multiracial identity, are, in the end, responsible for the ethnic minorities' difficulty in identifying with Englishness and being

⁴⁴⁶*Ivi*, p.68

⁴⁴⁷*Ivi*, p.41

⁴⁴⁸*Ivi*, p.63

⁴⁴⁹*Ibidem*

⁴⁵⁰Thomas, P., «All White? Englishness, 'Race' and Ethnic identities», in Aughey, A., Berberich, C. (eds.), *op. cit.*, p.91

accepted as English. Gee tries to insert this perspective also through her depiction of Elroy and his family, showing how the Kings are used to being surrounded by other people of Caribbean descent (Shirley appears to be the only white person with whom they are in contact), especially after the mother, Sophie, had felt disappointed and unwelcome in the land she thought to be her mother country too. The perception of being unwelcome, as well as constantly mocked and rejected by the native English, is quite acute for Elroy, who immediately gets offended when Shirley's mother reads the booklet of Elroy's church and laughs at the language used there. Enraged, Elroy shouts at Shirley that «'You people think you own the language-'»⁴⁵¹, showing that he too distinguishes between a 'white English lot' and his own tribe.

For Shirley's father, linking Elroy with Britishness is as problematic as accepting him as English. Thus, in Alfred's opinion Elroy is «about as British as bananas»⁴⁵², which is a way of acknowledging the bond between Elroy and the British Empire (bananas are a product the country used to import from its colonies) and, through that bond, a way to reject him, re-establishing the imperial racial hierarchy that is at the core of this structure of feeling (the empire) and that confines Elroy at the margins of the national community as the Other.

Alfred's attitude clearly embodies the exclusive character of Englishness. As Kiliç states, already «[by] showing Alfred White, the 'park keeper', protecting the land from the black 'invaders', the novel becomes a representation of Englishness in a multicultural world juxtaposed with the upsurge of nationalism»⁴⁵³. English exclusiveness is also openly acknowledged by Thomas commenting, again, on the park. Thus, reading the warning signs at the entrance of Albion park which states that «No Littering, No Soiling, No Golfing: No Motorcycles, No Camping, No Caravans» are allowed, he asked himself, ironically, if the Council is also afraid of «Hell's angels and gypsies» before finally concluding that «[t]his was England. If in doubt, keep them out»⁴⁵⁴. The rejection of the Other, embodied in the negative imperatives used in the signs, also summarises the «simplistic solutions the state finds to deal with problems»⁴⁵⁵.

In addition, Alfred's hostility towards both Koji and Elroy is also due to fear of miscegenation. Even if miscegenation would seem to be a word from the past, linked to the empire and to an outdated vision of the world, racial contamination and racial degeneration are still very common concerns, as shown by the prominence of these themes in contemporary

⁴⁵¹Gee, M., *op. cit.*, p.167

⁴⁵²Ivi, p.63

⁴⁵³Kiliç, M. Ö, *op. cit.*, p.129

⁴⁵⁴Gee, M., *op. cit.*, p.37

⁴⁵⁵Kiliç, M. Ö, *op. cit.*, p.129

literature and especially in novels such as Gee's, that is to say literary works that deal with national narratives of identity and seek to challenge the idea of a homogeneous and immutable nation. Examples of this include Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004), where the outcome of a sexual encounter between a white woman and a black man, a bi-racial baby, is given to a black couple for fears of social exclusion. One may also mention Julian Barnes' *Arthur & George* (2005), where George Edalji, the son of an Indian father and an English mother, is accused – seemingly due to his Indian features and 'mixed blood' – of a crime that, due to its perversity, is considered too 'foreign' to have been committed by someone who is really English. Jonathan Coe's *Expo 58* (2013) is another case in point. The novel's main character, Thomas Foley, is perceived as being disadvantaged both by his social background (his father, as a pub owner, is labelled as working class) and his Belgian mother, with racial degeneration extended to European offspring. The centrality of this fear in Alfred's subconscious is made evident in a flashback regarding young Shirley, when she confesses to be pregnant and Alfred's first thought is that the father of the baby could be a «darkie»⁴⁵⁶, a possibility that fills him both with rage and disgust. Ultimately, As Kiliç writes, «[t]he allegorical structure of the novel suggests a reading of Alfred's hospitalisation as King Alfred's defeat in battle»⁴⁵⁷, a defeat that, in Alfred's case, concerns precisely his inability to protect the national space (the park) and the private one (his family) from the invaders (the blacks).

Interestingly, rage and disgust are the same feelings Alfred experiences looking at the gift his daughter has bought to cheer him up during his hospitalisation. This is

a defiant little figure of John Bull with a squat glass bulldog beside him. The man's face was a cross between a baby's and a butcher's, made rounder by his low flat topper, his waistcoat an engraved Union Jack, straining across a sturdy pot-belly. [...] The thing had a small square pedestal, engraved at the front with 'Land of Hope and Glory' and at the back 'John Bull Esq.'⁴⁵⁸

Shirley does not think that the figure of John Bull is «nice», but it is small enough for a bedside table; besides, it looks quite English, which is the first and only requirement she is looking for, knowing her father's taste and nationalism. She actually struggles with the task, since it is difficult to establish «what is there that's English, these days?»⁴⁵⁹. The question seems to be asked to the reader, and it refers both to the multicultural aspect of contemporary societies and to the question of identity around Englishness itself. Ironically, even her nationalist brother Dirk has difficulties in distinguishing English things from foreign ones, as shown by the fact

⁴⁵⁶Gee, M., *op. cit.*, p.156

⁴⁵⁷Kiliç, M. Ö, *op. cit.*, p.130

⁴⁵⁸Gee, M., *op. cit.*, p.180

⁴⁵⁹Ivi, p.179

that he orders spaghetti alla Bolognese and is really convinced that it is an English dish. The difficulty to identify what is English and what is not is also exemplified by a dialogue between Thomas and Darren. The two meet in an Italian café, which for Thomas «couldn't be more English, with its salty, fatty, stewed-tea smell»⁴⁶⁰ even if the owner is actually an Italian, named Mario. This is the perception Darren has too, affirming that «'It stinks of smoke in here. That's so English.'»⁴⁶¹. Sitting in the café and talking animatedly about his personal problems, Darren defines Thomas as being «bloody English» for the way he reacts («'Can't you handle anger?'»⁴⁶²), but we already know that Thomas may hardly be defined as such according to the usual selection criteria of the Whites: «I'm never quite certain where I come from (with a rugby team of genes on my father's side - Jewish, Scottish, Italian, Spanish? There was even a rumoured great-grandma from Barbados)»⁴⁶³. Racial contamination is what characterised Thomas, who even possibly had a non-white immigrant as great-grandmother. Nonetheless, Darren, as his parents who are fond of Thomas, considering him English due to his education, posture and attitude. This method of categorisation may remind readers of Brian Marley in *Speak for England*. Not by chance, Thomas also seems to be unsure regarding his national identity ('I'm never quite certain where I come from') and he does not define himself as English (a white, and now clearly *Anglo-Saxon* identity) but British, a certainty he gets when entering in places like the Italian café.

The figure of John Bull is, at least, very English, considering that Bull has become, inside and outside the UK, a sort of representative of the nation. As Parrinder stresses, Bull is a «boozing, corpulent, cudgelwielding figure» that looks like a plebeian, but makes his money by trade and spends it like a lord»⁴⁶⁴, who »personifies the first four of the 'British beatitudes' recited at a drunken moment two centuries later in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (beer, beef, business, bulldogs, Bibles, battleships, buggery, and bishops)»⁴⁶⁵ and is an undisputed national symbol. According to Shirley,

Although Dad looked nothing like him, of course, there was something about the way John Bull stood, braced to the world, feet splayed, shoulders back, jaw pushed out towards the foreigners - Shirley had seen Alfred stand like that, back to the flower-beds, arms sternly folded, glaring across at some Asian children wondering whether to play ball on the grass.⁴⁶⁶

⁴⁶⁰*Ivi*, p.204

⁴⁶¹*Ivi*, p.206

⁴⁶²*Ivi*, p.209

⁴⁶³*Ivi*, p.204

⁴⁶⁴Parrinder, P., *op. cit.*, p.64

⁴⁶⁵*Ivi*, p.65

⁴⁶⁶Gee, M., *op. cit.*, p.180

The fact that John Bull resembles her father's posture, and in particular the connection between it and a xenophobic attitude, is an acknowledgement of the kind of national identity her father represents. Paradoxically, when he opens the gift, Alfred thinks that John Bull is an «[u]gly little bugger», a «nonsense, really. Expensive rubbish» and even that «[t]here never was a John Bull, that he knew of. And I know my history. Most of it»⁴⁶⁷. Not recognising John Bull as John Arbuthnot's personification of Great Britain is ironical and hints at the many things people expunge or ignore about their national history, among which is, as Gee highlights in the novel, the violent and shameful aspects connected to the empire. Not by chance, one of the books Winston King requires in the library is *One Hundred Years of Lynchings* by Ralph Ginzburg, whose title later becomes '*One Thousand Years of Lynchings*' to acknowledge that racism and violence are still going on. The book also anticipates the ending of Gee's novel itself, with the killing of Winston.

Moreover, Alfred's repulsion for the John Bull gift has also a lot to do with the inscription and his sense of national and personal failure:

'Land of Hope and Glory.' Stuff and nonsense. We had it once. Hope, and glory. Now the British Empire doesn't exist. I never thought that day would come. In my own lifetime, the end of the empire. He reached out fretfully to push the thing away, but his arm was tired, his hand was heavy. He closed his eyes so he wouldn't see it. Just go to sleep and leave it be ...⁴⁶⁸

To Alfred, Shirley's gift seems to be mocking at him, reminding him that the England he has known, the country the imperial narrative of identity depicts and has taught him to be proud of, does not exist anymore in the present: it has been lost in the past and from that past it remains irretrievable. The impossibility of recovering the country's glory from the past has already been hinted at by the author through the books that Thomas is forced to put away. Among the quoted titles, there is also a *History of the Empire. Part One: Expansion*: this seems to suggest to the reader that, as Thomas' colleague Suneeta told him, «Death is part of life, my darling»⁴⁶⁹, meaning that the imperial era is over and it is time to accept it and put that narrative aside, like the book itself. Interestingly, the remark comes from Suneeta, who, being a member of an ethnic minority, is an outsider to that narrative and, consequently, is not under its charm.

In the end, the fragility of the gift mirrors Alfred's own insecurities: old, sick, abusive towards his family, persuaded that his wife and everyone else around him view themselves as being more clever and cultured than him, Alfred knows he is not that model of 'patriarchal

⁴⁶⁷*Ivi*, p.332

⁴⁶⁸*Ivi*, p.332

⁴⁶⁹*Ivi*, p.103

authority' he wants to be, and this makes him, more than a symbol of the nation at its splendour, a symbol of national weakness and failure. Ultimately, Alfred's racism is a reaction against a lost sense of national superiority and individual confidence, which feeds an urge for revenge that will be passed on to his youngest son, with extreme consequences.

Thus, the only other person in the family that feels the same way towards Shirley's partners and identifies completely with Alfred's xenophobic attitude is Dirk, who has got a job in a newsagent's shop of one of his father's friends – George Millington – and still lives with his parents. Between father and son, George is nicknamed 'Saint George' as the saint patron of England, an «old joke»⁴⁷⁰, his father thinks, that actually hints ironically at the increasing discrepancy between ideal and real England, given that, quoting Dirk, «St fucking George» is «a sack of lard»⁴⁷¹, an old man suffering from asthma, always smoking and coughing, having nothing in common with a fighter of dragons. The repulsion Dirk feels for George parallels the same repulsion he feels for the job and, especially, for himself. The main reason underneath his self-repulsion are his homosexual urges, which, paradoxically, are directed towards *black* men, as shown by the «strange magazine» his mother found in his room with «photographs of black men without any clothes»⁴⁷² and by the sexual fantasies he confesses to the reader:

One day he'd travel. He'd like to travel. To parts of the world where things were still all right. Not that there were so many of them left. South Africa had fallen. Had been sold out. It was a black day for whites, when they sold out. It used to be paradise. He'd read about it. He tried to imagine it. Fucking paradise. He closed his eyes. Lions, tigers. Sort of pink blossoms, lots of them. Boogie-something. Boogie blossoms. And - swimming pools. And strong white men. Muscular. Toned. Working out in the sunlight. Short haircuts and - brick-hard buttocks. Press-ups flipping over into sit-ups, and fuck, they all had enormous hardons, and most of the men round the pool were black ...⁴⁷³

Although his daydreaming about travelling starts with mentioning South African apartheid as a 'paradise' for whites, which implies a desire to avoid any contact with non-white people, when the fantasy becomes a sexual one Dirk's thoughts go, almost unconsciously, from white men to black ones who are, ultimately, the very object of his sexual desire. This makes his racism more problematic than Alfred's, given that the anger and hatred that he usually directs towards immigrants, especially black ones, could be a way to mask his true desires or a consequence of his lack of self-acceptance.

⁴⁷⁰*Ivi*, p.81

⁴⁷¹*Ivi*, p.109

⁴⁷²*Ivi*, p.79

⁴⁷³*Ivi*, p.44

The disgust he feels for his own homosexuality is not the only factor diminishing his confidence and self-esteem: marked by an abusive childhood (due to his father's constant outbursts and beating), convinced that his mother merely 'tolerated' him (she considers him dull, ugly, and he has even heard her described his birth as «a mistake»⁴⁷⁴), ignored by his much older brother, no longer on speaking terms with the only woman he has ever liked (his sister) and aware that he is his father's second-favourite (the «other one»⁴⁷⁵ forever in Darren's shadow), Dirk has a multitude of issues. Nonetheless, striving for a positive identification, Dirk ends up worshipping his father, whom he idealises and from whom he derives all his opinions, becoming, in Shirley's words, «even worse than her Dad»⁴⁷⁶ but without his excuses. According to Shirley, Alfred's views are 'justifiable' given that he belongs to an older generation, born into the empire, immersed in the imperial narrative of identity and that of the Second World War. What she cannot understand is that Alfred's England represents for Dirk, more than anything else, an escape from his own reality of rejection and alienation, a way to retrieve an identity to be proud of and to feel legitimised in his own sense of victimhood. Thus, in a world where connections among people are everyday more imaginary (facebook, twitter, whatsapp groups), and where people feel lonely, displaced and hopeless, «Englishness offers one opportunity to become a collective noun once again - a 'we' where most of the time 'me' is our lot»⁴⁷⁷, an opportunity to be part of a 'tribe', to feel accepted and find others to identify with. It is for this very reason, his longing for acceptance, reassurance and belonging, that Dirk joins a fascist gang, whose sense of group cohesion is cemented around ideas of cultural and racial purity and expressed through a 'skinhead' crewcut and the occasional displaying of national symbols. Even for his mother, Dirk and his friends «look like Nazis»⁴⁷⁸, which is the impression most of the people get, as shown by the fact that one of Dirk's friends, Ozzie, is allegedly fired for the crewcut and the occasional wearing of a Union Jack t-shirt in the workplace. Consequently, Dirk keeps wondering, «[w]hy should it be racist to get a haircut? Why should it be racist to show the flag? What's bloody wrong with being pro-British? You had to be pro-British, in the last war. Then it was OK to be patriotic»⁴⁷⁹. Here the author is subtly hinting at the post-war debate about the Union Jack summarised by the sentence 'there ain't no black in

⁴⁷⁴Ivi, p.106

⁴⁷⁵Ivi, p.80

⁴⁷⁶Ivi, p.68

⁴⁷⁷Perryman, M., «Becoming England» *cit.*, p.14

⁴⁷⁸Gee, M., *op. cit.*, p.71

⁴⁷⁹Ivi, p.257

the Union Jack⁴⁸⁰, which exposes the flag as a symbol of division and the will to ignore the question of race in the traditional narrative(s) of identity. Dirk's choice to refer to the Union Jack rather than to the even more exclusive English Cross of St George is only due to the topic being linked to Ozzie. Thus, Ozzie is a white Australian who certainly cannot identify with (and therefore wear) the St George Cross, given that his origins determine his exclusion from Englishness. On the other hand, he can easily identify with the Union Jack as a member of the 'British stock', that 'white community of Britons' glorified by the post-war imperial narrative of identity. The subtle reference to the image of a white community of Britons, the Union Jack and the fact that Dirk talks about being 'pro-British' would all point to an association between his fascist gang and the British National Party. This is not in contrast with the idea of Dirk as a representative of English nationalism and as an embryonic version of a Brexit voter; rather, a possible link between Dirk and BNP is consistent with it, considering that great numbers of BNP supporters appear to be white English, impoverished or struggling to maintain their usual life-style, and consequently distrustful in regards to the establishment and hostile towards immigrants, whom they consider the main cause of their grievances. As Christopher Bryant reports,

[i]n recent years polls have also suggested that a majority of respondents, whether English or British, think there have been too many immigrants taking too many jobs from British workers, that some parts of Britain no longer feel British because of immigration, and that Britain is losing its culture as a consequence of both immigration and European Union policies and directives.⁴⁸¹

Dirk is indeed persuaded that his economic conditions, the lack of job opportunities and his sense of displacement in his own nation are all due to immigrants and ethnic minorities, who have invaded the country and are now the ones that «own most things. They've taken over the buses, and the trains. And the bloody streets. You can't get away from them»⁴⁸². As o' Toole notes, «'Invasion' is thus a structure of feeling that unites the two great neurosis», the Second World War and the end of the Empire, with the immigrants represented as «the Empire striking back by occupying England's own streets»⁴⁸³, or even as the Nazis who have actually won the war: in both scenarios, the country is ultimately transformed into a colony. This structure of feeling, as we know, has been deeply exploited in the Brexit discourse, with the EU described

⁴⁸⁰The sentence refers to the title of Paul Gilroy's work *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1991, which focuses on racial politics in England.

⁴⁸¹Bryant, C., «Towards a Cosmopolitan England», in Aughey, A., Berberich, C. (eds.), *op. cit.*, p.106

⁴⁸²Gee, M., *op. cit.*, pp.30-31

⁴⁸³O'Toole, F., *op. cit.*, p.92

as a Nazi super-state carrying out an unarmed invasion and Europeanisation of the nation, and it also dominates the post-Brexit discourse around the negotiations for the actual exit from the union. The link between the two paranoid fantasies, the ‘Empire striking back’ and the European Nazi super-state, is visible in the *White Family* too, and specifically through Dirk’s observations. Looking for his friends in a local pub, Dirk realises that he is surrounded by foreigners, who are not ‘actual blacks’ but

Spanish or French or whatever they were, fucking Europeans, fucking dagos, shooting their mouths off in foreign languages, hooting and tooting loud as lords - And soon they’d be ruling over these isles. There wouldn’t be a government, it wouldn’t be Britain, they’d just be some piddling little county of Europe, *Englandshire*, or *Englandstein*, or whatever disgusting bit of lingo they chose, and everyone would lord it over us ... They’ll come to *Londonburg* for their hols! *Londonburg!* he laughed aloud. It was a fucking good joke against the Krautz, but there was no one here to share it, and they looked at him funny, when he laughed on his own.⁴⁸⁴

Even though Dirk is described as a kind of lunatic, laughing on his own at jokes that nobody would appreciate except from his fanatic friends, the fantasy of a Britain transformed in a European ‘little county’ (called, not by chance, ‘Englandstein’ with a German intonation) is not his own personal nightmare, but a national psychosis, made possible by the loss of a sense of superiority and identity. If the country is not the super power it used to be, it is therefore possible to imagine it as the underdog, defeated and even invaded by non-Europeans and Europeans (who are even ‘blackened’ in the association), attempting at the freedom of the country and conspiring against its ‘resurrection’. The mechanism through which Dirk racialises people in a positive or negative way according to circumstances parallels the national one we have focused on talking about Polish immigrants and works both ways. Thus, through May’s memories the reader comes to know that at a certain point in time Dirk started going to his sister’s house and even enjoying Kojo’s company. Knowing him and having a ‘not threatening’ relationship with Kojo meant, as May stresses, «[b]ecause Dirk liked Kojo, Kojo stopped being black»⁴⁸⁵. In the same way, white people can stop ‘being white’ and perceived as the ‘black invader’ once they are marked in any way by the taint of foreignness. This occurs, for instance, when Dirk goes to his usual pub and discovers that the English barman has been substituted by a man named Paolo. Even though Paolo affirms he was «[b]orn just around the corner, mate», Dirk continues to feel «confused, disgusted»⁴⁸⁶, unable to accept Paolo’s claim to belong.

⁴⁸⁴Gee, M., *op. cit.*, p.300

⁴⁸⁵*Ivi*, p.76

⁴⁸⁶*Ivi*, p.302

It is the perception of being under attack, invaded, surrounded by conspiring enemies, that makes Dirk long for the homogenous nation of his father's memories, when

all the kids were normal then. Normal white. And there wasn't any crime. Not everyone beating the shit out of each other. Not everyone hating everyone else. There was brotherhood then. We were all English.

Hillesden was a village, in those days. I sometimes think I was born out of my time. It's just my luck to be born now, with no opportunities for native English. And prejudice against us just because we're white.⁴⁸⁷

Being 'normal white' means, of course, 'white Anglo-Saxon', including in the undesirable Others both the 'actual blacks' and the other *blackened* shades of white, who are all together scapegoats in Dirk's present reality. According to Dirk, if the golden past of his father was a 'brotherhood' with no crime and hatred, what is wrong with England is exactly its acquired heterogeneity: this conclusion fuels both his desire to restore a homeland he has never actually experienced (what we have already defined a 'nostalgia without memory') and his urge for revenge against those whose very existence interferes with this recovery. In this way, the author also points out the link between restorative nostalgia and conspiracy theories: according to the nostalgic, the nation is «forever under siege» and the recovering of the dreamish homeland the past portrays is precluded by those who conspire against it, meaning by those who do not fit in it and are, consequently, opposed to the recover. As Svetlana Boym explains,

the mechanism of this kind of conspiracy theory is based on the inversion of cause and effect and personal pronouns. "We" (the conspiracy theorists) for whatever reasons feel insecure in the modern world and find a scapegoat for our misfortunes, somebody different from us whom we don't like. We project our dislike on them and begin to believe that they dislike us and wish to persecute us. "They" conspire against "our" homecoming, hence "we" have to conspire against "them" in order to restore "our" imagined community.⁴⁸⁸

Thus, the same mechanism is traceable in Dirk's own fantasy of persecution: after projecting his own dislike onto immigrants, the designated scapegoat for his individual misfortunes and the national ones, he starts believing that the immigrants, as well as pro-immigrant politicians and intellectuals, dislike people like him (English, white and working-class) and conspire against his possibilities to succeed, leaving him with no opportunities to improve his standing and discriminating against him for his whiteness. Here it is also possible to recognise the roots of contemporary political discourse around the forgotten constituency, the 'white working-class', and especially 'white working-class boys', who feel they are discriminated against in favour of those coming from ethnic minorities. Dirk's delusional

⁴⁸⁷Ivi, p.188

⁴⁸⁸Boym, S., *op cit.*, p.43

theories are particularly evident when he talks about the newsagent's shop. Although he acknowledges that the economic losses of the newsagent's are probably due to the opening of bigger shops and due to the way George runs it, he still stresses that theirs is «an English shop», wondering «what have they got against us» to instead prefer «flashing their cards for the wops and the Jews»⁴⁸⁹. In addition, he believes that their biggest competitor, the Asian Patels, have «opened their shop, on purpose, less than a hundred yards down the road»⁴⁹⁰ in order to ruin their affairs.

Ultimately, Dirk's sense of victimhood and his belief in a conspiracy against white English is reinforced every time his sense of superiority, based on the imperial racial hierarchy, is challenged by present reality. An example comes from an argument that occurs when Dirk is on his way to visit his father:

The driver had looked at Dirk as if he was rubbish. 'What's this?' he had said. 'I don't want this. Haven't you read the notices? Can you read? It says "Tender exact money please." In plain English.'

And so on and so on, blah blah blah, while Dirk tore his pockets searching for change, and there wasn't any, not even ten pee, and the whole bus was glaring and muttering as if it was Dirk's fault the driver was a tosser.

They're all in it together, of course. Look around this bus and you can see it. Ninety per cent coloureds. Well, fifty, at least. And the driver's coloured, so they're on his side. And he has the fucking cheek to talk about English. As if they owned it. Our speech. Our language. (Tender exact money ... that's not proper English. Does a normal bloke use a word like 'tender'?)⁴⁹¹

While the bus driver is only asking for the precise amount of money as he would have done with any other passenger, Dirk's own prejudices transform a simple exchange into a racialised one. Thus, Dirk affirms that no 'normal bloke' uses the word 'tender' (which is actually written on the official notice) implying that the bus driver is not 'normal', and he actually is not if 'normality' means white given that the driver is 'coloured'. Consequently, Dirk considers him a 'tossler' who thinks to 'own' his language, which is a reversal of Elroj's accusation to Dirk's mother May. Furthermore, Dirk thinks 'the whole bus' is blaming him for no other reason than his whiteness, since ninety per cent of the people on the bus (he then corrects himself to 'at least, fifty') are coloured ('they are all in it together'). Dirk thinks that a similar persecution is under way when he goes to the stadium with his friends and the guards do not let them in. Even though one of the guards explains that nowadays you need a photocard

⁴⁸⁹Gee, M., *op. cit.*, p.126

⁴⁹⁰Ivi, pp.187-188

⁴⁹¹Ivi, pp.30-31

and a pre-paid ticket to watch a match, Dirk is firmly convinced that they have been discriminated against and comments that the stadium is just

another thing I couldn't get in to. Every fucking thing has been closed to us. Jobs, football games, everything that matters. [...] We need money or photocards or qualifications or pass-words that we can never learn. We need skills or languages or posh bloody accents or cars or computers or ties or suits - Or a black face. The two niggers got in. They said they had tickets, but I don't believe it.⁴⁹²

The passage above is quite telling, given that it perfectly expresses Dirk's sense of victimhood ('another thing I couldn't get in to', another thing 'closed to us') and the reasons-why he thinks to be 'victimised': his working class status ('posh bloody accents', 'cars' and 'ties and suits'); his education ('we need skills or languages or computers'); and his whiteness (or we need a 'black face' because the 'two niggers' got in). Dirk's anger is here clearly directed both towards people he labelled as the 'Other' in opposition, and people who think to be better than him (members of the middle-class, the cultural and political elites). This is made clear by Dirk himself when he criticises one of the shop's clients, Melissa, who he puts among the

[m]iddle-class people, who fancy themselves. They go down the end where the slums used to be. They ponce around in jeeps and things, I see them, couples, laughing together, talking in loud stupid voices, and fucking queers, fucking arse-bandits - I know they look down their noses at us. They're only here till they can afford to get out. I shan't do that. I'll stay here and - prosper. That *is* the word. Be prosperous.⁴⁹³

Part of Dirk's hatred comes directly from envy, the desire to be, like them, 'prosperous', to afford to go wherever he wants to go, in whatever kind of cars he wants. What he also envies about them, clearly, is their freedom, as well as their social status as 'cultured' people. This is, for instance, the reason why he also dislikes Thomas, who he defines a «Guardian-reader! Gobbler! Pansy!»⁴⁹⁴, stressing that he hates, especially, what he perceived to be self-confidence or trust in one's own knowledge, which is something Dirk totally lacks: using Shirley's words, Dirk feels that «they owned the world, people like him, with degrees, and good jobs»⁴⁹⁵ and that they live in a completely different reality from his own. Shirley too believes that, in comparison to other families, the Whites are underprivileged and, thinking about her pregnancy and leaving college, she stresses that «[p]eople from our class don't get two chances»⁴⁹⁶.

⁴⁹²*Ivi*, p.259

⁴⁹³*Ivi*, p.114

⁴⁹⁴*Ivi*, p.125

⁴⁹⁵*Ivi*, p.313

⁴⁹⁶*Ivi*, p.148

While Shirley is resigned, Dirk is constantly enraged by his encounters with people like Thomas and Melissa, who intensify, using a sociological concept, Dirk's sense of deprivation. Developed by scholars such as Runciman, Merton and Moore, the concept refers to the fact that people tend to evaluate their present conditions not according to an abstract sense of justice, but in comparison with the conditions of the people who surround them.⁴⁹⁷ The perception of being 'deprived' would then be triggered not by people's present conditions *per se*, but by «the deviation of the volume or intensity of the hardships they are forced to put up with from the distribution pattern of hardships between different sectors of society»⁴⁹⁸. Ultimately, it is the discrepancy between the habitual distribution pattern and the «new, sudden increments in the habitualized volume of hardship»⁴⁹⁹ that would be responsible for uprisings against the ruling system. According to Bauman,

[f]rom a time- and space-bound sense of deprivation triggered by the seen or imagined group 'like us' being endowed with advantages denied to 'us', we move to a permanent, and sort of 'free-floating', ambience of deprivation, no longer fixed once and for all to a specific 'comparative group'. But instead casting anchors randomly in any of the infinite number of harbours encountered along our life's itinerary.

With all varieties of human habitat on the planet open to visits and scrutiny, every human being's or human group's success is likely to be perceived as another annoying and exasperating case of my own deprivation and so to add to the warehouse of my grievances.⁵⁰⁰

The perception of an unfair increase in the volume of hardships suffered by the lower strata of society in comparison to the other classes has had a central role in Brexit, especially the feelings of anger and powerlessness following the 2007-2008 economic crisis and the 2009 MPs' expenses scandal. Disclosed just in the middle of the economic crisis, the MPs' expenses scandal regarding, in particular, MPs' second housing allowances, reinforced the idea of the contemporary political class as elitist and detached from the reality of the ordinary people. Together with the allegations following the Iraq war and the austerity cuts to welfare provisions, this increased distrust towards the establishment in favour of populist forms of political engagement.

Another element that contributes to Dirk's delusional fantasy of persecution is the newspaper *Spearhead*, through which the author highlights the influence the mass media have on our perception of the world. Dirk's knowledge seems indeed to come completely from

⁴⁹⁷Cfr. Bauman, Z., *op. cit.*, p.94

⁴⁹⁸*Ivi*, pp.94-95

⁴⁹⁹*Ivi*, p.94

⁵⁰⁰*Ivi*, p.99

trusting what he reads in *Spearhead*. For instance, he talks about a battle «being fought, on the streets of London, Liverpool, et cetera? - Bristol. That was the other one. The other spot where they'd gone in force», and criticises his mother for having always her «[h]ead in a book»⁵⁰¹ and knowing nothing about the reality of the nation; however, he has never been to Bristol and the battle he believes to be going on there and in the other cities is just what *Spearhead* displays for its readers. Thus, the newspaper paints England as the invaded nation Dirk believes it to be, with a war going on between the native English and all of the other inhabitants. According to *Spearhead*, the English «shan't lose» this war because «[t]he future of England»⁵⁰² depends on their will to protect the nation and «*free our streets of crime and fear*»⁵⁰³, meaning freeing them from the immigrants and the ethnic minorities polluting the national soil: now that the older generation is on its way out, it is up to Dirk's generation to «*hold the pass*» or, using a very typical expression in reference to immigrants, «*dam the flood*»⁵⁰⁴. The influence of *Spearhead* is also marked by the martial register that Dirk often uses, as «No more running. No more retreats» or «stand and fight, now. Stand and die»⁵⁰⁵, which is a way to convey through language the idea of war as present reality. Interestingly, a martial register is also the one used in the Church Shirley attends with the Kings, where she listens to Reverend Lack talking about a 'Battle of Britain' and the need to be ready to fight (it is not clear against whom) and has a sudden vision of the Reverend as Adolf Hitler. In this way, the author hints at the role religious institutions may have in discrimination and cultural segregation, and at religion as another possible source of racial hatred.

The use of a war-like register comes natural to Dirk, who links it to his father's tales about the war and exploited it to nourish his fantasy about being a soldier himself, someone fighting the enemy and to be proud of. In the end, *Spearhead's* narrative becomes so pervasive that it constantly emerges in Dirk's thoughts, affecting the way he reacts to events: when he understands, for instance, that George is not leaving him the shop but selling it to Mr Patel, he describes the sale, using *Spearhead's* own words, as a betrayal of his own «*legitimate expectations*», an example of how the English are «*losing [their] birthright*»⁵⁰⁶. This recalls another concept from the field of sociological studies, already hinted in the previous discussion concerning nostalgia and Koselleck's definitions of 'space of reference' and 'horizon of

⁵⁰¹Gee, M., *op. cit.*, p.44

⁵⁰²*Ivi*, p.194

⁵⁰³*Ivi*, p.188

⁵⁰⁴*Ivi*, p.190

⁵⁰⁵*Ivi*, p.341

⁵⁰⁶*Ivi*, p.192

expectations: the ‘revolutions of rising expectations’ or the ‘J-curve hypothesis’. This concept, associated mainly with James C. Davies’ 1969 conceptualisation, states that

the likelihood of violent revolutions derives its impetus from a downturn following a long period of rising expectations accompanied by a parallel increase in their satisfaction: ‘When perceptions of need satisfaction decrease but expectations continue to rise, a widening gap is created between expectations and reality. That gap eventually becomes intolerable and sets the stage for rebellion against a social system that fails to fulfil its promises.’⁵⁰⁷

The decrease in need satisfaction and the gap between expectations and reality are indeed main reasons for the sense of deprivation felt by the characters of the two novels referenced in this chapter: *Speak for England*’s main character Brian Marley highlights more than once that he is broke and that his life has turned out as a kind of failure compared to his own expectations and the ones his mother had for him, while Dirk’s expectations have their roots in the equally deluded expectations of his father, whose reality completely clashes with the alleged golden future he thought to be awaiting the nation after the war. Ultimately, losing his job is for Dirk an ultimate proof that «[e]verything’s going. Everything’s gone. There’s nothing left for me round here. Nothing left of what I had. Even Dad won’t be in the Park anymore. No one will know us. We won’t exist»⁵⁰⁸. This is what Dirk thinks of the nation too: now that the empire is gone, that immigrants are everywhere, that the country is a member of the European Union, ‘we’ are no more the super power ‘we’ used to be; therefore, ‘we’ do not matter anymore, ‘we’ are nothing.

Drunk and shocked by his dad’s forthcoming death and the loss of his job, Dirk throws himself into a fight in Albion Park started by his mates against «the enemy»⁵⁰⁹, some «darkies» he describes as «black as the night»⁵¹⁰ who, being already Dirk’s usual scapegoat, easily become the object of his rage. Interestingly, Dirk affirms that in the darkness it was impossible to distinguish «who was us, who was them»⁵¹¹ and that, interrupted by a woman screaming and calling for the police, he could see that there was nobody except from them, as if «the lads had been fighting each other»⁵¹². The image of a racial fight transformed into a kind of ‘white riot’ with whites fighting against each other clearly has a symbolic meaning: apart from being a reference to the race riots, the fact that no black man appears to be into view unveils his role as the ‘scapegoat’, and points at the need to look behind it.

⁵⁰⁷Bauman, Z., *op. cit.*, p.97

⁵⁰⁸Gee, M., *op. cit.*, p.301

⁵⁰⁹Ivi, p.303

⁵¹⁰Ivi, p.304

⁵¹¹Ivi, p.305

⁵¹²Ivi, p.306

For Dirk, who is completely embedded in the fantasy of persecution, recognising the ‘Other’ represented by the immigrant, the foreigner, the member of an ethnic minority, as just a convenient scapegoat for his individual flaws and for those of the nation is, ultimately, an impossible act and this leads him, in the last acts of the novel, to kill the first black man he meets in the Park in the attempt to ‘clean’ it, meaning the nation, and, ultimately, himself. Not by chance, the man he kills is none other than Winston King, who is

one of the few characters who does not think in the dichotomies of ‘us’ and ‘them’. He is one of the very few who question these concepts, probably because he has seen them fail. He cannot find his place in one of the categories on offer for him. It seems as if he was always part of ‘the others’: he is discriminated against by some English people because of his skin colour, and at the same time has to hide the fact that he is gay from his family because he fears they will cast him out.⁵¹³

Winston is also the perfect personification of the ‘invasion theme’: being Elroy’s brother, Winston is connected to the invasion of the Whites’ private space; being a black walking in Albion Park, he is a symbol of the immigrant ‘flood’ invading the nation; being homosexual, he also represents, according to the traditional views of the nostalgic, the degeneration of values. Moreover, his homosexuality is also what Dirk hates the most about himself; consequently, the act of killing also represents, symbolically, Dirk’s attempt to kill his own sexual identity.

The death of Winston King in Albion Park gives the novel a cyclical structure, being a kind of reversal of Alfred’s collapse after the dispute with the ‘invading’ black family. But for Alfred, rather than being a representation of the white victory over the invaders, the murder ends up being a symbol of defeat. The kind of immoral act that has never happened before in the park, it destroys Alfred’s sense of pride and undermines his life’s work, making him realise the cost of hatred: the end of civilisation. Consequently, when his wife confesses that she believes Dirk to be the killer, Alfred decides to denounce his own son, rejecting May’s remark, made in a desperate attempt to save Dirk, that the murdered man «was black Alfred. You could never stand them»⁵¹⁴. But this is not true anymore. Thus, the narrative shows how Alfred’s hospitalisation, causing a contact between him and the ethnic minorities (most of the nurses are black), starts to change his own perspective, pointing again at segregation as one of the main reasons of racial hatred. In the same way, going to the police station and meeting a group of black youth, Alfred recognises that his first impression of them – as the enemy coming to kill him – was wrong: when the youth are fully in view and he has actual contact with them, Alfred

⁵¹³Van Lente, S., *Cultural Exchange in Selected Contemporary British Novels*, Dissertation, der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 27 August 2014, p.213

⁵¹⁴Gee, M., *op. cit.*, p.393

notices that they are just teenagers, not so different from his own sons and daughter, and that «he'd just got confused»⁵¹⁵. Denouncing Dirk as a suspect in a murder investigation is, ultimately, an act of redemption and acknowledgement: Alfred understands that everything that happened is (also) his fault not simply because he has 'left his post', but because he has supported, perpetuated and indoctrinated his own son with a narrative of identity that, instead of strengthening the idea of a national community, has ended up undermining the very concept of interdependence (or solidarity) that holds a community together. The same narrative that is leading the country out from the European Union.

⁵¹⁵*Ivi*, p.402

Beyond Brexit: BrexLit and English Identity

From Denial to (Nearly) Acceptance: Cultural Responses and *BrexLit*

Undermining the very concept of solidarity at the basis of any national community seems to be the principle (and maybe only) ‘achievement’ of the Brexit vote, providing «a lesson», as Jonathan Coe wrote three years after the referendum, «in how quickly a country can degenerate into division and factionalism, and how tenuous are the bonds that hold us together around the vexed issue of national identity»⁵¹⁶. The Remain and Leave campaigns have indeed offered two competing representations of the country, one inclusive and supportive of the European project, another insular and linked to the traditional (and Eurosceptic) narratives of identity. Advertised as the salvific option that can restore the country’s glory and shelter the people from threatening invaders, impoverishment and hardships, Brexit soon stopped being a referendum about the European Union and British membership and became a vote for a certain imagining of the country and for solving its most pressing (national) issues. Unfortunately, the immediate consequences of the Brexit outcome are very different from what the Leave narrative had outlined. As journalist and novelist James Meek argues, the Brexit vote, ultimately, «didn’t settle any of the urgent problems facing the country»⁵¹⁷; on the contrary, it has contributed in increasing social tension and destabilising more than one ‘Union’. Thus, the Brexit vote has shaken both the European Union, threatening to trigger a domino effect in other member-states, and the United Kingdom itself, considering that half of the population did not vote for Brexit and that the gaps between the ‘elites and the people’, the ‘natives and the immigrants’, the ‘well-off and the left-behind’, have never been felt so sharply. Consequently, as Jonathan Coe stresses, the ‘vision’ that has emerged from the referendum is actually neither the Leave nor the Remain campaign’s, but one that is «more truthful» about a

country at war with itself. A country divided along lines of age, education, wealth and opportunity; a country seen quite differently by the old and the young; a prickly union in which provincial England had a very different sense of identity from metropolitan England, and felt little of the sense of “Europeanness” that Scotland, for instance, expressed strongly through its votes to stay in the E.U.⁵¹⁸

Three years before, writing in the aftermath of the Brexit vote, Zadie Smith defined the country coming out from the referendum debate in a similar manner, stating that «[o]ne useful consequence of Brexit» had been to

⁵¹⁶Coe, J., «How Brexit Broke Britain and Revealed a Country at War With Itself», *Time*, 6 June 2019, <https://time.com/5601982/how-brexit-broke-britain/> (5 September 2019)

⁵¹⁷Meek, J., *Dreams of Leaving and Remaining*, London & New York, Verso, 2019, p.113

⁵¹⁸Coe, J., «How Brexit Broke Britain and Revealed a Country at War With Itself» *cit.*

finally and openly reveal a deep fracture in British society that has been thirty years in the making. The gaps between north and south, between the social classes, between Londoners and everyone else, between rich Londoners and poor Londoners, and between white and brown and black [...].⁵¹⁹

A deep fracture that, although ‘thirty years in the making’ (and here Smith is clearly referring to the consequences of political choices marked by neoliberalism and individualism) has been constantly undermined by the cultural elite of the country, which, from the vote onwards, has defined Brexit as an «apparently troubling act of national self-harm»⁵²⁰; «a huge mistake [...] reached at hysteria point» and an expression of «anger and revenge»⁵²¹; «one of the worst political hangovers in history»⁵²²; «the most depressing, divisive, duplicitous political event of my lifetime»⁵²³; «[a] catastrophe»⁵²⁴; and even an outcome triggered by a «dark and dangerous stupidity, all the more pernicious for the way it is worn so lightly by its perpetrators and tolerated, sometimes even indulged, by the rest of us»⁵²⁵, who allegedly did not fight enough against the lies and the acts of manipulation that have characterised the Leave campaign.

It follows that the main response from many on the liberal Left soon after the vote, as Goodwin acknowledges, has been one marked by blind opposition and rejection⁵²⁶, a response driven by the fact that, despite the early signs, the Brexit outcome has come to them completely unexpected. This is quite evident in many of the articles and essays published in the immediate aftermath of the referendum, where the most common reactions to the vote are disbelief, anger and astonishment. For instance, Zadie Smith, who has been one of the first writers to comment about Brexit, describes what she felt watching «England fence itself off from the rest of Europe» as «an enormous sense of shock»⁵²⁷, a word that comes back in Eva Aldea’s essay ‘The Lost Nomad of Europe’, where the Polish-Romanian-Swedish lecturer and writer states precisely that «for many of us the referendum result came as a shock»⁵²⁸, meaning as the sudden realisation that a great part of the country they were living in did support and believe in the

⁵¹⁹Smith, Z., *op. cit.*

⁵²⁰Shaw, K., «Brexlit» *cit.*, p.29

⁵²¹O’Brien, E., cit. in Doyle, M., «‘UK was groomed’: Irish writers throw book at Brexit», *The Irish Times*, 27 June 2016, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/uk-was-groomed-irish-writers-throw-book-at-brexlit-1.2701474> (5 September 2019)

⁵²²O’Reilly, C., cit in Doyle, M., *op. cit.*

⁵²³Harris R, tweet on Twitter, 16 June 2016, 6:49, https://twitter.com/robert_harris/status/743440375981936640 (5 September 2019)

⁵²⁴Gébler, C., cit. in Doyle, M., *op. cit.*

⁵²⁵Stonebridge, L., «The Banality of Brexit», in Eaglestone, R. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.7

⁵²⁶Cfr. Meek, J., *op. cit.*,

⁵²⁷Smith, Z., *op. cit.*

⁵²⁸Aldea, E., *op. cit.*, p.152

Leave narrative of isolationism and scaremongering excluding people like her. Petra Rau, German senior lecturer at the University of East Anglia and, as Aldea, one of the contributors to Eaglestone's collection *Brexit and Literature*, affirms to «have no recollection of what I read or wrote or even did in the weeks after the vote to leave the EU. I seem to have spent much of the summer in a paralysed state of fury and disbelief»⁵²⁹, a situation made worse by her status as an EU citizen in the UK. Northern Irish poet and children's writer Shaun Traynor reported to have even signed for an Irish passport, a reaction to the vote similar to English poet and writer Blake Morrison's wife, who, as they «sat there absorbing the terrible news» in a country they could recognise no more, proposed instead to «move to Ireland»⁵³⁰, hoping that Morrison's Irish mother would have been enough to obtain an Irish passport. The Irish poet Vona Groarke has gone so far to consider Brexit similar to one of «[t]hose stories of youngsters slipping out of home because they've been groomed by men in dark rooms, who have no good in mind», affirming that she believes the UK to have «just been groomed»⁵³¹ in the same way.

Among the Remainers, we find also the English novelist Ian McEwan, who has commented on Brexit comparing the country to a «depressed teenage self-harmer» and declared himself to «belong to the smallest, saddest, most pessimistic faction» of those against a British exit: «I'm a denialist. Almost a year on, and I'm still shaking my head in disbelief – not a useful political act. I don't accept this near mystical, emotionally charged decision to leave the EU. I don't, I can't, believe it. I reject it.». What immediately strikes the reader about McEwan's speech is the use of the word 'faction', repeated in the sentence «[m]y faction lives in daily bafflement»⁵³², which is, coming from a novelist of his stature, certainly not a casual choice. 'Faction' perfectly describes how Brexit, as Freeman stresses, is «not so much a difference of opinion as a rupture»⁵³³ and recalls Coe's image of a 'country at war' where «many of the most culturally enfranchised people in the country are currently, and unusually, experiencing what it feels like to be politically disenfranchised»⁵³⁴, being Remainers under a government which constantly claims to be following the 'will of the people' in pursuing its Brexit agenda, yet remains firmly opposed to a second public consultation and even inclined (especially with Boris

⁵²⁹Rau, P., *op. cit.*, pp.31-32

⁵³⁰Morrison, B., *cit.* in Doyle, M., *op. cit.*

⁵³¹Groarke, V., *cit.* in Doyle, M., *op. cit.*

⁵³²McEwan, I., «Brexit denial: confessions of a passionate remainer», *The Guardian*, 2 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/02/ian-mcewan-denialist-confessions-remainer-brexit> (5 September 2019)

⁵³³Freeman, L., «IS THERE A GREAT BREXIT NOVEL?: Laura Freeman searches for new fiction that addresses the great political schism of our age, but instead of a considered approach finds clichés and caricatures», *Sunday Times*, 4 November 2018, p.4

⁵³⁴Stonebridge, L., *op. cit.*, p.11

Johnson as Prime Minister) to pursue a ‘no deal’ Brexit. The feeling of being a politically disenfranchised minority is also at the core of James Meek’s account of his personal reaction to Brexit. According to Meek, Brexit is less an event and more a feeling, which he imagines

very similar to learning that the mine or factory where you and your family have worked for a generation or two is closing, or that new people who look and talk and dress differently from your people are eligible for public benefits you’ve been queuing for. And now we Remainers were feeling it: people like me who had remotely observed others were experiencing it for ourselves. For Leavers the merit of voting to leave the EU wasn’t only in winning. It was in getting their opponents to feel like losers – to feel what they had felt, that deep unease at the shattering of their dreamscape. My bad feeling was somebody’s else catharsis.⁵³⁵

It follows the idea of Brexit has a [p]sychic dislocation», more difficult to fix than an economic collapse or a natural disaster, given that «the very act which is, for some citizens, a horribly demoralising reconfiguration of their sense of themselves in the world is, for many others, a purgative act, restoring a psyche wounded by decades of communal defeat»⁵³⁶. The Brexit vote is here depicted as a kind of revenge act: putting those who perceive themselves as left-behind, left-out, and vulnerable, finally in the position to make the others, that is to say the open, cosmopolitan and liberal part of the nation, feel the same sense of vulnerability and displacement.

The perception of having been, somehow, ‘detached’ or irresponsibly ‘unaware’ of the reality and feelings of one’s fellow citizens is well expressed by Zadie Smith, who describes her «Londoncentric solipsism» as being as dangerous as the political ambition moving Boris Johnson and the other politicians advocating for Brexit, adding that «the profound shock I felt at the result – and which so many other Londoners seem to have experienced – suggests at the very least that we must have been living behind a kind of veil, unable to see our own country for what it has become»⁵³⁷. The idea of Remainers living in a different nation and having no contact with the other side of the ‘front’, emerges clearly both in her already mentioned account of the vote, ‘Fences: A Brexit Diary’, as well as in Julian Barnes’s ‘Diary: People Will Hate Us Again’⁵³⁸, which provides the description of a very similar event. Thus, in both essays the writers describe Brexit talks taking place at the dinner table, involving dining companions who are all Remainers from the same social and political background – people who stand on the same side of the barricade, knowing nothing about life on the other side.

⁵³⁵Meek, J., *op. cit.*, p.112

⁵³⁶Ivi, pp.2-3

⁵³⁷Smith, Z., *op. cit.*

⁵³⁸Barnes, J., *Diary: People Will Hate Us Again» cit.*

Lack of communication, contact and mutual understanding between McEwan's faction and Farage's 'ordinary, decent' squadrons of Leave voters has also been acknowledged by other writers. Thus, Amanda Craig has referred an episode that happened in Devon and «helped her realise, 10 years later, that the vote for Brexit would be a certainty and not a vain hope among Little Englanders»⁵³⁹. As reported by Danuta Kean, a local councillor came to Craig asking for a job for someone he knew, telling the writer that «[p]eople don't realise, but in this part of the country we are poorer than Romania»⁵⁴⁰. This statement left the author astounded and shocked, and later became a source of inspiration for her last Brexit novel *The Lie of the Land* (2017). Anthony Cartwright, whose literary works, from *Heartland* (2009) to *Iron Towns* (2016) and the Brexit novel *The Cut* (2017), generally focus on working-class struggles, wrote in *Granta* that «[p]eople talk of the vote as a catastrophe, and they might be right, but what we must surely, finally, acknowledge is that for some places in our country the catastrophe has been going on for forty years or more and counting»⁵⁴¹.

Considering the prevailing reactions of the British cultural establishment, it is not hard to imagine that the first literary negotiations of Brexit tended to side with the Remain front and that the Brexit issue soon gained great relevance in the academic world. As Joe Jackson writes, the Brexit aftermath has been characterised by «an increasing array of Brexit-infused work»⁵⁴² or, using writer Sam Byers's words, of works dominated by a doomed sort of 'Brexit feeling'⁵⁴³, dealing, almost inevitably, with themes that have been at the core of the Brexit debate. Creative works related to the Brexit issue are, of course, not limited to the genre of the novel. We could mention, for instance, Carol Ann Duffy and Rufus Norris's play *My Country: A Work in Progress* (2017), partly based on interviews with Leavers and Remainers and speeches from party leaders, or the mini-plays *Brexit Shorts: Dramas for a Divided Nation* (2017), which have been commissioned by *The Guardian* and written by nine British playwrights explicitly to make sense of the referendum, available also as videos on *The Guardian* website. With regard to film, Francis Lee's movie *God's Own Country* (2017), set in the Yorkshire countryside and centred on the romance between a young English shepherd and a Romanian immigrant hired to help

⁵³⁹Kean, D., «Vanguard of Brexit fiction set to appear in 2017», *The Guardian*, 9 January 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jan/09/vanguard-of-brexit-fiction-set-to-appear-in-2017-mark-billingham> (5 September 2019)

⁵⁴⁰*Ibidem*

⁵⁴¹Cartwright, A., «Black Country», *Granta*, 15 July 2016, <https://granta.com/black-country/> (5 September 2019)

⁵⁴²Jackson, J., «Brex-lit: Social tensions inspire British novelists», *The Jakarta Post*, 6 January 2019, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/life/2019/01/06/brex-lit-social-tensions-inspire-british-novelists.html> (5 September 2019)

⁵⁴³Cfr. Byers, S., «Sam Byers discusses whether Perfidious Albion is a Brexit novel», *Youtube*, 4 April 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZCwN1cbmO2E> (5 September 2019)

him with his livestock, has been described by the *New Statesman* as «a love story for the Brexit times»⁵⁴⁴. Satirical works mimicking or rewriting children's literature in order to place them in a Brexit context are also flourishing. Examples include Bruno Vincent's *Five on Brexit Island* (2016) and *Five Escape Brexit Island* (2017), with the first reproducing the division between Leavers and Remainers and the second depicting a possible post-Brexit dystopic scenarios. Lucien Young's *Alice in Brexitland* (2017), similarly, engages directly with the Brexit campaign and transforms many of the characters of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* into well-known politicians (Farage, Gove and Johnson are all present, as is Donald Trump). Finally, Brexit is surfacing in poems too, with the anthology of poetry *Wretched Strangers* (2018), edited by JT Welsch and Ágnes Lehóczky, having been published «to mark the vital contribution of non-UK-born writers»⁵⁴⁵ to British culture and as a counter against Brexit xenophobia and nationalism. However, given that this is a literary analysis focusing on contemporary fiction, the works that will be taken into consideration fall into the category of the novel-genre, where there is already a well-established trend dubbed 'BrexLit' or 'Brexlit' (meaning, simply, Brexit Literature).

Used by many literary critics, the tag 'BrexLit', as Kristian Shaw explains, refers to literature that reflects «the divided nature of the UK and the ramifications of the referendum», being composed of «fictions that either directly respond or imaginatively allude to Britain's exit from the EU, or engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain's withdrawal»⁵⁴⁶. Soon after the referendum, many novels have been immediately defined as Brexit fictions following these criteria, starting from the early examples of Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016) and Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2016), both published in the very same year as the Brexit outcome, and flourishing into a distinct sub-genre in the subsequent years. This also includes political thrillers and dystopian fictions such as Stanley Johnson's *Kompromat* (2017), Mark Billingham's *Love like Blood* (2017), Michael Paraskos's *Rabbitman* (2017), Douglas Board's *Time of Lies* (2017), Sam Byers's *Perfidious Albion* (2018) and John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019); state-of-the-nation novels, such as Amanda Craig's previously mentioned *The Lie of the Land* (2017), Adam Thorpe's *Missing Fay* (2017), Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018) and Linda Grant's *A Stranger City* (2019); and fictionalised autobiographies such as Olivia Laing's *Crudo* (2018) and Rachel Cusk's *Kudos* (2018).

⁵⁴⁴Gilbey, R., «God's Own Country is a love story for the Brexit times», *New Statesman America*, 31 August 2017, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/film/2017/09/god-s-own-country-love-story-brexit-times> (5 September 2019)

⁵⁴⁵Quoted from the website page of the Boiler House Press advertising the anthology, <https://www.boilerhouse.press/product-page/wretched-strangers> (5 September 2019)

⁵⁴⁶Shaw, K., «Brexlit» *cit.*, p.18

It follows that novels that tackle Brexit belong to different genres, ranging from political thrillers to autofiction and from crime to state-of-the-nation novels. However, they can easily be distinguished into two categories: on one hand more ‘political’ fictions, meaning novels that focus on the way the political campaign has been conducted, dealing with themes such as post-truth, the danger of nostalgia, political mendaciousness, awareness and responsibility, and usually depicting dystopian post-Brexit scenarios; on the other hand are the more ‘intimate’, ‘psychological’ fictions, meaning novels that attempt to represent, instead, the people across the divide and to better understand the reasons underneath the attitude towards the Leave vote. This way of categorising Brexit fictions, which is to be found, for instance, both in John Day’s and in Kristian Shaw’s critical approaches, well defines the two major tendencies that characterise the sub-genre and is, therefore, the one that will be applied also in this brief introduction to Brexit Literature.

Challenging Brexit Narrative: Brexit ‘Political’ Novels

Generally speaking, the novels that belong to the ‘political’ category are mainly characterised, as John Day stresses, by «a kind of gleeful, frenzied dystopianism»⁵⁴⁷. The prominence of just dystopic traits is clearly due to the characteristics of the dystopian genre, which is traditionally deployed to uncover and push the limits of the dangerous tendencies that are present in contemporary societies and, consequently, tend to flourish in parallel with national turmoil as a reaction to controversial political landscapes. In relation to BrexLit, these novels usually mix the issues at the core of the Brexit debate with other, global concerns – *in primis* climate change and the pervasiveness of technology – and tend to also refer, to a greater or lesser extent, to Donald Trump’s presidential campaign. Typical examples of this trend are, for instance, Michael Paraskos’ *Rabbitman* (2017), Douglas Board’s *Time of Lies* (2017) and John Lanchester’s *The Wall* (2019). A very peculiar dystopian fiction, Michael Paraskos’s *Rabbitman* is a novel where an eight-year-old child stages together with her animated toys two parallel and interconnected plays that have got a lot in common with our contemporary reality. The first of these plays, entitled ‘The Federacy of Freedonia’, takes place in the USA and is concerned with a rabbit puppet named President Rabbitman, who clearly stands in for Donald Trump. Recalling Christopher Marlowe’s *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (1590), the play starts with President Rabbitman receiving the unexpected and unpleasant visit of a

⁵⁴⁷Day, J., «Brexlit: the new landscape of British fiction», *Financial Times*, 28 July 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/30ec47b4-7204-11e7-93ff-99f383b09ff9> (5 September 2019)

«devilishly handsome creature»⁵⁴⁸, Titivillus, who has come to collect the soul Rabbitman has pledged to him in exchange for power. Among the many crimes President Rabbitman is guilty of, he has played a role in the breaking up of the United Kingdom as well as in England's subsequent decision to leave the so-called European League. This political process, here «dubbed *Fuxit* by the press»⁵⁴⁹, was fully supported by English politician Balloonhead, the lead campaigner for 'Fuxit', who stands in for Nigel Farage. England – renamed Englandshire and fallen under the control of Freedomians – is the setting for the second play, a story about «[o]rdinary people»⁵⁵⁰ tricked into voting against their own interests and now facing the consequences of that decision. Even though politicians and the mass media, represented in the act of simplifying reality for their own purposes, openly lying to the people and duly punished in the course of the narrative, are the main target of the novel, the 'ordinary people' are not at all considered any less guilty. Thus, Remainers are described as «the silent majority» who said nothing or «anything loudly enough»⁵⁵¹, letting self-centred and greedy politicians such as Balloonhead get away with their crazy plans for the country, while Leavers are portrayed as «sinners» that have eaten from «the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Hatred»⁵⁵² and are unconcerned about where the truth lies, which is something people appear to be «not interested [...] any more» now that «[w]e live in a post-truth age»⁵⁵³: an age where facts and expert opinions are less important than the emotions that certain fabricated narratives are able to stir up.

Similarly, Douglas Board's dystopia *Time of Lies*, described by Chris Mullin as the «first post-truth, post-Brexit novel»⁵⁵⁴, has been inspired by both Brexit and Trump's campaign, focusing, more than on the act of lying in itself that the title suggests, on the rise of populism and the response to it by the liberal elites. Set in a post-Brexit Britain and revolving around the general election of 2020, the narrative is focused on the political rise of an ex-football hooligan, Bob Grant, who runs on, quoting Shaw, «a Trumpesque platform opposed to both the EU's bureaucratic machinations and the sickly influence of generic foreigners»⁵⁵⁵. Interestingly, one of the few pieces of personal information we learn about Bob is that he has always been

⁵⁴⁸Paraskos, M., *Rabbitman*, England, Friction Fiction, 2017 p.30

⁵⁴⁹*Ivi*, p.23

⁵⁵⁰*Ivi*, p.41

⁵⁵¹*Ivi*, p.156

⁵⁵²*Ivi*, p.148

⁵⁵³*Ivi*, p.76

⁵⁵⁴This review by author Chris Mullin is to be found on Douglas Board's own website, Douglas Board @BoardWryter, <https://douglasboard.com/novels/time-of-lies.html> (5 September 2019)

⁵⁵⁵Shaw, K., «Brexlit» *cit.*, p.18

«interested in the Second World War, Churchill and all that»⁵⁵⁶. References to Winston Churchill, as stressed before, have been central in the Brexit campaign and Bob's fascination with him could also be an implicit reference to Boris Johnson, who has published a book about the former British Prime Minister entitled *The Churchill Factor: How One Man Made History* (2014). Another important reference to a politician, this time to Donald Trump, would be, instead, the very name of Bob's party, 'Britain's Great', which recalls Trump's slogan 'Make America Great Again'. The character of Bob Grant results from a combination of different current politicians – who have been melded together in order to create the ultimate right-wing demagogue for the current age – and defines himself as a spokesman of the 'ordinary people' as well as a member of their 'tribe'. Not by chance, BG slogans describe him as «a prime minister you can have a drink with and *he'll buy his round*»⁵⁵⁷, while Bob's own speeches constantly stress a line between himself and those politicians that «went to posh schools here, went to university here» and think themselves to be, as his own brother Zach does (who has gone to college and is a leftist *Guardian* reader) better than the 'ordinary people'. According to Bob, these political and cultural elites «wouldn't know why Britain's great»⁵⁵⁸ and therefore do not deserve to be in charge of the nation. It follows that Bob Grant's campaign leverages not only on patriotism (he is even the author of a ghost-written book entitled *Getting Britain Back*), but also on people's anger towards the elites. Thus, as Zach states while impersonating his brother Bob in front of a crowd of BG supporters, 'Britain's Great' is a party born out of anger: people were angry about «not being listened to», about «being treated as stupid, foul-mannered, selfish and generally full of shit» and being considered never

good enough to run Britain, but only to work for it, to play the Lottery, to pay taxes, waiting for housing which never came, waiting for healthcare which only came too late (*shouts of 'Tell them!'*). Meanwhile the doing-nicelys were too busy dialling Uber and telling the rest of us to jump [...] to notice their boots pressed against our necks (*silence*).⁵⁵⁹

As we know, anger towards the elites, class conflict and resentment are indeed major factors in the rise of populist movements as they have been in the Brexit outcome, considering that the Leave vote was – at least partially – a response to austerity policies and growing distrust towards mainstream political parties. Distrust towards the current political establishment and anger for the constant impoverishment of the lower strata of society are well expressed in Board's novel, where a local BG councillor implies that the Conservative and Labour

⁵⁵⁶Board, D., *Time of Lies*, Hertfordshire, Lightning Books, 2017, p.78

⁵⁵⁷*Ivi*, p.127

⁵⁵⁸*Ivi*, p.27

⁵⁵⁹*Ivi*, p.262

politicians, who have «both sold Britain to foreigners, when we have had a housing crisis for three decades»⁵⁶⁰, are substantially the same thing, and that they have been helped in selling Britain off by the financial elite ('the bankers'), whose «shameless»⁵⁶¹ greed would have created the perfect conditions for the country's collapse and loss of prestige. Not by chance, bankers are, together with foreigners, one of the first targets of the BG government after the elections. Thus, «[b]ankers and former bankers - to improve [...] safety and community relations» are compelled to «always wear [a] B»⁵⁶² in public places, while any foreigner that wants to remain in the UK under the new BG government, as well as any British citizen who wants to remain in Europe, must register on the Fair Immigration website. Both decisions recall the Second World War or, more precisely, the treatment the Jews received under the Nuremberg Race Laws. References to the war and to the Nazi regime appear multiple times in the course of the narrative, often in the shape of passing thoughts, and are part of a strategy to show the pervasiveness of the memory of the war both in the Brexit campaign and in the British cultural consciousness, as well as a way to stress a parallel between the present time and the nationalistic fervour that led to the war. Ultimately, another central element of the Brexiteer's storytelling that comes back in *Time of Lies* is the fear of being invaded, with the depiction of «four hundred motley figures», among whom women and children, «corralled behind makeshift barriers in a freight marshalling yard»⁵⁶³. What the newspapers define as the «FIRST INVASION OF BRITAIN SINCE 1066»⁵⁶⁴ is actually the desperate attempt of some refugees from the Calais Jungle to reach Britain. In this regard, Board's representation of the immigration situation is true to life, as certain real-world elements are literally replicated in his text: the many attempts of the Calais refugee and migrant community to cross the channel; the attitude of rejection and outrage demonstrated by the British media (and public) towards these attempts, and the deep-rooted fear of invasion in the English national psyche, already demonstrated in the analysis of previous texts throughout this study.

Trumpism, Brexit and fear of invasion are again source of inspiration in John Lanchester's *The Wall*, whose title recalls, first and foremost, Donald Trump's proposition to extend the current barriers along the border between USA and Mexico in order to stop Mexican illegal immigration into the USA. In the novel, the Wall is simply the 'National Coastal Defence Structure' built after 'the Change', an environmental catastrophe that has led Britain to lose

⁵⁶⁰*Ivi*, p.48

⁵⁶¹*Ivi*, p.98

⁵⁶²*Ivi*, p.153

⁵⁶³*Ivi*, p.225

⁵⁶⁴*Ivi*, p.230

miles and miles of its coastline and even to forget what sandy beaches look like. The Change is «not a single solitary event»⁵⁶⁵, meaning a one-time natural disaster as it may appear at the beginning of the novel, but a slow change in sea levels and weather that has, nonetheless, completely re-shaped the country and the way of living. For this reason, the event is felt more as «a defined moment in time with a before and an after. There was our parents' world, and now there is our world»⁵⁶⁶. This definition of the Change could also apply to the way many people feel about the Brexit vote: something built up over a long period of time but causing a fissure that makes their perception of the country completely different from what it has been before.

Albeit primarily an ecological dystopia, Lanchester's new novel carries out many themes that could lead to define it as part of the Brexit trend. One of these, as anticipated, is fear of invasion. The main function of the Wall is certainly not protecting the country from further rise of the sea, but preventing the arrival of 'the Others', those unfortunate people that are escaping from countries that have been deeply affected by the Change. As Holland⁵⁶⁷ and Nevala-Lee have already stressed, both the image of the Wall and expressions such as «[t]he Others are coming»⁵⁶⁸ evoke the 'Night Watch' of George R. R. Martin's fantasy saga *Game of Thrones*, «except that the country is recognizably Britain, and the enemies on the other side aren't supernatural White Walkers, but human beings in rowboats and dinghies»⁵⁶⁹, who clearly stand for actual refugees escaping from wars and starvation in the real world. The incomers that are captured by those patrolling the Wall are put back in the sea or put to death, unless they accept to serve as Help, which is defined as «a form of providing welfare and shelter and refuge to the wretched of the world»⁵⁷⁰ but actually is, as Thomas-Corr highlights, nothing else than a «state-coordinated slavery whereby any citizen can "borrow" useful refugees»⁵⁷¹.

Another central theme of the narrative is intergenerational conflict, with the older citizens depicted as the ones responsible for the environmental catastrophe. Putting aside the warning the novel is sending to the current ruling establishment about climate change, the theme

⁵⁶⁵Lanchester, J., *The Wall*, London, Faber & Faber, 2019, p.110

⁵⁶⁶*Ibidem*

⁵⁶⁷The reference is to Holland, T., «The Wall by John Lanchester review - 'The Others are coming'», *The Guardian*, 19 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/19/the-wall-john-lanchester-review> (5 September 2019)

⁵⁶⁸*Ivi*, p.111

⁵⁶⁹Nevala-Lee, A., «Rising Seas, Migrants, War: A Timely Novel From John Lanchester», *The New York Times*, 5 March 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/05/books/review/john-lanchester-wall.html> (5 September 2019)

⁵⁷⁰Lanchester, J., *The Wall cit.*, p.148

⁵⁷¹Thomas-Corr, J., «The Wall by John Lanchester review – dystopian fable for our time», *The Guardian*, 15 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/15/the-wall-by-john-lanchester-review> (5 September 2019)

in question is also linked to Brexit, and especially to the idea that the referendum outcome has been ‘diverted’ by middle-aged and old people, leaving the young, who are the ones going to live in the future shaped by the vote, to suffer from its long-term consequences. The same sort of ‘generational divide’ is portrayed in the Wall, where the ‘olds’ responsible for the Change do not have to cope with its consequence and serve on the Wall as ‘Defenders’. Service on the wall is, instead, compulsory for the young, who live in constant terror since service can be prolonged (if they misbehave) and even condemn them to exile (if the Others breach under their watch). The only way to avoid Wall-duty is to choose to have children and become ‘Breeders’. The slogan «Breed to Leave»⁵⁷² certainly has got a certain ‘Brexit vibe’, as well as being clearly inspired by typical fascist policies to increase birth rate.

Other thematic threads connected to Brexit are the idea of ‘enemies of the people’ conspiring against the country and the dichotomy between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’. The idea of a kind of conspiracy, against Britain’s recovery of former greatness and, after the vote, against the implementation of the referendum outcome, is indeed hinted at in Lanchester’s novel, where Defenders are informed about some «deluded people» who are not taking the side

of the ordinary decent people of this country, the people you Defenders guard and protect, the people for whom you spend your long nights and days on the Wall, the people whose security is the meaning and purpose of what you do - no, they don’t take their side. [...] They take the side of the Others!⁵⁷³

Taking the side of the ‘Others’, meaning Europeans and immigrants in general, instead of protecting the interest of their own fellow citizens is exactly what Remainers have been accused of, depicted as traitors to their country and quislings.

For what concerns, instead, the populist discourse that contrasts the elite with the people, we see that, on the one hand, ‘Defenders’ like the main character Kavanagh are stuck with the Wall, having no power of choice over their own lives, and «should share things, so that they understand they’re all in it together»⁵⁷⁴; on the other hand, members of the elite enjoy a kind of freedom that is unknown to the common people, going anywhere on planes (even if fuel is scarce) «to talk to other members of the elite about the Change and the Others» or «[a]t least that’s what they say they do»⁵⁷⁵. The meaning of this passage is made apparent by the ironical reference to George Osborne’s sentence ‘we’re all in this together’ in relation to the economic crisis and the subsequent period of austerity. While ‘ordinary people’ suffer from the current

⁵⁷²Lanchester, J., *The Wall cit.*, p.35

⁵⁷³*Ivi*, p.112

⁵⁷⁴*Ivi*, pp.41-42

⁵⁷⁵*Ivi*, p.28

economic and political situation, the elites continue to go on with their lives as before, only pretending to be focused on solving it. Kavanagh, who secretly aspires to become a member of the elite too, is aware of the deep divide between the lower strata of society and the ruling class, who «have to let in some outsiders» like him now and then to «spread just enough benefits around to stop disorder from below» and to understand, through the newly arrived, «how the rest of the population are thinking»⁵⁷⁶. The very fact that the elites need new members to understand the way the rest of the population think, or ‘the mood’ of the people, is a demonstration of the detachment of the ruling class from everyday reality, a theme that is to be found in many other Brexit fictions.

Other novels share with *The Wall* the same concern about the way both climate change and the migrant and refugee crisis are dealt with, mixing it with a strong criticism of Brexit and Trump’s politics. These are *Crudo* by Olivia Laing and the novels that constitute Ali Smith’s seasonal cycle (the already mentioned *Autumn* and the subsequent publications *Winter* [2017] and *Spring* [2019]⁵⁷⁷), which are also similar in the way they focus on how social media reports the news, portrays reality and intrudes into people’s lives. *Crudo*, as anticipated, is a fictionalised autobiography whose main character, the 40-year-old writer Kathy, is based on Olivia Laing herself and on Kathy Acker, an American artist who died in 1997. According to Ayres, the title *Crudo*, which is the Italian word for ‘raw’, would indicate the main aim of the novel, that is to say «offering a raw impression»⁵⁷⁸ of Brexit and of the globalised political context in which it is inserted. Set in 2017, the novel takes place between Italy and England, following Kathy as she prepares for her wedding and adjusts to married life while simultaneously complaining about the state of the world. The constant influx of news stories that dominated the late 2010s – Trump and North Korea, the Grenfell Tower, Charlottesville, the death of John Ashbury and the post-Brexit fate of Europeans living within the United Kingdom – shakes Kathy deeply, upsets her faith in the present and creates the desire to return to her past. According to Kathy,

[s]ome sort of cord between action and consequence had been severed. Things still happened, but not in any sensible order, it was hard to talk about truth because some bits were hidden, the result or maybe the cause, and anyway the space between them was full of misleading data, nonsense and lies. It was very dizzying, you wasted a lot of time figuring it out. Had decisions really once led plainly to things happening,

⁵⁷⁶Ivi, p.73

⁵⁷⁷The last instalment of the seasonal quartet, *Summer*, is due to be published in 2020 and therefore will not be part of this analysis.

⁵⁷⁸Ayres, J., «Whose England? Whose Brexit?», *Public Books*, 3 November 2019, <https://www.publicbooks.org/whose-england-whose-brexit/> (5 September 2019)

in a way you could report on? She remembered it but distantly. A lot had changed this year.⁵⁷⁹

Making sense of what is going on and distinguishing the truth from the lies among the more ‘misleading data’ is fundamental, given that one’s knowledge of the facts influences their attitudes towards the events in question. In relation to Brexit, the different attitudes at play, with some people supporting it, some opposing to it and others refusing to engage, are compared with the different reactions people had under the Nazi regime according to their level of understanding of the available facts. Even if Kathy does not know «what she would do if it came down to it», meaning if history repeats itself, the fact that she «sees two books out of the corner of her eye. *Mother Country* and *Cruel Optimism*»⁵⁸⁰ and thinks of reading them is a plea for the reader to get informed and to avoid being manipulated. Furthermore, Kathy’s choice of books is also quite telling. Both books are works of non-fiction about the British welfare system⁵⁸¹ and reflect Kathy’s own considerations about what has happened to England, now «unrecognizable, officially racist»⁵⁸². Thus, while reading the news that Jeremy Hunt is allegedly going to sell off the NHS to private corporations, Kathy realises that «the public silver» is all that is left of the country, meaning the schools, the parks, the railway tracks, the Royal Mail, the NHS, while «[t]he gold had [already] gone», which refers not to the country’s glory or the empire, but to «electric power and other utilities»⁵⁸³, to the idea of common wealth and of the state as a shelter. The image of the world that comes out from the novel is of a scary place where there is «nowhere to hide»⁵⁸⁴ and what prevails, more than anything, is a sense of general vulnerability.

In the same way as Laing’s *Crudo*, Ali Smith’s novels focus on Brexit from a global point of view and aim to depict contemporary reality in its very making. As Smith writes in *Autumn*, people reading her seasonal cycle find themselves faced with «an old story so new that it’s still in the middle of happening, writing itself right now with no knowledge of where or how it’ll end»⁵⁸⁵, a statement that refers also to the moment in time of which her novel is trying to make sense, which is new and simultaneously old as the past resurfacing and rebranded. For

⁵⁷⁹Laing, O., *Crudo*, London, Picador, 2018, pp.62-63

⁵⁸⁰Ivi, p.63

⁵⁸¹Considering the first title a reference to Marylinne Robinson’s *Mother Country* (1989) and the second one a reference to Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism*, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸²Laing, O., *Crudo cit.*, p.132

⁵⁸³Ivi, p.89

⁵⁸⁴Ivi, p.133

⁵⁸⁵Smith, A., *Autumn*, Hamish Hamilton, 2016, p.181

what concerns literary genres, the novels resist «any facile categorization»⁵⁸⁶, constantly experimenting with style and language. The seasonal cycle is also unique insofar as the publication of subsequent novels is giving Smith the chance to use different approaches to challenge Brexit, following both the political process and the response to it in their parallel development through time. It is indeed possible to acknowledge a sort of ‘crescendo’ of the Brexit theme, with *Summer*, the last novel of the seasonal quartet, probably going to reach the climax. Thus, while *Autumn* is a first response to the referendum, and one that focuses on the Remain point of view, *Winter* gives more space to the representation of the social divide, with two sisters personifying the Remain and Leave sides, whereas *Spring* even takes what could be defined a fully-fledged ‘dystopian turn’, depicting a post-Brexit reality of concentration camps. While it is true that the novels cannot be defined as straight sequels to one another, focusing on different characters and developing different plots, they do share themes and strategies, creating an extraordinary interplay of ideas and images. Thus, all three novels are deeply concerned, beyond the Brexit issue and the themes already mentioned above, with post-truth and political mendaciousness, displacement and alienation, the concept of community over individualism, and the need to see what unites more than what divides us. Each of them also has what Garner defines as an «elastic structure» and, especially, a «combination of dreaminess and acuity»⁵⁸⁷, which is functional to the smooth passage from one theme to another and from present to past and *vice-versa*. Furthermore, it is also a way to stage the blur between reality and representation that characterises our hyper-technological age, causing a constant confusion between what is real and what is not, and a feeling of detachment that deeply influences how we experience, understand, and react to any kind of event. All Smith’s Brexit novels also refer, implicitly and explicitly, to previous literary works, from T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* (also written in a similar time of national turmoil), to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Shakespeare’s *Pericles*, *The Tempest* and *Cymbeline*, Dicken’s *A Tale of Two Cities* and *A Christmas Carol*, and Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. These references to other famous works of literature, more than an exercise in intertextuality, are a way to highlight, as Lyall acknowledges, major themes the cycle share with these particular works⁵⁸⁸, as well as to stress the idea of an unavoidable interconnection – among things, places and, most importantly, human beings. Moreover, each of the novels is

⁵⁸⁶Pittel, H., «Fiction in Dark Times: the Brexit Novel and Ali Smith», *Hard Times*, Vol 101, N.1, pp.58-67, 2018, p.61 (Harald Pittel’s quote actually refers specifically to *Autumn*, but I do believe his statement also applies to the other novels of the cycle).

⁵⁸⁷Garner, D., «Ali Smith’s Seasonal Cycle Turns to a Dreamy ‘Winter’», *The New York Times*, 8 January 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/08/books/review-winter-ali-smith.html> (5 September 2019)

⁵⁸⁸Cfr. Lyall, S., «From Ali Smith, It’s the First Great Brexit Novel», *The New York Times*, 17 February 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/17/books/review/autumn-ali-smith.html> (5 September 2019)

linked to a female artist: in the case of *Autumn*, the featured artist is Pauline Boty, the only female painter in the British Pop Art movement; in *Winter*'s case, it is the sculptress Barbara Hepworth; in *Spring*, the link is to the visual artist Tacita Dean. Lastly, the three novels published so far are all characterised by a profound engagement with the political context and are the very 'physical' manifestation of Smith's idea of art as an instrument, which not only depicts but also shapes reality through imagination. As Smith writes in *Autumn* referring to Pauline Boty's work,

art like this examines and makes possible a reassessment of the outer appearances of things by transforming them into something other than themselves. An image of an image means the image can be seen with new objectivity, with liberation from the original.⁵⁸⁹

Art is therefore represented as a way to better understand the *momentum*, stripping it of previous assessments and looking at it through different perspectives. In order to do this, the artist must develop a form of «narrative hospitality sensitive to the tensions of globalized life»⁵⁹⁰ in contrast with the hostility triggered by the revival of xenophobic nationalism. It is exactly to this idea of 'narrative hospitality' and of the role of art that Daniel Gluck, one of the main characters of *Autumn*, refers to, stating the need to «always try to welcome people into the home of your story» because «whoever makes up the story makes up the world»⁵⁹¹. The ability to imagine things other than the reality we are living in is, therefore, represented as the first step to believe in and create an alternative. In this way, Smith acknowledges the power literature (and art in general) has as counternarrative, as a sort of portal to alternative representations of reality and imagining of the future.

Counternarrative is an apt description for *Autumn* itself. Written during the Brexit debate and published soon after, the novel clearly sides with the Remain front, offering no Leave-perspective of the vote and showing «Smith's own festering authorial anger. at the political elite»⁵⁹². Defined by Preston as a «novel of ideas»⁵⁹³, *Autumn* begins with a misquote of Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*: «It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Again»⁵⁹⁴, which, according to Petra Rau, «suggests that this 'now', however strange it may feel to us,

⁵⁸⁹Smith, A., *Autumn cit.*, p.226

⁵⁹⁰Shaw, K., «Globalization», in O'Gorman, D., Eaglestone, R.(eds), *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction* (Routledge Literature Companions), Taylor and Francis, Kindle Edition, p.34

⁵⁹¹Smith, A., *Autumn cit.*, p.119

⁵⁹²Shaw, K., «Brexlit» *cit.*, p.21

⁵⁹³Preston, A., «Autumn by Ali Smith — 'the first serious Brexit novel'», *Financial Times*, 14 October 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/0e227666-8ef4-11e6-a72e-b428cb934b78> (5 September 2019)

⁵⁹⁴Smith, A., *Autumn cit.*, p.3

may only be yet another crisis in a long human history of conflicts and cataclysm [...]»⁵⁹⁵. A similar suggestion would come from the decision to bring together the Brexit campaign and the Profumo Affair of 1963. The focus on Pauline Boty's *Scandal '63* portraying Christine Keeler is indeed a way to talk about the «mass culture of lies»⁵⁹⁶ that is at the core of both events, as well as to place Brexit «within a wider historical panorama of UK governmental mendacity, making it clear that this should not be seen as exceptional in meaning or tenor»⁵⁹⁷.

Even if it may be just another passing crisis, the post-Brexit landscape the novel depicts is not meant to be a reassuring one: the vote has opened a deep divide («All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing»⁵⁹⁸); foreigners, even if only holidaymakers, are constantly harassed («This isn't Europe, they shouted at them. What they shouted was to go home»⁵⁹⁹); racist gangs hang around singing 'Rule Britannia' and threatening anyone they think to be 'different' («Britannia rules the waves. First we'll get the Poles. And then we'll get the Muslims. Then we'll get the gypsos, then the gays»⁶⁰⁰). The disruption the referendum has caused is «complemented by the collage-like, disjointed temporality of the narrative structure, with brief, fragmentary chapters shifting from Daniel's youth in 1930s Europe to Elisabeth's childhood in 1990s England»⁶⁰¹. The 32-year-old college lecturer Elisabeth and the 101-year-old Daniel are the main characters of the novel and their long-time friendship (Daniel being European) is clearly a direct response to the xenophobic Brexit narrative. Not by chance, Daniel is the only one to think that Elisabeth's surname «comes from the French words de and monde, put together, which means, when you translate it, of the world»⁶⁰², challenging British narrowmindedness (personified by the man behind the counter of the Post Office who jokes about her surname meaning she is a 'demanding' person) and positioning the novel itself against Theresa May's remark that «[i]f you believe to be a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere»⁶⁰³.

It follows that, while post-Brexit culture aims to narrow the community, fencing the nation off in a golden isolationism, Smith's narrative is about «history and being

⁵⁹⁵Rau, P., *op. cit.*, p.37

⁵⁹⁶Laing, O., «Interview. Ali Smith: 'It's a pivotal moment... a question of what happens culturally when something is built on a lie'», *The Guardian*, 16 October 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/16/ali-smith-autumn-interview-how-can-we-live-in-a-world-and-not-put-a-hand-across-a-divide-brexit-profu> (5 September 2019)

⁵⁹⁷Horton, E., «Hope», in O'Gorman, D., Eaglestone, R.(eds), *op. cit.*, p.327

⁵⁹⁸Smith, A., *Autumn cit.*, p.59

⁵⁹⁹*Ivi*, p.130

⁶⁰⁰*Ivi*, p.197

⁶⁰¹Shaw, K., «Brexlit» *cit.*, pp.21-22

⁶⁰²Smith, A., *Autumn cit.*, p.50

⁶⁰³May, T., *op. cit.*

neighbours»⁶⁰⁴; in which «common land» (the nation) being «by definition not private»⁶⁰⁵ is open to new arrivals and contaminations, and so should become home to a wider community. Thus, the love Elisabeth feels for her next-door neighbour and the tender care Daniel puts into their relationship, acting as both a father and a mentor to Elisabeth, introducing her into the world of art and teaching her how to think outside the box, are positioned against the «new kind of detachment»⁶⁰⁶ that characterises present-day Britain, the attitude towards isolation and the general indifference towards other people's lives and troubles. The culture of individualism is blamed for the current lack of empathy found in British society (in particular since «Thatcher taught us to be selfish and not just to think but to believe that there's no such thing as society»⁶⁰⁷). New technologies also account for a lack of engagement in society, with more people interacting impersonally through social media in the present. Mass media, also, is accused of making «things spectacular that aren't, and deal[ing] so simplistically with what's truly appalling»⁶⁰⁸. This last one is quite evident in relation to the Jo Cox's murder, which, as Elisabeth points out, is already «old news», whereas «[o]nce it would have been a year's worth»⁶⁰⁹.

Indifference and detachment are pointed at from the very beginning of the narrative, when Daniel, who is in a sort of comatose state in a care facility, dreams of waking up on a shore, a scene very similar to Ulysses meeting Nausicaa except that along the shore there are no beautiful women but dead bodies. Further up the beach, Daniel notes that there are also other people, «human, like the ones on the shore», but alive, who are «under parasols [...] holidaying up the shore from the dead»⁶¹⁰. The scene recalls, with the stress on the bodies of small children, the discovery of Alan Kurdi's body on a beach in Turkey, which made global headlines in 2015, while the image of people 'holidaying up', careless of the dead bodies around them, could be a reference to David Cameron's speech from Vietnam about the migrants' attempt to get into the Eurotunnel, when the then prime minister reassuringly affirmed that «everything that can be done will be done to make sure our borders are secure and make sure that British holidaymakers are able to go on their holidays»⁶¹¹. The indifference the holidaymakers show for the dead bodies, going on with their holiday plans and insisting on watching their little screens, would then be a mirror of the way the political class itself deals with such issues, seeing the migrants

⁶⁰⁴Smith, A., *Autumn cit.*, p.45

⁶⁰⁵*Ivi*, p.140

⁶⁰⁶*Ivi*, p.54

⁶⁰⁷*Ivi*, pp.111-112

⁶⁰⁸*Ivi*, p.56

⁶⁰⁹*Ivi*, p.38

⁶¹⁰*Ivi*, p.12

⁶¹¹Cameron, D., cit. in Mukherjee, A., «Migrant Britain», in Eaglestone, R. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.74

and refugees more as ‘something to fix’ or as ‘soon-to-be-invaders’ (as in Farage’s ‘Breaking Point’ poster) than as human beings. However, as Emily Horton writes, the dream-like status of the scene leaves «the passage [...] open to multiple contextualizations»⁶¹², among which the possibility that the scene reproduces one of Daniel’s own memories of the Second World War and therefore is part of Smith’s strategy to counteract, as Petra Rau stresses, «the defiant ‘splendid isolation’ rhetoric of Farage and Johnson»⁶¹³ in the Brexit campaign. This strategy – which sees post-Brexit racism and bigotry constantly pinned against memories of WWII atrocities, from Hannah Gluck’s escape from the Nazi in Nice to Daniel’s family being interned in a concentration camp – is also allegorically represented in the novel, when Elisabeth’s mother decides to bombard an electrified fence «with people’s histories and with the artefacts of less cruel and more philanthropic times»⁶¹⁴. Referring to ‘more philanthropic times’ against contemporary attitude of exclusion and rejection is a strategy to remind readers that there was a time where the nation was ready to give help to people in need. A response to the news that children asking for asylum in Britain are going to be detained in the same facilities as adults, the scene of the ‘bombarded fence’ in *Autumn* is highly symbolic, considering the fenced landscape as the nation, the fence itself as the kind of xenophobic rhetoric surrounding Brexit and its proposed anti-immigration policies, and the objects thrown at the fence as memory itself, reminding us of the mistakes of the recent past and warning about the dangers inherent in the resurgence of nationalism.

The themes Smith reflects upon in *Autumn* are further developed in the novel she published a year later, *Winter*, where the author explicitly attacks the British political class for the way the Brexit outcome is being handled, letting a character say that «the government [...] is using people’s rage for its own political expediency»⁶¹⁵. Those in charge, not only in Britain but also in the rest of the world, are described as «self-servers, who’d no idea about and felt no responsibility towards history»⁶¹⁶ and are creating, by turning people against one another, damage that will last for generations. The state of Britain after the referendum is even implicitly compared to the «kingdom subsumed in chaos, lies, powermongering, division and a great deal of poisoning and self-poisoning»⁶¹⁷ in Shakespeare’s play *Cymbeline*. In a similar fashion to Shakespeare’s fictional kingdom, Britain would indeed be a place where people live separately, each person in his/her own bubble, apparently unable to «step out of themselves» and

⁶¹²Horton, E., *op. cit.*, p.329

⁶¹³Rau, P., *op. cit.*, p.39

⁶¹⁴Smith, A., *Autumn cit.*, p.255

⁶¹⁵Smith, A., *Winter*, Hamish Hamilton, 2017, p.56

⁶¹⁶*Ibidem*

⁶¹⁷Ivi, p.200

acknowledge, beyond the divisions, their inherent interconnectedness: that «it's the same play they're all in, the same world, that they're all part of the same story»⁶¹⁸. Unsurprisingly, the last sentence comes from the Croatian immigrant Lux, who, being a migrant character, is an outsider to the national narrative of isolationism. Not by chance, Lux also represents a classic trope of Smith's narrative: «the stranger who can reawaken characters' dormant imaginations and emotions»⁶¹⁹, in this case, those of the Cleve family. Thus, the novel focuses on a single family whose surname, as Pittel writes, immediately evokes the idea of «social cleavages against the deeper connections of kinship»⁶²⁰. The family in question stands for humanity itself, bound up together, despite everything, by the simple fact of all being humans. This idea of a global family, bound together by shared humanity, is exactly what the author pits against the idea of Brexit as «a vote to free our country from inheriting the troubles of other countries, as well as from having to have laws that weren't made here for people like us by people like us», challenging the very significance of the 'us vs them' dichotomy «[g]iven that DNA's let us know we're all pretty much family»⁶²¹.

The main characters of the novel are the two sisters Sophia and Iris, who find themselves on opposite sides (Sophia has voted for Leave, Iris for Remain) of Brexit, along with Sophia's son Arthur, who is paying Lux to pretend to be his girlfriend in order to avoid telling his mother about the end of his relationship. Interestingly, the reason why Arthur, nicknamed 'Art', has broken up with his real girlfriend Charlotte is none other than a fight about politics. While Charlotte is constantly «moaning about the state of the world»⁶²² and urging Arthur, a nature-blogger and a copyright infringement officer for the same society that patrolled the fence in *Autumn*, to acknowledge the state of the country, take responsibility and be politically proactive, Art thinks that there is nothing to be worried about. Not only do they have «good assured jobs»⁶²³, but he insists that they have no responsibility if people are drowning in the Mediterranean Sea or if EU citizens do not know what is going to happen to them after Brexit: «[t]hey chose to come and live here. They ran that risk»⁶²⁴ much like the 'drowning' migrants, who would have chosen to risk their lives crossing the sea.

Arthur's selfishness, as made explicit by Charlotte, parallels the selfishness of the political establishment (with Brexit depicted as its visible, final consequence) as well as his

⁶¹⁸Ivi, p.201

⁶¹⁹Jordan, J., «Spring by Ali Smith review – a beautiful piece of synchronicity», *The Guardian*, 30 March 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/mar/30/spring-by-ali-smith-review> (5 September 2019)

⁶²⁰Pittel, H., *op. cit.*, p.64

⁶²¹Smith, A., *Winter. cit.*, p.206

⁶²²Ivi, p.54

⁶²³Ivi, p.55

⁶²⁴*Ibidem*

mother's, Sophia, a now bankrupt former art student and entrepreneur. Sophia's own situation, marked by economic, physical and mental decline (her decision to self-isolate is symbolically driving her mad), clearly contributes towards making her bitter, angry and indifferent. Sophia herself stresses that she thinks to have lost the ability to 'feel', meaning to empathise with other people's troubles, be they «[r]efugees in the sea. Children in ambulances. [...] People beaten up and tortured in cells» or just «ordinary people [...] walking around in the streets of the country she'd grown up in, who looked ruined, Dickensian, like poverty ghosts from a hundred years ago»⁶²⁵. Not only is Sophia self-centred, but her attitude is typically one of exclusion. Not by chance, Sophia firmly believes that «there *is* no more room»⁶²⁶ in the country for economic migrants that only «want *our* lives»⁶²⁷, a narrative that Iris immediately associates to «[t]he ghost of old Enoch»⁶²⁸. Sophia also immediately recognises, and judges, Lux's different accent, an ability she has inherited from her father, a veteran of the Second World War who lived the rest of his life hating certain accents and languages implicated in the conflict. Unlike her sister, who had spent most of her life minding her own business, Iris has always been involved in politics and considers the 'health' of the planet, as well as the living conditions of other human beings, something to fight for. Iris feels an urge for global inclusiveness, so much so that she claims to be «a citizen of the world who's been working with all the other citizens of the world» and is enraged at being told to be «a citizen of nowhere, to hear that the world's been equated with nowhere by a Prime Minister»⁶²⁹.

Ultimately, despite their differences, the two sisters come to reconcile when they both agree on the fact that, differently from the new generations, they «knew not to want a world with war in it», which is, clearly, what the country seem to be heading towards. The scene of reconciliation is also highly symbolical, since «[t]hey fall together naturally into a song in another language» which happens to be German, the language their father hated most because of WWII. Furthermore, they do not only sing in German, but rather «swing in and out from»⁶³⁰ it into English and *vice-versa*, creating a perfect vision of harmony between both themselves and, symbolically, England and Europe. The idea of creating harmony out of difference and working together is also stressed by the transformation of Art's 'unpolitical' blog about nature into a politically engaged resource, which covers a variety of themes and features the voices of many disparate writers – including both Art himself and his ex-girlfriend, Charlotte.

⁶²⁵*Ivi*, pp.29-30

⁶²⁶*Ivi*, p.205

⁶²⁷*Ivi*, p.206

⁶²⁸*Ivi*, p.205

⁶²⁹*Ivi*, p.233

⁶³⁰*Ivi*, p.301

Despite the conciliatory and hopeful tone of *Winter*'s conclusion, with the Cleves coming back to be a real family, in the last published instalment of the cycle, *Spring*, the future Smith imagines is, nonetheless, a bleak one. As Jordan notes, it is «more explicit, [...], more proselytising and polemical, than the playful, riddling Smith we're used to»⁶³¹, with sections that are disconnected from the main narrative and are meant to denounce contemporary dangerous tendencies. Some of these sections focus on populist discourse, denouncing the exploitation of patriotism («We need all that patriotic stuff. [...] a good old slogan Britain no England/America/Italy/France/Germany/Hungary/Poland/Brazil/ [insert name of country] First»⁶³²) and xenophobia (in the voice of a nameless refugee whose face is, tellingly «a breaking point»⁶³³). Others focus, instead, on more general themes, such as climate change, with a warning coming from the voice of the earth itself («Mess up with my climate, I'll fuck with your lives»⁶³⁴), verbal abuse online and the pervasiveness of social media and phone apps.

The open critique towards the state of the country, as well as of the world, is of course not limited to these sections, but features all throughout the novel, becoming at times more prominent than the story itself and transforming *Spring* into a fully-fledged political manifesto. This happens, for instance, when the film director Richard Lease, one of the main characters, remembers the last conversations he had with his friend, collaborator and onetime lover Paddy Heal (who has recently died from cancer), which appear to have been mostly about politics: namely, Donald Trump, climate change, the migrant crisis and, undoubtedly, Britain's own political situation. Thus, Paddy seems to have spent her last months enraged and upset about the British government «[m]essing with the ancient hatreds»⁶³⁵ in relation to Brexit and the Irish border; about the fire of the Grenfell Tower; about Windrush⁶³⁶ and about people not reacting to these scandals. When Paddy asks «[w]hat's happened to all the good people of this country?»⁶³⁷, Richard dutifully answers «[r]acism [...]. Legitimized. Legitimized division 24/7 on all the news and in all the papers, on so many screens, grace of the god of endless new

⁶³¹Jordan, J., *op. cit.*

⁶³²Smith, A., *Spring*, Hamish Hamilton, 2019, pp.4-5

⁶³³*Ivi*, p.126

⁶³⁴*Ivi*, p.8

⁶³⁵*Ivi*, p.66

⁶³⁶The reference is to the 2018 Windrush generation scandal, with many people arrived in the UK before 1973 wrongly detained, denied their legal rights, threatened to be deported and in some cases even really wrongly deported by the Home Office. For further information, see for instance «Windrush generation: Who are they and why are they facing problems?», *BBC News*, 18 April 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-43782241> (5 September 2019)

⁶³⁷Smith, A., *Spring cit.*, p.67

beginnings, the god we call the internet»⁶³⁸. Paddy, an Irish person living in the UK, and therefore someone familiar with racism, considers this to be too easy an answer.

The Windrush scandal is certainly a main source of inspiration for the novel, given that Smith has even inserted a brief story concerning a British citizen searched, arrested and deported to Ghana (a country he has actually never been to) simply because he stood «too close to a Porsche»⁶³⁹. The theme of detention in UK Immigration Removal Centres, which is not new to contemporary literature (it is a very prominent one, for instance, in Chris Cleave's *The Other Hand* and John Lanchester's *Capital*), is further developed through one of the main characters of the novel, Brittany 'Brit' Hall, who is a security guard for an IRC run by the SA4A (the same security firm we find in *Autumn* and *Winter*). In the IRC Brit works in, the security guards call the detainees 'deets' as in the insect repellent. Calling the detainees 'deets' implies that the guards themselves are the insects (enacting a reversal in relation to the linguistic register the press usually applies to immigrants), and that «[e]verything about the job is repellent»⁶⁴⁰, poisoning the guards' own lives. The effect the job has on the guards («it's a neurotoxin, under your skin going right into you. Numbness, coma»⁶⁴¹) is underlined also by Brit's boyfriend Josh, whose recent interest in a history book related to Nazism is, again, a way to stress the important role history has in raising awareness and understanding present reality. According to Josh, Brit is becoming «unreasonable self-righteous» due to her job, which is transforming her life into «the epitome of excrement»⁶⁴², 'numbing' her ability to feel, think and empathise. When Brit replies that her job is just paying the bills and delivering security results, Josh stresses that what she calls 'security' is nothing else than «upholding the illusion» that «keeping people out is what it's all about»⁶⁴³, acknowledging that the narrative of identity and the diffuse sense of national victimhood the Brexit discourse has exploited is only an expedient to avoid dealing with the real national issues (increasing poverty, growing inequality, dismantlement of the welfare system).

Although Brit is outraged at Josh's comments and seems to be fully caught up into the system (for instance, she tells a detained Kurd that the IRC «is not a prison» but a «purpose-built Immigration Removal Centre with a prison design»⁶⁴⁴), she is too well aware of the deception and the role she is playing in it («does that makes me the machine?»⁶⁴⁵, she asks at

⁶³⁸*Ibidem*

⁶³⁹*Ivi*, p.152

⁶⁴⁰*Ivi*, p.134

⁶⁴¹*Ibidem*

⁶⁴²*Ivi*, p.157

⁶⁴³*Ivi*, p.158

⁶⁴⁴*Ivi*, p.160

⁶⁴⁵*Ivi*, p.170

one point, hinting at her role as a cog or pawn in the system). Not by chance, she defines the IRC as «the place of the living dead»⁶⁴⁶, given that «[t]here were people [...] in a place designed when it was first built for 72-hour detention at the most, who'd been here for years, years and years»⁶⁴⁷. Her level of awareness is also shown by her answer to a BBC journalist about what she thinks of Brexit, when Brit undermines it stressing that «there's a world out there bigger than Brexit» and what should matter is that people – meaning people like her as well as people detained in IRCs – are actually becoming more and more «meaningless»⁶⁴⁸, both for the media and the world of politics.

Ultimately, the two stories that compose the main narrative, Richard's mourning for Paddy and Brittany's life as an IRC employee, end up smoothly intersecting, with the two characters meeting in Scotland where Richard, who has travelled up north out of impulse and grief, is attempting to commit suicide under a train. His plan is interrupted by Florence, a 12-year-old girl Brit met outside a train station and subsequently chose to travel with, suspecting her of playing a key role in many unbelievable stories she has heard. As both Jordan and Preston note, here the novel becomes «a refashioning of *Pericles*, Shakespeare's co-written play of migration and family separation, with Florence as a modern-day Marina»⁶⁴⁹ able to enter anywhere and persuade anyone to do anything, even to unlock a unit in the Wood (a detention centre known to be rough on women) and free some of the detainees there. Like Lux in *Winter*, the mixed-race Florence (probably inspired, considering her young age, by the activist Greta Thunberg) is a catalyst, forcing people to behave as they should and to question their preconceived ideas. A typical example of this occurs, for instance, in the conversation between Brit and Florence on the train while crossing the border between Scotland and England. While Brit underlines that Scotland and England are two different countries, Florence stresses that she could not see the border or any difference at all between the two, which makes her wonder what would happen if borders were a symbol of unity instead of divisions, «if we declared border crossings places where, listen, when you crossed them, you yourself became doubly possible»⁶⁵⁰. It is quite telling that Florence says this to Brittany, whose name implies that she is a personification of the country itself. This association puts Florence's consideration under a completely different light, stressing the necessity of re-thinking the way British politics depicts

⁶⁴⁶*Ivi*, p.132

⁶⁴⁷*Ivi*, p.135

⁶⁴⁸*Ivi*, p.163

⁶⁴⁹Jordan, J., *op cit.*

⁶⁵⁰Smith, A., *Spring cit.*, p.196

the country, undermining the elements that unite the nations while exacerbating the existent elements of division.

Florence acts as a catalyst also in the way she leads to the encounter between Richard and Alda, one of the volunteers creating a countrywide network to help people in need (illegal immigrants and escaped detainees) on which Richard will focus his new project, *A Thousand Thousand People*, to raise awareness on the living conditions of migrants and refugees in the country. Unfortunately, this is the only good thing that comes from the encounter. Thus, when Alda and Florence disappear to reach a secure area where escaped detainees are hiding from the authorities, Brit's sense of betrayal at being left behind («it was never about her. [...] She was the hired help»⁶⁵¹) leads her to betray them, telling SA4A (which ironically could be read as 'Safer') where she believes the two are heading to. After that, Brit goes on with her life, working for the same IRC as she had been at the beginning of her story and isolating herself even more, which is also a warning, turning back to the idea of an association between Brittany and Britain, of the future that awaits the country once it has isolated itself and expunged anyone and anything considered to be 'different'.

Even if Brit never admits to having voted for Brexit, her desire to distance herself from her Scottish colleague, her uneasiness listening languages other than English («[d]ifferent languages shouldn't be allowed in England»⁶⁵²), the impression she usually gets that people are making fun of her or thinking themselves to be cleverer than her, the job she does and the way she defends it would all seem to signal her sympathies for the Leave campaign. It follows that the characterisation of Leavers that comes out in Ali Smith's seasonal cycle (Sophia in *Winter* is getting mad, the gang singing 'Britannia Rule' in *Autumn* is clearly a racist group) is negative, as with the characters featured in Paraskos's and Board's novels. The characterisation of Leavers as «a bad lot»⁶⁵³ is also to be found in *Kudos* by Rachel Cusk, another autofiction – the last instalment of a trilogy also featuring *Outline* (2015) and *Transit* (2016) – whose main theme is none other than «the question of whether to leave or remain»⁶⁵⁴ both «in connection with families and marriages»⁶⁵⁵ and with Britain and Europe. Among the many people the main character, a writer named Faye, meets and talks to at a literary festival, there is a Welsh novelist who offers a description of the typical Brexit voter:

⁶⁵¹Ivi, p.317

⁶⁵²Ivi, p.327

⁶⁵³Freeman, L., *op. cit.*

⁶⁵⁴Cusk, R., *Kudos*, London, Faber & Faber Limited, 2018, p.12

⁶⁵⁵Clanchy, K., «Kudos by Rachel Cusk – a daringly truthful trilogy concludes», *The Guardian*, 4 May 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/may/04/kudos-rachel-cusk-review> (5 September 2019)

The day after the referendum, he said, he had been visiting his parents in Leicestershire and had stopped for petrol and a cup of coffee in a service station. It was a dismal place, and the man sitting next to him - a great pockmarked tattooed creature - was tucking into a huge plate of fried food and announcing to the whole room that at long last he could be an Englishman eating a full English breakfast in his own country.⁶⁵⁶

This description of Leavers as ‘creatures’ whose decision to vote for Brexit is something that «makes you think democracy wasn’t such a good idea after all»⁶⁵⁷ perfectly exemplifies, as we have seen, the attitude a significant part of the cultural elite has adopted towards the Brexit vote, considering it, as the Welsh novelist in *Kudos* states talking about the vote in Wales, «a bit of a case of turkeys voting for Christmas»⁶⁵⁸, meaning a vote driven by ignorance. Precisely as Cusk’s Welsh novelist, who does not analyse the vote seriously even though he knows that the percentage of Leavers has been higher in the poorest neighbourhoods, many members of the cultural elite have only focused on ridiculing and caricaturing Leave voters, showing no intention to engage more deeply with the socio-economic and cultural contexts – leaving aside prejudices and misconceptions – that may have made Brexit appealing to a portion of the country. This is the same attitude that we have found in many of the novels mentioned and briefly analysed so far, where Leavers are depicted as sinners, racists, ignorant people easily manipulated by politicians and mass media, and where the Leave vote is only something to oppose, challenge and reject.

Into a Leaver’s Mind: Brexit ‘Intimate’ Novels

Understanding both of the perspectives underpinning Brexit, which includes taking time to comprehend the Leavers’ mindset, is precisely the aim of the secondary of BrexLit novels, which look to tackle «radical inequalities of access and socioeconomic imbalance» and the «fears surrounding national identity and cultural change in post-Brexit Britain»⁶⁵⁹. Novels that have these characteristics include Anthony Cartwright’s *The Cut* (2016), Amanda Craig’s *The Lie of the Land* (2017) and Adam Thorpe’s *Missing Fay* (2017), three Brexit fictions that focus on everyday life in Britain, giving voice to the most vulnerable fringes of contemporary society. According to Day, these are «intimate novels that have retreated to the margins in order to explore the putative divide between metropolitan liberal elitism and economically deprived provincial despair»⁶⁶⁰, setting their narratives, as Jackson stresses, «in parts of Britain often

⁶⁵⁶Cusk, R., *op. cit.*, p.166

⁶⁵⁷*Ibidem*

⁶⁵⁸*Ivi*, p.150

⁶⁵⁹Shaw, K., «Brexlit» *cit.*, p.18

⁶⁶⁰Day, J., *op. cit.*

ignored in literature»⁶⁶¹ but deeply affected by de-industrialisation and unemployment. As Rachel Reeves writes, these are areas (the industrial towns, the coalfield and the rural districts) that have yet to recover from the economic crisis but that British politics seems to have forgotten, excluding them from policies that promotes economic growth and focusing, instead, on cities and regions (for instance, the South-East of England) that are already out of the Great Recession.⁶⁶² It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that these are also the regions of Britain where the majority of people have voted for Leave: for instance, the English and Welsh coalfield districts, where a majority of 62 per cent voted to Leave, or the rural district containing Grimsby, Cleethorpes and Immingham, whose inhabitants were 70 per cent in favour of leaving the EU.⁶⁶³

This is also the case of Dudley in Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut*, an area (the Black Country) that once was the industrial heart of England and is now «a site of multiple socio-economic deprivations», where the loss of industrial work has paved the way for low-paid, temporary jobs and precariousness and «the Leave vote was 67.6 per cent»⁶⁶⁴. Divided into chapters entitled 'Before' and 'After', with the referendum standing as a sort of 'temporal watershed' among the sections, *The Cut* is unique in the way it has been specifically commissioned by Meike Ziervogel of Peirene Press to understand «[w]hat fears - and what hopes - drove my fellow citizens to vote for Brexit»⁶⁶⁵. To obtain such a result, the novel focuses on the ill-fated romance between the young documentary maker Grace Trevithick and the labourer and ex-boxer Cairo Jukes, whose first encounter is, not by chance, linked to the vote. Thus, Grace is in Dudley in order to «get the voice of ordinary people»⁶⁶⁶ about Brexit, trying to lift the «kind of veil» she perceives between «these people»⁶⁶⁷ and the cultural elite she herself is a member of. Grace's attempt to depict the Leavers' perspective, opening a space for dialogue beyond her own stereotypes and expectations, mirrors Cartwright's attempt to mend the divide Brexit has uncovered ('the cut', as the title puts it), hoping his novel could serve as

a kind of antidote to the massive generalisations all sorts of people were making after the referendum, that we had seventeen and a half million racists on one side and

⁶⁶¹Jackson, J., *op. cit.*

⁶⁶²Cfr. Reeves, R., «For too long wealth and power has been concentrated in our cities», *New Statesman*, 20 March 2019, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/brexit/2019/03/too-long-wealth-and-power-has-been-concentrated-our-cities> (5 September 2019)

⁶⁶³Cfr. Meek, J., *op. cit.*

⁶⁶⁴Kelly, R. T., «Brexit in fact and fiction: a few first drafts of history», *Critical Quarterly*, Vol.60, N.2, pp.74-85, July 2018, p.79

⁶⁶⁵Ziervogel, M., introduction to Cartwright, A., *The Cut*, London, Peirene Press, 2017

⁶⁶⁶*Ivi*, p.22

⁶⁶⁷*Ivi*, p.19

sixteen million people who were happy with a kind of social apartheid based on class on the other.⁶⁶⁸

Thus, the first exchange and then the romance that develops between Grace and Cairo, the only person who agrees to talk to her about his voting intentions, not only symbolises the ‘awakening’ that the referendum has been in relation to the thoughts, the desires and the everyday reality of the «two distinct nations»⁶⁶⁹, but the characters also personify a willingness to go beyond the ‘easy’ generalisations Cartwright referenced. Grace, in particular, is constantly forced to re-negotiate her own preconceived ideas about Leavers, *in primis* the idea of them as ignorant people (her surprise for the way Cairo is able to articulate his thoughts hints at this) and the belief that the Leave vote is all «about immigration»⁶⁷⁰, racism and UKIP’s appealing storytelling. As Cairo states, the Leave vote actually has nothing to do with these issues, but rather is a reaction to years of economic decline and cultural isolation. According to Cairo, working class people voting for Leave are simply

[t]ired of change, tired of the world passing by, tired of other people getting things that you and people like you had made for them, tired of being told you were no good, tired of being told that what you believed to be true was wrong, tired of being told to stop complaining, tired of being told what to eat, what to throw away, what to do and what not to do, what was right and wrong when you were always in the wrong. Tired of supermarket jobs and warehouse jobs and jobs guarding shopping centres. Work had always worn people out, the heat of furnaces, the clang of iron, but this is tiredness of a different order, tiredness that a rest will not cure, like a plague, eating away at them all.⁶⁷¹

As Cartwright himself explains, the sense of tiredness that Cairo refers to in the story comes from the realisation that one is living «on what seems to be the wrong side of a historical divide»⁶⁷². Cairo views the working classes as having always been trapped producing the goods and materials that fuel the country, contributing to the wealth of the rich. They, however, never stand to experience this wealth themselves, remaining «neglected, forgotten»⁶⁷³ and now, in the present, experience the «actual loss» of «[j]obs, houses, security»⁶⁷⁴. The tiredness he speaks of, therefore, comes from the weight of centuries of being overlooked.

⁶⁶⁸«Interview with Anthony Cartwright», *The Worm Hole*, 28 June 2017, <http://wormhole.carnelianvalley.com/interview-with-anthony-cartwright-author-of-peirene-press-the-cut/> (5 September 2019)

⁶⁶⁹Cook, J., «The Cut by Anthony Cartwright review – the big divide in Brexit Britain», *The Guardian*, 23 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/23/the-cut-by-anthony-cartwright-review> (5 September 2019)

⁶⁷⁰Cartwright, A., *op. cit.*, p.24

⁶⁷¹*Ivi*, p.100-101

⁶⁷²«Interview with Anthony Cartwright», *op. cit.*

⁶⁷³Cartwright, A., *op. cit.*, p.41

⁶⁷⁴*Ivi*, p.40

It follows that for people like Cairo the vote represents a chance to make their «invisible, mute»⁶⁷⁵ world visible again, and their voices finally heard. Consequently, Cairo dismisses Grace's allusions to the influence of UKIP's narrative in his voting intentions, implying that he is not a pawn: he knows that, for most of the politicians and the newspapers advocating for Brexit, this is just «a funny game»⁶⁷⁶ to play from their fancy houses and lives, but his vote, as an act of protest against the system itself, has no part in it. Ultimately, the structural violence Cairo's community has been the victim of is exemplified by the way his interview is played on the news, with «subtitles under his words»⁶⁷⁷ as if he was not speaking English. Adding subtitles makes Cairo seem like a foreigner, someone that does not belong to the country or, to be more precise, someone that belongs to areas «[t]he rest of the country is ashamed of»⁶⁷⁸, while also making his opinion seem less valuable and more marginal. At the end of the novel, Cairo's sense of invisibility and lack of power over both politics and his personal life lead him to set fire to himself, a violent and brutal concluding scene that reproduces the beginning of the narrative (where a woman is on fire amid general indifference), giving to it a cyclical structure. Setting fire to his own body is clearly a way to make himself visible again and to symbolically 'regain' power in a world that makes people like him – with no skills or qualifications, and having been born in the wrong part of the country – think that they have no choice and no possibility of improvement.

Like Anthony Cartwright's novel, also Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* focuses on a part of Britain where the Leave vote has been higher than the national result – the rural areas of Devon – and aims to represent, as she explains, those «invisible people» (in this case, farmers) «too often forgotten or despised, especially by politicians»⁶⁷⁹. Defined by Angelini a «post-recession novel»⁶⁸⁰, *The Lie of the Land* is set after the economic crisis and before the referendum, depicting a country where «[b]anks have defaulted, businesses have gone bankrupt and millions have lost their belief in a better future» seeing «their income shrivel and their hopes fade»⁶⁸¹. This is happening both in London, where Lottie and Quentin, a married couple in crisis, are experiencing «the great unmentionable fear of middle-class life, that a person can

⁶⁷⁵*Ivi*, p.30

⁶⁷⁶*Ivi*, p.43

⁶⁷⁷*Ivi*, p.21

⁶⁷⁸*Ivi*, p.111

⁶⁷⁹McGlone, J., «Review: The Lie of the Land, by Amanda Craig», *The Herald*, 16 June 2017, https://www.heraldsotland.com/arts_ents/15351326.review-the-lie-of-the-land-by-amanda-craig/ (5 September 2019)

⁶⁸⁰Angelini, F., « Books: The Lie of the Land by Amanda Craig. A marriage and the nation fall apart in a novel that looks at life after Brexit», *The Times*, 11 June 2017, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/books-the-lie-of-the-land-by-amanda-craig-dblvbj0cf> (5 September 2019)

⁶⁸¹Craig, A., *The Lie of the Land*, Great Britain, Little Brown, 2017, p.2

be downwardly mobile, rather than upwardly»⁶⁸² so, as well as in Devon, where they move the family to avoid ending up broke. Thus, after the dairy and other shops have been forced to close, many of the Devonians are forced to ask for work in a food factory called Humbles, constantly competing with immigrants who, being «young and single»⁶⁸³ and staying only for a few months, are willing to accept low wages and degrading work conditions. In this way, the novel perfectly represents the difference Zadie Smith outlines between London and «[e]lsewhere in Britain», where

people really do live cheek-by-jowl with the recently migrated, and experience the undercutting of their wages by newcomers. They really do have to fight for resources under an austerity government that makes it all too easy to blame your unavailable hospital bed on the migrant family next door, or on an oblique bureaucracy across the Channel, which the nitwit demagogues on the TV keep telling you is the reason there's not enough money in the NHS.⁶⁸⁴

Moving the narrative from London to Devon, Craig has the chance not only to unveil the gulf that «lies between the urban and the rural»⁶⁸⁵ and the prejudices on both sides of the divide, but vitally to give voice to the rural perception of being a neglected community. Thus, although some of the locals show racist and prejudicial attitudes towards immigrants (one of the minor characters, Maddy, even warns Lottie's son Xan to «take care with those girls» from Poland, stating that all they want is «a little British baby [...] and benefits»⁶⁸⁶), their major problems are less related to migrants than to Britain's own policies, which fail to create wealth for society as a whole and to respond to the needs of common people. Thus, while the community's past was marked by a «cradle-to-grave socialism»⁶⁸⁷, now «[t]here's nowhere for mothers and babies to go, apart from the church, which is bloody freezing»⁶⁸⁸; there are endless waiting lists for school places and appointments with the doctor; the young who did not inherit a farm and have no skills or qualifications are not given a chance to be trained and employed; the farmers, dealing with «mountains of paperwork for the hated EU»⁶⁸⁹, are underfunded, exploited by or forced to compete with multinational corporations, and even growing weed to survive and Army veterans, even the disabled ones, are left without any allowances, their service to the country having been completely forgotten. If the countryside is, as the midwife

⁶⁸²*Ivi*, p.175

⁶⁸³*Ivi*, p.248

⁶⁸⁴Smith, Z., *op. cit.*

⁶⁸⁵ Shafak, E., «The UK is learning that like everything else in this life, democracies can die», *New Statesman*, 20 March 2019, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/brexit/2019/03/uk-learning-everything-else-life-democracies-can-die> (5 September 2019)

⁶⁸⁶Craig, A., *op. cit.*, p.70

⁶⁸⁷*Ivi*, p.44

⁶⁸⁸*Ivi*, p.202

⁶⁸⁹*Ivi*, p.89

Sally thinks, a place «where, if something goes wrong, [people] can be pushed out of sight, and out of mind»⁶⁹⁰ by the ruling class, it should not come as a surprise that, again as a vote of protest against mainstream parties, most of the Devonians are going to vote for UKIP and for leaving Europe.

Interestingly, Craig's novel also gives space to the immigrant's perspective. While in *The Cut* the immigrants that work with Cairo (the Romanians and the Albanians that are actually, respectively, from Moldova and from Kosovo) are only a ghostly presence, men that «disappear with the mist»⁶⁹¹, in *The Lie of The Land* Polish, Lithuanian and Romanian workers are not only the source of local outbursts due to the competitive force they represent, but characters who express their point of view and defend themselves against the locals' stereotyping. In the course of the narrative, they describe what reality in Britain, working both in farms and in factories such as Humbles, really looks like for people like them: «cramped and shoddy homes»⁶⁹² or caravans to share with strangers; terrible work conditions; low wages and overt racism. Inserting the migrant perspective is clearly a way to challenge the Brexiteers' storytelling about incomers «tak[ing] jobs and homes from English peoples»⁶⁹³, as well as to give them the dignity they were deprived of in the Brexit campaign, where they were not fellow human beings but faceless enemies and 'swarms' of invaders to be stopped or expelled.

Similar strategies to challenge Brexit discourse and depict the multiple perspectives that were at play in the referendum are to be found in Adam Thorpe's *Missing Fay*, another choral state-of-the-nation novel set in a Brexit area, the county of Lincolnshire. As Shaw reports, the area of Lincolnshire witnessed «the highest percentage of Leave votes in the UK»⁶⁹⁴, to the extent that it has even been defined by Day as «the Ground Zero of Brexit»⁶⁹⁵. Even if written mostly before the vote, the novel is marked by the same sense of hopelessness, powerlessness and abandonment that characterised Cartwright's and Craig's novels, staging a Lincoln, the city where most of the events occur, that is suffering due to both the recession and austerity policies. Set between 2011 and 2012, the novel is centred on the disappearance of a 14-year-old girl, the 'Fay' the title refers to, who impacts in different ways the lives of the other six characters that are at the core of the narrative: the shop manager Sheena, who is also Fay's supervisor for her Year 10 work experience; the Kiwi eco campaigner David, who is on holiday with his family and constantly worries about the environment; the survivor of the Kindertransport Howard,

⁶⁹⁰Ivi., p.84

⁶⁹¹Cartwright, A., *op. cit.*, p.36

⁶⁹²Craig, A., *op. cit.*, p.197

⁶⁹³Ivi, p.198

⁶⁹⁴Shaw, K., «Brexlit» *cit.*, p.20

⁶⁹⁵Day, J., *op. cit.*

struggling with old age and his wife's mental illness and hospitalisation; the owner of a second-hand bookshop, Mike, who is nostalgic for the ways of the past; the TV producer Chris, who is trying to leave behind his previous life by becoming a Trappist monk; and the Romanian Cosmina, who is working as a nurse in the care facility where Howard's wife and Mike's mother are, waiting to earn enough money to go to begin a class in journalism. For most of them, the missing girl, usually an element of the crime genre, is only someone «half seen»⁶⁹⁶ – a brief encounter, a poster on the wall, a passer-by, a ghost from the past – whose fate, ultimately, remains unknown. While Fay's disappearance partly represents in the course of the narrative, as Day writes, «a void [...] about our prejudices and how we fail to communicate them to one another»⁶⁹⁷, her near invisibility and the little interest people and newspapers show for her case also symbolises the very invisibility of the lower strata of society. Thus, as Hurley stresses, the fact that Fay is on benefits, living in «the rougher half of the council estate»⁶⁹⁸ with her «damaged mother, the dodgy stepfather»⁶⁹⁹ and the son of the latter, her very living conditions, taking care of both herself and her mother despite her young age, makes her the perfect «symbol of the white working class overlooked by politicians for years»⁷⁰⁰ and also of those who have been crushed by the economic crisis and the austerity cuts that followed.

Unsurprisingly, class prejudice towards the most vulnerable part of the society is evident all throughout the novel, with impoverishment being called a «myth»⁷⁰¹ and people on benefits being referred to as «scroungers»⁷⁰². This also appears in the form of xenophobia, which is a clear response to the city «[b]urgeoning with foreigners»⁷⁰³. Thus, although one of the main characters, Mike, states that «[w]e're all as one in Europe: [...] in less than two years – Romanians won't even have to have a work permit. They'll be a proper part of the family»⁷⁰⁴, this is clearly not the opinion of the majority. On the contrary, the majority of the minor characters shows explicit racist views, refusing to be visited by non-white doctors, making foreigners the scapegoats of everything bad going on in Lincoln, accusing them of being light-fingered and, by virtue of being in England, of stealing «someone's job. [...] Someone

⁶⁹⁶Hurley, A. M., «Missing Fay by Adam Thorpe review – a timely study of a restless nation», *The Guardian*, 22 June 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/22/missing-fay-by-adam-thorpe-review> (5 September 2019)

⁶⁹⁷Day, J., *op. cit.*

⁶⁹⁸Thorpe, A., *Missing Fay*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2017, p.133

⁶⁹⁹*Ivi*, p.143

⁷⁰⁰Hurley, A. M., *op. cit.*

⁷⁰¹Thorpe, A., *op. cit.*, p.150

⁷⁰²*Ivi*, p.143

⁷⁰³*Ivi*, p.131

⁷⁰⁴*Ivi*, p.193

native»⁷⁰⁵. Even the teenager Fay, caught shoplifting by the security guard Piotr, immediately associates his name with someone of «Polack or Latvi» origin and thinks to herself the soon-to-be Brexit mantra «[g]o back home»⁷⁰⁶. In the end, it is telling that one of the few characters showing a non-xenophobic attitude is Howard, who, as a Jew escaped from Germany, knows well the dangers inherent in certain attitudes and narratives, reminding the reader, with his very presence, of a time where the nation was comparatively open to welcome refugees. This is a time Howard's friends have clearly forgotten, as demonstrated by the fact that they do not care about National Holocaust Memorial Day and are forgetful of Howard's own status as a survivor. Inserting a certain typology of characters (survivors of the Holocaust, refugees) to raise awareness, makes the reader empathise with their plight. Invoking welcoming image of the country is also a strategy that we have already found in Ali Smith's *Autumn*, through the character of Daniel, and that is also present in Paraskos' *Rabbitman*, where a minor character (tellingly named 'Winston' as Winston Churchill) confesses his family to be Huguenots, «[r]efugees from persecution who came to this country and found a home. They came a long time ago, of course, but they still came from somewhere else and asked for help, and they got help»⁷⁰⁷. As in Smith's and Thorpe's novels, the very reference to refugees that have 'mingled' and become British themselves is also a way to question the very idea of an indigenous core, implying instead that the actual British population is in fact the result of previous and on-going migrant flows. In *Missing Fay*, ultimately, the clash between the two attitudes (the 'welcoming' past and the 'unwelcoming' present) is highlighted by Howard's reluctance in openly opposing his friend's racist views («better to keep your head down»⁷⁰⁸). With the 'natives' under the spell of the Brexit narrative, Howard clearly fears standing out and being recognised as an outsider despite having spent his entire life in England, a fear that highlights the national attitude of exclusion and the rootedness of the narratives of identity that were exploited during the course of the Brexit campaign.

After this brief investigation into the two different 'paths' composing Brexit Literature, it is already possible, even if only three years have passed since the referendum, to detect some common strategies, themes and characteristics that define the subgenre and are shared by the majority of the novels, both the 'political' and the 'intimate' ones. As emerged from the analysis, in fact, all of the texts refer, implicitly or explicitly, to the Brexit campaign, utilising the themes that were at its very core and, in most cases, even directly inserting its most popular

⁷⁰⁵Ivi, p.58

⁷⁰⁶Ivi, p.243

⁷⁰⁷Paraskos, M., *op. cit.*, pp.155-156

⁷⁰⁸Thorpe, A., *op cit*, p.58

slogans and images into the narrative. In relation to this, many of works featured explicitly reference the Second World War, offering alternative narratives to the isolationist and xenophobic one exploited by Brexiteers, as well as to the ethnic and social cleavages at the core of Brexit discourse, summarised by the two dichotomies ‘native versus foreigner’ and ‘people versus the elite’. Focusing on the latter of the two, in particular, authors tend to give space to self-criticism, analysing the extent to which the liberal Left and the cultural elite have become ‘detached’ from the world of the ‘ordinary people’ and calling for a more active role of literature (and art in general) in social and political matters. Furthermore, as both Shaw and Pittel have underlined, all the Brexit fictions published so far share a similar approach in relation to the European Union, which is rarely a topic of conversation – there are just a few passing references to it, normally relating to EU regulation or EU-funded things – and the narratives almost never take place within Europe itself (an exception is to be found, as we will soon see, in Jonathan Coe’s *Middle England*). Moreover, the novels in question are set specifically in England, mostly ignoring Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The choice of an English setting and, consequently, of an English perspective is in line with the major role England has played in the Brexit outcome, as well as being the most direct way to tackle one major factor that influenced the English vote: the question of English identity.

It is indeed not by chance that in front of Howard’s xenophobic friend’s house in *Missing Fay* there is a St George’s flag, or that Brit in Ali Smith’s *Spring* has to remind herself that she should say Britain instead of England, in a similar fashion to the way the politicians in Hawes’ *Speak for England* make British their buzzword and try to avoid directly referencing England. Thus, leaving aside more general references to the question of identity and its constructedness – examples are Lanchester’s approach in *The Wall*, when the main character Kavanagh, after being expelled from his country, wonders about the possibility of being part of a new kind of ‘us’ and finds it confusing, or Smith’s one in *Autumn*, when the main character Elisabeth, talking about Daniel to her mother, stresses that «[h]e’s not *just* one thing or another. Nobody is. Not even you»⁷⁰⁹ – many Brexit fictions tend to focus directly on Englishness, especially on English feelings of victimhood and superiority and on traditional and progressive visions of the country and its people. In *The Lie of the Land*, for instance, the locals feel themselves to be forgotten and unfairly disadvantaged compared to the foreigners. Furthermore, Lottie and Quentin are embarrassed at having a housecleaner who is «English like them, rather than foreign»⁷¹⁰ and are in shock when she is discovered to be a murderer, given that anyone

⁷⁰⁹Smith, A., *Autumn cit.*, p.77

⁷¹⁰Craig, A., *op. cit.*, p.375

evil, like the anonymous torturer of pets in *Missing Fay*, is immediately labelled as someone «not from round here»⁷¹¹, meaning definitely not English. Ultimately, Englishness is also a synonym of whiteness for the locals, with Lottie's son Xan, conceived after a brief fling with a black man, being requested to show his ID in order to prove he is English and being constantly reminded of his blackness as a characteristic that, in a «Devon [...] full of *white people*»⁷¹², makes him forever an outsider. In this way, the novel highlights the link between the exclusive character of English national identity and the 'native versus foreigner' divide at the core of the Brexit campaign, showing it to be a dichotomy that actually pins the English Anglo-Saxon ideal against anybody that does not fit in it.

Two novels that are particularly concerned with the notion of English identity and its relation to the Brexit narrative, and therefore require a more in-depth analysis, are Sam Byers' hi-tech dystopia *Perfidious Albion* (2018) and Jonathan Coe's Condition-of-England novel *Middle England* (2018). The focus on England and Englishness in both novels is already implied by their titles, given that 'perfidious Albion' is a traditional expression in relation to England, defining the nation as a treacherous and untrustworthy political and economic partner⁷¹³, and 'Middle England' is a common socio-political term referring to middle-class and working-class people in England who traditionally hold conservative, right-wing opinions.⁷¹⁴ Both published in 2018, the novels reflect upon the way nostalgic images of the country have been deliberately contrasted with present-day England, unveiling the exploitation of England's sense of victimhood, its feeling of loss and the persistence of a white Anglo-Saxon ideal in the traditional imagining of the community. Although at first glance good representatives of the two trends that characterise Brexit Literature (the political and the intimate one), the two fictions are actually quite hybrid, blending analyses and critiques of the most political aspects related to Brexit with the attempt to faithfully represent the different souls that compose the nation. Interestingly, both novels engage with the structures of feeling regarding nostalgia, class and racial hierarchies at the core of the Brexit vote in a very similar way to the two pre-Brexit fictions analysed in the previous chapter.

⁷¹¹*Ivi*, p.190

⁷¹²*Ivi*, p.26

⁷¹³Interestingly, the expression has been used in post-Brexit talks by the political scientist Brendan o'Leary, as reported by Staunton, D., «Perfidious Albion: an insult or an apt description of Brexit Britain?», *The Irish Times*, 25 May 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/uk/perfidious-albion-an-insult-or-an-apt-description-of-brexit-britain-1.3507489> (5 September 2019)

⁷¹⁴Such a definition of 'Middle England' is to be found, for instance, in Cole, P., «While middle England gets the Mail», *The Guardian*, 20 August 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2007/aug/20/mondaymediasection.pressandpublishing> (5 September 2019)

Darkin Versus Trina: The Two Englands of *Perfidious Albion*

Second novel by British author Sam Byers, *Perfidious Albion* is a hi-tech dystopia defined by Freeman as a «brilliant, twitchy satire on media manipulation, grievance oneupmanship and online echo chambers»⁷¹⁵. In a similar fashion to the other Brexit novels belonging to the first category of BrexLit, which are usually set in England at the time of the vote or soon after, the novel takes place in an English town called Edmundsbury (a name that evokes, even if no association is made explicit in the novel, the Suffolk borough of St Edmundsbury) in an unspecified time after Brexit, which is mentioned only once in the course of the narrative. Although the vote in itself seems to have a marginal role, the themes on which the narrative focuses – the way that the media and politicians manipulate people’s affective response to certain events, the open criticism towards the cultural elite, the «divides along genre, race and culture lines»⁷¹⁶ among the inhabitants, the contrasting visions of England it depicts – are certainly relevant to Brexit, leading to its identification as Brexit fiction.

Guiding the reader in a destabilising «world of quickfire information»⁷¹⁷, online harassment and ever-present, intruding social media similar to that depicted in Olivia Laing’s *Crudo* and Ali Smith’s seasonal cycle, the author portrays an England where «[t]he modern world can no longer be escaped»⁷¹⁸ even in small and remote towns like Edmundsbury, where the «culture of expenditure»⁷¹⁹ is reaching its peak, where there is no more sense of community, and where hyper-technological systems (such as those run by the local tech company Green) are flooding into every aspects of the town’s life to slowly remove the unproductiveness of choice and let ideas being generated only «by those whose position in the hierarchy allowed them to think»⁷²⁰. The future Byers depicts is indeed so bleak that a local company called Downton is planning to turn a council estate, the Larchwood, into a «grim social experiment»⁷²¹: a network with tenants logging in to offer their services to neighbours and accumulate ‘community points’ while using different entrances to the building according to income and property value. It appears quite obvious, considering the diverse character of the Larchwood, its status as a council estate and the idea of communal care behind its original conception, that the place, like the town itself, stands for England, and that the way it is going

⁷¹⁵Freeman, L., *op. cit.*

⁷¹⁶*Ibidem*

⁷¹⁷ Hewitt, S., « Perfidious Albion review: satire on post-Brexit Britain bristles with energy», *The Irish Times*, 4 August 2018, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/perfidious-albion-review-satire-on-post-brexit-britain-bristles-with-energy-1.3580977> (5 September 2019)

⁷¹⁸Byers, S., *Perfidious Albion*, London, Faber & Faber, 2018, p.164

⁷¹⁹*Ivi*, p.67

⁷²⁰*Ivi*, p.90

⁷²¹Hewitt, S., *op. cit.*

to be transformed. Vulnerable residents will be forcefully pushed out and gradually replaced with newer, richer prospects, gentrifying the area. The country, like the Larchwood, is moving away from the idea of the state as a shelter, designed to protect citizens, and moving towards a more corporate, individualistic, neoliberal future bent on making profits. Furthermore, the little interest that the ‘segregating’ project seems to arouse, with Downton’s plan being described by the director of the blog *The Command Line* Syllas as more «sad» than «evil»⁷²², clearly hints at the careless attitude of the cultural elite, exclusively concerned with how to increase its platform, and of the liberal Left, whose «shift towards a politics of identity»⁷²³ would have caused it to be forgetful of other central questions on which its policies were previously based, meaning class divisions and social mobility. The detachment from the reality of the common people and the bubble in which the cultural and liberal elites of the country are living are made evident in the novel when one of the members of the Rogue Statement, «an anonymous collective of theorist poseurs» trying to «decode the encoded fascism of everyday life», declares increasing street-violence as being less important to analyse than the intrinsic fascism of «iced buns» or «falafel wraps»⁷²⁴. The self-centredness of the cultural elite is also openly pointed out when Jess, one of the main characters of the novel, uses the avatar of Julia Benjamin to criticise *The Command Line* article her own boyfriend, Robert Townsend, has written about the Larchwood case, accusing him of caring only «about the extent to which he’s *seen* to care about the people of the Larchwood», so much that «his every self-congratulatory intervention reads less like the *cri de coeur* he so clearly wants it to be and more like the shameless exercise in self-promotion and personal glorification it really is»⁷²⁵. The lack of real empathy and the substantial indifference Jess detects and denounces as a defining character of Robert and others in the cultural elite is also exemplified in the course of the narrative by the way she is personally treated both as a victim of online harassment, with Robert initially downplaying it, and as a guest at the gatherings of Edmundsbury’s leading intellectuals, where she is described as being «screened-off»⁷²⁶, during all social interactions, which is to say that she is consistently being spoken about or spoken for, «but never quite»⁷²⁷ spoken to. While this represents the novel’s «takedown of masculinity in the 21st century»⁷²⁸, it also reflects the way in which the cultural elites view all those in the lower levels of society, whose members are never ‘someone’ to talk

⁷²²*Ivi*, p.22

⁷²³*Ivi*, p.278

⁷²⁴*Ivi*, p.6

⁷²⁵*Ivi*, p.20

⁷²⁶*Ivi*, p.3

⁷²⁷*Ivi*, p.8

⁷²⁸Hewitt, S., *op. cit.*

with but always ‘someone’ to talk for and whose opinions, as with those of Cairo’s in *The Cut*, are to be constantly undermined or demeaned.

Following this line of thought, the reader ends up finding it quite easy to understand why people, struggling to make ends meet and to feel at home in a constantly changing globalised world, would be attracted, as Syllas states, by «the new *punk*»⁷²⁹ movement that the populist right represents. Forgotten by the Left, ignored by the cultural elite, scared by «a future [...] rapid in its occurrence and uncertain in its shape», these people are represented as desperately clinging «to familiarity»⁷³⁰, embracing exactly the kind of nostalgia that is at the core of right-wing populism: a nostalgia «in which it was assumed that everything had been so much simpler before it all got so complicated»⁷³¹.

Looking for a politician who finally speaks to their views and beliefs – someone they view as being one of the ‘ordinary people’ rather than one of the «swindling careerists» inside of the «Westminster bubble»⁷³² – many inhabitants of Edmundsbury are turning to the right-wing columnist of *The Record* and «Farage-ish»⁷³³ politician Hugo Bennington. Defining himself as «a local lad, born and bred»⁷³⁴, Bennington has centred his rhetoric on plain «common sense»⁷³⁵, on «the idea that Britain was in a dreadful state», and on the cult of his own *persona*, projecting «an aura of invincibility»⁷³⁶ and simultaneously playing, as the Headmaster in *Speak for England* did, the role of «the man in the pub»⁷³⁷: someone ‘ordinary’ to trust and rely on. What the readers of *The Record*, represented in the novel by Bennington’s fan Alfred Darkin, find most appealing about him is his demonstration of those same qualities that have made populist politicians more appealing to certain kinds of voters in the present day: breaking and criticising the taboos of political correctness and doing it «in a language you didn’t need a master’s degree in bullshit to understand»⁷³⁸. Going against the taboos of political correctness means, for Hugo, openly saying things that «[p]eople [...] in the liberally biased media refuse to report as they actually are»⁷³⁹: for instance, the way in which massive immigration (since the Second World War) has been responsible for the current crisis

⁷²⁹Byers, S., *Perfidious Albion cit.*, p.144

⁷³⁰*Ivi*, p.8

⁷³¹*Ivi*, p.103

⁷³²*Ivi*, p.24

⁷³³Coe, J., «Jonathan Coe: can fiction make sense of the news?», *The Guardian*, 3 Novembre 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/03/read-all-about-it-can-fiction-make-sense-of-the-news> (5 September 2019)

⁷³⁴Byers, S., *Perfidious Albion. cit.*, p.25

⁷³⁵*Ivi*, p.254

⁷³⁶*Ivi*, p.76

⁷³⁷*Ivi*, pp.76-77

⁷³⁸*Ivi*, p.25

⁷³⁹*Ivi*, p.258

concerning social housing; and how «*equality run riot*»⁷⁴⁰ would be damaging to the future of white Englishmen, who would lose job opportunities because «*companies must have quotas to ensure that for every white Englishman they employ they must also hire three foreigners, two women, and at least one homosexual. Doesn't matter who's more qualified for the job*»⁷⁴¹. The idea of white English people as victims of immigration and of a 'distorted' concept of equality, as well as the demonization of the immigrants considered to be the main cause of the country's problems, clearly links Hugo's politics to Powellism and to Brexit discourse.

Eager to leave behind a legacy other than just a «handful of columns about waiting times in GP surgeries, the need for Muslims to conform to British values, the importance of wearing a poppy on Remembrance Day»⁷⁴², Hugo decides to go into politics, becoming a member of none other than the anti-European and rather xenophobic 'England Always' party. Described as «making a surprising noise in parts of the country, such as Edmundsbury, hitherto ignored by the self-serving shitshow of London-centric political wheeler-dealing»⁷⁴³, England Always is the obvious literary doppelganger of the United Kingdom Independence Party, forced, now that «Brexit was over», to shift from «redefining England's place in the world»⁷⁴⁴ to redefining England itself, redirecting people's fears and trying to meet, with the party's vision of the nation, their most inner fantasies.

The vision of England the party conjures up perfectly coincides with the imaginary nation Hugo has always referred to in his columns, the nation he nostalgically defines «the England of his childhood, of his frustrated and bitter dreams, an England in which he once again felt at home»⁷⁴⁵. This definition of the England Hugo dreams of, which perfectly matches Brian Marley's initial fantasy in *Speak for England*, directly evokes Svetlana Boym's reference to nostalgia as «a yearning for [...] the time of our childhood, [and]the slower rhythms of our dreams»⁷⁴⁶. In Hugo's case, the nostalgic longing for the «historical England» that «had once made him proud and secure» - clearly the version of the country depicted in the national narrative of past glory, built around references to the Empire and the Second World War – is both a yearning for «reassurance»⁷⁴⁷ and an act of rebellion against an unsettling reality: the present England he is forced to live in, which is a nation full of foreigners, «prancing, marrying

⁷⁴⁰*Ivi*, p.26

⁷⁴¹*Ivi*, p.25

⁷⁴²*Ivi*, p.118

⁷⁴³*Ivi*, pp.24-25

⁷⁴⁴*Ivi*, p.119

⁷⁴⁵*Ibidem*

⁷⁴⁶Boym, S., *op. cit.*, pp.xv-xvi

⁷⁴⁷Byers, S., *Perfidious Albion cit.*, p.103

queers» and «blaring, feral, feminist bitches»⁷⁴⁸ that «both disappointed and terrified»⁷⁴⁹ people like him, who have been ‘left behind’ economically, culturally or both. A vision that the author himself defines, in a sort of metafictional way, as being «near-dystopian». The present England that Bennington’s columns and speeches depict is indeed a nightmarish reality, a «country [...] overrun, under threat, increasingly incapable», with «[h]ordes of immigrants massed at its borders» and «basic morality [...] eroding at an alarming rate, worn down by tolerance, permissiveness, turpitude»⁷⁵⁰.

The elements that contribute to his vision of the country and are central to his politics – the fear of invasion in relation to the country’s borders, the image of a morally corrupted nation in decline, and the desire to return to the old values that once made the country great – are all, undoubtedly, derived from Brexit discourse. As a further proof, when asked by a journalist to list and explain the old values England should recover, Hugo even inserts among them some of the very milestones of the Brexit campaign, such as the idea that English people’s needs should come first, and the need to take back «[c]ontrol over our borders, our laws» and, ultimately, «our culture. We need to ensure we’re all, literally and hypothetically, speaking the same language»⁷⁵¹. The emphasis on immigration, in particular, on the need to ‘speak the same language’ and share the same ideals, together with the depiction of ‘hordes of immigrants’ trying to invade the country, immediately expose Hugo’s own xenophobia, which is at the very core of his rejection of English contemporary reality. Not by chance, after being forced to step back following a sex scandal and reflecting upon what he hates most about England, Hugo focuses again on «its hordes of immigrants» and adds another reference to foreigners, listing England’s «filthy street markets of foreign tat that babbled with every language except the one Hugo himself spoke»⁷⁵². It follows that, although Hugo distances himself from ideas of «segregation or ethnic cleansing or whatever it was»⁷⁵³ at the core of movements such as the «self-styled ‘militia’ [...] Brute Force»⁷⁵⁴ (a sort of fictional English Defence League Hugo secretly collaborates with), his harsh criticism of an England he ultimately defines as «[e]roded» and «[b]esmeared»⁷⁵⁵ is actually deeply rooted in the feelings of «fear and revulsion» that he experienced every time

⁷⁴⁸*Ivi*, p.316

⁷⁴⁹*Ivi*, p.103

⁷⁵⁰*Ivi*, p.24

⁷⁵¹*Ivi*, p.253

⁷⁵²*Ivi*, p.316

⁷⁵³*Ivi*, p.213

⁷⁵⁴*Ivi*, p.84

⁷⁵⁵*Ivi*, p.316

he stepped into a shop and was served by an inscrutable Indian, or listened to the babble of Middle Eastern and Middle European tongues as they clashed violently with the tribal boom-thud of rap from the open window of a passing car full of smug, grinning black men [...].⁷⁵⁶

The image of a country invaded, corrupted, and made unrecognisable by disgusting aliens exploiting its resources and profiting from its tolerance is also the one Bennington portrays in his stance against Downton's redeveloping for the Larchwood estate, a project he is secretly supporting while openly criticising it. According to Bennington, the project would indeed be the perfect example of the extent to which «the ordinary white, working class people of Edmundsbury had been forgotten, and what should have been rightfully theirs – jobs, housing, benefits, and the like – was now all going to immigrants and scroungers»⁷⁵⁷. The white English residents of the Larchwood are, in this narrative, people forgotten and abandoned by the state, forced to live in a dangerous environment and surrounded by neighbours ('immigrants and scroungers') that are the very personification of the England Bennington would like to erase.

Despite being a misrepresentation of the facts («Edmundsbury was home to fewer immigrants than anywhere else in the country»⁷⁵⁸), Hugo's narrative easily succeeds in increasing both anti-immigration sentiment and his own approval rating, so much so as to make his final decision to stand look more like a response to people's pleas than a planned political move. The power of Hugo's narrative is easily explainable as it leverages two equally deep-rooted feelings: fear concerning immigration and white English sense of victimhood, already exacerbated in the case of the Larchwood by Downton's aggressive attitude towards the residents refusing to sell their flats. Among these vulnerable residents whom Downton is trying to force out of the area by every means possible, going so far as to worsen conditions in their council flats, we find the already mentioned Bennington supporter Alfred Darkin, the man whose point of view is also at the core of Robert Townsend's article about the Larchwood situation.

Constantly threatened by Downton's man Jones, Darkin's everyday life is an unbearable «agony»⁷⁵⁹: his wife has been forcefully hospitalised and has recently died (the scene where he is handcuffed as watches her being taken away is another element that contributes to his representation as a victim); his flat is slowly deteriorating, succumbing to time and neglect; his

⁷⁵⁶*Ivi*, p.122

⁷⁵⁷*Ivi*, p.106

⁷⁵⁸*Ibidem*

⁷⁵⁹*Ivi*, p.23

aching and ageing body is continuously betraying him, making him lose control of his bodily functions while also confining him to his apartment. The death of his wife, the loneliness that characterises his life (the only person that comes to check on Alfred is the taxi driver Geoff, who used to drive him to visit his wife), the state of his apartment and the lack of control on his own body, all contribute to Alfred's sense of loss, which mirrors the national sense of loss in relation to the country's status in the world and the safety-nets both the community around the individual and the welfare system once represented. Moreover, the unfamiliarity Alfred feels towards his own aging body, whose unpredictable reactions both disgust and frighten him, parallels the same feeling of unfamiliarity he experiences every time he reads about present England in *The Record*. Thus, his mind is «full of worrisome scenarios» picked up from the newspaper in question, where «[h]e pictured himself opening the door [...] only for it to be forced back in his face, knocking him to the floor»⁷⁶⁰. Unsurprisingly, considering that the column written by the xenophobic Bennington is his favourite, the assailants he imagines knocking him down are «[m]en in balaclavas» whose «voices would be Polish or black»⁷⁶¹: foreigners, immigrants and even, simply, 'black' people, whose blackness, beyond nationality, is enough to define them as dangerous Others ready to attack him. These are, indeed, the very categories to which Bennington applies his «blame-mongering»⁷⁶², arguing that they are taking the houses, the jobs, the benefits and the protection that should be reserved for the 'white' English. Both the 'worrisome scenarios' which plague Alfred's imagination and the deeply ingrained idea that «[n]o one gives a shit about people like»⁷⁶³ him – arguably going so far as to discriminate against people because of their whiteness– can be traced back to *The Record*. As Alfred puts it: «you want to get something out of this country? Change your colour»⁷⁶⁴. In the same way that Dirk's hatred for the Other was intensified by the *Spearhead* newspaper in *The White Family*, *The Record* provides a similar narrative relating to alleged foreign invasion and the need for White English readers to reclaim their rights. The fact that Darkin never leaves his flat and that all his knowledge of England comes from the pages of *The Record* clearly deepens the influence the newspaper has on his perception of reality, which is made evident by Byers at the level of language with Darkin echoing, as Dirk in Gee's novel, the same phrases and headlines he reads in the paper. Thus, when Darkin talks about the Larchwood situation with Robert Townsend, the words he uses – for instance «[q]uotas»⁷⁶⁵ or the question he asks

⁷⁶⁰*Ivi*, p.36

⁷⁶¹*Ibidem*

⁷⁶²*Ivi*, p.103

⁷⁶³*Ivi*, p.51

⁷⁶⁴*Ibidem*

⁷⁶⁵*Ivi*, p.50

Robert about equality being a bad or good thing – come directly from a Bennington’s article, which Darkin believes to be more trustworthy (and this, again, invokes the Brexit campaign) than the «statistics» Robert tries to mention to disprove the idea that «[t]he cities are full»⁷⁶⁶ of foreigners.

With Darkin parroting Bennington, Byers introduces another of the novel’s main themes: specifically, the impact that the media and politicians may have on people’s responses to a given situation and their political views in general, as they both select which stories to tell and then report them with a particular political slant. The extent to which events can be effectively manipulated to obtain the desired reaction is highlighted in the course of the narrative when Bennington chooses to depict Darkin as the typical example of white English victimhood and the Larchwood as a failed, «*inclusive*» experiment symbolising the national failure of «the great politically correct, multicultural, multisexual, come-one-come-all melting pot of British culture we now find ourselves signed up to»⁷⁶⁷ – an embodiment of the England Bennington despises. To make both the narratives work, Bennington deploys what seems to be the main strategy of contemporary politics: «creating an ‘other’ that is one’s nadir and that is ‘wrong’»⁷⁶⁸. In the Larchwood case, this Other Bennington picks up to play Darkin’s ‘nadir’ is Trina, another resident of the council estate – a black woman – who has become quite popular on Twitter after mocking one of Bennington’s interviews. Although clearly ironic, the tweet in question – «#whitemalegenocide. Lol»⁷⁶⁹ – is purposefully misinterpreted by Bennington (and later by Townsend too) and transformed into a sort of national case, with Darkin described as «a vulnerable old man [...] stuck in his flat not knowing what’s happening, afraid to go out, afraid to speak his mind, afraid of his neighbours»⁷⁷⁰, and Trina depicted as a «dangerous extremist threatening the English way of life»⁷⁷¹ Darkin represents. Her life investigated, her work in the tech-company Green threatened, her flat surrounded by an enraged crowd, Trina realises that soon «[h]er own words, and by extension her identity, her name, her very existence, had been appropriated, twisted, refashioned and repurposed until all recognition or ability to identify had been denied her»⁷⁷². Thus, instead of being described as the loving partner, mother and hard worker she is, Trina has become a sort of terrorist, a radical person that, using Bennington’s own words, is «spewing hatred and violence»⁷⁷³ while «soaking up the benefits

⁷⁶⁶Ivi, p.51

⁷⁶⁷Ivi, p.257

⁷⁶⁸Murray, «The Psychopolitics of Brexit», in Eaglestone, R. (ed.), *op. cit.*, p.132

⁷⁶⁹Byers, S., *Perfidious Albion cit.*, p.137

⁷⁷⁰Ivi, p.257

⁷⁷¹Ivi, p.173

⁷⁷²Ivi. p.316

⁷⁷³Ivi, p.257

of the welfare state, able to live happily and freely in a tolerant society that turns a blind eye not only to her race but to her lifestyle choices, her beliefs»⁷⁷⁴. Bennington's last remarks refer to the fact that Trina lives with other two adults and a baby (an unconventional family the *Daily Report* website will go so far to describe, disparagingly, a «[t]hreesome») and that one of the other adults is on benefits (and therefore referred to as a «Benefits Scrounge»⁷⁷⁵). Furthermore, the fact that she is a black woman makes her the perfect personification of «the swelling, imagined mass of everyone who was not like him»⁷⁷⁶, meaning, *in primis*, anyone who is not white English and, consequently, is excluded from the England of Bennington's nostalgic fantasy. Thus, Hugo's England, like the Headmaster's in *Speak for England* or Alfred White's version in *The White Family*, is first and foremost a homogeneous vision of the nation based on a white Anglo-Saxon ideal, which inevitably leads to the rejection of anything that does not fit this image. Interestingly, this is again the same vision of the nation promoted in British television, for instance in those popular TV programmes broadcast by the BBC and ITV. This would include programmes such as *Downton Abbey* ('Downton', the name chosen by Byers, is unlikely to be a coincidence) or, going back in time, to programmes such as *Brideshead Revisited* (1981) and *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984) – both of which have been analysed by Stephen Haseler in *The English Tribe* (1996) due to the conservative and nostalgic version of Englishness they project. Founded on what Trina sees as «whitewashed nostalgia and chocolate-box history»⁷⁷⁷, these programmes – like the one she happens to watch «set in the last days of the Raj in which glowing young Caucasians lay about on lawns wearing a uniform of pristine whites, picking at sandwiches handed to them by turbaned extras»⁷⁷⁸ – show a homogeneous, white and male-dominant reality that has nothing to do with the England she inhabits. Being an outsider to this narrative and consequently impervious to its charms, Trina is aware that the English future the mainstream media and Bennington's rhetoric are trying to depict is, as she said talking about her new assignment at work, «nothing more than [the] past with a thin overlay»⁷⁷⁹.

The 'past' that for Trina would be a nightmarish reality - the base material for a vision of the nation she could never identify with - is exactly the reassuring fantasy that the «Darkins of the world»⁷⁸⁰, deluded and scared by the present-day England Trina embodies, are looking

⁷⁷⁴*Ivi*, p.222

⁷⁷⁵*Ivi*, p.202

⁷⁷⁶*Ibidem*

⁷⁷⁷*Ivi*, p.134

⁷⁷⁸*Ibidem*

⁷⁷⁹*Ivi*, p.376

⁷⁸⁰*Ivi*, p.170

for. Reading Bennington's article about himself and the possible 'threat' Trina represents, Darkin's first reaction is one of fear, coming from the sudden realisation that the England he has been reading of in *The Record* is not «out there, far away, encroaching but never quite arriving»⁷⁸¹; instead, it is only a few doors from him, «creeping in from every side and convening outside his door» in the shape of the «murderous black woman» that «was whipping up some kind of race war»⁷⁸². But his second reaction in realising that he is front-page news, that there is finally a politician who cares about him – offering both the «support» and the «attention» he was lacking for years and talking about retrieving an England he thought he could only dream of – is described as «the unexpected glow of a long-forgotten pride»⁷⁸³: the perception of being important, that his needs dreams are finally being taken into consideration. Darkin's feelings clearly mirrors the same feelings of pride and, especially, «hope»⁷⁸⁴ felt by the white working class itself, listening to politicians promising to protect the rights of the white Englishmen after years of policies promoting tolerance and multiculturalism at the expense of the idea of a 'white Anglo-Saxon privilege' inherited from the imperial racial hierarchy.

Ironically, Darkin could not be more mistaken about Bennington and the very dangers waiting outside his door. Thus, paradoxically, those that should have been his champions, the Brute Force men that start patrolling his flat to protect him and talk about cleaning the country up, are the only ones that seem to be a threat to his own safety (even attacking Darkin's only friend, Geoff), while Bennington, the voice of the people, ends up manipulating Darkin once more, making him believe that the possibility of him being attacked by Trina or one of her followers is real and persuading him to sell his flat to Downton.

Ultimately, although a dystopia, the novel ends on a sparkle of hope. Thus, while Darkin selling his flat to Downton is symbolic of his fully-fledged surrender to the political and financial elite, Trina, helped by Jess and another minor character named Deepa, manages to re-appropriate her own narrative, releasing the images that will cause Bennington's downfall and even obtaining a better job at Green, secretly preparing herself to leak information and fight back at a system that aims to manipulate the individual through the gathering and analysis of their digital data. Through Trina's act of rebellion, the author aims to remind the reader that «[n]othing had yet happened. Nothing was yet real. As long as it could only be imagined, it

⁷⁸¹*Ivi*, p.209

⁷⁸²*Ivi*, p.211

⁷⁸³*Ivi*, p.212

⁷⁸⁴*Ibidem*

could still conceivably be true»⁷⁸⁵. As long as we could imagine a way out, a different world, everything can be undone, everything can still happen.

The Heart of Brexit is in *Middle England*

Differently from *Perfidious Albion*, which is a dystopia set in post-Brexit Britain, Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* is a state-of-the-nation novel whose main narrative starts before the referendum, covering a time frame that spans from 2010 to 2018, the year of its publication. Divided in three sections, 'Merrie England', 'Deep England' and 'Old England'⁷⁸⁶, the novel can be regarded as the last chapter of a trilogy including two of Coe's previous fictions: *The Rotters' Club* (2001), a coming-of age novel set in Birmingham in the 70s and focusing on the political and economic turmoil that led to Margaret Thatcher's election, and *The Closed Circle* (2004), which continues the story of the characters at the core of the previous novel, setting the narrative between Birmingham and London under Tony Blair's government. The decision to revive characters from former novels is not new to Coe – the already mentioned *Number 11* is an example of this 'strategy' as a 'slippery sequel' to *What a Carve Up!* – and could not be more convenient than in this case, considering the elements *Middle England* shares with the previous novels of the trilogy and the themes it focuses on. Thus, beyond having in common some of the main characters, caught in different moments of their lives, the three novels are all characterised by a perfect mixture between fictional elements, cultural references, and historical events to which the «fictional characters must respond»⁷⁸⁷. In *The Rotters' Club*, the personal stories of the characters are entangled with a background narrative of economic decline, trade union activism, elitism, growing racial tension and terrorism, with one of the characters, Lois Trotter, even losing her boyfriend in an IRA terrorist attack (the Birmingham pub bombings). In *The Closed Circle*, the backdrop is composed by the dismantlement of factories, the power of market forces and the rise of the far-right in the post-industrial north of England, together with the impact of the September 11 terrorist attacks in the USA, the war in Iraq and Afghanistan and the debate about British intervention. In *Middle England*, ultimately, the events that powerfully intrude into the characters' lives are multiple, as a number of the defining moments from the 2010s are included: to reference only the major ones, this includes the 2010 coalition government between Conservatives and LibDems, the riots in 2011, the London Olympics in 2012, the 2015 general elections, the rise of Jeremy Corbyn, the murder of Jo Cox

⁷⁸⁵Ivi, p.381

⁷⁸⁶This division clearly reminds Julian Barnes' novel *England, England* (1998), which is also divided into three parts: 'England', 'England, England', and 'Anglia'.

⁷⁸⁷Ayres, J., *op. cit.*

and the Brexit outcome. Rather than being a pointless display of superficial factual knowledge, it is evident that the events – even the ones that may appear, at first glance, irrelevant, such as the murder of Jo Yeates in Bristol in 2010 or Trenton Oldfield’s disruption of the 2012 Boat Race between Cambridge and Oxford – are «intended to create a solid scaffolding against which the wholly fictional narrative of the characters’ private lives can rest securely»⁷⁸⁸ and to provide a general insight into the emerging political situation that gradually led to the eventual Brexit vote. Similarly to the other two novels of the trilogy, *Middle England* is indeed deeply concerned with the state of the nation (in particular in relation to social issues such as class divisions, elitism and inequality), critical of politics and the way it can, as Lois Trotter states in the course of the narrative, «tear people apart»⁷⁸⁹ – and especially concerned with English nostalgia and question of identity. As Derbyshire writes, «[t]he idea that there is a distinctively English melancholy that is the flipside of native violence and anger is one that runs through all three novels in Coe’s sequence» and particularly in *Middle England*, which is «saturated in the fraught and sometimes frightening politics of Englishness»⁷⁹⁰ that has been at the core of the Brexit campaign, showing the extent to which the Brexit vote, both for Remain and for Leave, has been influenced by one’s imagining of the nation.

The novel’s concern with Englishness is made evident from the very beginning of ‘Merrie England’, which is introduced by a quotation from Ian Jack stating that

[i]n the century’s last decades, “British” as a self-description began to offer something else [...] it had room for newcomers from abroad and for people like me who found its capaciousness and slackness attractive. Here was a civic nationalism that meandered pleasantly like and old river, its dangerous force spent far upstream.⁷⁹¹

Coming from a *Guardian* article about English nationalism and the Brexit outcome, the quote in question hints at the difference between Britishness and Englishness, considering the former an inclusive collective identity able to convey a sense of belonging beyond the blood-and-soil mentality, and the latter an exclusive one whose ‘dangerous force’ – in the shape of growing English nationalism – would have finally found in the EU referendum its opportunity to emerge from Britishness – «a host body with a very large grub inside»⁷⁹² – and to have its

⁷⁸⁸Coe, J., «Jonathan Coe: can fiction make sense of the news?» *cit.*

⁷⁸⁹Coe, J., *Middle England*, Viking, 2018, p.300

⁷⁹⁰Derbyshire, J., «Has Jonathan Coe written the first great Brexit novel?», London, *Financial Times*, 2 November 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/559a9338-dcff-11e8-8f50-cbae5495d92b> (5 October 2019)

⁷⁹¹Jack, I., «English nationalism has shattered my sense of belonging in Britain», *The Guardian*, 22 October 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/22/english-nationalism-belonging-britain-scottish-independence> (5 October 2019)

⁷⁹²*Ibidem*

say about the way the country should be. This involves, predictably, a return to England's past glories as a leader of the world and the return of national pride. Not by chance, melancholy and nostalgia for a past considered to be better than the present and more reliable than the future, both on a personal and national level, grip many of the main characters of *Middle England*, so much so that Leith has described it as

an autumnal novel, and a sad one: poignant about the passing of time, the wishing for what has vanished, the decades lost to obscure hatreds, misplaced loves and unsatisfactory marriages – and about what, washing up on the brink of old age, we're left with and what we can or can't make of it.⁷⁹³

A character who perfectly encapsulates many of the traits defined by Leith is Benjamin Trotter – one of the main characters *Middle England* shares with the other two novels – as he is constantly 'wishing for what has vanished' and pondering what he has been left with and what to do with it. Thus, as we come to know from his friend, the left-wing political columnist Doug Alderton, «[m]elancholy [...] is very much Benjamin's thing. English melancholy in particular. With a side order of morbid nostalgia»⁷⁹⁴. An ex accountant who has done well in the property market, Benjamin is an aspiring novelist, working year after year on the same project: a novel entitled *Unrest*, which combines a musical soundtrack, events of his personal life and «a vast narrative of European history since Britain's accession to the Common Market in 1973»⁷⁹⁵. Benjamin's intention to mingle historical and personal events perfectly coincides with the narrative strategy Coe's novels use and the historical period they cover, making *Unrest* a metafictional element standing for the trilogy itself and also implicitly hinting, considering its focus on Britain and Europe and its title, at the Brexit character of *Middle England*, centred on the 'unrest' that has led to the Leave vote. Furthermore, the fact that the fictional novel's main core is constituted by Benjamin's own past and that it is an ongoing work-in-progress is proof of Benjamin's inability to move on from the past and his desire to revive in any way possible his most intense memories. Even his recent move into «a converted mill house on the banks of the River Severn» – an «absurdly remote and secluded spot»⁷⁹⁶ that also his father Colin, a man profoundly disgusted by England's recent metamorphosis, defines ironically the «[m]iddle of nowhere»⁷⁹⁷ – is an example of his obsession for the past. His decision to buy such a house is

⁷⁹³Leith, S., «Middle England by Jonathan Coe review – a bittersweet Brexit novel», London, *The Guardian*, 16 November 2018, p.24

⁷⁹⁴Coe, J., *Middle England cit.*, p.198

⁷⁹⁵Ivi, p.107

⁷⁹⁶Ivi, p.6

⁷⁹⁷Ivi, p.7

tokenistic of his «perverse effort to recapture the past»⁷⁹⁸, fulfilling a personal fantasy dating back to 1979. The fantasy in question portrays a future in which Benjamin is married to the woman he has always considered the love of his life (the Cicely Boyd he falls in love with in *The Rotters' Club*) and living with her happily ever after in a converted watermill in Shropshire. Benjamin's attempt to both 'recapture the past' and 'fulfil a fantasy' clearly hints at the Brexit campaign, considering Brexit itself an attempt to 'recapture the past' – reversing time and restoring the country the national narratives depict – and 'fulfil a fantasy' – the idea that the country could be again, outside the European Union, the super power it was before, and that its people could finally live that 'golden future' they have been promised after victory in the Second World War. The area Benjamin selects to realise his fantasy is also highly symbolic, considering that «[l]iminal Shropshire, wedged between the Black Country and the Welsh border»⁷⁹⁹, represents in all the three novels of the trilogy

a kind of portal to another England, standing for something ancient and elusive, a counterpart to suburban Birmingham in the 1970s or to the exurban Middle England of the early 21st century, with its retail parks, Amazon fulfilment centres and coffee shop chains.⁸⁰⁰

This 'ancient' and 'elusive' England, which appears to be, first and foremost, unspoilt by modern life and substantially monocultural, is based on a conservative vision of the country, as underlined in *Middle England* by the references to Tolkien's literary works (Benjamin is even called «Bilbo»⁸⁰¹ by Doug). Thus, given that J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth was inspired by the author's own conservative imaginary of the nation, the references in question would implicitly associate Benjamin's nostalgic fantasy of isolation – and the Brexit one it symbolises – to traditional ways of imagining England.

Benjamin's desire to isolate and lose himself in the past is triggered by both personal and national failure. Divorced, estranged from the daughter Cicely had and subsequently hid from him for many years, recently cheated on and left again by her, Benjamin is disappointed by the way his life has turned out as well as by what the nation has become, losing that sense of community that he felt in the 70s. Not by chance, Benjamin decides to buy his father a DVD of the 1977 *Morecambe & Wise Christmas Specials*, which reminds him of his family being all together and of the «incredible sense of oneness» he had experienced back then: «a sense that the entire nation was being briefly, fugitively drawn together in the divine act of laughter»⁸⁰².

⁷⁹⁸Ivi, p.10

⁷⁹⁹Derbyshire, J., *op. cit.*

⁸⁰⁰*Ibidem*

⁸⁰¹Coe, J. *Middle England cit.*, p.8

⁸⁰²Ivi, p.48

Consequently, his own affection for the 1977 *Christmas Specials* and his eagerness to play the DVD for his father is another rather desperate attempt to recapture the past, in this case to retrieve an idea of the country and the people rooted in his childhood. This is exactly the reason why his sister Lois' «sarcastic comment about the dearth of TV channels in the 1970s» annoys him: it undermines not so much «one of his most cherished early memories», but his very belief that «Britain had been a more cohesive, united, consensual place during his childhood (all that had started to unravel with the election result of 1979) [...]»⁸⁰³. It follows that the nostalgia Benjamin feels for that unique moment of his adolescence is a response to the changes that the nation has undergone, with the communitarian values at the basis of the formation of the welfare system slowly put aside and the simultaneous spread, especially from Thatcherism onwards, of policies based, instead, on individualism and competitiveness. It is indeed not a coincidence that Benjamin's fantasy of a different future with Cicely is dated back to 1979, the year of Margaret Thatcher's election to prime minister and the moment he believes Britain started to fall apart.

This line of thought is reaffirmed later on in the novel by another character, Charlie, who is a childhood friend Benjamin has recently reunited with and a children entertainer deeply suffering from the economic crisis. Proof that the British school system is elitist and capable of dividing people and shaping their destiny – Benjamin and Charlie's friendship was interrupted by Benjamin attending a public school and their economic situations are now diametrically opposed – Charlie also writes and expresses his opinions beautifully, surprising Benjamin in the same way that Grace was surprised by Cairo's articulacy in *The Cut*. In this way, Coe is not only opposing those stereotypes that depict 'ordinary people' – of whom Charlie is representative – as ignorant, but through Benjamin's decision to help Charlie write his own novel he also «allegorizes the need to elevate and give space for lost, forgotten voices»⁸⁰⁴, something he also consciously attempts in his own novel making his «commentaries on Brexit Britain and the post-Brexit novel converge»⁸⁰⁵ precisely in Charlie's words. Thus, talking about the vote in 2018, two years after Brexit, Charlie reveals that he thought seriously about voting for Leave just to «give Cameron a kick in the nuts»⁸⁰⁶ for the austerity policies and the cuts to the welfare system his government delivered, before stressing, however, that «Cameron's only part of the story»:

⁸⁰³Ivi, p.49

⁸⁰⁴Ayres, J., *op. cit.*

⁸⁰⁵*Ibidem*

⁸⁰⁶Coe, J., *Middle England cit.*, p.415

[t]he way I see it, everything changed in Britain in May 1979. Forty years on, we're still dealing with that. You see – me and Benjamin, we're children of the seventies. We may have been only kids then, but that was the world we grew up in. Welfare state, NHS. Everything that was put in place after the war. Well, all that's been unravelling since '79. It's still being unravelled. That's the real story. I don't know if Brexit is a symptom of that, or just a distraction. But the process is pretty much complete now. It'll all be gone soon.⁸⁰⁷

The «erosion of the broadly felt communitarian values and sensibilities of the postwar welfare state»⁸⁰⁸, which Charlie is complaining about, was, as we have seen, a major theme in Gee's novel *The White Family*, where Alfred White's personal mourning for the wartime was clearly linked to the same elements that are at the core of Benjamin and Charlie's longing for the past of their childhood: the vanished sense of community, the slow dismantlement of the welfare system, the constant impoverishment of the lower strata of society. The themes in question have always been very prominent in Coe's *oeuvre*, and especially in the *Rotters' Club* and *The Closed Circle* that are, as Thomas-Corr writes, «abound in rose-tinted liberal hankering for a golden age of social democracy that perhaps never existed»⁸⁰⁹. The idea that the 70s were «a time when the English were at ease with each other»⁸¹⁰ is however constantly challenged in *Middle England*, with characters ready to remind readers that the decade in question was actually characterised by «record inflation, economic instability, industrial unrest»⁸¹¹, by terrorism (Lois is still suffering from PTSD) and, ultimately, by racism (Aneeqa, a Muslim Black girl and a sort of surrogate daughter to Charlie, is quick to tell him that she would not want to go back to the 1970, which would have been, as Charlie himself acknowledges, «a shit decade for someone like»⁸¹² her).

Although critical of an excessive idealisation of the 70s, Coe clearly believes Brexit to be, as Charlie states, a 'symptom' or a 'distraction' connected to the fact that what was good about that decade – the sense of community and the shelter the state represented back then – seems to be all gone. That «[s]omething's been lost»⁸¹³, as Charlie affirms, is indeed also suggested by other characters, *in primis* by Doug, who takes his daughter Coriander to see the factory where her grandad used to work and finds out that «there isn't much of the old place left»⁸¹⁴, implying that the England his and his father's generation used to know is not there

⁸⁰⁷Ivi, p.416

⁸⁰⁸Ayres, J., *op. cit.*

⁸⁰⁹Thomas-Corr, J., «The English Disease», London, *New Statesman*, Vol. 147, Fasc. 5443, 2-8 November, p. 57.

⁸¹⁰Massie, A., «The Brexit chronicles: BOOKS Jonathan Coe's 'Condition of England' novel uses a story of friends and family to illustrate our angry, divided times Allan Massie@alainmas», Edinburgh, *The Scotsman*, 24 November 2018, p.20

⁸¹¹Coe, J., *Middle England cit.*, p.416

⁸¹²*Ibidem*

⁸¹³*Ibidem*

⁸¹⁴Ivi, p.15

anymore. The theme of national loss and decline Doug’s remark hints at is fully developed in the course of the narrative in parallel with «forms of personal loss»⁸¹⁵. Starting from the way in which Benjamin mourns the death of his mother, his personal loss is linked to the public’s national loss – in relation to economic stability, job opportunities, privilege and prestige – through the use of Shirley Collins’ 1974 folk song *Adieu to Old England*, «one of the most eerie and melancholy English folk tunes ever written»⁸¹⁶. The song in question, one of the many Benjamin selected for a playlist to listen to with his mother in her final days, is a prison ballad of the 19th century that gives voice to a prisoner facing transportation. The prisoner complains about his misfortunes in comparison to the past «[o]nce I could ride in my carriage» while «[n]ow I’m in prison»⁸¹⁷), about the future as a scary reality bringing nothing else than «sorrows», and about his sentence, forcing him to leave everything behind and say «Adieu to old England»⁸¹⁸. While the song could be easily interpreted as a representation of Benjamin’s mother’s condition, with her seen as a prisoner of her illness, stuck in her deathbed and preparing herself to say ‘adieu’ to her nearest and dearest (unable to speak, it is not a coincidence that, hearing Collins’ song, she nonetheless tries to sing it), there is no doubt that the change of fortune it describes, the regret for the world that has developed in a sorrowful reality and the farewell to ‘old’ England could be easily associated with the reality of present-day England and the feelings of those people that, disappointed and scared by the future, would desire to vote for Brexit to express their anger and asked for a change. This association is suggested by Benjamin himself. Thus, listening to the song again after his mother’s funeral in April 2010, Benjamin suddenly realises that the words refer to «a story of loss, of loss of privilege, that resonated across the century»⁸¹⁹ and perfectly matches the story of «resentment», «rage» and «simmering injustice»⁸²⁰ he has just heard from his friend Doug:

People see these guys in the City who practically crashed the economy two years ago and never felt any consequences – none of them went to jail, and now they’re taking their bonuses again while the rest of us are supposed to be tightening our belts. Wages are frozen. People have got no job security, no pension plans, they can’t afford to take a family holiday or do repairs to the car. A few years ago they felt wealthy. Now they feel poor.⁸²¹

⁸¹⁵Ayres, J., *op. cit.*

⁸¹⁶Coe, *Middle England cit.*, p.17

⁸¹⁷*Ivi*, p.20

⁸¹⁸*Ivi*, p.21

⁸¹⁹*Ivi*, p.20

⁸²⁰*Ivi*, p.19

⁸²¹*Ivi*, p.14

Despite being able to connect the themes of Shirley Collins' song to the contemporary situation, the fact that Benjamin associates the two only after his talk with Doug underlines, again, how «hopelessly remote»⁸²² he really is, and not only from a geographical point of view. Thus, Benjamin is both a man of culture with a stable economic situation and one completely absorbed by his own reflective nostalgia, so much so that he is always half-present in the company of others, lost in his own thoughts about the past and uninterested in the present.

This is quite evident when we look at Danny Boyle's opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics, a scene that represents «a sort of simulacrum of the televisual communion» Benjamin dearly remembers from the 70s, and «[o]ne of the pivotal moments»⁸²³ of the narrative in relation to Englishness, merging both traditional and progressive images of the country. Not by chance Sohan, a gay scholar whose family is originally from Sri-Lanka and a friend of Benjamin's niece Sophie, «becomes obsessed with representations of Englishness after he sees the ceremony»⁸²⁴, focusing his research on the concept of «Deep England»⁸²⁵, an expression that has become of common use both in newspapers and academic journals. The way Sohan is struck by the event also reproduces Coe's own reaction to the «resonant, complex vision» of the country the creators displayed, all «without resorting to cliché»⁸²⁶ and perfectly harmonising very different elements. Inserting this event in the narrative allows Coe to connect the characters and highlight the cultural divide between them. Thus, the characters that are in all respects members of the cultural elite (Sohan, Sophie, who is an art historian, Benjamin's friends Doug and Philip, an editor) spend the opening ceremony looking out for «intertextual references»⁸²⁷ and trying to guess even the smallest acts of tribute in it (the pink pig flying over Battersea Power Station referring to 1977 Pink Floyd's album *Animals* is an example). Instead, those who belong to the 'ordinary people' (Sophie's husband Ian, a driving instructor, his mother Helena and Sophie's grandfather Colin) show a completely uncritical approach: on the one hand, they are happy to see the more traditional images of Britishness (the «four different choirs, from all four countries in the United Kingdom, each one singing a different anthem»⁸²⁸, «the scenes of rural life», the Queen with Daniel Craig playing James Bond); on the other hand, they are depicted experiencing disappointment, anger or confusion when the ceremony refers

⁸²²Thomas-Corr, J., «The English Disease» *cit.*

⁸²³Derbyshire, J., *op. cit.*

⁸²⁴Williams, J., «'Middle England,' a Traditional Novel Set in Our Very Unconventional Times», *New York Times*, 21 August 2019 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/21/books/review-middle-england-jonathan-coe.html> (5 October 2019)

⁸²⁵Coe, J., *Middle England cit.*, p.202

⁸²⁶Coe, J., «How Brexit Broke Britain and Revealed a Country at War With Itself» *cit.*

⁸²⁷Coe, J., *Middle England cit.*, p.130

⁸²⁸*Ibidem*

to events they consider to be irrelevant (such as the arrival of the *Windrush*) or to works of culture that are unknown to the average public (like *Pandemonium*, an «obscure book»⁸²⁹ written by the documentary film-maker Humphrey Jennings).

Differently from the other characters, Benjamin is not even watching the ceremony, working instead on the new version of his novel (now entitled *A Rose Without a Thorn* and focusing on the love story between himself and Cicely), and when he does watch it, only switching on the TV after a call from his friend Philip, he constantly loses track of it, passing from one personal memory to another. Furthermore, the show leaves him with the impression of «a country at ease with itself» and the belief that «[a]ll was well»⁸³⁰, which ironically stresses once again, considering the contrasting reactions of the other characters and the clash between their vision of the country, the extent to which he is actually out of touch from reality. His detachment is also underlined by the fact that he does not understand that Charlie's economic situation is dire enough to have forced him to use a food bank- Similarly, he does not understand that the rage his father feels at the idea that «the world's laughing at us»⁸³¹ has a lot to do with the erosion of the same values he complains about. Thus, the idea Colin has that people have «gone soft» (the same adjective the Alfred uses in Gee's *The White Family*) and that country has turned into a «joke» – only a ghost of the superpower it used to be – is strictly linked to the passage he has experienced first-hand from the «spirit» of community felt during the war, with «hundreds of people working together [...] for the war effort», to the cult of «[e]veryman for himself, survival of the fittest, I'm all right Jack»⁸³² at the core of Thatcherism.

However, Benjamin is not the only one who could be described as 'out of touch', detached from the conditions of the lower strata of society. This is also the exact definition that Doug gives to himself, acknowledging that the fact that he lives «in a house in Chelsea worth millions» with a wife whose family owns «half of the Home Counties» makes him detached from «that resentment, that sense of hardship»⁸³³ he is trying to write about and that he detects as the main cause of the 2011 riots and the victory of the Leave vote in the Brexit referendum. Talking about the riots with Nigel Ives (a member of David Cameron's staff), Doug indeed underlines that «these weren't just people randomly and spontaneously running into shops and

⁸²⁹*Ivi*, p.131

⁸³⁰*Ivi*, p.139

⁸³¹*Ivi*, p.262

⁸³²*Ibidem*

⁸³³*Ivi*, p.15

stealing stuff»⁸³⁴ and that the protests, started by the police shooting of Mark Duggan⁸³⁵ and then degenerating in the riots, were, first and foremost, «about race, and about power relationship within the community. It was about people feeling victimized. Not listened to»⁸³⁶.

The fact that people are not listened to by the political establishment is constantly proved by the conversations Doug has with Nigel, who candidly confesses, for instance, that «Dave and the whole team» thought people were saying «Brixit»⁸³⁷ instead of Brexit, and who constantly answers Doug's «[e]xcellent points»⁸³⁸ about the state of the nation or the Brexit referendum with reiterated political slogans, symbolising the self-centredness of the political establishment. It follows that both the political and cultural elites are represented as living in a bubble, completely detached from the struggles, the feelings and the beliefs of a part of the society they substantially never meet with and often either idealise or ridicule. This is made evident, for instance, in the following examples: when Nigel describes to Doug the kind of conversation he believes the 'ordinary people' might have about Brexit and the pros and cons of staying in the European Union, going through details and considering angles only politicians could look at; Coe's reference to the moment that Gordon Brown was caught on microphone describing one of his potential supporters as «‘a sort of bigoted woman’»⁸³⁹ after she expressed concerns about immigration; or when the writer Lionel Hampshire defines the «multicultural experiment in Britain [...] by and large [...] successful» and «[e]xtremes of left and right»⁸⁴⁰ not appealing to the British people. As Sohan tells Sophie, referring specifically to intellectuals such as Hampshire, it is clear that «[t]hese people don't know what they're talking about»:

[t]his so-called “tolerance” ... Every day you come face to face with people who are not tolerant at all, whether it's someone serving you in a shop, or just someone you pass in the street. They may not say anything aggressive but you can see it in their eyes and their whole way of behaving towards you. And they *want* to say something. Oh yes, they want to use one of those forbidden words on you, or just tell you to fuck off back to your own country – wherever they think that is – but they know they can't. They know it's not allowed. So as well as hating you, they also hate them- whoever they are – these faceless people who are sitting in judgement over them somewhere, legislating on what they can and can't say out loud.⁸⁴¹

⁸³⁴*Ivi*, p.96

⁸³⁵For further information, see «Mark Duggan death: Timeline of events», *BBC News*, 27 October 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-london-14842416> (5 October 2019)

⁸³⁶Coe, J., *Middle England cit.*, p.96

⁸³⁷*Ivi*, p.265

⁸³⁸*Ivi*, p.96

⁸³⁹*Ivi*, p.5

⁸⁴⁰*Ivi*, p.30

⁸⁴¹*Ivi*, pp.30-31

In the novel, the characters that perfectly personify the attitude Sohan is describing, embodying people's anger, resentment and disillusionment towards the political and cultural establishment and constantly complaining about political correctness, are Colin and Helena. Interestingly, they are also elderly people and the very ones struggling the most to cope with the new, progressive values the mainstream parties and the cultural elite are promoting. Not by chance, Colin and Helena are disappointed by the 2012 Olympics opening ceremony due to its «left-wing bias»⁸⁴², even being enraged by the reference to Britain's first Jamaican immigrants and the several «Victorian industrialists [...] played by black actors»⁸⁴³. As Helena outlines, for people like them voting has become «a waste of time» since

all the politicians subscribe to the same fashionable opinions. Of course I voted for Mr Cameron, but not with any enthusiasm. His values are not our values. He actually knows as little of our way of life as his political opponents do. They're all on the same side, really – and it's not *our* side.⁸⁴⁴

Furthermore, both characters also live in areas that have been deeply affected, economically speaking, by the changes of the last decades. Colin is living in a Birmingham deeply marked by the dismantlement of the industrial sites, with the old factory buildings he and his mother used to work for now replaced by «housing, retail units and a new technical college»⁸⁴⁵, while Helena is living in Kernel Magna, a village where family businesses have all closed and the inhabitants, one by one, are moving out, looking for job opportunities and better living conditions in less remote, forgotten areas of England.

Tellingly, Colin is so upset by the transformation of the area that he keeps forgetting that the factory has been closed – he even asks Benjamin to take him there to see the buildings – only remembering vividly the years before his retirement in 1995. His 'selected' memory clearly is an act of denial, as confirmed by the fact that he cannot stop wondering how the country is going to survive now that it does not manufacture anything, and how everything could have been wiped out so easily, without taking into account that a factory is, first and foremost, about people, meaning that it creates jobs and ensures the wellbeing and continued existence of the community. The perception he has of a nation changed for the worse, the sense of loss he is experiencing for his world erased and the disillusionment he feels towards the ruling political class are, ultimately, the factors that lead him to vote «Leave, of course» against the opinion of Sophie who, as Benjamin stressed, is «the one who's going to be around the

⁸⁴²*Ivi*, p.138

⁸⁴³*Ivi*, p.130

⁸⁴⁴*Ivi*, p.213

⁸⁴⁵*Ivi*, p.257

longest»⁸⁴⁶, forced to live with the consequences of the referendum outcome. In Colin's case, the Leave vote is clearly an act of protest against what the country has become and an opportunity, as Cairo too implies in *The Cut*, to make his voice be heard and to feel relevant again. The connection between the dismantlement of factories, the impoverishment of the community depending on them and the Brexit vote is also highlighted in *Middle England* by the many references to Hartlepool, the town from which Sohan's new man Mike comes, a place deeply affected by deindustrialisation where «[s]eventy per cent» of the inhabitants «voted Leave»⁸⁴⁷. Moreover, the idea of the Leave vote as a vote of protest is also suggested by Helena after Cameron's victory in the 2015 general elections, when she remarks that «[t]he people of Middle England» (implying people like her, believing in a conservative image of the country) did not have any real alternative to vote for and prophetically states that «if the time ever comes when we are given the opportunity to let him know what we really think of him, then believe me – we will take it»⁸⁴⁸.

As anticipated, Helena too is struggling in dealing with the way the nation has changed, both economically and culturally speaking. Not only does Kernel Magna seem like a kind of ghost town – as Ian tells Sophie going to visit his mother for the first time, a few shops and abandoned buildings are «all that's left of the village, now»⁸⁴⁹ – but the very composition of its population has been altered. This is made evident by Helena's remark about the new shop, a place where «[y]ou never know what language they're going to be speaking»⁸⁵⁰, and by the discovery that she is now going to be sent a foreign cleaning woman (Grete). Helena's xenophobia, which is highlighted by the way she treats and distrusts Grete, is also hinted at when Sophie talks about her field of study. Thus, Sophie is an art historian specialised in contemporary portraits of Black European writers in the 19th century, a topic that makes Helena ask «[w]ho on earth could [Sophie] mean»⁸⁵¹, as if 'Black' and 'European' are two adjectives necessarily contradicting one another. Helena's rejection of the association between blackness and Europeaness clearly highlights her belief in white supremacy (a theme Coe also explicitly refers to inserting a minor character 'briefing' Benjamin and Philip on the 'Kalergi Plan'⁸⁵²)

⁸⁴⁶*Ivi*, p.307

⁸⁴⁷*Ivi*, p.363

⁸⁴⁸*Ivi*, p.214

⁸⁴⁹*Ivi*, p.71

⁸⁵⁰*Ivi*, p.73

⁸⁵¹*Ivi*, p.74

⁸⁵²As Coe reports in the novel, 'The Kalergi Plan' (whose name derives from the Australian aristocrat Richard von Coudenhove-Kalergi), refers to the project of a pan-European state and to the man of the future as an individual of mixed race. Interestingly, the reference to it allows Coe to refer to conspiracy theories about the EU in the Brexit campaign, since the character in question believes 'the Kalergi Plan' to be underway, with the European Union as

and, consequently, in white privilege. Not by chance, when her son fails to get a promotion, Helena is outraged and convinced that Ian's rival candidate (his Asian colleague Naheed) has got it only «because of her ethnic background and her skin colour»⁸⁵³, never contemplating that she could have simply been the superior candidate.

This is exactly what Sophie suggests, in opposition to this line of thought, discussing the matter with another character she and Ian have met on a cruise. The character in question, Mr Wilcox, is a middle-aged man making his living selling and hiring out forklift trucks and possessing the same set of values as Colin and Helena. Not by chance, all the three characters complain about the same things: firstly, about the BBC representing only the point of view of the liberal elites of the country; and secondly, about the detachment of politicians and intellectuals from the everyday life of the «ordinary people»⁸⁵⁴ like him who, in contrast to members of the cultural elite like Sophie, would live with the consequences of economic decline and, using Byers' expression in *Perfidious Albion*, of 'equality run riot'. Thus, according to Mr Wilcox, «[p]eople like Ian don't get a fair crack of the whip any more» because they do not belong to a minority group (meaning that they are not «Blacks, Asians, Muslims, gays»⁸⁵⁵), an idea that perfectly coincides with Alfred Darkin's statement that – to get something from the state – the white English should change the colour of their skin.. Later on, Mr Wilcox's ideological stance is reiterated by Ian, who tells Sophie that «respect for minorities basically means two fingers to the rest of us» and that people like him – «white, and male, and straight, and middle class» – have actually «become victims»⁸⁵⁶ in their own country. It is evident that what Helena, Wilcox and Ian are really complaining about is the loss of the privilege 'the Anglo-Saxon whiteness' once ensured in the light of the imperial racial hierarchy unofficially implemented in the division of labour. As Coe outlines quoting a tweet from İyad el-Baghdadi at the start of the 'Deep England' section, «[t]o the privileged, equality feels like a step down»⁸⁵⁷, fuelling a sense of victimhood exasperated by «the stress of precarity»⁸⁵⁸ and the perception of one's grievances being ignored by the establishment. Ultimately, the source of this kind of discourse, as Newington writes, «quickly becomes clear» when «the grim spectre

the pan-European state Kalergi thought of and doing nothing to stop the gradual genocide of the white races of Europe.

⁸⁵³Coe, J., *Middle England cit.*, p.213

⁸⁵⁴*Ivi*, p.154

⁸⁵⁵*Ivi*, p.166

⁸⁵⁶*Ivi*, p.283

⁸⁵⁷*Ivi*, p.141

⁸⁵⁸Ayres, J., *op. cit.*

of Enoch Powell is invoked»⁸⁵⁹, with Helena commenting, after Ian become involved and was then injured in the 2011 riots, that Powell «was quite right [...] “Rivers of blood”. He was the only one brave enough to say it»⁸⁶⁰.

The reference to Powellism (and especially to its *Rivers of Blood* speech) immediately evokes the image of a country always «in a state of undeclared war»⁸⁶¹, which is exactly the impression Coe wants the reader to get, stressing «that Sophie (and everyone like her) and Helena (and everyone like her) might be living cheek-by-jowl in the same country, but they also lived in different universes»⁸⁶², divided by the values they believe in and the vision of the country they crave. Not by chance, Sophie admits to feeling «wholly estranged»⁸⁶³ both from Hartlepool, where she happens to go for Sohan and Mike’s wedding, and from Kernel Magna, which she associates, with its Golf and Country Club and the natives’ conservative views, to the ‘Deep England’ Sohan is researching. Interestingly, she finds it much easier to feel at ease in a European city such as Marseille – where she happens to attend a conference – rather than «in the country she was obliged to call home»⁸⁶⁴. The only ‘England’ she is in love with is, unsurprisingly, the progressive version of it that London represents, which is, with its mixture of languages and cultures, the dream of all ‘citizens of the world’.

The deep divide between traditional and progressive visions of England exemplified by the cultural distance between Sophie and Helena is also represented by the personal differences between Ian and Sophie, whose «Leave-Remain» marriage ends up representing a «microcosm of Brexit»⁸⁶⁵. Their differences, for so long hidden under the carpet, are indeed only exacerbated by the Brexit outcome, so much so that they are forced to turn to marriage counselling. Here Coe is using a strategy similar to other Brexit novels – the use of a marital or relationship crisis to represent the national divide – and simultaneously referring to real events, given that the data shared by the marriage counselling charity *Relate*⁸⁶⁶ has shown Brexit to be one of the major

⁸⁵⁹Newington, G., «Rotters in Brexitland», *Dublin Reviews of Books*, 1 February 2019, <https://www.drb.ie/essays/rotters-in-brexitland> (5 October 2019)

⁸⁶⁰Coe, J., *Middle England cit.*, p.90

⁸⁶¹*Ivi*, p.385

⁸⁶²*Ibidem*

⁸⁶³*Ivi*, p.369

⁸⁶⁴*Ivi*, p.122

⁸⁶⁵Turner, J., «'We've got to talk in a way that is not endlessly violent and confrontational': The author Jonathan Coe tackles Brexit in his latest novel — the country is still completely split, he tells Janice Turner», London, *The Times*, 3 Nov 2018, p.4.

⁸⁶⁶For further information on the matter, see Worley, W., «Brexit arguments causing rifts between couples, counsellors say», *The Independent*, 29 December 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/brexit-anxieties-issue-troubled-couples-relationship-counsellors-experts-a7500876.html>; Wooding, D., «NOT EU, IT'S ME. Brexit is leading to family break-ups as couples have furious rows over their vote», *The Sun*, 28 April 2019, <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/brexit/8955572/brexit-causing-family-break-ups/> (5 October 2019)

issues named by the couples seeking counselling, «a tipping point»⁸⁶⁷ unveiling the different values they believe in, the different ideas of the country they envision and their different imagining of the future. This is also the case for Ian and Sophie, as confirmed by the fact that the answers they give to the therapist to explain their anger for each other's vote do not relate to politics, but to their own personal identities. While Sophie accuses Ian of being less open than she thought, clearly implying, using Turner's words, that he is «parochial» and «mildly bigoted»⁸⁶⁸, Ian believes that his wife lives «in a bubble», unable to see that «people around her might have a different opinion to hers»⁸⁶⁹ and feeling morally superior (a typical criticism addressed to members of the cultural elite, and one that the reader can fairly recognise as true in relation to Sophie's attitude towards Ian). Their answers, as Leith stresses, highlight the extent to which «the Brexit vote was experienced and has continued to be experienced as a matter of personal identity»⁸⁷⁰. As Sophie herself acknowledges, the Brexit result has indeed meant to her «that a small but important part of her own identity – her modern, layered, multiple identity – had been taken away from her»⁸⁷¹, clearly meaning her cosmopolitan, European identity, which finds no room to exist in the Brexit narrative of isolationism, antagonism and fear of the Other.

In the end, Coe focuses precisely on the dangers that are inherent in this narrative, already hinted at in the course of the novel by the reference to Jo Cox murder, which shakes Lois so deeply that it makes her realise that it is time to move on with her life. Taking inspiration from the many similar outbursts of bigotry that followed the Brexit vote, Coe depicts Helena's ex cleaning woman Grete as a victim of verbal and physical abuse, attacked by a man that heard her speaking her native language and immediately associated her, following Brexit narrative, with the 'invaders' damaging the country and stealing jobs and benefits from natives like him. Even if the consequence of the assault is, luckily, only a broken phone, what happened is enough to persuade Grete and her husband that «there are other countries now where life might be easier for us»⁸⁷² and to move to France to work for Benjamin and Lois, who are also trying to move forward by opening a sort of B&B and organising creative-writing courses. The event leads also to a sort of revelation. Thus, when Helena, who has incidentally witnessed the assault, refuses to come forward and confirm Grete's version to the police, her son Ian suddenly realises that embracing a vision of the world based on the dichotomy of 'us versus them' as his mother

⁸⁶⁷Coe, J., *Middle England cit.*, p.326

⁸⁶⁸Turner, J., *op. cit.*

⁸⁶⁹Coe, J., *Middle England cit.*, p.327

⁸⁷⁰Leith, S., *op. cit.*

⁸⁷¹Coe, J., *Middle England cit.*, p.326

⁸⁷²Ivi, p.385

does mean, at the end of the day, losing one's humanity. This is the same revelation Benjamin has while looking at UKIP's 'Breaking Point' poster, whose open xenophobia finally drives him to engage politically, siding openly with the Remain front.

Ultimately, the following reconciliation between Ian and Sophie – who rushes to him after Grete tells her about the assault and Ian's argument with his mother – and the baby they conceived clearly want to symbolise a reconciliation at the national level.⁸⁷³ Thus, the couple's intention to work on their differences and their «tentative gesture of faith in their equivocal, unknowable future»⁸⁷⁴ would suggest the need for the country to «move on» from the past and «focus on the future»⁸⁷⁵, keeping in mind, as Jo Cox said, «that we are far more united and have far more in common with each other than things that divide us»⁸⁷⁶.

⁸⁷³The due date of the baby is, not by chance, the 29th of March 2019, the designated date for the implementation of Brexit at the moment of the novel's publication.

⁸⁷⁴Coe, J., *Middle England cit.*, p.421

⁸⁷⁵*Ivi*, p.391

⁸⁷⁶Jo Cox, maiden speech to the House of Common, 3 June 2015, cit in Coe, J., *Middle England cit.*, p.313

Conclusion

This study has focused on the literary representations of Brexit in relation to English literature, with the aim to investigate the impact of the referendum on literature itself and to achieve a better understanding of the Leave vote. In order to do this, the dissertation takes also into account literary works published before the referendum, looking for themes and images that were at the core of the Brexit campaign.

Since Brexit is a political outcome, the research started with the analysis of economic and political studies published from the referendum onwards, which have been fundamental both for defining Brexit and to the framing of this dissertation. The studies taken into account have pointed out that Brexit is part of a wider framework. The vote was indeed affected by global trends, such as the disillusionment towards mainstream political parties, the rise of populism and the spread of nationalist movements. It was also deeply influenced by global issues and events, such as globalisation, the economic crash, terrorist attacks on British soil and the migrant and refugee crisis. Secondly, the analyses have also underlined that Brexit is the most visible manifestation of a crisis of consensus towards the EU, which is traceable in many other European countries. This crisis would be especially related to the idea that the EU is undemocratic and overly-bureaucratic, as well as to fear regarding its possible transformation into a fully-fledged European super-state. In the British case, these studies have especially outlined the role played by traditional British Euroscepticism, with EU membership never considered to be an achievement but rather a further proof of the country's diminished status in the world. Many scholars have indeed pointed out that, since joining the EEC in 1973, British support towards the EU has always been purely utilitarian and that the British have no European myth to cement their belonging to the Union. This discrepancy between the British and the other EU members is particularly evident when talking about the Second World War, whose phantom presence is at the very core of the EU foundation. While in the other European countries WWII is defined as a catastrophe and the EU is portrayed as a sort of defensive bulwark against the future dangers of nationalism, in the British consciousness the war stands as the country's last great victory, pinned against the constant economic and political decline of the following decades. This also explains why references to the war – a traditional strategy to stem EU opposition – were not effective in reducing Leave support and ended up, on the contrary, increasing it by helping to reinforce the idea of a lost greatness. In the end, the studies have drawn a line between England and the other nations that constitute the UK, revealing that both Brexit and British Euroscepticism are, first and foremost, an English phenomenon. Thus,

while Scotland and Northern Ireland voted for Remain, and Wales registered a small majority in favour of Leave, England was central to the Brexit outcome. England was not only the nation where the majority in favour of Leave was the largest but, being home to the greater part of the population, its vote outweighed Remain majority in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Moreover, in contrast to the other nations that compose the UK, it is England that perceives Europe, accordingly to traditional cultural imaginaries, as the enemy in opposition. The idea of Brexit as an English phenomenon has also been confirmed by the analyses focusing specifically on attitudes towards the vote and their correlation to national identities, which have found out that those prioritising their English identity over others (*in primis* Britishness) were more inclined to vote for Leave. Ultimately, it is exactly on this factor – voters’ identification with Englishness and its connection to the Leave vote – that this study has been centred on, starting from a further analysis of the political campaign and then moving on to literary works published before and after the referendum. The analysis of the themes and the images at the core of the Leave campaign, in particular, has been essential in narrowing the research, outlining the structures of feeling that are deeply rooted in English identity and that were then exploited by Brexiteers to affect people’s support.

A closer look at the campaign has indeed disclosed that Brexit storytelling was especially based on the national narratives of identity related to the Second World War and the British Empire, leveraging a long-established English nostalgia for the wartime and the imperial era as well as their sense of victimhood. Both feelings are generated by a sense of loss triggered by the many changes the country has undergone. Politically and economically speaking, this sense of loss would be related, firstly, to the actual loss of jobs, to economic insecurity and to the dismantlement of the welfare system; secondly, to the demise of the British Empire and the loss of geopolitical power; thirdly, to the devolution process, in which the English had no say and no chance to have an ‘assembly’ on their own as the other nations of the UK; and, ultimately, to the attitude of the political and cultural establishment of the country, generally ignoring, ridiculing and silencing any English nationalist outburst or grievance. From a cultural point of view, the perception of having lost something would be, instead, strictly related to English question of identity. In contrast with the other national identities comprising the UK, Englishness was indeed largely used for constructing a supranational identity (Britishness) and now is often confused with it as the two concepts are no longer separable. After the dismantlement of the empire, massive immigration from the ex-colonies and the development of Britishness into a multicultural identity, the English were forced to re-negotiate their sense of themselves. In the end, the vision of the country that most English seem to have embraced is

one long lost in the past: a rural, pastoral and exclusively white England. This vision of the country, linked to traditional ways of representing the nation and to the imperial racial hierarchy, is diametrically opposed to present-day England. In this way, the selected imagining is another element that contributes to English sense of loss, especially concerning ideas of white Anglo-Saxon superiority and privilege. In the end, this is exactly the same vision of the country the Brexiteers advertised, which is one of the main reasons of the success of their campaign among the English.

These considerations have been crucial in relation to the second section of this dissertation – which focuses on pre-Brexit fictions – defining the very criteria of selection that has been applied to the choice of the literary works: being set in England; being particularly concerned with Englishness; engaging with the structures of feeling that were at the core of the Brexit campaign related to nostalgia (for WWII and the British Empire) and tribalism (imperial racial hierarchy and the clash between the elites and the people). Following these criteria, the novels selected for close reading were *Speak for England* (2005) by James Hawes and *The White Family* (2002) by Maggie Gee, which are both particularly concerned with the clash between traditional and progressive images of the nation. Although written well before Brexit, the novels are characterised by many of the themes and images that were part of Brexit storytelling: distrust towards the elites; nostalgia for a past that is believed to be better than the present and the future; the idea that the nation should be a homogeneous body; a diffuse sense of victimhood; fear of immigration and xenophobia.

The same themes and images are, unsurprisingly, at the core of the novels published after the Brexit referendum and deeply influenced by the Brexit campaign. The novels in question are the focus of the third section of this work, which does not want to be – and also cannot be, considering the timeliness of the subgenre and the on-going publications of new fictions – a comprehensive account but only an introduction to Brexit Literature. Described also as ‘BrexLit’, Brexit Literature is a flourishing subgenre composed of fictions that respond – implicitly or explicitly – to the Brexit outcome, engaging with the themes and strategies of the political campaign and depicting the cultural divide the referendum has disclosed. The novels that have been already identified as BrexLit fictions belong to different genres but share similar characteristics, so much so that they can easily be distinguished into two macro-categories: the political novels and the intimate ones.

Novels that are defined as part of the political category of BrexLit tend to insert the referendum in a wider framework and depict dystopic post-Brexit scenarios. They also refer – more or less openly – to the Brexit campaign, challenging Brexit narrative and focusing on

post-truth, nostalgia and political mendaciousness. Michael Paraskos' *Rabbitman* (2017), Douglas Board's *Time of Lies* (2017), John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019), Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017) and *Spring* (2019), are all examples of this category that have been analysed in the course of this work. The intimate novels are, instead, fictions that are more concerned with the national divide, focusing on both Remainers' and Leavers' perspective. These novels are usually set in English areas that have been deeply affected by the process of de-industrialisation and the 2008 economic crisis, depicting the everyday life of the most vulnerable members of contemporary society. More than opposing to Brexit narrative, the intimate novels aim to understand the Leave vote. Novels that belong to this category and that have been taken into account in this study are Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2016), Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* (2017) and Adam Thorpe's *Missing Fay* (2017).

After introducing BrexLit from a general point of view, the study focuses more closely on two BrexLit fictions: *Perfidious Albion* (2018) by Sam Byers and *Middle England* (2018) by Jonathan Coe. These two novels show elements that are typical of both of the macro-categories of Brexit Literature and could indicate a further development of the sub-genre. Moreover, both novels engage directly with the structures of feeling at the core of the Brexit campaign in a very similar way to the novels analysed in the previous section, focusing on the English sense of victimhood and exposing the national divide between liberal and conservative imaginings of the national future.

Although very different in the approach adopted, all these novels appear to be united by the same concerns: offering «escape as well as insight»⁸⁷⁷ in relation to an event – Brexit – that is tearing people apart, trying not only to make sense of it but also to heal the national wound it has opened up recovering, through literary representation, a sense of community. For what concerns, especially, the Leave vote, what emerges from the analysis of both the pre-Brexit and the post-Brexit novels taken into consideration is that underneath Brexit there is – beyond economic and political factors – a desire to go back in time, unravelling what England (and the world itself) has become. As Linda Grant writes in her state-of-the-nation novel *A Stranger City* (2019), the idea that fuelled the Brexit vote is that anyone should go home to his/her country of origin, that we all should «go back into our original boxes like we're not mongrels from here there and everywhere»⁸⁷⁸. It is evident that this is an idea in line with traditional conceptions of what a national community should be, but completely outdated in a world where communities

⁸⁷⁷Ferguson, D., «From epic myths to rural fables, how our national turmoil created 'Brexlit'», *The Guardian*, 27 October 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/27/brexlit-new-literary-genre-political-turmoil-myths-fables> (30 October 2019)

⁸⁷⁸Grant, L., *A Stranger City*, Great Britain, Virago Press, 2019, p.320

are becoming every single day more multinational. Ultimately, what all the novels analysed clearly imply is the need for the English to embrace «a more positive sense of national belonging»⁸⁷⁹. Abandoning «the illusion, which currently is our reality, that there are no other futures than the nation-state»⁸⁸⁰, the English might conversely focus on new ways of imagining the country and its people as open to change and diversity.

⁸⁷⁹O'Toole, F., *op. cit.*, p.200

⁸⁸⁰Cheyette, B., «English Literature saved my life», in Eaglestone, R., *op. cit.*, p.69

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