BrexLit: The Problem of Englishness in Pre- and Post-Brexit Referendum Literature

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An Honors Thesis presented by
Dulcie Everitt
to the Department of English
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
Honors in the Major Field

Connecticut College
New London, Connecticut
May 2020

Abstract

The Brexit referendum of June 23, 2016 was an unparalleled political shock that forced an entire nation into a state of heightened self-reflection and polarisation. The United Kingdom became the Disunited Kingdom, with Scotland and Northern Ireland voting to remain in the European Union, while England and Wales voted to leave. The results of the referendum highlighted fundamentally dissonant understandings of nationhood—what it means to be "English" as opposed to "Scottish," "Irish," and "Welsh"—and revealed how all of these separate nationalisms are beginning to overtake a collective, overarching "British" identity. However, because the majority of Leave voters reside in England, Brexit raised particularly significant questions about what it means to be English, hence the focus of this thesis on problems of Englishness.

Unsurprisingly, Brexit caused an immediate stir within the literary community. British authors sprinted to complete novels that shed light on the struggle to pin down English identity—a literary phenomenon dubbed "BrexLit" by the *Financial Times*. Englishness has proven difficult to define, both in literature and political science. The difficulty lies in the fact that Englishness is a type of nationalism that struggles to recognise its own peculiarities, and any satisfying incarnation of it is steeped in myth and falsehood. Despite this conundrum, authors have been grappling with English identity for decades—centuries even—making literature an integral tool for understanding it. Due to this extensive history of literature as a medium for defining Englishness, isolating BrexLit as the means to this end would be imprudent. Instead, I compare texts published before and after the Brexit referendum in order to explore the problem of Englishness from two temporal perspectives.

In this thesis, I explore the theoretical literature on how nationalisms are formed, and I examine English nationalism as a unique and "exceptional" case. I also dissect the history of the UK's relationship with the European Union to better understand the precedent for the Leave vote, and I analyse how relationships within the UK—between Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, and England—have triggered renewed attempts to define Englishness. I then engage the literature, starting with texts published in the two decades leading up to the referendum vote, before considering BrexLit, which I define as texts published in the period between 2016–2020, between the vote and the UK's official departure from the EU on January 31, 2020. Because scholarly criticism of BrexLit texts is not yet available because they were published so recently, I have turned to periodical book reviews to capture the immediate critical reception of these novels.

I conclude that Englishness is an enigma, not because no identity exists at all, but because the impulse of Englishness is itself a paradox. Englishness attempts to be both an identity of exceptionalism and superiority, yet it is simultaneously rooted in post-imperial grievance and the fear of being dominated by Europe. BrexLit texts vary in their visions of English society post-referendum—in some, the break with Europe provides an opportunity for renewal, while for others, England's future vanishes entirely. Ultimately, BrexLit seeks to re-examine the nature of Englishness and offers readers the opportunity to step outside of the chaos, to reflect, and in many cases, to heal from the dismal anxiety of the present.

Contents

Note on Usage

Writing about England and the United Kingdom can create challenges for a readership unfamiliar with the nuances of terminology associated with them. To ease these problems for the reader, I have made decisions that may come at the expense of convention but offer a greater opportunity for clarity. I have used "UK" and "Britain" interchangeably throughout this thesis to avoid confusion about the difference between the two. Having said this, I also use "Britain" or "British" when I am referring to the Empire or the British people at large, though I use it taking for granted the reader's understanding that Britain, even today, is dominated by England in terms of politics and power. I would also like to make clear, for the benefit of the reader, that "England" is not the name of the polity of the United Kingdom. When I refer to England, I refer specifically to the subnational territorial unit that lies south of the Kershope Burn and east of the River Wye. When I refer to Englishness, I refer specifically to a national identity that is distinct from "British" and that represents a constituent part of the United Kingdom—an identity that forms itself in opposition to other national identities within the UK, those of Scotland, Wales, and (Northern) Ireland.

PART ONE

Chapter One
Introduction: Theories of Nationalism and the English Case

> The Romans first with Julius Caesar came,
> Including all the nations of that name,
> Gauls, Greeks, and Lombards; and by computation,
> Auxiliaries, or slaves of every nation.
> With Hengist, Saxons; Danes, with Sueno came,
> In search of plunder, not in search of fame.
> Scots, Picts, and Irish from th' Hibernian shore;
> And conquering William brought the Normans o'er.
>
> All these their bar'brous offspring left behind,
> The dregs of armies, they of all mankind:
> Blended with Britons, who before were here,
> Of whom the Welch have blest the character.
>
> From this amphibious ill-born mob began
> That vain ill-natured thing, an Englishman.
>
> —Daniel Defoe, *The True-Born Englishman*, 1701

Over the past two decades, the Western world has collectively experienced a resurgence of nationalist sentiment that has deeply disturbed the political landscape. Throughout Europe, nationalist, right-wing political parties have begun to capture a larger number of supporters, while in the United States, Donald Trump's presidency has brought to light some of the ugliest facets of American self-conceptualisation. However, nowhere else have the effects of resurgent nationalism been more crippling than in England. In the four years since the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union on June 23, 2016—a movement dubbed "Brexit"— a seismic shift has occurred towards a collective effort and desire to (re)discover the meaning of Englishness among those who consider themselves a part of this national group. Although what

is happening in England is, as Fintan O'Toole suggests: "a local version of a global phenomenon…it is also different" (O'Toole x). Unlike other Western countries experiencing a resurgence of right-wing nationalism, England is not a sovereign state, but rather a constituent part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Therefore, English nationalism is a form of nationalism that does not directly correlate to the existing nation-state. English nationalists are attempting to define and assert Englishness as distinct within the larger polity—an attempt that has struggled to find firm ground and has in fact submerged England in a crisis of identity. Given the stark contrast between how the English voted (Leave, with the notable exception of London), how Wales voted (Leave, by a smaller majority) and how Scotland and Northern Ireland voted (Remain), speculation surrounding what "Englishness" means as opposed to "Britishness" has been rife among scholars, politicians, and artists. Such speculation has displayed not only the vast array of theories on English nationalism; it has also shown just how incapable of defining itself England actually is. Discussions of Englishness bring to the fore how history (and the dearth of accurate historical knowledge), political rhetoric, and the international liberal order, which the UK had a major hand in creating, have worked together to produce the contemporary manifestations of English nationalism.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word "nationalism" was first recorded in 1798 by Augustin Barruel, a French publicist and Jesuit priest. He used the term as follows: "Nationalism, or the love for a particular nation, took place of the general love" (*OED*). Barruel's use of the term here suggests that, at the turn of the nineteenth century, an identification with and love of the nation was felt more strongly than other forms of identity attachment, such as religion. Indeed, though nationalism has been defined in a multitude of different ways by scholars, politicians, and historians alike, this is typically how political

scientists suggest that contemporary nationalism functions. One of the leading scholars on nationalism, Benedict Anderson, defines it as "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 6). Anderson locates the rise of modern forms of nationalism as simultaneous with the rise of print capitalism, the novel and the newspaper, arguing that "these forms provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the kind of imagined community that is the nation" (Anderson 25). Indeed, the rise of print capitalism in the eighteenth century provided a new opportunity for those in power to disseminate identical information across entire nations. When a target population located within the same geographical area is reading the same texts, its people are inevitably tied together in new and significant ways, and this forms a basis for the "imagined community." Anderson's argument neatly corresponds with Barruel's use of the term in 1798, that nationalism "took place of the general love"; as Anderson argues, our modern era of nationalism arrives with the rise of print capitalism in the eighteenth century, and leads to national identity becoming more important than other identity attachments (a theory that Barruel proves to be true).

Anderson's theory becomes even more persuasive when looking at the changes in the definition of words related to nationalism. For example, "nationalist" appears in 1715 and 1716 as "An adherent or advocate of a national church," but just over a century later in 1817 it reappears as "A person considered as belonging to a particular nationality; a typical representative of a particular nationality" (*OED*). One's religious attachment in England in particular was of course extremely important during the Reformation of the sixteenth century, and the violent struggle between Protestants and Catholics is a long-standing example of how national attachment—one's "Englishness"—was less important than one's relationship to the

Church. It is only, as Anderson suggests, with the rise of print capitalism that nationalism as we know it truly emerges.

Unlike Anderson, some scholars focus less on the mechanisms through which modern nationalisms came to be, and more on how modern nationalisms are experienced. Jeremy Black states that "Nationalism is a feeling as much as a principle" (Black 1), suggesting that there is something more emotional than logical about nationalism. Similarly, Tom Nairn suggests that "'Nationalism' is the pathology of modern developmental history, as inescapable as 'neurosis' in the individual, with much the same essential ambiguity attaching to it, a similar built-in capacity for descent into dementia, rooted in the dilemmas of helplessness thrust upon most of the world (the equivalent of infantilism for societies) and largely incurable" (qtd. in Anderson 5). Describing nationalism like a contagion or a virus suggests that there is something irresistible and inescapable about it, as though it is a lifelong virus that flares up in the right environmental conditions. In this definition, Nairn also touches on some of the key characteristics of modern nationalism: its "ambiguity", its capacity to eradicate accurate historical knowledge ("descent into dementia"), and its inescapability ("largely incurable"). All three of these characteristics affect the experience of nationalism at both the collective national level, and at the individual level.

Despite the fact that scholarly analysis of nationalism is a fairly recent phenomenon (the majority of this work was carried out in the twentieth century), and often focuses on the world of nations since the seventeenth century at the earliest, many scholars use "nationalism" to describe a phenomenon in England specifically that is purported to have existed for far longer. Eric Hobsbawm, for example, suggests that nationalism is a phenomenon that *can* exist in the absence of the modern nation-state and Anderson's print capitalism. He writes: "nationalism comes

before nations. Nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way around"
(Hobsbawm 10). Hobsbawm's argument here is a version of the chicken and the egg; in order to
create a nation-state, one first requires a group of people (nationalists) to actively create,
perform, and assert their collective identity as a nation. On this understanding, nationalism does
not require a territory—and certainly does not require print capitalism and the novel—to be
experienced, and therefore suggests that England could have been privy to the experience of
nationalism long before the eighteenth century. Jeremy Black similarly argues that England
experienced nationalism long before other states, claiming that it met many of the modern
conditions for nationalism discussed in academia: "Nationalism is frequently discussed as a
product of the last quarter-millennium…many characteristics of nationalism, including a
collective name, shared history, a distinctive shared culture, an association with a specific
territory, and a sense of solidarity, can be seen earlier, and certainly so with England" (Black 36).
Black similarly undercuts Anderson's requirement for print capitalism and the novel, suggesting
that "A sense of national consciousness [in England] did not require mass support, nor indeed an
audience" (Black 63). If this is true, then English nationalism might be an exceptional case of
nationalism, where the desire to belong and co-exist with those who share your space, language,
and, in many cases, ethnicity, came before a regional effort to convince people that they had such
a desire.

However, even if both Hobsbawm and Black suggest that nationalism has been, and can
be, experienced in England without modern innovations, they also both acknowledge the
problematic nature of the very term "English nationalism." England today is not, in actual fact, a
sovereign state in its own right at all. English nationalism is a "proto-nationalism…because there
is currently no English state within the United Kingdom, which is the United Kingdom of Great

Britain and Northern Ireland" (Black 1). Although what Black says is true, England has not

always been a part of the United Kingdom. England was among the first nations to exist in its

recognisable territorial form, emerging as a distinct kingdom even before the Norman conquest

of 1066, and its long history provides it ample space to have developed some form of cohesive

identity before the formation of the UK. Throughout the Middle Ages, particularly at the end of

the Hundred Years' War, England was on track to develop a "greater degree of national identity

and uniformity" (Black 75)—a precursor perhaps to the form of nationalism rife during the rise

of the British Empire, which I will discuss later. However, as early as the sixteenth century,

under Tudor rule, England began to define itself through expansion across the island on which it

lies. King Henry VIII (r. 1509–1547), who was partly Welsh-descended, sought to align the

English and Welsh through the Laws in Wales Acts (1535, 1542), which politically incorporated

Wales into the Kingdom of England. Notably, this law incorporated Wales into England, rather

than merging them as equals. A unitary British kingdom—the beginning of the end for England

as a self-contained nation—truly commenced with the Act of Union in 1707, whereby England

joined with Scotland to create the Kingdom of Great Britain (of which Wales was automatically

a part as well). Ireland, which is of course itself an island, was the last member of the current

United Kingdom to join the conglomerate. In 1801, Ireland officially became a part of the United

Kingdom, despite having been subject to English, and later British, monarchical rule for over six

hundred years. It was not until the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 when the Irish Free State (which

became the Republic of Ireland in 1949) broke away from the United Kingdom leaving Northern

Ireland behind, that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland was finally

formed.

So how can England, which no longer exists as a sovereign nation-state, but rather as a part of the larger polity of the UK, experience its own nationalism? And does Hobsbawm's suggestion that nationalisms precede nations make the case of English nationalism less confusing? Perhaps so, for if England has, for all intents and purposes, lost its nation-state, then the nationalist push to reclaim it seems extremely predictable. However, it was England that spearheaded the formation of the UK in the first place, arguably in an attempt to gain some control over the people and resources its entire local vicinity, Furthermore, if nationalist movements tend to stem from a desire for national self-determination—a Wilsonian principle dating back to World War I—then the English case is even more confusing. England's lack of a sovereign nation-state does not mean that it lacks political power or necessarily self-determination. In fact, it continues to dominate politics across the entire UK, with the government operating out of Westminster in London, led by a prime minister who is typically English. While Anglo-centrism in the UK may in part reflect the distribution of the population—just under 84% of the British population lives in England (*World Population Review*)—if nationalist movements arise out of a desire to assert political independence and power, then neighbouring Scottish, Welsh, and Irish nationalisms, which are formed in opposition to an Anglo-centric framework of government, appear far more natural. The only convincing argument that England has somehow lost sovereignty as a result of UK politics is the West Lothian question, which is the argument over whether MPs from Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland should be able to vote in matters concerning only England when English MPs are unable to vote on exclusively Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish matters because these regions have their own regional assemblies. Certainly, it would seem appropriate to hold the same standards placed on England in reverse, providing some legitimate fuel to the fire of English nationalism.

Having said this, the paranoia and protectionist rhetoric emerging among English nationalists suggests that a more complicated explanation is required to fully understand what has triggered this recent surge of nationalism. One explanation is that Englishness has historically been formed in response to, and as a consequence of, international pressures, whether those be positive for the nation's status as a global power, as with the rise of the British Empire, or negative, as with the fall of Empire and the rise of insurgent Scottish, Welsh, and Irish nationalisms. In other words, Englishness is "reliant on opposition to others" (Black 14). Although the rise of the British Empire was not a uniquely English pursuit, to the English, and indeed to many foreign nationals, "England" and "Britain" are often viewed as essentially coterminous (Black 83), meaning that Empire is often associated specifically with England as opposed to with Scotland, Northern Ireland, or Wales. Therefore, as the British empire expanded and gained global power and significance, so did what Arthur Aughey calls English "exceptionalism" (Aughey, *The Politics* 23). As Britain became a global superpower, "Englishness was of universal, not just local significance—an exemplary exception—and so did not have to adopt…cultural distinctiveness" (Aughey, *The Politics* 94). Exceptionalism is significant because many modern nation-states have developed a sense of nationalism in the post-colonial era as a way of redefining and reasserting themselves on the global stage. England did not have to do this; it was never oppressed but was, rather, the oppressor, which meant that the only self-conceptualisation it needed during the rise of Empire was to imagine itself as the superior nation. A collective belief in British distinctiveness and exceptionalism did indeed rise up and take root at the height of the British Empire, though many English people thought of exceptionalism ironically as a "norm" (Aughey, *The Politics* 23), rather than something exclusive to England. Despite this, the song "Rule Britannia," a patriotic homage to Britain's

military strength and exceptionalism, links "national destiny, naval strength and personal liberty" (Black 8) and is still frequently played today during events of national significance. Similarly, during the Victorian era "Britain displayed attitudes of national uniqueness, nationalist self-confidence, and a xenophobic contempt for foreigners…seen as backward and illiberal" (Black 9–10). Though these attitudes were not directly related to Britain's military prowess, the notion of British exceptionalism, and therefore of Englishness as equivalent to greatness, successfully pervaded the national consciousness.

Fast forward to the twentieth century as war grips Europe: the international landscape began to change drastically, forcing England into a new and profound experience of identity-based confusion. World War I initially seemed to bolster British global supremacy, but Britain also suffered tremendous loss of life and resources. Just under forty years later, World War II constituted a major turning point for Britain. Despite demonstrably winning the war, it suffered major economic and social trauma that drastically depleted its assets and capital. The year 1945 ushered in a concentrated period of decolonisation as the British Empire began to steadily decline. At the same time, in a collective effort to prevent future wars like those experienced in the first half of the century, Europe began to collaborate in a liberal international project where the creation of new institutions created a rules-based international order. The UK was a founding member of both the United Nations (UN) in 1945, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1949, willingly placing itself in organisations where it was simply one nation among many. Meanwhile, Europe engaged in its own regional project named the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) (1951 Treaty of Paris), and had six member states: France, West Germany, Luxembourg, Belgium, Italy, and the Netherlands. The ECSC existed as a standalone entity until 1967, when the Treaty of Brussels led to the assimilation of the ECSC into the

European Economic Community (EEC), which was established in 1957 by the Treaty of Rome. The six founding states of the ECSC were the same six states that belonged to the EEC, so even as the functions merged there was little change to the dynamic within the bloc. New members steadily began to join the EEC over the next half-century, but the European Union as we know it did not exist until 1993 and the Treaty of Maastricht.

Despite Winston Churchill leading the charge for a united European entity from the outset, even calling for the creation of a "United States of Europe" in 1946, he never suggested that the UK would actually be a part of it. Churchill aligned the UK with the US and the USSR at the end of his speech: "Great Britain, the British Commonwealth of Nations, mighty America—and, I trust, Soviet Russia, for then indeed all would be well—must be the friends and sponsors of the new Europe and must champion its right to live. Therefore I say to you 'Let Europe arise!'" (Churchill, "United States of Europe"). Here, Churchill places the UK and its Commonwealth on a pedestal with two other global superpowers, and suggests that the UK is somehow above entering into this European project. Certainly, unlike its European neighbours, the UK's entry into the EEC represented not a gaining of significance, but rather "a contraction of power now that Britain, whose influence was spread across the globe, has returned to the condition of a medium-sized European power" (Aughey, *The Politics* 88). The sense that the UK (England in particular) had lost some of its exceptionalism in the global arena meant that almost immediately after it joined the EEC there was widespread angst about the European project. The UK entered based on the economic benefits that the EEC would offer them, and never strongly supported the aim of an "ever closer union" that was enshrined in the Treaty of Rome in 1957 (Miller). Importantly, the UK did manage to retain some facets of its own political and economic culture over time that other EU members have not—for example, the UK did not enter the euro,

instead keeping its own currency, the pound sterling. In this way, the UK (and by default England) did preserve some of its exceptionalism even as it entered the EEC on a supposedly level playing field. However, ultimately, the shift from global superpower to one-among-many powers proved to be a stressful transition in terms of defining Englishness in particular, since it had not only been the political powerhouse of the UK but of a large percentage of the Earth. As Fintan O'Toole points out, "In reality, Britain went from being an imperial power to being a reasonably ordinary but privileged Western European country. In the apparition conjured by Brexit, it went straight from being the colonizer to being the colonized" (O'Toole 86). Indeed, the depletion of English influence within the EEC meant a collapsing of identity where identity traditionally meant global dominance; although the void this left was initially unnoticeable, it was undeniably present, and the Brexit campaign offered to fill it.

Aside from membership in the EU, another, more local threat to English national identity began to emerge in the last three decades in particular: devolution of the United Kingdom itself. Scholars analysing the resurgence of English nationalism post-referendum have asserted that it is the insurgent nationalisms of neighbouring Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, that have truly driven contemporary versions of Englishness. Indeed, Jeremy Black argues that "nationalism, or at least a distinctive nationalism, has been precipitated, and, in part, forced upon England, by the development in the British Isles of strident nationalisms that have contested Britishness, and with much success. Irish nationalism was the first, but it was followed by those of Wales and, more prominently, Scotland" (Black 2). As Ireland, Scotland, and Wales engaged in their own attempts to reassert their identities—movements triggered by disillusionment with the Anglo-centric conception of Britain—the possibility that England's power could further diminish loomed large. This novel concern, as Aughey describes it, was "not the end of empire but the end

of the United Kingdom or the anxiety that, while the other nations are coming out from under the 'safety blanket' of Britishness, the English will be smothered under its folds" (Aughey, *The Politics* 97). The growing strength of insurgent nationalisms within the UK was a serious wake-up call for England: either it must follow suit and, in retaliation, reassert a version of its own identity, or it must be prepared to lose its last glimmer of exceptionalism on the international stage.

English nationalists' attempts to repatriate themselves with a lost English identity over the past two decades in particular have allowed for the introduction of new nationalist narratives into the mainstream political discourse. One such narrative is nostalgia—an appeal to a better, more glorious past. The word "nostalgia" can be defined as both an individual and a collective experience—the latter being more relevant to the discussion of nationalism. The *OED* defines nostalgia as a "sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the past," or "a collective term for things which evoke a former (remembered) era" (*OED*). In recent Western political rhetoric, the invocation of nostalgia has especially been used by xenophobic politicians and leaders to bolster their platforms. Donald Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again" is an invocation of past greatness that, regardless of whether that greatness ever existed as imagined, appealed to a large share of the country that felt left behind or angry with their current situations. The same was true of the Brexit referendum campaign slogan: "Take back control," which implied that control had been not only lost, but *taken* from the UK, in this case by the EU. The invocation of nostalgia is not a new political device; as David Lowenthal outlines:

> There always appears a time when 'folk did not feel fragmented, when doubt was either absent or patent, when thought fused with action, when aspiration achieved consummation, when life was wholehearted; in short, a past that was unified and comprehensible, unlike the incoherent, divided present.' The only thing missing in this past, of course, is its own nostalgia for an undivided, coherent past. (qtd. in Aughey, *The Politics* 83)

Indeed, the appeal to a "great" past where one had "control" suggests that the current political and economic situation—which is tremendously divided and divisive—is "new" and can be reversed by imitating the world as it existed in the past—the opposite of what we would typically describe as progress. The greatest deception of nostalgia, as Lowenthal points out, is that every generation feels it; at no time in history has the world, and England in particular, been completely at ease with itself and its present moment.

Having said this, appeals to nostalgia are most successful when a significant percentage of the country feels disenfranchised by the current political environment, and when going back in time means returning to a period of greater stability and prosperity in their lives. Immediately following the Brexit referendum, three political scientists, Steven Winlow, Steve Hall, and James Treadwell sought to get a sense for what that environment looked like in England and understand how the Leave campaign was successful there in particular. They spoke with several fervent Brexit supporters—specifically those associating themselves with the English Defence League (EDL), a far-right political group that describes itself as having "risen from the English working class to act, lead and inspire in the struggle against global Islamification," and "respects English tradition" (*English Defence League*). The authors link the "rise of the right"—the title of their book—to the "palpable sense of lack" (Winlow, Hall, and Treadwell 2) being experienced by the people, and suggest that:

> many ordinary people…often see for themselves a life of unending struggle, a life in which the pleasures of community life have been withdrawn, a life of frustration, interrupted all too briefly by occasional flurries of consumerist hedonism. They can sense life only as a backward step, the loss of things deemed valuable and important. The benefits of our allegedly open, marketised society are the privileges of successful others. Those trapped in the lower echelons can see no forward step in their own lives. They are convinced that for them the best times have now been left behind. As a result of all this, a growing number of these people are now very angry. (Winlow, Hall, and Treadwell 3)

The anger described here is one of disenfranchisement and frustration, and it explains, in part, why Leave was as successful as it was—it offered a change that Remain didn't and gave its supporters hope for a better future that could be rediscovered by returning to the past. As the void of Englishness became ever-more apparent in the face of rising nationalisms in Ireland, Scotland and Wales, the English have found themselves stuck, not by choice but by necessity, "in the process of recovering the past (not *a* past) that was for centuries buried and hidden from them" (Aughey, *The Politics* 84). The problem is twofold: this past is being framed as an idyllic period which, in reality, never existed, and unpleasant history continues to be buried and hidden by politicians to further their own platforms. Nostalgia in its modern form is not only a manipulative political device—it is also a cruel one that shrugs off the responsibility of helping those who feel abandoned in favour of blaming external forces and inciting political polarisation.

Although the political weaponisation of economic lack was one way in which the Brexit campaign gained widespread support among the more rural areas of England, a more disturbing, yet related tool was used as well: xenophobia. Nigel Farage, leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), was arguably the ringleader of xenophobic rhetoric during the campaign. He spouted lies about the number of Syrian refugees waiting to cross into the UK, using the side of a London bus to exhibit a shocking image of hundreds of Middle Eastern asylum seekers and suggest that they were waiting to steal jobs and services from the "true" British people (see Appendix, Figure 1). Farage's rhetoric inspired vicious debate about race and ethnicity in the UK, and it took particularly deep root in the minds of many English people, inspiring them to vote Leave on referendum day. However natural Farage made this xenophobia seem, England historically was not built on ideas of a single ethnic identity. In fact, as recently as the eighteenth century "the English were quite exceptional in boasting of their mongrel origins (Britons, Anglo-

Saxons, Scandinavians, Normans, Scots, Irish, etc.)" (Hobsbawm 108). This is of course not to say that xenophobia in England was unheard of until 2015. Daniel Defoe's satirical poem "The True Born Englishman" that begins this chapter was written in 1701 to defend King William of England, who was from the Netherlands, against xenophobic attacks. The poem has gained significant popularity particularly in the past few decades for "its exposure of the fallacies of racial prejudice" (Mutter) in England—the same racial prejudice that has recently been incited for political gain. The hyperbolic language of the "amphibious ill-born mob" and "vain ill-natured thing" are amusing; as Defoe points out, those touting racial purity are themselves descended from an enormously diverse population—they are the product of the very "ill-born mob" they so despise. In his defence of the foreign-born King William—the second of three foreign kings within the century—Defoe demonstrates a deep scepticism for any definition of the "true born Englishman" that relies on ethnicity. Although his scepticism is surely shared by many in England today, the xenophobic rhetoric of the Leave campaign proved too powerful to override and has led to a resurgence in English ethnic (white) nationalism that has driven it into isolationism—a retreat from the other.

Perhaps a more subtle, yet equally powerful tool of the Leave campaign was its emphasis on British—particularly English—culture as distinct yet in jeopardy, as "control" from Brussels washes it out. The international liberal project means answering to laws written outside the UK, but more than that it offers a new closeness (ideological but often perceived as geographical) between European countries and the UK that many feel entails stripping each nation of their individuality and creating one large, monolithic region. Of course, this is not only a European phenomenon, but a global one, and there is deep dissatisfaction in England with globalisation, which England ironically helped to produce. Ultimately, there is a sense that the cultural integrity

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of the nation is being lost at the hands of both supranational organisations and global

corporations. In his book *Real England: The Battle Against the Bland*, Paul Kingsnorth laments

the "totalitarian" (Kingsnorth 5) nature of the massive Bluewater shopping centre in Kent,

suggesting that it represents the mass homogenisation of English high streets—the crushing

weight of capitalism that is literally levelling parts of the countryside to make way for new

consumerist attractions. As the snowballing effects of globalisation significantly change the

English landscape, its inhabitants recoil and seek affirmation of England's distinctiveness despite

belonging to a global system—a move that found level ground to land on during the Brexit

Referendum.

Though all of these explanations for the resurgence of an English nationalism are

convincing, they are also deeply confusing, seemingly trying to work from two opposite

perspectives: that of the dominator, and that of the dominated. In his book *Heroic Failure: Brexit*

and the Politics of Pain, Fintan O'Toole straightforwardly explains how English nationalism is at

its core an enigmatic project: working irreconcilably for both forms of modern nationalism, and

that this phenomenon can only be explained with the word "self-pity." He writes:

> Crudely, passionate nationalism has taken two agnostic forms. There is an imperial nationalism and an anti-imperial nationalism; one sets out to dominate the world, the other to throw off such dominance. The incoherence of the new English nationalism that lies behind Brexit is that it wants to be both simultaneously. On the one hand, Brexit is 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. On the other, it is an insurgency and therefore needs to imagine that it is a revolt against intolerable oppression. It therefore requires both a sense of superiority and a sense of grievance. Self-pity is the only emotion that can bring them together. (O'Toole 3)

Here, O'Toole sums up what most have found it nearly impossible to understand about English

nationalism, and more broadly, a collective English identity. Englishness is problematic and

troubling not because there is necessarily a total absence of identity—though the existing identity

is not based in anything particularly convincing—but because it attempts to piece together two opposing impulses: dominance and liberation. Global pre-eminence remains central to England's position within the UK, but the Brexit campaign convinced people that England needed to be liberated from the perceived domination of the EU. Although the contraction of power and the rise of new nationalist voices have certainly provided modern English identity its fodder, the enigma of Englishness still cannot be pinned down, in part because England has managed to indulge itself in defeatism and exceptionalism simultaneously. The trend towards a nostalgic, xenophobic, and self-pitying form of English nationalism is something that all of the literature covered in part two of this thesis examines. However, while pre-referendum novels problematise this trend, BrexLit, in many cases, attempts to redefine it by offering the reader the possibility of a more inclusive English nationalism—one which does not fear the foreign nor retreat into isolationism, but which oppositely remains a part of the global whole.

Chapter Two
The UK, the EU, and the Rise of Insurgent UK Nationalisms

England's position in relation to the rest of the world has historically shaped the nation's understanding of itself, and, as established in chapter one, as England's power has diminished, so has its national self-image. However, in order to understand the transformations that have destabilised what it means to be English, it is vital to dive deeper into England's rocky relationships, both with its neighbours on the Continent, embodied through its relationship with the European Union, and with its neighbours within the United Kingdom. In this chapter, I will provide context for how the UK arrived in its current situation, which will both ground the reader in the historical background for the discussion that proceeds and also set the scene for many of the literary texts covered in the second part of the thesis. I will explore the UK's relationship with the EU since Margaret Thatcher's prime ministerial term, devolution under Tony Blair, and David Cameron's role in holding a referendum that has changed the future of the UK forever. I will also look at the referendum campaign itself, to better understand how Leave captured the English vote, and how powerfully divisive Brexit became over the course of two years—powerful enough to inspire a literary movement.

"A Stranger in Europe": The UK's Quest for Dominance in an Organisation of Equals

As mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, the UK's membership in the EU formally began in 1973 when it joined the European Economic Community (EEC), which became known as the European Community (EC) in 1993. UK entry occurred just over two decades after the formation of the original European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1952, of which it was never a part, but a formal relationship between the UK and the six founding members was

already developing over that time. When the UK originally declined to join the six founding members of the ECSC and EEC, the decision was made based on the idea that the UK approached politics differently from this newly forming community. Harold Macmillan, the UK Prime Minister from 1957–1963, wrote in his diary that it was the "British 'functional' versus the Continental 'federal' approach" (Wall 1). There was also widespread consensus that the economy in the UK was strong enough that it didn't need assistance from a union of this sort, and so it remained adamantly out of the group. Stephen Wall suggests that it was only "After the debacle of Suez in 1956" when "our self-image of great power status could no longer be indulged" (Wall 2), and when the new EEC emerged with the Treaty of Rome in 1957, that the UK began to shift its attitude towards the supranational organisation. Despite attempts to join the EEC throughout the 1960s, Britain was forced to pay for its ambivalence at the conception of the ECSC with two vetoes by France on EEC entry. It took until 1973 for the UK to gain ascension into the EEC bloc, and despite the political excitement of this new partnership, there was also a widespread view, spearheaded by the opposition leader at the time, Hugh Gaitskell, that Macmillan's decision to join "was playing fast and loose with 'a thousand years of history', a charge that resonates in Britain to this day" (Wall 3). Gaitskell's view that the UK was historically incompatible with the EU alludes to a deep-rooted concern that shifted into the foreground during the Brexit referendum: that the UK never belonged in a community of nations like that the EU—one of power-sharing and interdependence. In essence, the UK has always felt itself to be, as Arthur Aughey would say, exceptional.

After what Stephen Wall refers to as a "brief honeymoon" (Wall 3), serious negotiations with the EEC began with the UK at the bargaining table. The UK was almost immediately wary of discussion surrounding major treaty changes, but their first major dissent emerged over the

issue of the UK's financial contribution to the EC budget. The foundations of the agreement over financial contributions were already in place before the UK joined in 1973, which made it very difficult for it to influence proceedings. In 1969, the six original members had "transformed EC financing into what is still known as the 'own resources' system whereby the EC was funded by a mixture of levies and duties on imports into the Community" (Wall 4). British diplomat Sir Con O'Neill took immediate issue with the own resources system, suggesting that "the levies we should pay on agricultural imports would be far higher than those paid by any other member," and that "There was bound to be an equally profound bias against us on the expenditure side" (O'Neill qtd. in Wall 4). This was exacerbated by issues surrounding the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) instituted in 1962, which made it so that over half of the entire EEC budget was being directed into agriculture that was benefiting primarily French farmers at an additional cost to the UK. O'Neill's frustration at the apparent inequity of this arrangement even drove him to claim that France's veto of UK entry into the EU had been precisely so that France could develop financial terms "favourable to her before Britain was in a position, as an EC member, to influence the outcome" (Wall 4). It was in this spirit of suspicion, and with this immediate conjecture that the UK would bear an unequal financial burden, that Britain's relationship with the EEC began.

The turbulent beginning to the UK's relationship with the EEC caused much anxiety within British politics, and under Harold Wilson's Labour government in 1975, a referendum was held on EEC membership. It is notable that this first referendum was held under a Labour government; at this time most Euroscepticism came from the left-wing of British politics, while the Conservatives remained strong proponents of the EEC. As mentioned briefly in chapter one, the UK joined the EEC primarily because it offered them a strong economic opportunity. As

Douglas Webber writes, "the rationale advanced for [UK] accession was overwhelmingly economic—that membership would be good for the British economy and therefore for Britons' living standards. In contrast, the *political* case for European integration—that it promoted political stability and peace—was rarely made, leaving its EU membership vulnerable to a political backlash if its economic benefits failed to materialize" (Webber 184). At such an early stage it was of course unlikely that the UK economy would be booming as a result of joining the EEC, but the referendum hoped to gauge the public support while there was still widespread uncertainty. The public voted overwhelmingly "Yes"—to remain a member of the EEC—the only exceptions being Shetland and the Western Isles (Nelsson). England, among the four constituent parts of the UK, showed the most widespread support for remaining in the EEC, with the percentage of "Yes" wavering between 60–80% across every constituency (*The Guardian*, "How the regions voted in the referendum"). A *Guardian* report written in 1975 by Ian Aitken on the results of the referendum opened with: "The champagne corks of the pro-Marketeers were still popping last night as Mr Wilson returned to Downing Street" (Aitken). Aitken suggests that the referendum was "a unique and historic triumph for a Prime Minister who had secured the backing of the country over the heads of a majority in his own party. He celebrated it with a brief statement declaring the formal end of the 14-year controversy over Europe and calling on the anti-Marketeers to join wholeheartedly in working inside Europe to solve the economic crisis" (Aitken). While Wilson's declaration of a "formal end" to European controversy certainly seems premature to the contemporary reader, it is true that the overwhelming "Yes" vote indicated that the UK, and England in particular, was united in supporting an ongoing partnership with Europe.

Despite the overwhelming majority of the 1975 referendum vote and the UK's support of the EEC, the economic strain of membership began to take its toll in the late 1970s. When

Margaret Thatcher became prime minister in 1979, "budgetary inequity was becoming more pronounced. Britain was one of the poorer member states in terms of relative prosperity, but the second largest net contributor to the EC budget after West Germany, by far the Community's richest member" (Wall 5). Although Thatcher did not run a campaign based on economic inequities within the EEC, she did dedicate herself to seeking a better deal for the UK, an undertaking that Prime Minister David Cameron would pick up forty years later. At the Dublin European Council in 1979, after a series of proposals were made to alleviate the UK's financial burden, Thatcher made her infamous "I want my money back" demand when she proclaimed that "a series of ad hoc fixes would not be the answer," and told the press: "I am only talking about our money, no one else's" (Thatcher qtd. in Wall 6). Thatcher's comment caused much anger among other members of the EEC who felt that Britain was already making self-serving demands on what was now an entire community's resources, and who worried that, should Britain get its way, they would ultimately lose out. Indeed, Thatcher's comment was an indication that the UK remained concerned exclusively with national self-interest from the outset and was never truly committed to establishing a federal political partnership with its European neighbours. However, the reaction of other members to Thatcher's demands also indicates that this suspicion worked both ways, and Europe has also always been wary of the UK, perhaps frustrated by the power dynamics that meant the UK could legitimately make such demands in the first place despite not being a founding member state. At the risk of accusation, there may also have been an element of frustration as other member states sought to assert their dominance in this new partnership by somewhat exploiting British resources and claiming that doing so was in the interest of all. Either way, Thatcher's demands—and their success—created a dynamic of British resistance to the EEC that never truly dissipated; it may even have been the memory of Thatcher's economic

negotiation that allowed the Leave campaign nearly forty years later to so successfully mobilise support based on (false) claims about the profligate UK contribution to the EU budget.

The feud over the British contribution to the EEC budget continued over several years, and intensified again in 1982 when Britain invoked the Luxembourg Compromise to challenge agricultural price fixing and further protect the UK economy while ensuring that contributions to the budget did not rise. The invocation was outvoted by other member states, which was met with anger on the British side. The media reaction was more understanding of other members' behaviour: "*The Times* saw the whole incident as 'a gesture of exasperation at what our partners perceive as impossibly selfish and obstructive behaviour on Britain's part'" (Wall 14)— exasperation that began three years earlier with Thatcher's demands in 1979. The resistance with which both Britain and other member states engaged in these negotiations drove many to doubt the entire project of the EEC. In 1983, foreign secretary Geoffrey Howe suggested that "people are coming to see the Community as at best irrelevant and at worst obstructive to Europe's fundamental challenge to halt decline in its international competitiveness, to restore sustainable growth and to generate new employment" (Howe qtd. in Wall 28). Certainly, there was major concern that the project was run counter to national instincts to protect their own economies and was therefore destined to fail.

However, even with tensions over budget contribution, the UK government did remain committed to seeing the project forward and looking ahead to a successful compromise that would be satisfactory for all members. There were marked attempts on the British side to push for a single-market European community that would edge towards the vision of the EU that first inspired the ECSC. However, Thatcher's government spent most of the 1980s fending off treaty changes and entirely new treaties that would have radically shifted the nature of the agreement

towards becoming a truly federal "United States of Europe," reaffirming British resistance to an "ever closer union." Thatcher's sharpest derision of the EEC came in 1988, when in a speech she said: "We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels" (Thatcher qtd. in Wall 80). Here, loud and clear, is the expression of a feeling of power shrinkage in the decade and a half after Britain joined the EEC. Although there was no evident lament that Britain could not control others in this new bloc, there was a concern that it would begin to *be controlled* by forces outside of itself—a notion that was greatly unsettling to a nation so used to controlling others. This very fear of and frustration about a perceived rule from Brussels also emerged as a key campaigning point of Leave throughout its Brexit campaign, demonstrating that the roots of this sentiment run much deeper than many cared to recognise. Indeed, Douglas Webber ultimately roots today's continued Euroscepticism in Thatcher's prime ministerial term, suggesting that "she played a key role in this period planting the seeds of Euroscepticism that would grow during the next 25 years to the point where this movement not only overwhelmed and destroyed the prime ministerships of her two Conservative successors, Major and Cameron, but also brought the UK to the brink of Brexit" (Webber 188). If this is true, then the precedent for Brexit began almost forty years before the referendum vote happened.

A decade on, the UK government under Tony Blair made the controversial decision in 1997 not to join the euro in the first wave in 1999. The impression was, at first, that the UK would join later, once it had been assured that the move would benefit the UK economy and to allow a smoother transition into something as yet unknown. That process was analysed through a series of "five tests" (Wall 170), but even as preparations were made, by 2005 the British

economy was performing much better than the eurozone economies (Wall 171), and the potential

for success in a referendum on the euro was extremely low. As we know, the UK never ended up

joining the European Monetary Union (EMU), and this decision remains one of the starkest

indicators that Britain saw itself as exceptional, both in terms of its power and its ideology,

within the EU.

Blair furthered this message through his attempts to assert the British perspective on the

Iraq War. While many other EU members remained strongly sceptical or vehemently opposed to

military action in Iraq, Blair followed US President George W. Bush into combat. Both the euro

decision and Blair's attitudes towards Iraq yet again emphasise how British interest and action

have, for a long time, appeared opposed to Europe's. Stephen Wall describes Britain as "A

Stranger in Europe" in the title of his book, suggesting both that Britain was a sort of imposter in

the bloc in the first place, and that its relationship with the EU throughout its membership was

fraught with difference. Certainly, the exceptionalism with which Thatcher and Blair conducted

their politics with the EU show marked attempts to protect British interests while performing,

unconvincingly, dedication to European interests as a whole. The UK's rejection of the "ever

closer union" instituted by the Treaty of Rome perhaps indicates why it has been so hesitant to

fully engage with the organisation since it joined, and this refusal demonstrates a frustration that

the EU has been moving towards a goal that is not endorsed wholeheartedly by the UK. The

UK's focus on the economic benefits of the EEC from the outset has meant that whenever the

economic gain begins to look weaker, the UK draws back and retreats into Euroscepticism.

However, even though most of the UK's grievances with the EU have been based on the

economy, there was also a clear power dynamic threatening the relationship between the two

from the very outset of UK membership. The struggle for pre-eminence displayed by the UK

during this time also points out a key aspect of Englishness: the belief in their superiority over other countries. Evidently, such a belief precludes an ability to thrive in a system that places them on an equal level to others. It was perhaps for this reason that David Cameron's Thatcher-esque promise to renegotiate the terms of EU membership for the UK in 2015 resonated particularly strongly in England. While he judged this well, his decision to call a referendum—perhaps hoping to echo Wilson's "Yes" success in 1975—was, as we know, sorely miscalculated.

Threats to a United United Kingdom: Insurgent Nationalisms and Englishness

The very English pursuit of dominance within the European project mirrors the Anglo-centric axis of power that has existed in the territorial UK for centuries, and which has been the undercurrent of recent insurgent nationalisms in Scotland, Wales, and Ireland that threaten to break up the UK. The newly invigorated calls for political or total independence in each country are the result of discontent with England's historical supremacy over the affairs of the UK and have been a central point of conflict and negotiation in Parliament for the last fifty years. This conflict has only been exacerbated since the Brexit vote, in which voting patterns across the UK were starkly different across border lines. For the sake of concision about what is a vastly complex set of relationships, this discussion will cover the insurgence of Scottish, Welsh, and Irish nationalism specifically in the last century, though it will focus primarily on the years since UK entry into the EEC (1973) and on the situation during and since Tony Blair's prime ministerial term from 1997–2007.

Irish nationalism has been among the most violent and aggressive forms of nationalism over the last century and has constituted a genuine threat to English people, and indeed Irish

people, for almost all of that time. The Irish nationalist ambition is in Arthur Aughey's words:

"to bring about the end of partition in Ireland" (Aughey, *Nationalism, Devolution* 129)—to

reunite Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland. Since the Act of Union in 1801 that first

officially bonded Ireland with the Kingdom of Great Britain, Tim Coogan suggests there has

been "a constitutional movement for the repeal of the Union and for Home Rule" (Coogan 4).

This movement has been spearheaded by two political groups in particular: the first is the Irish

political party Sinn Féin (the name of the party meaning "ourselves"), and the Irish Republican

Army, commonly known as the IRA. While Sinn Féin were the parliamentary negotiators of the

Home Rule movement, the IRA was an extremist organisation that had no elected political

power, but which did affect policy-making through acts of terrorism. The IRA was founded in

1858 by James Stephens and Thomas Clarke Luby, following the suppression of an earlier

revolutionary group (Coogan 11–12), and since 1903 it has undertaken several violent campaigns

against both England and Northern Ireland. The first in England was the "Dynamite campaign":

"a series of dynamitings carried out by young Irishmen throughout England for approximately

two years beginning in 1903," followed by a bombing campaign in 1939 (Coogan 14–15). In

1969, what became known as "The Troubles" officially began—a three-decades-long conflict

between nationalists and unionists spearheaded by the IRA. In July of 1972, the IRA bombed

Belfast killing nine people and injuring 130, known as "Bloody Friday" "What was the IRA?"),

and in 1974 it bombed two pubs in Birmingham—one of which is recounted in Jonathan Coe's

The Rotters' Club, which will be explored in the next chapter. Various ceasefires occurred during

which time the IRA negotiated with the British, but it was not until 1998 and the "Good Friday

Agreement" (otherwise known as the Belfast Agreement) that the Troubles ended, and IRA

violence finally ceased. In 2005, the IRA officially disbanded, but the legacy and trauma of its

operations still linger in the relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and between Ireland and England. Evidently, the force of Irish nationalism has threatened England and Englishness for almost one hundred years, and over that time, it has forced England to reckon with its own identity in opposition.

In Scotland, the nationalist movement has visibly occurred in a far more concentrated space of time than the movement in Ireland, though it has been carried out with equal fervour. Scottish nationalism, which strives for political devolution and, more recently, independence from the UK, has proceeded extremely quickly since 1997, when Tony Blair made an election promise to introduce new plans for political devolution for all UK territories. Blair's plans were an attempt to appease the growing desire for political autonomy in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales that was fuelling nationalist political parties like Sinn Féin in Ireland, the Scottish National Party (SNP) in Scotland, and Plaid Cymru in Wales, and to secure the ongoing union of the UK. However, the plan was carried out by Westminster in an attempt to appease insurgent nationalisms and ended up being a flawed attempt at power-sharing throughout the UK. Although Blair's plans did initially garner support from England's neighbours, who had unsuccessfully sought political devolution for years, in time growing restlessness emerged and renewed demands for more independence trickled to the fore. In Scotland, this effort was led by SNP leader Alex Salmond, who had significant support among voters who were particularly distrustful of Blair after his decision to support George W. Bush in Iraq, and who was therefore able to take control of the Scottish Parliament in Holyrood, Edinburgh. Salmond laid the groundwork for a Scottish referendum on complete independence from the UK—a sign to Westminster and to England that devolution was not enough. The referendum was held in 2014, seven years after Blair left office, but he continued to be involved in the debate despite his

absence from government. According to James Foley and Pete Ramand, "Blair warned that independence would cost every Scottish family £5,000, an alarmist slice of fantasy arithmetic dreamed up by Whitehall officials" (Foley and Ramand 1). The strategy Blair used here of financial instability was echoed by David Cameron in the lead-up to the Brexit referendum in 2016, when he warned that leaving the EU would cost the UK insurmountable amounts of money and plunge it into a recession. However, unlike Cameron, Blair's tactics (of course alongside many others carried out in support of UK unity) actually worked, and Scotland voted "No" to independence, forcing Salmond out of office. It's possible to speculate that Cameron's emphasis on economic scaremongering during the Brexit "Remain" campaign was because of the success of the economic perspective in Scotland in 2014, though if that is the case, the similarity between the questions (and populations) at hand was sorely misjudged. According to Foley and Ramand, the Scottish independence referendum was Blair's doing: "his major legacy was handing Scottish nationalists an indefinite right to govern Holyrood. Just as Thatcher's policies had produced devolution, so Blair's transformation of Labour produced 2014, perhaps the biggest threat to British statehood for generations" (Foley and Ramand 1). The symmetry cast here between Thatcher and Blair suggests a continuity between two prime ministers across party lines, and indicates that during their terms in office they were both responsible for bringing the UK to the point of dissolution. It also casts an important connection between Thatcher's involvement with the EU, and Blair's handling of UK unity, that reinforces how Englishness is based on the desire to dominate.

Turning to Wales, Arthur Aughey in his book *Nationalism, Devolution and the Challenge to the United Kingdom State* writes that in 1973, the Royal Commission on the Constitution "found that many of its witnesses thought Wales should continue to have a strong voice at

Westminster. Equally, it found a deep anxiety that national identity was eroding because of policies which paid insufficient regard to Wales" (Aughey, *Nationalism, Devolution* 146). However, in a 1979 referendum on Welsh devolution offering Wales the opportunity to govern itself, "All eight counties in Wales voted no and by substantial margins" (Aughey, *Nationalism, Devolution* 146). According to Aughey, the results of the 1979 referendum suggested that the Welsh "lacked confidence in each other" (Aughey, *Nationalism, Devolution* 147) and in their ability to govern themselves, despite a genuine concern that they were not being given enough attention in Westminster policy-making. When Tony Blair's New Labour government reopened the discussion on devolution, there was a marked shift in Welsh attitudes towards embracing the opportunity to self-govern. Jonathan Bradbury suggests that there were three reasons for this shift:

> First, devolution offered itself as one way of realising New Labour's concern for autonomy and responsibility within communities…Second, devolution was now more in tune with Welsh Labour sentiment…the Labour Party, perhaps even despite itself, had become a vehicle of local patriotism…Third, the Thatcherite programme of privatisation shifted the focus of Welsh politics from a concern to maintain an economy reliant on nationalised industries towards a need to attract inward investment…the imperative was to market Wales properly as an attractive nation/region within the European Union. (Bradbury qtd. in Aughey *Nationalism, Devolution* 147)

In Bradbury's analysis, Welsh nationalism was re-invigorated in the 1980s and 1990s under Margaret Thatcher, John Major, and Tony Blair's prime ministerial terms, and occurred in response to both growing alignment between Labour Party priorities in Wales and England, as well as the desire to become a more unique and distinctive country within the EU. While this movement still had widespread support throughout Wales, unlike in Ireland and Scotland, the Welsh nationalist movement was "more comfortable with the notion of devolution within the context of the UK" (Servini), and most of the population felt no strong desire to separate from the UK entirely. Given the historical relationship between England and Wales, which traces back

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as far as the Normans and was made binding under Henry VIII's reign, Welsh nationalism has certainly been historically more muted than Scottish and Irish nationalism. However, devolution precipitated a resurgence and reinvigoration of Welsh nationalist sentiment that achieved the opposite of what Blair intended and complicated the stability of the UK even more.

Ultimately, while devolution offered Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales greater opportunity to self-govern, debates surrounding independence and anger at the Anglo-centrism of government in the UK remain heated. Foley and Ramand suggest that the intensity with which Scotland in particular—but I would argue also Ireland and Wales—have been seeking to assert their own identities, comes down to a discontent with the way that British politics is carried out, and the way that its power is portrayed. They write: "British politics relies on an imaginary sense of power and purpose; but the reality often intrudes, exposing the shabbiness of Westminster's ambitions. When facts trespass on prevailing assumption, a crisis results; and UK politics faces crises on many fronts" (Foley and Ramand 16). Just as Aughey writes about English "exceptionalism," here Foley and Ramand suggest that this exceptional idea is cast over Britain as a whole. However, they also remind us that the fractures within the UK paint a different picture; the three periphery nationalisms resemble each other closely in terms of their nationalist aspirations, while England remains an outsider. Foley and Ramand go on to suggest that "for the most powerful states, nationalism affirms their right to rule" (Foley and Ramand 17). Scotland, Ireland, and Wales are not among the "most powerful states," but they do meet this expectation. While English nationalism follows this trend, it does so with the additional caveat that it also affirms their right to rule *others*. It is this distinction that explains the nationalist projects in all four corners of the UK—the centre struggles to retain its power while the periphery seeks to escape from under it, and it is the threat of a disunited kingdom that explains why discussions

surrounding Englishness have been re-invigorated with such speed over the last two decades since Tony Blair's devolution plans began.

David Cameron and the UK's Cliff Dive into the Brexit Referendum

How Brexit came to be is the combined result of the UK's fraught relationship with the EU, and the impact of devolution and the rise of insurgent nationalisms within the UK on the English character. However, the opportunity to turn these underlying feelings into action was truly initiated in 2015, when David Cameron and his Conservative Party launched his re-election campaign for the general election of that year. The promise of a referendum vote on membership in the EU before 2017 was established as a central component of Cameron's campaign, and was released in the Conservative Party manifesto in April 2015. At the time, the promise of holding a referendum was glossed over by the media, appearing last in a *BBC News* list of "Key Messages" ("Election 2015: Conservative manifesto at-a-glance") and next to last in a *Guardian* article that also offered a summary of the manifesto (Perraudin). Despite being a key element of his political platform going forward, Cameron did not harp on his offer to hold a referendum throughout his campaign. Pauline Schnapper wrote that Europe was "The Elephant in the Room" in an essay of the same title that predicted that debates about Europe would dominate the political discussion in the lead-up to a referendum. She argues that the inclusion of a referendum in his manifesto was the result of a ten-year attempt to "please the growing number of Eurosceptics in his party," and she recounts his previous attempts to do so:

> When the Lisbon treaty was signed by the Brown government in 2007, he had demanded a referendum and when this proposal was turned down, William Hague, the shadow Foreign Secretary, promised "not to let matters rest there", although what he meant by this exactly was never clarified. Indeed, Cameron abandoned the pledge when the Lisbon treaty was ratified by all other member states, much to the dismay of his radical Eurosceptic backbenchers. He was therefore already on the defensive when he pledged in

the 2010 manifesto to introduce a bill in Parliament which would require any new transfer of power to Brussels to be subject to a referendum. The party would also campaign for a repatriation of powers to the national level in three areas: the Charter of Fundamental Rights, criminal justice and social legislation. (Schnapper 2)

Schnapper's observations shed light on the precedent to Cameron's decision to put forth a referendum—something that many people throughout Britain had overlooked—and offers an understanding of why Cameron decided to include an EU referendum in his campaign in the first place. Not only was he throwing a bone to the Eurosceptic wing of his party, but he was doing so after several failed attempts to appease them during his first prime ministerial term.

Yet, though the offer of a referendum may have made political sense for Cameron as leader of a party with a Eurosceptic wing, what is not so easily explained is how Cameron could justify putting the future of the country on the line for an ultimately self-serving purpose. In the wake of Brexit and even now, Cameron is continuously and harshly criticised for so willingly offering a vote and giving voice to a wing of his party that he did not belong to—a voice that resonated with England far more strongly than Cameron and his cabinet anticipated. In the abstract of her essay, Pauline Schnapper goes further than to say that Cameron was unprepared, suggesting that "it was not in the *interest* of either the Conservatives, Labour or the Liberal Democrats to make much use of the issue, leaving it to UKIP and, to a certain extent the SNP" (Schnapper 1, emphasis mine). Here, Schnapper indicates that the Conservatives put forth a manifesto pledge that did not even serve them, let alone the entire UK. Even more alarmingly, as Jonathan Coe recalls in his BrexLit novel *Middle England*, which is explored in part two of this thesis, nobody truly expected the referendum to be a success for the Leave campaign. Even those who most vehemently rallied for Brexit—notably Boris Johnson, now the Conservative prime minister, and Nigel Farage, the leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which existed for the sole purpose of leaving the EU, had no plans for what would happen if the vote

delivered a Leave majority. Cameron's decision not to discuss Europe and an EU referendum at length in the lead-up to the 2015 general election, as Schnapper suggests, surely contributed to the rise of UKIP's political platform, and provided an opportunity for the reassertion of English nationalism in England.

UKIP has been a steadily growing force in British politics since its inception in 1993. The party's primary—and arguably only—political message lies in its opposition to the Maastricht treaty, and its desire to take the UK out of the EU. Yet, even before there was an opportunity to make this happen, the popularity of UKIP was gaining ground. A *BBC News* article written by Alex Hunt in 2014 titled "UKIP: The story of the UK Independence Party's rise" suggests that leader Nigel Farage "seems to have struck a chord with disenchanted voters from 'the big three'" (Hunt). He writes that by 2013 "UKIP, rather than Westminster's official Labour opposition, seemed to have become the party of choice for the anti-government vote and the anti-politics vote" (Hunt). Since there was no impending referendum in 2014 to explain the trend towards UKIP votes, one can conclude that the reasons for UKIP's growing popularity, at this stage, was more closely tied to anti-establishment rhetoric and disenfranchisement—both side effects of the 2008 economic crash. Indeed, UKIP membership after the 2008 crash soared from 14,630 in 2008 to 32,447 in 2013 (Hunt). The assumed link between UKIP votes and the struggling economy is in fact reflected in UKIP's logo, which depicts the name of the party as the strike through the symbol for the British pound—where the monetary symbol suggests a promise of greater wealth and prosperity. Other logos include the word "UKIP" appearing to the left of a lion roaring—a symbol that appears strikingly similar to the lion that represents Premier League football. The imagery used by UKIP began to catch the eye of voters who were frustrated with

the narrow political sphere dominated by the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats, which for them represented the maintenance of a status quo that did not serve them.

Despite this gradual surge in popularity, UKIP never truly held any political power in Westminster. They did not even hold an elected seat in Westminster until 2015 (TLDR News), and haven't held another since, after losing it in the 2017 snap election ("Election 2017 Results"). Having said this, they have had better representation in the European Parliament as MEPs, holding 24 out of 73 UK seats in 2014 and beating both the Conservatives and Labour (TLDR News). However, when David Cameron was re-elected in 2015 and preparations for an EU referendum began, UKIP was able to fully mobilise on its own political platform, offering an opportunity to reject mainstream politics in a meaningful way. UKIP channelled frustration with the UK government towards Brussels and the EU, arguing that current problems stemmed from the UK's membership in a supranational organisation. Under Farage's leadership, the party achieved this in a few ways. In 2010, the Conservative Party pledge promised to reduce immigration to the tens of thousands, but in 2015, the migration level was recorded at 330,000 by the Office for National Statistics. Although the UK was never part of the Schengen area—the zone that allows the free movement of people across national borders in Europe—EU citizens were able to live and work in the UK, just as UK residents could live and work in any other member country. The UK had also been one of the only EU countries to accept East European immigrants after many of the former-Communist countries joined the EU in 2004, which was the largest wave of immigration in its recent history (Warrell) and raised questions surrounding how that surge would impact UK wages and employment prospects. Farage used these concerns surrounding immigration—on employment as well as social services including the NHS and education—to suggest that voting Leave would be a sure way to prevent such high levels of

immigration from happening again and to "Take Back Control" of UK borders. He claimed that

Turkey was joining the EU (Stewart and Mason) (even though this was untrue) to incite fear over

another immigration wave—now especially targeted towards the Middle East, inciting more

xenophobia and, in this case, Islamophobia as well. Farage also teamed up with Boris Johnson of

the Conservative Party to spearhead the Leave campaign, which lent political legitimacy to him

where he had previously had no stable power. Further reinforcing the idea that the EU was

draining the UK of its ability to care for its own people, the Leave campaign plastered the side of

a red bus with the slogan "We send the EU £350 million a week…let's fund our NHS instead"

(see Appendix, Figure 2). Although this figure has since been contested for accuracy, the bus

was a key focus of the campaign, garnering much media attention and inspiring many to become

more optimistic about the possibilities for life outside of the EU. All of this, on top of the 2010

eurozone crisis and the 2015 migration crisis, Euroscepticism began to rise rapidly throughout

2015 and into 2016, and while Cameron remained primarily silent or on the defensive, UKIP

aided by Johnson slowly began to take over the conversation.

Over the course of the campaign, the political atmosphere throughout Britain started to

become more toxic and threatening. As stakes rose, which side of the referendum one supported

became not only a point of political difference, but of personal difference, and the UK became

increasingly polarised. While the starkest indicator of the polarisation felt among citizens is the

41% increase in reported hate crimes after the Brexit referendum was held ("Race and religious

hate crimes rose 41% after EU vote"), during the campaign itself there were also clear signs of

an emerging divide. On June 16, 2016, exactly one week before the referendum was held,

Yorkshire MP Jo Cox was brutally murdered by a man named Thomas Mairn, a white

supremacist and Nazi sympathiser. Cox was targeted for her support of the campaign to remain

in the EU, and the attack was carried out as she was on her way to a public library to hold a surgery[1] for her constituents. Mairn shot her before dragging her into the street where he repeatedly stabbed her, as well as a 77-year-old man who attempted to intervene (Cobain, Parveen and Taylor). According to eyewitnesses, as he carried out the murder Mairn muttered: "Britain first, keep Britain independent, Britain will always come first," before finally yelling "This is for Britain" (Cobain, Parveen, and Taylor). This sickening act of terror revealed the way that the EU referendum had incited far-right extremism—not only empowering Eurosceptics, but also racist, white-supremacist factions and individuals across the UK. That the attack took place in Yorkshire—a Brexit hotspot—also demonstrates that the divide was felt most strongly in Leave epicentres, and this trend was further reinforced by the fact that England and Wales saw the sharpest increase in hate crimes post-Brexit referendum as opposed to Scotland and Northern Ireland ("Brexit 'major influence' in racism and hate crime rise"). The EU referendum campaign left a trail of hatred and violence from which the UK has yet to recover. It unleashed far-right sentiment that had been simmering under the surface of society, and its success was consolidated by a 52% Leave vote on June 23, 2016.

Post-Referendum Britain: Uncertainty Looms

From experience, the aftershock of the referendum was tangible in the atmosphere of England in June 2016. There was a sense of overwhelming silence and reflection on what had just happened, which was then consequently overwhelmed by a seething sense of disappointment, then anger, and confusion on both sides. When Boris Johnson took the stage for the Leave campaign to trumpet the results, his dishevelled state prophesied what was to be a

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[1] In British politics, a "surgery" is a "session at which a Member of Parliament, local councillor, etc., is available to be consulted locally by his constituents, usually on regular occasions" (*OED*).

terrifying and turbulent few years, all defined by political chaos, uncertainty, and painfully slow negotiation with the EU. Indeed, to the date of writing, almost four full years after the initial referendum, despite the fact that the UK officially left the EU on January 31, 2020, the transitionary period to disentangle from EU law and customs union arrangements is far from over. So, in a sense, Brexit is still not complete, and in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, it remains unlikely that it will be for some time while the world trains its focus on other things. The unpreparedness of the government to tackle a Leave vote was a potent indication that there were two divergent understandings of Englishness—one portrayed by Cameron and his confidence in the UK's progressive attitude towards international institutions, and the other portrayed by Nigel Farage and his Eurosceptic, isolationist, and xenophobic rhetoric. Cameron, and indeed most of the UK's politicians and people, was unable to recognise the strength of the latter's resonance in England, which suggests that Brexit revealed something about Englishness that many people had never truly acknowledged and accepted.

Given the difference in voting across the UK, the Brexit vote has also reignited debates surrounding Scottish independence in particular, while the debacle over how the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland would be affected by Brexit has led to a greater resurgence of Irish nationalist sentiment as well. Although Wales also slimly voted to leave the EU, independence debates are unsurprisingly having ripple effects there too, as the prospect of UK disintegration looms large. Scottish National Party Leader and First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon has already requested another Scottish independence referendum, claiming understandably that Brexit provides new grounds for independence that the Scottish people should have the opportunity to vote on. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has rejected that request, suggesting that the recent 2014 referendum deems it unnecessary. Of course, there is also the

possibility that Johnson denied Sturgeon's request because he fears that she was right and, this time, Scotland might really vote "Yes."

After David Cameron officially gave his notice of resignation—the exact response to a Leave vote he had previously claimed he would never give—the situation became even more complicated. Theresa May replaced Cameron as prime minister on July 19, 2016, promising to deliver Brexit under "strong and stable leadership" despite having been on the side of Remain in the lead-up to the referendum. Luke McGee of CNN suggests that May was able to become prime minister because: "She backed Remain, but her track record in the Home Office meant she was tough enough to stand up to the EU. She was the best candidate to unite two sides of the Conservative Party that voted for different things" (McGee). Indeed, although May's message was intended to provide composure to the Brexit proceedings, she was ultimately unable to live up to her own expectations, and the UK entered a period of political deadlock. In June 2017, less than a year after entering office, May called for a snap election to increase her parliamentary majority, which would allow her to push through her Brexit plans with ease (McGee). However, instead of gaining a larger majority, May lost her majority altogether, creating new challenges for securing the Brexit she wanted. Creating a confidence and supply agreement with the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party, May was able to "prop up her minority government," and she continued to negotiate with the EU, during which time her negotiating position weakened (McGee). When an agreement was reached between May and the EU, her proposal was put to the House of Commons three times—and every time it was rejected. Meanwhile, as May continued to push for her deal to be passed, the EU allowed the official date for Brexit to be pushed back multiple times to allow the prime minister time to unite her parliament. This not only created an atmosphere of frustration within the government, but across the UK as well; the

population, while many remained vehemently opposed to Brexit going forward at all, became

extremely tired of waiting for something to happen. The uncertainty of how and when Brexit

might happen was worse than the prospect of it actually happening. In her final push to pass a

deal, May told her party that if they backed her deal, she would resign as prime minister,

allowing someone else to carry her work forward. Even though May had lost the confidence of

her party and her cabinet, even this did not work, and May resigned without delivering Brexit.

Since May's resignation in July 2019, the UK has procured yet another new prime

minister, Boris Johnson. Former Mayor of London Boris Johnson was a key figure of the Leave

campaign from the outset, and though he is often derided for his scruffy appearance and remains

severely unpopular among many Remainers, he has managed to successfully deliver a Brexit

deal—the first Conservative leader in four years to live up to his own promise to "Get Brexit

Done." Johnson entered office through a Conservative leadership contest, i.e., he was not voted

in by the general public. Although he managed to secure a Brexit deal in October 2019, like

May, Johnson's deal was rejected by lawmakers, and he also triggered a new general election in

an attempt to prevent further deadlock and to ensure that the UK left the EU by January 2020.

The general election took place on December 12, 2019, and it proved to be one of the most

remarkable votes in recent British political history. The Conservative party under Johnson won

365 seats—47 more seats than they previously had ("UK results: Conservatives win majority").

Almost the entirety of England voted blue, i.e., Conservative, with the notable exception of

London. These results were extraordinary because many constituencies which are historically

red—i.e., who have consistently voted Labour for decades—switched to support Johnson,

suggesting either that Brexit had become essentially the only policy that constituents were

interested in, or that they were voting against a Jeremy Corbyn leadership. The same happened in

reverse in London, which historically votes Conservative due to the high amount of wealth concentrated there. Londoners voted Labour hoping that a Jeremy Corbyn leadership would allow a do-over for the Brexit vote. The rest of the UK was split: Scotland voted overwhelmingly for the SNP—an indication that the Scots are more interested than ever in independence, while Northern Ireland was split between Sinn Féinn and the DUP. Wales, too, was split between Conservatives and Plaid Cymru—the Welsh national party. Though the general election results consolidated Johnson's position as PM and have allowed him to successfully deliver Brexit in January 2020, they also suggest a new political divide is emerging throughout the UK along national lines—one that may see the union break apart for good.

The five years since the Brexit referendum have been filled with uncertainty and chaos. The shocking events that both led up to and proceeded from the 2016 referendum have driven the people of the UK to re-evaluate their own identities and relationships to the world, as well as their relationship to their, for now, united kingdom. England, with its majority Leave vote, has revealed that its identity is steeped in a desire for and belief in its own power and control, and that it feels aggrieved in a European organisation of equals. Ultimately, Englishness now seems to stand in opposition to the direction the world is heading in—towards increasing interconnectedness. Yet, it is also apparent that this identity is not felt unanimously, and that for many English people, Brexit has been a horrifying ordeal. In the literary world, England's struggle for identity has been a theme for decades, but the unique and concentrated upheaval of Brexit has inspired a new literary movement that is essential for understanding how that identity continues to be shaped today. In the next part of this thesis, I will move on to discuss both literature published before the 2016 referendum and the "BrexLit" published afterwards, in order to demonstrate how literature contends with the remarkable problem of Englishness.

PART TWO

Chapter Three
Pre-Brexit Referendum Literature: Problematising Englishness

As the poem that begins this thesis—*The True-Born Englishman* by Daniel Defoe—suggests, literature has functioned over the centuries as a means of understanding and reacting to the political debates surrounding English nationalism, and has been used as a medium through which to reflect on the nature of English identity. In his book *Literary Englands*, David Gervais suggests that "In our time 'Englishness' has become a theme for speculation rather than dogma; twentieth-century writers have found it an elusive and ambivalent concept" (Gervais iii). Indeed, in post-referendum Britain as new theories and ideas surrounding Englishness emerge, an abundance of literary material has been published that considers both the reasons for and the implications of the Brexit referendum—a literary movement the *Financial Times* dubbed "BrexLit." These literary texts, alongside several published before Brexit, provide useful insight into the condition of Englishness as experienced in the immediate lived moment. The speed with which most BrexLit novels were published also attests to this. These are not just works of fiction; they are documents of history.

One cannot understand David Cameron's call for a referendum and the outcome in 2016 without considering the historical tensions between Britain and the EU, nor can we understand the marked difference between how the English voted compared with their UK neighbours without understanding the rise of insurgent nationalisms and their historical groundings. In the same way, one cannot understand BrexLit without first understanding the literary stage onto which it walks post-referendum in 2016. Of course, literature that grapples with Englishness pre-Brexit is incredibly extensive, and I could not hope to deal with all of it comprehensively. I have

chosen to consider three works that best represent the pursuit and formation of an English

identity at the turn of the twenty-first century. They are as follows in the order they appear in the

chapter: *England, England* by Julian Barnes, *The Rotters' Club* by Jonathan Coe, and *Jerusalem*,

a play by Jez Butterworth. These texts were all renowned for their representations of modern-day

England and Britain, and give vital insight into how Englishness is discussed in literary texts in

the two decades leading up to the Brexit referendum. The contemporary nature of the works is

deliberate and intends to provide relevant context for discussions surrounding Englishness today.

They will each serve to ground the forthcoming BrexLit conversation and demonstrate how the

referendum altered—or didn't alter—portrayals of Englishness in literature.

Julian Barnes' *England, England*: Creating England's "Tourist Mecca"

Julian Barnes' *England, England* was published in 1998, eighteen years prior to the

Brexit referendum, but this novel is extremely valuable, and almost prophetic, in its engagement

with Englishness, isolationism, and the invocation of history and myths as a tool of

manipulation, making it central to the BrexLit discussion. *England, England* follows Sir Jack

Pitman and Martha Cochrane as they and their colleagues realise the vision of building a new

and improved version of England on the Isle of Wight: a theme park that they call "England,

England." The island becomes a destination for tourists who want to experience all the best

aspects of England—both real and fictional—including Big Ben, Harrods, and the legend and

folk-hero Robin Hood. In Barnes' own words, *England, England* is "about the idea of England,

authenticity and the search for truth, the invention of tradition, and the way in which we forget

our own past" (Barnes, *Conversations* 27). Through another lens, the novel is also about memory

and the construction of identity—both at the individual and the collective levels. Almost every

line considers an aspect, attitude, or idea associated with Englishness, and it is for these reasons that the novel remains so relevant today—at a time when England, and critically the entire United Kingdom, is reckoning with its identity, its history, and its future.

As discussed in part one of this thesis, Englishness is further activated in response to the threat of insurgent nationalisms within the UK, as well as the retraction of England's global significance and power. When Barnes was writing *England, England*, Scotland had just had a successful referendum vote on devolution, meaning that for the first time since 1707, there would be a Scottish parliament that could make decisions away from Westminster (albeit only in areas not specifically reserved to Westminster). The vote sent a message to England that Scotland remained a distinct entity—in other words, it reminded people that Scottish nationalism still exists, and that it seeks to push back against an Anglo-centric British government. In his recent book *English Nationalism: A Short History,* Jeremy Black suggests that it is the very rise of insurgent nationalisms around the UK—in Northern Ireland, Wales, and Scotland—that "precipitated, and, in part, forced upon England" (Black 2) the need to define their own national identity. Given that Barnes' novel depicts an Englishness that firmly rejects its UK neighbours and appeals to instinctual touchstones of English identity that are often based on myth, *England, England* can also be read as a direct reaction to the phenomenon Black describes.

Throughout *England, England*, one of the pillars of English nationalism is defined as knowledge of England's history and the retention of a definitive collective memory. However, from the outset of the novel, both memory and history are regarded as unreliable and therefore untrustworthy. The novel opens with Martha Cochrane, the female protagonist of the book, being asked: "What's your first memory?" (Barnes 3). She replies: "I don't remember," (3) for the very simple reason that, to Martha, all memories are lies. She defines memory as "a memory now of a

memory a bit earlier of a memory before that of a memory way back when" (3), making it impossible to actually remember the first memory itself—each version is layered with the memory of remembering. Knowing that it is in all likelihood a lie, Martha sets the scene of her first memory: putting together a Counties of England jigsaw, which she describes as looking like "a bulgy old lady sitting on a beach with her legs stretched out" (4). She goes on to make a retrospective quip on her inaccurate puzzle attempts: "you know what children are like with jigsaws, they just pick up any old piece and try to force it into a hole, so she probably picked up Lancashire and made it behave like Cornwall" (4). The forcefulness of this image—as if Martha is trying to make a square fit into a circle—indicates a strenuous attempt to unite England geographically. As Peter Childs points out, the image of a young child jamming a puzzle piece depicting a specific part of England into the wrong place "becomes not just a metaphor for the forcing of memory but a metonym for Part Two of the book, in which pieces of England are assembled and forced into place to provide a potted toytown version of the country" (Childs 110). Indeed, when Martha suggests that she probably made Lancashire "*behave* like Cornwall," she indicates a performativity that becomes essential to the functioning of England, England later in the novel, when various geographical places are squashed together to behave like a cohesive whole. It also ironically depicts one of the key figureheads of the England, England project—a project about revitalising and affirming English identity and nationalism—unable to geographically identify areas of her own country. Although Martha is young in this scene, this contributes to an immediate sense of scepticism about whether Martha and her colleagues are really qualified for the undertaking of recreating England, and leads them to question the entire project's legitimacy later in the novel. As the reader discovers, the fact that they are *un*qualified is in actual fact what will make Marth and her colleagues ideal for their roles.

Martha's jigsaw also allows us insight into how she perceives England as part of the greater UK conglomerate. She remembers that "she would usually work her way round the coastline—Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Monmouthshire, Glamorgan, Carmarthen, Pembrokeshire (because England included Wales—that was the bulgy old lady's stomach)—all the way back to Devon, and then fill in the rest, leaving the messy Midlands till last" (Barnes 5). The dismissive suggestion that "England included Wales" is notable, because although English courts have included Wales since 1536, Wales is not a part of England in any other sense. It is a part of the United Kingdom, but not England. Furthermore, Wales becomes "the bulgy old lady's stomach," which evokes the idea that England (the old lady) has swallowed Wales whole—as though England is literally able to consume other countries. There is a distinct sense of English dominance in this image, and Barnes suggests that, even though Martha is very young, she has already been conditioned into an Anglo-centric view of the UK. Furthermore, that England is an "old lady" here signals towards England's long history and, in a respect-your-elders type of way, suggests that England commands more respect and importance than its neighbours—not least because its neighbour is here depicted as a morsel of food. In this puzzle scene, we find the first instance of Anglo-centric thinking in the novel—a trope that continues primarily because mentions of Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland appear very rarely at all. By the omission of its neighbours, England is placed at the heart of the text.

When it comes to creating the blueprint for England, England, it becomes increasingly clear that in order to preserve England and Englishness, the team feels that its UK neighbours must be eradicated from the picture altogether. In part two, the "Gastronomic Sub-Committee" (93) for England, England is discussing the key foods that should be on menus across the island. On the list is "Yorkshire pudding, Lancashire hotpot…Chelsea buns, Cumberland

sausages…muffins, crumpets…and parkin," but "The Sub-Committee banned porridge for its Scottish associations" and "Welsh rarebit, Scotch eggs, and Irish strew were not even discussed" (93–94). In this passage, it becomes starkly clear that this project deliberately eradicates any trace of its neighbours' culture, creating a sanctuary for England and English culture as though it were a protected species. This theme of English isolationism is made even more apparent when Sir Jack decides to base England, England on the Isle of Wight, which is "twenty-three miles in length, thirteen across at its widest point. One hundred and fifty-five square miles" (76) total. Compared with the actual size of England, which is over fifty thousand three hundred square miles, the Isle of Wight is miniscule, but Sir Jack, the entrepreneur and self-proclaimed genius at the helm of the project, asserts that it is "perfect for our purposes. A location dying for makeover and upgrade" (79). Ironically, the Isle of Wight is a colossal downgrade from Old England in terms of size and capacity, and on top of this, everything is designed to look like it used to at some point in the past—the exact opposite of what we would expect from a "makeover and upgrade." However, the fact that Sir Jack describes it as such suggests that he is tapping into what English people see as the idealised version of their country; he is appealing to the underlying hallmarks of English nationalism, which include nostalgia for a great past, which imagine that England is exceptional, and that when another place is built in its image, it is "upgraded" somehow. Certainly, in a sense, the overtaking of the Isle of Wight to build England, England is a microcosmic example of colonialism, which in the novel appears to be extremely gratifying to Sir Jack and his team, as well as to the theme park's visitors.

As they attempt to erase Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland from the picture, Sir Jack and his team, including Martha, seek to guard English history with equal vigour. However, the version of history that they want to protect is deliberately inaccurate, and rather than promote

knowledge, they seek to revive mystical and mythical associations with England to inspire a

connection to the version of Englishness that people *want*. To be sure, Sir Jack is entirely

unconcerned with the accuracy of his project, just as long as it will satisfy the romanticised

version of England that his visitors desire. He hires Dr Max as the team's "Official Historian"—

the word "official" being deeply satirical given the fact that the history he is hired to deliver is

totally unofficial. Dr Max is described paradoxically as a man who "Considered himself

cultured, aware, intelligent, well-informed. No educational or professional connection with

History, as requested" (83). Though Dr Max seems utterly unqualified for the role of an official

historian, his personal idea of himself as "cultured, aware, intelligent" and "well-informed" make

him perfect for what Sir Jack is looking for—someone who *feels* like they know English culture,

and can therefore replicate that feeling to satisfy the ignorance and desires of visitors. Indeed, it

is not in the job description of the Official Historian that he should be precise. Another member

of the team, Jeff, sums up Dr Max's actual role in a conversation with him:

> 'You are our Official Historian. You are responsible, how can I put it, for our
> history. Do you follow?'
> 'Clear as a b-ell, so far, my dear Jeff.'
> 'Right. Well, the point of *our* history—and I stress the our—will be to make
> guests, those buying what is for the moment referred to as Quality Leisure, *feel better*.'
> 'Better. Ah, the old e-thical questions, what a snake-pit they are. Better.
> Meaning?'
> 'Less ignorant.'
> 'Precisely. That's why I was a-ppointed, I assume.'
> 'Max, you missed the verb.'
> 'Which one?'
> 'Feel. We want them to *feel* less ignorant. Whether they *are* or not is quite another
> matter, even outside our jurisdiction.' (73)

In this pivotal dialogue, we discover that in this novel, history is not used as a tool of

information, but rather of deception—the idea that one is learning about a nation's past is the

cornerstone of England, England's marketing strategy, but it is not its end goal. The emphasis on

"*feel*" implies that England, England is designed to deceive its visitors in its performance of

England and Englishness—it purposefully corrupts history to create an emotive space where people can imagine themselves to be culturally immersed, but where they are actually being culturally brainwashed. Yet, that brainwashing is achieved by simply invoking traditional and folkloric versions of Englishness that are continuously asserted through myths and stereotypes, and are therefore extremely gratifying for the average person. Later, as Dr Max writes a historical report for the island, the narrator offers the reader a disheartening conclusion: "that patriotism's most eager bedfellow was ignorance, not knowledge" (85). Jeff's earlier assertion that England, England is designed to fight *feelings* of ignorance rather than ignorance itself is ultimately exposed as a strategy to bolster patriotism and gratify visitors while keeping people in the dark about the unpleasant facets of England's true history.

It is not until deeper into the novel that the reader becomes aware of which aspects of Englishness Sir Jack and his team believe the island should display; in other words, which mixture of truth and myth they believe will most satisfy its visitors' desired vision of Englishness. To inform their decision-making, Jeff creates a survey where "twenty-five countries had been asked to list six characteristics, virtues or quintessences which the word England suggested to them" (86). The reader is reassured that those who took the survey "were not being asked to free-associate; there was no pressure of time on the respondents, no preselected multiple choice," and that, "Citizens of the world therefore told Sir Jack in an unprejudiced way what in their view the Fifty Quintessences of Englishness were" (86). Jeff's survey and Sir Jack's instructions invite people from around the world—notably not from England—to define the country based on their personal perceptions of it. Their question is designed to bring to mind the most stereotypical and uncomplicated perceptions of England, and this is evident in the results of the survey: At the top of the list sits the "1. Royal Family," followed by "2. Big Ben/Houses of

Parliament and 3. Manchester United Football Club" (86). Further down, we find "Robin Hood and His Merrie Men" and "Phlegm/Stiff Upper Lip" (86). Robin Hood's appearance in this list is notable, primarily because he is a mythical character, but also because he is a heroic one. Of course, for England, England this is the perfect subject: one that makes visitors feel a sense of English superiority and escapism simultaneously. That England, England is constructed based on the results of this list demonstrate that its ultimate project is to generate a pseudo-history that is designed to appeal to the most comfortable and attractive notions of Englishness, and that it relies on an extremely limited and romanticised vision of England. Furthermore, the resulting list of "quintessences" is absent of any actual "characteristics" or "virtues" as was originally requested—which comically implies that no virtues immediately spring to mind.

On a more uncomfortable note, Barnes also brings the reader's attention to the way that this list is labelled as "unprejudiced." There is, in fact, blatant prejudice throughout the entire list—specifically racial prejudice. What people come up when they think of England with is a monolithic interpretation of what England looks like. For example, there is no mention of the ethnic diversity of England, or its embrace of a globalised world. Oppositely, all of the people listed are powerful and white: "Shakespeare," "Winston Churchill," "Francis Drake," "Queen Victoria" (87), and the quintessences are all associated with the upper-class, highly-educated strata of English society: "Oxford/Cambridge," "Harrods," "flagellation/public schools" (87). Even the myths and fairy tales that are listed as associated with England, such as "Robin Hood" and "Alice in Wonderland" (87), betray a distinct lack of ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. There is a clear assumption that England is a place of prosperity and power, and one that is dominated by white, bourgeoisie citizens and leaders. As the man most directly contributing to the endurance of these associations, Dr Max becomes another link in the chain, adding himself to

the long list of white men that has the power to write England's history. He is "Caucasian, middle-class, of English stock though unable to trace his ancestry beyond three generations. Mother's origin Welsh borders, father's North Midlands…Spoke one language. Married, no children" (82–83). Although this passage indicates that he is "unable to trace his ancestry," it seems more likely that he is unwilling, for fear of finding out that—horror!—he is not one hundred percent "English stock." The racially imbalanced perspective of English history is not news to anyone, but the effect that it has on the way that not only the English, but the entire world perceives England has far-reaching consequences, which are put on display here during the process of development for England, England.

If England, England is a venture that seeks to further marginalise voices of those traditionally underrepresented or unacknowledged in English society, then its placement on a small island is also an opportunity to reduce the number of people that have access to it and be more selective about who those people are. One way that the island excludes people, and disproportionately people of colour (though this is never explicitly mentioned as a side effect), is by making it a pre-requisite of entering the island to have a good credit rating (184). Because wealth is accumulated more easily by white people (especially white men), England, England is not only isolationist, but also racist and xenophobic—a disturbing precedent to set in their development of a supposedly untarnished and improved version of England. Later in the novel, it becomes clear that this tone is carried forward by those living on England, England when one of the island's new employees, Johnson, has complaints filed against him for his "racist remarks about many of the Visitors' countries of origin" (214). Disturbingly, UKIP's mantra of "Take Back Control" and its spread of propaganda that depicted long lines of refugees during the Brexit referendum achieved exactly the same goal as Sir Jack's credit rating—it made people fear and

sneer the other, creating a prejudiced, and more importantly inaccurate, depiction of what English people look like. It also unleashed a similar torrent of racial abuse that has yet to abate. Unfortunately, just like in England, England, that depiction had an undeniable appeal, and drew support from those who share its vision for what England looks like in its purest form.

The idea of the credit rating also poses questions surrounding capitalism and the role of the free market in this novel. England is far older than capitalism, but the development of England, England as a profit-making venture is an immediate indication that capitalism is a central component of the nation-building process on the island, and Barnes suggests that the greedy preoccupations of the market-driven endeavour to create England, England thwart the proper functioning of democracy. In turn, this leads to the corruption of morality on the island. The idea of a flailing democracy becomes evident during the "two sets of negotiations" (127) held at the outset of the (re-)building process on the island. The narrator notes that "The public was admitted and all proper democratic procedures followed: which meant, as Sir Jack privately observed, that tokenism, special interests, and minority groupings ran the show, the lawyers made a bundle, and you spent your time on all fours with you arsehole getting sunburnt" (127). Sir Jack's comical internal observations suggest that democracy functions in a distinctly un-democratic manner, and he satirises its ability to operate in a capitalist world. Tokenism and special interest imply that the market-driven preoccupations of government lead to internal corruption, while Sir Jack's sneering note that "minority groupings ran the show" seems to betray a politically right-leaning distaste for the protection of minority groups, since it is an exaggerated statement about how influential minorities are able to be in the democratic process. Furthermore, the final phrase of this sentence invokes an image of someone doubled over, or perhaps even begging, demonstrating in physical terms the ways that capitalism warps political

and legal proceedings. The breakdown of democracy and decency on England, England is

elaborated on later in the novel, when Martha reflects:

> In some parts of the world they'd already be facing multi-million-dollar suits for sexual
> harassment, racial abuse, breach of contract in failing to make the client laugh, and God
> knows what else. Thankfully, Island law—in other words, executive decision—
> recognized no specific contract between Visitors and Pitco; instead, reasonable
> complaints were dealt with on an *ad hoc* basis, usually involving financial compensation
> in exchange for silence. (218)

Martha's rumination demonstrates the extent to which a project based on profit and patriotism

can bring a democracy into ruin and can allow shallow corporate interests to become more

important than the people they serve. Barnes satirically (yet morosely) demonstrates here that

when England is created in the image of what people want it to be, it leads to moral ruin and the

breakdown of laws upholding basic rights, even implying that the island has become a

dictatorship. He seems to send a clear message to the reader that what results from Sir Jack's

recreation of England is an extremely bleak vision of what Englishness stands for.

The strategy of the team of entrepreneurs who create England, England—from the survey

on the quintessences of Englishness to the belief in the power of ignorance—is ultimately

extremely successful. In part three of the novel, a reporter writes an article about the island titled:

"A Tourist Mecca Set in a Silver Sea" (181), giving the impression that England, England has

become a destination akin to a religious pilgrimage. She writes approvingly of Sir Jack:

> It was also his original stroke of lateral thinking which brought together in a
> single hundred-and-fifty-five-square-mile zone everything the Visitor might want to see
> of what we used to think of as England. In our time-strapped age, surely it makes sense to
> be able to visit Stonehenge and Anne Hathaway's Cottage in the same morning, take in a
> 'ploughman's lunch' atop the White Cliffs of Dover, before passing a leisurely afternoon
> at the Harrod's emporium inside the Tower of London. (183)

Tellingly, the reporter suggests that the island contains "everything the visitor might *want* to see

of what we *used to think of* as England" (italics mine), suggesting that the project has

successfully rewritten a new, more popular and more satisfying history. The geographical

proximity of the attractions on the island are also a key selling point here, which demonstrates

the appeal of convenience over true cultural immersion—another market-driven preoccupation.

England, England provides its visitors with an opportunity to skim-read the supposed best parts

of England, and gives them an experience that will simply validate their existing beliefs rather

than challenge them.

As the article indicates, just as England, England's corrupt version of history has replaced

the true version of events, England, England has also replaced Old England altogether. The

narrative goes on to depict an Old England in decline, eventually forced to rebrand itself as

simply 'Anglia.' Unsympathetic to the downward trajectory of their mother nation, the island

puts out an official statement, that reads:

> Old England had progressively shed power, territory, wealth, influence, and
> population. Old England was to be compared disadvantageously to some backward
> province of Portugal or Turkey. Old England had cut its own throat and was lying in the
> gutter beneath a spectral gas-light, its only function as a dissuasive example to others.
> FROM DOWAGER TO DOWN-AND-OUT, a *Times* headline had sneeringly put it. Old
> England had lost its history, and therefore—since memory is identity—had lost all sense
> of itself. (259)

This passage unashamedly asserts that England's identity is rooted in its exceptionalism, and that

Old England's loss of power has occurred in a manner akin to a suicide. As part one of this thesis

demonstrated, England's rejection of globalisation and multilateral institutions is deeply ironic

given that it had a hand in creating this very world order, and here we find an acknowledgement

of shame at this irony. Indeed, the "shedd[ing] of power, territory, wealth, influence and

population" refers scathingly to the collapse of the British empire, while the suggestion that it

represents a "dissuasive example to others" laments the breakdown of the global relevance of a

once-prosperous nation. On top of this, the comparison of Old England to a "backward province

of Portugal or Turkey" arrogantly displays, once again, England's belief in its own superiority and exceptionalism. The idea that "Old England had lost its history" and therefore "all sense of itself" suggests that England, England has effectively stripped Old England of its historical veracity, creating a new, marketable version of Englishness that keeps visitors both entertained and ignorant, and satisfies a fraudulent yet apparently ubiquitous vision of the nation.

The final description of the decaying Old English nation nudges the reader towards a sense of disappointment and loss, and portrays England, England as a power-hungry, corrupt, and neglectful place. Ultimately, the island is about convenience, money, and the appeal of a version of Englishness that is romanticised and steeped in myth, but despite this, it overtakes Old England in terms of relevance and power. Such is the disturbing conclusion of Barnes' alternative world: people are driven not by a desire to truly understand England, but to idealise it; people are driven not to protect English history, but to refashion it to incorporate myths such as Robin Hood, who captures the imagination of the young and inspires the old. The utopian version of English identity that England, England offers satisfies the version of Englishness that people *want*, something that, in the world of the novel, Old England does not. *England, England* unveils the pretences under which English identity is constructed and reinforced, and bleakly concludes that if the unique identity that people envision for England were true, it would result in moral and social corruption and decay. In this way, Barnes passionately rejects contemporary manifestations of Englishness, and invites the reader to consider the dangers of English nationalism in its current form.

Jonathan Coe's *The Rotters' Club*: Struggles of Class, Race, and the IRA

Set against the backdrop of industrial Birmingham in the 1970s, *The Rotters' Club* is both a coming-of-age story and a fictional, yet historically precise account of the political turbulence

in England during this decade. Published in 2001, the novel tracks the lives of Benjamin Trotter and his friends, as well as their families, as they deal with the troubles of adolescence, the struggles of class warfare, rampant racism, and the emerging threats of the IRA and sub-nationalisms within the United Kingdom to England and Englishness. Over the course of the novel, we are invited to imagine the backdrop against which identities are formed in England in the 1970s, and encouraged to understand the forces that, eventually, created the conditions for Brexit in 2016. Furthermore, *The Rotters' Club* is a valuable novel for this project as it is part of a trilogy that ends with a BrexLit novel, *Middle England*, in which Coe revives the same characters to explore how they engage with the political turmoil of the Referendum. While I will explore *Middle England* in the next chapter, this section will focus on how *The Rotters' Club* depicts Englishness in the 1970s, and how we might use that to better understand Englishness in the age of Brexit.

From the outset, *The Rotters' Club* is written against the backdrop of class-based and racial tensions that lie bubbling under the surface of everyday life in Birmingham. One of the central characters in the novel is Bill Anderton, father of Benjamin's friend Doug Anderton, and a "shop steward in the Longbridge underseal section" (Coe 14)—Longbridge plant is a motor vehicle factory. Alongside his day job, Bill is also a key leader in the labour union movement and remains firmly committed to his cause throughout the novel. While Bill's life is defined by the class struggle, many remain resistant to, or unpersuaded by the fact that class-warfare still exists in 1970s Britain. When Jack Forrest, the smug boss of Colin Trotter, who is in middle management at the Longbridge plant, invites both Colin and Bill to the pub for a drink, he announces the reason for the evening: "'You have something in common, you see.' Jack

regarded them both in turn, pleased with himself. 'Don't you know what it is?' They shrugged.

'You've both got kids at the same school'" (15). He goes on:

> Britain in the 1970s. The old distinctions just don't mean anything any more, do they? This is a country where a union man and a junior manager—soon to be senior, Colin, I'm sure—can send their sons to the same school and nobody thinks anything of it…What does that tell you about the class war? It's over. Truce. Armistice.' He clasped his pint of Brew and raised it solemnly. 'Equality of opportunity.' (16)

Jack's proud assertion that Britain has overcome the class war suggests something more than denial—there is an air of righteousness, and perhaps even a warning in his proclamation, as if to say: see, your sons have "equality of opportunity," so you have nothing to complain about. Of course, Jack's is an extremely myopic view of what the class struggle looks like in the first place; there is certainly a desire for equality of opportunity, but labour unions also demand better pay, better working conditions, and raise a plethora of other issues that directly affect the workplace and workers' quality of life outside it. Recognising his own difference of opinion, "Bill said nothing: as far as he was concerned, the class war was alive and well and being waged with some ferocity at British Leyland, even in Ted Heath's egalitarian 1970s, but he couldn't rouse himself to argue the point" (16). Bill's resignation to silence suggests that while the issue remains untouched for now, it is stirring beneath the surface and threatens to spoil the illusion of an equal society for people like Jack—the same kind of stirring that caused a generation's worth of frustration with the EU came to the boil during the Brexit referendum campaign in 2016.

Alongside an illicit affair with Miriam Newman, her disappearance and suspected murder, and an internal feud with right-wing colleague Roy Slater, Bill Anderton continues his efforts to support the labour movement at Leyland throughout the novel. Despite those efforts, ultimately the factory enters a phase of "restructuring" (303) brought about by a delegate vote on the chairman of British Leyland's proposals to support the failing factory. The proposals

involved cutting the workforce in half, leaving many unemployed and unable to support

themselves and their families. Bill mourns this loss:

> Twelve and a half thousand redundancies. A painful but necessary process. He pitied the management their twinges of conscience…and thought too about the weeks and months and maybe lifetimes of hardship and hopelessness that so many thousands of his men were going to face in the bitter, market-driven era to come…there had been plenty of days, good days, and not so long ago, when he truly believed that the struggle could be won; but the decade was old now and he was growing old with it, and he knew that those days would never come back. (304)

Bill's tragic acceptance of defeat and his reflections on the hardships ahead clearly demonstrate

that these redundancies will have widespread, hard-hitting implications for workers. The story of

the restructuring if Longbridge is grounded in reality, and with Coe's own fictional restructuring

of the event in the world of the novel, the reader gains insight into the immediacy with which

these jobs were taken away. The sharp loss of these workers' livelihoods is portrayed as a result

of the market-driven era, and the struggles that people will face as a result imply that their

grievances will lie with the market and, inevitably, the government that controls the economy.

Indeed, the loss of income that Bill describes here is a familiar phenomenon that leads to

disenfranchisement and a deep-seated resentment for the establishment. Given the economic

indicators of voting Leave or Remain in 2016, Coe's portrayal of the situation at Longbridge

Factory provides some insight into the economic backdrop against which English people are

making political decisions. Birmingham did indeed vote Leave, albeit by a very small margin,

and many testify that the primary driver of that decision was the economic situation many still

find themselves in ("EU Referendum: Birmingham votes Brexit by a whisker"). Indeed, where

Bill reluctantly leaves the days of optimistic class struggle behind, it is possible to speculate that

the Brexit referendum provided a long-overdue opportunity to make a statement about class and

economic wellbeing—about how modern life in the EU (and in the West more generally)

rewards some and strips others of their livelihoods. Those who are losing want to retreat to the

past where they had job security and where their future is not dictated by what is often perceived

as a foreign body.

Race in this novel functions very similarly to class. Racism is a simultaneously

uncomfortable yet blatant force that profoundly affects life at King Edward's School, the school

that Benjamin Trotter and his classmates attend. Steve Richards, "the only black pupil in their

year: the only one in the entire school, in fact" (Coe 27), becomes the target of both

subconscious and targeted racism, and his treatment demonstrates the severe overestimation of

social equality and progress in the 1970s. In our first introduction to life at the school,

Culpepper, the school's most notorious bully and an overt racist, begins to criticise one of their

teachers:

> 'Fletcher's a dreadful old liberal softie. He wouldn't let anyone get away with
> impersonating a nigger.'
> > 'You shouldn't use that word,' said Chase. 'You know you shouldn't.'
> > 'What—nigger?' said Culpepper, enjoying the effect these two tiny syllables were
> having upon them. 'Why not? It's in the book. Harper Lee uses it herself.'
> 'You know that's different.'
> > 'All right, then. Wog. Coon. Darkie." (25)

Chase's discomfort indicates that Culpepper's racist language is taboo, but Culpepper's blasé

willingness to continue to use offensive terms in spite of criticism also demonstrates that racism

is still an entrenched social norm. Further reinforcing the pervasive nature of racism in this

novel, the narrator tells us that from the moment Steve joins the school, "the other ninety-five

boys in his year called him 'Rastus'" (27), an offensive nickname given to black men based on

the caricature figure associated with the Cream of Wheat breakfast porridge company in the

United States. Even Benjamin, who is generally outraged by Culpepper's actions and becomes a

good friend of Steve later in the novel, sees little wrong with the nickname when challenged by

his friend Claire. Claire is revealing which boy at school "*everybody's* crazy about" (93):

> 'Benjamin waited for her to elaborate, but apparently it was too obvious to need spelling out. In the end he hazarded a guess. 'Is it Culpepper?'
> 'Culpepper! Give me a break. He's Mister Repulsive.'
> 'OK then: who?'
> 'Richards, of course.'
> Benjamin was dumbfounded. 'You mean Rastus?'
> Claire gasped, and almost choked on a crisp. 'You don't call him that, do you?'
> 'Why not?'
> 'It's so…insulting.'
> 'No it's not. It's a joke.'
> 'You can't call him Rastus just because he's black. How would you like it if nobody ever called you by your real name?'
> 'Nobody does. Not at school, anyway. They call me Bent.' (93–94)

In this dialogue, we see Benjamin struggle to understand the fundamental difference between the

joking nickname given to him and the racist nickname assigned to Steve, and we witness an

important learning moment for him. After this conversation, Benjamin becomes slightly more

attuned to the problematic nature of Steve's treatment by other boys at the school, though his

progress is somewhat slow. In this way, the reader begins to witness the process of untangling

racist frameworks of life in England for young people at this time.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, not all the boys in the novel are as willing to learn as Benjamin,

and Steve's treatment gets progressively more violent at the hands of Culpepper in particular

over the course of the novel. Benjamin recounts an incidence of Culpepper's malicious feelings

towards Steve to his sister Lois, telling her that while playing rugby, there was "some sort of

tackle" (169) between Steve and Culpepper:

> and the next thing you know Culpepper's down on the ground screaming in agony—and I mean literally screaming—and it turns out he's broken his arm. Well, Richards is very contrite, as you might expect, and very upset about it, actually, because he's a gentle sort of bloke and doesn't like to hurt anybody, but now Culpepper's going around telling people that he did it on purpose. Which is rubbish, anyone'll tell you that. The fact is that he just hates Richards and he'll do anything he can to make life hard for him. He's hated

> him ever since he first came to the school, some people say it's because he's black but I don't think that's the reason, I think he just hates him because he's a better athlete than he is, a better sportsman, better at everything really. (169)

As he recounts the event, Benjamin roots Culpepper's frustration solely in jealousy, again demonstrating a naïve lack of recognition that his accusation is grounded in his racist attitudes towards Steve. Mirroring Jack Forrest, Benjamin's quick dismissal of the notion that Culpepper would spread lies based on the colour of Steve's skin implies once again that even as racist acts continue to happen with frequency, society is resistant to see them for what they are, instead making excuses that paint a picture of moral and social progress that has not really occurred.

Having said this, there is some truth in Benjamin's perception of the root of Culpepper's hatred; it becomes clear that Steve is indeed the superior athlete, and that Culpepper *is* consumed with jealousy about this, going to some extreme lengths to try and out-compete Steve. On the school sports day, Steve is unable to find his St Christopher's medal—a good luck token that has obvious sentimental meaning to him—and he "openly accused Culpepper of stealing" (253), fully aware of Culpepper's vendetta against him. The reader is encouraged to believe Steve's accusation, and to feel delight when, despite Culpepper's effort to play mind games, Steve wins sports day. However, this victory is Steve's last, as it drives Culpepper to make his final sabotage attempt, this time with far graver consequences. Sat waiting to take their final physics exam, it is strongly speculated that Culpepper slipped a drug into Steve's drink, distracting him first by returning the St Christopher's medal which he had supposedly "discovered…while rooting around in Mr Nuttall's lost property box" (317), and then serving him a spiked tea. This time, Culpepper's efforts are far more effective, and Steve does poorly in his exams, causing him to lose his place at Cambridge and ultimately setting him on a far lower path than he was capable. Reflecting on this misfortune later, and on his own relationship with Steve, Benjamin muses:

why have we not invited Steve?, is it because his future seems so uncertain, after what happened last year, and I just cannot envisage where he is going to be in forty years' time, or is there another reason, a nastier reason, for excluding Steve from my little fantasy, you can never tell, these things go very deep, and when Cicely and I went to visit him the other day there was certainly an element of hostility, I thought, of bitterness, even though he didn't hold me to blame personally, a gulf had opened up between us, a little gulf, if there can be such a thing… (378)

The undertones of subconscious racism in Benjamin's internal monologue open up serious questions about how black people in England at this time are excluded from opportunities and from social life by both systemic and malevolent forces. The suggestion that "these things go very deep" suggests that subconsciously entrenched racism remains firmly rooted in Benjamin's mind, even though he is able to somewhat recognise it, and consequently demonstrates that racial tension remains an everyday fact of life in England. Steve's treatment throughout the novel and his uncertain situation at the end all serve to direct the reader's empathy towards him, while Culpepper embodies the rampant racism in society, and Benjamin embodies society's unwillingness to confront people like Culpepper for what they are.

As class and race threaten the stability of people's lives on the ground level, an arguably even greater threat is ever present: the Irish Republican Army (IRA). The IRA was originally founded as the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) on St. Patrick's Day in 1858 by James Stephens and Thomas Clarke Luby, following the suppression of an earlier revolutionary group (Coogan 11–12). The IRA's political platform was grounded in the Home Rule movement—a movement that gained momentum after the Act of Union in 1800 that incorporated Ireland into the Kingdom of Great Britain and provided Ireland with seats in the UK Parliament in Westminster. Despite this political incorporation, which theoretically empowers Ireland to affect UK affairs, Tim Coogan suggests that absorption into Westminster actually *dis*empowered Ireland to make its own laws: "Ireland could no longer legislate for herself under the British

crown, and the hundred or so members that she sent to Westminster were able to make very little

impression on an assembly of 670 when it came to matters affecting Irish interests" (Coogan 4).

There were two attempts to pass bills on Home Rule by Prime Minister William E. Gladstone in

1885 and 1893, but both were blocked by the House of Lords (Coogan 8). Taking matters into its

own hands, the IRA operated as a terrorist organisation throughout the twentieth century,

attacking primarily England and Northern Ireland in bouts of violent bombing campaigns,

several of which took place during the 1970s. The targeted attacks on England, as opposed to on

Scotland and Wales, are a manifestation of the anger directed towards England by its neighbours,

and make clear that England is seen as the cause of Ireland's modern struggles for political

independence.

The first mention of the IRA in *The Rotters' Club* comes when Bill Anderton finds a

leaflet circulating around members of his charity committee. The leaflet reads:

IRA BASTARDS KILLED 12 PEOPLE
ON MANCHESTER BUS YESTERDAY
REFUSE TO WORK WITH
IRISH BASTARD MURDERERS[.] (Coe 37)

The leaflet serves both to highlight the kind of rhetoric that surrounds not only the IRA, but Irish

people at large, as it reads like a xenophobic attack itself towards all Irish people, even though

Northern Ireland is part of the UK. It also serves to remind the reader that these attacks are

happening in several cities throughout England. The brief mention of IRA bombings here serves

as foreboding for a later bombing that profoundly affects the characters of the novel. The event

happens when Benjamin's sister, Lois, and her boyfriend Malcolm are spending the evening

together at a local tavern, for a "special occasion" (103). As they sit, Malcolm begins a

profession of love that he never gets to finish:

Malcolm fingered the leather box in his jacket pocket. He had not meant to ask her so early, but it was no use: he couldn't contain himself.

'Look, love, you know what I think about you, don't you?'

Lois didn't answer. She just looked back at him, her eyes starting to brim over.

'I love you,' said Malcolm. 'I'm crazy about you.' He took a long breath, an enormous breath. 'I've got to say something to you. I've got to ask you something.' He grasped her hand, and squeezed it tightly. As if he would never let go. 'Do you know what it is?'

Of course she knew. And of course, Malcolm knew what the answer would be. They understood each other perfectly, at that moment. They were as close to each other, and as close to happiness, as it is possible for two people to be. So Malcolm never did ask the question.

Then, at 8.20 precisely, the timing device set off the trigger, the battery pack sent power running through the cables, and thirty pounds of gelignite exploded on the far side of the pub.

And that was how it all ended, for the chick and the hairy guy. (104)

We later discover that the "thirty pounds of gelignite" was planted by the IRA, and that Malcolm is taken victim in an extremely violent way: after the bombing happened, when Lois came to, she found herself on the ground holding Malcolm's head—only his head—in her hands (312). The space dedicated to this scene in the narrative seeks to evoke pathos in the reader and create a sense of the experience of terrorism on the human level. Often terrorist attacks are described by the number killed without regard for the actual people involved, whereas this scene invites us to imagine what it might feel like for Lois to have the hope of a lifelong future with someone ripped away because of something entirely out of her and Malcolm's control. The effect of this bombing on the lives of Lois and Benjamin will last through until the final book in the trilogy, well into adulthood. Immediately after the event Lois is taken to a mental asylum, unable to so much as speak for a long time after the incident. Even when she returns home, "Loud noises still scared her, and she could not tolerate violent films on the television" (272). Lois' trauma is frequently returned to throughout the novel as a reminder of the human impact of the IRA's nationalist mission, and also serves to place the reader in an Anglo-centric frame of mind that imagines the IRA as a malevolent force.

Benjamin holds a deep-seated resentment for the IRA after it destroys the life of his sister, but he never reflects upon these emotions until he is confronted with a man who oppositely supports the IRA movement. The confrontation occurs in Wales, after Benjamin has gone to find the girl he loves, Cicely. It is the first time that Benjamin has found himself somewhere in the UK that is not Birmingham—that is not *England*—and his geographical relocation in the novel provides an opportunity for Benjamin to learn about a perspective on England that he has never been exposed to before. Cicely is staying with her Uncle, who, it turns out, is a Welsh nationalist. Benjamin is alarmed by this revelation: "He had heard about the Welsh nationalists on the news. They burned people's holiday cottages down" (348). As Cicely describes the extent of her Uncle's affiliation with the Welsh nationalist movement, she reveals: "He's always giving quotes about it to the English newspapers and getting into all sorts of trouble. He supports the IRA as well" (348). Benjamin's response is one of shock, anger, and most of all, confusion:

> Benjamin's eyes widened even further. For years, ever since the pub bombings, or even before the pub bombings, he had heard nothing—whether from his family, his friends, the teachers at school, the politicians on the television—nothing but vilification and contempt being poured on the IRA. He had heard them being called everything from child-murderers to lunatics and psychopaths. It had simply never occurred to him before that there might be another way of looking at it…And yet this man supported the IRA! The people who had killed Malcolm and caused Lois such dreadful suffering. How could that possibly be? Was the world even *more* complicated than he had imagined—weren't there even *any* arguments with only one side to them? How on earth did people like Doug keep hold of their certainties, their clearly defined, confidently held political positions, in a world like this? (348)

In this baptism of fire, Benjamin struggles to reconcile issues of place and perspective, for the first time realising that there could be reasons for supporting the attacks against his sister and other English people across the country that he has never considered. His most profound confusion is that he has never heard anything except "vilification and contempt" from the news

and television platforms in Birmingham, which points to the Anglo-centrism of national media, and the hegemony of the English perspective in controlling how people perceive issues affecting the entire United Kingdom. The scene in Wales offers an opportunity for the Anglo-centric view, to which both the reader and Benjamin are accustomed, to be de-centred, and gives voice to the conflicting perspective. While Benjamin cannot truly shake his resentment of the IRA for what it does to Lois, in this moment he becomes painfully aware that there is more than one way to look at the issue, and that for other people across the UK, Malcolm and Lois' lives were merely collateral damage in a project of national self-determination.

Cicely's Uncle goes on to elaborate on his political position towards English-Welsh relations to Benjamin. Referring to him as "Englishman" (350) in a jeering manner, he explains his discontent with England the English people:

> 'Personally, I don't like the English…Do you know why?' Without waiting for an answer, he went on: 'I'll tell you, then: the Welsh have hated the English for as long as anyone can remember, and they'll carry on hating them until the English leave them alone and stop interfering in their affairs. They've hated them ever since the thirteenth century, when Edward the First invaded Wales and his armies slaughtered the women and children and Llewellyn the Second was slaughtered too and laws were passed which banned Welsh people from holding positions of authority…' (350)

Cicely's Uncle's explanation is grounded in grievances surrounding the historical relationship between England and Wales that continue to grip the Welsh consciousness, and he articulately explains the problematic nature of England's continued insistence on controlling Wales politically. The lack of punctuation as he goes deeper into his speech speeds up his dialogue and makes his list of grievances appear even more frantic and extensive. His monologue is an indication to the reader—and of course to Benjamin—that sub-nationalisms within the UK are gaining ground, and that whether they are Welsh, Irish, or Scottish, they are all united in their anger at the English. While we have already seen the personal devastation of the IRA's

nationalist attacks, Benjamin's experience in Wales draws the reader's attention to the bigger picture, and suggests that there is an even greater threat at large: one that threatens England and Englishness, as well as the unity of the UK as a whole. It is movements like the IRA and people like Cicely's Uncle that reveal a disunited kingdom build on distrust and conflicting desires to assert unique political identities. The major difference for England as opposed to Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, is that their political identity *is* the control of its neighbours' affairs. So, as much as England retaining its identity threatens the identities of the Welsh, Irish, and Scottish people, the demands of the Welsh, Irish, and Scottish people threaten the identity of the English. It is this tension that Jeremy Black suggests creates the desire to shape and fortify an English identity—a project that we see take place in *England, England*— and that allows for a reassertion of Englishness based on dominance and exceptionalism, which manifested in the Brexit vote.

The Rotters' Club examines the struggles of class, race, and sub-nationalisms to provide the reader with many valuable insights into the landscape of Englishness in 1970s Britain. While the novel is ultimately fictional, it draws from history with a keen eye to exposing what it might really have felt like to grow up during this era of uncertainty and political tumult. The centrality of Birmingham and Benjamin's intense struggle to understand the anti-English perspective also helps explain why many in England continue to feel that their identity is threatened by external forces, and thus seek to assert a version of Englishness that is cohesive, superior, and retreats into isolationism. Throughout the novel, English identity is shown to be continuously challenged by racism, classism, and Anglo-centric understandings of the United Kingdom, ultimately depicting a fractured and uncertain sense of self. As the protagonist of the novel, Benjamin best encapsulates this uncertainty; while he learns to appreciate the perspective of others throughout the novel, he also remains deeply confused about what to think—who to believe, and how to

have strong and unchanging convictions. Benjamin becomes the lens through which the reader sees an Englishness that is unwittingly blinkered and unable to confront any uncomfortable, or unpleasant narratives about the history of their nation's pre-eminence. The revival of Benjamin and many of his friends and family in the final book of Coe's trilogy, *Middle England*, continues to provide insight into how the experience of Englishness is threatened, asserted, and reinforced in chapter four of this thesis.

Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem*: A Rejection of the World England Helped to Create

In 2009, Jez Butterworth's play *Jerusalem* became an overnight sensation. It received widespread critical acclaim and became immensely popular for its seductive representation of Englishness. Dominic Cavendish of *The Telegraph* encapsulates the critical reception of the play by suggesting that *Jerusalem* is a "state-of-the-nation drama with an incendiary difference. It speaks about a nation that has almost forgotten it is a nation" (Cavendish). Indeed, *Jerusalem* is a play that attempts to perform and re-forge Englishness through a mystical revival of the enchanted forests of England, an appeal to the English soil, and a distinct rejection of the laws that govern that land, symbolised by the Kennet and Avon Council that protagonist Johnny "Rooster" Byron fervently defies. Throughout the play, the land is intimately linked with the identity of the characters, and thus with Englishness—a romantic relationship that Wendell Berry's encapsulates in the statement: "If you don't know where you are, you don't know who you are" (Berry qtd. in Kingsnorth 1), written in his book of essays titled *The Gift of the Good Land*. Furthermore, the world of *Jerusalem* inspires the belief that there is something more magical in the rural—the "real"—England than the version to which we have become accustomed: the cookie-cutter housing estates, chain restaurants, and global capitalist projects that continue to dominate the landscape. Through Johnny Byron's and his friends' rejection of

globalisation, the free market, and the English law, Butterworth seeks to revive a lost mysticism—a lost love—of England. And yet, to argue that *Jerusalem* is a "state-of-the-nation" play is misleading. *Jerusalem* is not a representation of the England we are confronted with today, but rather a representation of an England, and an Englishness, that the nation, perhaps even the world, *desires*.

Jerusalem is set on April 23rd, which is St George's Day in England, traditionally understood as England's national day. St George is the patron saint of England despite having been born in Cappadocia. He was a soldier in life but became a martyr in death for refusing to renounce his faith as a Christian man. Upon his death, St George acquired his own written legend in bishop Jacobus de Varagine's *The Golden Legend*, in which he slays a dragon and rescues a princess. Although the same tale has been associated with other patron saints as well, the legend remains associated almost exclusively with St George. Immediately grounded in the context of both national celebration and magical tales, the curtain opens on a supernatural landscape. The stage directions of the Prologue read: "*A curtain with the faded Cross of St George. A proscenium adorned with cherubs and woodland scenes. Dragons. Maidens. Devils. Half-and-half creatures…A fifteen-year-old girl,* PHAEDRA, *dressed as a fairy, appears on the apron. She curtsies to the boxes and sings, unaccompanied*" (Butterworth 5). The stage direction that the cross of St George is "faded" is immediately notable; its worn appearance suggests both that this is a long-held tradition—that this flag is a symbol that reaches deep into England's history—and also implies that the meaning of the celebration is becoming less clear over time. In other words, the faded flag suggests that the collective English memory is beginning to forget who it is as a people on its national day. Phaedra proceeds to sing the song after which the play is titled: "Jerusalem." The song's lyrics are from William Blake's poem: "And did those feet in ancient

time"—a poem inspired by the folklore that Jesus visited England as a young man. "Jerusalem", like the cross of St George, is an appeal to the nation, as it is often considered a patriotic song and is even regarded as England's unofficial national anthem. Both the cross of St George and Phaedra's singing are direct appeals to the nation and the national consciousness, designed to immediately invite the audience into a carefully curated version of Englishness.

The central protagonist of the play is Johnny "Rooster" Byron, who in the words of Ben Brantley is "a boastful wreck of a man held together by drugs and drink, existing as a 24-hour party guy in a squalid mobile home in the English countryside" (Brantley). Johnny's primary engagement throughout the play is a face-off with the English law, as his illegal squatting causes the local Kennet and Avon council to attempt to forcibly remove him from the land where his mobile home stands. Johnny's entrance onto the stage occurs as Linda Fawcett, "Senior Communication Officer" of the council, and her male colleague Parsons, request an audience with him: "FAWCETT: Mr Byron? Mr John Byron? Johnny Byron? (*Knocks.*) John Rooster Byron…Mr Byron? (*She knocks.*) Mr Byron? Would you care to step outside for a moment?" (Butterworth 7). Fawcett's stuttered address demonstrates an appeal to formality, while Johnny's silence demonstrates that that formal address is meaningless to him. Fawcett's stiff, official language continues as Parsons records her outside the home: "Linda Fawcett, Kennet and Avon Senior Community Liaison Officer. 9 a.m., 23rd April. Serving notice F-17003 in contravention of the Public Health Act of 1878, and the Pollution Control and Local Government Order 1974" (7). As Fawcett states the laws that Johnny is breaking, a "*Loud barking can be heard from inside*" (7), which eventually becomes "*Plaintive howling*" (8), and the audience discovers that it is coming not from an animal, but from Johnny himself. Fawcett patronises Johnny by remarking: "Very funny, Mr Byron. Extremely amusing" (8), as though rebuking a child for

making light of a serious situation. He is not dissuaded, and "*A hatch opens on the top of the mobile home. A head appears, wearing a Second World War helmet and goggles, with loudhailer, like out of the top of a tank. Barking*" (8). When Fawcett and Parsons leave the stage, he continues to frustrate their purpose by parodying their legal jargon:

> JOHNNY. Testing. Testing, one two. This is Rooster Byron's dog, Shep, informing
> Kennet and Avon council to go fuck itself. Woof woof!...
> Hear ye, hear ye. With the power invested in me by Rooster Johnny Byron—who can't
> be here on account of the fact he's in Barbados this week with Kate Moss—I, his faithful
> hound Shep, hereby instruct Kennet and Avon to tell Bren Glewstone, and Ros Taylor,
> and her twat son, and all those sorry cunts on the New Estate, Rooster Byron ain't going
> nowhere. Happy St George's Day. Now kiss my beggar arse, you Puritans! (9)

Johnny's bizarre actions immediately mark him as a defiant, lawless creature, and his monologue completely undermines the legitimacy of attempts by the council to enforce the law. Johnny's cursing is also a starkly uncensored contrast to the polite formality of Fawcett's tone on the recording device, and for the audience, is extremely comical. Moreover, in this very first appearance, Johnny immediately becomes the embodiment of modern frustrations with the forces that seek to control our movement and our lives. While the audience may feel disillusioned with the complexities and formalities of the law, Johnny is a vision of the defiance they wish they could exhibit, but of course can't; he is rebellious, and free, and he actually gets away with it. For this reason, his character becomes instantly likeable.

Johnny is equally popular, particularly with young people, within the world of the play, and his friends deeply admire him for his defiance of the law and his protection of the land. The action on-stage revolves solely around Johnny's mobile home, with characters constantly moving into and through his space. Some come for drugs and parties, others to say hello or goodbye as friends, and still others seem to simply gravitate towards the space regardless of whether they are particularly fond of him. Patrick Healy describes Johnny as "a kind of Pied Piper, drawing the

young and the old into his clearing—in part for his drugs, but also because he is a romanticised embodiment of the William Blake poem" (Healy). In this comparison to Blake's poem, Healy suggests that Johnny serves as a character who rejects modernity—the "dark Satanic Mills" of Blake's poem—and embraces "Englands green & pleasant Land" in a way that makes him a defender of the kind of England and Englishness that Blake's poem describes. Healy's argument becomes particularly convincing in a scene involving Lee, a character who has a one-way ticket to Australia the following day and spends his last twenty four hours almost exclusively in Johnny's company. Lee suggests that Johnny's home stands on a "ley line…lines of ancient energy, stretching across the landscape. Linking ancient sites…This is holy land" (Butterworth 72). Here, Lee refers to a concept developed in ancient Europe that draws a series of lines across the Earth that connect historical structures and landmarks, and which supposedly demarcate "earth energies," making them a natural component of the land ("The ley of the land"). Lee's description of Johnny's home firmly roots Johnny in an area of land that contains magical properties, suggesting in turn that this magic is endemic to English soil. In this way, as Johnny fiercely protects his home, his visitors and his audience are entranced and inspired by his venture to protect his plot of land.

Mark Rylance, who played the character of Johnny in both the London and New York productions, advances our understanding of Johnny further in an interview with Andrew Marr. Rylance suggests that Johnny is "providing a certain kind of wildness for the young people that's not totally destructive at all. A certain kind of rite into adulthood…And something crazy not to do with corporate efficiency or any of the news…it's something to do with the land I guess and people's true nature" (Rylance). Like Healy, Rylance pays attention both to the characterisation of Johnny as a drug-dealing party animal, yet also as a man who becomes inseparable from

English soil in all its mystical glory. The mention of "corporate efficiency" returns us to the

Kennet and Avon council, whose plans for the development of a New Estate epitomise the

homogenisation of English landscape to fit the global capitalist mould. Johnny's defiance of the

bulldozing council depicts him as the ultimate defender of English land, and this appeals to an

underlying sense that a connection to the earth is becoming increasingly difficult in our modern

reality. Paul Kingsnorth wrote an entire book titled *Real England: The Battle Against the Bland*

on this very idea: how the homogenisation of England is disrupting English people's connection

to their land. He first states the reasons for his frustration. He writes:

> England matters to me. Not because I am a 'patriot' in the old-fashioned sense of the word. Not because I think it's better than everywhere else. Not because I don't like foreigners or have a visceral desperation to win the World Cup. Simply because it is my country. It is the place I was born and grew up in and it is the place I belong. I know its landscapes and its history, and feel connected to both. (Kingsnorth 12–13)

Then, Kingsnorth goes on to state exactly the problem that he has observed:

> I discovered that the real England is being eroded by three forces, which are meshing together to form a uniquely destructive whole: a powerful alliance of big business and big government; an unspoken, twenty-first-century class conflict, in which every nook and cranny is being made safe for the wealthy urban bourgeoisie; and a very English reluctance to discuss who we are as a nation or to stand up for our places, our national character and our cultural landscape. (Kingsnorth 13)

Kingsnorth's passage is powerful in its suggestion first that there is such thing as a "real

England" and that what we see in England today is *not* real—i.e., it's global, it's corporate, it has

lost its uniqueness. He suggests that Englishness is reluctant to recognise its own peculiarities,

and that England's unwillingness to defend itself is causing it to be destroyed. Of course, no one

is a stauncher defender of the English soil on which he stands that Johnny, and perhaps it is for

this exact reason that he, and the play *Jerusalem*, had such a profound effect on audiences.

There is something invigorating about his defiance perhaps because English people, whose daily

lives already operate within the context of a globalised world, are able to recognise, for the first

time, the exceptional nature of the English land. He becomes the mouthpiece for an Englishness that people seem to be missing but cannot easily express, and effortlessly convinces the audience that if we do not fight for a distinctive England and Englishness, it will cease to be a unique and distinctive place.

Kingsnorth's book also points us towards notions of England's uniqueness within the world, and his desire to reject the effects of globalisation and modernisation imply an embrace of isolationism and a sinking into a past associated with glory and power. As mentioned above, Johnny's home is the centre of the play—we never leave his space and the land that is being fought for. With our eyes trained so firmly on the mobile home, the audience develops a myopic vision of what England looks like—one that is also shared among the characters. Johnny's circle—his community—is isolated by virtue of being situated in the woods away from the man-made society that surrounds it. Furthermore, the only character who expresses any desire to leave is Lee, and his friends are unable to understand his wishes. Johnny does no more than to remark: "I shouldn't worry, boy. You'll be back next year" (Butterworth 21), which in few words suggests that Lee won't be able to stay away from England for too long. Davey spends more time expressing his opinion on the matter:

> DAVEY. Rather you than me, mate. I've never seen the point of other countries. I leave Wiltshire, my ears pop. Seriously. I'm on my bike, pedalling along, see a sign says 'Welcome to Berkshire', I turn straight round. I don't like to go east of Wootton Bassett. Suddenly its Reading, then London, then before you know where you are you're in France, and then there's just countries popping up all over. What's that about? I can't help it if I like it here. I can't help it if I'm happy. (24)

Davey's quip: "I've never seen the point of other countries," reveals a belief that there is no need for any place other than England; he indirectly betrays his extreme Anglo-centrism with the notion that everything else is simply "other," and takes up space in a world that belongs to England. The image of Davey's ears popping when he leaves Wiltshire also suggests a literal

change in the atmosphere and indicates that his body is either unaccustomed or unprepared to exist in an atmosphere that is not the one which he currently inhabits. Furthermore, the proximity he describes to Reading, London, France, and the rest of continental Europe demonstrates a sense that everything is becoming too close together—that it is all narrowing in a way that appears threatening to the characters.

However, the depiction of Englishness that *Jerusalem* provides to its audience here is incredibly ironic. To suggest that the characters' pushback against a globalised world is a noble instinct inherent to the English character ignores the fact that it was Britain who created such a world in the first place. At its height, the British Empire controlled approximately a quarter of the land on Earth (Taylor), and has invaded a staggering 90% of the world's nations (Seymour), demonstrating its historical mission to make the world in its image. While globalisation and empire are two distinct projects—one seeking to pull the world into a closer but mutual relationship and the other seeking to dominate the world—they are similarly poised to homogenise culturally disparate places. Therefore, in *Jerusalem*, globalisation is threatening because it takes a step towards a united world that is *not* dominated by England; it implies that England will undergo the same changes to accommodate other cultures as the rest of the world, and this does not sit well with those who believe in English exceptionalism. Despite the difference between globalisation and empire, pushing back against a close-knit world is, in a real sense, *anti*-English, and therefore appears to be an incredibly ironic impulse in the world of the play.

Regardless, Davey continues to lament the loss of the local and the encroachment of more distant places by recapping a story that he saw on the local news about an old woman who was kicked to death: "I'm at home, on me own, watching, getting that upset, tearing up, the lot,

before I realise it's some old biddy from Wales. Some Welsh nonsense. Good luck to 'em. I ain't never even fucking been there and I never fucking will" (Butterworth 60). Here, Davey makes an even clearer statement about locality—one that suggests he cannot feel empathy for anyone outside his immediate vicinity. Others begin to pile in on Davey's frustration:

> DAVEY. You want to gas yourself in your garage in Gloucester, be my guest. How could I possibly care less?
>
> TANYA. Show me a good house fire in Salisbury. Now *that's* tragic.
>
> LEE. Way I see it, for local news to make *any* sense, you've got to have at least a *chance* of shagging the weather girl. (60)

Davey and Tanya display a distinct insensitivity to issues that lie outside of their immediate geographical vicinity, even though the events they describe should invite sympathy even from afar. Lee even suggests that news covering more distant places is nonsensical. The myopic narrowness of these characters' perspectives betrays the isolationism of their community, and reiterates their firm stance against the forces of globalisation. Butterworth surely remains aware of the absurdity of his characters' convictions, and perhaps directs the audience to acknowledge the moral dangers of retreating inward with such vigour. However, the popularity of the play as a beacon of Englishness in an England that has lost its identity suggests that the audience did not see this scene as a problematic warning, seeing it rather as a comedic exchange that encapsulates feelings that the audience is unable to express.

Certainly, Davey's lament for the loss of local news is also a valid one. Local news platforms are indeed beginning to disappear as they are outcompeted by larger regional and global news sources, which serve to further blend the world into one and eradicate the uniqueness of one's small place in that world. Davey's rejection of such erasure demonstrates his desire to remain insulated in his community—a desire shared by the other characters in the

play—and this invites the audience to imagine the allure of feeling that one's place in the world matters in its own right, as opposed to being simply a fragment of a greater global whole. Furthermore, Davey goes on to quip that the local news is too busy "merging with BBC Belgium" (60) to notice local events. Here, rather than commenting on his frustration with news expanding to cover European regional events, Davey targets Belgium, the country where the EU is based, indicating a Eurosceptic viewpoint. Of course, it would make sense for Davey and his fellow community members to be sceptical of the EU's liberal project in light of their rejection of global connection and cooperation, and this dialogue suggests that at least in the world of the play, the EU is perceived as being partly responsible for the loss of a local English identity—one rooted in the soil that Johnny and his friends so fervently seek to protect. Davey and Tanya's dialogue in this scene affirms the fact that grievances with the European project were felt long before the referendum was announced in 2015, and provides some precedence for the notion that the referendum vote was in response to the belief held by English people that belonging to Europe meant a loss of identity—one that they hoped to reclaim upon exit.

Isolationism and the rejection of globalisation aside, Johnny appeals to the English collective psyche as a man who represents, and is connected to, the mystical version of "Englands green & pleasant Land." Over the course of the play, he and other characters talk about him as though he himself is a mystical being—one that defies not only the legal, but even the natural laws that bind humans. The first instance of this occurs when Ginger tells the story of when Johnny was a daredevil at the Flintock fair: "He was a daredevil. Used to jump buses on a trials bike. All over Wiltshire. Dorset. The Downs. He jumped the lot. Buses, tanks. Horseboxes. Jumped an aqueduct once. He was gonna jump Stonehenge but the council put a stop to it" (31). He goes on: "Broke every bone in his body. Broke his back in Swindon. Both arms in Calne. His

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legs in Devizes. His neck in Newbury. Then, at the Flintock Fair, 1981, he died" (31). Lee aptly

describes the audience's likely reaction to the news that Johnny once died: "Bollocks" (31), but

Ginger remains adamant: "I was there. I saw it with my own eyes" (31). To further surprise,

Ginger recounts Johnny's return to life: "They pronounce him stone dead…Paperwork,

everything…suddenly everyone turns round and he's gone. He's vanished. There's just a blanket

with nothing under it. They follow this trail of blood across the field, past the whirler-swirler,

into the beer tent, up to the bar, where he's stood there finishing a pint of Tally-Ho" (32). The

description Ginger gives of Johnny's revival is reminiscent of Jesus' resurrection, particularly

with the sudden disappearance of the dead body. Given the parallel between Johnny and Jesus

alongside the fact that the play is titled after Blake's poem about Jesus' mythological visit to

England, Johnny can be regarded as a Christ-like figure for England—a divine protector of sorts.

However, while Jesus' resurrection is temporary as he returns to Heaven to be with God, Johnny

remains Earth-bound. Johnny's resurrection and perpetual grounding in place might indicate to

the audience that he is a difference type of religious figure—one who seems Christ-like, but who

is not sent by a divine figure who does not exist on the Earthly plane. Instead, Johnny is

commanded by nature and the land—his duty is to the English soil, not to world as a whole, and

so while Jesus is a universal figure of redemption for Christians everywhere, Johnny becomes a

figure of redemption and protection for English people alone. He is the answer to the desire that

Blake's poem seems to denotes: Jesus does come to England, except in the world of *Jerusalem*,

he is Johnny, and he never left—he continues to fight for England even today.

While Johnny is portrayed as being mystical himself, he also claims to have born witness

to many supernatural events. His first tale is that he "once met a giant that built Stonehenge"

(57). Incorporating giants into the world of the play connects *Jerusalem* to the English medieval

literary canon, and feeds into what Jeffrey Cohen calls the "cultural function of the giant" in English literature: "to serve as a powerful expounder of dominant contemporary myths, from how the world was formed and where linguistic difference originates to why stone ruins dot the British countryside, and what comprises heroic male identity" (Cohen 1). Indeed, Johnny's claim that the giant he encountered "built Stonehenge" stems directly from the medieval notion that giants are the only explanation for such a site to exist in the first place, and to suggest that he met a giant at all implies that he is a heroic figure. Later, Johnny is asked where this meeting occurred, to which he replies: "Just off the A14 outside Upavon. About half a mile from the Little Chef" (Butterworth 57). The absurd juxtaposition between the plainness of this location and the supernatural sighting of a giant is greatly amusing, and serves to integrate the mystical into everyday England in a way that irresistibly links the medieval world to our modern one, inviting the audience to believe that despite the blandness of the A14, such wonders as seeing a giant are still possible. The allure of such mysticism over the bland every day that an English audience is accustomed to is extremely powerful, and offers them new possibilities for imagining the nation of which they are a part—one that is far more exciting, vibrant, and fundamentally and distinctively *English*.

Johnny's encounters with the supernatural do not end with giants. Later, in a conversation with Phaedra, who is described throughout the play as a "fairy," Johnny reveals more of what he has witnessed in the forest surrounding his home:

> JOHNNY. I've seen a lot of strange things in this wood. (*Beat*.) I seen a plague of frogs. Of bees. Of bats. I seen a rainbow hit the earth and set fire to the ground. I seen the air go still and all sound stop and a golden stag clear this clearing. Fourteen-point antlers of solid gold. I heard an oak tree cry. I've heard beech sing hymns. I seen a man they buried in the churchyard Friday sitting under a beech eating an apple on Saturday morning. (102)

Johnny's tales paint a picture of the enchanted forests of England in a similarly alluring way to the depiction of giants roaming around A roads. The "plague of frogs"—the second plague of Egypt in the Bible's Book of Exodus—like Blake's poem, locates religious and divine events on English soil, while a crying oak tree and a singing beech denote a natural world that can feel and do things beyond what we might imagine or be scientifically capable of understanding. For an English audience, all of this imagery revives the notion that there is a magic indigenous to the English land, and provides yet another moment of escape from the blandness of everyday life. Sparking the imagination of the audience in this way invites them to take more pride in being connected with the enchanted English land. Like *England, England*, *Jerusalem* seeks to satisfy its audience's deepest desires.

While the allure of mysticism in the play can be read as an opportunity for escapism, Laura Barton of *The Guardian* alternatively suggests that there is an impulse while watching *Jerusalem* to believe Johnny—to take him at his word and believe in his assertions that England is an enchanted place. She writes: "And for all the outlandishness of his tales, there lingers the unshakeable, unsettling feeling that maybe it isn't all bombast and bluster. Maybe there truly were giants and bullets and fairies and dragons. Perhaps, in all the fable and folklore, and in the fire and fathom of those eyes, Rooster might just be telling the truth of this land" (Barton). Here, Barton provides insight into why *Jerusalem* received such critical acclaim in its short run on stage; namely, because it inspires feelings of reverence towards the history of English land that are absent from any formal or informed understanding of what it means to be English. Once again, Johnny's performance is able to persuade the audience that England's land is magical; perhaps rather than allowing them to escape from blandness, Butterworth is encouraging them to view it in a new way. Where globalisation seeks to make everywhere look the same as

everywhere else, and where the mundane boredom of chain restaurants plagues the local landscape, the play asks the audience to envision an England that maintains its mystical roots, and inspires them to protect it from the globalising forces that threaten to destroy its exceptional nature.

While many are, like Barton, deeply enamoured by *Jerusalem*'s depiction of the supernatural and by Johnny, the Christ-like protector of Englishness, the invigoration the audience feels from his tales is also absurd. Johnny's success as protector of his patch of land is fairly long-lasting throughout the play despite being under siege from the very first scene with the visit from the Kennet and Avon council. However, even though we never see him evicted from his home, which gives him a sense of permanence in the land, Butterworth never makes it clear either way whether Johnny will win this fight. We can assume that he won't, considering that he is literally surrounded by council members ready to forcibly remove him from the site at the end of the play. The lack of a firm victory for Johnny indicates that he—and if he is the embodiment of Englishness, then consequently, Englishness—are incompatible with modernity and will ultimately be crushed by the forces they push back against. There is no smugness in this conclusion—on the contrary, it is a sad one, but nonetheless, the mysticism that surrounds Johnny's life ultimately comes across as a drug-hazed delusion and perhaps even a naïve belief that England can exist separately from the rest of the global capitalist modern world—a world, of course, that it helped to create.

Jerusalem is a play that appeals to a nation without a firm identity. It draws on folklore and mythology, and harps on modern frustrations with legal enforcement and global expansion to inspire a newly invigorated sense of Englishness rooted in land that is at its core mystical, divine, and permanent. It is, in Ben Brantley's words, "a mythic England that may never have been but

that everyone, on some level, longs for" (Brantley). The allure of the play is that it provides the audience with an English national identity that is worth fighting for—one rooted in defying the law and protecting the land as Johnny does. Indeed, the English land feels worthy of such fervent preservation against modern capitalist forces as we watch Johnny's spirited defence of his home, Davey's lament for the loss of the local, and as we imagine giants reaching down to lay the stones of Stonehenge. However, the play is brimming with a love of Englishness that is based on fiction, and illogically positions England in opposition to the capitalist world that it helped to create through British colonial pursuits and membership in global supranational organisations. Although Butterworth is certainly aware of the limits of his characters, and despite the fact that many areas of post-Brexit England today likely find the type of patriotism it displays objectionable, the appeal of *Jerusalem*'s assertion of a firm, unique, and magical identity associated with Englishness might explain why the political strategy of the Leave Campaign worked in 2016. Politicians campaigning for Leave were able to exploit the English desire to identify itself as special by making vague promises about restoring the UK to its former glory, and using xenophobia to suggest that Leaving would offer a chance to cleanse and protect the land from foreigners. It is indeed possible that *Jerusalem* pre-emptively struck the same chord with its English audience as the promise of Brexit struck in its people seven years later.

Chapter Four
BrexLit: Writing in the Present

> Here's 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.
> —Ali Smith, *Autumn* (181)

The texts that I have covered to this point have allowed the reader to gain an understanding of how Englishness has been portrayed in literature leading up to the Brexit referendum. These texts will continue to provide comparative significance in this second chapter of part two, which will focus specifically on BrexLit—works published post-referendum. These works will appear in chronological order: *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin*, a volume of poetry published posthumously by Geoffrey Hill (2019), *Autumn* by Ali Smith (2016), *Perfidious Albion* by Sam Byers (2017), *Middle England* by Jonathan Coe (2018), and *The Cockroac*h by Ian McEwan (2019). These works all consider the seismic shifts that caused the Brexit referendum, or that occurred afterwards, and each allows us new insights into the problem of Englishness and where it might be headed next.

Before analysing these texts, it is vital to note that historically, literature is often written to glorify events that are in reality devastating failures. As Fintan O'Toole points out in his book named after this phenomenon—*Heroic Failure*—English literature follows suit, epitomised by Alfred Tennyson's poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade," which commemorates one of the most brutal and unnecessary massacres of English men in a war, and yet has become a rallying cry for English patriotism. O'Toole uses George Orwell's words to describe this phenomenon: "English literature, like other literatures, is full of battle-poems, but it is worth noticing that the ones that have won for themselves a kind of popularity are always a tale of disasters and retreat. There is no popular poem about Trafalgar or Waterloo, for instance…The most stirring battle-

poem in English is all about a brigade of cavalry which charged in the wrong direction" (Orwell

qtd. in O'Toole 82). With this in mind, BrexLit can be seen as both an iteration of and a break

away from this literary tradition. While much of the popular literature that has been produced in

response to the 2016 referendum is indeed rooted in what appears to be the devastating failure of

Brexit, it does not offer any glorification of the event. O'Toole argues that this is because

England has ceased to be confident about its own superiority, meaning that turning failure into "a

statement of strength" (O'Toole 84) has become difficult at best and impossible at worst.

Perhaps it is not that England lacks confidence, but that Brexit provides no room to conceal

failure as success. Instead of glorifying Brexit itself, many BrexLit authors focus on visualising

new and better versions of Englishness—ones that will allow England to move forward from

Brexit and remain part of an interconnected world.

Geoffrey Hill's *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin*: Dying Man, Dying Nation

Geoffrey Hill is a renowned English poet, best known for his 1971 volume of poems

titled *Mercian Hymns*. *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* is Hill's final volume of poetry,

and it was published posthumously in 2019. Hill died just one week after the Brexit referendum

in 2016, and *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* is filled with his final reflections on the

state of Englishness in the lead-up to, and just following, the referendum. Despite the fact that

this is not the first published example of BrexLit, it was the first to be finished—albeit finishing

was not really Hill's decision. Although the volume is a series of separate poems, they flow from

and between each other, and all share an almost identical form, separated only by numbered

breaks. Indeed, the poems are each preceded by a number in the order that they appear in the

book, which suggests that one should read this volume chronologically, almost like an epic

poem. Regardless of how the text is read, Hill's final volume is a weighty grappling with England; Hill described the poems as "odes" (Hill 3), and in his review of the book, David Wheatley of the *Guardian* suggests that the poems address a "nation out-of-kilter" (Wheatley). As Wheatley writes: "There is scarcely one of the 271 sections in this book that does not assail the reader with the force of a vatic last judgment" (Wheatley). Certainly, Hill wrote these poems as a dying man in a dying England, and, while Hill's speaker only *represents* himself, one feels that his final volume is a divination for the country that he leaves behind.

The form of *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* is consistent with much of Hill's earlier work. He frequently uses assonance, consonance, and internal rhyme as opposed to end rhyme, generating a distinct rhythm and heightening the unity of the lines. Hill's uses of assonance and consonance not only link the sounds of words with each other, which enhances the reading experience, but also reinforce a shared meaning between the words, offering an even greater sense of accord within the lines of the poems. The poems also all follow the form of free verse, and are laid out like prose, often with multiple sentences making up a single line within the poem. Free verse does not follow a set meter or rigid rhyme scheme—though as mentioned it does make use of internal rhyme—but rather reflects natural speech patterns, and is better able to encapsulate complex ideas and the meandering trail of thought. Although free verse has been the primary form of poetry since the twentieth century, and therefore was not Hill's creation, this form is apt for the religious and prophetic associations of his volume. As in the book of Psalms, prose poetry is often used as a way of communicating a religious or prophetic message. Furthermore, Hill's attempts to grapple with English identity would appear far more straightforward if he adhered to a set metre and rhyme scheme; the use of free verse reflects the sinuous attempts to locate and pin down what Englishness means. The volume's contention with

Brexit further emphasises this; in the turbulent period that defined the Brexit referendum debate, Hill uses poetry to mirror this turbulence through free verse—a somewhat chaotic, yet no-less-unified attempt to reconcile meaning.

Before considering the poems themselves, it is imperative to understand how the title of the volume relates to them and their overarching message. There are two Books of Baruch, each with a vexed position in relation to the religious canon. The first is a book in the Apocrypha—one of the books of the Old Testament that not all Christians accept as legitimate (Hogan). In the second and third centuries, Christian beliefs were extremely diverse; many recounted episodes of Jesus' life and spoke of angels that are not mentioned in the Bible that we have today. In an attempt to standardise these various beliefs and create a cohesive religion, multiple councils were formed to decide which beliefs should be suppressed and which should be promoted as the true word of God, and "Heresiologists—heresy hunters of a bygone age who busied themselves exposing people judged dangerous to the Christian masses—fulminated against what they maintained was the falsehood of the gnostics" (*The Gnostic Bible* 2). The result was that the monotheist belief—that Jesus was not eternal and does not participate in the same substance as God—was suppressed and condemned as the heterodoxy, while the trinitarian position—that endorsed the holy trinity of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit—became the new orthodox position (*The Gnostic Bible* 11). Among those whose ideas were rejected were the Gnostics, who "provided innovative and oftentimes disturbing interpretations of the creation stories they read" (*The Gnostic Bible* 2), and their gospels were cast out and hidden for centuries—that is, until they were discovered in 1945 in a cave in Egypt (Pagels). The second Book of Baruch—a gospel written by the Gnostic Justin—was not found among these Gnostic gospels, but we know of its existence from the writings of Hippolytus, who wrote disdainfully of the Gnostics in Book 5 of

his work: *Refutation of All Heresies*. Hill's decision to title his work *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* indicates that he is aligning his poetry with a suppressed text—one that conveys a belief that is contrary to the orthodox manner of understanding. He is also identifying with a gnostic—a heretic—writer, which intimates a belief that his work might be suppressed by others, or if not suppressed, at the very least rejected. It may also predict that it could be lost for good— relegated to the dust of history; after all, he knew he would not be around to see that the work was published. The cover art of this book of poems reinforces this idea; taken from William Blake's *America: A Prophecy*, it shows an old, haggard man with a walking stick entering the mouth of a cave himself—easily read as Hill entering the world of the dead, but more importantly, entering the same kind of space in which the Gnostic gospels were hidden for hundreds of years.

Hill's sense of connection to the Gnostics becomes more apparent throughout the poems themselves, and foregrounds the volume's political position. In poem 59, the speaker defines his terms: "By gnosis I mean both what it ought to have been and what it is, to tell truth" (Hill 26). The speaker's emphasis on truth here falls directly in opposition with how the orthodoxy viewed the Gnostics—as heretics and liars—and rather suggests that gnosis is a pursuit of truth and knowledge. The notion that the Gnostics were those who told the truth is, in itself, heretical. Yet, this idea is reinforced in poem 70, when the speaker speculates: "Almost always the wrong people are admired, rewarded, and sedulously guarded; it is how things are wired and starred" (32). Again, these lines reverse the narrative of truth between the orthodoxy and the Gnostics, suggesting that the council members who chose which beliefs became the official canon were the "wrong people" and consequently that the Gnostics were right. In this way, the poem offers emancipation from the label of heretic ascribed to the Gnostics, and casts doubt on the ways that

narratives are formed and consolidated. Furthermore, the line "it is how things are wired and starred" suggests that the power structure that allows the wrong people to remain on top is "wired" into society. In other words, the speaker suggests that the world is connected and powered according to this dynamic. The word "starred," though, can also be used to mean fractured: "To make a radiating crack or fracture in (a surface of glass, ice, etc.)" (*OED*), suggesting that though a system that keeps the "wrong people" in power is ingrained into society, it is also what is causing it to fall apart. The word "starred" used in this sense also relates to a line in a later poem depicting a cracked mirror (Hill 92), indicating that the splintering of reflective surfaces is used purposefully as a tool to represent a contorted vision of power and identity in England. Certainly, the musings in these poems, while they appear to be reflections on an ancient Greek council's judgments, might also be read as reflections on the UK government, and the Conservative government in control at the time Hill was writing. Such a reading becomes even more convincing upon completing the book, when the reader has been more exposed to the poet's own political tendencies, which will be discussed later in this section.

While Hill does reflect on the Gnostics as a way of understanding frames of power and truth, he also demonstrates a personal attachment to the idea of gnosis that does not necessarily relate to the Gnostics themselves. Several times throughout the volume, the same line repeats: "what I love and admire is true gnosis; everything that I hate is not" (38), and in poem 81 he follows this repeated phrase with the line: "Of my thesis this is the ghost-score" (38). The speaker suggests that they may not be following an objective standard for gnosis or knowledge throughout, but that gnosis to them is a subjective endeavour. However, this poem also returns to the notion of the vatic—the word Wheatley uses to describe the effect of Hill's poems ("a vatic last judgement"). Using this word likens Hill as a poet to Old Testament prophets—a key

romantic turn—and forces us to consider the role of the prophet. Prophets deliver divine, universal truths that often appear in contrast with mankind's common certainties, which leads people to reject them. In this way, the indication towards subjectivity in the line "what *I* love and admire is true gnosis" may be intended to insinuate that the speaker, under divine supervision, is the only one who can truly distinguish the truth, rather than that he might have a personal bias that shields him from it. While there is certainly an air of self-righteousness in the notion that the poet's truth is the right one, that self-righteousness is depicted as warranted, as within this book, Hill's gnostic hand appears to speak the true word of God. Furthermore, in poem 90, the speaker describes how they read and relate to *The Book of Baruch*: "*The Book of Baruch* is easy going, compliant with my disproportionate ideal, surviving surreal mismanagement with humour and style; collapsible for ease of stowing" (41). This poem links Hill's identification with the Gnostics and his own political position, which lies in opposition the system of power in place in the UK. The phrase "surreal mismanagement" reinforces Wheatley's sense that Hill was writing about "a nation out-of-kilter" (Wheatley), and more blatantly criticises those currently in power. The word "surreal" on its own also suggests something about the atmosphere of England—that there is something bizarre about what is happening in this country. That the poet reacts with "humour and style," suggests a somewhat therapeutic approach to dealing with the strangeness of the present—as opposed to a barrage of politically disillusioned poems intended to overwhelm the reader with dread, Hill elects to imbue his work with wit and enjoyment as a means of healing.

Many of the early poems in the volume focus specifically on the capital city, London, and its ability to withstand attack. One of the longer poems, poem 36, recounts the devastation of the London Blitz during World War II, beginning the poem:

> Like much else rebuilt out of brick dust, ash, and silt of soot; a holocaust in that word's
> true cast: a multiplex burnt offering, residue of scorched hollows, roast flesh,
> hallows torched, when the City went up.
> Roman and Saxon roused from half-houseled sleep where they had housed. (Hill 15)

Here, the poet depicts a scene of total ruin; he uses the word "holocaust," as he suggests, for its

original definition, as opposed to the twentieth-century associations we attach to it. One *OED*

definition of "holocaust" reads: "Complete consumption by fire, or that which is so consumed;

complete destruction, esp. of a large number of persons; a great slaughter or massacre" (*OED*).

The deadly image of "complete consumption by fire" imagines that nothing was left standing

after the Blitz—that London fell completely. The reference to the roused Roman and Saxon

further emphasises the notion of ruin; Roman ruins lie scattered throughout London—the

remnants of buildings once destroyed by the Saxon Boudica in a devastating and flattening attack

on the city. These lines could be read as suggesting that the ruin of the Blitz revealed more ruins

that lay undiscovered throughout London, but they could also simply be read as references to the

city's history of destruction. If the latter interpretation holds, Hill is indicating something

remarkable about London and its ability to endure attack. Indeed, Matt Brown of *Londonist*

suggests that after the Saxons destroyed London, "a bigger and stronger city rose in its place"

(Brown), the poet's suggestion that the Blitz raised sleeping Romans and Saxons may imply that

though the Blitz destroyed London, it also reinforced it and made it stronger.

Throughout the rest of poem 36, the speaker considers all of the religious buildings that

were gutted in the Blitz: "St Andrew Holborn…St Mary Abchurch…St Mary-le-Bow…St

Margaret Pattens…St Andrew Undershaft" (Hill 15). Apart from St Andrew Undershaft, all of

these churches are known as the "Wren churches" (Downes), as they were rebuilt after the Great

Fire of London in 1666 by architect Christopher Wren, whose most famous project is St Paul's

Cathedral, which he also designed to replace the rubble of the old St Paul's left by the fire

(Downes). Just as Wren's churches were rebuilt in the aftermath of a fire in 1666, so were his churches rebuilt again in the aftermath of the Blitz in the 1940s. Hill expands on the reconstruction that was necessary to preserve them after the Blitz in poem 50. He writes: "The beauty of the restored Wren churches should be a matter of record, indeed of gratitude; or, failing that, of duty" (Hill 23). These three words: record, gratitude, and duty, all imbue a sense of patriotism to the rebuilding process, as though we owe something not only to history and the record of the past for the benefit of the future, but to the capital city itself—the centre of England and its power. Indeed, duty to one's country and land is a prominent nationalistic idea—one that was strongly reinforced in the two world wars of the twentieth century. The patriotic image of restoring some of London's most architecturally significant buildings after they have come under attack suggests once again a history of destruction and rejuvenation for the capital city. Yet, using Wren's churches in particular goes further, to paint a picture of the city as palimpsest, where traces of the past remain even though they have been obliterated. The repetition of fire and destruction—by the Saxons, by the Great Fire of London, and by the Blitz—suggest that though the country's foundation may be destroyed, they can be rebuilt, and will return stronger than before. Such a message presents a more hopeful message for post-Brexit England—that although leaving the EU might constitute a destructive act, as before, England will heal, and will be ready to face the next threat that presents itself.

However, despite the apparent patriotism with which the poet relays the rebuilding of the Wren churches, Hill's volume as a whole rejects the idea of a "romantic nationalism" (29), and ridicules those who find ways to reassert English exceptionalism. In poem 21, he writes: "Royal Tudor satyr masks, with horns and tusks worn down to papier-mâché husks conserved, or not, at Hampton Court, are revelled-in by those who would maintain our nation's token place—even

now, without grace—in the Divine Plan" (10). The consonance of this line is reflected not only in internal rhyme, but also in meaning. The masks and tusks turn to husks—a historical sequence of degradation. The material the poet describes has been worn down to papier mâché, suggesting an impermanence and fragility that undercuts the notion that these royal relics are eternal symbols of the "nation's token place," or exceptional status. The speaker of the poems also inserts his own position on patriotism in poem 64: "I am an old-fashioned patriot even though, long ago, I fell to praising the Easter Rising" (29), suggesting that his love for England has been challenged by feelings of camaraderie with the Irish rebels who led an armed insurrection in opposition to English rule in 1916. In other words, the speaker recognises England's flaws as an oppressor, and that feeling appears to be held in contrast with a sense of patriotism.

In the next line of the same poem, Hill writes: "Our fellow citizens, chiefly, make fools of us; not uncommonly at grand funerals and the unveiling of national memorials" (29). This line speaks to the act of reinforcing a national identity; through "grand funerals" we feel a collective sense of mourning for an individual who presumably means something to England, while the "unveiling of national memorials" similarly imbues the country with a collective sense of pride in English achievements of the past. Yet, the poet suggests that these acts "make fools of us"— that they reveal an almost laughable impulse to swoon at the grandeur of the nation based on hollow displays of national honour and egotism. The final line of the poem reads:

> There are fools enough to be made fools of, I grant you that.
> Romantic nationalism (*supra*) is a kind of fate. (29)

Here, the poet reinforces the relationship between nationalism and foolishness, while also suggesting that nationalism is "fate" in today's modern world. Indeed, it is difficult to exist apart from one's national identity—the world is divided into nations and one's national identity

dictates everything about how one is able to live one's life. Yet, in poem 262, Hill relates the notion of fate and romantic nationalism to the patriotism of the year of the Blitz:

> That there is strong correlation between character and fate is probably proven
>> somewhere.
> If so, our nation in nineteen forty was a major exception to that rota[.] (141)

The Blitz began in 1940, and the speaker suggests here that the "foolish" romantic nationalism of today is distinct from the feeling of patriotism in that year. In this way, Hill is suggesting that something fundamental has changed about England and Englishness since the second world war—perhaps pointing out that strong national pride during a time of destruction and war is far less foolish than romantic nationalism in a time of peace and prosperity. It seems that the romantic nationalism of today that Hill speaks of relates to the re-emerging rhetoric of British superiority, and the form of baseless yet fervent nationalism that proliferated during the Brexit campaign in 2016.

Although Hill's poems read distinctly as though they hold the key to what Englishness means, in the latter part of the volume the poems fall into the same pattern as the pre-Brexit referendum texts of the previous chapter: into recognising that there is no simple answer to the conundrum of identity in this nation. In the first line of poem 174, Hill writes: "'All the mirrors in England are broken' I've taken from *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*. Possibly it is how we all feel" (92). Amidst the reference to the 2004 novel by Susanna Clarke, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, which is about the revival of practical magic and is set during the Napoleonic Wars, this line generates several layered meanings. The first relates to the fact that in Roman times, people believed that mirrors contained the soul of the person looking into them, and if the mirror broke, it meant that the person's soul was damaged, hence seven years of bad luck. From this, one might understand poem 174 to be a reflection (no pun intended) on the broken soul of England—

on the evil that it has historically been capable of—and an omen for seven years of bad luck (which could be considered a kind of practical magic to punish wrong-doers). On this reading the poem condemns what the nation stands for historically; rather than pride, there is a sense of disappointment in England. On top of the damaged soul of England, the image of a broken mirror suggests that one cannot see one's reflection clearly, and without a complete image of oneself, one lacks a coherent identity. In this way, poem 174 feeds directly into the idea that Englishness is unable to recognise itself, or construct a complete identity. The dislocation of England's identity is further emphasised in poem 182, in the line: "The England of my fable an unstable floating island seldom in the same place" (99). The word "fable" here suggests that there is a moral message about Englishness to be extracted from *The Book of Baruch*, while the untethered image of a floating island indicates the placelessness of England. Such placelessness, combined with the word "unstable," again points the reader towards a conception of an England that has been politically and physically uprooted, and that is being pushed along by the waves and tides of the world rather than charting its own course. In this way, there is also a distinct lack of agency in this image, and England loses both its identity and its power.

Furthermore, as Hill is clearly grappling with Englishness, the use of the first-person narrative throughout might reveal how he feels individually given the contemporaneous circumstances, or once again give a vatic power to his lines. In the latter half of the book, the poems become more brazen, and the poet begins to reveal his outlook on contemporary events in England; namely, the general election of 2015, and the Brexit referendum of 2016. In poem 186, the poet concisely expresses his political position in the general election with the line: "Corbyn must win" (102). He goes on in poem 194:

> The radical politics are not an obstacle: a revival of archaic, anti-oligarchical zeal.
> If the free spirit is unelectable, so be it.

Come the turn of the wheel it shall have my vote, posthumous or not. (107)

Hill's inclusion of Jeremy Corbyn's name leaves nothing to the imagination here—this is a statement of political interest and one that suggests that Hill is discouraged by a country he sees as "oligarchical." Presumably after Corbyn is not elected, and as the Brexit proceedings begin, the poet continues to relay his voting intentions. In poem 264, in a line separated on the page from the rest of the poem, Hill writes: "Come June I shall vote 'Remain' though disquieted by what I know will even then, even if we win, squat in the high seats, acting as if benign albeit of covert reign" (142). This statement blatantly demonstrates Hill's concern about Euroscepticism in the British government, and it also alludes to the growing division throughout society. In the line "if we win" the "we" implies that there is a group he belongs to within the larger group, while the expression of concern that something (Euroscepticism) will linger and "squat in the high seats" implies that tensions will remain even after the votes are cast.

Hill engages more with the Brexit referendum in his final poems, becoming more and more direct—perhaps as he felt time was running out to say his piece. Poem 266, ostensibly written very close to his death and perhaps with a mind to the increased violence that accompanied the referendum debate, begins as follows:

> I look at the handsome intelligent face of Stephen Lawrence, and mourn; and at the
> coarse blebbed features of his murderers, and feel shame.
> The virtues attributed to our nation are a Referendum scam, as with misinterpretation of
> *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or 'Jerusalem' or the nuclear deterrent or Classic
> FM or the Heir Apparent. (143)

In the first line, Hill refers to Stephen Lawrence, a young black boy who was murdered in Southeast London in 1993. His murder was an "unprovoked attack by a gang of white youths" ("Stephen Lawrence murder: A timeline of how the story unfolded"), and the police response to the murder has been heavily criticised in the decades since. As of April 2018, the case had not

been fully closed. Though four men have been implicated in Stephen's murder, it took years for

the court to prosecute them and the search for witnesses and evidence was deeply flawed. Hill

calls Stephen's murder to mind as a reminder of the underlying racial tensions that exist in

England, and have existed for decades. The second line: "The virtues attributed to our nation are

a Referendum scam" demonstrates that the nationalistic ideals of a strong, independent, superior,

and, of course, white Britain are little more than a performance intended to inspire collective

feelings—once again stirring that romantic nationalism that Hill has struck down as foolish. Hill

also refers to Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem*, suggesting that a misreading of the play is to suggest

that it is a beautiful ode to England; it seems he agrees with the reading I put forth in chapter

three, in which I argue that *Jerusalem* is a performative representation of what people *want*

England to look like, but that the image it portrays is romanticised and ahistorical, not to mention

hypocritical in its attack of the global world that England helped to build.

 The final poem of the volume, poem 271, is a wonderfully crafted description of how

Britain looks after the Brexit referendum in 2016, in the final week of Hill's life:

> The numbness after the shock of exit, big-bummed Britannia in her tracksuit; her
> phantom lap of honour; no other runner.
> July the dark month; the lime leaves turned matt. The newly-bloomed mallow will see us
> re-autumned before it falls fallow.
> Even so, the power of stout roses has risen watt by watt against the afterglow of each
> brief thunder-shower. (Hill 145)

The first words of this poem: "The numbness after the shock of exit" gives the poem an almost

lethargic feeling; the reader is forced to slow down, imagining the nation like a body paralyzed

in shock—frozen, silent. The line "big-bummed Britannia in her tracksuit" is extremely comical,

using the English fashion trend to depict a nation on its arse. Hill continues to mock Brexit

triumphalism as a "phantom lap of honour," suggesting that Brexiteers are imagining themselves

as having beaten something or someone, when really, they have only beaten themselves. The

next line: "July that dark month" brings to mind the cyclicality of the seasons, but where July ought to be one of the brightest months of the year, the vote has plunged it into darkness and decay—nature will be "re-autumned." Yet, despite the morose (while humorous) tone of this final poem, Hill ends on a note of national rebirth: "the power of stout roses has risen watt by watt against the afterglow of each brief thunder-shower." Roses are the English flower, and are often a symbol of Englishness (as we will see later, Ali Smith uses an image of roses to end her novel, *Autumn*, too). Here, Hill seems to suggest, as he does with the Blitz and Wren's churches, that with destruction comes the opportunity for rebirth and rejuvenation, an overwhelmingly positive and hopeful way to end his final volume of poems.

Geoffrey Hill's *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* is an extraordinary book of poetry that tracks a poet's final reflections on Englishness as he stares both death, and a dramatically changing nation, in the face. He sees poetry as an opportunity to contribute to the resurgence of the nation that he hopes for; in poem 200, Hill writes: "Poem as urgent sperm bank for sunk re-emergent nation" (110). Indeed, in the final years of his life, Hill's poems become his children—his legacy—and his attempt to bring something into the world that can heal and rebuild a nation he believes is suffering a slow death by nationalism. Although Hill never lived to see the rest of the Brexit proceedings unfold, his poems can be read as a document of what Englishness, and the debates about Englishness, look like at this watershed historical moment. Hill dedicates much of his volume to recounting esteemed English writers, poets, and figures whom he admires or doesn't. He recounts English history as a way of understanding English identity, and he recognises the difficulty of defining Englishness as a time when the answer is murkier than ever before. He also likens all of his reflections with the work of a supposed heretic—a reminder to the reader that this work intentionally goes against the grain, but

alongside his reflections on the distribution of power, also suggests that it holds a prophecy—

that it holds the truth. Despite all this, Hill's final volume ends on a note of hope; where London

has been destroyed by fire, it has also been rebuilt, rising like a phoenix from the ashes.

Although Brexit looms large as a force as destructive as fire, Hill reminds us that English roses

will bloom once again; this is a disaster, but it will not be the final word.

Ali Smith's *Autumn*: Time, Love, and Collage

  Autumn by Ali Smith is often referred to as the first BrexLit novel, published less than

four months after the Brexit referendum in 2016. Smith is a prolific Scottish author, playwright,

academic, and journalist, and she has accrued a number of awards over her career, in addition to

being shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize four times. Although she is from Inverness, she

currently lives in Cambridge, England. *Autumn* is the first in Smith's latest series of novels,

which make up a seasonal quartet. Each novel is named after a season of the year, but despite

their apparent continuity, each has its own unique plot. However, as the titles suggest, time, and

our experience of time, is the central theme that connects all four novels, and *Autumn* in

particular grapples with time in marvellously complex and subtle ways. Ironically, *Autumn* is set

primarily in the summer of 2016, in the midst of the Brexit referendum debate, vote, and

aftermath. However, the novel is not dedicated to reminiscing directly about these events. The

primary narrative of the novel follows old friends Elisabeth, who is thirty-two years old, and

Daniel Gluck, who is one hundred and one years old, unconscious, and on his death bed, through

their relationship, past and present. The novel is organised achronologically, jumping seamlessly

to different points in Elisabeth's and Daniel's lives. *Autumn* also operates in a strange limbo

between life and death, as Daniel lies quietly dying, dreaming and slipping slowly but surely

away from his connection to the living. Although autumn is a time of decay—and Smith is sure to link the experience of Brexit to that decay—like Geoffrey Hill, the novel offers a conception of time as a restorative, cyclical force. While division and political turmoil are rife throughout the book, so are friendship, art, and love. Ultimately, Smith allows the reader to imagine a world beyond Brexit, even as death—both of Daniel and of the nation—looms large.

Autumn begins with a riff on Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*—a historical novel set in both Paris and London during the French Revolution that pays close attention to the dichotomy between the two capital cities at a time of immense upheaval. Dickens' opening line reads:

> It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way—in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. (Dickens 1)

Opening his novel in this way, Dickens calls the reader's attention to the outright opposition between London and Paris during this time, and depicts a world in which "the superlative degree of comparison" becomes the orienting force. Dickens' call to associate this atmosphere with "the present period" feels as though it could also connect to our present moment in the time of Brexit, yet this time, the opposition is not between nations, but within one. Ali Smith uses her own version of Dickens' opening line; much shorter, but no less impactful, Smith writes: "It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times" (Smith 3). By imitating Dickens, Smith implies that she is writing about a time of dichotomy, yet she offers us no contrast between supposed sides. It is also notable that while Dickens was writing about the dichotomy between two countries— England and France—Smith is writing about a dichotomy that exists within one country. Smith

continues: "Again. That's the thing about things. They fall apart, always have, always will, it's in their nature" (3). Smith's use of the word "Again" to refer to the very first line of her novel is the first example of her complex handling of time; the reader has no background for when "the worst of times" might have happened before, since the book has only just begun. Yet, Smith makes a statement about how things fall apart: "always have, always will," which suggests that there is a cyclical pattern to human experience. While the immediate notion that things always fall apart appears like an image of hopelessness, Smith subtly weaves this idea throughout the rest of the novel in a way that actually casts it as an image of hope.

Continuing to introduce the reader to her complex framework of time, Smith continues in this first chapter with a dream sequence, in which Daniel has passed over into death, and time appears to be absent entirely. The sentence that begins the sequence goes: "So an old old man washes up on a shore" (3). Immediately, this line casts the reader's mind to the reel of news stories about migrants whose bodies washed up on the southern coasts of Italy and Spain as they attempted to escape war-torn territories in search of a better life in Europe. Smith goes on: "He looks like a punctured football with its stitching split, the leather kind that people kicked a hundred years ago. The sea's been rough" (3). The leathery image of the old man's skin indicates his age, while the likeness to a punctured football suggests a kind of deflation and violence that are grotesque. However, our concerns for this body are temporarily alleviated as it seems to be animated in the form of Daniel Gluck: "Daniel sits up on the sand and the stones ¶ — is this it? really? this? is death?" (4). Looking down at his naked body, Daniel "sees that his body's still the old body, the ruined knees" (4), and discouraged by the fact that he has not become young again in death, he proclaims: "Thank you for having me, death. Please excuse me, must get back to it, life" (5). Here, Smith blurs the line between Daniel as dead, and Daniel as alive—indeed,

we learn later that in a way, Daniel *is* somewhere in between, as he lies dying and unconscious in a nursing home—not quite alive but not quite dead either.

Wandering around the beach he has found himself on, Daniel sees a girl and attempts to hide his naked body from her, retreating to a forest where he discovers that he can sew leaves into a jacket (9). When he emerges from the woods, the landscape has changed:

> But the sea? Silent, like sea in a dream.
> The girl? No sign. The ring of dancers round her? Gone. On the shore, though, there's a washed-up body. He goes to look. Is it his own?
> No. It is a dead person.
> Just along from this dead person, there is another dead person. Beyond it, another, and another.
> He looks along the shore at the dark line of the tide-dumped dead…
> Further up the beach there are more people. These people are human, like the ones on the shore, but these are alive. They're under parasols. They are holidaying up the shore from the dead. (12)

Daniel "looks from the death to the life, then back to the death again" (13), witness to this shocking and stark representation of life and death existing in the same place—the living either ignorant of or unbothered by the trail of dead bodies littering the beach that they are tanning on. For the reader, what seemed like a harmless, enchanted vision of what death looks and feels like, becomes a distressing and familiar reminder of the crisis of immigration, and one is forced to imagine that life and death exist alongside each other, acting simultaneously, as opposed to operating on separate planes of time and space. In this way, life does not lead to death, but happens alongside it; just as Daniel hovers somewhere in between these two states, they become interconnected, and time ceases to operate linearly. Daniel recognises that "it will not last, the dream" (13), but even as the reader is snapped back into a more quotidian world, our preconceived notions about time begin to disintegrate.

As with the surrealism of the first chapter, the novel as a whole follows an unconventional form. Structurally, the book is divided into chapters of varying length. The

chapters are not chronologically ordered; instead, as Sarah Lyall of the *New York Times* notes in

her review:

> Chronology skips forward and backward and sideways, moving slowly and then quickly. "A minute ago it was June," the author says. "Now the weather is September." Smith's writing is fearless and nonlinear, exploring the connectivity of things: between the living and the dead, the past and the present, art and life. She conveys time almost as if it is happening all at once, like Picasso trying to record an image from every angle simultaneously. (Lyall)

Indeed, at the start of each chapter, there is a time-phrase to locate us in a specific moment. For

example, one chapter opens: "It is a Wednesday, just past midsummer" (Smith 15), another

opens: "It is just over a week since the vote" (53), and still another—the chapter Lyall refers to

here—opens: "A minute ago it was June. Now the weather is September" (85). Tellingly, most

(though not all) of the lines that open a chapter do not mention a specific year. In the cases

quoted above, they mention either the day of the week, a unit of clock-time, or a month—all

things that are constantly repeating themselves—contributing towards a reading of time as

cyclical and repetitive. Furthermore, in chapter thirteen, whether Smith means to say that

between June and September three months have gone by in what *felt* like a minute, or whether

she is noting how fluctuations in temperature confuse our understandings of what time of year it

is, she draws a distinction between how time actually works, and the experience of time.

In her review of *Autumn*, Joanna Kavenna spends some time considering this

contradiction: "This question—of the nature of time itself, and the nature of our experience of

time—is ancient and baroque. We conduct our lives with reference to an agreed symbolical

system, clock time, and yet there is also the wholly subjective experience of time—which the

philosopher Henri Bergson called *la durée* or duration. As in: time flies when you're having fun"

(Kavenna). Indeed, one day on a walk with Daniel, Elisabeth remarks: "Time flies" (Smith 76),

to which Daniel responds: "Well, yes. It can do, Daniel said. Literally. Watch this" (76), and he

"took his watch off his wrist and threw it into the water" (76). In this marvellous visualisation of time flying—a watch flying through the air—the reader becomes even more acutely aware that Smith is dealing with time in a completely new and unconventional way. As Smith draws our attention to these two alternate ways of thinking about how time operates, and as the chapters flit back and forth between the past and present, the reader is invited to re-evaluate their own relationship to time in the current moment. It is as though there is nothing anchoring us to the present alone—our past and present exist, like the living and the dead on the beach, simultaneously. Furthermore, as Kavenna asks: "If time demolishes all things, then does the febrile, forlorn present matter anyway?" (Kavenna). Read in this way, *Autumn*'s orientation towards the Brexit vote seems to be one of indifference. "things. They fall apart" (Smith 3), Smith writes; the UK joined the EU, the UK leaves the EU. What was made was always destined to disintegrate—it's the same cycle of the seasons that causes the leaves to fall.

The sporadic narrative of time is most clearly explored through the relationship between our thirty-two-year-old protagonist, Elisabeth, and her one hundred and one-year-old friend Daniel Gluck. The first time we see Elisabeth and Daniel interact, Elisabeth visits him in the nursing home. Yet, before we are privy to their actual interaction, there is a short chapter where Elisabeth speculates about what will happen when she sees him: "The last three times Elisabeth's been, he's been asleep. He'll be asleep this time too, when she gets there. She'll sit on the chair next to the bed and get the book out of her bag…Daniel will be so asleep that he'll look like he's never going to wake up" (29). She goes on:

> If he were to wake, the first thing he'd do is he'd tell her some fact from whichever fruitful place in his brain he'd been down deep in […]
> Sounds serious, she'd say.
> It was, he'd say. Nothing comic isn't serious […]
> What you reading? he'd say.
> Elisabeth would hold it up.

> Brave New World, she'd say.
> Oh, that old thing, he'd say.
> It's new to me, she'd say. (29–31)

Although the reader is immediately told: "That moment of dialogue? Imagined" (33), it seems that even though Daniel didn't say the words out loud, for Elisabeth, he did say them. In the same way that the first chapter visualises a physical limbo between life and death for Daniel, in this chapter there is a space between what is real and what is imagined. In Elisabeth and Daniel's interaction, he continues to interact with her in-person in Elisabeth's mind, even though no words are truly exchanged.

Their imagined dialogue continues as Elisabeth admires Daniel, "as still as death in the bed. But still. He's still here" (35). Again, this line alone uses the word "still" to place Daniel in an intermediary position between the states of life and death; he looks "still," i.e., unmoving, as in death, but he is "still," i.e., continues to be, alive. Elisabeth looks up the word still "just to see what'll come up" (35). After the last sentence she reads: "*People were still alive who knew the Wright Brothers*" (36), Daniel's voice once again emerges (though it doesn't):

> Ah yes, Orville and Will, the two flighty boys who started it all, Daniel, lying there so still, says without saying. The boys who gave us the world in a day, and air warfare, and every bored and restless security queue in the world. But I will lay you a wager (he says/doesn't say) that they don't have the kind of *still* on that list which forms part of the word di*still*ery. (36)

Here, Smith continues to explore something that both happens and doesn't happen at the same time, allowing us insight into a character who lies dying through the imagination of another. She also does so by using the word "still"—a word with a plethora of meanings that can link to both life and death. The power of this imagined dialogue is consolidated later in the novel as we leap back in time to a moment when Elisabeth is young, and she and Daniel are playing a storytelling

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game. Elisabeth makes up one character: "A man with a gun" (118), and Daniel chooses the

other: "I choose a person who'd come in disguise as a tree" (118). Elisabeth is appalled:

> A what? Elisabeth said. No way. You're supposed to say something like another man with another gun.
> Why am I? Daniel said.
> Because it's war, Elisabeth said.
> I have some input into this story too, and I choose a person who's wearing a tree costume, Daniel said.
> Why? Elisabeth said.
> Ingenuity, Daniel said.
> Ingenuity won't win your character this game, Elisabeth said. My character's got a gun […]
> Bullets are faster and stronger than tree costumes and will rip through and obliterate tree costumes, Elisabeth said.
> Is that the kind of world you're going to make up? Daniel said.
> There is no point in making up a world, Elisabeth said, when there's already a real world. There's just the world, and there's the truth about the world.
> You mean, there's the truth, and there's the made-up version of it that we get told about the world, Daniel said.
> No. The *world* exists. *Stories* are made up, Elisabeth said.
> But no less true for that, Daniel said. (118–119)

In this dialogue, Daniel challenges Elisabeth's understanding of the truth, suggesting that even

though something doesn't physically happen, it can still be real. Indeed, the dialogue that

Elisabeth imagines between herself and Daniel is no less real to the reader apart from the fact

that we are told it was imagined. Daniel also defies Elisabeth's expectations for what a story

should look like in the first place, offering an unconventional character that Elisabeth finds

bizarre and illogical.

In the following chapter, the reader is offered the rest of the story about the man with a

gun and the man in a tree costume, and it becomes a metaphor for the world that, one might say,

we *really* live in. We whizz forward in time again: "Time-lapse of a million billion flowers

opening their heads, of a million billion flowers bowing, closing their heads again, of a million

billion new flowers opening instead" (123); and we find that "Elisabeth, sitting in Daniel's room

in The Maltings Care Providers plc just short of twenty years later, doesn't remember anything of that day or that walk or the dialogue described in that last section" (123). However, the narrative offers us the story regardless: "here, preserved, is the story Daniel actually told" (123). His story begins with the man dressed as a tree, asking: "Sure you want war?" (124). The man with the gun, though he aims his weapon at the man dressed as a tree, says "I'm a peaceable person…I don't want trouble. That's why I carry this gun. And it's not like I have anything against people like you generally" (124). The story continues:

> What do you mean, people like me? the person dressed as a tree said.
> What I said. People dressed in stupid pantomime tree costumes, the man with the gun said.
> But why? the person dressed as a tree said.
> Think what it'd be like if everyone started wearing tree costumes, the man with the gun said. It'd be like living in a wood. And we don't live in a wood. This town's been a town since long before I was born. If it was good enough for my parents, and my grandparents and my great grandparents.
> What about your own costume? the person dressed as a tree said.
> (The man with the gun was wearing jeans, a T-shirt and a baseball cap.)
> This isn't a costume, the man said. These are my clothes. (124–125)

Daniel's story uses language reminiscent of xenophobic debates surrounding who, or which "kind" of people belong in a place, and which do not. The man with the gun's assertion that "it's not like I have anything against people like you generally" (124) seems to mirror xenophobic language targeted at minority ethnic groups lumped together as a collective "other," but here that language is comically cast towards a man dressed like a tree. Yet, as Bhikhu Parekh notes, an attack on multiculturalism in Europe is "often a coded word for Muslims" (Parekh 51), and the emphasis on the "costume" of the man dressed as a tree does also appear to be reminiscent of contemporary xenophobia towards Muslim people in particular, who are more visibly "other" due to their religious attire, such as the hijab for women. The role of Muslim individuals within western European society is often debated in controversial ways; for example, the Islamic veil

dominated debates in Britain in 2006 (Parekh), and France has banned the *hijab* and all

"ostentatious symbols of religions" in the public sphere (Parekh). Daniel's comment on the man

with the gun's costume suggests that there is no significant difference between dressing as a tree

and dressing, as we might say, "normally," ridiculing this is a point of difference between the

men. Indeed, Daniel's story can be read as a metaphor for an English person swept up in the fear

of someone who does not look or think like them. Since the reader is encouraged to take the side

of the man dressed as a tree, Daniel's story offers an alternative narrative to xenophobia and a

new way of understanding our differences. Of course, this a metaphor is also another example of

where Smith uses liminal space—this time between what is said and what is meant.

As Daniel's story suggests, although *Autumn* is generally indirect in its approach to

Brexit, the novel does consider the atmosphere in England at the time of the referendum. Smith's

Dickensian refrain that begins the novel continues in a later chapter, which encapsulates how the

results of the referendum vote were received. In this chapter, every line begins "All across the

country" (Smith 59–61), emphasising not an era of opposition, but a *place* of opposition:

> All across the country, there was misery and rejoicing.
> All across the country, what had happened whipped about by itself as if a live electric wire had snapped off a pylon in a storm and was whipping about in the air above the trees, the roofs, the traffic.
> All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing. All across the country, people felt they'd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won. All across the country, people felt like they'd done the right thing and other people had done the wrong thing. All across the country, people looked up Google: *what is EU?* All across the country, people looked up Google: *move to Scotland*. All across the country, people looked up Google: *Irish passport applications*. (59)

Notable here is how the references to Scotland and Ireland indicate that the "country" Smith

talks about is not the UK as a whole, but rather England on its own, with Wales either remaining

complicit or absent. Although this chapter reminds us of the polarising forces that tore England

apart during the Brexit campaign and referendum and signals towards some celebratory

emotions, returning to the opening line, Smith suggests that even for those who felt they had

won, this remained "the worst of times."

In a chapter that precedes this moment in the novel, but proceeds from it chronologically,

"just over a week since the vote" (53), "Elisabeth passes a cottage not far from the bus stop

whose front, from the door to across above the window, has been painted over with black paint

and the words GO and HOME" (53). Elisabeth notices that "People either look down, look away

or stare her out. People in the shops, when she buys some fruit, some ibuprofen and a newspaper

for her mother, speak with a new kind of detachment" (53–54), and her mother "tells her when

she gets there that half the village isn't speaking to the other half of the village" (54). The

rhetoric of "go home" was used viciously throughout the Brexit campaign to refer not only to

immigrants, but also to those members of British society who do not fit a white British

archetype. Even those who had lived in England their entire lives were exposed to this kind of

xenophobic attack. While the words and the atmosphere of this scene are familiar, they are still

unsettling to the reader, and the stark image of a village sliced in half demonstrates in visual

terms the polarisation that emerged in the wake of the vote. The division of the town becomes

even more pronounced with the erection of an electrified fence "slicing straight across a path

Elisabeth's walked several times since her mother came to live here" (56). That the fence

prevents Elisabeth from her usual walking route depicts an image of entrapment, and suggests a

new limitation has been imposed on where she can walk, which stands in perfectly for the

looming retraction of options to live elsewhere in the EU, and the constricting isolationism that

Brexit has produced.

In another instance, Elisabeth sits at her mother's home and considers her journey to get there, "most of all about the Spanish couple in the taxi queue at the station. [¶] They'd clearly just arrived here on holiday, their luggage round their feet. The people behind them in the queue shouted at them. What they shouted at them was to go home. [¶] This isn't Europe, they shouted. Go back to Europe" (130). The repetition of "go home" again indicates that this is not an isolated event, and Elisabeth recognises this: "Elisabeth sensed that what was happening in that one passing incident was a fraction of something volcanic" (130). She goes on: "This is what shame feels like" (130). The targeting of individuals clearly only visiting the UK as tourists demonstrates a particularly ugly reflex in which anyone who is not quintessentially English, i.e., white and English-speaking, does not belong. Although Elisabeth was clearly only a witness to the incident, she feels shame nonetheless—a particularly pertinent example of how almost half the country, and likely more, since not everyone who voted for Brexit condoned carrying out these kinds of verbal attacks, is implicated in the actions of the other half. Elisabeth's recollection of this event in the taxi queue is yet another example of how polarised the country has become, and demonstrates once again how violent language and actions are becoming more prevalent.

The first encounter with Brexit-related violence in the novel appears when Elisabeth first visits Daniel in the home. In another dream sequence—this time in the mind of Elisabeth—they go on a walk together, and Elisabeth starts the conversation with: "Someone killed an MP, she tells Daniel's back as she struggles to keep up. A man shot her dead and came at her with a knife. Like shooting her wouldn't be enough" (38). That Jo Cox's murder is relayed in the framework of a dream is important here—dreams are, like stories, imaginative compositions which we tend to agree don't necessarily hold truth in their own right. Yet the reader is acutely aware of the

truth of this story, and her dream becomes a space in which she can communicate with Daniel while he remains unconscious. Even more nightmarishly, Elisabeth continues: "But it's old news now. Once it would have been a year's worth of news. But news right now is like a flock of speeded-up sheep running off the side of a cliff" (38). While the image of the sheep as mindless animals following each other off the side of a cliff provides some comic relief, the fact that the brutal murder of an MP could so immediately qualify as "old news" suggests a seriously concerning and unprecedented atmosphere of violence has been unleashed.

Zooming out from the English case, Smith dedicates the chapter after the "All across the country" monologue to a recollection of a mix-up involving a swastika banner being raised in Nice, France in 2015. The chapter relays how it was "a film production unit filming an adaptation of a memoir, using the Palais to recreate the Hôtel Excelsior, where Alois Brunner, the SS officer, had had his office and living quarters after the Italians surrendered to the Allies" (63). The film unit had, without warning, raised "a long red banner with a swastika at the top of it" (63), and it incited a visceral reaction: "Some people screamed. There was a flurry of shouting and pointing" (63). The local authorities ran a survey to ask: "Were locals right to be angry about the banner: Yes or No?" (64), and of four thousand votes, seventy percent said no (64). In this scene, we leap from the Brexit referendum to a display of 1940s fascism. Real or fake, that these two chapters appear next to each other is telling, and it seems that Smith offers us a rather grim comparison. Indeed, thinking back to a cyclical framework of time, these two moments might appear next to each other not because they happened chronologically, but because they resemble each other in some way. It could be that Smith draws the reader to this moment of false panic to indicate that there is something performative about the swing to the right—perhaps that something that looks like fascism might not really *be* fascism—a potentially reassuring line of

thought. However, the symbolic value of raising the flag at a time when right-wing nationalist and fascist groups were resurfacing and gaining strength across Europe does point towards a reading of this scene as a stark warning that the ideas and events that accompanied the Brexit referendum seem to be mirroring a very dark period of history.

Although scenes such as these appear frequently and demonstrate the incredible surge in nationalism and xenophobia that Brexit produced, from the outset, Elisabeth and Daniel's relationship appears in opposition to this trend. When Elisabeth first meets Daniel, it is because her homework is to interview a neighbour, and he is her neighbour. Although Elisabeth's mum has serious reservations about allowing Elisabeth to interview him: "He probably can't speak very good English" (45), Elisabeth replies defiantly: "He's not frail…He's not foreign. He's not old. He doesn't look in the least imprisoned" (45). Here, Elisabeth immediately pushes back against her mother's assumption about Daniel's nationality, showing that she is not tarnished by prejudice or instinctual xenophobia. Furthermore, the development of their cross-generational friendship defies conventional understandings of friendship and love, as well as how Brexit came to be. In the aftermath of Brexit, most of the results coverage stated a wide generational schism—the old voted to leave (presumably because they remembered the "good old days"), while the young voted to remain (presumably because the EU was all they knew). However, rather than playing into this narrative, Smith creates a harmonious intergenerational relationship that is based on mutual respect, trust, and shared values, and that provides a platform for shared ideas and reciprocal learning. Despite their age difference, they each become a companion for the other and they develop a genuine friendship that becomes more like a familial bond. For Elisabeth, it even feels like love: "It isn't that kind of relationship, Elisabeth said. It isn't even the least bit physical. It never has been. But it's love. I can't pretend it isn't" (146). Given that

novels historically emphasise sexual love, it is notable that Smith chose an atypical, non-sexual relationship to form the strongest bond in the novel. Elisabeth and Daniel's relationship is further proof that *Autumn* is purposefully flouting literary expectations; both the non-linear form of the novel and its central narrative of a nonconforming loving relationship legitimise new frameworks for understanding the world.

Their relationship not only defies common understandings of friendship, but it also closely interrelates with Smith's conception of time. Elisabeth and Daniel may be from different generations—different times. Yet, if time is a cycle, then we can imagine that, while their lived experiences may have occurred at a different point on the wheel, there is actually very little to separate them. Furthermore, when Daniel and Elisabeth first meet, Elisabeth is only eight years old and is new to the neighbourhood. Daniel's greeting immediately confounds her:

> Very pleased to meet you…Finally.
>> How do you mean, finally? Elisabeth said. We only moved here six weeks ago.
>> The lifelong friends, he said. We sometimes wait a lifetime for them. (52)

Daniel's suggestion that one sometimes waits a lifetime for a lifelong friend seems contradictory—surely if you have already lived a lifetime you cannot newly meet a lifelong friend. However, his statement once again suggests that time is not operating linearly, but cyclically—as though, even though he is just meeting Elisabeth now, he has known her his whole life. Here is another example of the difference between time and the experience of time—we often meet someone and remark: "It feels like I've known you my whole life," though of course we haven't. Daniel's character makes this suggestion seem less clichéd and emotional, and more matter-of-fact, as though he knows something about time that the reader does not. Smith also considers what seems like the "problem" of their age difference. Elisabeth's mother is deeply concerned by their friendship, telling Elisabeth:

> Unnatural.
> Unhealthy.
> You're not to.
> I forbid it.
> That's enough. (83)

However, Elisabeth defies these orders, and their relationship continues to flourish. Smith beautifully repeats Elisabeth's mother's words later in the novel, this time with Elisabeth directing them at her mother, who is falling in love with another woman:

> It is like magic has happened in my life, Elisabeth's mother whispers to Elisabeth when Zoe's left the room.
> Unnatural, Elisabeth says.
> Who'd have known, who'd have guessed, it'd be love, at this late stage, that'd see me through? Elisabeth's mother says.
> Unhealthy, Elisabeth says. I forbid it. You're not to.
> She gives her mother a hug and a kiss. (238)

In this moving scene, Smith reminds the reader that what may seem "unnatural" and "unhealthy" is often the most beautiful, and in this way, non-normative expressions of love overcome every social expectation that is encountered in this novel.

Due to its label as a BrexLit novel from the outset, many have struggled to reconcile key parts of *Autumn* to the politics of Brexit. The most critical of such under-analysed moments, is how Smith grapples with various different art forms, and Daniel becomes the mouthpiece through which she does so. Every time Daniel sees Elisabeth, the first thing he asks is: "What you reading?" (68). The first time he asks, Elisabeth "showed him her empty hands" (68), and he replies: "Always be reading something, he said. Even when we're not physically reading. How else will we read the world? Think of it as a constant" (68). Daniel's emphasis on reading as a way of reading the world suggests several things: the first is that literature is a key tool that allows someone to become more perceptive of the world around them—to build stories, perhaps, out of the things that they see. The second, is that literature contains information about the world

we live in, so that we might better understand it. Towards the end of *Autumn*, one of the chapters begins with: "Here's an old story so new that it's still in the middle of happening" (181)—an apt way to describe the novel itself, which is being published in response to, and in the midst of, Brexit. If Smith is indicating that literature is a way of understanding the world, then she is also clueing the reader into why this novel is important, and how she intends for the reader to use it.

Daniel is not only partial to literature but also to visual art. One day, as they sit together on a bench after a walk, Elisabeth confides in Daniel that she is "planning to go to college when I leave school…If I can afford it" (71). Without hesitation, Daniel replies: "Oh, you don't want to go to college…You want to go to collage" (71). While Elisabeth asserts that Daniel is using the wrong word, Daniel disagrees: "Collage is an institute of education where all the rules can be thrown into the air, and size and space and time and foreground and background all become relative, and because of these skills everything you think you know gets made into something new and strange" (71–72). Immediately, Daniel's description of collage appears to be a description of *Autumn*—it is a work that throws out the traditional narrative of storytelling and becomes a patchwork of scenes and moments that jump back and forth in time, a work where past, present, life, and death all intermingle. Daniel continues his speech by asking Elisabeth to close her eyes as he describes a piece of art—a collage—to her from memory. When Elisabeth asks where he saw it, Daniel replies: "I saw it in the early 1960s…He said it as if a time could be a place" (75). Later in her life, Elisabeth discovers the actual painting in an art shop, and we discover that the painter was a female Pop artist named Pauline Boty (1938–1966). Boty is a largely forgotten female Pop artist, even though she was the only female painter in the British wing of the Pop Art movement and was also one of its founders. Elisabeth is studying art at the time, and she finds her discovery of Boty interesting, especially because her tutor had "told her

that categorically there had never been such a thing as a female British Pop artist, not one of any worth, which is why there were none recorded as more than footnotes in British Pop Art history" (150). Clearly, her tutor suffered a chronic lack of effort to look for one, or he would have found Boty, but Daniel, on the other hand, has her work etched into his brain.

The most striking aspect of Boty's works is that they are all collages, explaining (in part) Daniel's fascination with them—the other part being that we discover Daniel was once in love with Boty in his youth. The works by Boty that are described in *Autumn* are big and bold, and all of them express an elision between playfulness and seriousness. One painting, titled: "Untitled (Sunflower Woman)" (see Appendix, Figure 3) is described by the narrator as:

> It was of a woman on a bright blue background. Her body was a collage of painted images. A man with a machine gun pointing at the person looking at the picture formed her chest. A factory formed her arm and shoulder.
> A sunflower filled her torso.
> An exploding airship made her crotch.
> An owl.
> Mountains.
> Coloured zigzags. (151–152)

Every layered image depicts a kind of explosion—most obviously in the gun and the exploding airship, but also in the sunflower, which is an explosion of colour and life. Notably, the image of a man with a gun is located at the woman's chest and throat where her voice is, while the sunflower is located at her abdominal area, which is associated with maternity and child-bearing. By making up a woman's body with these sometimes violent and explosive fragments, Boty represents both a reclaiming of the female body and an admission of its occupation by a confusing mixture of suppression and freedom. The juxtaposition of the grey images and the bold colours of the sunflower and the zigzags highlights this aesthetically as well. It is remarkable that the woman has a smiling face, despite the chaotic imagery displayed from the neck down. Although it is unclear whether the smile is genuine or contrived, one can read the

painting as a depiction of the contrasting forces that define and pull apart the female body, as well as her resilience, or perhaps the social expectation that she remain smiling. Boty is clearly making a statement on how women are constructed in a man's world—"A Man's World" being a title she uses for some of her other paintings. Her unapologetic imagining of this feminist trope is daring, and Smith provides ample space in the novel to appreciate this.

In a review in *The Guardian*, Joanna Kavenna suggests that Boty is a presence in *Autumn* primarily as "a symbol of all those who are 'Ignored. Lost. Rediscovered years later. Then ignored. Lost. Rediscovered again years later. Then ignored. Lost. Rediscovered ad infinitum' ([Smith] 239)," and that the rebellion Boty's art expresses reflects the rebellious nature of the novel's characters (Kavenna). Indeed, Kavenna touches on the fact that Boty's artwork has frequently been buried and unappreciated in the years since Boty's premature death—yet another example of the cyclicality of time. In addition, Boty's work also seems to, in itself, reflect the form of *Autumn* as a whole, which indicates that Boty's collage aesthetic is a clue for how to read Smith. The patchwork of collage raises interesting questions about parts and wholes—do the individual images and chapters work together seamlessly and become part of a whole, or do they maintain their individuality? In a novel that is preoccupied with the polarising Brexit referendum, the collage might function as a powerful artistic imagining of the polarised self and nation. Thinking back to the Sunflower Woman's smiling face, it might also depict how easily conflict can be disguised when you zoom out far enough. Collages also refuse to tell a simple story. Perhaps Smith chooses this form because there is no longer a simple story to be told— traditional narratives cannot capture the moment like they could before. Everything overlaps and interweaves—views, beliefs, time, and space.

Despite the many instances of violence and polarisation that weave throughout the novel, *Autumn* is ultimately hopeful. The nasty spray-painted "GO HOME," written in black, is added to "in varying bright colours, WE ARE ALREADY HOME THANK YOU," and someone has "painted a tree next to it and a row of bright red flowers underneath it. There are flowers, lots of real ones, in cellophane and paper, on the pavement outside the house, so it looks a bit like an accident has recently happened there" (Smith 138). The fact that the added lines are written in bright colours suggests a vibrance and optimism that are clearly absent in "GO HOME," and although the image of flowers on the ground is described like a reaction to a tragic death of some sort, it also suggests that there has been an overflow of compassion for those who have been targeted by the vandalism. The final time we see this house, "It's like nothing's ever happened, unless you know to look a little more closely to make out the outline of the word HOME under the layer of blue" (253). The erasure of these words may suggest that the words have been covered over in order to ignore them, yet the fact that the word that remains slightly visible is "HOME" is comforting—as though the house and its inhabitants are publicly proclaiming themselves as belonging, despite attempts to cast them as outsiders.

Finally, Smith considers the interconnectivity of people and the world in one of Daniel's final dream-like sequences, as he sits with his sister and explains to her all of the things he is: "I'm the butterfly antenna. I'm the chemicals that paint's made of. I'm the person dead at the water's edge. I'm the water. I'm the edge. I'm skin cells. I'm the smell of disinfectant…I'm the ink, the paper, the grass, the tree, the leaves, the leaf, the greenness in the leaf. I'm the vein in the leaf. I'm the voice that tells no story" (191–192). His sister "(Snorts.) There's no such thing" (192), she says. "Just one lone single leaf, are you?" (192). Daniel explains with ease: "No. To

be more exact. As I've already said. As I've already made clear. I'm all the leaves" (192).

Explaining in a different way, he goes on:

> There's always, there'll always be, more story. That's what story is.
> (Silence.)
> It's the never ending leaf-fall.
> (Silence.)
> Isn't it? Aren't you?
> (Silence.) (193)

In this wonderful passage, Daniel links his life to things that are eternal: nature, the cycle of the seasons, and he also suggests that stories themselves are endless. He also reminds his sister, who is dead, that she remains alive in his mind—she is, in the moment, not real, and yet she also is. Daniel's words also relate to the novel as a whole; Smith is telling us that *Autumn*—a story titled after the fall of leaves that Daniel describes—is also cyclical and infinite, just like the seasons.

Ali Smith's *Autumn* is a profound and beautiful novel, intended both to capture the current political moment and to escape from the utter dejection that accompanies it. The final lines of the novel indicate rejuvenation even as things are beginning to decay:

> The furniture in the garden is rusting. They've forgotten to put it away for the winter.
> The trees are revealing their structures. There's the catch of fire in the air. All the souls are out marauding. But there are roses, there are still roses. In the damp and the cold, on a bush that looks done, there's a wide-open rose, still.
> Look at the colour of it. (259–260)

The presence of roses, which are not only the quintessential English flower, but also the flower most closely associated with love, emerges here as an image of rebirth and hope for England. As in Geoffrey Hill's *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin*, rather than remain stagnant in the present moment, Smith allows time to expand and life to explode, and she reminds us that even something as devastating as Brexit cannot stop the healing passing of time, which will go on in

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its cyclical fashion and pull us along with it. Indeed, *Autumn* shows us that art, people, and events are all part of an endless, ongoing cycle. Everything is happening together, simultaneously, and the world is connected by time, space, and its diverse beliefs, like one giant collage. Smith does seek to capture the atmosphere in England post-referendum, and she depicts Englishness as a thorny, polarised identity. However, rather than isolating England, Smith visualises it as just one piece of the global puzzle, offering a new, more hopeful and globally interconnected conception of Englishness in the wake of Brexit. Ultimately, hope prevails, and love overcomes hate in these extraordinary times.

Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion*: Stuck in Dystopia

Sam Byers is an English author who entered the literary scene in 2013 with his debut novel *Idiopathy*, which earned him media attention and landed him two awards—the Betty Trask Award and the Waterstones 11 Prize. Published in 2018, two years after the Brexit referendum, *Perfidious Albion* is Byers' second published novel and was longlisted for both the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction and the Encore Prize. It is a work of dystopian fiction—and a satire— published in a moment when the hopelessness and uncertainty surrounding Brexit continued to grip the nation, and when concerns about the political direction of the Western world were rife. Byers targets specifically the role of the internet and social media as forces that enable and provoke sexist, racist, and nationalistic messages that lead to a polarised society. Indeed, throughout the Brexit campaign, social media and the internet were used as platforms through which to disseminate, in many cases, xenophobic and hateful messages that spurred a click-bait culture within politics. This click-bait phenomenon was exploited during the Brexit campaign by various organisations in ways that threatened the democratic process. The Cambridge Analytica

scandal, which involved the analysis of Facebook users' data by parent company SCL Group, according to a whistle-blower, "likely breached the U.K.'s strict campaign financing laws and may have helped to sway the final Brexit outcome" (Scott). Cambridge Analytica has also been at the centre of controversy in the US, where the illegal data-mining of fifty million Facebook users helped to sway the 2016 US presidential election (Scott). Throughout the novel, Sam Byers reveals the dangers of this trend towards data-mining as a source of political power, exploring how ethical boundaries break down in today's click-bait culture.

Byers' novel is a BrexLit novel not in its engagement with Brexit—the vote is mentioned once throughout the novel—but in its *feeling*. In an interview with Faber & Faber, Byers said: "I think it's fair to say at this point that Brexit is a feeling as well as an event, and that was one of the questions I was interested in when it came to writing the book" (Faber & Faber). He also suggests that this feeling is specific to the English condition during this time. He muses: "When I come to look back at it in a few years' time I think this will come to feel like an emotionally very distinct period of English life" (Faber & Faber). Indeed, navigating through Byers' dystopia, it becomes clear that the world of *Perfidious Albion* is intended to be a mirror to our own, and Byers' writing is, in itself, an emotional response to the turbulent political times that we live in.

The title of the novel "*Perfidious Albion*" is an international relations term meaning "England or Britain considered as treacherous in international affairs" (*OED*), which immediately marks Byers' work as a state-of-the-nation novel dealing specifically with the problem of Englishness. The action of the novel occurs in the future in 2020 (now our present), in a small town in England named Edmundsbury, which becomes a microcosmic example of the impact of data and social media on politics. There is also a greater conspiracy at large; Green, a large tech company, uses Edmundsbury residents (and their own employees) as lab rats for data-

mining experiments without their consent. Rather than creating a product, employees of Green *are* the product—they help the tech giant learn how people behave in certain situations, gathering information to help other companies and individuals target specific people who are likely to react positively to their platforms. Of course, this is exactly the work that Cambridge Analytica did in 2016, and what Google, Facebook, Uber, and other Silicon Valley giants continue to do today. The "Twitterverse" looms large throughout the novel too, providing a powerful and occasionally dangerous space to air thoughts. The novel follows politician Hugo Bennington—who closely resembles Farage—the leader of political party "England Always"—which closely resembles UKIP; a journalist named Robert and his partner Jess, who is a formidable feminist; an old white man named Darkin whose xenophobia is fuelled by the feeling that he has been left behind; and a black woman named Trina who sends an offhand tweet and unintentionally rouses white supremacist ideas into mainstream media. Among others, these characters all interact primarily through cyberspace to demonstrate the quintessential tensions that are rife within English society today and ultimately depict a bleak vision of England, and Englishness, in the current political moment.

Edmundsbury is described as a place that "North London refugees" fled to, and which "increasingly existed in the collapsed distinction between creativity and commerce" (Byers 5). These "refugees" from London are satirically depicted as primarily white men suffering from intense nostalgia for the imagined England of the past. Indeed, the novel opens at a social event hosted by Jacques DeCoverley, "a blow-in from the city" who "was reinventing himself as a deep-thinking rural gentleman for the twenty-first century, wearing wellington boots indoors and waxing lyrical about a 'lost' England comprised entirely of hedgerows and loam" (5–6). DeCoverley's move from London—the diverse capital city—to the outer regions of England,

coupled with his snobbish nostalgia for a "lost England," immediately indicates that he is a

somewhat intolerant man. Byers' description of DeCoverley satirises him as a man who strongly

believes in his own self-importance, while the lament for the "lost" nation is reminiscent of

Jerusalem's depiction of a nation overrun by globalisation and capitalism, causing it to suffer a

loss of identity. DeCoverley starts his night by discussing the meaning of the word "now" with a

journalist named Robert, concluding that "These are post-present times" (3), before going on to

infuriatingly lament his success as a writer: "'I'm rapidly coming to the conclusion that the best

thing I could do for my career right now would be to write something wildly unsuccessful. I *pine*

for obscurity'…He squinted, momentarily pained by his own significance" (7). The absurd and

arrogant tone of this conversation is immediately agonising for the reader, which sets the tone for

the rest of the novel. From the outset, the reader is confronted with characters who we are

encouraged to dislike and a social space that is overwhelmed by narcissism and a distinctly

masculine self-importance.

Unfortunately, DeCoverley's self-aggrandising nature is shared by his guests. A group of

"theorist poseurs" attempt to "decode the encoded fascism of everyday life," including the

"fascism of iced buns" (6), while a man named Lionel Groves revels in his capacity for emotion

as others "used him as a litmus test for what they should be feeling themselves" (11). The

discussion on the "fascism of iced buns" is both pretentious and ridiculous, and is a botched

attempt at sounding deeply philosophical, while the fact that Groves acts as a male "litmus test"

for emotion indicates that both he and those around him are performing emotion rather than truly

feeling it. Jess, who is Robert's partner and who researches internet misogyny, surveys the room

and despairs at the vision of masculinity that confronts her: "It was, Jess thought, the age of

beatified masculine emotion. Everywhere you looked, men were sweeping up awards for feeling

things" (11). Jess' observation implies that the value placed on masculine emotions is higher than the value placed on feminine emotions, and the reader is encouraged to sympathise with her revulsion. This opening scene introduces a hostile environment of male-dominated power and self-importance, and lays a dismal foundation for the wider world of the novel.

Throughout the novel, the most powerful and controversial figures are all (white) men. The most notable of these is Hugo Bennington, leader of the political party England Always. We are first introduced to Hugo through the perspective of Darkin, an old white man living precariously in a soon-to-be demolished housing estate. Darkin's political opinions are derived from the pages of a newspaper called *The Record*, which paints "a near-dystopian vision of England…The country was overrun, under threat, increasingly incapable. Hordes of immigrants massed at its borders. Its infrastructure frayed at the seams. Basic morality was eroding at an alarming rate, worn down by tolerance, permissiveness, turpitude" (24), and describes Hugo Bennington as the "one, lone politician" they proclaim to be different (24). That Byers describes *The Record*, which publishes stories that very closely resemble those that proliferated during the Brexit campaign as "near-dystopian" offers a bleak indication that the world we live in might already be something out of a dystopian novel. Certainly, the image of "Hordes of immigrants massed at its borders" is reminiscent of Nigel Farage's outrageous poster depicting lines of Middle Eastern immigrants supposedly all waiting to enter the UK (see Appendix, Figure 1). Reading *The Record*'s endorsement of Bennington is not intended to move the reader towards supporting him or believing the paper. Rather, given the paper's ludicrous description of England and Bennington's close resemblance to Farage, we are invited to reject and disdain both. However, the paper achieves the intended effect on Darkin. The narrative notes that, "Like any long-standing *Record* reader, he read not to have his fears assuaged, but to have them confirmed"

(24). Darkin's reading material resembles publications in the real world like the *Daily Mail*, and the reference to confirmation bias here aptly epitomises a click-bait culture. While Byers is calling the reader's attention to the role of the media in inciting division and fear in this novel, he also bleakly reminds us that our reality looks very similar.

It is quickly revealed that Bennington is a contributor to *The Record* and that his latest column is a xenophobic rant that bolsters white nationalist ideas about who is entitled to what in a given society. He begins by asking: "*Equality: is it a good or bad thing*?" and "*Is there such a thing as too much equality?*" (25). He goes on to complain about how "*housing is scarcer than it has ever been, yet immigration continues to rise. Unemployment among working Britons still isn't coming down fast enough, yet time and again we hear that 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*" (25). He then goes on to end with a sickening flourish: "*what we have in Britain now is a society that asks those who work to share their earnings with those who scrounge; those who have grown up here to share their hard-fought space with those who have just arrived; and those who deserve their place to share it with those who merely envy it*" (26). Bennington's opinion piece contains several assumptions, the most obvious being that white English people (most likely white men in particular) are more deserving and harder-working than their minority counterparts. The language that he spouts here, about a "hard-fought space" and people who "deserve their place," is an ugly representation of the most xenophobic incarnations of English nationalism and is treated in almost identical fashion in Jonathan Coe's *Middle England*, which will be discussed later. Just like Nigel Farage and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), Bennington uses his platform as a tool to further a political agenda that serves only two sets of people: himself, and those who look like him.

Hugo Bennington's xenophobia is based on a conviction that racial diversity is incompatible with Englishness, and he uses his voice as a way of "deliberately fanning the flames of racial hatred" (270) in order to convince others of the same. Both he and his editor, Teddy, seek out opportune moments to do this—one that presents itself when Trina, a black woman who works at Green, posts a flippant tweet that reads: "*#whitemalegenocide. Lol.*" (137) after she is angered by an unpleasant encounter with her white male colleagues. Teddy tells Hugo: "'This tweet was written by someone who is basically just some woman. Some black woman. She's not a somebody…it's not really a thing, but what I'm saying is that it could very easily *become* a thing, if we wanted it to'" (149). Teddy acknowledges that this tweet is not a genuine threat but that, with the right reaction from Hugo, it could be depicted as one, and could bolster the racist message of his platform. He also merrily states that "this is even better than a death threat. This is a genocide threat" (150). Hugo is at first sceptical that the tweet is worth responding to, recognising that: "It says *lol* at the end. That doesn't make it sound very threatening" (150). However, Teddy is uninterested in the intention behind the tweet—he is solely concerned with how it appears on the surface. His binary analysis of the tweet is summed up by the question: "Does it or does it not say white male genocide?" (150). In answering this question, Hugo is quickly convinced to take action, and his response is emulated by internet trolls who respond en masse to Trina's post. By taking the tweet at face value and twisting it as a genuine threat to white men everywhere, Teddy and Hugo purposefully portray Trina as a racial terrorist—a claim that is effortlessly swooped up by his followers. This includes Darkin, who happens to be Trina's neighbour and who becomes convinced that "on the estate a murderous black woman was whipping up some kind of race war" (211). Here, Byers demonstrates how quick and easy it has become to put ideas out into cyberspace that can be picked up and twisted

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in order to fit a political agenda. The narrative does not depict Trina as dangerous in the slightest, but one moment of anger, albeit misjudged, has the potential to change her life completely. Even worse, he shows how easy it is for people like Bennington to take something that appears harmless and make it appear grievous in order to bolster his platform and empower his base of supporters.

Even before Hugo enacts his racially-motivated response to Trina's tweet, he recognises that there has been a shift in how leaders and influential figures capture their base of support: "Hugo was old enough to remember the days when politics was about reassuring people. But those days were over. Now you had to keep them fearful" (78). Here, Byers subtly denotes "Project Fear," which was what the Leave campaign dubbed the Remain campaign for its attempts to raise (legitimate) concerns about the economic toll that Brexit would have on the UK. In doing so, he satirically implies that there was fearmongering about "Project Fear," and incorporates the fearmongering approach of the Brexit campaign into the world of the novel. The appeal of fearmongering lies in its ability to quickly capture the horror and, consequently, the support of people who would otherwise be unlikely to be politically engaged in the political system. The power of fearmongering also extends to other careers besides politics. Over the course of the novel, Robert, a journalist for *The Command Line*, sinks into the quicksand of fearmongering and becomes an agent of click-bait as he slowly but surely heeds the advice of his editor, Silas. Silas is adamant that any reaction is better than no reaction, regardless of what Robert says. The first piece of advice he gives to Robert in the novel is: "You're nobody until somebody hates you, Robert…No-one sucks up anymore. It backfires…better to get in there early with some pre-emptive hatred and get credit for that. Anyway, hatred equals hate-clicks, so, you know, win" (19–20). This logic reframes journalistic success as the number of clicks you

get—in other words, how much attention one receives—rather than the accuracy of the information one presents. In a manner similar to Sir Jack in *England, England*, Silas recognises the power of giving people what they want, as opposed to what they need. For Robert, confirming and validating his readers' understandings of the world becomes more important and more fruitful for his career than challenging them to reframe their perspectives. Byers encourages the reader to feel dismayed by the trend that Robert follows, and he freezes us in a vision of the world that bleakly resembles our own, offering no alternative for the corruption that we witness.

Robert is initially tentative to dive into controversial reporting. He dabbles in feminist thought-pieces but swiftly shrinks away from such discourse. Ultimately, Robert takes the plunge into stormy waters with an investigative piece on the Larchwood estate featuring Darkin as a way of "*humanising* the estate story" (54). Robert is genuinely shocked by the state of Darkin's apartment, describing it to Julia as a "real *scene* of a flat. Stuff smeared on the windows. Dark…Filthy. Stank" (54) and writes a reactive piece in response to what he witnesses. The resulting article is unintentionally positioned as a defence-piece for old, white men who have been discarded, ignored, and forgotten by the English public. Silas has high praise for Robert's piece, primarily because it is controversial. When Robert cannot see what is controversial, Silas responds: "'About being a man? About being white? About being English? Nor can I, Rob. Nor can you. Nor can the Darkins of the world, am I right? But the point is that it *is* controversial. And that's exactly what this piece is saying'" (143). Here, Silas defends the position that white men are oppressed by English society, and he either cannot recognise or purposefully ignores the fact that taking this stance relies on extremely problematic understandings of race and opportunity in England. Under the pretence of "starting a conversation" (143), Robert engages in

the rhetoric of white supremacy, where Englishness equals whiteness, and the greatest threat to the country is "*white male plight*" (150).

Despite continued hesitance to write articles purely to provoke reaction, Robert is continuously pulled deeper into this cycle. When Trina's tweet begins circulating more widely, Silas calls it "a godsend" (183) and entices Robert with a single promise for writing a responsive article: "You're about to go supernova" (183). As Robert slips further and deeper into the rhetoric of racism and white nationalism, he convinces himself that what he is writing is justified. He assures himself that in his first piece on Darkin, he was simply standing up for a man who "had been unjustly maligned and ignored in favour of hipper, more attractive causes" (277–278). Yet, even as he self-deceives, he does acknowledge that he is no longer "reporting what was happening…what was happening had come to have less and less bearing on what he thought, until all that mattered…was that he thought at all. Now, what he thought *was* what was happening" (278). In this final statement, Robert acknowledges how he has managed to monopolise the news with his own opinions—even though the reader knows that he writes not out of genuine belief but out of the desire to provoke a reaction. This dismal depiction of how the news functions—not as an objective source of information, but as a provocative opinion piece— reflects once again the moral and intellectual decay that is widespread in both the novel and the post-referendum England that it reflects.

Eventually, Robert convinces himself that "Silas was right: hatred, pushback, dissent were all just modified matrices of the only things that meant anything: impact and volume" (278). Robert's assertion that impact and volume are the only meaningful measures of information casts a dismal shadow over the state of the nation, indicating that societal values have been warped to defend the incitement of latent xenophobia and white nationalism because

they are popular with readers. The rational reader is invited to feel deeply disturbed by Robert's

ultimate willingness to stir up racial tension, just as they are invited to feel repulsed by Hugo

Bennington's political platform. For both Robert and Hugo Bennington, having a voice is more

important than what one uses that voice to say. Although Byers depicts a world dominated by the

rhetoric of the Leave campaign, he does so from a distinctly Remain position.

More so than political rhetoric, data-mining becomes an immense source of power that

similarly cares to protect neither people nor ethics. Data cares about data—about clicks and the

quantification of human behaviours so that such information might be weaponised. Throughout

the novel, a group of masked individuals calling themselves "The Griefers" threaten residents

with claims of holding individuals' data, using phrases like "*We are your face*" and "*What don't

you want to share*" (31) to elicit a fearful public response, yet they have no way of backing up

these claims besides a "sequenced dissolve of faces" on their website (232). The Griefers execute

staged public insurrections to reassert their threats, which are effective in stirring up public

anxiety about data and data privacy. Both Jess and Deepa, her friend and fellow Green employee,

spend much of the novel considering the implications of these threats, and whether the threat is

true or simply another tool designed to incite fear. Deepa expresses that she almost wishes they

would release data proving that the threat is true, because:

> it would be disruptive and awful and shaming and probably sort of violent and maybe
> offensive…but at least it would be committed and it would be in the name of something,
> whereas if you go out there with your dicks swinging around going, oh, we're going to go
> all the way, and then it turns out that not only are you not going all the way but you don't
> really have any, like, *way* to go, then that's just…shit. (234)

Here, Deepa acknowledges that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between a genuine threat

and a fearmongering threat, and expresses frustration that the line between the two has been

blurred. She also alludes to the idea that the visceral reaction that occurs in people is the same

regardless of whether the threat is real or fake, lending legitimate power to the Griefers whether or not their warnings are genuine. Jess explicitly recognises: "'Whatever they're doing and however or wherever they're doing it, the feelings they're producing in people are real, so you want what they're doing to be real as well, to *merit* the feelings'" (234). The observation here—that whether or not something is true, it has the ability to incite a reaction in people—can easily mirror the morose reflections of a post-referendum England looking back on the Leave campaign. As has been established, Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson frequently made illegitimate claims about what would happen if the UK remained in the EU—it would receive a colossal influx of Turkish migrants, and it would continue to pay huge sums of money to the bloc—yet despite the fact that these claims were false, they evoked genuine fear in many people. Once again, this scene freezes us in a vision of post-referendum England that is unable to move past the moral turpitude of the Brexit campaign, and offers no escape from the dystopia in which we actually live.

As it turns out, The Griefers are not really data terrorists at all, but a group of trained actors employed by tech-company Green as part of an elaborate "experiment" on the town of Edmundsbury (366). Green markets itself as a simple tech-company based in Edmundsbury, but Jess, Deepa, and Trina, who have developed a friendship over the course of the novel, all suspect otherwise. Before she was let go from her job at Green after her controversial tweet, Trina was confined to a single level of Green's office building, and frequently wonders what goes on above her and why it is a secret. When she is asked to return to meet with Bangstrom, her slimy boss, the three women use it as an opportunity to uncover the surreptitious objective of the company. When Bangstrom makes clear that he is willing to rehire Trina, she requests a promotion to "The Field," which is the name of a computer programme that Trina helped to create and a department

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within the company—the headquarters of which are located on the upper level of the building. When Bangstrom agrees, Trina is granted access to a wealth of knowledge that was previously shielded from her. She is newly privy to genuine information about who the Griefers actually are ("performance artists" (365)), and the purpose of having them, which Bangstrom reveals is simply: "outcomes" (366). He also reveals that Edmundsbury was chosen for headquarters because Green "needed a stable, contained setting" (366) to harvest data from the local population:

> Internet naivety is over. You think people are still surprised to find out that tweets are public and your data may be used for other purposes? Are they fuck. They know that, and they live around it. But they still maintain this illusion of division between their online and offline lives. So our aim with Edmundsbury was pretty basic: make a real-world haven, fuck with it, watch what happens. We're not interested in how people behave when they feel restricted. We're interested in how people behave when they think they're totally free…That's where the real data is, and that's where the profit is. A map of how people react to certain threats, to the unknown, to *disruption*. (367)

This revelation suggests that Green has used an entire population of people, against their will, as guinea pigs in a data-mining experiment—one driven by corporate greed and that relies on the illusion of freedom. If Edmundsbury is a microcosmic example of England during and after the Brexit campaign, this passage is an alarming comparison which suggests that England has been the subject of a dystopian experiment on how people behave when they are under an influence of control—of fear—that they cannot see. The narrative invites one to wonder whether the entire Leave campaign, aided by the data-mining and microtargeting of Cambridge Analytica, was an experiment on an entire population. Although Hugo Bennington and Robert are not part of Green's scheme, they feed into the simulation in alarming yet familiar ways. Ultimately, Byers invites the reader to imagine a world in which people are purposefully subjected to a campaign of fear and monitored for their reaction, and then to consider how closely that world looks like our own—a truly dystopian vision.

Perfidious Albion captures the exact political mood that reverberated after the Brexit referendum. While Geoffrey Hill's *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* and Ali Smith's *Autumn* are hopeful in their conceptions of time as a restorative force, *Perfidious Albion* freezes us in a terrifying and stagnant vision of England and Englishness—where data is a weapon, where politics is a self-serving endeavour, and where conspiratorial forces seek to exploit the general public. Indeed, the novel ends abruptly with: "And then" (383), suspending the reader in the middle of a sentence we expect to go on. As we turn the page, we find "Error 404: The page you are looking for does not yet exist" (384). The use of this internet code language is clearly relevant to the novel's overarching themes, but it also suggests a complete absence of future. Of course, this book is so on the nose that there literally is no future yet—as Robert says, "what…could be more now than now?" (21)—but the implication of the error code is that we are stuck in this dystopian version of England—that there is no way out. The disturbing ending leaves us with a distinct sense of hopelessness and frustration that we are unable to escape our current moment. However, it can also be read as an urgent call to reject the current trajectory of English politics and society, not only against the pervasive data-mining and fearmongering, but also against a monolithic vision of England that has inspired a new wave of hatred and violence throughout the nation. *Perfidious Albion* is, at its core, a satire, but it is also a warning that, if we do not change our trajectory soon, we too will be frozen in this bleak and perverse state of Englishness.

Jonathan Coe's *Middle England*: Crisis and Comedy

Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* is the third installment of a trilogy that began in 2001 with *The Rotters' Club*, closely followed in 2004 by *The Closed Circle*. The series was originally

meant to conclude at book two; however, in the wake of the Brexit referendum in 2016, Coe decided to revive his characters to explore, once again, the human impact of a state of political turmoil in Britain, as well as its impact specifically on England and Englishness. Following the chronology of their lives from children growing up in the 1970s to the present, Benjamin and his schoolmates are now in their middle age; some have children, and their parents are all old or have passed away. Because *Middle England* is the last book of a trilogy, Coe is able to use its predecessors as comparative, or mirroring works, which gives a broader scope for demonstrating the changes that have occurred in England and Englishness over the past fifty years. *The Rotters' Club* is set primarily and almost exclusively in Birmingham, a city hovering in the region commonly referred to as "Middle England." By the time we reach the novel that takes that name, the original characters are dispersed across the country, but their roots remain firmly in their home city, and this continues to define their relationship to the political world around them. All three of the novels deal extensively with politics and the political atmosphere throughout the country during the time periods in which they are set. While *The Rotters' Club* follows the conflicts between trade unions and the government at the Longbridge factory, a car manufacturing plant in Birmingham, *The Closed Circle* deals extensively with the New Labour movement in British politics and the post-9/11 West. *Middle England* begins in April 2010 and tracks the fall of Labour to the Conservative/Lib-Dem coalition, all the way through to 2018 and post-referendum Britain. The action of the novel happens against the backdrop of the eight-year newsreel between Gordon Brown's and Theresa May's governments, through the 2012 Olympic Games, the London riots, and the murder of Jo Cox. *Middle England* is itself split into three parts: "Merrie England," "Deep England," and "Old England," each covering a few years and their accompanying political moods. Over the course of the novel, we watch as a microcosmic

example of England's perpetual struggle for identity unravels, and the country experiences marked shifts from national cohesion to national division, from acceptance to intolerance, and from futility to hope.

Because the novel was published within two years of the referendum and was written as the consequences were still taking shape across the UK, the action of the novel is extremely familiar to the well-informed reader. As Sam Leith of *The Guardian* notes, "in that respect, of course, we know what's going to happen because we're living it. This is a book that foretells the present." Indeed, there are no mysteries in *Middle England* besides those that are closely related to the personal lives of its characters. However, the way in which Coe captures one of the most seismic referenda in modern British history is somewhat surprising: he writes a comedy. Although Coe confronts some of the uglier facets of Britain in the years up to and after the Brexit referendum, he does so—in a very English fashion—with a sense of humour and self-deprecation that settles the reader into a spirit of hopefulness; a review in the *Evening Standard* wrote that "Coe's light, funny writing makes you feel better" (Butter). The purpose of this novel is not, like Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion*, to reinforce the dystopian vision of Britain that much of the country was imagining after the referendum, but to lift the reader out of their shock, and prompt them to believe that, one day, they will look back on Brexit and be able to laugh.

The novel opens in the solemn moments after Benjamin Trotter, the central protagonist, leaves his mother's funeral with his grieving father, Colin. Benjamin and Colin drive "through the heart of Middle England," a drive described as "a placid, unmemorable journey where the only punctuation marks were petrol stations, pubs and garden centres, while brown heritage signs dangled the more distant temptations of wildlife centres, National Trust houses and arboretums in front of the bored traveller" (Coe 3–4). The morbidity of the funeral coupled with the

dreariness of the surroundings creates a gloomy atmosphere almost immediately. In an attempt to distract them from where they have just come from, Benjamin turns on the radio, which is playing Fauré's Piano Trio. Entering Benjamin's mind, the narrative suggests that the music "seemed to mirror, in sound, the gentle curves of the road, and even the muted greens of the landscape through which it carried them. The fact that the music was recognizably French made no difference: there was a commonality here, a shared spirit. Benjamin felt utterly at home in this music" (4). Opening the novel with a scene in which an English radio station—Radio Three—is playing French music offers an immediate sense of connection with Europe, highlighting how Benjamin's definition of "home" extends across the English channel to the Continent. That Benjamin feels the song mirrors the English countryside's landscape is a further emphasis on the fact that Europe and the UK are, in Benjamin's mind, both "home," each reflecting and complementing the other in this classical music piece. This scene is also a reminder that for almost all of Benjamin's life, the UK has been a member of the EU—it is all he has known, and he is extremely comfortable with it. Colin, on the other hand, a young man during the second world war, feels no such connection to the music: "'Turn that racket off, can't you?'" (4). Opening the novel in this way both points out Benjamin's European—as opposed to solely English—identity, and also immediately indicates a generational divide that separates Benjamin's attitudes to Europe from his father's—a divide that was eventually used to explain voting behaviours across England in the 2016 referendum.

Benjamin switches the radio to Radio Four's *PM* programme, which unlike the calming notes of Fauré, "plunged [them] into a familiar world of gladiatorial combat between interviewer and politician" (4). The programme is being run in the lead-up to the 2010 general election, and the "big story seemed to be that the prime minister, Gordon Brown, fighting for re-election, had

been caught on microphone describing a potential supporter as 'a sort of bigoted woman', and the media were making the most of it" (4–5). The report involves a statement from a Conservative MP, who "gleefully" suggests that "'The prime minister has shown his true colours…Anyone who expresses these legitimate concerns is simply a bigot, in his view. And that's why we can never have a serious debate about immigration in this country'" (5). This discussion serves as the first intimation of political tension in the novel; the lament that there cannot be a "serious debate about immigration" serves to foreshadow the future and also to reveal that these conversations were happening, quietly, unnoticed, for years before they came to the fore with ferocity in 2015–2016. Indeed, Benjamin and Colin simply turn off the radio to avoid listening to the programme, dismissing it entirely and therefore lending it no power. The muting of the radio is both an indication that in 2010 politics was still something that many felt they could comfortably ignore, and a foreboding moment in which two characters willingly dismiss the bubbling of an ideological conflict that will soon spur immense upheaval across the entire nation.

Despite Benjamin and Colin's dismissiveness, early signs of political unease are rife throughout the "Merrie England" section, and most suggest a communal anger simmering within the people. Benjamin's friend from school, Doug, now a political journalist in London, discusses his take on the current political landscape with Benjamin:

> 'I honestly think we're at a crossroads, you see. Labour's finished. I really think so. People are so angry right now, and nobody knows what to do about it…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 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.' (14)

Here, Doug observes how the 2008 economic crash has contributed to a heightened level of anger and frustration throughout the UK, an anger that is directed towards the government under which the crash happened. While Doug's commentary in this moment relates directly to the impending general election that will, as he predicts, invite a Conservative government led by David Cameron into power, it also tells the reader something about how one's economic situation can drastically shift one's political alliance. In their book *The Rise of the Right,* Steven Winlow, Steve Hall, and James Treadwell analyse the conditions that allowed the right-wing group the English Defence League (EDL) to gain so much support in the lead-up to Brexit, and they explain why so many others felt that 2016 was an opportunity to take back something that has been lost:

> many ordinary people…often see for themselves a life of unending struggle, a life in which the pleasures of community life have been withdrawn, a life of frustration, interrupted all too briefly by occasional flurries of consumerist hedonism. They can sense life only as a backward step, the loss of things deemed valuable and important. The benefits of our allegedly open, marketised society are the privileges of successful others. Those trapped in the lower echelons can see no forward step in their own lives. They are convinced that for them the best times have now been left behind. As a result of all this, a growing number of these people are now very angry. (Winlow, Hall, and Treadwell 3)

Like Doug, Winlow, Hall and Treadwell emphasise that the simmering anger throughout Britain is a side effect of our market-driven society, which serves some while crushing others under its weight. Just as we saw the rejection of a marketised society in *Jerusalem* in chapter three, here, three political scientists track these frustrations among those in the real world who are suffering most as a result of the current economic system. At this early stage in the novel, it is already abundantly clear that the economy has become one of the most important issues for the average British person and, consequently, is one of the most significant indicators of the political direction that the country will take.

Another, more menacing scene of bubbling anger occurs at a Speed Awareness Course, where Sophie, Benjamin's niece, is in attendance. As Sophie sits in the class that is being led by an Asian woman named Naheed, she notices that everyone there has something in common: "As Sophie listened to the speakers, so different in age, class, gender and ethnicity, all with such different stories to tell, she realized that they were in fact united by one common factor: a profound and abiding sense of injustice" (Coe 37). One driver, Derek, seems particularly afflicted, and interrupts Naheed's advice on road safety to ask: "'I've been driving for forty years…And I've never had an accident. Why should I take lessons from someone like you?'" (40). Derek's defiance hints at a sense of his injured pride after being forced to return to an educational environment despite his "forty years" of experience behind the wheel. More than this, there is a blatantly racist undertone to Derek's sneer: "someone like you." In a way that is reminiscent of Daniel Gluck's story about a man dressed in a tree costume in Ali Smith's *Autumn*, Derek targets Naheed's nationality as a way of undermining her authority, her sense of belonging, and her expertise. In a later conversation with Sophie, Naheed acknowledges this emotional charge as a normalcy: "One thing you learn in this job—there's a lot of anger out there…it's not always to do with race anyway. People like to get angry about anything" (43). Naheed calmly and coolly observes the general simmering of unpleasant emotion that underlies her everyday experiences and creates a distinct sense of foreboding—while they are not yet disruptive, racial tensions are certainly noticeable.

As we saw in *The Rotters' Club*, class and race immediately form a framework for understanding British politics generally, and Englishness in particular, and this only becomes more pronounced throughout the "Merrie England" section. Although many characters become more attuned to recognising these early indications of political unease, there is still a general

sense that the country is, as a whole, blissfully unaware of how serious the consequences of this anger, if unchecked, can become. When Sohan, a gay Sri Lankan man chairs a panel with two writers—one English and one French—the Frenchman, M. Aldebert, suggests that "'The French are an intolerant, judgemental people. Not like the British, I think'" (29). When asked to elaborate, he continues: "'In France, we look at the British and we are impressed that, unlike most other European countries, you don't have this phenomenon—a popular party of the far right…You have UKIP, of course, but my understanding is that they are a single-issue party, who are not taken seriously as a political force'" (29). Aside from the distinct sense of foreboding that ensues from the four letter combination: UKIP, Aldebert's speech suggests a calm confidence in the level nature of British political life. He also distinguishes between France and Britain to suggest that Britain is an exception to the current European rule. Aldebert's colleague and white English writer named Lionel Hampshire follows up smugly with his own take on Britain's exceptional political nature:

> 'I'm not an uncritically patriotic person. Far from it. But there is something in the English character that I admire…I mean our love of moderation…We're a pragmatic nation, politically. Extremes of left and right don't appeal to us. And we're also essentially tolerant. That's why the multicultural experiment in Britain has by and large been successful, with one or two minor blips…speaking personally, these are the things I most admire about the British: our moderation, and our tolerance.' (30)

Hampshire's speech about political moderation in Britain seems deeply ironic and comical to the contemporary reader, who, with the benefit of hindsight, can confirm that extremes will in fact dominate the political landscape. It is also amusing that Hampshire interchangeably uses "English" and "British," which suggests that he does not know the difference between his subnational territory and the polity of the UK—in other words, that he doesn't know much about his country at all. Just as Jack Forrest suggests that class warfare is over in *The Rotters'* Club, Hampshire's pride in unwavering British tolerance is undercut by events that follow, and is made

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to seem both naïve and laughable. Indeed, his reverence for the success of the "multi-cultural experiment" feels exhausting and depressing in the light of the referendum campaign and its xenophobic aftermath. To talk about Britishness as being equivalent to "tolerance" is also a line that both inspires laughter and a morbid sense of exasperation that the country might have been so blind to its impending fate.

Sohan's reaction to the conversation that unravels on-stage marks him as a knowing victim of the underlying current of racism that Naheed experiences in her classroom, and he feels both anger and frustration at both Aldebert and Hampshire's remarks:

> 'What a load of self-satisfied bullshit,' said Sohan. But, regrettably, he did not say it on stage […]
> Every day you come face to face with people who are not tolerant at all … 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. (30–31)

Sohan's personal experiences as a Sri Lankan man create a sharp divide between himself and the authors who join him onstage. While his home is in England, he recognises that others cannot reconcile Englishness with anything other than whiteness, offering another indication that race is playing a key role in influencing political attitudes. Furthermore, the ready use of the phrase "fuck off back to your own country" that has become such an indicator of the post-Brexit referendum political atmosphere, used in a scene set in 2010, allows Coe to introduce both the existence and denial of division and tension within England simultaneously. When Sohan acknowledges that the anger of the people is turned from the "other" to the government—the people who are enforcing policies to protect them—he helps to explains why later, when political figures start to align themselves with those harbouring the rumblings of racism and anger, the

locus of their frustration is able to shift so quickly, and indeed violently, onto immigrants and those who do not fit the "white British" archetype.

The first time in the novel where underlying tensions—specifically racial tensions—rise to the surface is during the London riots of 2011. Though they are not labelled "race riots" officially, the London riots were unequivocally racially motivated. Coriander, Doug's daughter, is the vehicle through which the reader experiences the riots. She is a white, upper-class, fourteen-year-old girl who "lived in a house currently valued by local estate agents at a little over six million pounds, spreading over five floors, tucked away in a hard-to-find backwater between the King's Road and Chelsea embankment" (77). Perhaps unexpectedly, Coriander loathes her privilege, and finds solace only in the voice of Amy Winehouse, who had recently passed away, because "She *was* the voice of North London" (79), a place which to Coriander is far more diverse and interesting than Chelsea. Coriander is invited to the London riots by "AJ, a young and handsome black boy she'd met at a club in Hackney" (79), with a message promising "Pure terror and havoc" (79). At the riot, chaos does begin to ensue. People are "smashing up the windows of the bus which had been parked and abandoned when the traffic came to a halt…Two Rastas were trying to get down the street back to their flat but the police weren't letting them through…protesters had now armed themselves with bottles looted from the local Tesco…They ran past a Mazda MX5 which had been set on fire" (80–82). Coriander shares in the anger of her black compatriots, who "were angry at the killing of Mark Duggan four days before and the years of unfair treatment from the police," while "the police were angry at the lawlessness of the protest and the violence they were being threatened with" (82–83). With the chaotic description of the riots, the novel demonstrates that the recent trigger event of Mark Duggan's death is not the only reason for this outburst of violence. The underlying racial tension that has been kept

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forcibly at bay since and even before Culpepper and Steve Richard's feud in *The Rotters' Club* is finally boiling over and is being recognised for what it is. The riots become yet another instance of foreboding, inviting the reader to understand how the country became a hotbed for an even greater overboiling of xenophobia in 2016.

While Coe continues to reveal the deep-set division and anger throughout England and the UK, he also takes time to consider what brings the UK together as a whole. He does so most notably in the final chapter of the "Merrie England" section—a chapter that follows the novel's characters as they watch the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in London 2012. In their book *Performing Englishness: Identity and Politics in a Contemporary Folk Resurgence*, Trish Winter and Simon Keegan-Phipps suggest that the Olympic opening ceremony is, in essence, "a performance celebrating the national identity of the host nation" (Winter and Keegan-Phipps 4). Considering the complex definition of nationhood when it refers to the conglomerate of the UK, there was serious debate about which aspects of national identity should be performed at the event. Morris dancing, for example, is a traditional English folk dance, and as early as 2005 there was debate surrounding its inclusion (Parkinson). In the end, it made only a brief appearance in the closing ceremony as a "figure of fun within a celebration of British humour, rather than as representing traditional culture *per se*" (Winter and Keegan-Phipps 4). Winter and Keegan-Phipps argue that "national identity is understood not as something that is naturally given or pre-existing, but as something that is made," specifically through performative acts such as folk dance and music (Winter and Keegan-Phipps 12). Benedict Anderson similarly claims that nationalisms can be understood as "imagined communities," which are created and displayed to a group of people who then consider themselves connected in a unique way. Connecting these two notions of nationhood to the case of Britishness, J. Storey claims:

There is nothing natural about nationality. One is not born British, one becomes British…The performance of nationality creates the illusion of a prior substantiality—a core national self—and suggests that the performative ritual of nation-ness is merely an expression of an already existing nationality. However, our nationality is not the expression of the location in which we are born, it is performatively constructed in processes of repetition and citation, which gradually produce and reinforce our sense of national belonging. (Storey 19)

On these theoretical understandings of how national identity is created through performance, the reader is encouraged to recognise that the Olympic ceremony functions as a celebration that seeks to reinforce that collective identity. It provided the UK with an opportunity to reinforce an idealised version of what it means to be British—importantly, not English, Scottish, Welsh, or Northern Irish—to both residents of the imagined community of Britain, and indeed to the entire world. It was a project of celebration, unity, and patriotism, and Coe includes this scene to demonstrate how quickly a performance of nationalism can grip the community's collective imagination, despite many of the characters being otherwise able to acknowledge the deep-set divisions that exist within the nation.

Coe demonstrates the role of performance in sustaining and perpetuating a collective nationalism by recounting specific moments that occurred during the ceremony and flitting frequently between each character's point of view. What results is a case study in the unifying power of performative narratives of nationhood and nationally broadcasted television. The chapter begins:

> At nine o'clock on the evening of Friday, 27 July 2012:
> Sophie and Ian were sitting together on the sofa in their flat, watching the Olympic opening ceremony on television.
> Colin Trotter was alone at home in Rednal, sitting in his armchair, watching the Olympic opening ceremony on television.
> Helena Coleman was alone at home in Kernal Magna, sitting in her armchair, watching the Olympic opening ceremony on television.
> Philip and Carol Chase, along with Philip's son Patrick and his wife Mandy, were sitting in the living room of their house in King's Heath, a Chinese takeaway on their laps, watching the Olympic opening ceremony on television.

Sohan Aditya was alone in his flat in Clapham, lying on the sofa, watching the Olympic opening ceremony on television and texting his friends about it.

Christopher and Lois Potter, in the midst of their subdued walking holiday in the Lake District, were watching the Olympic opening ceremony on television of their rented cottage.

Doug Anderton, his daughter Coriander and his son Ranulph were all sitting in separate rooms of their house in Chelsea, watching the Olympic opening ceremony on different televisions.

Benjamin was alone in the mill house, sitting at the desk in his study, making cuts and revisions to his novel, while listening to a string quartet by Arthur Honegger. (Coe 129)

In this passage, with the exception of Benjamin, we have a wide array of individuals with widely different views, in widely different locations across England (or in different rooms in the same house), all tuned in to exactly the same programme, imagining themselves as a community. It once again returns us to Benedict Anderson's theory about how the emergence of print capitalism and national newspapers disseminated a cohesive form of imagined community nationalism, because these forms provided "the technical means for 're-presenting' the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation" (Anderson 25). In the same way, we see here that Coe's characters from across the country all tune in to the same TV channel, and they all fall deeply into an emotional, patriotic reverence for Britain.

Everyone except Benjamin is shown to emerge from the ceremony with a passionate sense of connection to their fellow Brits, with many characters having experiences that feel to them like an enlightenment. Indeed, as Philip watches the ceremony, he becomes excited at a Pink Floyd reference that he "and a few million others" (Coe 130) would understand, and he calls Benjamin to tell him to turn on the TV and watch as Mike Oldfield, an English composer, plays *Tubular Bells* (134). Similarly, Sohan and Sophie exchange excited texts about "*Pandemonium*" and "*Humphrey Jennings*" (131) and Sohan is so puzzled and inspired by the

ceremony that he later commits his career to the study of Englishness. Doug, who makes a living

analysing and criticising British politics, feels

> the stirrings of an emotion he hadn't experienced for years—had never really experienced
> at all, perhaps, having grown up in a household where all expressions of patriotism had
> been considered suspect: national pride…at this moment he felt proud, proud to be
> British, proud to be part of a nation which had not only achieved such great things but
> could now celebrate them with such confidence and irony and lack of self-importance.
> (132)

Even Coriander, who frequently expresses disdain for almost everything, after watching a scene

about Tim Berners-Lee, exclaims: "'What? The *British* invented the internet? ... That's

amazing'…She took out her BlackBerry and took a picture of the image on the screen, then

wrote *I come from an awesome country* and tweeted it to all 379 of her followers" (138). In all of

these reactions, there is a sense of national belonging that overrides individualism. The Olympic

ceremony becomes not just a celebration of sports, but a celebration of Britishness, and it ignites

a sense of unity that is otherwise absent from the novel. The only character who does not fall into

a flurry of excitement is Benjamin. Even after Philip implores him to watch, Benjamin turns on

the TV but does not concentrate on it, his mind drifting to other places. That he chooses to listen

to Arthur Honnegger, a Swiss composer, above watching the Olympic opening ceremony and

indulging in the display of Englishness, marks Benjamin, in multiple ways, as a neutral

bystander to the nationalism that surrounds him.

As we enter the second section of the novel: "Deep England," the unity inspired by the

Olympic ceremony falls away entirely, and we enter a far more recognisable world: one that is

dominated by the threat of UK fragmentation and withdrawal from the EU. "Deep England" is a

satirical term coined to describe, according to *The Guardian*, the Brexiteer Englanders who

"believe that life was better before the evils of industrialisation, foreign competition and, you

know, immigration" ("This is 'Deep England'"). With such people in mind, the action of the

novel reopens in 2014 to tell the reader that "'Yes Scotland' had now secured one million signatories to its campaign for an independent Scotland ahead of the referendum in September; that the number of British people needing emergency supplies from food banks had already risen by one-fifth this year; and that the BBC was being accused of a cover-up over its role in the recent police raid on Sir Cliff Richard's home following sexual assault allegations" (Coe 154). Where "Merrie England" was a section full of blissful denial and simmering tension, the reader can immediately sense that "Deep England" will be quite the opposite. Indeed, the section begins by revealing a far more visible atmosphere of xenophobia and anti-foreign sentiment. As Sohan and Sophie have drinks in London's newest high-rise building, the Shard, Sohan comments: "'London doesn't belong to Londoners anymore…This building where we're standing. London's latest star attraction. You think it's British? Ninety-five percent of it is owned by the state of Qatar…Walk anywhere in central London these days and the chances are you're treading on foreign soil'" (143–144). Sohan's reflections on the international character of London, while not necessarily derisive in tone, highlights a general feeling among the population that they are being taken over—that there is a malevolent "foreign" force and that global capital is overtaking the cultural integrity of London.

Not only foreign investment, but foreign people, or at least people who appear foreign, are the targets of similar attacks. When Sophie and her husband Ian are on a cruise ship filled with retired English couples, Sophie tells her table about Ian losing his bid for promotion at work to his colleague Naheed. A fellow passenger, Mr Geoffrey Wilcox, comments:

> 'Hmm. Naheed—so I'm guessing this is…an Asian lady, am I right?'
> 'That's right.' […]
> 'Look,' he said. 'I don't want to cause trouble. But your husband here is feeling bad about not getting the job, and all I'm saying is, he shouldn't blame himself' […]
> 'We all know what it's like nowadays,' said Mr Wilcox.
> '"What it's like"?'

'This country. We all know the score. How it works. People like Ian don't get a fair crack of the whip anymore.' (165–166)

Mr. Wilcox's observation concerning "People like Ian" is a blatant reference to the colour of Ian's white skin. He is suggesting that there is a culture of favouritism towards people like Naheed who belong to ethnic minorities that precludes white English people from moving up in the world. Geoffrey continues: "'We don't look after our own anymore, do we? … If you're from a minority—fine. Go to the front of the queue. Blacks, Asians, Muslims, gays: we can't do enough for them. But take a talented bloke like Ian here and it's another story" (166). Geoffrey's speech holds a very dangerous assumption about race in England. First, he has received no information to suggest that Ian is "talented," other than his physical appearance, i.e., his whiteness. Second, he is suggesting that when a black, Asian, Muslim, or gay person is hired it has nothing to do with *their* talents, but rather is a result of their ethnic identity or sexuality. This is the rhetoric of "they are stealing your jobs"—a totally ironic frustration experienced by white people when they are no longer granted a supremacy that they believe they are entitled to. Geoffrey's statements suggest that an encroaching belief that the foreign "other" is the root of white men's problems is gaining ground, and Coe goes on to demonstrate how easy it is to get swept up in the xenophobic rhetoric that has begun to take hold.

While Sophie is deeply concerned by Geoffrey's assumptions about Naheed's promotion, Ian slowly becomes more convinced of his own victimhood—a difference of opinion that eventually drives them apart as a couple. Ian's gradual snowball into anger appears to fit O'Toole's notion of "self-pity"—the only emotion that can reconcile both a belief in one's superiority and the feeling that one is being oppressed (O'Toole 3). Initially unconvinced by Geoffrey's comments, when Geoffrey turns out to be right in an earlier speculation that two women travelling together on the ship were "lezzers" (Coe 161), Ian experiences a moment of

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reflection: "if Mr Wilcox had been right about those two, why shouldn't he be right about other things as well" (171), meaning about Naheed. From this moment, Ian develops an extremely short fuse for anything "PC." When Sophie is suspended from her lecturing job due to a student complaint about "transphobic remarks made by Sophie during a seminar" (243), Ian becomes exasperated at how she handles the situation. Sophie sees everything as nothing more than a "misunderstanding" (282), and defends her student on account of having "respect for minorities" (282). Ian shoots back:

> 'Will you *stop* being so bloody…PC about all of this!'
> Sophie sat back and smiled. 'There we are. I wondered how long it would take before those two little letters were introduced into the conversation.'
> 'Meaning?'
> 'Do you have any idea, Ian, how often you accuse me and everyone else of being too "PC" for your liking these days? It's become your obsession. And I don't even think you know what it means.'
> 'I know exactly what it means. What you call respect for minorities basically means two fingers to the rest of us. OK, so protect your precious…transgender students from the horrible things people say about them. Swaddle them in cotton wool. What happens if you're white, and male, and straight, and middle class, hmm? People can say whatever the fuck they like about you then.' (282–283)

Ian's outburst is another sharp indication that the rhetoric of white male plight is creeping to the surface of the everyday. The rumblings of class, and racial tensions have been felt since *The Rotters' Club*, but here they both leap to the fore simultaneously with a confidence and outrage that threaten the stability of relationships between people all across the UK. Ian's anger also stems from a blow to his confidence when he doesn't receive a promotion, which suggests he is lashing out against the system of political correctness that he holds responsible. In a sense, Ian's anger is sad—he cannot see that the opportunity denied to him has been historically denied to minority groups for decades—centuries even—and rather than admit that Naheed may be equally, if not more qualified for the position he lost, he uses her as a scapegoat for his own failure. In a final, stinging condemnation of Sophie's behaviour, Ian tells Sophie that in the

upcoming Referendum, "'Leave is going to win. Do you know why? … People like you,' he said, with a note of quiet triumph. And then he repeated, with a jab of his finger: 'People like *you*'" (284). In this chilling scene, the reader witnesses the vicious polarisation that the Brexit campaign unleashed on the country in a married couple. Once again, the phrase "people like you" indicates a world increasingly defined by sides and binaries: white or non-white, Leave or Remain, and so on. The forcefulness of Ian's words and gestures demonstrates that Sophie and Ian have become completely alienated from each other, and their relationship shatters. From a human perspective, watching the savage political battle between Leave and Remain break apart a married couple is extremely depressing, and reveals just how ugly the Brexit campaign was.

Meanwhile, it becomes clear throughout "Deep England" that popular understandings of Englishness are beginning to unravel, to reveal a place that has no true identity. When Sophie, Ian, and a Chinese businessman named Mr. Hu, set out to play a round of golf on a Sunday morning, Mr. Hu is delighted with the opportunity to partake in an activity that is so quintessentially English. He comments to Sophie: "This is where golf should be played,' he said, gesturing around him. 'In England. England's "green and pleasant land".' They walked on. 'You teach at university, right? So you know about William Blake?...This poem, "Jerusalem"—it's very beautiful" (207). Mr. Hu's reference to Blake's poem is a reminder of Jez Butterworth's play *Jerusalem* and suggests that the depiction of Englishness invoked in both the poem and the play is felt as much abroad as on home soil, though of course, as explored in chapter three of this thesis, such a depiction is based on myths and fallacies. Mr. Hu continues to show interest in English traditions, comically unaware that he identifies many aspects of English culture that are either outdated or that simply never happened. Noticing a picture of "a dozen or so red-coated,

top-hatted riders cantering through fields and leaping over hedges in pursuit of a recalcitrant fox," Mr. Hu says:

> 'Now this,' said Mr Hu, 'is something I would really like to see. A traditional British hunt. Perhaps for my next visit, Mr Bishop, you could arrange it? Purely as a spectator, of course.' […]
> 'I'm afraid that fox-hunting is now regarded as a criminal activity in this country…It's been banned for quite a number of years.'
> 'Banned? How strange. I didn't realize…Of course, the British are famous for their love of animals.' (212)

This amusing exchange demonstrates that even a businessman from China can long for the kind of England that one finds in a period drama—the kind that does not exist, and perhaps never really existed as we imagine it—revealing that the most pervasive understandings of Englishness are based in myths. The dialogue here is also reminiscent of the theme park Julian Barnes' novel *England, England*, which was developed in order to preserve mythological figures such as Robin Hood and depict them as true English heroes, ultimately creating a new version of England which satisfies the world's muddled understanding of Englishness. Ultimately, we see that no-one, whether English or not, seems have a sense of Englishness, or indeed England, that does not rely on either myth or fallacy.

While "Deep England" portrays how the experiences of everyday people began to drastically shift in the lead-up to the referendum, it also satirically portrays the very events that allow this change of atmosphere to take place—namely, David Cameron's re-election campaign and the release of the Conservative Party manifesto. When London-based journalist Doug sits with his friend and fellow political pundit Nigel (not Farage), who is involved with Cameron's campaign, Nigel sits extremely smug in the steady assurance that the Conservatives will win: "The *confidence*, Douglas, the *enthusiasm*—that's what's off the scale. Dave's ready for this fight, and do you know why? Because he knows he is going to win" (181). Ironically, when

Doug retorts: "He hasn't been reading the opinion polls, then?" (181), Nigel responds

dismissively: "We never take any notice of opinion polls. They're always wrong" (181). As the

reader knows, David Cameron certainly never thought that the opinion polls indicating a pro-

Remain Britain could possibly be misguided, but in this moment, we are encouraged to laugh at

Nigel's foolishness. Doug and Nigel go on to read the section of the 2015 manifesto that forever

changed British politics: "Page seventy-two of the manifesto: 'Real change in our relationship

with the European Union'…'Only the Conservative Party will deliver real change and real

choice on Europe, with an in-out referendum by the end of 2017'" (182). Doug's concern over

the political gamble represented by a referendum on EU membership is swiftly swatted aside by

Nigel, who makes the blasé yet assured statement: "the bottom line is, it's not going to happen"

(185). When Doug asks: "'Why not?'" Nigel replies: "'Because there's no way he's going to win

an overall majority. All the opinion polls say so. Don't you ever look at them, Douglas? You

really should.'" (185). This scene between Doug and Nigel is intended as more than mere

backstory. In this final laugh out loud moment where Nigel completely contradicts his earlier

assertion that he never pays attention to opinion polls, while the reader is invited to feel a sense

of frustration at his smugness, this scene ultimately satirises Cameron and his party's decision to

include a referendum on the EU in the Conservative manifesto without considering the real

consequences of that decision were things to turn out unexpectedly, offering the reader an

element of comic relief from what is otherwise an infuriating series of events.

The comedy continues when Doug and Nigel next meet, after the date of the referendum

is officially announced: "A few weeks earlier, David Cameron had visited Brussels to negotiate a

new deal with the European Union, hoping to extract concessions which would give Britain

exceptional status–even more exceptional than it had already–and pacify the country's seemingly

ever more vocal army of Eurosceptics" (264). The word "exceptional" here relates back to Arthur Aughey and English exceptionalism, and Coe clearly satirises Cameron's greedy attempts to make Britain even more powerful within the bloc. When the date of the referendum is announced on "23 June — the second day of the Glastonbury Festival, as it happened" (264), Doug sardonically asks Nigel: "Well, then, that's a hundred thousand young people who won't be bothering to vote, isn't it?" (265). Reassuring Doug, Nigel replies that "Dave has foreseen every eventuality," though *not* including "the one where he loses and we have to leave the EU" (265). Nigel concedes that what he means is: "Every *probable* eventuality, I should say" (265). Once again, Coe's satire depicts Nigel and the entire Conservative Party as utterly foolish and laughably oblivious to the chain of events that will occur as a result of their actions. The comedy of this scene culminates in a laugh-out-loud-worthy mistake that the Conservative Party has been making up to this point by thinking that Brexit was called "Brixit" (265). The novel depicts Nigel, David Cameron, and the Conservatives as a group of airheads unable to even get the name of their own referendum right, and the reader, while horrified, can exult at the senselessness of Cameron's government and the knowledge that they were woefully, pitifully wrong. In this way, Coe's satirical portrayal of Cameron's manifesto promise provides an opportunity for the reader to relieve their frustration and pain through humour, thus creating a more light-hearted atmosphere to a deeply troubling event that was still very much consuming conversation at the time the novel was published.

In *The Rotters' Club*, the reader was exposed to the human trauma of the IRA's attacks in Birmingham through the experience of Lois Trotter and her boyfriend, Malcolm. In *Middle England*, the trauma of the Brexit campaign is also crystallised in a tragic death, this time the real murder of Jo Cox, a Labour MP Remainer who was brutally murdered in the street.

Importantly, Lois, also a victim of a nationalist attack, is the character through whom we experience it. As Lois is going about her day, Lois hears news "which brought her afternoon to a halt":

> A member of parliament had been attacked in her constituency; attacked in the street as she walked to her local library, where she had been intending to hold a surgery.
>   Lois had never heard of the MP. Her name was Jo Cox. She was the MP for Batley and Spen, a constituency in Yorkshire. A young woman. The attack sounded horrific. She had been both shot and stabbed by her assailant. As he attacked her he had shouted some wild, seemingly incoherent words which were later reported to have been a cry of 'Britain first. This is for Britain.' (308)

Jo Cox's death rattled the entire nation beyond words. An act of what appeared to be homegrown terrorism had been inspired by a debate on the mainstream political stage—a debate that was consuming people's whole lives. Now, through Lois, we watch as the fierce Brexit campaign claims the life of a young woman who sought to defend what she thought was right. This was, as the assailant's cries reveal, a nationalist attack, and when it is reported that Jo Cox died from her injuries, Lois experiences a fit as she is reminded of her own personal experience of violence at the hands of a nationalist organisation:

> 'No, no, no, no, *NO!*' she wailed, and threw herself down on the sofa. Her body was racked with sobs. 'No!' she kept saying, again and again. 'No, no *NO!*' then she stood up and yelled at the TV screen: 'You stupid people!' She strode over the window and looked out at the quiet street and shouted, louder than ever: '*You stupid people– letting this happen!*'…for the next few minutes she was kicking furniture, throwing cushions, pounding the walls with her fists. She smashed a vase and soaked the carpet with water. How long the fit lasted, she couldn't say. Eventually she blacked out. (309)

In this harrowing scene, we watch Lois as she is both reminded of her own trauma and disgusted at the sight of similar violence. Her screams are deeply upsetting since the reader barely hears Lois' voice at all since the first novel in the trilogy, and when we do she is portrayed as a relatively meek character. The intensity with which she experiences Jo Cox's murder ripples through the reader as their own reminder of the shock of this event, and they are invited to feel

deep sympathy and melancholy for the life-shattering effects of a campaign pursued by irresponsible, hatred-stoking politicians.

As we enter the final part of the novel titled "Old England," one might be reminded that in *England, England*, this is the name given to what is truly England after the theme park replaces it in terms of global relevance. In Barnes' novel, Old England is a decaying, deteriorating, and now historically irrelevant place. In *Middle England*, it is portrayed similarly. We enter part three after the referendum has happened—the narrative skips over the day of the referendum itself, except for showing Colin Trotter place his "Leave" vote and dying on the same day. Colin's timely death is an overt statement about the voting trends that resulted in an overall Leave result. The narrative suggests that in his old age, Colin has placed a vote that will never affect him—a disappointingly ageist but in many ways true statement that lends legitimacy to the anger of the younger population who have been dumped in a situation that many of them didn't vote for. Colin's death is also reminiscent of David Cameron's decision to resign after the referendum results came in; he created an awful situation and then left others to pick up the pieces.

"Old England" opens like "Merrie England" did—with a funeral, this time Colin's. As Benjamin and Lois prepare to scatter their father's ashes, Benjamin places his iPod on a nearby bench and starts loudly playing "The Lark Ascending," an melody composed by Englishman Ralph Vaughan Williams: "Almost at once, the gentle, modal chords rose up, unmistakeably English: Benjamin closed his eyes and for a few seconds lost himself in the music, music which he had heard thousands of times but would never tire of, music which spoke to him in the subtlest, most persuasive way of his roots, his sense of self, his feeling of profound attachment to this landscape, this country" (316). Benjamin's attachment to the "unmistakably English"

melody he plays is notable in comparison with the "recognizably French" (4) music that made

him feel so at home while winding through the English countryside at the beginning of the novel.

The shift from feeling at home in music from another European country to feeling profoundly

attached to an English melody suggests a kind of isolationism and contraction of what home

means for English people post-Brexit referendum. Despite how it seems, Benjamin does not feel

the allure of isolationism himself. As he and Lois leave, Benjamin reflects on the music again:

> He thought about Vaughan Williams: his conception of music as 'the soul of a nation', the way he had uncovered so many old English folk tunes, helping to rescue a whole tradition almost from oblivion, and yet there was no contradiction, no tension even, between this deep cultural patriotism and his other political beliefs, which seemed to have been so liberal and progressive. He thought about how badly this country, this crisis-riven country, stood in need of figures like that at the moment… (318–319)

Here, Benjamin reflects on the English composer Ralph Vaughan Williams' legacy as a musician

and suggests that the patriotism of Williams' English music did not preclude him having a liberal

progressive attitude. Considering his "crisis-riven country," Benjamin's musings here suggest

that English patriotism, which is cast in such a negative light in the wake of the referendum,

should and can be used to unite, rather than divide people. In other words, Benjamin does not

think that taking pride in one's country should be mutually exclusive from embracing the rest of

the world. His attitude suggests a disappointment with the referendum result, despite having not

been particularly invested in the debate as it was happening. His reflection also demonstrates the

kind of person Benjamin wants to be: patriotically English and a global citizen, all at once—a

new and far more hopeful vision of Englishness.

Unlike Benjamin, Sophie is unable to feel hopeful in the wake of the referendum, and in

fact feels extremely dejected by the isolationism that the referendum symbolised. Sitting on a

bench in Hartlepool, a place just south of Durham, Sophie reflects on her identity and her

Englishness:

this was England after all—her country—but she felt wholly estranged from this corner of it. For the last ten years, despite the time she had spent in the Midlands, her heart had always been in London. She considered herself a Londoner, now, and from London she could not only travel by train to Paris or Brussels more quickly than she could come here, but she would probably feel far more at home on the Boulevard Saint-Michel or Grand-Place than she did sitting on this bench. (369)

Of course, Sophie's young age contributes greatly to the way that she identifies herself in contrast with Benjamin, as does her attachment to London, as opposed to Benjamin's Birmingham. As we know, London was one of few metropolitan areas in England to overwhelmingly vote Remain in the referendum, demonstrating an overwhelming commitment to a multi-ethnic society and a globally connected world. Sophie demonstrates that being a "Londoner" is an international identity—one that is inherently connected to the European nations that Brexit has scorned. For Sophie, isolationism is claustrophobic, and she is able to distinguish between being English and being a Londoner in a way that suggests that they are irreconcilable identities post-referendum. It seems that the identity of a Londoner is more European than it is English.

Sophie's anger at the Leave vote is not solely a sense of personal dejection. As we saw in the middle section of the novel, the Brexit debate drove her and her husband Ian apart as he became more consumed by the rhetoric of the Leave campaign. In the third and final section, we learn that Sophie and Ian have been attempting counselling to heal their marriage: "A very specific form of counselling, in fact. Post-Brexit counselling" (325). While the reader is encouraged to laugh at the absurd fact that a whole new type of therapy was created to deal with the polarising effects of the Brexit referendum, this reveal also demonstrates how much people needed this type of support in its immediate aftermath. Sophie later reflects on her separation from Ian:

from every rational point of view, the trigger for her separation from Ian looked crazy. A couple might decide to separate for all sorts of reasons: adultery, cruelty, domestic abuse, lack of sex. But a difference of opinion over whether Britain should be a member of the European Union or not? It seemed absurd. It was absurd. And yet Sophie knew, deep down, that it had not so much been a reason as a tipping point. Ian had reacted (to her mind) so bizarrely to the referendum result, with such gleeful, infantile triumphalism (he kept using the word 'freedom' as if he were the citizen of a tiny African country that had finally won independence from its colonial oppressor) that, for the first time, she genuinely realized that she no longer understood why her husband thought and felt the way that he did. At the same time, she herself had been possessed by the immediate sense, that morning, that a small but important part of her own identity—her modern, layered, multiple identity—had been taken away from her. (326)

Here, once again Sophie considers the way the referendum has jeopardised her global sense of identity, and she recognises that in a sense, she blames Ian for the part he played in allowing that to be taken away. She also highlights her frustration at Ian's "triumphalism," comparing him to a member of "a tiny African country that had finally won independence from its colonial oppressor." The reader is encouraged to read these lines with the same scepticism as Sophie: the hypothetical comparison between an English liberation movement and an African liberation movement is both appalling and amusing, because of course it is British oppression that Africa had to liberate itself from in the first place. The incredible reversal that takes place in Ian's mind, and presumably other Leave voters, that English people were the ones who were being oppressed in the new order that the EU offered is a frustrating and historically jumbled understanding of England's place in the world. Just as Johnny Byron, the supposed English protector in *Jerusalem*, pushes back against the forces of globalisation that England helped to create in the first place, here Sophie considers Ian's beliefs to be an equally ironic conception of Englishness that is extremely powerful, but deeply flawed.

In the final chapter of the novel, we are geographically resituated to Benjamin and Lois' new home together in France. Their move is primarily a chance to start a life away from the chaos of Brexit, which has proven extremely draining for them both, and to live together as a

family. Grete and Lukas, a Polish couple who used to work for Ian's mother, have also left

England and come to France, having concluded that "there are other countries now where life

might be easier for us" (385). Grete takes on the role of housekeeper while Lukas works nearby,

and they live on the same grounds as Benjamin and Lois with their young daughter. Their new

home is the location of the final gathering of the novel, as they invite friends and family from

England to visit. The first to arrive is Sophie, who travels from London, and the next is

Benjamin's friend and struggling entertainer Charlie who arrives with his wife Aneeqa. Claire

Newman, Benjamin's friend from school and a central character in *The Rotters' Club* arrives

next with her husband Stefano. The final arrival is one of Benjamin's writing students,

Alexandre, who has travelled a shorter distance from Strasbourg. As they all gather for a meal,

Benjamin surveys around the table and begins a speech: "'Six English people…two Lithuanians,

a Frenchman and an Italian all had dinner together one beautiful evening in September. Sadly,

this is not the set-up for a joke…But what it is—if anything—what it represents, what it

symbolizes, I should say…'" (415). As Benjamin trails off, Claire picks up the speech on his

behalf: "'We get the message…It's a wonderful example of European harmonization'" (415).

Benjamin heartily agrees with Claire, and continues his semi-drunk rambling:

> '*Exactly*,' said Benjamin, striking the table for emphasis. 'That's exactly what I'm
> trying to say. What could be more inspiring, what could be a more
> powerful…metaphor…for the spirit of cooperation—international cooperation—which
> prevails, which *has* prevailed—which *ought* to prevail, if…if we, as a nation, hadn't
> made this…regrettable, but understandable—in *some* ways understandable…'
> 'Sit down and shut up,' said Lois.
> 'I will not,' said Benjamin. 'I have something to say.' […]
> Then, in a tone of belligerent triumph, he said, '*Fuck Brexit!*' and sat down to a round of
> applause. (415)

Benjamin's speech invites the reader to smile, as he completes his spirited and uplifting appeal to

his friends and family to remain confident in the project of internationalism in spite of the Brexit

referendum result. He pulls us away from the political turmoil that continued to swallow the nation in 2018 when *Middle England* was published, and grounds us in an extremely heartening example of a group of people defying the resounding message of the referendum. Although this scene takes place in France—in Europe—and therefore seems to suggest that this kind of harmonisation requires a removal from England in its current state, there is still an element of hopefulness, that even despite all of the hideous xenophobia and polarisation that have occurred over the last four years of the novel, humanity will prevail, and the spirit of Englishness is up to the people—not to politicians.

On top of Benjamin's speech, the novel closes on the ultimate note of hopefulness. As Sophie begins to drive away from Benjamin and Lois' home, Lois reveals to Benjamin that Sophie is pregnant (421). Benjamin is elated at this news:

> His heart thumping, his spirits soaring as the news gradually permeated his weary, addled consciousness, Benjamin raised his arm at the receding car and began to wave in quick frantic movements. But his niece was not looking back. Her eyes were fixed on the road ahead as she accelerated down the lane, one hand on the steering wheel, the other resting on her swollen belly: home, for now, to Sophie and Ian's tentative gesture of faith in their equivocal, unknowable future: their beautiful Brexit baby. (421)

This final reveal of the novel is a promise of new life, new hope, and a new future, not only for Sophie and Ian, but more broadly, for the entire country. Rarely do we see the words "beautiful" and "Brexit" paired alongside each other, yet to close the novel in this way indicates that this child—this new life and a symbol of the next generation—will be able to heal a divided relationship, and a divided England.

Coe's *Middle England* is a stunning example of how literature can both mirror and meditate on the present moment simultaneously, inviting sympathy, anger, and amusement from the reader all at once. Unlike the first two books in his series, the action of *Middle England* ends in the exact year the book is published, rooting the story distinctly in our politically turbulent

present, when the Brexit negotiations were still being painfully turned over and over, providing people with no real opportunity to move on from the 2016 referendum. Despite, or perhaps because of the emotional exhaustion of Brexit, *Middle England* provides the reader with an opportunity to escape their own personal experiences of the referendum by plunging them into the lives of a plethora of characters—some who will share the readers' views, and others who won't. In this way, the novel is an exercise in human understanding and an opportunity to heal from the polarisation of the current moment. While Coe does not shy away from the ugliest facets of Brexit and the troubling effects that it has had on many people's lives, he also does not seek to exacerbate them by offering no hope for the future. As Sarah Butter of the *Evening Standard* writes of *Middle England*, "Brexit and outrage may dominate but Coe finds humanity" (Butter). Indeed, Coe sets out to capture the political mood and deal with some of the secondary consequences of the referendum—strained marriages, broken friendships, violent interactions— yet he does so with an equally distinct sense of balance, compassion, and hope. *Middle England* is comparable to Geoffrey Hill's *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* and Ali Smith's *Autumn*; although the spirit of defeatism and hopelessness that is so familiar in our society today is rife, Coe does not let this swallow the novel entirely. In spite of the chaos, there is room for silence, and there is room for the future.

Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach*: A Government Against the People

Ian McEwan's novella *The Cockroach* is a political satire and an unapologetic condemnation of the government in the aftermath of the Brexit referendum. The novella follows a conceit in which cockroaches inhabit the body of the British Conservative prime minister and his entire cabinet (as well as the President of the U.S.), and together they work to deliver a new

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economic system called "Reversalism," standing in for the "Leave" campaign. The opposition to Reversalism is "Clockwise economics" ("Remain") and is deemed a "dead hand" (McEwan 47), even though it is the system used throughout the rest of the world. McEwan depicts the debate between the two economic systems as being absurd and totally devoid of legitimate reason or humanity—symbolised, of course, by the insect-inhabited bodies of the people in charge. While Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion* and Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* are both satirical sketches of Brexit Britain, McEwan takes on the political landscape in an exceptionally unforgiving manner. Perhaps written to capture the rage of the Remainers throughout the nation, *The Cockroach* certainly has no time for objectivity in the wake of Brexit, and in that sense is a valuable testimony to the incredibly polarised nature of Englishness in our time. McEwan demonstrates a clear bias throughout the book, made all the more evident by his previous success as a novelist who writes disdainfully about the upper class and politics. However, given the binary nature of England at the time McEwan was writing, the reader should also remain aware that this biased account is one that much of the nation will derive immense, smug pleasure from reading.

Before engaging with the work of the text, it is important to fully grapple with the conceit that it follows, especially with regard to the premise of Reversalism. The idea is explained at length:

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

Aside from reading as an absurd economic system—and one that would imaginably lead to incredible hoarding of things as opposed to money—Reversalism is literally an indication that politicians, and the people in the world of the book who voted for it, want to do everything backwards. McEwan's imaginary system takes the way that we live and flips it on its head— something that the politicians and Reversalists are hopeful will immeasurably improve lives, but that seems perfectly capable of doing the opposite. The use of an economic system to symbolise Brexit is also notable here, since one of the primary indicators of voting Leave was socioeconomic status, and because the economy frames everything about how we live our lives. The literal backwardness of changing the economic system in this way mirrors the way that Remainers perceive Brexit as a backward step for the UK when it leaves the EU and turns inwards on itself. Reversal is the opposite of progress, and McEwan means to emphasise this point throughout the novella.

Upon reading the very first line of the novella, *The Cockroach* reveals itself as a spin on Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), which depicts the life of a man name Gregor who wakes up and finds himself transfigured into a giant insect. *The Metamorphosis* starts as follows: "One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin" (Kafka 1). In an almost identical opening, *The Cockroach* begins: "That morning, Jim Sams, clever but by no means profound, woke from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into a gigantic creature" (McEwan 1). While Kafka's character Gregor Samsa has gone from human to "vermin," Jim Sams is vermin—a cockroach—who has become a human. Similarly, while Gregor's transformation is often read as resulting from a desire to escape responsibility from the world, Jim's transformation from cockroach to human oppositely posits him in the highest position of responsibility in the United Kingdom—into the

role of prime minister. Reflecting on how he came to control the body of the prime minister, Jim recalls that after exiting the gutter where he lives, "Mounting the pavement, as he did, he submitted to the collective spirit. He was a tiny element in a scheme of a magnitude that no single individual could comprehend" (6). The use of the phrase "collective spirit" is reminiscent of the idea of the will of the people—that they have spoken as one and must be respected—a notion often referred to post-referendum as the impetus for getting Brexit done. Following the conceit, this language suggests that the "collective spirit" of Reversalism (thereby Brexit) created an invisible force that drove cockroaches into positions of human power—a harsh criticism indeed. As Jim becomes accustomed to his new human form while lying in bed, he is reassured by his ability to recall how he got to where he is: "It was good to know that his brain, his mind, was much as it had always been. He remained, after all, his essential self" (8). Here, far from suggesting that the transformation from cockroach to politician is a bizarre and extremely unfamiliar one, Jim suggests that even in his insect form, his mind works much the same as it is working now. This could either be read as an appreciation for the intelligence of cockroaches, or, more likely, a denigration of politicians who can be easily imitated by a cockroach. Jim's transformation immediately conveys the idea that there is a lack of humanity in British politics (led by an English prime minister), as he is essentially not human in this book.

Jim's attempts to adjust to his human form and new role as prime minister are tentative yet internally confident throughout the novella. When an aide comes to his attic room to make sure that he is awake, she reveals: "It's Wednesday. Cabinet at nine. Priorities for government and PMQs at noon" (10). Jim's internal monologue reveals a familiarity with this recurring human event:

Prime Minister's Questions. How many of those had he crouched through, listening enthralled from behind the rotten wainscoting in the company of a few thousand

select acquaintances? How familiar he was with the opposition leader's shouted questions, the brilliant non sequitur replies, the festive jeers and clever imitations of sheep…But was he adequately prepared? No less than anyone else, surely. (10)

The sardonic description of PMQs here makes this sacred British political tradition look like a playground fight between children—a description that should not be completely rejected, but which sharply undermines the severity and significance of this weekly occurrence. The mention of "sheep" here is comical given that cockroaches, who are literally pheromonally programmed to follow and find each other, still see politicians as sheep in the sense that they are easily influenced or led. This line also invokes a further use of animal imagery within the conceit of the novella, again dehumanising the politicians involved in this weekly debate. The idea that this cockroach, who has watched PMQs be conducted by a different species, is no less prepared than anyone else, further undercuts the intelligence of politicians, literally suggesting that an insect could step in without anyone noticing. For those readers who are, understandably, frustrated by the jeering that takes place weekly in the House of Commons, this description is comical and deeply satisfying, while for those who sit in the House, it is incredibly demeaning.

In his new position of power, Jim begins the process of weeding out those in his party who disagree with the move towards Reversalist economics in order to create a united cabinet. He starts by firing Simon, a fellow cabinet member who raises concerns about the state of the country: "The country's tearing itself apart. We had that ultra-Reversalist beheading a Clockwise MP in a supermarket…time to call it off" (16–17). In this barely concealed reference to Jo Cox's murder, McEwan depicts a country similarly gripped by extremism and opposition, using Simon's character as a kind of whistleblower. After a moment of reflection, Jim dismisses Simon from his job: "I want your resignation letter on my desk within the half hour and I want you out of the building by eleven" (18). The abruptness of this decision suggests a new, hard-headed

intolerance for those who do not support Reversalism within Jim's government, and reveals a concerning disregard for the how the debate between two economic systems is impacting—now violently—the lives of British people.

Though Simon's immediate dismissal is harsh, others are more cruelly dealt with. Benedict St John, the Foreign Secretary, watches with growing alarm as Jim's cabinet grows more emboldened, and begins a "secret cabal" among the backbenchers "to help the opposition defeat the Reversalism bill when it came back to the Commons" (67). To deal with Benedict's scheme, Jim solicits the help of a woman named Jane Fish, who "belonged mostly in the no-nonsense faction" (72) of politics and "had been a passionate Clockwiser until, respectful of the will of the people, she became a passionate Reversalist. She was admired for speaking well for both" (72). While Jane Fish is not portrayed as a particularly powerful political figure in the novella, she does bear some resemblance to former PM Theresa May, who initially campaigned for Remain before switching her tune and stepping into office vowing to follow through with Brexit. Jim and Jane work together on a manuscript to be published in the *Guardian*—a manuscript, it turns out, that accuses Benedict of "harassment, bullying, obscene taunts and inappropriate touching that led by turns to verbal abuse" (77). The news spreads quickly and gives Jim the necessary excuse to remove Benedict from his position. The viciousness of this accusation and the willingness of the prime minister to disseminate a lie of this scale into the public sphere leads the reader to wonder what other lies he might be capable of spreading for his own sake, and it stands to reason he could lie to the public about anything else that serves him. Jim's lie makes the reader distrustful of his motives not only with regard to controlling who remains in his immediate circle, but also with regard to his larger goal of introducing a Reversalist economy to Britain.

The brutal plot against Benedict is alarming in itself, but it is even more so because

Benedict is the only member of the cabinet who is his true human self. In Jim's very first cabinet

meeting in his new body and role, he is understandably nervous about appearing plausible to his

fellow humans. However, he quickly has a joyous revelation, realising that he is not the only

cockroach who has inhabited the body of a human.

> It was in those few seconds, as he met the bland gaze of Trevor Gott, the
> chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, then the home secretary, attorney general, leader of
> the house, trade, transport, minister without portfolio, that in a startling moment of instant
> recognition, an unaccustomed, blossoming, transcendent joy swept through him, through
> his heart and down his spine. Outwardly he remained calm. But he saw it clearly. Nearly
> all of his Cabinet shared his convictions. Far more important than that, and he had not
> known this until now, they shared his origins…It had never occurred to him that the
> mighty burden of his task was shared, that others like him were heading towards separate
> ministries to inhabit other bodies and take up the fight. A couple of dozen, a little swarm
> of the nation's best, come to inhabit and embolden a faltering leadership. (20)

In this passage, Jim somehow sees through the human exterior of others and recognises that their

true form is the same one that he left behind that morning—a cockroach. Furthermore, this

passage also apparently alludes to the genuine commonalities that exist between politicians—for

example, that many traditionally emerge from educational institutions such as Eton and

Oxbridge—and implies that their privileged backgrounds make them vermin. While this

depiction of who inhabits high-ranking roles in the government lacks nuance, it does reflect a

popular and genuine belief about the prerequisites for power in the UK—a belief that many

throughout the UK find deeply frustrating, and which McEwan clearly criticises. As Jim

continues to scan the room, he also feels the presence of a "traitor at his side" (20): "When Jim

had looked into the eyes of Benedict St John, the foreign secretary, he had come against the

blank unyielding wall of a human retina and could go no further. Impenetrable. Nothing there.

Merely human. A fake. A collaborator. An enemy of the people. Just the sort who might rebel

and vote to bring down his own government. This would have to be dealt with" (21). The

description of Benedict's eyes as an impenetrable wall suggests not only a lack of depth to his character, but also an inability on Jim's part to understand him. Perhaps obviously, McEwan depicts Benedict as human to cast him as the "good guy" in Jim's government—he is the only one willing to take a stand against Reversalism and attempt to bring down what he sees as a dysfunctional and dishonest leadership. In other words, he has his humanity. On the other hand, Jim and his fellow cockroaches are fundamentally not human, which suggests that their motives and actions are to the detriment of other people (which by the end of this book, they are). By expelling Benedict from their midst, Jim empowers his cockroach-cabinet to achieve their goals without the interference of someone with a humanity—a sharp critique of what and who it takes to deliver something like Brexit.

Once Jim has successfully weeded out the dissenters and is left only with his fellow cockroach-humans, the path towards Reversalism is confirmed, but when he is asked to explain why they are pursuing this end in the first place, Jim is unable to provide a satisfactory answer. In a private meeting with the chancellor in Berlin, Jim is asked, through an interpreter: "'Why are you doing this? Why, to what end, are you tearing your nation apart? Why are you inflicting these demands on your best friends and pretending we're your enemies? Why?'" (86). It is notable that this question comes from the chancellor of Germany—one of the largest powers in the European Union. In the context of the book, Reversalism, like Brexit, has major implications for Britain's relationship with the EU in economic terms, but this question is still a very thinly veiled reference to the real-world Brexit scenario. Without verbally responding, Jim turns over thoughts in his mind: "Because. Because that's what we're doing. Because that's what we believe in. Because that's what we said we'd do. Because that's what people said they wanted. Because I've come to the rescue. Because. That, ultimately, was the only answer: *because*" (86–

87). Each utterance of "because" becomes less and less meaningful over the course of this internal monologue, ending with only the word by itself. In each sentence there is an attempt at logic, but they are all ultimately unconvincing, and the final "*because*" betrays that there is simply no reason at all for Reversalism. It is just something that is happening because. The lack of purpose betrayed by Jim's thoughts once again reflect the real-world Remain position that Brexit is a meaningless endeavour spurred by a vote that was in the first place illegitimate. It also excludes the possibility that there could be any sound reasoning to wanting Brexit to happen in the first place, which is an equally popular position for Remainers. Robert Shminsley of the *Financial Times* lamented McEwan's novella in his book review for this very reason. He writes: "[*The Cockroach*] simply symbolised the self-righteous inability to understand the half of the country that does not have the innate good sense to agree with McEwan" (Shminsley). Indeed, McEwan's writing here feeds into the polarising narratives that separate Leave from Remain and reads sanctimoniously, offering no real attempts to understand that the Leave campaign could have had any logical premise, or to heal from the hatred that Brexit unleashed.

Just as Jim is unable to articulately explain why his government has continued to forge a path for Reversalism, he is equally unwilling to remain trapped in the prime minister's body to see it through, triumphantly returning to his cockroach form. Once the bill for Reversalism is signed into law, Jim instructs that "All Cabinet members were to leave their borrowed bodies tidily at their ministry desks, ready for the return of their rightful owners" (McEwan 95), and they return to the gutters. Before they leave Downing Street, the cockroaches all assemble in their true forms to celebrate what they have accomplished, and this meeting reveals why McEwan elected to have it be cockroaches, as opposed to any other insect, that possess the government. Addressing his colleagues and kin, Jim proclaims:

'Our kind is at least three hundred million years old. Merely forty years ago, in this city, we were a marginalised group, despised, objects of scorn or derision. At best, we were ignored. At worst, loathed. But we kept to our principles, and very slowly at first, but with gathering momentum, our ideas have taken hold. Our core belief remained steadfast: we always acted in our own best interests. As our Latin name, *blattodea*, suggests, we are creatures that shun the light. We understand and love the dark…we have lived alongside humans and have learned their particular taste for that darkness…whenever it is predominant in them, so we have flourished. Where they have embraced poverty, filth, squalor, we have grown in strength…When that peculiar madness, Reversalism, makes the general human population poorer, which it must, we are bound to thrive.' (97–98)

Jim's speech is on the surface comical, as the reader imagines a group of cockroaches bemoaning their marginalisation from human society. However, there is a deeply sinister undertone here that attacks the politicians who delivered Brexit, as well as the general population who voted for it. The imagery of this scene is extremely atavistic—the speech is given "behind a wastepaper bin" (96) and longs for a darker time, both literally and figuratively. Jim's primary message is one of survival: that the cockroaches are an ancient species and must ensure that the conditions in which they thrive are kept so that they continue to live for millions more years. He suggests that the progress made in human society is making the world uninhabitable for them, as they require "poverty, filth, squalor"—all of which humans seek to eradicate in favour of progress and prosperity. The idea that these cockroaches wish to turn back the clock to a world such as this is an extremely harsh criticism of the Leave position by McEwan. He portrays Euroscepticism as something far more menacing, and suggests that a government that seeks to deliver Reversalism—that seeks to deliver Brexit—does so knowing that it is against the best interest of the people.

Where McEwan is criticising politicians, Jim's remark that "Merely forty years ago, in this city, we were a marginalised group" dates back exactly to 1979 (since the year of the book's publication)—the year that Margaret Thatcher became prime minister—and the year that the

UK's relationship with the EU started to become strained under her leadership. Indeed, Thatcher's term incited Euroscepticism within government that, as Jim suggests, has been "gathering momentum" ever since. As Jim's monologue suggests, the victory of the Eurosceptics equivalates to a giant step backwards; back towards the dirty conditions that favour cockroaches while doing a disservice to humans. McEwan's message, here, is literally that Brexit will make us poorer, and does more for insects than it does for people. With regard to the population of Leave voters, there is also an insinuation here that they are in some way barbarous—that they are willingly and knowingly voting for their own demise and to reverse the progress made by the more civilised members of society, i.e., Remainers. Once again, these accusations against those pushing the Brexit agenda read as an emotional and polarising response to the ongoing push to leave the EU, and captures a snapshot of how divided the country continues to be, even three years on from the referendum vote.

Ultimately, *The Cockroach* suggests that the only explanation for the actions of politicians who continue to push for Brexit is that they have been possessed by cockroaches who seek to halt human progress and return to the filth of years past. The nostalgia of the novella is not for better times, as is the common rhetoric, but for worse times that will allow these insects to best survive. Of McEwan's final message, Robert Shminsley writes: "Even now, you can hear the cackles across London, in the living rooms of Lewisham and the semis of Surbiton. Yes! Yes! Brexit is nothing more than a wicked populist plot to sow division, drive down living standards and so promote the social conditions in which extremists may thrive" (Shminsley). Shminsley's derisive observation that this story re-asserts the liberal perspective of Londoners—one of England's only Remain dominated regions—shames McEwan's novella for feeding into a polarising narrative, and frames it as an emotional response to Brexit that precludes any attempt

to understand the opposite side. Shminsley even calls McEwan's novella an "essay," as opposed to a work of literature, a particularly sharp indication that he is raising concerns about the one-sided nature of the text. Certainly, where Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* gives voice to a plethora of perspectives that the Brexit debate inspired in the British population, *The Cockroach* privileges one as the right one. Since it speaks from the Remain perspective, and much of England voted Leave in the Brexit referendum, the novella might even appear to be anti-English. Certainly, it reveals a deep disdain for the form of Englishness that currently confronts the nation. In the same way as *Perfidious Albion*, McEwan's novella serves as a snapshot of just how polarised—just how *angry*—post-Brexit referendum Britain has become, and it suggests to the reader that the aftershocks of the Brexit debate are far from over.

PART THREE

Chapter Five
Conclusion: Reimagining Membership

It is frankly difficult to conclude something that hasn't finished happening yet. BrexLit is by no means a literary phenomenon that has seen its last day, and it is unlikely that it will for the foreseeable future. As the UK continues to learn its place in the new world order it has created for itself, literature will continue to emerge in response. However, the immediacy with which BrexLit was published demonstrates a fierce desire to grapple with the political moment in which English people find themselves—one defined by division and uncertainty not only about the future of their country, but also about their collective identity. I argue that each of the literary texts covered in part two, whether published pre- or post-referendum, offers a unique conception of Englishness, but what unites all of them is that they zealously scrutinize an identity that often goes un-examined. For English people, it is in their interest *not* to investigate Englishness—to avoid confronting its history of violence and colonialism, and to ignore the implications of internal conflicts over race and class on a supposedly collective identity. However, the authors and texts I have covered refuse to follow suit. Where pre-Brexit referendum texts sought to problematise the form of Englishness that has emerged in the past two decades, BrexLit texts, in many cases, attempt to resolve it. In all of the eight texts I have covered, Englishness is depicted as an enigma not because no identity exists at all, but because the identity that has traditionally been sought by many English people is steeped in myth and conveniently obscures England's true past.

In chapter three, I examined how *England, England*, *The Rotters' Club*, and *Jerusalem* each seek to portray an England that is struggling to achieve a collective identity, and how each

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author highlights an array of problems associated with that endeavour. In Julian Barnes'
England, England, in order for Englishness to be experienced in a satisfying and cohesive way,
Sir Jack designs a fictional re-interpretation of England in the form of a theme park, which
eventually supersedes "Old England" in terms of its global relevance. Jonathan Coe's *The
Rotters' Club* offers the reader a coming-of-age story: through Benjamin's attempts to
understand himself as an individual and as an Englishman, Coe directs the reader towards the
problems associated with Englishness, where identity is defined by ongoing race and class
warfare and the English inability to think of themselves from a perspective beyond their own
narrow borders. In Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem*, England is a mystical and enchanted land, and
its elucidation of Englishness as a force of anti-modernity is spectacularly hypocritical. *England,
England* and *Jerusalem* both portray an Englishness that satisfies mystical, mythical fantasies
about England and its history, but which ignores England's brutal history of violence and global
conquest. The assertion of that flawed, collective identity is portrayed as absurd in both texts,
and the reader and the theatrical audience, respectively, are asked to simultaneously indulge in
and criticise these interpretations of Englishness, though *Jerusalem* offers more opportunity for
indulgence out of the two. Meanwhile, *The Rotters' Club* more closely guides the reader through
the formation of a young man's English identity in the 1970s, offering a more realistic depiction
of the challenges of Englishness. Despite their differences, these three texts all engage with the
market-driven era in ways that point towards the economy as a key factor for the resurgence of
English nationalism, and they all reveal the problematic upshots of longing for a more exclusive
English identity—an impulse that they prove was becoming ever more powerful in the lead-up to
the Brexit referendum.

Amidst the turmoil of the referendum, BrexLit shows us something significantly different. When the future of the UK changed on June 23, 2016, so did the literature about English identity; rather than simply problematising Englishness, authors now in many cases sought to resolve it. For Geoffrey Hill, tracing the historical destruction and rebuilding of London in *The Book of Baruch by the Gnostic Justin* becomes a way of demonstrating the resilience of London as a metaphor for the strength of Englishness, and although the poet's concerns about the future of his country are resonant, Hill's humour imbues the reader with a renewed sense of hope for the future. Similarly, Ali Smith's *Autumn* offers the reader what they least expect in the immediate wake of the vote: a heart-warming, unconventional story of an inter-generational friendship, and an affirmation of time as a healing mechanism for the division that seeps through the novel. Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* offers a diverse range of perspectives of England and Englishness in a fictional reimagining of the events leading up to and after the referendum, but he too ends the novel on a point of hope—a gathering of friends from across Europe, and the revelation that one of the protagonists is pregnant with her first child. Hill, Smith, and Coe linger not on the disappointment and loss associated with Brexit but, rather allow their readers to look towards a positive vision of the future. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion* and Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach* are satirical and deeply pessimistic visions of Englishness—the former rooted in the appeal of populism and data conspiracies, and the latter depicting a corrupt, cockroach-infested government that works against the best interest of the people. Even though they were published two and three years after the referendum, respectively, neither *Perfidious Albion* nor *The Cockroach* offers the reader any real hope or vision for the future, and while they reject the current incarnations of English nationalism, they offer no better alternative.

Consequently, I find that there are two distinct strains of BrexLit: one rooted in hope and the other in hopelessness. Yet BrexLit texts, despite their differences, all reject the current dominant form of nationalism that confronts England. Rather than depicting an England that confirms a gratifying, yet deeply flawed, form of Englishness as in *England, England* or *Jerusalem*, BrexLit portrays an England that has lost sight of itself, and exposes it instead as, in David Wheatley's words, a "nation out-of-kilter" (Wheatley). All of the novels in chapter four perform a kind of demystification, asking the reader to leave pre-referendum nationalism and this out-of-kilter nation behind. However, while Byers and McEwan stop there, Hill, Smith, and Coe, offer the reader an opportunity for realignment. The hope with which they end their literary texts offers a new foundation for Englishness that allows it to remain a part of the world. *Middle England* ends with a vision of European, multicultural harmony, while *Autumn* reminds England that it is just one part of the collage that makes up the world. Although the Brexit referendum resulted in the UK relinquishing its membership in the EU, these BrexLit texts offer a reimagination of what membership can mean for England in this new era. They invite the reader to recognise the possibility of an English identity based on inclusion and humility, and to consider that being one among many powers is not a threat to English dominance but, instead, a chance to participate in the global whole—to contribute to the collage of nations and identities that make up the world. Just like Benjamin Trotter, the reader can leave the pages of these novels feeling that Englishness does not have to be mutually exclusive from a global, liberal identity. The opportunity to reframe Englishness as an identity that will *remain* a part of the world despite the Leave vote is what makes these BrexLit texts so deeply powerful.

This thesis has been dedicated to revealing the power of BrexLit to both expose the rifts in English society and detoxify Englishness in the wake of one of the most toxic events in its

recent history. All BrexLit texts were published with haste, responding immediately to the state of the nation after the referendum vote—something that I claim is one of their greatest strengths. However, there has been some recent debate on whether texts published in moments of crisis are worthwhile at all. In an article written for the *New York Times* in March 2020 about literature in the time of coronavirus, Sloane Crosley suggests: "From an artistic standpoint, it's best to let tragedy cool before gulping it down and spitting it back into everyone's faces…Art should be given a metaphorical berth as wide as the literal one we're giving one another" (Crosley). Crosley's suggestion that art should not attempt to grapple with a crisis as it is happening is based on the notion that "get-it-while-it's-hot literature" is "limited" somehow, and that those texts published immediately are "born of ego or competition or fear" (Crosley). Why, she asks, "do we continue trying to interpret our nightmares as they happen?" (Crosley). My answer is that literature is intended to interpret the world in which we live. Like all forms of art, literature offers us an exceptional opportunity to step outside of our lived experience and to reconsider our relationships to the world, and to ourselves. In the case of BrexLit, the immediacy of the response is both an attempt to document this incredible and turbulent period, and also to understand its impact on the nation and its people. Sure, novels written long after a critical event like Brexit with the benefit of hindsight might be able to capture a perceptibly more overarching picture, as they will have had more time to let the implications of the UK leaving the EU simmer. But without the literature that documents *the moment*—as Sam Byers suggests, the *feeling*, of Brexit as it happened—the art that comes out of it will undoubtedly lose some of its charge. Since 2015, the UK has experienced a period of turmoil and fast-paced change, and the accompanying, unparalleled confusion surrounding Englishness naturally drove authors towards their chosen art form in an attempt to resolve it. In the most wonderful sense, BrexLit is a vehicle

for understanding what has been least visible to us during this English crisis. While some of the texts I have covered—most notably *Perfidious Albion* and *The Cockroach*—are arguably egoistic and self-indulgent, they are also invaluable explorations of how Englishness has been complicated by the political shock of Brexit.

Writing this as an Englishwoman has been an adventure towards better understanding something that I had never been able to articulate. Englishness, to me, had always been a series of stereotypes: "stiff upper lip" and enjoying a well-formed queue. However, the literature covered in part two provides an opportunity to reflect on the ways in which English identity is created, challenged, and reinforced, and in this exceedingly difficult and troubling period of change, that is both a disconcerting and empowering endeavour. Without a doubt, more than being simply the only way to interpret the contemporary English nightmare, BrexLit, as with all literature, allows readers to connect, empathise, and contend with something that is rife with confusion and uncertainty. Though it may not change the state of England or convince the entire population to accept a more inclusive form of Englishness, it certainly has the power to inspire reflection on both, and it motivates English people in particular to ask themselves who they *really* want to be in this new and unknown future. BrexLit seeks to re-examine the nature of Englishness, and offers readers an extraordinary opportunity to step outside of the chaos, reflect, and in many cases, heal, from the dismal anxiety of the present.

Appendix

Figure 1. Source: https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-politics-48222583/brexit-debate-heats-up-on-question-time.

Figure 2. Source: www.inews.co.uk/news/leave-campaigners-suggest-pledges-may-not-upheld-537181.

Figure 3. Pauline Boty, "Untitled (Sunflower Woman)," 1963. Source: medium.com/@abundanceofquotes/if-the-terrify-you-they-mean-to-583a6892c2c0.

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