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The Post-Dialogic Imagination: Brexit Friction, Brexit Fiction

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Dirk Wiemann explores recent British fiction, including the works of Jonathan Coe and Ali Smith, to consider how novels have approached Brexit and its impact on the ability to conduct dialogue and form national imaginaries. Adopting a Bakhtinian lens, he considers how novels negotiate the polarized agonism that threatens to undo social cohesion with models of meaning-making rendered ineffective in new conditions.

> “Brexit is not only political, economic and administrative: perhaps most significantly it is an event in culture, too” (Eaglestone 2018, 1).

Robert Eaglestone’s claim, with which he programmatically opens his edited volume on *Brexit and Literature*, resonates with numerous other assessments of the importance that the Brexit process had for culture, and vice versa, culture for the Brexit process. In this context, discussions about the relation of Brexit and the British novel have been particularly prolific and intense. This can hardly come as a surprise given the intimate linkage that literary critics, in Britain perhaps more than anywhere else, have construed between the novel and the nation ever since influential critics like F.R. Leavis or E.M. Forster declared the writing and reading of novels to be part of the national DNA. Even today, individual

critics postulate some “native aptitude […] manifest in the English novel” as a literary form deemed specifically germane to “the English imagination” (Ackroyd 2004, 448).

It is true that such postulations of an organic ‘native aptitude’ are the exception rather than the rule today, but the idea of a nexus between nation and novel has remained a commonplace in British literary circuits, especially with an eye on the subnational disposition of Englishness. Thus, Nick Bentley for example, maintains that “the realist novel represents the ideal literary expression of Englishness” (Bentley 2007, 488), while Patrick Parrinder holds that historically “the emergence of the idea of national character has itself been linked to the rise of the novel”, and that in future

> the English novel will […] have to depend upon national identity for its life support if it is to survive as a distinct form. National identity, for its part, will continue to draw strength from the concern with identity in the nation’s fictions. (Parrinder 2006, 34)

A prolific give-and-take seems thus to persist between novel and nationhood, each dependent on the other for its flourishing. What are the implications of Brexit for this happy mutuality? How does the outcome of the Referendum affect the novel-and-nation nexus, given a situation in which the nation appears to reassert itself in the act of ‘taking back control’, but at the same time is revealed to be irreconcilably divided like hardly ever before?

In times of neo-nationalist assertiveness paired with toxic divisiveness, practitioners and critics on both the left and right seem to agree on one point: the ‘task’ of the British novel today consists in “opening a space for dialogue and thus offering a modicum of hope for cultural recuperation and regeneration” (Shaw 2018, 25). And for most critics, Britain’s novelists have so far almost unanimously failed to deliver. Thus James Meek, in his provisionary survey of Brexit writing, takes “many on the liberal left”, including himself, to task for what he perceives as a failure to seriously engage with the motivations of those who voted Leave; instead he diagnoses a widely shared consensus among Remainers that “Brexit is to be opposed, not understood” (Meek 2019, 7). This lack of empathy, novelist Zadie Smith agrees in her ‘Brexit Diary’, engenders a biased and myopic reductivism that constructs all who are not part of one’s own filter bubble as objects of ridicule “for ‘shafting themselves,’ for ‘voting against their interests.’” (Smith 2018, 29) What is required, Smith concludes, is a sober and balanced perspective that reopens the option for dialogue and mediation: “ignorance at the ballot box shouldn’t be celebrated or disingenuously defended”, yet the fact remains that “[h]owever people vote, we have to listen to them” (*ibid*. 30). Moderation and, if possible reconciliation are also top priority for Anne-Julia Zwierlein and Joanna Rosteck (2019, 127) who expect Brexit fiction to “mediate between positions, to depict various possible political and attitudinal stances towards Brexit and its plural interpretations” instead of “reinforc[ing] the (alleged) divides across Britain that have become visible through the Referendum”. Marxist critic Kate Bradley (2017) appears to share some of this liberal ethics when she

condemns Ali Smith for a one-sided representation that does not even “attempt to explore the political views of the […] nasty people”, or “the motivations for their xenophobia” that so upsets Smith’s protagonist. Bradley’s exasperation culminates in the rhetorical question, “what’s the point of a novel about a changing political landscape that doesn’t attempt to understand anything apart from the author’s point of view?” Meanwhile, on the right end of the political spectrum, David Martin Jones (2019) deploys a similar normative demand for a ‘balanced’ representation of all camps and turns it into a firebrand accusation of the perceived arrogance of virtually all Brexit novels, which he summarily dismisses as the swansong of “a cosmopolitan Remainer elite” that self-righteously reiterates the “smug, self-referential worldview found in English literature departments, literary reviews and progressive publishing houses” (98), and that despises “the old, the white, and the working class who spoilt their cosmopolitan dream” (97).

No doubt all these responses to, and demands on, ‘BrexLit’ are politically worlds apart from each other and yet united in their more or less explicit and frequently frustrated expectation that novels should offer “a balanced view” (Zwierlein and Rosteck 2019, 127) and, in a reversal of Meek’s critique cited above, ‘not oppose but understand Brexit’. My own reading of Brexit fiction is slightly different. Rather than a lack of empathy and balance I see a metatextual strategy at work in these novels through which they reflect their own positionality and entanglement in a deeply agonistic society whose fissures the Referendum makes manifest. These novels, then, do not deliberately refuse to offer a ‘balanced view’ but rather acknowledge their incapability to do so. They are hence not expressions of some biased elitism but the seismographic registration of a social rift that appears beyond repair and that faces the novelist with a dilemma: s/he is compelled to find a formal articulation for a situation that appears to cry out for its adequate novelistic representation (as all the normative expectations of the critics cited above indicate) but that at the same time defies precisely such a representation because it puts into question one of the most basic preconditions on which the novel traditionally relies, namely the climate of a community establishing itself dialogically. In response to this dilemma, a number of Brexit novels have taken on a reflexivity through which they articulate Brexit as a crisis of society *and* of the novel as a representational form. I would like to illustrate this with reference to a few passages from select Brexit novels by Ali Smith and Jonathan Coe.

The end of dialogue

“It is the end of dialogue,” muses Elisabeth Demand, the deeply worried protagonist of Ali Smith’s celebrated ‘Brexit novel’ *Autumn* (2016), while listening to a Radio Four panel discussion where Leave and Remain advocates are “saying stuff to each other and none of it actually ever becoming dialogue” (Smith 2016, 112). Political discourse between opposing camps, on public radio as well as at street level, regresses to hate speech and toxic abuse. This is indeed a threat to the very cohesion of the nation, as Smith’s novel insistently dramatizes. Thus, a three pages long panorama of Britain immediately after the Brexit Referendum offers a lengthy variation on the theme of a deep cleavage

“all across the country”:

> 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, money money money money. All across the country, no money no money no money no money. All across the country, the country split in pieces. All across the country, the countries cut adrift. All across the country, the country was divided, a fence here, a wall there […]. (Smith 2016, 59; 61)

While this passage clearly emphasises the nation’s divisiveness, it cannot go unnoticed how all those apparently irreconcilable antagonistic factions are yet simultaneously held together by the conspicuous repetitiveness of the anaphoric phrase, “all across the country”, that on the level of content ensures that nothing and no one is exempt from this divisiveness, but, on the level of form, provides a unifying frame for all that appears so irreconcilable. What thereby emerges, (if only) in the medium of poetic language, is a paradoxical commonality that all the numerous opposing camps share: namely the literal common ground of ‘the country’ as such.

The end of dialogue is not only a topical problem at the narrative level of Smith’s novel; it is also a metatextual device that refers to one of the most privileged categories in current theories of the novel, especially those that take a keen interest in the social role of literature. Ever since the belated Anglophone reception, from the 1970s on, of the works of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, the novel as a form is widely considered to be constitutively *dialogic*. For Bakhtin, it is precisely its polyphony and multi-perspectivism that qualifies the novel as the one literary form best suited to give adequate verbal *gestalt* to the realities of a differentiated, pluralistic and internally diverse society in which multiple voices, registers, styles and speech genres coexist, sometimes peacefully, often in conflict, but essentially in a relation of ‘dialogism’. This implies that every single utterance is constituted in response to precedent or coexistent utterances of which it is ‘aware’, and in anticipation of future responses to itself: “A word, discourse, language or culture undergoes ‘dialogization’ when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions of the same things” (Holquist 1981, 427). Social life thus appears as one vast polymorphous and interminable conversation with a myriad of participants. For the totality of “the dialogue of social languages as it exists in a given era”, Bakhtin coins the term “heteroglossia” (1981, 417): a condition that he, writing under Stalinist centralism, does not associate with social disaggregation but rather with a liberating pluralism and the subversion of authoritarianism. In this perspective, the novel as a literary form attains a particularly important role as the very medium in which the polyphony of social life is given a coherent shape:

> The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. The links and interrelations lead to the novel’s heteroglossia and dialogization. (Bakhtin 1981, 262).

The novel, then, makes room for the centrifugal, pluralizing tendencies at work in a heteroglot society while at the same time 'linking' and 'interrelating' this multitude of discrepant voices and speech types into one overarching meaningful orchestrated 'totality'. In this light, Ali Smith's panorama of post-Referendum Britain is clearly monologic in its stylistic homogeneity that allows for no diversity. Rather than affirming social heteroglossia, this repetitive style appears to formally correlate to the 'end of dialogue' that Elisabeth registers and that will leave her, in a later passage, standing in solipsistic bewilderment "in the echo of herself" (Smith 2016, 198). And yet it cannot go unnoticed that *Autumn* as a whole is a remarkably heterogeneous text that collates a variety of fragments, narrative strands and intertextual references that remain largely disconnected. These component parts include, among others, the feverish dreams and reminiscences of a dying old man; Kafkaesque episodes of failed conversations between Elisabeth and a clerk at a post office; interspersed prose poems zooming in on the passing of the seasons; extracts from a school essay that Elisabeth had to write in fifth form; historical background information on the Profumo affair or the little known 1960s pop artist, Pauline Boty. In *Autumn*, 'orchestration' occurs not so much in the conventional sense of narrative emplotment but rather in the spatial mode of a collage (the very technique that Boty excelled in). There are, therefore, links and connections but they are subterranean and unrealized by the text in which all the fragments appear to stand 'in the echo of themselves', where "half the village isn't speaking to the other half of the village" (54), and every "moment of dialogue" turns out to be "imagined" (33). But 'imagined' is far from ineffective.

The imagined community divided

Arjun Appadurai's work has consistently engaged with the imagination as a productive, world-making force especially under conditions of globalization. From the conjunctures and disjunctures of transnational cultural flows, people assemble their always provisional identities, both individual and communal, as inhabitants of "imagined worlds" (Appadurai 1998, 34): the post-national successors of the 'imagined communities' as which Benedict Anderson has influentially defined the modern nation. Interestingly, for Anderson the (realist) novel figures as a crucial device for the bringing-forth and reproduction of the national imaginary: not so much in topical but in strictly structural terms. For Anderson, the nation is an anonymous community of strangers who will never meet and yet have "complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity". The awareness of coexisting in synchrony with strangers appears therefore as crucial for cohesion of the nation, conceived as a "social organism moving calendrically through homogeneous empty time" (Anderson 1993, 25-26). The novel, according to Anderson, is one of the most germane cultural devices to foster this specific imaginary because it allows for the *formal* figuration of precisely this shared temporality: novels (and no doubt, later on, feature films) have "spectacular possibilities for the representation of simultaneous actions" (194) and hold these otherwise unrelated activities together by nothing but their "calendrical coincidence" (32): "performed at the same clocked, calendrical time, but by actors who may be largely unaware of one another", these activities coalesce into an "imagined world conjured up by the author

in his readers' minds" (25). This temporal coincidence is clearly present in Smith's post-Referendum panorama 'all across the country' where it is not only space but also time that all Britons share. For it is strongly suggested at the very beginning of the panoramic long shot that all these opposing responses to the referendum are happening simultaneously: "All across the country, there was misery and rejoicing" (Smith 2016, 59) at the same time. Whatever follows from this establishing shot is a long series of variations on, and specifications of, that opening statement with its establishment of cross-country synchrony, thereby imagining the nation as a community in shared time-space and yet internally polarized beyond reconciliation.

Nation-states can and will utilize this 'grammar' of community cohesion through the imaginary experience of synchronized activities by encouraging the participation in "mass ceremonies" of "simultaneous consumption" of such cultural input as, say, the nine o'clock news or, more festively, royal weddings or important sports events: "What more vivid figure for the secular, historically clocked, imagined community can be envisioned" than a nation glued to the TV set with everybody assuming virtually everybody else engrossed in the very same simultaneous experience (Anderson 1993, 35)? In Jonathan Coe's *Middle England*, this experience is nostalgically remembered by one of the protagonists who recalls how, as a child in the 1970s, the Christmas ritual of watching the Morecambe and Wise comedy show on BBC exhilarated him with an "incredible sense of oneness, a sense that the entire nation was being briefly, fugitively drawn together in the divine act of laughter" (Coe 2017, 48). The dispersed characters of the novel undergo a similar experience of secular communion on the occasion of the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics. Coe devotes ten full pages to this event, zooming in on sixteen different characters located in their separate settings and yet united in their common participation in the "precisely simultaneous consumption" of the media event:

> Sophie and Ian were sitting together on the sofa in their flat, watching the Olympic opening ceremony on television.
>
> Colin Trotter was alone at home in Rednal, sitting in his armchair, watching the Olympic opening ceremony on television.
>
> Helena Coleman was alone at home in Kernel Magna, sitting in her armchair, watching the 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. […] (Coe 2017, 129)

The dynamics of this enumeration is similar to and at the same time subtly different from Ali Smith's

panorama of cross-country responses to the Referendum. For where Smith moves from unity to division (every clause beginning with the same phrase but leading to the opposite of its counterpart), Coe highlights the reverse logic, namely the genesis of 'oneness' from diversity, as every specific situation results invariably in the identical act of 'watching the Olympic opening ceremony on television'. As one of the characters sums up the event post fact, however, this is the last time that "so many millions of disparate people had been united, drawn together by a television broadcast" in which Britain performs as "a country at ease with itself" (139). From then on, by contrast, the nation on its path towards Brexit will imagine itself as a community in division, united by *ressentiment* instead of fellow feeling:

> so different in age, class, gender and ethnicity, all with such different stories to tell, they were in fact united by one common factor: a profound and abiding sense of injustice. […] they all burned with a righteous sense of indignation, a feeling that they had been singled out, picked on, by malign, unseen forces. (37-38).

Similarly in *Autumn*, every morning Elisabeth "wakes up feeling cheated of something. The next thing she thinks about, when she does, is the number of people waking up feeling cheated of something all over the country, no matter what they voted" (Smith 2016, 197). As Britain turns into a nation paradoxically united in division and resentment, not only Bakthin's dialogic principle but also Anderson's model of unification through synchrony get sceptically revised. Even while it consolidates in strict calendrical simultaneity, the imagined community is now 'united by one common factor': the pure negativity of a post-dialogic imagination. Novels, under these conditions, cannot easily offer a 'balanced view' nor play go-between to the hopelessly opposed factions 'all across the country'; they can, however, sensitively register how the polarized agonism that threatens to undo social cohesion requires new modes of meaning-making for which there are as yet no models. Whether or not the novel will still be an active cultural device in that endeavour remains to be seen.

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