

The Novel Today: Recent British Fiction

Lecture 13:

Brex(I)it

1) Brexit and Literature

2) A First Brexlit Classic: Ali Smith, *Autumn* (2016)

3) Brexit Dystopia: John Lanchester, *The Wall* (2019)

4) Coda: Ian McEwan, *Yet Again* – *The Cockroach* (2019)

1) Brexit and Literature

- Brexlit: The Emergence of a New Genre (?) (MA thesis Sarah Kennedy 2019)
- Definition Kennedy: “literature which reflects on what is happening in British society around Brexit, which may have been written to influence public opinion and even political decision-making processes”
- Shaw 2018, 18: “In a post-Brexit landscape, novels are already appearing that could claim the tag of Brexit fiction, or ‘BrexLit’, reflecting on the divided nature of the UK and the ramifications of the referendum. The term BrexLit concerns fictions that either directly respond or imaginatively allude to Britain’s exit from the EU, or engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain’s withdrawal.”

Zwierlein/Rostek, “Literatures of Brexit: An Introduction”:

Dominant Modes of Representation (126):

- **the satirical/dystopian:**
Douglas Board, *Time of Lies: A Political Satire* (2017), Michael Paraskov, *Rabbitman* (2017), Mark Billingham, *Love Like Blood* (2017), Stanley Johnson, *Kompromat* (2017), Sam Byers, *Perfidious Albion* (2019), John Lanchester, *The Wall* (2019)
- **the testimonial/verbatim:**
The Guardian (ed.), *Brexit Shorts: Giving Voice to a Divided Britain Through New Dramas* (2017), Carol Ann Duffy & Rufus Norris, *My Country: A Work in Progress* (2017)
- **the realist/panoramic:**
Ian McEwan, *Nutshell* (2016), Amanda Craig, *The Lie of the Land* (2017), Adam Thorpe, *Missing Fay* (2017), Anthony Cartwright, *The Cut* (2017), Jonathan Coe, *Middle England* (2018)

(on “Poetry and Brexit” cf. Varty 2018)

Attempts at Explanation:

Eagleston 2018:

Lyndsey Stonebridge, “The Banality of Brexit”

Anshuman A. Mondal, “Scratching the Post-Imperial Itch”

Robert Eaglestone, “Cruel Nostalgia and the Memory of the Second World War”

Michael Gardiner, “Brexit and the Aesthetics of Anachronism”

Simon Glendenning, “Brexit and the German Question”

Fintan O’Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (2018).

James Meek, “Brexit and Myths of Englishness.” *LRB* 40.19 (2018).

David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The New Tribes Shaping British Politics* (2017).

Sleaford Mods – Invisible Britain (documentary film, 2015).

2) A First Brexlit Classic: Ali Smith, *Autumn* (2016)

The Novels of Ali Smith:

Like (1997)
Hotel World (2001)
The Accidental (2005)
Girl Meets Boy (2007)
There But For The (2011)
How To Be Both (2014)
Autumn (2016)
Winter (2017)
Spring (2019)
Summer (2020)

(+ short stories, plays, non-fiction)

Autumn (2016):

- the first of four projected 'seasonal' state-of-the-nation novels, written while the Referendum was held and the aftermath unfolded
- written (as it were) in 'real time', "using real time information to mould the story" for "a reflection of the moment" (Kennedy)
- Elisabeth Demand (32), art lecturer, frequently visiting Daniel Gluck (101) in hospital and otherwise going about leading her life in spite of everything (Brexit, temporary employment, aging mother ...)
- somewhat enigmatic 'neutral' heterodiegetic narration in present tense with unmarked shifts into internal focalisation (E's thoughts, D's dreams)

Beginning:

It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. Again. That's the thing about things. They fall apart, always have, always will, it's in their nature. So an old man washes up on a shore. He looks like a punctured football with tis stitching split, the leather kind that people kicked a hundred years ago. The sea's been rough. It has taken the shirt of his back; naked as the day I was born are the words in the head he moves on its neck, but it hurts to. So try not to move the head. What's this in his mouth, grit? it's sand, it's under his tongue, he can feel it, he can hear it grinding when his teeth move against each other, singing its sand-song.

[...]

Daniel Gluck, your luck's run out at last.

He prises open one stuck eye. But –

Daniel sits up on the sand and the stones

– is this it? really? this? is death? [...] (3-4 ... p. 13)

It is a Wednesday, just past midsummer. Elisabeth Demand – thirty two years old, no-fixed-hours casual contract junior lecturer at a university in London, living the dream, her mother says, and she is, if the dream means having no job security and almost everything being too expensive to do and that you're still in the same rented flat you had when you were a student over a decade ago – has gone to the main Post Office in the town nearest the village her mother now lives in, to do Check & Send with her passport form.

[...]

The Post Office ticket machine gives her a ticket with number 233 on it for counter service. The place isn't busy [...] But the number she's been given is so far ahead of the numbers highlighted on the boards above everybody's heads as *coming up next* (156, 157, 158) [...] that she leaves the Post Office, crosses the green, goes to a second-hand bookshop on Bernard Street. [...] (15-16)

Selected Passages:

It is just over a week since the vote. [...]

The village is in a sullen state. 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)

[Her mother] points to the other side of the map, furthest from the coast.

That's where the new fence has gone up, she says. Look.

She's pointing to the word *common* in the phrase *common land*.

Apparently a fence three metres high with a roll of razorwire along the top of it has been erected across a stretch of land not far from the village. [...]

Go and see it, her mother says. I want you to do something about it.

What can I do about it? Elisabeth says. I'm a lecturer in the history of art. (55)

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 of 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 looked up Google: *what is EU?* [...]

All across the country, the country was divided, a fence here, a wall there, a line drawn here, a line crossed there,

 a line you don't cross here,

 a line you better not cross there,

 a line of beauty here,

 a line dance there,

 a line you don't even know exists here,

 a line you can't afford there,

 a whole new line of fire,

 line of battle,

 end of the line,

 here/there. (59/61)

3) Brexit Dystopia: John Lanchester, *The Wall* (2019)

The Novels of John Lanchester:

The Debt to Pleasure (1996)
Mr Phillips (2000)
Fragrant Harbour (2002)
Capital (2012)
The Wall (2019)

(+ essays, journalism, non-fiction)

The Wall (2019):

- setting: after the 'Change' (*Kuishia* in Swahili: 'the ending'), an island nation sets to defend itself against 'the Others' by means of a 10,000-km-long, 5-m-high and 3-m-wide wall along its coastline
- a two-year service on the wall as a 'Defender' is obligatory for every citizen growing into adulthood (no exemptions)
- generational guilt, the challenge of 'Breeding'
- nuclear power is readily available, but no fossil fuel
- non-compliance adds time to the service, if 'Others' manage to get in, 'Defenders' are set to sea, successful invaders get the choice between euthanasia, being set to sea again or becoming 'Help'

- first-person narrator Joseph Kavanagh ('Chewy')
- Hifa, Shoona, Cambell, Mary, Hughes
- the Corporal ('Yos'), the Sergeant ('Sarge'), the Captain
- 'the elite', politicians, the 'baby politician'

- Part One: The Wall (ch. 1-12)
Part Two: The Others (ch. 13-17)
Part Three: The Sea (ch. 18-25)

Beginning:

It's cold on the wall. That's the first thing everybody tells you, and the first thing you notice when you're sent there, and it's the thing you think about all the time you're on it, and it's the thing you remember when you're not there anymore. It's cold on the wall.

You look for metaphors. It's cold as slate, as diamond, as the moon. Cold as charity – that's a good one. But you soon realize that the thing about the cold is that it isn't a metaphor. It isn't like anything else. It's nothing but a physical fact. This kind of cold, anyway. Cold is cold is cold.

Ch. 2:

I think they used to call it concrete poetry, that thing where the words on the page look like a physical object, the object that the poem is trying to describe.

[...]

You could talk about the Wall in prose, or you could talk about it in poetry, but either way concrete would be prominent. (13/14)

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(15)

cold::concrete::wind::sky::water

sky!
cold
concrete
water
wind

cold
 concrete
 cold
 water
 cold
 sky
 cold
 wind
 cold
 (16)

Ending:

“Tell me a story,” said Hifa.

I tried to think of one. “Everything is going to be all right,” I said, that’s what a story is, something where everything turns out all right, but I said that and I could see it wasn’t what she wanted to hear, but my mind was blank and all I could think was that she wants me to tell her a story, a story where something turns out all right. I said this to myself over and over again, that’s what a story is, something that turns out all right, and then it came to me, and what I said out loud began like this: “It’s cold on the Wall.”

4) Coda: Ian McEwan, Yet Again – *The Cockroach* (2019)

Ian McEwan is known for holding “strong opinions on Brexit, being an avid opponent of both the Referendum and its outcome. [...] *Nutshell* (2016), published roughly two months after the Referendum, does not explicitly comment on Brexit and is thus [...] not officially counted as ‘BrexLit’, [but] it is strongly indicative of the author’s anti-Brexit mindset, portraying a ‘less than united kingdom’ which is, along with the rest of the world, in deep crisis, governed and plagued by nationalist forces, and in the process of succumbing to a ‘[c]onfusion about values’.”

(Meifert-Menhard 2019, 195)

***The Cockroach* (2019):**

This novella is a work of fiction. Names and characters are the product of the author’s imagination and any resemblance to actual cockroaches, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Beginning:

That morning, Jim Sams, clever but by no means profound, woke from uneasy dreams to find himself transformed into a gigantic creature. For a good while he remained on his back (not his favourite posture) and regarded his distant feet, his paucity of limbs, with consternation. A mere four, of course, and quite unmovable. His own little brown legs, for which he was already feeling some nostalgia, would have been waving merrily in the air, however hopelessly. He lay still, determined not to panic. An organ, a slab of slippery meat, lay squat and wet in his mouth – revolting, especially when it moved of its own accord to explore the vast cavern of his mouth and, he noted with muted alarm, slide across an immensity of teeth. [...]

[cf. Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* 1915]

Suddenly, a movement on the floor caught his attention. It was a little creature, in his own previous form, no doubt the displaced owner of the body he now inhabited. [...] It was a long way back to the palace [of Westminster], and there would be much danger along the way. But if it made it without being squashed underfoot, it would find, behind the palace panelling of below the floorboards, safety and solace among millions of its siblings. He wished it well. But now he must attend to his own concerns. [...]

Reversalim:

The origins of Reversalim are obscure and much in dispute, among those who care. For most of its history, it was considered a thought experiment, an after-dinner game, a joke. It was the preserve of eccentrics, of lonely men who wrote compulsively to the newspapers in green ink. Of the sort who might trap you in a pub and bore you for an hour. But the idea, once embraced, presented itself to some as beautiful and simple. 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 he 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, 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. The landlord must tirelessly purchase manufactures goods to pay for his tenants. The government acquires nuclear power stations and expands its space programme in order to send out tax gifts to workers. Hotel managers bring in the best champagne, the softest sheets, rare orchids and the best trumpet player in the best orchestra in town, so that the hotel can afford its guests. The next day, [...] the trumpet player must shop intensely in order to pay for his next appearance.

Full employment is the result.

- the Reversalist Party “with its populist, anti-elitist message” vs. ‘the Clockwisers’
- the Conservative Party promised a referendum on reversing the money flow

The prime minister who had called the referendum resigned immediately and was never heard of again. In his place there emerged a compromise candidate, the lukewarm Clockwiser James Sams. [...] Then, without warning and to general amazement, Sams and his wavering cabinet seemed to find their courage. They were about to leap.

Ending:

He did not mention it, but he knew that every minister in his Cabinet understood the perils that lay ahead. It was just after 4 p.m. on a cloudy afternoon when they slipped through the open door and past the duty policeman. They welcomed the winter gloom. Because of it, they did not see the little creature scurrying towards Number Ten to resume its life. [...]

A Map of (Post-)Modern Fiction

<u>Modes:</u>	<u>Documentary Fiction</u>	<u>Realist Fiction</u>	<u>Revisionist Fiction</u>	<u>Implicit Metafiction</u>	<u>Explicit Metafiction</u>
<u>Scales:</u>	external/environmental reference illusion 'real' comm./character comm.	←		→ internal/systemic ref.	auto-referentiality anti-illusion lit. comm./narr. comm.
<u>'Programs':</u>	(Avantgarde) ↑	<u>Realism</u>	Romanticism →	<u>Modernism</u>	← Aestheticism ↑
<u>Orientations of Meaning:</u>	obj. (subj.) [[lit.]]	obj. subj. (lit.)	(obj.) subj. lit.	(obj.) subj. lit. → lit.	[(obj.)] (subj.) lit.

(cf. Reinfandt 1997, 240)

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 26.1 (2019): *Brexit and the Divided United Kingdom*, ed. by Joanna Rostek and Anne Julia Zwierlein.
 26.2 (2019): *Literatures of Brexit*, ed. by Anne-Julia Zwierlein, Joanna Rostek and Ina Habermann.

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