Fiction in Dark Times: the Brexit Novel and Ali Smith

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The 2016 vote to leave the European Union has incited many tormenting questions regarding the present state and future development of British society. Contemporary novelists are reacting differently to this situation, giving rise to what some reviewers have labelled "the post-referendum novel", "Brexit fiction" or simply "Brexlit". It seems well worth investigating what constitutes this emergent strand of literature in terms of common themes and shared prospects. How do authors with different backgrounds approach the referendum and its implications? To what extent can such fiction be understood as a new phenomenon, or even genre in its own right? And which are the strategies chosen to make literature function as political engagement? After a general survey of the field, this article will have a closer look at Ali Smith's *Autumn* and *Winter*, often hailed as the landmarks of Brexit fiction.

Does Brexlit mean Brexlit?

To begin with, there have been both broader and more narrow assessments of what qualifies as Brexlit in the first place. Overviews include books that appeared before and after the vote, and which were written in various cultural and political contexts. For example, in his detailed account of the new literary landscape published in *Financial Times*, Jon Day also includes Howard Jacobson's anti-Trump satire *Pussy* (2015).[1] A reviewer for the *Guardian*, Danuta Kean, draws attention, among others, to Heinz Helle's *Eigentlich müssten wir tanzen* (2015, translated into English as *Euphoria*)[2], an apocalyptic vision of (German-yet-generalisable) consumer society. However, what most approaches to Brexit fiction have in common is that they are indeed centred on contemporary Britain, and while some of these books take issue with its political elites and governmental system, such as Andrew

Marr's farcical thriller *Head of State* (2015) and Douglas Board's dystopian satire *Time of Lies* (2017), the more typical pre- and post-referendum novels focus on the larger society as such.

It is here that a somewhat problematic tendency becomes manifest. Most Brexit novels are more specifically written from an *English* perspective; they are concerned, like Paul Kingfield's historical novel *The Wake* (a 2013 Joyce-inspired experiment in pseudo-archaic language to probe into the past levels of collective consciousness), with "English identity", and their proceedings are located geographically somewhere between London and "the heart of England" (as indicated on the back cover of Jon McGregor's *Reservoir 13*; see below). It should be stressed that in most Brexlit not only "Europe – as a geographical reality and political idea – is largely absent from its pages"[3] (save an EU-funded flowerbed here and there), but so are the inhabitants from Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, not to speak of the larger history of immigration entailed by Britain's colonial past that would fundamentally complicate the idea of indigenous Englishness. In all these books, there can be no doubt, this is England in times of crisis, "England divided" (as in Benjamin Myers' *The Gallows Pole* (2017), which envisions the precursors of that division in history). Brexit

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fiction thus privileges England in order to expose it in fractured state, typically centred around a more or less complex, and more or less fictionalized, though always threateningly deep, social conflict.

In some cases, as in McGregor's *Reservoir 13* or Adam Thorpe's *Missing Fay* (both 2017), Brexit fiction shows similarities with the crime novel. Both stories, as Jon Day adequately summarizes, revolve around a missing girl which functions as "a void at the heart of a novel that is really about our prejudices and how we fail to communicate them to one another"[4]. However, whereas the most recent instalment of Mark Billingham's successful Tom Thorne novels, *Love Like Blood* (2017), immerses the detective in a post-referendum setting, Thorpe's and McGregor's books feature yet another void as they also leave empty the *detective's* place. Unlike the traditional trajectory that is arranged around the detective as an agent restoring a certain sense of order to a world otherwise out of joint, in *Missing Fay* and *Reservoir 13* it is mainly for *the reader* to bridge the clash of widely diverging perspectives, thus encouraging the reading subject, as it were, to overcome society's communicative gaps.

This bridging approach is most conspicuously conducted in Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2017), the one book that was explicitly commissioned as a "Brexit novel" by its publisher. Advertised to offer "a fictional response to a complex issue" on the back cover, *The Cut* is centred around the chasm of understanding between Grace Trevithick, a successful London-based documentary film-maker, and Cairo Jukes, an ex-boxer from Dudley (at the centre of the formerly industrial Black Country) who is down to collecting metal from defunct factories on zero-hours contracts. Grace meets Cairo for an interview; their mutual attraction leads up to an affair in which the social and cultural distance is for a short time overcome, but when Cairo is unable to bear the difference, he feels driven to a most melodramatic (self-)destructive response. The gendered and class-marked divide thus evoked brings up several key issues in which, dramatized and distorted as they are under the fatal influence of the populist right, one can see the extent of social alienation, financial hardship and lack of solidarity that has marked pre- as well as post-referendum England. But to analyse social division in this clear-cut way has arguably little to offer for a more profound understanding why so many voted for Leave, which was by no means just a provincial or lower-class phenomenon.[5] While there seems to be considerable interest in holding up a mirror to contemporary society, only a handful of Brexit novels make a serious effort at exploring the wider cultural dimensions of the present crisis, and there are only few examples suggesting that a

more complex approach to social critique, beyond the reduction in terms of country vs city or the like, might be in order.

From *Autumn* …

Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), highly celebrated by the press and shortlisted for the 2017 Man Booker Prize, should be considered as an exception in this respect, one that also resists any facile categorization in terms of existing genre markers such as satire or dystopia. The first to appear in a planned quartet that follows the seasonal cycle, *Autumn* is out to exhibit a vibrant ideal, the rich potential of love as inspirational connectedness, provocatively pinned against the reality of present-day British society that has lost all its belief and hope save narrow-minded framing, compartmentalization and privatization, in short: the drawing of lines and borders for its own sake, amounting to "a new kind of detachment".[6] While there is little resistance against this predicament, the commodified culture of meaningless delimiting and measuring exerts a severely alienating effect on individuals. Such 'unculture', the novel suggests, is what's behind the aggressive mentality of distrust and hostility that sometimes leads to outbursts of hatred, such as habitual racism, anti-immigration campaigns or the murder of Jo Cox.[7]

However, these social pathologies are also evident in the absurdity of rather harmless everyday situations. Thus when Elisabeth Demand, a 32 year-old art history lecturer, goes to the downsized post office to renew her passport using the practicable Check & Send service, she is told that her head is the wrong size and that her eyes are too small (on the photograph she intends to submit, that is). That uneasy impression about her is very much in tune with the reservations shown by her mother who has been thinking that something is wrong with her daughter since childhood days, when Elisabeth became friends with Daniel Gluck, their aging neighbour. Elisabeth's friendship with the thin and cultivated man of unclear (German-French-English) descent intensifies over the years, much to her mother's disdain, who finds such a relationship "unnatural" and "unhealthy"[8], suspecting that Daniel must be a pervert or gay (or both). However, Daniel's desire is really much more sublime. While it remains unclear what exactly he did during his life – aside from once having written the song lyrics for a one-hit wonder – he is certainly an artist of sorts, highly receptive and expressive of what art has to offer, always intensely engaged in inspirational relations. It is this friendship in creative dialogue and joint story-making that gives Elisabeth an idea of who she actually is, as Daniel reveals to her what is really relevant about art, truth and

life itself. Her congenial friend is always on her mind as Elisabeth gradually discovers a voice, sexuality and love-life of her own, and arrives at an aesthetic ideal animated by a sense of feminism stifling traditionalism in academia. But unlikely as it might seem, her mother, too, is eventually able to go beyond the conventional frames of thinking in which she was stuck for so many years.

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(centred around the female 1960s pop artist Pauline Boty, whose artistic vision Daniel once fell in love with and which he manages to communicate as an original experience to Elisabeth).

Having experienced the full and unrestricted potential of inspirational connectivity, Elisabeth is thus empowered to resist, at least partially, the overall conformism of the detached unculture, reacting emotionally and critically to empty conventions when facing narrow-mindedness in outsourced (formerly) public services as well as She discovers a new way of loving when she meets Zoe, a former child-star, now a psychologist and generally an open-minded and understanding woman (such love is "unnatural" and "unhealthy", Elisabeth mockingly remarks)[9]. On top of that, her mother turns into a political protester of sorts as she desperately attacks an ominous electric fence that is installed in open nature to usurp a piece of common land for an unclear – yet probably detrimental – purpose, its mere presence bringing up associations with detention camps for refugees. The fence is heavily guarded by security

and Elisabeth's mother is immediately arrested after the attack; however, she is firmly determined to extend her protest, planning to unrelentingly bombard the fence with a pile of desirable antiquities that previously were on her mind before she 'got political'. The fence, introduced as a key symbol of the 'new detachedness', thus transforms into a sign of hope and resistance, and it is in this sense that the novel's final lines encourage the reader to see the roses that still exist in the all-encompassing autumnal rot.

The hope the novel invests in overcoming the deplorable state of society is also formally enacted. Evoking life in its full and shared intensity, reality in *Autumn* principally eludes any endeavour to fix it to one particular point of view, as is made clear by the non-linearity and multi-perspectivity of Smith's narrative, which, indebted to Virginia Woolf in its proclivity for free indirect discourse and also inspired by Shakespeare's *Tempest*, takes the reader from dream to the everyday, a collage oscillating between past and present as well as life and death, amounting to a world in which memories and empathy are as real as any other experience. In the days of post-truth, Smith's imaginative realism seems to encourage, in a way, a return to facts – the *deeper* facts, that is, reflecting an intersubjective sense of truth that is not simply arbitrary but authentic and solidary. Such literature is far removed from mere dystopianism, which is implied as Elisabeth, sitting at Daniel's deathbed, comes to swap her reading from *Brave New World* to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

What makes *Autumn* more convincing than other approaches to Brexit fiction, then, is that it avoids being lured too much into the discursive arena of Leave and Remain camps, while positioning itself nonetheless clearly on the latter side by capturing the mentality, or structure of feeling, of the new detachment and by animating the belief in the richness and intensity of life that comes with removing rather than erecting borders. It would hence be too simple to dismiss *Autumn* for 'merely' offering a general critique of (post-)modern alienation, of too much abstracting from the particularity of the contemporary crisis. At the same time, the novel's focus on England serves mainly to reveal the constructedness of English identity and the questionable limitations thus maintained. While the multiple French and German connections around Daniel implicitly expose the idea of separating British from European culture as utter nonsense, it is for Daniel to point out that the roots of Elisabeth's surname, "Demand", are probably French, "du monde". To be really demanding, then, is to be a citizen of the world, resisting the facile coding of identity in terms of national boundaries. Thus while Smith's

novel implicitly advocates a climate of openness regarding the 'refugee crisis', and casually registers immigration from Eastern Europe (as reflected in the staff of care assistants responsible for Daniel), it should be added that the Scottish writer questions more deeply the idea of an indigenous 'core' of the British population, exposing it as always already constituted by migration.

… to *Winter* …

Winter (2017), the second instalment in Smith's seasonal cycle, takes a more domestic approach at addressing the specific mood of Britain's divided society. Loosely connected to its predecessor via shared themes and similarities in characters, *Winter* transforms Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* into a subtly crafted post-referendum allegory. The novel is centred around the Cleves family, the name evoking social cleavages against the backdrop of the deeper connections of kinship. At first sight, the two elderly Cleves sisters, Sophia and Iris, could not be further apart regarding their world-views. The introverted Sophia is a former art student and a once successful, now bankrupt and socially isolated entrepreneur, having just lost her own chain of stores specialized in home decoration, whereas Iris is a socialite and left-wing political activist, her life-long engagement ranging from anti-war to environmentalism and quite a few other issues. No wonder that the sisters have not spoken to each other for nearly three decades. But a connection remains, as Sophia has bought the sixteen-bedroom country-house in Cornwall that was previously inhabited by Iris and her commune of political friends. In this atmosphere of stifled nostalgia, Sophia continually drifts into memories of her youth spent with Iris and feels haunted by a childlike ghost.

The Cle(a)ves also get a generational dimension as Arthur (called Art), Sophia's son, has been left somewhat disorientated between his mother's and aunt's diverging outlooks. Recently dropped by his girl-friend, Charlotte, for his indifference regarding the crises of the present, Art in fact prides himself for bringing a political dimension into his blog on nature observation ("Art in Nature"), which, however, is exactly what makes Charlotte furious, dismissing Art's project as his "*irrelevant reactionary unpolitical* blog".[10] Joining his Scrooge-like mother for Christmas, Art visits her in her (otherwise empty) house, picking up Lux on the way, a young and witty immigrant woman, beautiful and pierced, from Croatia but extraordinarily fluent in English. Having just run into her at a Bus Station, Art gives Lux the weird sum of 1008 pounds for pretending to be Charlotte during his stay with his mother. Surprisingly, skinny and homeless Lux turns out to be

a catalyst *par excellence*. Not only does she easily connect with the otherwise uncommunicative Sophia, but she also encourages Art to invite her sister, Iris, to come over as well. An unexpected get-together unfolds between the four of them, Sophia, Iris, Art and Lux – between people who would otherwise have been fixated on their separate ways. Smith impressively demonstrates her skills of sketching out quirky yet to some extent plausible characters, and it is only when a general impression has been evoked regarding these individuals' overall outlooks, their divergent mental worlds, how they became what they are, that the contrary positions of the Brexit divide, the Remain and Leave camps, come to be attributed to Iris and Sophia respectively.

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But the novel's meticulous allegorizing goes far beyond dramatizing the perceived and actual social divides, as it reaches out for a discussion about the deep, intricate and precarious relations between art and politics, or individualism and solidarity. Within the 'logic' of this set-up, Sophia, the 'fallen artist', would embody an understanding of art as a contemplative ideal that is removed from the everyday, amounting to a detached ideal of self-cultivation that is seemingly hinted at through Iris' long-standing habit of nicknaming her "Philo". However, Iris later undercuts this lofty association with philosophy, suggesting that seeing art as a separate sphere has led her sister not to higher levels of insight, but towards sophistry and the market-place. Epitomizing the opposite position, Iris emphasizes that

art and politics are in fact identical in that they both aspire to bring out "THE HUMAN" [sic!].[11] It seems that Iris' incessant engagement for a variety of political causes and movements have not helped much to form an idea of art that goes beyond such clichés.

It is for Art now to explore new ways of connecting art (which is, in a way, himself) and politics. Inspired and animated by the light-bringer Lux who acts as a fascinating-yet-evanescent embodiment of change, Art discovers that his interest in nature must be thoroughly transformed so as to quit regarding nature as a place beyond politics. He relaunches his "Art in Nature" blog, turning it into a collaborative project to which even his former girl-friend Charlotte contributes. The family reunion on Boxing Day, as made possible by Lux, also brings Sophia and Iris closer to each other, against all odds. The novel thus ends on a reconciliatory note, demonstrating that conflict between (seemingly) incompatible outlooks, unavoidable as it is, should neither be exaggerated nor repressed. Rather, the divergence between standpoints and worldviews should be accepted, frustrating as it might be, so as to condition higher levels of harmony in a culture that is enlightened enough to combine empathy with arguing. It is in this way that Smith responds to the present crisis by giving a new, political meaning to Christmas, a point that is underscored as it is set – in a surprising conclusive shot at Donald Trump – against the shallow praise of Christmas spirit in a recent public statement that once more reflects the wintry bleakness of the POTUS's mind/heart.

… and beyond

Ali Smith has been accused of not knowing where to end, meaning that *Winter* is more on the lengthy side compared with its predecessor.[12] However, to write a novel that could go on and on is very much in the 'nature' of Smith's writing, her playful and pleasurable endeavour of unpacking values, beliefs and standpoints to present the stories, the twists and turns as well as the still underexplored levels of social interconnectedness that constitute such positions. Recently, the novel has been shortlisted for the Orwell prize for books, which is awarded for outstanding political literature, following George Orwell's ambition to "make political writing into an art". *Winter* is just the sixth novel ever to be nominated for the prize which is usually given to non-fiction.[13] The judges are quite right to recognize that the scope and quality of Smith's recent writing makes it a remarkable and valuable antidote for anyone frustrated by present-day societies, disorientated and torn as they are between all kinds of actual and imagined crises and the respective

populist and right-wing responses. One can hardly wait to see how Smith's seasonal cycle will blossom in spring and summer.

Endnotes/References

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2 Danuta Kean. "Vanguard of Brexit fiction set to appear in 2017". The Guardian, 9 Jan. 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jan/09/vanguard-of-brexit-fiction-set-to-appear-in-2017-mark-billingham> [accessed 30 June 2018].

3 Day.

4 Day.

5 More than 40% voted for Leave in London. See "EU referendum: The results in maps and charts". BBC.com, 24 June 2016. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-36616028> [accessed 30 June 2018]. For an overview of the socio-demographic background of voters, according to which the lower middle-class was as likely to vote for Leave as the working or lower classes, see Harold D. Clarke, Matthew Goodwin and Paul Whiteley. Brexit. Why Britain voted to leave the European Union. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, 146-74: 155.

6 Ali Smith. *Autumn*. London: Penguin, 2017, 52

7 Helen Joanne Cox was a Labour MP who was murdered on 16 June 2016 by Thomas Alexander Mair, an adherent to far-right ideology. In Mair's eyes, Cox was a danger to Britain and a "traitor to white people" due to her support of the European Union and her liberal stance on immigration. The murder, which is widely acknowledged to have overshadowed the 2016 referendum, is mentioned in passing in Smith's novel, amidst several examples given for the dangerous presence of aggressive hostility from the right in today's Britain.

8 Smith, *Autumn* 83.

9 Smith, *Autumn* 238

10 Ali Smith, *Winter*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2017, 58

11 Smith, *Winter* 317

12 James Wood. "The Power of the Literary Pun". The New Yorker, 29 January 2018. < https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/29/the-power-of-the-literary-pun> [accessed 30 June 2018].

13 Alison Flood. "Ali Smith novel could be first to win Orwell prize in a decade after making shortlist". The Guardian, 18 May 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/may/18/ali-smith-novel-could-be-first-to-win-orwell-prize-in-a-decade-after-making-shortlist> [accessed 30 June 2018].