Review: *Brexlit: British Literature and the European Project* by Kristian Shaw, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 256 pp., ISBN 9781350090835, h/bk £100, p/bk £28.99, e-book £26.09.

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On 11 July 2016, Theresa May, the then-candidate for Conservative Party leader, declared: 'Brexit means Brexit'. Despite the assertive tone of this tautological statement, from the current perspective, May's catchphrase proved to be a rather problematic utterance. And not because Brexit does not mean Brexit—as it does for all on Brexit's islands—but because Brexit means much more than *just* Brexit. Brexit means the row over the Northern Ireland Protocol, the stock and supply chain issues, the new point-based immigration system, and the cost-of-living crisis. May's ostensibly straightforward statement thus stands in stark contrast with the intricate reality of Brexit—a complex event of profound social, political, economic, and emotional significance. In his latest monograph, *Brexlit: British Literature and the European Project* (2021), Kristian Shaw recognises this multidimensional and complicated nature of Brexit, investigating the impact that the 2016 vote had on contemporary literature, as well as the reasons behind the referendum results themselves. Shaw calls his method 'reading Brexit backwards' (2), as he traces the history of British Euroscepticism (and its literary incarnations) back to the 1940s, making *Brexlit* the first systematic study of 'the literary response towards European integration from the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community to Britain's eventual withdrawal from the EU' (2).

The term 'Brexlit', coined by Shaw and first used in his chapter "BrexLit" included in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (2018), a collection edited by Robert Eaglestone, describes 'fictions that either directly respond, or imaginatively allude, to Britain's exit from the EU, or engage with the subsequent sociocultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain's withdrawal' (4). Shaw's definition does not concentrate solely on post-referendum fiction but instead extends onto pre-referendum texts, recognising Brexit (as well as Brexit literature) as a part of a wider social, political, and aesthetic unfolding. This focus is reflected in *Brexlit*, which interrogates the wider tradition related to, as the monograph's subtitle suggests, the influence and representation of the European project in British literature. The ambition to trace such a large literary trend designates the scope of Shaw's book: while his first monograph, *Cosmopolitanism in Twenty-First Century Fiction* (2017), centred around works of five authors (David Mitchell, Zadie Smith, Teju Cole, Dave Eggers, and Hari Kunzru), *Brexlit* impresses with its vastness, as it surveys 'the work of over a hundred British writers' (4), including established literary figures, such as Ali Smith, Bernardine Evaristo, Ian McEwan, and Kazuo Ishiguro, as well as less-known authors, such as Chris McQueer, Glen James Brown, or Tracey Mathias. The wide-ranging scope also originates from Shaw's argument, as *Brexlit* analyses 'the historical background and future implications of Brexit' (2) in order to show that literature is capable not only of representing but also anticipating political debates and influencing them.

Shaw's critical intervention contextualises the history of British Euroscepticism and its direct impact on the Brexit referendum: the introduction of *Brexlit* discusses the changes in the attitudes towards Europe and European Project between 1945 and 2020, paying particular attention to the pivotal moments in the relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union, including the United Kingdom entering the Common Market in 1973, the 1975 United Kingdom European Communities membership referendum, the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the 2015 'refugee crisis', and the 2016 Brexit vote. Drawing on opinion polls, public surveys, governmental reports, and media accounts, in the introduction, Shaw maps out a nuanced web of motivations and rationale behind the referendum, trying to answer two questions: Who voted for Brexit? And why? The introduction delineates a network of underlying factors that contributed to the outcome of the 2016 votes, rightly attributing the result to 'the complex intersections of race, class, sovereignty and devolutionary developments (as well as several idiosyncratic casual factors)' (1). By building on various sociological, political, and cultural studies, Shaw elucidates how Brexit has its roots in anti-globalisation sentiments, growing resistance to migration, economic depravation, as well as British exceptionalism, English identity crisis, and the devolutionary processes, as his book argues against reductive interpretations attributing Brexit to single factors or simplistic oppositions (for instance, as a struggle between affluent cosmopolitan middle-class and 'left behind' Northern working class).

Each of the following five chapters provides a further analysis of the reasons behind the Brexit vote, showing how literature 'anticipated many of the debates that would erupt during the referendum campaign' (34). Chapter 1 delineates the tradition of British Eurosceptic fiction burgeoning since the post-war period. Thinking through novels such as Kingsley Amis' *I Like It Here* (1958), Angus Wilson's *The Old Men at the Zoo* (1961), and Robert Harris' *Fatherland* (1992), Shaw scrutinises Europhobic tendencies in the pre-referendum British fiction rooted in anxieties about the cost of the EEC membership, the loss of sovereignty, and German alleged domination in the European project. Chapter 1 then moves to the post-1990 novels, such as Elizabeth Wilson's *The Lost Time Café* (1993) and Tim Park's *Europa* (1997), which, even though, as Shaw argues, attempted to show 'a stronger inclination to engage with Project Europe' (58), proved unable to endorse the idea of closer European integration in the post-Maastricht era. Following Andrew Geddes' argument that the United Kingdom joined the EEC 'based on pragmatic calculations about costs and benefits, rather than any attachment to European ideals' (quoted in Shaw, 28), in Chapter 1, Shaw vividly illustrates that Britain has always been 'the awkward partner in the European community' (31): 'the belligerent neighbour, peering over the Channel with disdain at the Continent' (58), unwilling and unable to build a long-lasting relationship with the rest of Europe.

Chapter 2 moves its focus from Europe to the UK's internal politics, grappling with the issue of Englishness and Britishness. The chapter expounds how the referendum, framed as the 'English revolt', was the consequence of the split between British and English identity and the crisis of the latter. Chapter 2 also introduces the idea of the *English sublime*: 'a nationalist fable founded on a haunting and destructive jingoism which aggressively mourns the illustrious past, offers redemptive traces of former imperial glories and laments the cultural heterogeneities of the inferior present' (72). Using James Hawes' *Speak for England* (2005) as a case study, Shaw effectively demonstrates the political significance of English sublime as well as of postcolonial and hauntological melancholia—two feelings, which contributed to the support for the 'Leave' campaign in 2016, as England tried to retrieve its lost identity and imperial status by championing the idea of Anglosphere. The second part of the chapter turns to the intersection of nostalgia for Englishness, deindustrialisation, and sport. Surveying texts such as J. G. Ballard's *Kingdom Come* (2006), Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (2009), as well as Anthony Cartwright's novels about the Black Country, *Heartland* (2009) and *Iron Towns* (2016), Shaw explicates how the economic decline among working class contributed to nostalgic nationalism, which fuelled English Euroscepticism alongside football hooliganism. His reading of Cartwright's *Heartland* focuses on an 'almost diaristic' (85) character of the novel, which documents the impact of Thatcherite policies on the post-industrial town of Dudley. Shaw examines how socio-economic circumstances, such as the decline of the Black Country, 'bleed into the fabric of the novel' (85-6), demonstrating that contemporary literature not only has the ability to narrativize political debates but also anticipates certain political issues, including English nationalistic resistance, which 'erupted during the EU referendum campaign' (86). Shaw's literary analyses in this chapter ultimately make it clear that 'English nationalism is decidedly at odds with the project of European integration' (60), for it draws on the tradition of English exceptionalism as well as the longing for the Empire: ideas incompatible with the values of the European project.

Building on the discussion of national identity, Chapter 3 examines the political importance of the devolutionary processes in the UK. The chapter includes separate sections on Welsh, Scottish, and Northern Irish literary responses to devolution and Brexit as well as a short section on the idea of English devolution. The limited size of each subchapter, especially in comparison to Chapter 2 which focuses entirely on the intersection of Englishness and Britishness, somehow mirrors Fintan O'Toole's claim that Brexit was 'essentially an English phenomenon' (2018, XVI). In the subchapters dedicated to Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, Shaw productively pays attention to the differences in the political landscapes of each devolved nation, as he investigates

the writing of Niall Griffiths, John Osmond, Ali Smith, Irvine Welsh, Abbie Spallen, and Jez Butterworth (to name just a few). Nonetheless, due to the volume of material, in Chapter 3, Shaw faces a necessary trade-off: breadth or depth. The analyses of certain texts, for instance, Fiona Shaw's *Outwalkers* (2018) or Michael Hughes' *Country* (2018), are thus apt but inevitably short, as the chapter surveys multiple genres and literary traditions. This limitation does not signify the loss of quality, however, but rather comes across as a natural consequence of the project's ambition set to trace ebbs and flows in the literary responses to the UK's relationship with Europe in the last seventy years.

In *Brexlit*, Shaw focuses predominantly on the novel form, recognising it as 'a significant, socially constitutive form for challenging monolithic constructions of national identity, heightening public consciousness of political events and advancing an outward-facing global outlook in defiance of prevailing political discourses' (3). Literature for Shaw allows for an 'empathetic identification, enabling readers to cross established lines of nationality, ethnicity, class and gender to identify and understand the views of others' (3). The other's perspective is at the centre of Chapter 4, 'Fortress Britain', which interrogates the pre- and post-Brexit attitudes towards migration: 'the defining emotive electoral issue in the years leading to the referendum' (143). Shaw drafts the history of the British anti-migration stance, examining the post-2004 escalation of xenophobic sentiments as well as the UKIP's contribution to the creation of the country's hostile environment. The chapter focuses on the economic anxieties related to Eastern European migrants alongside border anxiety related to refugees' presence in the UK. Reading texts such as Marina Lewycka's *Two Caravans* (2007), John Lanchester's *Capital* (2013), Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West* (2017) and *Refugee Tales I–III* (2016, 2017, 2019), Shaw argues that contemporary British novels reject a sense of exclusionary solidarity based on national belonging and instead critique violent immigration policies. Ending on a rather hopeful note, Chapter 4 reiterates Shaw's argument, demonstrating that literature does not merely represent the perspective of global others but acts 'as an emancipatory vehicle to counteract myths surrounding the act of migration' (166) and, in doing so, becomes a means to bring political change.

In the final chapter, Shaw tends to post-referendum fictions, expounding their social, political, and ethical significance. The chapter surveys a wide range of post-Brexit texts, including Ian McEwan's *Cockroach* (2019), Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2017), Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018), Adam Thorpe's *Missing Fay* (2017), and Sarah Moss's, *Summerwater* (2020), elucidating how the recent British novels responded to the results of the referendum as well as the resurgence of populism, post-truth politics, and the culture wars. The section finishes with an insightful reading of Ali Smith's seasonal quartet: 'timely and timeless' (208) series that 'forges bonds of connectivity and establishes forms

of dialogue between characters on both sides of our divided Brexit Britain' (213). Not only does Shaw map out the profound importance of Smith's series in the context of Brexit literature, he also reads the quartet as an exemplar of, what he and Sara Upstone (2021) deem as *transglossic literature*, which involves 'the alignment of aesthetics and ethico-political imperatives, a productive optimism of renewal and a deep *simultaneity* committed to the contemporaneous occupation of multiple positions' (213). Shaw concludes Chapter 5 by highlighting how post-Brexit fiction, in opposition to Eurosceptic novels discussed in the previous chapters, promotes an open and hospitable outlook, offering 'an outward-looking cosmopolitan engagement' (214). In doing so, argues Shaw, contemporary fiction resists the nationalistic, xenophobic, and racist discourses prevalent around the time of the referendum, revealing its ethical and political value.

In the conclusion, Shaw compares Brexit to waiting for Godot: 'Brexit has been a Beckettian experience – a constitutional drama with no evident final act' (215). Arguably, Brexit did finally come, however. After all, Brexit does mean Brexit. And yet, Shaw is right. We live in the era of *Brexeternity*, where Brexit is done and yet will never be done. Its spectre haunts political and media consciousness to this day, and there is currently no sign that the Brexit era is coming to an end. We can expect more stories exploring the aftermaths of Britain's decision to withdraw from the EU, as post-referendum literature enters its next, post-Covid phase. And while *Brexlit* lays the ground for reflections on the future trajectory of British literature, it also makes a powerful case for the social and political importance of contemporary fiction and raises vital questions about academia's role in shaping post-referendum narratives, underscoring the value of Arts and Humanities degrees and their capacity to explain Brexit.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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