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Unfolding Ruptures: Brexlit and the Contemporary

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In the frame of contemporary literature, one cannot but consider Brexit as a significant turning point in the development of literary responses to the present. Yet, far from being a single or isolated political event, Brexit quickly became a site where longstanding socio-cultural, economic, geopolitical or even personal issues intersected, thus provoking an array of well-known writers to add their (fictional) perspectives to the debate. For this reason, the present article attempts to illuminate the characteristics of Brexit literature, or 'Brexlit' (Shaw 2018; 2021), by contextualising it within the contested period of the early twenty-first century, which is often referred to as 'the contemporary'. This includes a survey of key terms and definitions of the period, such as 'metamodernism' (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010) or the 'transglossic' (Shaw & Upstone 2021), as well as an analysis of two important British examples of 'Brexlit': Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018) and Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion* (2018). These novels are both representative of predominant generic modes and themes that exist within Brexit literature, but also reflect international trends of twenty-first-century literature. Central to the stories is an atmosphere of Brexit-induced rupture which, I argue, aligns evocatively with the concept of 'schismogenesis' as theorised by Gregory Bateson (Szakolczai & Thomassen 2019), a phenomenon that reveals the irreconcilability within society after such a seismic event.

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Introduction

The first quarter of the twenty-first century has seen several crises, some of which seem to be historically unprecedented due to their lasting impact on the world. On a global scale, one can think here of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks and the subsequent 'war on terror' in the early 2000s, the 2008-2011 global financial crisis, the European refugee crisis in 2015, the COVID-19 pandemic, and more recently, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the current 'war in Gaza' that has followed the October 7 attack on Tel Aviv of 2023 or the U.S.-Iran military confrontation in early March 2026. Europe has often been at the centre of attention during these events – apart from its geographical centrality, it has variously exerted its influence as an economic and political power in ongoing turbulent times. However, Europe and, to be more precise, the European project has likewise suffered major setbacks during this period. The solidarity within the union continues to be threatened, for example, by the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis that necessitated firm austerity measures for individual nation states, by the rise of right-wing populism and nationalist tendencies (especially in France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands or the UK) or by the dysfunctional EU migration and asylum policy. Above all, the Brexit referendum in 2016 and the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU in 2020 exposed an estrangement from the continent that was predicated on Britain's lasting Euroscepticism, which solidified towards the end of the twentieth century.

This list of events and developments glossed above is not exhaustive, yet it illustrates the perpetual crisis-ridden atmosphere of the new century as symptomatic of the period, where contemporary literature arises and thus responds to it in identifiable forms. This article elucidates this further and contributes to the project of periodising and historicising the literary present, by specifically focusing on British literature and Brexit as a turning point in the development of literary responses to the current age. Brexit is significant in this regard because of its political, economic, social and cultural implications beyond national borders: it shifted power inside the EU and weakened Western political unity, it also disrupted global trade networks by necessitating new regulatory barriers and customs checks, it halted the free movement of millions of EU citizens in the UK and Britons living in Europe, and ultimately questioned the idea of a European identity as connected to a shared political and cultural project. At the same time, Brexit is historically less of an event and more of a process, whose causes are deeply-rooted in British-European history, such as Britain's predominant 'island mentality' (Wilson 2014) as opposed to continental Europe (Spiering 2015), Britain's late membership and uneasy standing within the former EEC, later EU, or the UK being 'amongst the most Eurosceptic countries in the EU' (Halikiopoulou & Vlandas 2018:

444). Additionally, Brexit literature particularly reflects the prevailing climate of social differentiations after the millennium that can also be found in other societies around the world, where minor differences are made bigger due to certain socio-political or ethno-national conditions (Thomassen 2010). Generally, Brexit literature, or 'Brexlit' (Shaw 2018; 2021), characteristically incorporates issues of national identity, class division, social inequality, and also frequently addresses phenomena like post-truth, populism, xenophobia, neoliberalism, neopatriarchy and/or precarity. It is therefore useful to understand regional and global literary trends of the decades after the millennium, which, as a new time frame, has been defined as 'metamodernism' (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010) or variously as the 'transglossic' (Shaw & Upstone 2021) within cultural and literary studies.

Accordingly, the article aims to contextualise 'Brexlit' within the contested period of the early twenty-first century, often referred to as 'the contemporary', in two steps: First, there will be a theoretical discussion about how to understand and conceptualise it as a potential new period, which includes a survey of the existing terms and definitions of the period. In order to situate 'Brexlit' within contemporary literature and contemporary literary studies, and elucidate its importance, it will be necessary to look at those concepts, which meaningfully elaborate on the characteristics of early twenty-first-century literature, and select useful analytic categories that can be identified in 'Brexlit' as well.

Secondly, there will be an analysis of these contemporary features in Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018) and Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion* (2018), both of which are, in particular ways, paradigmatic examples of 'Brexlit'. As a state-of-the-nation novel, *Middle England* depicts a group of interconnected characters over the span of almost a decade, and explores how political and cultural tensions change their lives. The realist mode employed by Coe represents a major strand within Brexit literature (Zwierlein & Rostek 2019), and reinforces the novel's incisive look at a country struggling with division and self-definition via the individual characters' differing attitudes and social affiliations. Another important element in the novel is nostalgia, which becomes a form of mourning on a personal as well as on a societal level, and which is paired with a sceptical outlook on globalisation and multiculturalism. *Perfidious Albion*, on the other hand, is a dystopian satire set in a fictional near-future English town, where political extremism, online propaganda and tech companies dramatically encroach on the characters' daily lives and relationships. In this scenario, the effects of populism and 'affective polarisation' (Gohrisch & Stedman 2023) on democratic norms are central to the plot and express a wider form of social rupture. Despite their generic and structural differences, the novels both exemplify 'schismogenetic processes' (Thomassen 2020)

and the irreconcilability of opposing sides, such as Leave and Remain within the Brexit debate, as well as how this changes society on a permanent level. While the plot of *Middle England* follows a pre-Brexit to post-referendum chronology, thereby recording how these processes unfold over time, *Perfidious Albion* begins with the already existing Brexit division, or 'schism', among the population and concentrates on the severe outcomes. The concept of 'schismogenesis', originally introduced by Gregory Bateson (Szakolczai & Thomassen 2019), will be used to trace contemporary 'schismogenetic' manifestations within both instances of 'Brexlit'.

Framing the Contemporary

The question of how to define contemporary literature starts with a delineation of its time frame, since 'contemporary' is a relative term that has been used to denote a 'new' kind of literature at least since the 1970s. In their introduction to *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*, Bentley, Hubble and Wilson propose that, when compared to earlier fiction, 'the "contemporary" denotes not just every present but the particular present of the early twenty-first century', which also involves the term's shifted use from an adjective to a noun (2015: 9). As a result, 'the contemporary' has become a term which implies a specific focus on temporality and the notion of time itself that challenges the modalities of periodisation, because there is no retrospective distance from which to 'see' it (Bentley, Hubble & Wilson 2015: 10). Peter Boxall calls this the 'illegibility of the present' (2013: 1-2) and refers to Giorgio Agamben's description of how one must be disconnected from one's own time to a certain extent: 'Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it' (Agamben 2009: 41). While this 'sense of untimeliness, of time being out of joint' (Bentley, Hubble & Wilson 2015: 10) aptly characterises the overall experience of living in the present, there are also many rejoinders to this. For example, in *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present*, Theodore Martin scrutinises assumptions about 'the contemporary' and argues that it is '*not a period*, [...] *not contemporary*, [...] *not historical* [...and] *not mere presentness*' (2019: 2-5; italics in original). Instead, for Martin, one can observe a 'transformed relationship to [and use of] genre' (Martin 2019: 7), which distinguishes twenty-first-century literature from modern or postmodern literature. Throughout his study, he examines how genres like the detective novel, and related generic conventions are adapted by writers 'in response to changing historical conditions' (Martin 2019: 13). This traceable generic change, or 'drift' as he calls it, is seen as an expression of the contemporary and vantage point from which we can consider change. In other words, Martin offers a perspective that rejects the idea of the twenty-first century being

synonymous with 'the contemporary' as a period, while reinforcing Boxall's sense that the present is illegible: 'to be contemporary [...] is to confront one's basic inability to define the contemporary' (2019: 18). Furthermore, he contends that 'the development of a globalized, financialized, and flexible mode of capitalism can be seen to modify our basic sense of the present, turning it into something precarious yet perpetual, uncertain yet inescapable, at once crushingly constant and constantly disappearing' (Martin 2019: 19).

Similarly, Boxall cites Jean-Paul Sartre's notion of how certain conditions, such as technology or means of transport, shape one's experience of the present by blurring one's perceptions or bringing them into focus. In Sartre's understanding, this is comparable to looking out of a driving train or car and trying to see clearly the landscape or objects that rush by, which is difficult if not impossible in some cases (1960: 228). In other words, there is a direct connection between the perception of time and the existing (and changing) technology, which has a temporal, spatial or kinetic effect on it. Accordingly, Boxall concludes: 'Sartre's sense that the contemporary is always unavailable to us [...] is not itself a timeless one – a constant, ahistorical condition of contemporaneity per se – but is instead an experience *of* the present that is itself shaped to a degree *by* the present' (2013: 3; italics in original). Sartre's view thus provides a more lucid insight into the period's peculiarities and consequently into the ways that writers respond to it, because other than suggesting that the present moment is always 'elusive' (1960: 227), he indicates how this specific 'illegibility' can be used to distinguish it from other periods. In a way, this echoes Daniel O'Gorman's and Robert Eaglestone's statement that 'While all contemporary fiction is – at least for the moment – also twenty-first century fiction, twenty-first century fiction is not all, necessarily, contemporary' (2019: 4).

Yet, the questions of how contemporary literature can be characterised, what its relation to previous decades that were mainly defined by postmodernism is, and crucially here, where to situate 'Brexlit' within this landscape, remain. Bentley, Hubble and Wilson attempt to address the former points by arguing that fiction of the 2000s deals with postmodernism in terms of its finality. They maintain that the end(s) of postmodernism can be understood: in 'a chronologizing sense' with 9/11 as a breaking point and 'historical marker', although specific and singular events might not directly impact literary aesthetics[1]; in a 'philosophical sense' because postmodernism 'became embedded in mainstream culture in a way that undercut any sense of radical alterity', and in 'the sense of its ends and means as a set of cultural practices' (Bentley, Hubble & Wilson 2015: 14-15). Furthermore, they point out three ways in which writers deal with the 'legacies of postmodernism':

> [There are] those novelists who continue to use narrative techniques associated with postmodernism but who have reintroduced a set of grounded ethical positions [e.g. David Mitchell, Ali Smith, Will Self]; those who have attempted to return (or continue) to work in a broadly realist mode as an implicit rejection of postmodernism [e.g. Monica Ali, Andrea Levy, Caryl Phillips]; and those who have self-consciously returned to modernist techniques as a way of return to a pre-postmodernist aesthetics [e.g. Zadie Smith, Ian McEwan]. (Bentley, Hubble & Wilson 2015: 17)

Although this categorisation does not offer a conceptualisation of the contemporary novel as such, it helps to identify overall tendencies in the writers' various works of the early twenty-first century.

There is a further point in Boxall's discussion to consider here. He highlights the general 'international nature of the contemporary novel itself [that emerges] from a global cultural matrix', because writers depict the global cultural shifts that are typical for the twenty-first century (Boxall 2013: 7), even though their texts are anchored in a specific national context. So, when talking about the contemporary British novel, for example, one must acknowledge both its existence in 'an international, cosmopolitan space' (Boxall 2013: 7) as well as its 'increasingly divergent national traditions' (Horton et al. 2024: 7).

While it seems obvious that the years since the millennium constitute a new literary period, where postmodernism has become an inadequate theoretical frame and new paradigm shifts have occurred, such as the 'affective turn' (Clough & Halley 2007) or the 'genre turn' (Crosthwaite 2019), scholars have yet to agree on a fitting alternative, introducing numerous terms that point in diverse critical directions. These are, for example, 'post-postmodernism' (McLaughlin 2004; Nealon 2012), 'digimodernism' (Kirby 2009), 'metamodernism' (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010) or the 'transglossic' (Shaw & Upstone 2021) [2], although not all of them identify the specific elements of twenty-first-century literature which make it contemporary. To locate 'Brexlit' within the literary present and explain its contemporariness, it is useful to concentrate on 'metamodernism' and the 'transglossic', because in combination these concepts help to understand, for example, the active engagement of 'Brexlit' with socio-political developments as well as the depiction of divisive and simultaneously existing affective states like anger and fear. Alongside Bateson's theory of 'schismogenesis', the concepts of the 'metamodern' and 'transglossic' offer a way to trace processes of division, affective intensification and formal experimentation in the two novels under discussion here, which are representative of broader tendencies in contemporary (global) fiction.

The origin for Vermeulen's and van den Akker's conceptualisation of 'metamodernism' lies in the observation that there is a new 'emerging structure of feeling' (2010: 2) in the first decade of the 2000s, which supersedes the elements of postmodernism. They characterise this as an oscillation 'between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, between hope and melancholy, between naïveté and knowingness, empathy and apathy, unity and plurality, totality and fragmentation, purity and ambiguity' (Vermeulen & van den Akker 2010: 5-6). Thus, 'metamodernism' comprises an experience of the present which is primarily a dialectic between incompatible things (somehow opposites), but also a seemingly perpetual phase of transition between modernism and postmodernism. This is an intriguing assertion, though Vermeulen and van den Akker are very much dependent on previous periods, as indicated by the term itself, when characterising a new one. Additionally, they describe the metamodern 'in-betweenness' as a '"both-neither" dynamic' (2010: 6), which is difficult to verify in literary texts. Nevertheless, the aspect of how literary practices negotiate between two poles and 'overcom[e] and undermin[e] [...] conflicting positions, while being never congruent with these positions' (van den Akker, Gibbons & Vermeulen 2017: 10), will be considered for the textual analysis below.

In comparison to Vermeulen's and van den Akker's transitional understanding of 'metamodernism', James and Sheshagiri offer a slightly different perspective, which is more unidirectional. They argue that '[m]etamodernism regards modernism as an era, an aesthetic, and an archive' and 'find that a more ambitious aesthetic-historical pursuit characterizes an otherwise disjunctive collection of writers and novels: to move the novel forward by looking back to the aspirational energies of modernism' (2014: 88, 93). This kind of retrospective view is increasingly used by literary critics to trace modernist features in contemporary literature.

In contrast to these notions, Shaw and Upstone suggest thinking about 'contemporary literature outside the modernist suffix' (2021: 579) to avoid reductive implications. With the 'transglossic' they propose a concept that is unlike Vermeulen's and van den Akker's, because '*trans*, meaning to move across, [has ...] a particular contemporary relevance' and '*glossic* [...] refers to an active and performative articulation across positions, both formally and thematically, which defines the particularities of contemporary literary expression' (Shaw & Upstone 2021: 580; italics in original). They detail six related characteristics by which the 'transglossic' can be determined, four of which are especially useful in understanding and situating 'Brexlit'.

One of these characteristics is 'deep simultaneity', described as 'a commitment to the simultaneous occupation of multiple positions which is fundamental in its sustained expression at both formal and thematic levels within the text', and 'the notion of

movement across different identities, perspectives, and subjectivities' (Shaw & Upstone 2021: 581). This kind of simultaneity suggests itself especially within the context of Brexit, for example, where the two main perspectives of 'Leavers' and 'Remainers' coexist and divide the British population, although the population itself is much more diverse. Shaw and Upstone also note that such narratives of deep simultaneity refer to extratextual social and political realities (2021: 583). The characteristic of 'artistic responsibility' ascribes an essential political element to contemporary fiction. Shaw and Upstone imply here that writers position themselves 'as public intellectual[s] with social responsibility' (2021: 589) by responding to certain developments and events. While such creative intervention might not be true for all 'Brexlit' writers, the preoccupation with controversial topics like Brexit does not indicate neutrality or arbitrariness either. Aligned with the previous one, the category of 'productive authenticity' is seen as 'an authentic dialogue and communicative strategy that activates not only a more empathetic reader response but also a deeper literary encounter between reader and author' (Shaw & Upstone 2021: 591). Potentially, this leads to actual change outside of the text, though this would be hard to prove. However, it can also be understood as a form of resistance and initiation of 'social transformation' (Shaw & Upstone 2021: 593). Finally, 'trans-formalism' is the characteristic of the 'transglossic' which most directly engages with the question of literary form and its contemporary realisation. It is defined as 'a speaking across forms and literary paradigms' (Shaw & Upstone 2021: 594) of the previous century by entangling them, without necessarily resolving one or the other.

Overall, an analytic combination of elements from 'metamodernism' and the 'transglossic' makes it possible to fully grasp the tendency of contemporary fiction to negotiate opposites, rely on the simultaneity of perspectives or identities, and employ different narrative forms, among other things. At the same time, these two concepts are useful to explore how and why 'Brexlit' is broadly representative of contemporary literary trends despite its apparent singularity in responding to Brexit. The following analysis of Coe's *Middle England* and Byers' *Perfidious Albion* therefore intends to reveal both 'metamodern'/'transglossic' elements that signify contemporariness as well as the specific importance of 'Brexlit' within early twenty-first-century literature.

Transglossic Brexlit Writings

The momentousness of Brexit in the recent history of the United Kingdom, Europe and to some extent beyond relates to it being a process more than a singular event. As such, it is a contemporary symptom of national and international developments: Internationally, these are, for example, the general weakening of Western liberal

democracies and the simultaneous rise of right-wing populism, a growing distrust in the political elite to face the challenges and multiple crises of the new millennium, an altered media landscape with social networks and the influence of fake news. Nationally, there is the overall economic decline followed by austerity measures in the post-Thatcher era, increasing social inequality, the climate of frustration and anxiety about the future among the population, a leaning towards xenophobia and anti-immigration attitudes. Nevertheless, one might ask why Brexit eventually revealed the full extent of the country's already existing division.

In this context, the concept of 'schismogenesis' as theorised by Gregory Bateson offers a useful perspective. 'Schismogenesis' as '*a process of differentiation in the norms of individual behaviour resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals'* (Bateson as quoted by Szakolczai & Thomassen 2019: 158; italics in original) occurs in many social or political areas, but particularly unfolds in moments of crisis. In the case of Brexit, differences grew so intensely that a binary logic (of Leave and Remain) was 'stamped unto' society and its values (Thomassen 2010: 8). This resulted in the creation of two camps and made the middle ground disappear (Thomassen 2023: n.p.). Yet, 'schismogenesis' does not only refer to the beginning of schisms but also their reproduction (Szakolczai & Thomassen 2019: 158), which makes them more persistent and harder to overcome. In contrast to other vocabulary used in relation to Brexit, such as 'division', 'fracture' or 'fissure', 'schismogenesis' explains the Brexit effect more accurately. Brexit literature, as will be argued below, equally reflects these 'schismogenetic features' (Thomassen 2010: 9) on different levels.

As one of the first literary critics of Brexit fiction, Shaw emphasised the relevance of 'Brexlit' as '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' (2018: 18) shortly after the referendum. He generally distinguishes between 'pre-Brexit Europhobic fictions' and 'post-Brexit fictions' (2018: 16, 18) and elaborates on the latter in a monograph (Shaw 2021). Additional studies from recent years explore the range of 'Brexlit' (e.g. Eaglestone 2018; Habermann 2020; Keller & Haberman 2021; Korte & Mª Lojo-Rodríguez 2020), but do not discuss its general place within twenty-first-century literary cultures and scholarship at length; an omission the following analysis aims to address.

A key instance of 'Brexlit', alongside Ali Smith's 'seasonal quartet' (2016-2020), is Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018), which is often cited as exemplifying its notions of nostalgia and Englishness (e.g. Everitt 2021; Henneböhl 2023; Shaw 2021). The novel's plot includes central political events and events in the characters' lives that span from 2010 to 2018. The story is presented by a heterodiegetic narrator with

several focal characters and starts years before the Brexit referendum, when the Conservative Party won the General Election and David Cameron first became Prime Minister, which indicates the beginning of a changing political landscape. It recounts the 2011 London riots and increasing debates about immigration, nationalism and 'Britishness' during the pre-Referendum years. Then, there is the depiction of the Brexit vote itself, followed by the political fallout, deepening social divisions and shifts in British party politics. These different stages of pre-, mid-, post-referendum are structurally reflected by the novel's three main parts, entitled 'Merrie England' (April 2010-July 2012), 'Deep England' (August 2014-June 2016) and 'Old England' (September 2017-September 2018). The titles and additional quotes also embed how Britain's (self-)image dramatically alters over the course of the story – from an idealised vision of a traditional England that, however, also 'had room for newcomers from abroad' (Coe 2018: 1), to a place where 'equality feels like a step down' (Coe 2018: 141) and tensions eventually erupt into open social and political conflict. The novel thus closely interlinks form and content in a 'transglossic' manner, because Brexit as a process functions as the guiding frame for both, which is indicated by the retelling of the political and social backstory as well as the gradual revelation of the referendum's aftermath. Considering the characters and related themes, such as the influence of the past in form of memories and nostalgia or the effect of divisive emotions like anger, there are further 'transglossic' tendencies in *Middle England*, which will be analysed in more detail.

Above all, the novel illustrates the general idea of an across-movement via the theme of nostalgia, which always moves along the present of the characters and anticipates their (limited) possibilities of the future. In this regard, nostalgia comprises several levels of temporality and determines how the characters experience the current time. Benjamin Trotter, one of the protagonists, is in his fifties when he decides to move from London to the countryside in the West Midlands without his wife. Significantly, he thinks about how:

> he had bought this house in order to fulfil a fantasy. Many years earlier, in the month of May, 1979 – when Britain was on the brink, as it was now [in 2010], of a momentous general election – [...] he had fantasized about the future. [...And] then, in a last-ditch attempt to live out that fantasy, a perverse effort to recapture the past by realizing his past's vision of the future, Benjamin had suggested selling their flat, and using some money to buy this house [...]. (Coe 2018: 10)

This passage exemplifies how the novel entangles the characters' stories with Britain's history by referring to political turning points as well as how nostalgic fantasy

juxtaposes several periods of time, because it relies on 'subjective state[s]' of feeling (Davis 1979: 13) about the past. These retrospective feelings are primarily depicted as negative. Benjamin eventually gives up his vision of the house after spending some years there. Moreover, he only becomes a successful writer by turning the most idealised and painful part of his past (the relationship with his ex-wife) into a novella, while leaving out the rest of his life (Coe 2018: 217).

Similarly, Benjamin's niece Sophie clings to an emotionally charged moment in the past when, shortly after being married, she shared a kiss with an American scholar during a conference in France: 'It was almost six years since she had met Adam in Marseille but ever since then a fantasy, a foolish, unworkable fantasy, had lodged in her mind [...]' (Coe 2018: 375). Again, Coe implies that a 'fantasy' connected to a memory can only be misleading and despite knowing how 'perverse', 'foolish' or 'unworkable' it is, the characters hold on to it. In Sophie's case, being stuck with an irretrievable past almost ruins the future with her husband, Ian. Her life comes to a standstill, when they temporarily break up because of their differing political views (Coe 2018: 368-369). Benjamin's father Colin, on the other hand, recalls Britain's 'great' industrial past, while being confronted with 'a vast expanse of wasteland' and '[h]undreds of acres of mud, deserted and featureless in the failing light' that are left of it (Coe 2018: 16, 260). In sum, nostalgia creates a temporal multiplicity in the novel by 'enact[ing] the spatio-temporal confluences of Homi K. Bhabha's time lag in which we [as readers] find ourselves simultaneously in both past and present, the here and the elsewhere' (Shaw & Upstone 2021: 582), which itself is an instance of 'deep simultaneity'.[3] This is because past and present (and the memory of the past) seem to be incompatible for the characters and therefore exist concurrently in specific passages of the text.

Other examples highlight this even more. Towards the end of the novel, Benjamin and his sister Lois find themselves 'on a hillside filled with memories', scattering the ashes of their parents and realising 'the view was the same [...]. Its permanence was comforting: a reminder of stillness and continuity in a world which seemed to be changing faster than either of them could understand' (Coe 2018: 316). Yet, they both clearly downplay how the present view differs from their memory. Benjamin also often reminisces about his childhood in the 1970s, when 'Britain had been a more cohesive, united, consensual place' (Coe 2018: 49), even though the opposite is true – considering, for example, high inflation and unemployment, severe strikes, an unstable government, deep social tensions, the violence of the Troubles or the decline of Britain's international status during that decade. For this reason, both passages are ironic and point to a kind of false nostalgia, where personal memories transform facts and reality is ignored. At the same time, these passages reveal Coe's general blending of realism, satire and social critique in the novel, which is an example of

'trans-formalism'. Although Shaw's and Upstone's definition of 'trans-formalism' is, admittedly, a matter of interpretation in this regard, they argue that it is the equivalent to 'deep simultaneity' on a formal level because of how it combines various realist, modernist and postmodernist forms of writing (2021: 594). In *Middle England*, Coe broadly employs the realist mode – but primarily for political storytelling. He mixes humour with social analysis to address complex political realities, such as increasing polarisation, nationalism or populism, and thereby follows international trends of the contemporary towards using a hybrid form (Shaw & Upstone 2021: 583).

Nostalgia then does not only function as a leitmotif connected to the characters in the novel but also illustrates how Britons were influenced by the past in the context of Brexit. Robert Eaglestone calls this 'cruel nostalgia [which] is a form of affect memory' (2018: 96) where collective memory of the British Empire or World War II is evoked with certain affects to appeal to the Leave or Remain side.[4] Benjamin's father, for example, interprets the 'desolate reminder of the decline in British industry' (Coe 2018: 257) as a reason why the world looks down on them. He believes Boris Johnson's claim about the EU becoming a 'German-dominated European superstate' (Coe 2018: 292), which must be defeated like Nazi Germany by voting Leave. As a last thing before his death, Colin casts his vote, which underscores Coe's sense of irony. Essentially, as Benjamin's friend Doug declares, 'Nostalgia is the English disease, […] Obsessed with their bloody past, the English are – and look where that's got us recently. Times change. Deal with it' (Coe 2018: 391). This statement can be read as a satirical generalisation, but it also alludes to the 'schismogenetic features' that are omnipresent in the novel.

In the novel's first part leading up to Brexit ('Merrie England'), there already exists an atmosphere of anger among the population (Coe 2018: 19, 21, 43), which is easily manipulated by politics and therefore acts as a catalyst for the creation of schisms (Thomassen 2010: 7). The impending division is exemplified by the relationship between Sophie and her mother-in-law Helena, whose xenophobic sentiments tear them apart: They 'might be living cheek-by-jowl in the same country, but they also lived in different universes, and these universes were separated by a wall, infinitely high, impermeable, a wall built out of fear and suspicion […]' (Coe 2018: 90). Further developments show 'an incredible fault line running right through British society' and how 'Politics can tear people apart' (Coe 2018: 95, 300). In the second part of the novel ('Deep England'), which recounts the Brexit referendum, the schism between Leave and Remain is 'stamped unto the wider population – also due to the role played by political/religious leaders who thrive on the schism itself' (Thomassen 2010: 8). Benjamin, for example, observes how the issue of immigration 'had a galvanizing effect on the referendum campaign […]. The tone changed too. It became more

bitter, more personal, more rancorous. One half of the country seemed to have become fiercely hostile towards the other' (Coe 2018: 299). The third part ('Old England') reveals how the schism between the two camps persists in the aftermath of Brexit, also because especially right-wing politicians and certain media try to sustain '*the Energies behind the Referendum Result*' (Coe 2018: 357; italics in original). *Middle England* thus records how Brexit changed the country and epitomises how 'schismogenetic processes' unravel in modern societies. Despite this bleak outlook, Coe ends the novel on a positive note – with an international gathering of friends in France and a 'beautiful Brexit baby' (Coe 2018: 421). But there are also other moments of hopefulness and unity in *Middle England*, such as the Olympic ceremony in 2012 (Coe 2018: 139). In a way, this speaks of a metamodern oscillation between 'between hope and melancholy' or 'totality and fragmentation' that Vermeulen and van den Akker describe (2010: 5-6).

The second example of 'Brexlit' to discuss here, which also includes typical features of early twenty-first-century fiction, as will be shown, is Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion* (2018). In recent scholarship, the novel is mainly analysed in connection to its satirical mode and the depiction of Englishness (e.g. Elices 2023; Shaw 2021; 2024; Zwierlein & Rostek 2019). Perhaps more significant, however, is its depiction of an entanglement of right-wing populism, post-truth rhetoric, racist fantasies, manipulative social media and gentrifying aspirations of ruthless tech companies in a heated post-Brexit atmosphere. The novel is set in a fictional small town in rural England called Edmundsbury, whose idyll is disturbed by two international companies – one intends to redevelop a housing estate (Downtown) and the other secretly collects personal data of the inhabitants on a large scale (Green). Additionally, there is a group of strangers in disguise who call themselves 'The Griefers' and threaten to expose individuals with their entire internet history. In this dystopian set-up, the characters struggle with the challenges of the political landscape, their relationships and their own principles.

Much more explicitly than Coe's novel, *Perfidious Albion* reflects the 'illegibility of the present' (Boxall 2013: 1-2) and altered experience of living in it due to the effects of 'Web 2.0' and digitalisation. Jess, one of the protagonists, has a specific awareness of this:

> [...] Jess considered the way in which all of these individually small and almost unnoticeable changes in experience added up to a seismic shift in consciousness. Around her, perfectly unaware people traversed pools of altered light, their senses tuned to new pitches of speed and immediacy. [...] Progress was always present; it

> was only its speed that changed: from faster than light down to glacial, imperceptible to vertigo-inducing. Nothing was ever stable; nothing was ever at rest.
> And this was just the physical, the tangible. In the world of feelings and perceptions, drift was endemic. (Byers 2018: 66)

Throughout the novel Jess' character becomes a kind of reference point for an intensification of these shifts, which is presented in focalised passages such as this one. Her thoughts provide an insight into Edmundsbury's transformation from a personal level, while also speaking for other people. At the same time, she embodies the present-day tendency to use multiple personalities in different social and online contexts: 'Everyone, she now saw, was doing exactly what she spent her time doing: donning a series of masks, creating convenient personalities they could inhabit. You were this person at work, this person at home, this person in print, this person digesting the ideas of another' (Byers 2018: 171). But beyond the usual face-work in social interactions, Jess creates several alternative online identities – to take revenge for the online violence she experienced, to intellectually attack misogynists or manipulate her own boyfriend, Robert – over which she increasingly loses control (Byers 2018: 55-64). Her 'gathered selves' (Byers 2018: 64) imply an aspect of 'deep simultaneity' that Shaw and Upstone refer to as a '[fluidity …] transcribed in the notion of movement across different identities, perspectives, and subjectivities' (2021: 581). This kind of fluidity is pervasive in *Perfidious Albion* via the character conception (of, for example, Jess or her friend Deepa) and the overall character constellation by representing 'a conterminous occupation of multiplicity' (Shaw & Upstone 2021: 581) of (political) positions.

The latter is furthermore connected to how the novel incorporates the idea of 'Brexit identities' (Tilley & Hobolt 2023) and their repercussions. According to Tilley and Hobolt, 'the referendum campaign and the outcome generated two new political identities: "Leavers" and "Remainers". These Brexit identities crosscut partisan identities and voters formed deep emotional attachments to them' (2023: 546). In the aftermath of Brexit, they turned out to be 'salient' and 'relatively stable over time' (Tilley & Hobolt 2023: 546). As such, 'Brexit identities' are clearly a feature of 'schismogenesis', as previously outlined in *Middle England*, but they also have further implications that are particularly apparent in *Perfidious Albion*. One is 'affective polarization', which is 'an emotional attachment to in-group partisans and hostility towards outgroup partisans' (Hobolt, Leeper & Tilley 2021: 1477), and the other are related 'perceptual biases' (Tilley & Hobolt 2023: 547; see also Brusenbach Meislová 2021).

For the nationalist right-wing party in the novel, England Always, 'affective polarization' becomes a strategy to secure votes and confirm the beliefs of their followers:

> Somewhere in the midst of this flirtation, England Always, chests puffed with post-exit pride, had begun their transformation from a party concerned with redefining England's place in the world to a party preoccupied with people's place in England, and had moved from shaping England's post-Europe future to recapturing its pre-contemporary pomp. Brexit was over, but the energy it had accumulated had to be retained. Fears needed to be redirected. Hatred needed to pivot. (Byers 2018: 119)

Instead of offering political strategies to handle the consequences of Brexit, the party harnesses the affective power of controversial issues, such as immigration or diversity, to channel it anew for their nationalist objective. This typically reckless course of action by populist parties is articulated in a satirical but also matter-of-fact way by Byers to highlight the dangers of post-truth politics (e.g. Kalpokas 2019). The spokesman and party leader, Hugo Bennington, is depicted as a manipulative, selfish, power-hungry opportunist without any real political vision. But after years of working as a politician and eventually failing, he admits to himself 'how much he hated England' (Byers 2018: 316), which is paradigmatic of the ironies in the novel.

One of England Always' voters is the widower Darkin, who lives on the Larchwood estate and is at risk of being evicted due to Downtown's gentrification plans. He supports Hugo Bennington and finds some reassurance in reading the racist and identitarian newspaper *The Record*:

> From the pages of *The Record*, a near-dystopian vision of England emerged. 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. Darkin found this both terrifying and reassuring. Like any long-standing *Record* reader, he read not to have his fears assuaged, but to have them confirmed. (Byers 2018: 24; italics in original)

This underscores the crucial role of 'affective polarization' in creating prejudices, stereotypes and 'perceptual biases'. As the mouthpiece of England Always, *The Record* thereby easily stirs negative emotions, such as fear and hatred, that target minorities and an open, multicultural society. Consequently, politicians like Bennington can step in to offer 'carefully oversimplified politics' (Byers 2018: 106), which worsen the situation. Ironically, Darkin is tricked to leave his flat in the end by Bennington himself, whose candidacy is actually financed by Downtown.

Apart from this, Byers generally emphasises the power of manipulating emotions and the resulting impact for society. Bennington's actions exemplify this: 'This was

a man who was deliberately fanning the flames of racial hatred, who was making life in England unsafe in real and terrifying ways' (Byers 2018: 270). 'The Griefers', albeit remaining anonymous for a long time, equally affect the town of Edmundsbury: 'Whatever they're doing and however or wherever they're doing it, the feelings they're producing in people are real [...]' (Byers 2018: 234). Despite the dystopian scenes and the satirical distortion in *Perfidious Albion*, Byers thus manages to maintain the relation to the extratextual reality of Brexit Britain, where political instability and misinformation have become part of everyday life. This aligns with the 'artistic responsibility' that Shaw and Upstone locate in 'transglossic' writings, namely that 'the post-millennium has produced fictions that are explicitly rather than implicitly political' (2021: 589). In the case of the novel, Byers uses the inherent features of satire to voice his trenchant critique and to foster the reader's engagement. As Matthew Hodgart points out: '[...] politics is the pre-eminent topic of satire. [...] satire is not only the commonest form of political literature, but, insofar as it tries to influence public behaviour, it is the most political part of all literature' (2017: 33). Overall, Byers advocates a form of artistic intervention (Shaw & Upstone 2021: 589) that also pushes the boundaries of literary genres, such as satires (e.g. via the level of exaggeration, the presentation of somehow still credible developments, the conceptualisation of caricature characters besides individualised ones). And although a large portion of 'Brexlit' are satires – Douglas Board's *Time of Lies* (2017) has several comparable elements – few tie reality and literary imagination together to foreground the 'possible public role of fiction in actively engaging in political events' (Shaw & Upstone 2021: 589). While it can be argued that 'Brexlit' is per definition political (e.g. Zwierlein & Rostek 2019), this kind of ethical objective is not self-evident in all works. Unlike Coe, Byers focuses much more on what comes after 'schismogenesis' and how it permanently changes society, which further underlines this.

Conclusion

The relevance of 'Brexlit' in the context of contemporary literature can be determined in the way it incorporates characteristics of the 'transglossic' and how it illustrates the kind of irreconcilable differences or schisms, which seem to increase in modern societies due to global developments, such as populism, nationalism, post-truth politics, media influence, online radicalisation, affective manipulation or culture wars. Brexit functions as a backdrop to respond to these developments fictionally, because they all relate to it – which is also what makes Brexit a unique socio-political event in this context. In a broader perspective, 'Brexlit' attests to the ability of literature to engage in topical discourses and reflects international trends in contemporary fiction,

alongside British ones. *Middle England*, for example, concentrates on political upheaval and social divisions in the 2010s, which aligns with the recent turn toward political storytelling. The novel's concern with questions of belonging and (national) identity, which are frequently attached to nostalgic fantasies, is a central aspect in international literature as well. The analysis of 'transglossic' elements in *Middle England* has furthermore shown how Coe combines realism with a satirical tone, which mirrors the general increase of hybrid forms. *Perfidious Albion*, on the other hand, is less conciliatory because it foregrounds political anxieties and demonstrates the destructive effects of digital culture – both on an individual as well as on a social level. These are typical issues of twenty-first-century literature, although they are extremely satirised, since Byers adopts a more openly critical tone than Coe. In short, 'Brexlit' exemplifies the embeddedness of fiction in extra-textual socio-political contexts, which has become more important for writers in the crisis-ridden present. At the same time, *Middle England* and *Perfidious Albion* reveal a form of rupture that is commonly depicted in 'Brexlit' as dividing people, ethnic groups or political opponents. These 'schismogenetic processes' are symptomatic of contemporary European societies as well as international politics (especially since 9/11) that tend to escalate conflicts (Thomassen 2010: 6-7).

Regarding the discussion about how to outline the early twenty-first century as a literary period in general, this article has also highlighted some of the problems of contemporariness per se and the challenges of conceptualising the present as a period. Using selected aspects of 'metamodernism', such as the idea of how cultural/literary practices oscillate between two poles, in combination with the concept of the 'transglossic' nevertheless clearly suggests that 'Brexlit' embodies contemporary literature. On the other hand, the analysis of 'Brexlit' novels has shown that 'metamodern' and 'transglossic' characteristics help to render visible a broader tendency towards the simultaneity of identities and perspectives, a spatio-temporal instability and an emotionally driven politicisation (and often polarisation) of the present to which literature responds. As a reflection of this, 'Brexlit' does more than merely present moments of crisis – and, admittedly, not all current crises have led to a similar volume of novels, or plays, poetry collections and short stories for that matter in such a diverse range – it becomes an active site, in which the origins, meanings, affects, and consequences of crisis are negotiated. For this reason, 'Brexlit', which promotes involvement in socio-political issues, might be indicative of how crises will be handled in the future of the contemporary.

Notes

[1] Rachel Greenwald Smith (2015), for example, argues that early 9/11 fiction was, surprisingly, aesthetically continuous with 90s-style lyrical realism and postmodern experimentation came to an end without 9/11 having the expected impact on literary aesthetics.

[2] Beyond literature there are even more 'modernisms' to be found (e.g. Bourriaud 2009; Lipovetsky 2005).

[3] Bhabha describes this 'time lag' as 'a contingent moment [...]. The time-lag between the event of the sign (Tangiers) and its discursive eventuality (writing aloud) exemplifies a process where intentionality is negotiated retrospectively.' (1994: 183).

[4] Eaglestone derives this from Lauren Berlant's discussion on the consequences of affect in *Cruel Optimism*, which means that certain desires can be harmful for the person who strives for them, because they remain inaccessible (2011: 227).

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