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Brexit and the Decline of the English Novel

After the June 2016 referendum, novels about what had happened began to appear on best-seller lists and the shelves of British bookshops. Brexilit addressed “the mind-bending horror of Brexit”. It explored not only the political cleavage between Remain and Leave voters, but “deep cultural and attitudinal divisions” that will, the *Guardian* argued, “animate British politics for decades to come”.

The horror of the long-drawn-out crisis comes with a political health warning. Fintan O’Toole thinks the Brexit vote was informed by “a strange sense of imaginary oppression”. Voting Leave on a ballot paper, he says, was the white racist equivalent “of scratching the name of England on their arms to prove their love”. James Graham, discussing his Brexit docudrama *The Uncivil War*, thought that David Cameron called the 2016 referendum believing he inhabited one reality only to find the electorate lived in a different one, “dominated by anger, populism and anti-establishment sentiment that had been bubbling away under the surface. It just erupted and the volcano has not stopped spewing.” Given the British preference for social analysis in novel form, how might Brexilit help us negotiate what Graham considers the current “national trauma”?

English fiction, from Charles Dickens to George Orwell, has frequently provided a more compelling insight into the “condition of England” question than the polysyllabic howl of sociologists. In a recent edited volume, *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (2018), Robert Eaglestone, Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of London, observes that literature broadens our ability “to think, feel and argue”. Consequently, fiction might afford “an especially useful and appropriate way to address political arguments about national identity which lie at the heart of Brexit”.

So far so good. When, however, the professor says that Brexit “is no friend to creative cosmopoli-

tan literature or to attentive and responsive literary scholarship” things take a distinctly Orwellian turn. It has “stirred up a terrifying political discourse” where “opponents of Brexit are described as saboteurs or enemies of the people”, Eaglestone tells us. His fellow professors of contemporary literature and European thought at the universities *inter alia* of East Anglia, Kent, Dublin, Warwick and the LSE agree. Thomas Docherty considers Brexit “an assault upon the intellect”. Michael Gardiner asserts that Brexiteers use “anachronism as a weapon” to disrupt our “neo-liberal present”. More specifically, Lyndsey Stonebridge considers Brexit stupid: “Men too stupid to think about the consequences of their action tricked the British into making a fatally stupid decision.” In Stonebridge’s judicious assessment, Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage “took evident pleasure in performing their twitfuckery” upon the unsuspecting British people.

Summing up the views of the professoriate, Baroness Young of Hornsey finds Brexit an “existential mire” that the “creative mind” must work through via “the insightful and valiant efforts” of novelists like Ali Smith, Andrew Cartwright, Jonathan Coe, Rachel Cusk, Olivia Laing, Sam Byers and Douglas Board, all of whom discuss the consequences of Brexit in a variety of genres, ranging from auto fiction to social novels and political satire.

Ali Smith’s *Autumn* (2016) was “the first significant post Brexit novel”. Long-listed for the Booker Prize, it opens in sub-Dickensian mode: “It was the worst of times. It was the worst of times.” Through the not very compelling relationship between Elisabeth, a young lecturer in art history and her dementia-ridden ageing mentor, Daniel, Smith reflects upon the recent past and the disturbing present condition of England. A week after the 2016 referendum, Elisabeth finds her mother’s village in “a sullen state”—“Go Home” in black capitals adorns the local bus shelter. Her mother is tired of

“the vitriol, the anger, the meanness”, as well as the “violence”, which somewhat inconveniently, “hasn’t happened yet”.

Since Brexit, the UK has disintegrated:

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 people looked up Google: move to Scotland. All across the country people looked up Google: Irish passport applications. All across the country people felt unsafe ... All across the country people drew swastika graffiti ... All across the country racist bile was general ... All across the country, everything changed overnight.

A few months later, “a bunch of thugs” in the street outside Elisabeth’s London flat chant:

Britannia rules the waves. First, we’ll get the Poles. And then we’ll get the Muslims. Then we’ll get the gyppos, then the gays. *You lot are on the run and we’re coming after you*, a right-wing spokesman had shouted at a female MP on a panel on Radio 4 earlier that same Saturday. The chair of the panel didn’t ... even acknowledge the threat.

Such an unlikely response from the national broadcaster suggests the author herself might inhabit a parallel reality. It is one all the Brexit novelists share. Anger at the “No” vote and the threat it presents to their borderless worldview pervades Brexit.

Indignation comes naturally to the self-indulgent contemporary genre of auto fiction practised by Olivia Laing and Rachel Cusk. Thus, *Times* best-selling author and *Guardian* columnist Olivia Laing’s *Crudo* introduces the reader to her alter ego, Kathy, engaging in an apocalyptic rant about the state of the post-Brexit world. Laing’s Kathy is a fictionalised, Anglicised version of the 1980s New York punk author Kathy Acker, who lived fast and died youngish. Acker wrote largely forgotten paeans to *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984), masturbation, body piercing and sado-masochism. Even the *New York Times* considered that she “raised literary masturbation to an anti-art form”. Laing’s expurgated version of a reborn Kathy offers her millennial readership sanitised, snowflake-sensitive, literary masturbation.

Laing’s Kathy is “avant-garde, middle-class-in-flight”, but she “did not like the bourgeoisie”. Now a forty-something successful but impeccably progres-

sive writer, she commutes between London, Rome and New York, attending literary conferences.

Although living the literary high life, Kathy hates “living at the end of the world”. Anticipating the coming apocalypse: “she was fairly certain that by the time she was an old lady they’d be eating out of rubbish dumps, sheltering from a broiling impossible sun. It was all done, it was over, there wasn’t any hope.” Like liberals everywhere, “she missed Obama. Everyone missed Obama. She missed the sense of time as something serious and diminishing. She didn’t like living in the permanent present of the id”, despite the fact that Kathy serves up nothing but the angry id of liberal narcissism.

Analysing the referendum, she finds that: “People were told Brexit would be good, so they voted for Brexit and now all the EU citizens would be sent home, according to a leaked document.” She assumes that “Jacob Rees-Mogg would be the next Prime Minister, he went on *Good Morning Britain* and explained pleasantly that he thought abortion should be illegal even for rape and that he would like to ban gay marriage.”

Consequently, Kathy:

hated everything ... it was all so tawdry, the endless malice of the polite right ... At the weekend she was going to a party with people who had openly praised Enoch Powell, at the weekend she was going to a party with people who had said of refugees crossing to Greece, it’s ridiculous, they should just bomb the boats.

In alt-paranoid style, Kathy contemplates a bleak future:

run by strongmen, she saw the poorer nations of the world obliterated by climate change, she saw the liberal democracy in which she had grown up revealed as fragile beyond measure, a brief experiment in the bloody history of man ... she knew she shouldn’t read the paper, but she snuck looks from the minute she woke up ... How’s the car-crash of Brexit proceeding, how are they getting along with changing all the country’s laws in secret, how much do we hate foreigners today, who’s winning? Kathy ... was riven by despair.

Whilst Olivia Laing’s Kathy surfs a wave of liberal dread, Rachel Cusk’s *Kudos* explores her fictional alter ego, Faye, a successful feminist writer’s encounters with fellow writers at an expenses-paid conference in an unnamed European country. Cusk thinks that “character” doesn’t “exist anymore”. Instead Faye passively records random

conversations. One is with a “Welsh writer”, who observes patronisingly: “the people who lived in the most helpless poverty and ugliness were those who had voted most overwhelmingly for Brexit, and nowhere was that truer than his own small country”. It was, he states, “an act of collective self-harm”, “a case of turkeys voting for Christmas”.

The Welsh proles are stupid. The writer knows of:

housing estates down south in the post-industrial wastelands, where the men still rode ponies and shot at one another with guns and the women brewed up cauldrons of magic mushrooms in their kitchens: he didn't imagine they spent much of their time discussing their membership of the EU even if they knew what it was.

Visiting his parents after the referendum, the writer stops for coffee at a motorway service station, and “a great pockmarked tattooed creature” sits near him “tucking into a huge plate of fried food and announcing to the whole room that at last he could be an Englishman eating a full English breakfast in his own country”. It makes you think, the writer concludes, that “democracy wasn't such a good idea after all”.

The Brexit novelists want to elect a new people. The current white male population—racist, homophobic, dumb and illiberal—is not fit for purpose. White middle-class liberals Sam Byers, Jonathan Coe and Douglas Board, who satirise Brexit's dystopic aftermath, exemplify this tendency. In Douglas Board's *Time of Lies* the Leave vote presages the rise of an English fascist movement. It is set in the near future, when the financial crisis that follows Brexit sees the “wreckage” of Corbyn's leadership split Labour in two. The Conservative government clings to power, while the Supreme Court rules that the way it negotiated Brexit was so stupid, it “was null and void”.

Facing new elections, a populist party, “Britain's Great”, with its paramilitary youth wing, “The Vigilance”, overtakes both the Conservatives and Labour in the polls. Bob Grant, a more attractive, but unstable, version of Donald Trump, leads Britain's Great (BG). He's “a piece of off-white trash. Someone who left school with a knife more times than with homework”. The right-wing media, of course, love him, and sluttish journalists like *Shock News* reporter Annabel Deil promote his Britain-first nationalism. A self-made millionaire, Grant expresses himself in a limited, but comminatory, South London patois: “Britain's Great”, he

intones, “cos we are. You want to know why? Need to be told. Then fuck off.” “Britain's Great. End of.” BG's preferred rallying ground is the Den, home to Millwall, an unfashionable football club known for its London dockland fans' past links to the National Front. BG adopts the club supporters' chant: “No one likes us. We don't care.” The heady cocktail of British identity politics combined with an assault on financial capital proves irresistible. Elected to government in the May 2020 general election, BG requires all bankers and former bankers to wear a large letter “B” on their clothes in a laboured Third Reich analogy. Zack, Grant's liberal brother, finds it “scary how hope has been sucked out of our national life. It's never been more important to read about how the world should be rather than how it is,” he opines. He finds solace in the *Guardian's* “refreshing” wit and reason.

English politics has descended to the “kindergarten”. BG's controversial manifesto commitment to “strong borders, controlled migration and safe streets”, had unleashed a “mindless politics which had weakened every democracy in the world” whilst unravelling the “rule of law tweet by tweet”. Within weeks, the new populist government is at odds with the European Commission and threatening to explode a nuclear bomb over its Brussels headquarters. A Civil Service-engineered coup, however, ends BG's brief populist experiment.

A similar populist contempt informs Sam Byers's *Perfidious Albion* (2018). Edmunsbury, a small town on the outskirts of London that serves as a microcosm for post-Brexit Britain, hosts the anonymous, multinational Green, a company that follows “the disruptive logic of the Silicon Valley”. Moving fast and breaking things, Green harvests personal information and runs social experiments to build an algorithmically-ordered digital dystopia. The plot involves Downton, a private housing trust, with close links to Green, “decanting” residents from a decaying 1960s public housing estate it now runs, in order to transform it into an upmarket, high-tech, gated community. One of the estate's old white residents, Alfred Darkin, stubbornly refuses to move. Darkin, who lives in state-pensioned squalor on a diet of cigarettes, fast food and lager, becomes the focus for the populist post-Brexit party “England Always” and Ronnie Childs's “Brute Force”, a white fascist “militia”, while the novel's feminist heroines, Jess, Deepa and Trina, seek to discover Green's sinister social plans.

Progressive or reactionary, gay or straight, the white English male cast of *Perfidious Albion* are either hypocrites or racists. Darkin is bitter and broken: “You want to get something out of this country?” he asks rhetorically; “Change your country.” Ronnie

Childs is hard and stupid, while Hugo Bennington, a sleazy right-wing journalist with political ambitions, influences Darkin and the England Always worldview.

Bennington, and the conservative media generally, offer only a bleak portrait of England. "The country was overrun, under threat, increasingly incapable. Hordes of immigrants massed at its borders. Its infrastructure frayed at the seams." Meanwhile, "British television had ... given itself over to a comforting nostalgia", perpetuating "a faded and frequently offensive ideal", a "tsunami of whitewashed and chocolate box history" distasteful to multicultural millennials like Trina and Deepa.

England Always embraces the faded ideal and seeks to turn back the tide of "political correctness gone mad". "Chests puffed with post-exit pride", the party transformed itself from one "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 capturing its pre-contemporary pomp". Byers's satire reduces populism to a mixture of mindless thuggery, racism and cynical manipulation. The *Guardian* found the novel "furiously smart ... and madly funny".

The *Observer*, similarly, welcomed Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018), a novel that "tells us something about the temper of our times". The temper, of course, is bad. The country is "in a wretched state ... fractured, groaning under the pressure of an austerity programme". Coe's social satire traces the period from the electoral defeat of Gordon Brown in 2010 through to 2017 through the experience of three generations of an English family, the Trotters, from Birmingham, their friends and relations. Brexit exposes the fault lines that emerged after 2010 between town and country, young and old, contrasting the mindful cosmopolitanism of tertiary-educated young Londoners with the mindlessness of old provincial racists.

The novel's main character, Benjamin Trotter, is a fifty-something divorcee who sells up in London so he can write a novel in a converted mill house on the Welsh border. Benjamin is a working-class product of an independent boys' school and a scholarship to Oxford. His father, Colin, worked at the now defunct Longbridge motor plant that once provided employment for much of the post-war Midlands working class, like the father of Doug Anderton, Benjamin's old school friend. Doug, now a suc-

cessful left-wing journalist, lived, before they split, with his wealthy, ex-catwalk wife and their snowflake daughter, Coriander, in a six-million-pound Chelsea house. Benjamin's niece, Sophie, teaches art history at the University of London. She completed her doctoral thesis on "Contemporary Portraits of Black European Writers". The thesis leads to a book contract, a permanent lectureship and a series on the television channel Sky Arts. Sophie marries Ian, surprisingly a heterosexual white middle-class male, blissfully indifferent to academic politics. Ian, however, is frustrated by his failure to get promoted in the diversity-sensitive public sector where he works. His wife's impeccably liberal standards don't help. On a lecturing cruise, Sophie is told, "you'd better decide ... which is more important ... your husband or being politically correct". Ian's mother, Helena, and Sophie's grandfather, Colin, agree. Helena

thinks England suffers under a tyranny of political correctness. Colin thinks Britain has "gone soft" and the rest of the world "is laughing at us". Ian feels "like a victim in his own country".

Any reply to this viewpoint, Sophie decides, would "mean confronting the unspeakable truth: that Sophie (and everyone like her) and Helena (and everyone like her) 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".

Several years later, Coriander, now an LGBT-aware student union rep, condemns Sophie's art history tutorial for "transphobia". Sophie is briefly suspended from her post. Her gay friend and fellow lecturer Sohan, who is writing a book on "Deep England", suggests she takes her story to the *Daily Mail*. Sophie, however, like her persecutor, Coriander, supports Jeremy Corbyn, the "wise avuncular socialist" leading the much-needed return to traditional Labour values.

It is the referendum and its aftermath, however, that cements the differences bubbling beneath the surface of not-so-cool Britannia. Benjamin is horrified to read Boris Johnson comparing the European Union to Nazi Germany because both strove to create "a German-dominated European super state". He considers the referendum "duplicitous". Doug thinks it showed David Cameron to be "a weak, cowardly, malignant, narcissistic fool". Meanwhile Sophie's mother, Lois, who has never recovered from the IRA bombing of a Birmingham pub in

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1974, finds her trauma rudely revived when she hears the news of Remainer MP Jo Cox's murder by a man shouting "Britain First". She has a fit, beats the wall with her fists and screams, in terms Professor Stonebridge would approve, "You stupid people—letting this happen." Curiously, the Islamic State-inspired murder of Lee Rigby (2013), the attacks on *Charlie Hebdo's* offices and the Bataclan in Paris (2015), and in Nice and Brussels (2016) evoke no such traumatic response in Lois, or disturb the progressive verities of Brexlit more generally.

Lois's father, Colin, has a stroke and dies after voting Leave, while Sophie splits from her Leaver husband. They reconcile only when Ian awakens to his mother's racism and the error of his ways. Sophie feels that Brexit has stripped her of "a small but important part of her own identity—her modern, layered, multiple identity".

Doug, in investigative journalist mode, shows that the ignorant masses who voted Leave have been duped by dark forces. The emergence of a no-deal agenda in 2017, stoked by "a disparate, amorphous coalition of vested interests", organised by the sinister Sir Ronald Culpepper and his free-market Imperium Foundation think-tank, compounds the fears of Doug and the Trotter family. Brexit had been "the wet dream" of conservatives like Culpepper "for years". Charlie, another old school friend, reinforces the point. The post-war social contract, "has been unravelling since 1979 ... that's the real story ... the process is pretty much complete now". Ultimately, the social divisions Brexit crystallised are Margaret Thatcher's legacy.

Disillusioned by Brexit, Lois and Benjamin sell their respective properties and open a creative writing school in Provence. Sophie, a cosmopolitan anywhere, joins them. She now feels more at home "on the Boulevard Saint-Michel" than in northern England. An old friend, Claire, visiting Benjamin, asks, "What the hell is going on in Britain at the moment? All the Italians think the Brits have gone completely crazy." Claire and her wealthy Italian husband evidently hadn't heard of the Liga di Nord.

No Brexlit character pauses to consider that the conduct of the European Commission might explain Brexit's popular appeal. Instead, Brexlit saves its self-righteous indignation for the old, the white and the working class who spoil their cosmopolitan dream; all Europeans and migrants receive bouquets, the brickbats are reserved for the dull, racist, nostalgia-obsessed, provincial Brits.

In fact, Brexlit nowhere tackles the impact of mass migration, facilitated by a Europe *sans frontières*, on wages and public services or how this might induce popular resentment. At the 2011 cen-

sus the UK's second city, Birmingham, the setting for several Brexit novels, approached majority-minority population status. Nearly 40 per cent of the population identified as South Asian; more than 20 per cent practised Islam. This remarkable urban transformation and its cultural impact pass unseen. The only intimation that Birmingham now hosts a Muslim population that has altered the city's character occurs when Benjamin Trotter remarks that his old school now had a prayer centre to cater for the school's 30 per cent of boys "who practised the Islamic faith".

The viewpoint of a cosmopolitan Remainer elite is thus Brexlit's default mode. Brexit is an unmitigated disaster. It exemplifies "the English disease"—nostalgia. The English are "obsessed with their bloody past ... and look where that's got us".

Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* is the only Brexit novel to express any sympathy for the white working-class predicament. Meike Zeirvogel, Cartwright's German publisher, was "shocked" to find herself living in a "divided country" and commissioned him "to build a fictional bridge between the two Britains". Cartwright represents this division through the contrasting characters of Cairo Jukes, an ageing ex-boxer, also from Birmingham, working as a contract labourer cleaning up industrial sites, and Grace, a worldly, cosmopolitan, Hampstead-based documentary film-maker.

Grace arrives in Birmingham to canvass opinion on the referendum. She finds an "invisible veil between her and these people ... This is how it began, she supposed, prejudice on the scale of a whole country." Cairo is the only local who speaks to her. He tells her, "We've had enough." The short interview is a social media sensation, even though Cairo's speech requires subtitles. Cairo's odd dialect reveals that "all you people want to say is that it's about immigration. That we'm all racist. You doh wanna hear that its more complicated than that."

The interview with Grace leads to a documentary film commission and their unlikely relationship blossoms. Grace discovers that the white working class have lost "jobs, houses, security". "There is a culture that has been neglected here," she opines fatuously. Cairo's father tells her there used to be "man's work" at the furnaces, "not like now". The town of Dudley is "a hole" worse than the "border camps, Serbia ... Syria". A drunken brawl in a local curry house run by Cairo's friend, Jamie Iqbal, where UKIP activists hold regular Friday meetings, symbolises Leave voters' hypocrisy on the subject of immigration. Cartwright demonstrates how "this carrying on about foreigners", as Cairo's daughter puts it, and a working-class aversion to a metropolitan elite,

obscured debate. The novel ends when metropolitan Grace tells Cairo she is having his child. Cairo finds the situation intolerable and immolates himself outside a local mosque. This melodramatic conclusion leaves fictional bridges burnt rather than built.

Analysing social divisions in these simplistic terms fails to explain why so many voted for Leave, which was neither just a provincial nor a working-class phenomenon. Consequently, no novel makes a serious effort to explore the wider cultural dimensions of Brexit. Brexlit ignores the Islamically-inspired terror attacks across Europe after 2014, and the impact they may have had on the popular perception of immigration, especially in the wake of Angela Merkel's arbitrary decision to open Europe's borders to refugees in 2015.

Middle England's clumsy attempt to integrate recent history into the lives of its fictional characters never considers the impact the 2016 attacks on Westminster Bridge, Borough Market or Manchester Arena might have had on social attitudes. The auto fiction of Cusk and Laing, the predictable satires of Board and Byers, and Cartwright's laboured attempt at kitchen-sink realism, studiously avoid the cultural issues raised by religious terror, mass migration, the financial crisis and globalisation.

Brexlit instead reinforces the smug, self-referential worldview found in English literature departments, literary reviews and progressive publishing houses. Characters are one-dimensional, the plots soap-operatic. It's hard to think of a time when the English novel would not have made more of the ironic possibilities that the chaos of Brexit affords. Post-war English writers as various as Evelyn Waugh, Anthony Powell, George Orwell and John Braine would surely have dealt with Brexit in a more controversial and provocative manner. They would certainly have done some research, as Orwell did when he took *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and would never have expressed such contempt for the working classes or shown the unqualified respect for Labour politicians, liberal journalists, the progressive European establishment or Remainer civil servants as Brexlit does. Anthony Powell would have found in Olly Robbins a fine example of the civil service's Widmerpool tendency. Waugh's Lord Copper would have enjoyed the Conservative and Labour parties' shambolic reaction to the "No" vote. John Braine's Joe Lampton would have shown far more

resilience than Cairo Jukes as well as contempt for the patronising, progressive views of women like Grace or Sophie Trotter. But we need only consider briefly how the modern condition-of-England genre first emerged to see the depths to which it has now fallen.

The first condition-of-England novels of the 1840s responded to the acute political crisis generated by the 1832 Electoral Reform Act, which rationalised, but did not extend, the franchise. The progressive reform ministry's subsequent passage of the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834), which curtailed outdoor poor relief, its failure to repeal the Corn Laws that kept the price of grain artificially high, and draconian restrictions on freedom of assembly, association and the press, fuelled working-class resentment. The rise of the Chartist and trade union movements campaigning for reasonable wages and the right to vote stirred riot and rebellion. These

premonitory snuffings of popular democracy coincided with revolution on the continent and famine in Ireland. European society then, as now, endured "struggling, convulsive unrest".

In November 1839, George Maule, Treasury Solicitor to the Attorney-General, wrote to Thomas Jones Phillips, the Mayor of Newport, concerning a Chartist "uprising" that left twenty-two dead. His letter ends, "We live in dreadful times." The leaders of the "insurgency", which demanded universal manhood suffrage and secret ballots, were sentenced to death

for high treason. The Crown subsequently commuted the sentence to transportation for life to Van Diemen's Land. A similar fate awaited trade unionists and strikers protesting against their poverty, and demanding the Charter, in the factory towns of Manchester and Birmingham between 1842 and 1848. Then as now the liberal establishment had little time for the ignorant masses and their duplicitous leaders.

However, the nineteenth-century novelist, rather than caricaturing the stupidity of the industrial working class, tried to understand the motivation that drove them to violence. Writing shortly after the Newport Uprising, Thomas Carlyle asked, "What means this bitter discontent of the Working Classes? Whence comes it? Whither goes it?" Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Emily Bronte and Charles Kingsley all tried to answer Carlyle's question. His tract on *Chartism* (1840) provided a

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useful starting point. Carlyle considered Chartism a natural reaction to the insouciant liberal progressivism of the day. After 1832, Robert Peel's reform ministry demonstrated indifference bordering on contempt for the economic plight of the industrial working classes during the recession of 1838 to 1844. In these complicated times, Carlyle wrote, "with cash payment as the sole nexus, the lower classes declare in their confused and emphatic way that they must be governed". Instead a "paralytic" radicalism, committed to an abstract *laissez faire* ideology, believed government could do nothing. Absent a welfare state, public education or social insurance, stagnation of trade leads to wage cuts, immiseration, strikes and demands for democratic accountability. Migration and the corn laws exacerbated the pressure, making food dear and the price of labour cheap.

The natural consequence was physical force, Chartism and trade unionism. Condition-of-England novelists like Elizabeth Gaskell made this point explicit in novels like *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855). Gaskell, like Dickens in *Hard Times*, did not consider working-class characters like Nicholas Higgins, John Barton or Stephen Blackpool as mindless thugs. Instead they sought to expose the wilful ignorance of the propertied class, their preoccupation with "facts", and their lack of inquiry into the condition of the poor. The condition-of-England novel, in profound contrast to Brexlit, sought to correct that lacuna.

In *North and South*, set in Milton (Manchester), Gaskell's chapter "What is a Strike?" opens with an Anti-Corn Law League hymn:

But work grows scarce
while bread grows dear
and wages lessened too
for Irish hordes were bidden here
our half-paid work to do.

Nicholas Higgins, the independent-minded handloom weaver and trade union organiser, takes up the cause of justice. "Why are we to have less wage now," he asks reasonably, "than two year ago?" When Henry Thornton, the inflexible mill owner, imported "hands" from Ireland, it "irritated the Milton people excessively ... and the stupid wretches wouldn't work for him". Higgins, who wants a fair day's pay for his work, particularly resents the decision to import "Paddies" who "did na know weft fro warp".

The problem of the industrial classes, as Carlyle and Gaskell observed, was not the responsible, abstemious English workers, but the wretched, feckless Irish who drove the price of labour down.

Gaskell is not unsympathetic to "Paddy work" as "a navvy", but Carlyle and the Manchester mill-owner and Karl Marx collaborator Friedrich Engels see the Irish undermining solid Saxon working-class values.

"The uncivilised Irishman," Carlyle wrote, "not by his strength, but by the opposite of strength, drives the Saxon native out, takes possession in his room. There abides he, in his squalor and unreason, in his falsity and drunken violence, as the ready-made nucleus of degradation and disorder."

Engels, writing in 1845, thought Carlyle "perfectly right". The Irish:

insinuate themselves everywhere ... With such a competitor the English working-man has to struggle, with a competitor upon the lowest plane possible in a civilised country, who for this very reason requires less wages than any other. Nothing else is therefore possible than that ... the wages of the English working-man should be forced down further and further in every branch in which the Irish compete with him.

The vicious Irish drunk of the mid-nineteenth century and the later nineteenth-century "hooligan" gang share an interesting affinity with the tattooed English oafs of Brexlit. By an interesting metonymy, Brexlit has transformed the English working classes into the equivalent of Irish savages and transferred their nineteenth-century virtues to the virtuous migrant. Moreover, while Brexlit novelists present their progressive liberal cosmopolitan peers in positive terms, novelists like Dickens found their nineteenth-century equivalents risible. Dickens had little time for the workings of Chancery in *Bleak House* or for Gradgrind in *Hard Times*. He reserved particular scorn for those like Mrs Jellyby, who ignored the poverty of outcast London to devote herself to educating the natives of Boorioboola-Gha on the left bank of the Niger. What Dickens satirised as Jellyby and her government admirers' "telescopic philanthropy", the Brexlit novelist would consider uncritically as virtuous cosmopolitanism.

The progressive London literary establishment, its academic book reviewers and Remainder publishing houses like Faber & Faber and Penguin have turned the English novel, not into a mirror to investigate the condition of England, but into a form of ideological group-think that Soviet-era dissidents like Czeslaw Milosz would recognise.

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