Post-Brexit Britain from the Satirical Gaze of Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion*[1]

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Abstract. 2016 marks a decisive turning point in Europe's recent history. On June of that same year, a referendum was called to decide whether the country should remain or leave the European Union. Although many analysts, commentators and even colleagues in the EU saw this as a bizarre move, the results unearthed the polarization that has historically underlain the country and the unresolved divide between two clearly unreconciled positionings. The re-emergence of a discourse, epitomized by Nigel Farage's UKIP deeply permeated some sectors of the British society and brought back a movement that longed for reinstating the country's imperial past and its most self-isolationist claims. It is this context of political turmoil and growing racial tension that writers like Jonathan Coe or Sam Byers tackle in novels such as *Middle England* (2018) and *Perfidious Albion* (2018), respectively. Focusing particularly on Byers' work, his satirical approach to Brexit enables him to build up a society in which readers witness the rise of media totalitarianism and the control of dissenting voices through an intricate network of hi-tech corporations. Bearing all this in mind, the aim of this paper will be, first, to explore the ways *Perfidious Albion* satirizes the ideological foundations of populism on which Brexit was sustained and, secondly, to delve into the apparatus of rhetorical devices the author draws on in order to address his criticism.

Keywords: satire, populism, immigration, homeland, Brexit

[es] La Gran Bretaña post-Brexit desde la mirada satírica de Perfidious Albion de Sam Byers

Resumen. 2016 representa un punto de inflexión decisivo en la historia europea más reciente. En junio de ese mismo año, se convocó un referéndum que decidiría si Gran Bretaña permanecería o abandonaría la Unión Europea. Aunque muchos analistas, comentaristas y socios de la Union consideraron que los resultados de la votación demostraron la polarización de la sociedad británica y la división entre dos posturas que, a día de hoy, siguen siendo irreconciliables. El resurgimiento de un discurso, representado por el UKIP de Nigel Farage permeó muchos sectores de la población y reestableció un movimiento cuyo objetivo principal era reinstaurar el pasado imperial del país y su vena más aislacionista. Es este contexto tan turbulento el que tratan novelas como *Middle England* (2018) de Jonathan Coe y *Perfidious Albion* (2018) de Sam Byers, respectivamente. Si nos centramos más concretamente en la segunda, su visión satírica del Brexit le permite recrear una sociedad en la que somos testigos de la tiranía mediática y el control que se ejerce sobre aquellas voces que difieren a través de una compleja red de empresas tecnológicas. Habida cuenta de estas cuestiones, el objetivo de este trabajo es, en primer lugar, abordar los fundamentos ideológicos del populismo en los que se asentó el Brexit, y, en segundo, explorar el aparato de estrategias retóricas que el autor utiliza para construir su sátira

Palabras clave: Sátira, populismo, inmigración, patria, Brexit

In his biting dissection of the Roman empire's decaying state, Juvenal argued that "*Difficile est saturam non scribere* /it is difficult not to write satire," which is probably the statement that better describes the purpose and tone of satire. These words, which accurately verbalise the poet's profound indignation with the progressive disintegration of Rome's former military and economic domination, have paved the way for the emergence and solid growth of satire studies and satirical literature throughout the centuries. As literary history reveals, the pervading presence of this mode from Greek and Roman times –and before– has become a valuable tool to comment on –and debunk– a wide array of political, religious or social issues. If we focus more particularly on the context of British literature, the country has produced a plethora of writers who managed to come to terms with their surrounding reality through their

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satirical poems, novels or essays. From Chaucer, Marston, Hall, Dryden, Johnson, Pope to Huxley or Orwell, among many others, the proliferation of this literary mode has led to very telling considerations.

Scholars like Mary Claire Randolph (1941, 417) or Northrop Frye (1944, 75) have argued that British satirists found their inspiration in such Roman poets as Persius, Lucilius or Horace, whose conception of this mode was very close to Juvenal's "*difficile est saturam non scribere*." This could mean that the vices and follies originated in Britain have found a satirical response from medieval and Restoration to 20th and 21st-century writers. In this regard, Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion* (2018), published two years after the Brexit referendum took place, appears as a strong link with those satirists who dug into their nation's backyard in an attempt to unearth corruption and hypocrisy. Bearing this mind, this paper follows Paul Taggart's approach to the notion of the "heartland" as "a construction of an ideal world but unlike utopian conceptions, it is constructed retrospectively from the past", which is a central pillar in Brexit's populist discourse (2004, 274). From that point, our contention is that Byers' novel questions the validity of this concept and satirises collateral factors such as political futility, social confrontation, racism and ideological dumbness through a wide array of rhetorical devices such as animalisation, irony, or the so-called *reductio ad absurdum*.

2016 was an extremely relevant year in which the world witnessed a series of major, though highly, unexpected events. In just five months –from June 23rd to November 8th–, Britain voted in favour of exiting the European Union and Donald Trump was elected the 45th President of the United States after one of the most unanticipated electoral results in modern democracy.[3] This political momentum triggered a great deal of reactions in the literary scene, which very quickly spotted the satirical potential of this situation and the different agents that actively participated in it. The growth of lampoons, comic strips in magazines, sharp columns in newspapers as well as Orwell's *1984* and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* reaching top positions in the US best-selling lists attest to the relevance of satire as a most suitable vehicle to examine those scenarios from more critical and mocking standpoints. Edward Rosenheim once said that satire was basically "an attack upon discernible, historically authentic particulars" (1963, 318), to which Earl Bargainnier added that "if the satirist fails to achieve such necessary clarity of his aims, he will surely lose his audience" (1978, 5). Referentiality lies at the basis of satire's success and also contributes to strengthening the readers' sense of connection with the circumstances the writer is portraying. The fact that it needs to be so decisively sustained on this reciprocity explains why there have been so many other literary works that have never come down to us or that have not been adequately understood. Being such a persuasive and rhetorical art, readers are pleased when they are able to discover what lies beneath the façade of a satirical text and usually come to the conclusion that our presumed virtuosity and moral righteousness exempt us from its criticism. In this vein, Swift pointed out that satire is "a mirror wherein beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own," which explains why we tend to approach these works from a pedestal of integrity that we normally grant ourselves. On many occasions, however, satire proves to be an eye-opening experience, especially when we end up realising that we are co-responsible of the vices and follies that are under scrutiny.

Targets are among those "necessary and sufficient conditions" Don Nilsen mentions in his seminal article "Satire: The Necessary and Sufficient Conditions – Some Preliminary Observations." From its early origins, this mode has been conceived as an attack upon all kinds of personal, institutional, private or public shortcomings, which, for the satirist, are impediments for the social well-being and mislead people in their pursuit of truth. For John Snyder, satire "means to criticize, to aim reason at targets" (1991, 95), a statement that directly points to the punitive side of these writings. Even though the selection of discernible, identifiable objects very much determines the success of satire, it has also led many authors to prioritise those that could help them moralise their readership. At certain periods of time –especially in the 18th century in Britain–, the purpose of satirists was not only to chastise wrongdoings, but also to amend them. In *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) or *The Dunciad* (1728), Swift and Pope stick to a typically Roman satirical formula, which Randolph (1944, 172) and Real (1992, 12) explore in their respective works. They suggest that these moralising satires are articulated around a Part A, where satirists condemn the folly, and a Part B, in which they propose their alternatives to correct it. This model, which was prevalent well into the 19th century, soon turned these writers into distrustful individuals, not only because they bothered the *status quo* with their challenging attitude, but moreover because they could spark the critical thinking of their readers. Even though it is extremely complex to affirm that satire has instigated any real social or political change, as Swift naively sought to achieve when he published *Gulliver's Travels*, it is also worth noting that the publication of this sort of literature has usually been strongly banned, especially in England when Robert Walpole passed the Licencing Act in 1737 after Henry Fielding staged two of his most scandalous plays, *Pasquin* (1736) and *The Historical Register* (1737).

In order to circumvent these historical limitations and to endow their works with the necessary stylistic framework, writers draw on a myriad of rhetorical devices. It was argued above that satire needs to be highly persuasive and indirect, so that authors are able to address their criticism in a veiled and undetectable manner. The original Arab, Irish and Greek invectives were solely concerned with attacking their targets, which explains why they were so overtly explicit and raw. They kept the punitive disposition that has pervaded satirical literature from its origins, yet their

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[3]   Perhaps due to their unexpected outcomes, these two events and the literary responses they are receiving have been often tackled in conjunction. In his illuminating paper on political fiction, Johannes Wally notes that: "As different as these two events may be, they have both been analysed in terms of a return of nationalistic and anti-intellectual populism. Especially the anti-intellectual thrust of this populism might have initiated a return of politically engaged fiction in British literature" (2018, 64).

lack of formal elaboration hinders their categorisation as proper satires. Many scholars (Rawson, 1980, v; Seidel, 1979, 10) have argued that this mode must be indirect, not only as the primary means to escape censorship, but also to favour the use of irony and wit.[4] The best satire is characterised by *double entendre* and a very peculiar linguistic register, which seek to disguise its object of attack, yet at the same time expose it in the most accessible manner. As our takes on *Perfidious Albion* will reveal, the use of fantasy and exaggeration, together with a specific kind of settings, are essential criteria to build up an outstanding satirical piece, or at least, one that is prone to be remembered.

In this regard, Byers' work emerges as a suitable example of a typical 21st-century satirical novel, which is framed within the long-standing tradition that Alberto Lázaro (2001, 80-81) has delved into in some of his studies. He suggests that, even though satirical narratives went through a period of crisis in the first half of the 20th century, the number of writers that might be acknowledged as satirists is, indeed, long and prominent. In "The Revival of the Satiric Spirit in Contemporary British Fiction," he mentions names –David Lodge, Will Self, William Boyd, Emma Tennant, Fay Weldon, or Tom Sharpe–, who prove that this satiric spirit is deeply imprinted in the British literary consciousness. Satire and the British novel have traditionally gone hand in hand, nurturing each other with a wide thematic spectrum and an endless array of formal possibilities. It goes without saying that the socio-political scenario has changed with respect to the Golden Age of 18th-century satire, but writers still hold the same pungent and dissecting scalpel when they face the reality that surrounds them. Brexit, in this sense, turns out to be a catalytic factor for the reinvigoration of contemporary satire, which, once again, appears as a helpful mechanism to tackle one of the most decisive and controversial episodes in British contemporary history. As it could be expected, the socio-political repercussions of leaving the European Union have had an unquestionable impact on the British literary scene. Novels like Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* (2017), Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018), or Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach* (2019), revolve around some of the major issues that were discussed –and still are– in the most influential economic and political forums around the world. Populism, nostalgia, anti-immigration policies, histrionic political figures or isolationism are some of the tropes these works examine and which also inform Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion*.

The satirical undertones of this novel do not come as a surprise in Byers' career. With the publication of *Idiopathy* in 2013, he seemed to establish the foundations of *Perfidious Albion*, in which he dismantles all the pillars that erected the Leave campaign of Nigel Farage's UKIP and some other conservative voices like Boris Johnson. Byers sets the action in the small village of Edmundsbury, some years after Brexit was consummated, in a country dominated by technocrats and radicalised politicians, whose discourse fuels the need to defend the country's old values that are jeopardised by the menacing growth of immigration and feminism. From the very beginning, Byers makes clear that there is no room for spatial or temporal detachment in his novel. As a matter of fact, we might not expect such an early and open reference to Brexit in a satirical text, in which disguise and indirection are deemed crucial. From this point, the author devotes most of his narration to portray the location where the story is going to unfold, and this proves essential to reinforce its critical tone. We should emphasise here that settings in satire have played a decisive role as the element that enables authors to put together all the targets that they seek to condemn, as Gregory FitzGerald points out: "There are abundant illustrations of how the milieu itself may be among the several objects of satiric assault: the social, political, professional, even the economic background of the satiric plot" (1986, 2).

There is a common belief that satire is a pre-eminently urban mode, since we tend to assume that vices, follies, crime and corruption find their origin in the city rather than in the countryside, which has traditionally been associated with more tranquil, bucolic and peaceful environments. Many 18th-century British satirists explored this duality to exalt the country's glorious past in opposition to the current state of decay.[5] In *Perfidious Albion*, Byers draws a drastically different scenario, in which the small and almost unknown town of Edmundsbury becomes the triggering point of all the intricacies that underlie the plot of the story. In this case, this place does not seem to align with Johnson or Pope's pastoral idealisation, but becomes a sort of battlefield in which the two clashing, post-Brexit positionings struggle to impose their own views. Edmundsbury and the so-called Larchwood estate are the two sites that more clearly reveal Britain's polarised reality before and after the 2016 referendum and encompass all the targets Byers aims to criticise. Through the figure of Darkin, an old, hermetic and ideologically backward character, the author manages to unveil questions that Leave advocates put on the table to justify their Brexit agenda. From an anonymous and anodyne man, who almost nobody knows, Darkin becomes the emblem of the extreme right-wing party "England Always", led by Hugo Bennington and whose main political dictates are to reinstate the old values –whatever those values might be–, do away with immigration, close off the borders and control the feminist voices that question the country's patriarchal order. Bennington paints Darkin as a man that the British multicultural, multiracial and multivocal society has left behind in a state of complete abandonment. In this respect, he uses him as a scape goat to justify his populist discourse and to instil fear upon the population. Closely related to this idea, John

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[4]   In this respect, Claude Rawson contends that: "Satire, as we have long been accustomed to think, is a learned art: elaborately allusive, cunning in secret stings and subtle indirections" (1980, v).

[5]   In "London: a Poem" (1738), an imitation of Juvenal's Third Satire, Samuel Johnson, whose love for London was undeniable, cannot put up with the decline of a city that had been the epitome of colonial splendour. His profound disappointment leads him to opt for more rural retreats, which he sees as symbols of virtue, purity and innocence In this respect, Fredric Bogel argues that Johnson "identifies vice with the city rather than with human nature, and he correspondingly idealizes the country, expecting to find there not 'a purer Air' but a veritable *locus amoenus*" (2001, 63).

Morgan argues that "one of the dominant motifs in discussions in the aftermath of Brexit was that the 'leave' vote was propelled by fear" (2017, 154).

Darkin's apartment soon becomes the locus of a restless struggle, which Bennington believes to be key to control his own narrative and that of his opponents. This place echoes quite accurately Alvin Kernan's postulates on those settings that tend to be more recurrent in a satirical novel. He argues that the scene of satire "is always disorderly and crowded, packed to the very point of bursting" (1962, 167). If there is a literary mode that finds pleasure in portraying the most revolting details, that is, for sure, satire. In these works, there is no room for luxurious palaces, flamboyant castles or well-off neighbourhoods. It is no wonder, thus, that Byers' portrait of Darkin's house abounds in allusions that unveil its miserable situation: "(…) at which point, he would be reminded that the decay he saw and felt in his body, his flat, and the estate outside was merely the closest observable evidence that everything, without exception, was going to shit" (2018, 93-94).

Even though it might seem that settings simply frame the narrative action of literary works, they are normally conceived as microcosms that enable authors to address current issues from a relatively more distanced perspective. In the case of satire, these *milieus* are even more important, especially when writers need to persuade their readers that the controversial matters they are tackling are just fiction.[6] In *Perfidious Albion*, it is more than clear that Byers' intention is to trace a parallelism between the decay of Darkin's apartment and the sense of domestic and international dislocation the country went through after the Brexit referendum. This character is trapped between the unstoppable growth of populism, which presents him as the vivid example of how traditional British values can be eroded or even destroyed, and the new reality of a society that tries to get over its past and look forward from more open-minded viewpoints. As the following lines accurately reveal, Darkin proves to be a symbol that needs to be reappropriated by Bennington, who uses him as a warning to the population and as the actual evidence that Britain could be on the verge of a national, patriotic or racial collapse: "'Lies,' said Darkin. 'All lies. You can't trust statistics. Who do you think makes all the statistics in the first place?' He shook his head. 'You want to get something out of this country? Change your colour'" (2018, 207).

Bearing this in mind, it is no surprise that Bennington soon emerges as a central target of Byers' political satire. He builds up a character that is embedded in a long tradition of politicians that have been the object of derisive satirical comments. In the context of 18th-century British literature, there are numerous poems and plays that severely condemned the administration of Prime Minister Robert Walpole –mockingly known as "Bob Booty" by the most renowned members of the Scriblerus Club. George V, the Duke of Wellington or Sir Robert Peel recurrently appeared in the pages of 19th-century cartoonists, while Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair or Boris Johnson have been usual targets in the popular "Spitting Image" TV shows. Byers, in this vein, resumes this fruitful production of political satires and delineates a character that seems to be inspired not only by contemporary leaders such as Nigel Farage or Boris Johnson, with whom he shares a great deal of similarities, but also by other radical voices such as Oswald Mosley or John Tyndall. Bennington is the perfect incarnation of the demagogic views that permeated the British political arena in the months prior to the Brexit referendum. As Paul Taggart suggests, the success of populism is mainly articulated upon the idea of the heartland, which he defines as "a construction of an ideal world but unlike utopian conceptions, it is constructed retrospectively from the past –it is in essence a past-derived vision projected onto the present as that which has been lost" (2004, 274). These constant looks at the country's past of colonial domination and tight immigration control serve Bennington to justify his own nostalgic look at those moments in which Britain was a world power. The loss of those ideals is what leads him to reclaim "the England of his childhood, of his frustrated and bitter dreams, an England in which he once again felt at home" (2018, 486).

This need to see Britain again as a vital agent in the decision-making process is what impelled populists to reconstruct and idolise that image of the "empire on which the sun never sets." This is precisely what Taggart identifies as the central contradiction that underlies any populist discourse: "It is difficult to reconcile an essentially future-oriented project with the values derived from a past-oriented and rather vague notion of the heartland. Yet it is exactly that disjuncture that lies at the heart of the populists' ability to mobilise the constituencies that they do" (2004, 280). Byers satirises these assumptions by means of a grotesque portrait of the deeply backward values that are perpetuated by mass media. TV shows are full of images that appeal to the viewers' nostalgia and their patriotic fervour, which also contribute to nourishing their fierce defence of the British "way of life" against the intrusive "other." Everything is about exalting a historical time in which racial and social differences were legitimised, because subjugation and conquest were the roles that the country was expected to play:

> Trina encountered first a programme in which everyone had to cook according to nineteen-forties rations, then a reality show based around the pressures of competitive knitting, and finally a much-discussed and supposedly narcotically addictive period drama set in the last days of the Raj in which glowing young Caucasians lay about on lawns wearing a uniform of pristine whites, picking at sandwiches handed to them by turbaned extras while professing to be ever so worried about the future. (2018, 551)

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[6]   A particularly illuminating example is the opening foreword in Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach*. This novella, which is extremely critical about the figure of former British PM Boris Johnson, begins as follows: "Names and characters are the product of the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual cockroaches, living or dead, is entirely coincidental" (2019, 14).

Even though Frank Palmeri (1990, 6) states that satire is an essentially conservative mode, Byers discloses the dangers of a society that is stuck to a highly questionable past, since that can encourage the population to believe that the only normative and accepted reality is that of "cultural homogeneity, traditional values, and a strong national identity" (Margalit 2019, 166). These essentialist beliefs, which easily transpire from the media to the citizens and vice-versa, end up firing up a deeply racist sentiment against anything that deviates from the standard notion of nationhood. The turbulent pre-referendum times, in this sense, were tinged by an outbreak of xenophobic reactions against immigrants, who were seen, first, as a threat to "the jobs and wages of native workers" (Margalit 2019, 155), and, second, as a disruption of the social order and conventions. This is precisely what Bennington stands up for: "What was at threat here, he said in his latest column, was not simply the day-to-day security of a small English town, but a way of life, and the extent to which this way of life was or was not defended had wide-reaching and potentially ruinous implications for the whole country" (2018, 845).

As a political satire, *Perfidious Albion* is very keen on questioning the *status quo* and discrediting those that help to enforce it, especially if they show any kind of totalitarian inclination, as is Bennington's case. The novel is full of episodes in which Byers manages to expose the extremist discourse that lay at the ideological basis of parties like Farage's UKIP or the so-called Brexit Party (now Reform UK). However, these apparently fearful and merciless leaders have been favourite targets for satirists, who usually find a special satisfaction to overthrow them from their pedestal of absolute power and inviolability. Bennington emerges as a perfect example of the "dog-eat-dog" politician, praised once by a cohort of adulators, who are the same ones that get rid of him when he is no longer useful.[7] To describe this fall into the abyss, Byers digs into the strategies that his counsellors and collaborators contrive to finish with Bennington's career. It is at this point that the novel reaches its satirical heyday through the use of scatology and other rhetorical devices. Byers' intention is to present Bennington in his most distorted and grotesque stance and, for that, he employs the so-called *reductio ad absurdum*, which is a typically satirical mechanism that seeks to lower individuals, institutions or behaviours so as to reveal their most vulgar, foolish or pointless side. The interest now is to erase any trace of this political dilettante and the best way is to demolish his reputation and show him as no more than a dumb puppet. To achieve that, Byers vents Bennington's most bodily and downgraded side after a picture of his penis is leaked to the press and made viral on the Internet.

From a narrative perspective, this proves to be a decisive turning point, because bodily allusions have been really helpful to unearth the least decorous behaviours of people, which is one of the main issues satirists aim at in their works.[8] When Bennington is just reduced to his genitalia and gradually disposed of his human traits, satire finds the perfect occasion to reach its most humorous and mocking dimension: "How maddening, he thought, to know that this, of all the possibilities, would be his undoing. It was, in many ways, his ultimate fantasy: his dick writ large, mapped over England's topography" (2018, 1284).[9] The way Bennington's genitals are superimposed over the British map is a smart way of taunting Britain and its decision to leave the EU. In satirical terms, juxtaposing two apparently antagonistic concepts within the same context does not only produce a hilarious outburst, but also enables Byers to, as Matthew Hodgart suggests, "deflate false heroes, imposters and charlatans, who claim a respect which is not their due" (1969, 30). Bennington and, generally speaking, Britain's fall into disgrace, reveals that Brexit lacked a solid and consistent agenda. It seems sure to say that it was the result of a political trap in which former Prime Minister David Cameron was caught, since he was more than positive that Brexit was just the bizarre project of some radical, anti-establishment humbugs with no chance to succeed. As he himself pointed out on a BBC interview back in 2006, Farage's UKIP was just "a bunch of (...) fruitcakes and loonies and closet racists, mostly" (BBC, 2006).

These last words make clear that Cameron's transition from a forthright attack on those parties that claimed for Britain's EU exit to eventually agree upon a referendum in 2016 are the consequence of a tense internal dispute within the Conservative party and, more particularly, with its more Eurosceptic wing. In this respect, Jonathan Coe already hinted at this turmoil in his Brexit satire *Middle England* (2019), in which he points to this same reason to explain why the referendum was held: "'So that's why Cameron is promising this referendum. To silence those people.' 'Don't be silly, Douglas. Holding a referendum on such an important issue just to silence a few annoying people in his own party? That would be a highly irresponsible thing to do'" (2018, 1105). At the most heated moments of the Brexit debate and with the UKIP gaining ground, the country experimented a worrying growth in racist and xenophobic assaults, which reached its most tragic peak when Jo Cox, a young and promising Labour MP deeply involved in humanitarian and pro-refugee actions, was shot and stabbed to death in the streets of Birstall, West Yorkshire.[10] This anti-immigration sentiment was fuelled by the radicalized discourse of all those who believed that a monoracial and isolated country was the only way to bring back past glories. As the following passage clearly shows, Byers captures this pervading, almost neo-nazi, violence on numerous occasions throughout the novel: "For several years, Childs had positioned himself as head of the East

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[7]   In this respect, Kernan suggests that satire is the perfect locus to deal with this descent into the depths of failure: "The descent from the high air to the mud and garbage traces in concrete terms the path which dullness takes in satire: it rises high (magnifies) only to plunge deeper" (1965, 52).

[8]   As a matter of fact, Edward and Lillian Bloom assert that: "The business of the satirist causes him to reveal human beings in their public roles, and this means that some people are stripped of jealously guarded privacy, that they are exposed in actions generally withheld from polite observation" (1979, 157).

[9]   Intimately related to this idea, Peter Elkin notes that "the satirical process, then, is one of reduction of reduction to absurdity or infamy" (1974, 4).

[10]   The murderer, Thomas Mair, was heard shouting "This is for Britain", "Britain first" or "Keep Britain independent" at the crime scene (Cobain 2016).

of England wing of a self-styled 'militia' called Brute Force. Brute Force's agenda was, in no uncertain terms, street-level race war. They wore a uniform of black bomber jackets, oversized black boots, and camouflaged combat trousers" (2018, 336). This situation enables him to anatomise the impact of street agitation and racism through the same satirical gaze that permeates the entire novel. Even though the reality the author portrays is really troubled and hostile, he manages once again to focus on its most ridiculous and untenable side. His approach to racial bigotry is an example of how satire is expected to work when handling these complex issues and the cathartic effects it brings to a text that explicitly condemns intolerance and segregation.

It has been argued above that Britain witnessed an increasing number of cases in which members of ethnic minorities were racially assailed. Harry Lambert explains that people who voted in favour of Brexit were predominantly against multiculturalism (81%), immigration (80%) and feminism (74%) (2016). The usual populist takes on this matter have sought to foster the assumptions that immigrants destabilise the country's identity, are a threat against the social order and steal the jobs from nationals. This belief lies also at the basis of the biased views of many characters in Byers' novel. Once again, Bennington emerges as the voice of significant population sectors that also shared and stood up for these beliefs: "His message was clear: the ordinary white, working-class people of Edmundsbury had been forgotten, and what should have been rightfully theirs –jobs, housing, benefits, and the like– was now all going to immigrants and scroungers" (2018, 429). The reality behind these words does not normally coincide with the impact of immigration in employment terms. This apocalyptic discourse, in which newcomers are described as the source of all evils and the reason for the collapse of the NHS and the entire welfare state, is consistently refuted by scholars like Yotam Margalit, who argues that "while immigration is a salient concern for populist voters, economic insecurity directly related to immigration is not a key explanation for this concern" (2019, 163).

Margalit's conclusion is very helpful to understand how Byers dismantles these essentially weak preconceptions and reveals that the foundations of Brexit were strongly sustained upon jingoistic and partial views on immigration. In satirical terms, this allows the writer to expose, once again, Bennington's hypocrisy, who tries to disguise his racism behind a veil of fake commitment to the ethnic communities. His approach to these issues does not only question his political stature, but also unearths his sheer ignorance: "Sometimes, if he felt more evidence were needed, he would point to the valuable contributions assorted ethnic minorities had made to the country, such as Indian food and Thai massage" (2018, 491). This comment lays bare Bennington's stupidity, which Byers satirises from the distance that humour usually provides. As Leonard Feinberg rightly suggests: "Not only we do laugh *at* people, we always laugh at their deficiencies…. We laugh at the person who is more stupid than the norm, not at the person who is more intelligent" (1978, 89). This is precisely the case in this novel, in which readers cannot help grinning at a character with very clear political aspirations, who believes that the most significant contribution of these ethnic minorities simply comes down to Indian food and Thai massage. Byers turns this limited perspective into a metaphor of the narrow-mindedness of blind radicalism, whose foundations and *modus operandi* have shaken the political arena in the last few years.

So far, satire has been discussed from a univocal perspective, that of Hugo Bennington, whose extremism is but another sign of his own foolishness. However, there have been very few references to the role that ordinary people play in this novel, who are apparently safeguarded from Byers' criticism. Under this light, it seems clear that the author's prime mode of criticism is to address the flawed politicians and not those who voted for them. One should add here that the best examples of satirical literature are multidimensional, in the sense that they do not only concentrate on the vice itself, but also on all those circumstances and individuals that trigger that vice. Although Bennington is the materialization of the most sombre side of politics, Byers widens his attack and questions the people's lack of solid criteria to choose their representatives. In *Perfidious Albion*, there is a strong sense of inaction and this is evinced in the way people end up embracing the postulates of an aimless party and its gang of street agitators: "This message had proved extremely popular, so popular, in fact, that once the decanting was under way, many of the residents saw in Hugo's political rhetoric a near-prophetic ability" (2018, 430). What these words ultimately reveal is that politics is mere rhetoric, an effective way of persuasion that appeals exclusively to the emotions. In this respect, Stuart Gietel-Basten interestingly notes: "But the power of the Leave campaign can be explained by the fact that it was not just about distant political institutions and secretive decision-making cabals, however derided or feared; it was about gut-wrenching issues like borders, culture, and the homeland" (2016, 678).

This last crucial idea is closely connected with the extent to which the ordinary population is controlled by language in the political context. In deeply troubled times like the years that preceded the 2016 referendum, many politicians opted for the articulation of a discourse that was rather void of content, yet was very effective to draw the attention of people who believed that exiting the European Union was the quickest way to reinstate Britain's dominant *status quo*.[11] As Byers very wittily reveals, the Leave campaign was strongly sustained on messages that were sometimes intentionally cryptic, but whose goal was to pinpoint the landmarks of its agenda. Interestingly, we should note how there are moments in the novel in which Bennington's speeches are deeply reminiscent of Orwell's Newspeak in the way he uses words that sound conciliatory and politically correct, even though the underlying implications are much more radical and offensive. So far in this discussion, there have been numerous allusions to

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[11]   In relation to this idea, Steve Corbett argues that: "The populist discourse deployed by Eurosceptics before and during the referendum channeled a desire for empowerment and human dignity into a simple solution to complex problems: leave the EU, and the UK can 'stand on its own two feet'" (2016, 26).

racism and isolationism as two vectors upon which Brexit was articulated. Under this light, it is more than clear that the racial policy was on the agenda from the moment this debate was opened, and the way it was addressed is what leads Byers to satirise hypocrisy and double sidedness.

If, as Michael Seidel explains, the satirist "goes even further and suspects the very nature of language in fostering hypocrisy" (1991, 22), *Perfidious Albion* directs a smart criticism towards linguistic manipulation and how politicians draw on an apparently technical jargon to deviate the attention or to hide important information. Instead of being explicit and to avoid sounding excessively controversial about immigration and multiculturalism, Bennington states that his take on these issues is to call for "positive community engagement", which could be initially read as a constructive manner of approaching these matters (2018, 1055). However, this attempt to sound committed and devoted to the minorities simply hides the will to do away with anything that could challenge long unquestioned racial assumptions. To this, the journalist that is interviewing Bennington responds him in a forthright manner: "And what do you say to people who say that, far from promoting positive community engagement, you're actually deliberately stoking the fires of racial hatred and then manipulating the fallout for your own political gain?" (2018, 1056). Byers focuses his satirical comment on Bennington's conspicuous lack of reliability, which is, however, accepted by those who are not able to see through the message's real intentionality.

Byers' novel draws the population as a shapeless mass that can be easily manipulated by pure demagogy. In fact, there are moments in which the author redirects his satire to place it on the people's volatile judgement and, for that, he recurs to animal imagery as one of the most effective satirical devices. Throughout the history of satire, the use of animals has enabled writers to question the foundations of humankind and its presumed supremacy. Animals have usually helped writers to demystify human beings by means of disclosing their most irrational and scatological side. If, as it has been argued above, satire is about reducing, tracing these comparisons with the animal world cannot be more demeaning for the individual, who, in Swift's own words, is no longer an "*animal rationale*", but an "*animal rationis capax*." The choice of the type of animal is also relevant considering perceived positive or negative associations that they carry and the place they occupy in the food chain. This explains how satirists, whenever they wanted to pursue a more degrading effect, have recurred to insects, snakes, donkeys or pigs, for they carry disgusting, poisonous, dirty or, simply dumb connotations. To this, Ellen Douglass Leyburn adds that "the choice of animal characters to throw human traits into bold relief is the concentration upon isolated human characteristics" (1956, 222).

This technique of animalising human characters presumably seeks to level up two worlds that have normally gravitated around seemingly unreconciled binaries: rationality vs irrationality, feelings vs instincts, intelligence vs dumbness. For this reason, satire digs into the possibilities that questioning this clear-cut polarities might bring to a text and the extent to which inverting this order could also challenge our prevailing expectations. In *Perfidious Albion*, the way characters are depicted at some points in this novel reveal their reduction to no more than a numb herd of brainless sheep, thus, reinforcing Byers' satirical take on an uncontested anthropocentric hegemony by means of the use of animal imagery, as the following quote reveals: "Whatever the complexities and intricacies and, frankly, even the realities of what was happening, Hugo reminded himself as the car pulled up to the edge of the Larchwood Estate and he took in a pleasing vista of strobing blues and pig-penned protesters, one thing was certain: a full-blown shitshow was in effect" (2018, 1207). As John Wilmot described in his brilliant "Satire against Humankind", for the human logic, this view of demonstrators as pigs that are wandering around the streets of Edmundsbury without any clear purpose cannot be more telling.

Considering historical events of such transcendence as Brexit have always been a source of satirical comments. Byers' novel reveals that the circumstances that surrounded the 2016 referendum for the British exit of the European Union cannot only be circumscribed to that very year, but to a long period of recurrent social and political tensions in the country. The populist discourse that was embraced by figures like Nigel Farage or Boris Johnson also permeated wide sectors of the population, who believed that leaving the EU was the *sine qua non* condition to regain national control and bring back the nation's old glories. This turbulent and extremely polarised context has been the perfect groundwork for writers like Ali Smith, Jonathan Coe, Ian McEwan or Amanda Craig to dig into Brexit from a satirical perspective. As this article has attempted to demonstrate, satire can be a perfect tool to unearth the dangers of demagogy and of how the population can be easily misled by the empty words of politicians like Hugo Bennington. In *Perfidious Albion*, Sam Byers manages to unveil the unsubstantial foundations of Brexit as a deeply radicalized construct and of the ideologues that were behind it. The author satirises political futility, social jingoism and the vulnerability of the people, who are driven by empty, yet effective, messages that appeal to their most emotional and irrational side. Just like in many classical satires, the human condition, represented by Bennington and his supporters, is repeatedly downgraded through the use of animalisation and reduction, which mostly seek to demythologise our sense of anthropocentric hegemony. Byers' novel, thus, is a perfect example of a bidirectional satire, in the sense that its criticism focuses both on the origin of the vice and on those that contribute to its dissemination. The aftermath of Brexit and the consequences it can bring about in the near future still draw a great deal of literary attention as the academic studies such as Kristian Shaw's *Brexlit: British Literature and the European Project* (2021) or Christine Berberich's *Brexit and the Migrant Voice* (2022) very clearly evince. Considering that this is still an unresolved matter, it seems safe to say that the production of satires that gravitate around this crucial historical event is going to be a fruitful area in the next few years.

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