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Metamodernism and BrexLit

The Feeling of Brexit in Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion* (2018) and Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018)

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Abstract

This thesis will examine the debate surrounding the notion of metamodernism as a framework for considering cultural products of the post-postmodern era we are in. It seeks to establish how metamodernism can be employed as a framework for the interpretation of BrexLit novels, what this reveals about the underlying structures of feeling regarding Brexit, and the way in which contemporary British literature appears to have a renewed interest in modernist concerns. The question as to the ways in which Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion* (2018) and Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018) reflect metamodernist concerns regarding structures of feeling in relation to Brexit, will be answered by means of close reading and textual analysis of these two novels. The findings that result from this will add to the understanding of literary responses to end engagement with the matter of Brexit, the relation between contemporary British literature and modernism, and allow for a more feasible understanding of the way in which the current historical moment is attempted to be defined in the light of metamodernist structures of feeling.

Keywords: *metamodernism; post-postmodernism; modernism; contemporary literature; BrexLit; Brexit; structures of feeling; Sam Byers; Jonathan Coe*

1. Introduction

““Post-postmodernism” is an ugly word,”¹ Jeffrey T. Nealon claims. He even dubs the term “plain ugly: it’s infelicitous, difficult both to read and to say, as well as nonsensically redundant.”² Yet, in his book, of which these allegations are the opening lines, he argues that such a term is relevant because we have moved beyond postmodernism. The mere fact that not only Nealon, but numerous scholars indeed, are trying to define cultural movements, actually reveals that a certain importance is attached to cultural periodisation. Throughout literary history, scholars have felt the need to define cultural movements and phenomena in order to create a clear narrative that allows scholars to categorise cultural products and their specific time of production. This categorisation is not only relevant to the basic grasp of cultural products, but also adds to the understanding of human nature itself. If culture is regarded as the expression and reflection of human feelings in relation to societal developments, studying and gaining a deep understanding of the products said culture brings about allows for an interesting and relevant way of developing a profound comprehension of what was going on in a certain society at a specific moment in time. The periodisation of theoretical notions allows for generalisations regarding certain bodies of cultural products, which, in turn, help understand general societal, philosophical, discursive and ideological trends.

Nealon’s effort is part of a larger tendency and shows how the periodisation of literary movements, however practical it may seem at first glance, has been subject of academic debate. A prime example can be found in the debate surrounding the current historical

¹ Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), ix.

² Ibid.

moment we find ourselves in. “Postmodernism is dead,”³ a phrase that can be encountered in both literary supplement and academic journal, is often interpreted as a call for a new vocabulary that allows engagement with current literary trends. In this call, we see a search for a lexicon that goes beyond postmodernism, which reflects the nature of the post-postmodern era we find ourselves in. But why would postmodernism be dead? One of the reasons could be that towards the end of the 20th century, Fukuyama alleged that mankind had reached the end of history.⁴ Liberal democracy and capitalism had won. It seemed as if all the big societal questions had been agreed upon. Despite the way in which this point of view is strongly rooted in a Western perspective on the world, and expressed by an academic elite, allegations like these started to crumble as global civilization moved into the 21st century. Scholars started to see how the promises of liberal politics, prospering economies and social welfare were broken, and how the world had to face numerous “crises of an ecological, economic or (geo-) political nature.”⁵ History appeared to be very much alive instead, but the postmodern discourse as used before did no longer seem to serve its purpose. This is where the gap between the established discourse and the changed reality comes to the surface, and the question as to what follows postmodernism arises. Post-postmodernism could be a straightforward answer to this question, but may not be a fitting discourse for this new cultural period.

Nealon places his analysis of post-postmodernism in Fredric Jameson’s postmodern tradition, claiming it to be “best understood as a historical period of capitalist development rather than (or, really, as the prior ground of) understanding it as a style of artistic practice, a

³ Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen, *Metamodernism: historicity, affect and depth after postmodernism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 3.

⁴ Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), x.

⁵ Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen, *Metamodernism: historicity, affect and depth after postmodernism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 2.

movement within various art and architecture discourses, or even a kind of zeitgeist.”⁶ While this approach does justice to the changing face of contemporary culture and society, mainly by acknowledging the far-reaching consequences of capitalist and unfettered economies, it does not seem fully able to provide a more inclusive engagement with the cultural products the current era brings about. As the call for an altogether new discourse emerges, Nealon does not offer something different, but attempts to cling to postmodernism and its general theoretical mode of interpretation, almost as if existing in linear relationship: “Deconstruction, then, is no longer an exit from where we are; but, just as important, deconstruction *is* where we are: deconstruction is the logic of value under late, later, or just-in-time capitalism.”⁷

1.1 Towards Metamodernism

Another term that attempts to define our current historical moment, but which engages with cultural products to a far greater extent, is metamodernism. This notion considers how the current times can be related to early 20th-century modernism, both in general zeitgeist and literary stylistics. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen, in their research on metamodernism, seek to establish how cultural products of the metamodern era reflect a certain zeitgeist that is similar to the modernist era. They employ the notion of *structures of feeling*, which was coined by Raymond Williams, to operationalise this metamodern zeitgeist. Williams explains how people often reflect on culture in the past tense, and how we fail to recognise changes in culture before they are institutionalised. We only perceive culture in the form that is generally consented upon and acknowledged, but seem to be blind to those developments that show us that new patterns or elements in social and cultural reality formation are on the rise. Williams asserts that “we are then defining these

⁶ Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), x.

⁷ Ibid, 125.

elements as a ‘structure’: as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension.”⁸ We want everything to be fixed, while nothing is actually fixed according to Williams. Feeling, experience, the social and the cultural are all in constant formation, so we should consequently think about these matters as constantly in motion. As the active reading and interpretation of art provides a formative process, Williams claims “the point is especially relevant to works of art, which really are, in one sense, explicit and finished forms – actual objects in the visual arts, objectified conventions and notations (semantic figures) in literature.”⁹ Structures of feeling are social experiences in formation, which appears to be in line with the way in which the metamodern era and theory are only just unfolding as well.

David James and Urmila Seshagiri map the way in which contemporary literature sports an increasing amount of modernist stylistics, connecting this to the rise of metamodernism. The societal, historical and political issues that contemporary literature deals with, all have their own particularities that are difficult to interpret in the light of fixed movements, but which may be fruitfully interpreted by means of adopting a metamodernist view. Despite the ongoing problematisation of both the notion of metamodernism and periodisation in general, postmodernism is dead, and we need a new discourse to deal with contemporary literature. The way in which contemporary British novels have a tendency to employ modernist techniques in various ways may point towards a metamodernism being a good starting point for developing such a discourse.

⁸ Devika Sharma, and Frederik Tygstrup, eds., *Structures of Feeling* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 5, doi: <https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1515/9783110365481>.

⁹ Raymond Williams, “Structures of Feeling,” in *Structures of Feeling*, ed. Devika Sharma, and Frederik Tygstrup (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 20-21, doi: <https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1515/9783110365481>.

1.2 Current Historical Moment: Brexit

One of the major particularities of the current moment may be the changing face of European politics, culminating in Brexit, which is one of most prevalent debates and issues in British society today. Slightly more than half of the voters (51.9%) chose to leave the European Union in the referendum on 23 June 2016. Brexit is, however, not just a political matter. It has revealed and caused huge rifts in British society that need to be addressed, and recent developments surrounding Brexit, as well as the political campaigns that dominated the lead-up to the referendum, have triggered a large number of cultural responses in virtually all disciplines. The arts seem to allow for a multi-faceted mode of engaging with an issue that involves a long and turbulent history, political and personal sentiments of millions of people, persistent and complex political games, and contested questions of identity.

Where responses in literature are concerned, Eaglestone has convincingly argued that these developments have given rise to the new genre of BrexLit.¹⁰ Kristian Shaw defines the genre as concerning “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.”¹¹ This might raise the question as to how BrexLit as a label does justice to a piece of literature, especially in the light of academic debates concerning the hybrid nature of contemporary literary texts. On the other hand, the label does serve the purpose of categorising and bringing attention to a growing body of literary works that engage with Brexit. It shows that Brexit does not only define British politics, but also leaves its mark on culture. The way in which this influence manifests itself can be found partly in both the expansion and diversification of the body of BrexLit.

¹⁰ Robert Eaglestone, *Brexit and literature: critical and cultural responses* (London: Routledge, 2018).

¹¹ Kristian Shaw, “BrexLit,” in *Brexit and Literature Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018), 15.

What makes BrexLit interesting to research in relation to metamodernism is the way in which it may be connected to the structures of feeling that Vermeulen, van den Akker and Gibbons describe in their delineation of metamodernism. Indeed, as Eaglestone observes, “Brexit is unavoidably to do with identity as well as analysis, ‘who are we’ as well as ‘what we do’.”¹² The way in which van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen describe metamodernism first and foremost as a structure of feeling that reflects the shared sensibility of the current historical moment appears to be in line with Eaglestone’s main reason for investigating literary responses to Brexit: “Literature and its study play a crucial role in our thought about how we live as individuals and as communities because of its deep involvement with personal and communal identity and because it broadens and reflects on our ability to think, feel and argue.”¹³

1.3 BrexLit: Byers and Coe

To further explore and map literary responses to Brexit and the metamodern quality they embody, the novels that will be analysed in this thesis are Sam Byers’ *Perfidious Albion* (2018) and Jonathan Coe’s *Middle England* (2018). These novels seem to have a very different focus at first glance. Whereas the first addresses the downsides of technology in a fragmented manner, the latter chronologically takes on the narrative of the last decade of British politics. *Perfidious Albion* is characterised as dystopian satire,¹⁴ while *Middle England* seems to approach Brexit with a type of satire that is based in everyday life.¹⁵ At the same time, they both deal with Brexit and trace the way in which it is felt throughout British society. Both novels are multifaceted and consider more than Brexit alone. The title of Byers’

¹² Robert Eaglestone, *Brexit and literature: critical and cultural responses*, (London: Routledge, 2018), 2.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Anthony Cummins, “Perfidious Albion by Sam Byers – review,” *The Guardian*, July 29, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jul/29/perfidious-albion-sam-byers-review>.

¹⁵ Sam Leith, “Middle England by Jonathan Coe review – a bittersweet Brexit novel,” *The Guardian*, November 16, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/16/middle-england-by-jonathan-coe-review>.

novel is a phrase that surfaced regularly in the Brexit debate and that dates back to the 13th century. Throughout history it was used in the context of international relations and refers to Britain not keeping promises and thus being unfaithful to other countries it made promises to or alliances with.

Middle England contains a passage that comically draws on the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games in London as a story about how Britain was, could have been, or maybe even is, sharing the larger story of collective identity formation by condensing it in a single event. The historical and almost mythical allusions to what is or once was Britain, add to the sense of how the BrexLit genre manifests itself in relation to history, and how it fits into the larger tradition of myth-making. Literary strategies like these also sketch one of the various ways in which people try to make sense of the world nowadays; how the structures of feeling of the Brexit era are taking shape. The novels both present the reader with identifiable characters bound to cope with Brexit, and are therefore inevitably dealing with the metamodern oscillation of the current historical moment. Brexit as a major political event could be one of the concerns of metamodernism because it engages, among other things, with the changing face of politics and identity formation.

1.4 Thesis Outline

These issues have led to the following question: “In what ways do Sam Byers’ *Perfidious Albion* (2018) and Jonathan Coe’s *Middle England* (2018) reflect metamodernist concerns regarding structures of feeling in relation to Brexit?” The combination of the relatively recent resurfacing of metamodernism and the emerging genre of BrexLit could reveal an interesting angle for the interpretation of the underlying structures of feeling of Brexit. It may also uncover in what ways British contemporary literature has a renewed interest in modernism, and how this serves the oscillating structures of feeling in being expressed. The research into these moving targets hopefully contributes to the formation of metamodernist theory, and to

our understanding of contemporary literature, culture and (cultural) responses to major political events in general. The project also aims to place the two novels that are discussed in a broader academic and societal context by providing elaborate textual analysis. In the end, a profound understanding of societal divisions and mechanisms may be the key to reconciliation. Even though cultural realities are not always the same and may not always be in line with one another, literature should have a significant responsibility in addressing these societal and social dichotomies. This thesis builds on previous research on metamodernism, opting for a case study in attempt to make the theoretical and abstract matter slightly more concrete.

In the first chapter, I will endeavour to further explain and explore the theoretical notion of metamodernism and its concerns regarding structures of feeling. I will go into metamodernist engagement with modernism in terms of zeitgeist, and operationalise this in order to apply them to Byers' and Coe's BrexLit novels. These novels will be analysed in chapters 3, 4 and 5 by means of close reading and textual analysis. The analysis will be threefold, as the notion of structures of feeling will be operationalised by means of dividing the analysis into three separate themes: Britishness, politics and societal dichotomies. The first analytical chapter will focus on how the novels present the role of Britishness in the formation of structures of feeling regarding Brexit. The second analytical chapter will address how the novels deal with the structures of feeling in relation to the changing face of politics. The third and final analytical chapter will reveal how societal dichotomies shape the structures of feeling of Brexit. The conclusion reflects on the research question and considers the findings in a broader context.

2. Theoretical Framework: Metamodernism

The term ‘metamodernism’ has been coined in recent academic debates, attempting to provide suitable terminology for the era currently unfolding. Baciú, Bocoş and Baciú-Urzică describe how the term was first introduced by Zavarzadeh in 1975, and how it was re-introduced by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker in 2010.¹⁶ These latter scholars outline this new type of modernism as:

characterized by an oscillation between a typically modern commitment and a markedly postmodern detachment. We call this structure of feeling “metamodernism”. According to the Greek-English lexicon the prefix “meta” refers to such notions as “with”, “between”, and “beyond”. We [use] these connotations of “meta” in a similar, yet not indiscriminate fashion. For we contend that metamodernism should be situated epistemologically with (post) modernism, ontologically between (post) modernism, and historically beyond (post) modernism.¹⁷

This seeming uncertainty inherent to the term, which could just as well serve as an explanation of the concept trying to explain the current historical moment, raises questions regarding the legitimacy and relevance of this philosophical notion:

Why is it necessary to introduce a new concept, a new philosophical vision on the fundamentals of existence and of the world? What else could this bring in addition to what exists at the moment as a philosophical reflection on the essence of the universe and the evolution of the contemporary world? Is it really necessary a new philosophical vision to build a new interpretative system about the Universe? Is this concept different from postmodernism or just a new philosophical concept artificially introduced, one which will not leave traces?¹⁸

¹⁶ Ciprian Baciú, Muşata Bocoş, and Corina Baciú-Urzică, “Metamodernism – a conceptual foundation,” *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 209 (2015): 34, doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.11.226.

¹⁷ Timotheus Vermeulen, and Robin van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2 (2010): 2, DOI: 10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677.

¹⁸ Baciú et al, 34.

Kersten and Wilbers (2018) also see how the term is under debate: “the “Metamodernism” label—and its relationship to the supposed demise of Postmodernism and resurfacing of Modernism—sometimes yields clashing interpretations.”¹⁹ Their work considers the notion in relation to contemporary English literature, which seems to look back to and engage in a dialogue with early 20th century modernism.²⁰ Despite the ongoing problematisation of the term and the debates this involves, they show that metamodernism is relevant to both contemporary British literature itself and its reception, even though the implications of the resurgence of modernism cannot be fully indicated yet.

2.1 Modernism Revisited

Kersten and Wilbers follow James and Seshagiri’s approach, who apply the notion of metamodernism to contemporary literature. The distinguishing feature of these latter scholars’ approach appears to be the way in which it forms a “defense of returning to the logic of periodization. Such an approach not only offers a rubric for reading contemporary literature’s relationship to modernism but also generates a retrospective understanding of modernism as a moment as well as a movement.”²¹ The type of literature that is discussed in the light of metamodernism is, however, not exactly the same as the literature that was written by Woolf, Joyce and their contemporaries during the early years of the 20th century. Instead, they notice that “the growing body of twenty-first-century metamodernist fiction does not only (or even principally) redeploy familiar traits like rupture, irony, and fragmentation as benchmarks of newness or arbiters of compositional value and esteem.”²² Looking at metamodernism, they find that a more sophisticated “aesthetic-historical pursuit characterizes an otherwise

¹⁹ Dennis Kersten, and Usha Wilbers, “Introduction: Metamodernism,” *English Studies* 99, no. 7 (2018): 721, DOI: 10.1080/0013838X.2018.1510657.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ David James, and Urmila Seshagiri, “Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution,” *PMLA* 129, no. 1 (2014): 88, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24769423>.

²² David James, and Urmila Seshagiri, “Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution,” *PMLA* 129, no. 1 (2014): 93, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24769423>.

disjunctive collection of writers and novels: to move the novel forward by looking back to the aspirational energies of modernism.”²³

James and Seshagiri focus on “contemporary fictions distinguished by inventive, self-conscious relationships with modernist literature. The legacy inscribed in these relationships is an important but little-charted twenty-first century aesthetic that we call metamodernism.”²⁴

David James explains how 21st-century novels tend to go back to modernist techniques and legacies in his *Modernist Futures* (2012). The way in which modernism has been defined as employing strategies that deal with the consciousness and experience of modern life and modernity, seems congruent with the oscillation and structures of feeling as described by van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen, drawing on the special quality of literature to trace what cannot be described. James recognises the “working definition of the modernist novel as a medium for connecting interiority and accountability, braiding the description of characters’ innermost reflections into the fabric of worldly situations.”²⁵ While both James and Seshagiri are highly aware of the aesthetic and stylistic issues that attend metamodernism, they seem less concerned with issues of zeitgeist, which may be more relevant to discuss in the light of Brexit and cultural responses.

This is where another important voice in the metamodernism debate comes into play: Van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen, in their *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism* (2017), explore a bend and return in history, and acknowledge the historicity of the present itself rather than positing an end that has already been reached, as Fukuyama does. The term metamodernism relies on the notion of modernism and thus claims a significant relation to be present. The challenges we face as a society today are nothing like the challenges brought about by the Great War raging through Europe, the Great Depression

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ David James, *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9.

keeping the world in an iron grip, or modern technologies entering into everyday life. Especially since we now know far greater wealth and welfare in western society. Yet, the first part of the 21st century also has a striking similarity to the first part of the 20th century, when modernism ran rampant. In some ways, the wars in the Middle East, the 2008 financial crisis, fast developments in (information) technology, and maybe even the coronavirus pandemic, may evoke sentiments and situations reminiscent of those in the first part of the 20th century. Even though we find ourselves in a completely different era, there may be similarities between how we feel about and attribute meaning to the current historical moment, and how modernists used to do this roughly a century ago.

2.2 Structures of Feeling

Metamodernism, according to Van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen, provides a means of tracing the ‘structures of feeling’ that are related to our experience of time or place, or the “sentiment, or rather still a sensibility that everyone shares, that everyone is aware of, but which cannot easily, if at all, be pinned down.”²⁶ The arts, maybe even only the arts, can convey the message of this deeply embedded experience as a “whole experience”²⁷. This structure of feeling is “that element of culture that circumscribes it but nonetheless cannot be traced back to any one of its individual ingredients.”²⁸

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, the notion of structures of feeling was introduced by Raymond Williams. Devika Sharma and Frederic Tygstrup allege that the notion “implies a continuous search for supplementary clues and traces that might lead us to understand the cultural and historical specificity of what we study, the sense of lived lives

²⁶ Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen, *Metamodernism: historicity, affect and depth after postmodernism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 7.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, 8.

underpinning the cultural record we can access from the archives.”²⁹ They also explain, as do Van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen, that Williams’ notion, however relevant and important, has barely been theorised. Experience remains the key term: “what seems to interest Williams is the very basic idea, yet very complex phenomenon, of the lived presence.”³⁰ Williams is thus concerned with questions we can all relate to and that we have certainly asked ourselves, either consciously and directly or subconsciously and indirectly:

What does it feel like to be in a particular situation? How do our propensities for doing this and not that emerge? What fuels our enthusiasm or enhances our wellbeing? How do the little things pertaining to feeling, bodily sensation, and atmosphere inflect, even ever so slightly, the ideas we proclaim and interests we pursue? What we arrive at here is a participants’ perspective on culture; that is, not only what was said and done at a particular place and at a particular time, but what it was like to be there.³¹

Thinking about structures of feeling directly opposes the quantification of the humanities that has been a recent trend, and goes back to the humanities’ unique quality of tracing what may not be discovered by hard sciences.

2.3 Operationalisation

Byers’ *Perfidious Albion* (2018) and Coe’s *Middle England* (2018) will be analysed in the light of three overarching themes that show how they attempt to trace the structures of feeling that Brexit has engendered, and that can be related to modernism. What binds these novels is the way in which they deal with British identities, the changing face of politics and societal dichotomies that are already in place and still on the rise. Apart from being embedded in the novels, these issues are also recognised by both journalists and academics. They see how Brexit has divided the nation even further, inherently bringing issues of identity to the fore:

²⁹ Devika Sharma, and Frederik Tygstrup, eds, *Structures of Feeling* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 1, doi: <https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1515/9783110365481>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

“We live in a divided country. The 2016 Brexit vote – and, to a degree, the general election last December – revealed a fissure of leave v remain, left v right, old v young, urban v provincial.”³² Browning shows that “for many the referendum became (or subsequently ‘has become’) a deeply emotional experience in which ‘leaving’ or ‘remaining’ in the EU has been ascribed with fundamental ontological significance.”³³ He also perceives a shifted political reality and a resurgence of populism, and shows that “the promise of fulfilment [...] can be politically seductive and mobilizing, is a central strategy of populist politics, but as such is also one that is only likely to exacerbate the ontological anxieties and insecurities upon which populist politics preys.” The fact that these concerns, central to the novels under discussion, raise questions and inspire debate makes them interesting to analyse in the light of metamodern structures of feeling. Closure on these issues may never be possible, but that is exactly what makes it relevant to at least create a sense of the current historical moment in a way that is only reserved for the humanities. This appears to be in line with the way in which Van den Akker and Vermeulen describe how “Metamodernism moves for the sake of moving, attempts in spite of its inevitable failure; it seeks forever for a truth that it never expects to find.”³⁴

³² Rhiannon Lucy Cosslet, “‘We have a no-politics rule’: how families can heal their Brexit rifts,” *The Guardian*, March 7, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/07/we-have-a-no-politics-rule-how-families-can-heal-their-brexit-rifts>.

³³ Christopher S. Browning, “Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfilment,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32, no.3 (2019): 223, DOI:10.1080/09557571.2019.1567461.

³⁴ Timotheus Vermeulen, and Robin van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2 (2010): 5, DOI: 10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677.

3. Structures of Feeling & Britishness

Both *Perfidious Albion* and *Middle England* delve into the process of identity formation, on a personal as well as on a collective level. What makes these novels interesting in the light of tracing the structures of feeling of Brexit, is the way in which the novels deal with Britishness and national identity formation as a fundamental element of Brexit. According to Eaglestone “nations are produced in the imagination by concepts, narratives, memories and traditions.”³⁵ Both novels seek to paint a picture of how both the Leave and Remain camps form their ideas about the nation, but they do so in different ways that reveal how they underlyingly deal with their sense of Britishness.

Perfidious Albion questions multiple types of identity formation, one of which is how people relate themselves to the country they live in, and how they do this in a time in which anonymous technologies like the internet allow for taking on as many identities as you want. Its dystopian post-Brexit setting in the rural east of England, reminiscent of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005) both in location and in the sense that doom is lurking in the background while only being allowed to touch the surface now and then, allows for an exploration of what could be one of multiple realities in the near future. Byers investigates British national identity formation mostly by means of characters that take up a role in the margins of the story.

The archetypical boasting intellectual DeCoverley, who moved from London to the seemingly quiet town of Edmundsbury, achieved what he desired, as “leaving London was the new moving to London. You slogged it out, made a name for yourself, then decamped to the sticks and devoted yourself to thrashing city life on Twitter while roaming the fields in pursuit of your tweedy ideals.”³⁶ After years of living as a self-proclaimed street philosopher, he now

³⁵ Robert Eaglestone, *Brexit and literature: critical and cultural responses* (London: Routledge, 2018), 1.

³⁶ Sam Byers, *Perfidious Albion* (Sebastopol, CA: O’Reilly Media, 2018), 5.

reinvents “himself as a deep-thinking rural gentleman, wearing wellington boots indoors and waxing lyrical about a ‘lost’ England comprised entirely of hedgerows and loam.”³⁷

Britishness in *Perfidious Albion* appears to be only existing in the minds of a certain part of society that has yet to come to terms with the world as it is now, as the novel’s title already implies Albion’s, or Britain’s, deceit and treachery, both externally and internally. The word ‘Albion’ nods to this nostalgic, rose tinted view of a bygone England which is found to be manipulative and misleading in the novel.

Hugo Bennington, right-wing politician and aspiring England Always party member, a party reminiscent of UKIP both in ideology and in the fact that it played a significant role in getting Britain to leave the EU, reflects: “When he talked of present-day England and the ways in which it both disappointed and terrified him, he made it clear he was regarding it in contrast to another, historical England, which had once made him proud and secure.”³⁸ After his musings he meets his party leader Alan Elm in Milton Keynes to complain about political correctness going mad while downing Indian curry and ale.³⁹ This scene adds to the understanding of these characters as unaware or ignorant of the historical and cultural developments that have shaped a more modern version of Britishness over the last century. The novel allows the reader to directly pinpoint the Leavers and the Remainers: the first group residing in the idea of a pastoral Britain of times gone by, and the latter recognising the wasteland version that emerged from it while not being able to come to terms with the situation in an altogether different way.

Trina, one of tech company Green’s only coloured employees, who lives at a miserable housing estate with her non-nuclear family, observes how “British television had given itself over almost entirely to the perpetuation of a faded and frequently offensive

³⁷ Ibid, 5-6.

³⁸ Ibid, 103.

³⁹ Ibid, 119.

English ideal.”⁴⁰ She cherishes the opportunities she has had, and the typical countryside bike rides to and from work, but does not seem to have any deep affection for Britain. The other characters that could be defined as Remainers, like Robert, Jess and Deepa, seem less concerned with Britishness, and more with other fundamental trends and issues of contemporary society and identity that need not be specific to a nation. Their concerns with technology, privacy and the constant imagery concerning masks and faces, could have been situated in any Western country, and appear to be more of an existentialist nature relating to the challenges of living in a highly modern society, reminiscent of the way in which these themes were dealt with roughly a century ago. Byers’ engagement with Britishness seems to be more in the background and reserved mostly for the Leave camp, allowing other types of identity formation with regards to gender and online versus offline realities to play a more significant part in his novel. This recognition of multiple identities may even leave room for Britishness to develop into a more subtle concept that could, in time, become something that is part of any British person’s collection of identities. The idea that there is no single truth or identity was central to modernism, and this plurality can be related to the modernist interest in the fragmented individual. This concept now re-emerges as a central point to discussions about (national) identity formation, and shows how complex or even unattainable this process can be. The fact that issues of identity do occur in literature in various ways, shows how the arts attempt to trace the structures of feeling of this particular aspect of the current historical moment, and how it relates to Brexit.

Middle England, on the other hand, is a state-of-the-nation novel that deals with issues of Britishness more explicitly. All characters seem to engage with the notion of Britishness in one way or the other, against the mainly urban backdrop of Birmingham and London. The first part of the novel, *Merrie England*, is introduced by means of a quote from Ian Jack from

⁴⁰ Ibid, 134.

The Guardian, who offers a hopeful view on the term ‘British,’ as it appeared to him in the last decades of the previous century: “It had room for newcomers and for people like me who found its capaciousness and slackness attractive.”⁴¹ Yet, he also sees that “here was a civic nationalism that meandered pleasantly like an old river, its dangerous force spent far upstream.” This invites parallels with how Van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen see how texts that express structures of feeling may be “characterised by a sense of earnestness and hope.”⁴² The three parts of the novel mark different stages in England’s development, starting in April 2010 and ending in September 2018. This novel clearly distinguishes between Leave and Remain as well, and just like Byers’ novel, it shows how thin the protective layer is between civilisation and the dangers that threaten it. Unlike *Perfidious Albion*, Coe’s novel is set against the backdrop of actual politics and politicians. It seems to draw on all the British clichés, stereotypes and imagery, but adds a humane layer of experience to it.

Sohan, an academic with Sri Lankan roots, comments that Brits “don’t appreciate Johnny Foreigner coming over to the land of Dickens and Shakespeare and telling them how it should be done.”⁴³ Later in the novel he becomes involved with research on what it means to be English and the idea of Deep England, which only exists on the golf club according to Sophie, his colleague.⁴⁴ Together with Sophie, one of the protagonists, Sohan sees how “St. Paul’s Cathedral looked tiny and vulnerable from here, struggling to assert any kind of identity in the face of the modernist, Brutalist and post-modernist creations which had so recently sprung up around it.”⁴⁵ It no longer carried out the identity of the phoenix rising from the ashes of the Great Fire. They give shape to the idea of Britishness as experienced by younger people; full of pop culture references and strongly divided into a young, urban,

⁴¹ Jonathan Coe, *Middle England* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 1.

⁴² Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen, *Metamodernism: historicity, affect and depth after postmodernism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 8.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 27.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 203.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 144.

cosmopolitan London and the remaining rural part of the country, filled with the Old Guard's narrow-mindedness. According to Sohan, Britain's essence can be best described with a comparison to Tolkien's work, as he "created the Shire and populated its pastoral idyll with doughty, insular hobbits, prone to somnolence and complacency when left to their own devices but fierce when roused."⁴⁶ References like these and the inclusion of two academic figures in the field of the arts showcase a high awareness of literary traditions and add a metafictional quality to the novel.

Opposite to these progressive characters is Ian's mother Helena, who is not always happy with progressive daughter-in-law Sophie. She quotes Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech multiple times,⁴⁷ claims the Birmingham politician was right all along, and eventually proves one of the main personifications of Euroscepticism and anti-immigration in the novel. Yet, she is not one of the main characters, which also leaves the Leave camp slightly marginalised in Coe's novel, and reserved for the same ignorant and intolerant white class that clings to a Britishness of times gone by. On the other end of the spectrum we find the intellectual Benjamin, whose ideal life is somewhat reminiscent of the Bloomsbury Group⁴⁸. His group of friends, introduced in the novel's opening scene, contains mostly intellectuals and has been together ever since boarding school, which adds to another type of higher-class Britishness altogether. Even though they consider themselves left-wing, friend and journalist Doug Anderton finds himself writing increasingly moderate pieces, and starts a relationship with a Conservative politician, angering his unruly daughter even more.

The way in which all characters deal with the Olympic opening ceremony can be accurately described by drawing on what metamodernism is according to Vermeulen and Van den Akker: "We will call this discourse, oscillating between a modern enthusiasm and a

⁴⁶ Ibid, 202.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 90.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 10.

postmodern irony, metamodernism.”⁴⁹ However critical in the first place, each and every one of the characters are bursting with enthusiasm and pride for their country after seeing this accumulation of British greatness: “England felt like a calm and settled place tonight: a country at ease with itself.”⁵⁰ Britishness is described as “semi-hostile indifference” and “keep calm and carry on”⁵¹ to “*Awesome*”⁵² in the course of two chapters, even though the reader never gets to know what it really means to be British, neither through the novel’s narrative, nor through Sohan’s research. Middle England embodies the nation as a whole, almost similar to the way in which England is presented as caricature in Julian Barnes’ *England, England* (1998).

Both novels draw on the hybridity that is inherent to Britishness and identity formation in general, following modernist tradition and metamodern concerns regarding the structures of feeling of Brexit. They pose the question of identity as an issue central to modern-day society, and thus revealing particularities of how people experience this as part of the general structures of feeling. This invites parallels with how Van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen describe the current historical moment as being “in constant oscillation, continuously overcoming and undermining hitherto fixed or consolidated positions.”⁵³ The novels present different versions of Britishness that are shared by different groups within society, and which were employed by both the Leave and Remain camps during the Brexit campaign and after. It shows how people increasingly experience difficulties figuring out who they are and where they belong, especially now the idea that one has multiple identities is getting more generally recognised. Awareness may be on the rise, but in the end this major identity crisis seems one

⁴⁹ Timotheus Vermeulen, and Robin van den Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2 (2010): 1, DOI: 10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 139.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 124.

⁵² *Ibid*, 138.

⁵³ Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen, *Metamodernism: historicity, affect and depth after postmodernism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 6.

of the challenges we face as a society today. According to Shaw, “literature has always been a significant influence on the perception of Britishness [...], shaping the identifiers of national identity in the popular cultural imagination.”⁵⁴ Here a dialogue becomes apparent between literature and identity, oscillating towards a dynamic and hybrid definition of identity. The combination between an identity crisis and an emerging dialogue, and the tension this brings about, is exactly what makes Britishness so important in the light of Brexit. The notion is under severe change and criticism, while all characters seem to deal with it in their own way. Even those who would rather not identify with the traditional and conservative form of Britishness, consciously relate themselves to another idea of the nation. This metamodern oscillation is traced in the novels, which attempt to uncover what Brexit feels like to the people. The novels, thus, lay bare how Britishness leads to a dividing friction that is part of the structures of feeling of Brexit.

⁵⁴ Kristian Shaw, “BrexLit,” in *Brexit and Literature Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018), 18.

4. Structures of Feeling & the Changing Face of Politics

Shaw points out that BrexLit is capable of “demonstrating literature’s potential to engage with emergent political realities.”⁵⁵ One of these main shifts in the political landscape is the rise of populism, culminating in Brexit. Both *Perfidious Albion* and *Middle England* deal with the faces behind the populist politics, and trace how the sense of being on a turning point emerged in the political sphere. *Perfidious Albion* contains a warning concerning the danger of right-wing politicians that appear humorous or harmless, and the risk of not taking those forces seriously enough. Fascism and populism reigned supreme around the same time as modernism did, and its revival adds to the idea of facing challenges reminiscent of the challenges we faced a century ago. *Middle England* is even more directly and explicitly political, and features the real politicians and parties of the last decade of British politics. This allows for a more nuanced narrative, and even though political events and characters are central to the novel, they remain somewhat in the background. The novel uncovers where British politics came from, what it is moving towards now, but also sketches the turning point and the friction this causes.

Perfidious Albion provides a very obvious embodiment of populist politics with the character of Hugo Bennington. He may be easily confused with Nigel Farage, taking on a humorous attitude, heavily criticising immigration, writing columns, and presenting himself as your everyday man in the pub. In one of his columns, Bennington rages about there being too much equality at the expense of white Englishmen.⁵⁶ He tries to keep fascist militia Brute Force under control, a group reminiscent of the English Defence League. He and his absurd

⁵⁵ Kristian Shaw, “BrexLit,” in *Brexit and Literature Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018), 16.

⁵⁶ Sam Byers, *Perfidious Albion* (Sebastopol, CA: O’Reilly Media, 2018), 5.

political adviser Teddy aspire to get Edmundsbury's seat in Parliament for England Always.

The party's populist nature and intentions do not remain obscure:

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.⁵⁷

Both Hugo and Teddy are constantly aware of the show they are putting up, while continuously referring to and making use of well-known populist rhetoric.⁵⁸ This re-emergence of populism, and even fascism in some instances, is in some ways reminiscent of the previous time these forces got a foothold in politics and society. Even though the novel acknowledges that these forces are completely different now, it does provide a sense of a danger being present that people can just as easily criticise and fall for. This intangibility appears to be in line with the opaqueness of structures of feeling, while being part of those same structures of the current historical moment.

This populist shift goes hand in hand with the increasing vulgarity of politics: "As politics and commerce had become murkier, so the buildings in which vital transactions took place had become ever more resplendently clear."⁵⁹ This observation appears to be in line with "the reinvention of transparency [...] in architecture"⁶⁰ in metamodernism, according to Vermeulen and Van den Akker. These scholars also draw on the hollowing out of both political and public debate, which is reflected in the novel as well:

Indeed, a recent statistical analysis of Hugo's columns for *The Record*, carried out, ironically enough, by some whining liberal hoping to eviscerate Hugo through his use of language, had revealed that *whining* was

⁵⁷ Ibid, 119.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 250-259. This point is made very clear in the confrontation between Hugo Bennington and Vivian Ross.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 31.

⁶⁰ Timotheus Vermeulen, and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture* 2 (2010): 6, DOI: 10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677.

his most commonly used term, beating out liberal, conspiracy, politically correct and ‘Multicultural’, which Hugo always both capitalised and placed in inverted commas.⁶¹

This passage shows how politicians’ utterings are extensively analysed, while actual debate fails to occur. The way in which these politics are increasingly led by fear comes to the fore when Trina, an individual heavily marginalised in British society, publishes a tweet with #whitemalegenocide after racist comments made by Bennington. Hugo decided to confront her, and in doing so “needed to pretend he was arguing solely with her in order to hide the fact that he was arguing with everyone he thought of as being like her: namely the swelling imagined mass of everyone who was not like him.”⁶² Politicians like Bennington appear to feel threatened by the changes in modern day society, underscoring the metamodern idea of being on a turning point. Apart from commenting on purely political powers, the novel also addresses the increasing power of big tech companies, and their ability to control everyday life without it being noticed.⁶³ The demise of Bennington means the rise of Teddy, who closely cooperates with tech companies Downton and Green. ‘Downton’ appears to be a nod to a relationship between the growing vogue for nostalgia in entertainment and a growing politics that relies on nostalgia for a bygone England for its success. Teddy takes over Hugo’s position within England Always while blatantly admitting that he has no idea what he is doing.⁶⁴ He seems only interested in fame and influence, using his position as a welcome addition to his glamorous life, adding even further to the idea that politics are radically changing.

Middle England traces the political landscape by means of the regular conversations between Doug Anderton and Nigel Ives, the coalition government’s deputy assistant director of communications who never really answers any questions, evades every form of

⁶¹ Sam Byers, *Perfidious Albion* (Sebastopol, CA: O’Reilly Media, 2018), 75.

⁶² *Ibid*, 202.

⁶³ The Larchwood estate as petri dish for a gamified way of regulating society and system internalisation.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 321.

confrontation, and constantly contradicts himself. These conversations also show that there seems to be a turning point that is felt throughout Westminster and beyond. In their first chat, they talk about the recently formed coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats: “You’re talking about the spirit of the age, Douglas. A complete break with the old two-party system. No more petty antagonism. Just common ground and cooperation. It’s a *very* exciting time to be entering politics.”⁶⁵ This illustrates the first step towards a different order, but also underscores how different British politics turned out eventually, culminating in Brexit and antagonism running rampant. Nigel boasts about the banter between David Cameron and Nick Clegg, while Doug comments on the hypocrisy involved on the side of the Liberal Democrats.⁶⁶ According to Nigel, at this moment in time, the British people spoke with “a loud, unanimous, decisive, voice and what they said could hardly have been clearer. They said, “We don’t know.””⁶⁷

This ‘we don’t know’ situation is also exemplary of the Brexit referendum. When the Conservative Party launched its manifesto for the general election in 2015, their unique selling point became: “Real change in the relationship with the European Union.”⁶⁸ Doug sees how the British people do not really care about the EU, and that Cameron promises the referendum to silence the people in the party who “keep banging on about how much they hate the EU and won’t shut up until we do something about it.”⁶⁹ Nigel denies this and argues that it is all about will of the people. At the same time, Nigel claims that the British parliamentary system “keeps the fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists from having any real influence. [...] imagine what would happen if they were given an equal say with everyone else on matters of national importance.”⁷⁰ The referendum does exactly the opposite,

⁶⁵ Jonathan Coe, *Middle England* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 34.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 35.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 182.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 183.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 268.

according to Doug. This adds to the idea of a shift towards a politics imbued with emotions and antagonism, that is both radical and impalpable. After the Brexit vote, Nigel avoids Doug for sixteen months. When they do eventually meet, Nigel still defends Cameron, until he breaks and admits that “we’re utterly and irredeemably fucked. It’s all chaos. Everyone’s running around like headless chickens. Nobody has the faintest idea what they’re doing. We’re so fucked.”⁷¹ His confusion is extreme, and he decides to leave his job. The actual referendum and its outcome are not directly reported in the novel. This may imply that the referendum itself was no longer anything that could be attributed any significant meaning to, or that everything had been decided all along in the events and situations that surrounded it. The referendum was not solely political, and this intangible quality is in line with the structures of feeling of Brexit.

In this regard, *Middle England* contains roughly the same warning as *Perfidious Albion*. Populist forces are omnipresent, even though we may not always be aware of them when they are not explicitly voiced. These forces should, however, be taken seriously, partly because of the way in which they have contributed to a world war and mass genocide in the previous century. A sense of madness roams the pages of both novels, a sense of a wretched system, but also a sense of being on a turning point, as metamodernism claims as well. Simultaneously, there appears to be no pervasive thought on which way to go from here, which is where one of the major challenges of the current time lies. The way in which the reader is urged to look into the heads of multiple characters to recreate the political narrative is reminiscent of the way in which modernist fiction was constructed. It contributes to the way in which the characters try to make sense of the world around them and trace the structures of feeling of this historical moment for themselves. This fragmentation in both narratives seems to strengthen the sense of being on a turning point that cannot yet be defined conclusively,

⁷¹ Ibid, 332.

which resonates with the metamodern idea that structures of feeling can never be described entirely or precisely.

5. Structures of Feeling & Societal Dichotomies

According to Shaw, “Brexit did not divide the nation, it merely revealed the inherent divisions within society.”⁷² Also Van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen see how instances of inequality become more overt, especially as “these rising levels of inequality were papered over – or veiled by – increasingly booming levels of economic growth”⁷³ up until the global financial crisis. These divides are omnipresent in both novels and prove to be very diverse. Yet, they all seem to culminate in the Leave-Remain divide. The texts engage with the tensions these divides bring about in a way that attempts to reveal part of the structures of feeling of this current historical moment. Through these divides, both novels recognise the fragmentation of reality, which is also reflected stylistically.

Perfidious Albion brings multiple societal divides to the fore, with Darkin as a prime representative of a group in society that does not feel heard or taken seriously. He lives in a neglected apartment on the decayed Larchwood estate, and is barely capable of living on his own and making ends meet. He struggles with the death of his wife Flo, but caring neighbour Geoff keeps an eye on him. Darkin is anti-immigration, feels completely forgotten, and admires Hugo Bennington and his columns. Yet, the passages devoted to him allow for an empathic representation of the Leave camp: “In an ever-complexifying world, simplicity was a much sought-after and increasingly finite commodity, and people had a tendency to grab it where they could find it.”⁷⁴ On the other end of the spectrum we find self-proclaimed left-wing intellectuals like Robert Townsend, his boss Silas and Jacques DeCoverley, making exclamations like: “‘Indeed’, he said, taking a ruminative sip of his Negroni and slicking a

⁷² Kristian Shaw, “BrexLit,” in *Brexit and Literature Critical and Cultural Responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018), 16.

⁷³ Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen, *Metamodernism: historicity, affect and depth after postmodernism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 16.

⁷⁴ Sam Byers, *Perfidious Albion* (Sebastopol, CA: O’Reilly Media, 2018), 103.

finger across his glossy brow. ‘These are post-present times.’”⁷⁵ To them it appeared that “*Not wanting it all* was the truly radical act. Everything else, it seemed, was dead.”⁷⁶ This distinction lays bare a hollowing out of public discourse in the intellectual class, while they accuse the Darkins of this world of ignorance. Robert takes up Darkin as a case and writes about him, which is unintentionally picked up on by Hugo Bennington and his followers. This intellectual class appropriates a command over social mobility by means of having tech companies Green and Downton gamify a new version of the estate: “social mobility was back, and it had never been more fun.”⁷⁷ This strengthens the divide that is already present, because one part of society feels they can, and maybe even should, take control over another part of society.

Another important dichotomy in the novel surfaces between the masculine and the feminine. The women in the novel are of a generation highly aware of, and educated in, feminist discourse; reminiscent of the New Woman in modernist literature. In terms of their progressive outlooks on life, work and relationships, they could be compared to Vivie Warren from George Bernard Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1893). Two of the women, Jess and Trina, have been the subject of male abuse, primarily online, but Trina has suffered physical violence as well. Towards the end of the novel, the women join forces in an attempt to stop the Griefers, a group that threatens to make every person’s data public, one after the other. They discover that Edmundsbury is actually Green’s petri dish for testing a gamified work sphere.

Most intellectual men in the novel claim to be leftist and progressive, but actively exercise white privilege and toxic masculinity. Robert gained success off Jess’ abuse, and is driven mad by her online alter egos that constantly comment on his articles. When he and

⁷⁵ Ibid, 3.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 8.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 41.

DeCoverly discuss one of these alter egos, Julia Benjamin, they play the victim because they are accused of being privileged: “As if, you know, just because I’ve had the benefit of a private education.”⁷⁸ About the received critical comments they say: “Yes, so *privileged* to have to deal with all this shit every day.”⁷⁹ They conclude that all that Julia Benjamin really wants is “being fucked. [...] I imagine that she’s terribly ugly, don’t you?”⁸⁰ If she wants to be an intellectual, she can have it, according to the men. Another example of this type of masculinity is strongly expressed in the scenes featuring Bream and Holt, two absurd Green employees and Trina’s rude colleagues. Their obsession with productivity is voiced in a very flattened tech-world way of speaking,⁸¹ all couched in a language that does not seem to express anything. This continuous tension and movement between meaninglessness, while still being driven forward by a cause, appears to be in line with the metamodern oscillation as well.

A third divide, which may not necessarily be a societal dichotomy but certainly defines our lives, is that of online versus offline. *Perfidious Albion* does not deal with technology itself, but with the way in which it has actually changed the feel of life and its emotional pitch; it traces the effect technology has on the characters and how they try to make sense of it, and thus attempts to track its structures of feeling. Jess wonders: “At what point had the velocity and mania of physical events begun to match that of their online counterparts?”⁸² About the relation between herself and her online alter egos, Jess thinks that “the point at which they met was exactly the space that other theorists contested: the blurry interstice between the real and the virtual, the online world and its unplugged counterpart.”⁸³ The novel seems to build on the idea of the digital dualism fallacy; online and offline cannot

⁷⁸ Ibid, 226.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 229-230.

⁸¹ Criticized by Trina on pages 100-101.

⁸² Ibid, 192.

⁸³ Ibid ,29.

be neatly separated because online life is bedded so deeply into the fabric of our lives, and our experiences do not divide neatly along digital or analogue lines. The social control depicted in the novel appears to build on that too: It is not just about sucking up data; it is about manipulating feeling for political and economic purposes. The novel implies that we are at a moment in time when we can still resist the extent to which tech companies and governments use data to gain deeper access to our lives, and when we can still both adjust our behaviour and legislate at a global level to make sure the implications for democracy and justice are considered. The final page, “Error 404: The page you are looking for does not yet exist,”⁸⁴ leaves the reader to stop and think about where we are and decide for themselves, and thus urges them to engage with these particular structures of feeling of a post-Brexit England and its technological developments. This also adds to the way in which political campaigns, like the Brexit campaign, are increasingly run online, allowing for more public interference and discussion, whether meaningful or not.

The final dichotomy is that of inner versus outer life. This is again not necessarily a societal divide, but something that has its function in representing Leave versus Remain. The novel is concerned with our inner life, and tries to capture what it feels like to be alive in this particular historical moment. This inner realism appears far more important than outer realism or plot. In working to capture the effect of technological and media change on our emotional and psychological lives, rather than focusing on the technology itself, modernism appears to be the obvious reference point. This sense is strengthened by the Eliot reference at the moment Jess starts building her ultimate alter ego after Robert sends the group of woman-haters that has previously harassed Jess on Julia Benjamin: “This was how things ended, she thought, but also how they began: with neither a bang nor a whimper, just a click.”⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Ibid, 384.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 250.

This representation of inner life in relation to outer life is shaped by a sense of fragmentation and the effort to delve into the characters minds. Reflecting on her online identities in relation to what they did to her partner Robert, Jess “felt, instead, dissipated, fragmented, diluted.”⁸⁶ While Robert, when encountering Darkin in a helpless state and starting to form the idea of taking him up as a cause, noted that “his feelings [...] were in a state of oscillation: concern on the one hand, but on the other, uncomfortably, excitement.”⁸⁷ This dichotomy between inner and outer life is emphasised by modernist techniques. This is in line with how James characterises the modernist novel as “particularly concerned with exploring how the immediacy of inward experience relates to the interpersonal facets of social accountability.”⁸⁸

Middle England also builds on several societal dichotomies that picture how Leave and Remain interact with and oppose each other. The first dichotomy is the exact same divide between the intellectual class and the people as depicted in Byers’ novel. This confrontation is embodied most directly in the relationship between Sophie and Ian. When they first meet in a Speed Awareness Course that Ian teaches, he seems amused by her quoting Huxley and modernity: “Speed, it seems to me, provides the one genuine modern pleasure.”⁸⁹ Whereas Sophie is very conscious of her multi-layered self and reality as an academic, Ian is depicted as the relatively simple lad. They heavily fall out over the fact that Ian voted Leave and Sophie Remain, and even separate for a while. In their therapy sessions, their therapist notices: “What’s interesting about both of those answers is that neither of you mentioned politics. As if the referendum wasn’t about Europe at all. Maybe something much more fundamental and personal was going on.”⁹⁰ Ian accuses Sophie of feeling morally superior,

⁸⁶ Ibid, 64.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 45.

⁸⁸ David James, *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9.

⁸⁹ Jonathan Coe, *Middle England* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 39.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 327.

while Sophie accuses Ian of not being open. Eventually, they make up and are even expecting their “beautiful Brexit baby.”⁹¹ Their example is telling for the way in which Brexit has revealed the rifts present in British society, and typical of the way in which the divide between these groups is framed.⁹² The friction that now surfaces, which may have remained hidden had there not been a referendum, shows how British society finds itself in the midst of a shift that resonates with metamodernist structures of feeling, and maybe even “allows us to come to terms with the gap between what we thought we knew and the things we experience in our daily lives,”⁹³ as Van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen assert.

Another divide that is present in this novel is a generation gap, which surfaces between Doug and his daughter Coriander, who asks her parents: “Why does your generation have to be so bloody binary about everything?”⁹⁴ As her father, “Doug hoped that she would overcome, sooner or later, her anger at the world and more specifically at the world that his generation had bequeathed her.”⁹⁵ This anger, resulting in a strong social justice warrior trait on the part of Coriander, eventually resulted in Sophie⁹⁶ being suspended from her job. We also see this generational divide in the conversations between Doug and Nigel, when the latter was still hopeful: “We’re talking about a generational divide. You and your friends and my dad were brought up in a certain way. You’re used to an antagonistic form of party politics. But Britain’s moved on.”⁹⁷ This creates a sense of the injustice felt on both sides of the Brexit spectrum.

⁹¹ Ibid, 421.

⁹² Sophie’s grandfather Colin has the role of misunderstood, ignored and forgotten older white man, like Darkin in Byers’ novel. The scene (p. 256) in which he visits the place where his former employer, the Longbridge factory, used to be, only to find out that it no longer exists, allows for a completely different way of creating empathy with both the Colins and Darkins of this world. Also the way in which anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic cruise passengers (p. 156) do not want to read Lionel Hampshire’s novel because the characters are “psychologically complex,” adds to the differences between the groups under scrutiny.

⁹³ Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen, *Metamodernism: historicity, affect and depth after postmodernism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 3.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 195.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 388.

⁹⁶ Who is always extremely cautious and politically correct.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 35.

Middle England also deals with the divide between the masculine and the feminine, but there seems to be a slightly more diverse set of characters. The novel only has two characters with a non-Western background. Sohan, whose homosexuality shows how ridiculously late same-sex marriage was legalised in the UK, can be compared to Trina from *Perfidious Albion*, while he appears less of a victim. The character of Naheed showcases the misogyny felt by a certain male part of the population, especially towards women with a non-British background: “Her knowledge and experience commanded respect, even though the resentment felt by some of the men at being lectured on this subject by a woman – by an Asian woman – was palpable.”⁹⁸ The discussion on male and white privilege is brought up by Sophie when Ian feels bad about Naheed getting a promotion instead of him.⁹⁹ The novel’s second part, *Deep England*, is introduced with a quote from Iyad el-Baghdadi: “To the privileged, equality feels like a step down. Understand this and you understand a lot of populist politics today.”¹⁰⁰ The novel subtly deals with injustice and inequality, and presents everyday situations as illustrations for the inequality underlying Brexit as to trace the situation’s structures of feeling in this regard.

The final divide is also that of inner life versus outer life. Like Byers, Coe employs modernist techniques to allow the reader to delve deep into the characters’ minds, while the subjective views of the characters can never be fully trusted. The most telling example is Benjamin’s stream of consciousness that the reader follows for six pages, in which he elaborately ponders on his life.¹⁰¹ According to James, the modernist novel attempts not only to “stimulate the experience of the material world but also to stimulate new interpretations of it.”¹⁰² He explains that “their strategies for remaking form into a process of participatory

⁹⁸ Ibid, 40.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 283.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 141.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 335-340.

¹⁰² David James, *Modernist Futures: Innovation and Inheritance in the Contemporary Novel*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 15.

engagement both defines what modernism means to contemporary novelists and underlines why it still matters.”¹⁰³ Coe seems to build on this, not only by means of attributing a prominent role to writing and academia in this novel, but also by actively having the reader reconstruct the narrative of Brexit. Despite the fact that his novel is in chronological order, Coe works with flashbacks, and creates a sense of fragmentation by means of making leaps in time and by paying attention to the fragmented thoughts of the characters. The omnipresence of information has the undesired effect of never allowing the characters to get up to speed with the world around them, let alone take a proper position regarding the matter of Brexit.¹⁰⁴

Both novels seem to employ various techniques reminiscent of modernism to deal with the sense of fragmentation and divisions within society. The societal dichotomies under discussion do not only appear to describe what is so particular about Brexit, but also trace what may be the biggest challenge of global society today: the ever-growing dichotomies between educated and uneducated, male and female, black and white, and everything that emerges from this. Facing modernity is not new in itself, but the novels do provide a sense of being at a crossroads, at a metamodern turning point “between irony and enthusiasm, between sarcasm and sincerity, between eclecticism and purity, between deconstruction and construction,”¹⁰⁵ as described by Van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen. Yet, according to them, “ultimately, it points to a sensibility that should be situated beyond the postmodern, one that is related to recent metamorphoses or qualitative changes in western Capitalist societies.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Jonathan Coe, *Middle England* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 302.

¹⁰⁵ Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen, *Metamodernism: historicity, affect and depth after postmodernism* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 3.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

6. Conclusion

In exploring the ways in which Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion* (2018) and Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018) reflect metamodernist concerns regarding 'structures of feeling' in relation to Brexit, it has become clear that these novels unveil complex structures of feeling regarding identity formation, the rise of populism and vulgarity in politics and growing societal dichotomies. The fact that these themes are addressed in the novels, underscored by the application of modernist techniques, may suggest that the structures of feeling of the current historical moment bears a likeness to the structures of feeling of the modernist era. The novels clearly have a sense of progress and decline to them, and the troublesome relation with Europe invites parallels with the way in which the British empire started falling apart during the first decades of the 20th century. The reader is invited to look into the heads of characters and should recreate the narrative for her or himself. The relation between the human psyche and the external world is very important in modernist fiction and is ubiquitous in both *Perfidious Albion* and *Middle England*. The characters do not always have the ability to communicate with each other and seem to feel misunderstood or disconnected. Alienation appears to slowly creep up on them, leaving them in a state of disillusionment. In this respect, metamodernism provides a different angle to look at Brexit and the cultural responses it has evoked. The structures of feeling that surfaced by means of applying a metamodernist framework to the novels by Byers and Coe might have remained less obvious otherwise. The analogy between the novels and metamodern theory adds to the understanding of Brexit and how it is experienced.

The divisions that come to the fore, like uneducated versus educated, female versus male, left versus right, appear to have played an important role in Brexit and the general concerns of societies today. These huge rifts in society, that seem to be only getting bigger, should be addressed more directly. The question remains as to how this should be done.

Literature is a good starting point to open up the discussion, but a significant part of the target audience would unfortunately not be reached. Metamodern concerns regarding structures of feeling allow the notion to be highly conscious of literature's ability to trace what cannot be expressed and thus to pave the way for discussion, which is what makes metamodernism interesting in this regard. Metamodernism could provide a starting point for a different role for the arts within society; a role in which the arts function as the connecting factor that invites everyone to join in a grounded debate.

As is inherent to the definition of structures of feeling as given by Raymond Williams and adopted by Van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen, the notion cannot provide a definite answer or explanation of the current historical moment, but it can be traced by means of the arts. This emphasises the lack of theorisation of William's notion of structures of feeling. A more solid theorisation could allow for more concrete and interesting insights into any historical moment, and an even more feasible comprehension of metamodernism as a literary movement and concept. This may also lead to a more grounded operationalisation of structures of feeling, which could benefit the way in which conclusions can be drawn regarding the nature of the current historical moment.

While metamodern theory is strongly positioned in relation to modernism, Van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen also relate the notion to postmodernism. This postmodern element, however, seems to remain somewhat underdeveloped, which might warrant further scrutiny of its position within the metamodernism debate. Metamodernism invites further reflection on the legacy of postmodernism, given the idea that the current era follows the postmodern era, and is often described as post-postmodern in want of a more suitable term. A more outspoken idea on the relationship with postmodernism could provide a theory that is grounded, to a greater extent, within the chronology of periodisation of Western literatures. If this position is defined more precisely, metamodernism might go a long way identifying the

current literary trend, moment, or movement, including even more types of contemporary literature.

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