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British Jewish Writing in the Post-2016 Era: Tom Stoppard, Linda Grant and Howard Jacobson

Sue Vice

School of English, The University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK; s.vice@sheffield.ac.uk

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Abstract: This article analyses the ways in which British Jewish writing has responded to the watershed events of 2016: the vote to leave the EU in the United Kingdom, and the election of Donald Trump as President of the USA. It argues that such a response demands varied generic and narrative forms, as exemplified in three case studies. Tom Stoppard's 2020 play *Leopoldstadt* is a historical drama about twentieth-century Austrian history, but the moment of its staging and its links to the playwright's biography convey its cautionary relationship to the present. Linda Grant's 2019 novel *A Stranger City* is set in a post-2016 London that has become unfamiliar to its inhabitants, while Howard Jacobson's *Pussy* of 2017 is a satire aimed at Trump's electoral success. In each case, cultural turmoil is represented in terms of Jewish history.

Keywords: Tom Stoppard; Linda Grant; Howard Jacobson; Brexit; Trump

1. The 2016 Turning-Point

This article explores the ways in which British Jewish literature—meaning fiction and drama that addresses aspects of Jewish history, and written, as in the present cases, by Jewish-identified authors in Britain—has responded to events in the UK and USA since 2016. I have chosen this date in acknowledgement of its status as a contemporary watershed, to enable an exploration of the effect on British Jewish cultural production of two significant and divisive events in the western world: the Leave result of the EU referendum in Britain on 23 June 2016, and the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the USA on 8 November of the same year.

Each of the three texts analysed here, by authors whose renown arises from varied British literary traditions, takes a contrasting approach to representing the post-2016 era. These works are Tom Stoppard's play *Leopoldstadt* of 2020 and two novels, Linda Grant's *A Stranger City* of 2019 and Howard Jacobson's *Pussy* of 2017. In each of these fictional worlds, aspects of Jewish history appear as a cautionary model for the dangers of the populist sentiment embodied by the Leave vote and Trump's electoral success. The invocation of such a history takes a different form in each case: while Stoppard's play concerns the wartime fate of an Austrian Jewish family, Grant's novel represents the immediate post-referendum state of multicultural Jewish and non-Jewish London, and Jacobson's exposes the mechanisms of populist appeal in his fictional version of Trump's America. The negative effects of nationalist rhetoric for the Jews themselves are shown or implied in all three examples. However, the nature of wartime persecution and genocide is also invoked, either contextually or explicitly, as a warning that such rhetoric might expand to target other groups in these new circumstances. Thus, while the setting of Stoppard's *Leopoldstadt* in early twentieth-century Austria might seem distant from events in twenty-first century Britain, the impetus for its composition and the moment of its premiere in London in early 2020 made the play's contemporary relevance discernible to critics and audience members alike (Maltby 2020; Szyszkowitz 2020). Grant's *Stranger City* offers an approach to Jewish history that is the most clearly monitory of the three texts discussed here, since the novel's characters themselves view the post-2016 fate of vulnerable minorities in Britain in the terms of wartime

antisemitism. By contrast, the satirical nature of Jacobson's *Pussy* means that, although its fierce critique of Trumpian politics is never explicitly named as such, the novel requires the reader's direct decoding of its protagonists and events in order that the allegory should function. In each case, the representation by British Jewish writers of the fate of Europe's Jews and the nature of nationalist discourses in relation to contemporary occurrences in the UK or USA is a new development in literature of this kind. It is a strategy that has elements in common with Michael Rothberg's notion of multidirectional memory (Rothberg 2009), albeit, as these examples show, with a tellingly different emphasis on present uncertainties in relation to past affronts.

The post-2016 period has in any case witnessed the appearance of wide-ranging examples of British Jewish literature, most notably explorations of family history, including Gaby Koppel's novel *Reparation* (2019) and Kim Sherwood's *Testament* (2018), as well as memoirs such as Shelley Klein's *The See-Through House: My Father in Full Colour* (2020) and George Szirtes' portrait of his mother, *The Photographer at Sixteen* (2019). It could be argued that such works, by authors who have also published their explicit responses to the referendum result, are inevitably affected by the events of 2016 with their emphasis on refugee and Holocaust antecedents. However, my chosen examples more directly represent, or indeed address, the implications for Jewish life of the contemporary upsurge in populist nationalism, and for the liberal values of pluralism and equality to which antisemitism traditionally embodies opposition. In relation to these particular concerns, the works discussed here are distinct not only from other examples of post-2016 British Jewish literature, but also from other non-Jewish-centred British fiction, such as Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018) or Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House* (2017), which focus respectively on the UK referendum and the US election.

The present examples represent, rather, the intersection between these events and their relation to Jewish life. As well as refracting the events of 2016 through an awareness of Jewish history, alongside the implications of such a history for other minorities, to apparently multidirectional effect, fictional form itself in each case registers their pressure. The narrative elements of retrospection and foreshadowing are enlisted as part of the plot, even in the distinct modes used by each writer: that of historical drama in Stoppard's case, contemporary realism in Grant's and satirical fable in Jacobson's. Generic experimentation and hybridity of this kind registers the writers' efforts to reflect on momentous occurrences even as the effects of 2016's 'establishment-rocking electoral results' (Lawson 2017) are still making themselves known.

2. The Present in the Past: Tom Stoppard, *Leopoldstadt*

Tom Stoppard's *Leopoldstadt* does not overtly allude to the EU referendum. Indeed, the play appears to offer a self-contained time-capsule, set as it is in Vienna between 1899 and 1955. However, the play's representing the shifts in the fortunes of the Merz and Jakobovicz families in this half-century span, with scenes also set in the years of 1924 and 1938, cannot help but be viewed in an actively cautionary light from a post-2016 vantage-point. The post-referendum context in which *Leopoldstadt* appeared could be considered as an example of those 'silences', in Pierre Macherey's phrasing, that convey the presence of inescapable ideological and historical forces which 'haunt' a literary work even, or especially, in their absence (Macherey 1978, p. 94). However, the reception of *Leopoldstadt* did not need to resort to positing the existence of what Macherey goes on to call the text's 'unconscious', consisting of 'history beyond its edges, encroaching on those edges' (Macherey 1978, p. 94), in noting what one critic has called the 'sobering contemporary references' (Hemming 2020) of this play about pre-war Vienna staged in post-referendum London, with its 'reflections on today' (Szyszkowitz 2020).

As the play's title alone suggests, while time progresses, historical conditions may decline. Leopoldstadt, named after the seventeenth-century Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I who expelled the Jews from that area of the city, was the slum district in which the community and its new arrivals lived for the subsequent three centuries up to the Second World War. One of the play's protagonists, Hermann Merz, prides himself on having left behind the Leopoldstadt of his Polish grandparents along with their lifestyle, to the extent that he is a Catholic convert married to the non-Jewish Gretl, the

apparent success of his assimilation at the dawn of the twentieth century signalled by his being on the brink of membership in the exclusive Austrian Jockey Club. As Hermann puts it,

> HERMANN: We wept by the waters of Babylon, but that's gone, and everything after, expulsions, massacres, burnings, blood libels, gone like the Middle Ages—pogroms, ghettos, yellow patches . . . all rolled up and dumped like an old carpet. (Stoppard 2020a, p. 25)

Yet, despite—or, with an uncomfortable hint at hubris, because of—Hermann's faith in the progressive teleology of history and Austria's status as the true 'Promised Land' (Stoppard 2020a, p. 22), he is forcibly returned to the very slum that his grandparents had fled. In the scene set in 1938, Hermann's family are to be banished to Leopoldstadt as the result of virulently racist twentieth-century politics. Hermann's suicide there is not shown but related in passing, a parenthesis in the post-war musing of his great-nephew Nathan about the legal ownership of the Klimt portrait of Gretl which has been appropriated by the state: 'Under the law as it stood, when Hermann threw himself down the stairwell of the tenement in Leopoldstadt, was he still the owner of the portrait?' (Stoppard 2020a, p. 96). By the very means of its brevity, Nathan's account conveys the horror of Hermann's realisation that his certainty in 1899, 'We are Austrians now!' (Stoppard 2020a, p. 22), was so violently contradicted by the events of 1938—in terms not only of his family's fate or the Anschluss, but also the 'plebiscite' that followed, giving 99% support to reunification with Germany—that he took his own life, even before the definitive resumption of 'expulsions, massacres, burnings'.

Leopoldstadt follows a recognisable and ominous narrative arc, in which the Jewish characters inhabiting an early twentieth-century European setting behave with what might seem for the more knowledgeable audience like a wilful blindness to what is inevitably approaching. In Stoppard's play, the theatrical form itself, with its impression of events unfolding in the present as we watch, sometimes succeeds in turning this cognitive disparity into one of dramatic irony, rather than that of the condescension or blame involved in viewing the *dramatis personae* simply as 'victims-in-waiting' (Bernstein 1998). At the same time, *Leopoldstadt* is an autofiction, or autodrama, fulfilling Stoppard's declared wish to write a 'Jewish play' and one manifestly inspired by his family history (Akbar 2020). An autobiographical essay by Stoppard makes clear such details of this history as the fact that his mother Martha Straussler fled Czechoslovakia with her two sons after the German invasion in 1939, initially to Singapore (Stoppard 2020b, pp. 5–8). Stoppard's father Eugen was killed when the Japanese army sank the ship on which he was bound for Australia, but his wife and children succeeded in travelling to India and, after the war, the widowed Martha married the British army officer Kenneth Stoppard. whereupon the new family moved to Britain. Stoppard includes in the play figures who embody elements of his own unusual position, as a world-renowned British playwright born into a Jewish family in the former Czechoslovakia just before the outbreak of war. The effect is to redouble the connection between the play's focus on the ostracism and murder of the Austrian Jews and the moment of its opening in contemporary London in January 2020. Yet Britain itself is invoked only late in the play, and in relation to its unwillingness to assist Jewish refugees.

In an apparently more positive sense, the figure of the British journalist Percy Chamberlain appears in a scene set in November 1938 as the fiancé of Hermann's niece Nellie Rosenbaum, the death of whose husband Aaron has left her a widow and single parent to eight-year-old Leo. Percy, in a role akin to that of Stoppard's stepfather, acts as a soothsayer from a British perspective, warning Nellie and her family to flee Vienna, since, as he puts it, 'things will get worse . . . Much worse . . . Hitler wants a city without Jews, and one way or another he'll get it' (Stoppard 2020a, pp. 70, 86). Percy's appearance in the family home coincides with that of an Austrian 'Civilian', who describes himself as an 'Umzugshauptmannsleiter' or relocation officer (Stoppard 2020a, p. 79), to enforce the family's eviction from their apartment on Vienna's central boulevard, the Ringstrasse. A confrontation is starkly enacted between the decent Percy and the brutal Civilian, the latter's attitude clear in his mockery and threats towards the disabled grandmother Wilma, baby Bella, the toddler Heini and his mother Hermine alike. Yet Percy also passes on news of a more general failure to offset the effects of antisemitic policy, in his account of the Evian Conference: 'the British delegate said . . . the very idea [of throwing

open the gates of Palestine] was untenable, owing to the terms of the British mandate in Palestine, and prevailing conditions' (Stoppard 2020a, p. 65). Although dialogue of this kind might appear simply to be didactic (Lewis 2020), when viewed in allegorical rather than simply realist terms its role is the more discomfiting one of challenging the national story of Britain's wartime moral exceptionalism.

In the play's concluding scene, set again in the Merzs' Ringstrasse apartment but now in 1955, a different confrontation between a British and an Austrian perspective takes place. Stoppard's structural role, as the Czech-born stepson of a Briton, has its equivalent in that of Leo Rosenbaum, born in Vienna as the great-nephew of Hermann Merz and now Percy's stepson, yet described in the stage directions as the '*middle-class Englishman*' Leonard Chamberlain (Stoppard 2020a, p. 91). The playwright has recounted taking his stepfather's surname within three weeks of arriving in Britain in 1945, metamorphosing from the Czech Tomik Straussler into the 'English schoolboy' Tom Stoppard (Stoppard 2020b, pp. 5, 8). Such a life-history might appear to be one of a miraculous last-minute escape and cause to celebrate British sanctuary. However, in the world of the play, Stoppard's equivalent Leo—as the script continues to call him, in preference to Leonard—has the truisms of his new life challenged and subverted by Nathan, the only member of the Merz-Jakobovicz clan who did not emigrate to have survived the war. It is as if Stoppard's fictional avatar is divided into two, an inner debate about his history acted out on stage in the form of a confrontation between this pair of characters. Leo's response to Nathan's account of the wartime murder of the latter's mother in Auschwitz is to claim that 'The Germans killed my mother, too—in the Blitz', while he has to be prompted by his cousin to recall that his biological father was shot 'by the Austrians' in 1934 (Stoppard 2020a, p. 93). In this way, Nathan's survivor trauma and Leo's partially suppressed memory of his European origins are set against each other to challenge not only Leo's but also the audience's certainties:

> LEO: [My mother] wanted me to be an English boy … We were top country! … being made British was the greatest good fortune that could possibly have happened to me.
>
> NATHAN: Top country.
>
> *The merest suspicion of a sneer stings Leo into a retaliation.*
>
> LEO: Well—we stood alone, didn't we! (Stoppard 2020a, pp. 94–97)

This exchange is both an encounter between members of the same Austrian Jewish family in the light of their diametrically opposed wartime experiences, and, more allegorically, the dramatization of a British versus a European view of the lessons to be gained from that war. Such dialogue is particularly significant in the unspoken context of the UK's 2016 referendum, given the significance of nostalgic views of both imperial and wartime history not only as enlisted by the Leave campaign, but as part of a much more widespread British national imaginary. As Kate Maltby notes of the play's performance, 'sardonic laughter' from audiences in early 2020 greeted Leo's enumeration of such reasons for pride in his adopted Britishness as 'fair play and parliament and freedom of everything, asylum for exiles and refugees … Oh, and I forgot Shakespeare' (Stoppard 2020a, p. 97), since, as she adds, 'the immigrant-friendly credentials of Leo's confident assertion' are not 'quite so guaranteed in the year 2020' (Maltby 2020). In the play, such specific myths as that of Britain's possessing the moral and military high ground in 'standing alone', and of national unity and sacrifice as typified by the Blitz, are held up for debate, along with the allegiance to empire that, in this case, entailed preventing Jewish emigration to Palestine.

The setting of *Leopoldstadt* in Austria rather than Stoppard's native Czechoslovakia supports its fictionality in distancing the plot from the details of his biography. Indeed, Hermione Lee claims that the writer Daniel Kehlmann, an adviser on the play whose Austrian Jewish grandparents had not been protected during the war by their conversion to Christianity, felt it was, rather, his family history that was being dramatised in *Leopoldstadt* (Lee 2020). The action's taking place in Vienna enhances the play's allegorical status, increasing the irony of barbarism descending on a capital city which has maintained, despite the war and post-war occupation, its celebrated cultural identity. In such a setting, the behaviour of 'ordinary Viennese citizens' (Stoppard 2020a, p. 90) in robbing and assaulting their

Jewish neighbours on Kristallnacht could provoke self-reflection on the part of present-day western audiences in other, not dissimilar cities such as London or New York. Such reliance on a British or North American audience's inclination to see the play's apparently hyper-specific setting to possess a broader relevance, and prompt not just horror at the misdeeds of others, but self-scrutiny, is a daring strategy, yet, as accounts of audience response in early 2020 London reveal, one that succeeded. In this way, we might see a connection between Stoppard's play and the television adaptation of Philip Roth's 2004 novel *The Plot Against* America (HBO 2020), its counterfactual plot about Nazism taking hold in the USA of the early 1940s adapted for a post-2016 context. Although *Leopoldstadt* does not possess elements of an alternative history, its concluding with Leo's look back from his adopted British perspective at a disavowed Austrian Jewish family takes on extra significance not just because of its drawing on elements of the playwright's life, but because of the moment of its staging. As Stoppard put it of the post-2016 era, in an interview from the time of writing *Leopoldstadt*, 'a play about Englishness would have to be about Brexit' (quoted in Zarin 2018).

3. A Hallucinatory Present: Linda Grant, *A Stranger City*

Linda Grant's *A Stranger City* is also framed by specific dates, opening in February 2016, four months before the referendum, and concluding in that event's immediate aftermath. While Stoppard's play uses the history of a Viennese district as its organizing symbol, Grant's novel is set in London, the title's 'stranger' both adjective and noun: it refers to the defamiliarization or making-strange of the city, and to the transformation of its inhabitants into 'strangers' to each other, in the post-referendum era. Where *Leopoldstadt* represents wartime events in order to invite comparison with the present, *A Stranger City* does the opposite in showing the irruption of atrocities associated with the war into its contemporary moment. The malign effects of the vote to leave the EU take the form of specific episodes, most distressingly an acid attack on the British-born but 'olive-complexion[ed]' Marco, as well as characters' awareness of a less tangible alteration in the country's 'atmosphere' (Grant 2019a, pp. 20, 203, 241). This term's conveying an, intangible but pervasive change is supported by the fact that 'Brexit', the word used most widely after its coinage in 2012 to refer to Britain's projected and actual departure from the EU (Moseley 2016), appears only once in the entire novel, in the context of the character Francesca's internal voice (Grant 2019a, p. 318). All other allusions to the referendum's outcome withhold any specific label, characters calling it variously 'all this nonsense', 'the *big thing*', 'this business of, you know' (Grant 2019a, pp. 109, 165, 195), implying its inessential quality as an apparent watershed that simply ratified the pre-existing tendencies of a destructive nostalgia's 'retro spirit' (Grant 2019a, p. 210). Indeed, the novel's temporal and symbolic location is that of a transitional phase before any definitive political action has taken place.

In *A Stranger City*, London's new atmosphere is shown to affect communities of all kinds, ranging from the owners of a Greek delicatessen, for whom even the 'partitioned Cyprus' to which they return offers greater 'tranquillity' than the UK, to Jamaican nurses going back 'to their island, saying enough was enough' (Grant 2019a, pp. 209, 241). However, it is the novel's Jewish characters, personified by Francesca's grandparents, who are shown to be particularly attuned to the new era's threats. To her grandfather Younis, the onset of change 'was something he could smell; an idea concentrated into an odour', akin to that he had 'sniffed out' in his native Iran in 1979, thus divining that the impending revolution meant the Jewish community's days there 'were coming to an end, yes, even after thousands of years' (Grant 2019a, p. 205).

In her British habitat, although her family are Jews of Iranian rather than European origin, Francesca's perceptions about the effects of the referendum draw on imagery of the Holocaust. The term 'Holocaust' itself is another crucial word that goes symptomatically unmentioned, and those under its threat in the present are not Jews but asylum seekers, people of colour or simply non-British Europeans, including, with uncomfortable irony, a local German family. In what seems to be simply a social faux pas at that family's Christmas party, Francesca declares that, 'if it came to it, she would be happy to hide the whole family in their attic and provide the little girl with either a notebook or an

iPad in which to write her diary' (Grant 2019a, p. 204). Caspar and Elfriede, the parents of Gaby, the little girl in question, are offended at this apparent insinuation that they 'were Nazis, or responsible for the Nazis' (Grant 2019a, p. 206). But Francesca's fantasied revisioning of Anne Frank implies rather that Germany and Britain have 'swapped the political roles typically assigned to them' (Wally 2018, p. 81), British pragmatism displaced by a populist nationalism. In the UK of late 2016, it is those who are not British who are the new Jews. Soon afterwards, Francesca experiences a 'faint hallucination' in continuation of such a thread of thought, on a visit to a secluded area of north London, 'called marshes but the wetlands lay deep under the deposited rubble from thousands of bombed houses of the Blitz' (Grant 2019a, pp. 225–27). Such a topographical image invokes London's 'palimpsestic' nature while also suggesting that the Blitz has a particularly concrete role, its weighty significance in the present including the blotting out of geographical features (Grant 2019b). This sequestered location, known as the Island, reminds Francesca 'sharply and unpleasantly' of a visit to what she calls 'the concentration camp' in Poland, the withheld proper name on this occasion, as implied by the marshy terrain, that of Auschwitz.

This uncanny perception on Francesca's part seems to cause the desolate area to become populated by 'people no more solid than wraiths, dressed in modern clothes':

> Through the last street of the Island they were arriving at their destination and looking round, some assessed the situation accurately. She could see they were deportees, hemmed in on all sides awaiting future arrangements for their permanent departure. (Grant 2019a, p. 227).

The term 'deportee' in Francesca's vision has an imprecision that harks back to Nazi-era euphemisms for being sent to one's death, as the notion of 'permanent departure' suggests here. Yet it also encodes the real-life fate of 'illegal immigrants', as Francesca's husband Alan perceives when observing from the bottom of their garden the 'filthy engines' of 'deportation trains' following 'a network of cross-hatching across the eternal landscape of England' (Grant 2019a, p. 254). Alan's status as a documentary-filmmaker gives a realist frame to Francesca's hallucination, increased by his perceiving that, from inside the trains, 'the deportees raised their palms, pleading at the glass' (Grant 2019a, p. 254). It is as if those who observe events in contemporary Britain have become versions of the 'complicitous' bystanders familiar from historical accounts of Polish witnesses to the wartime deportation trains heading to the death-camps (Stacy 2021). Alan's father, a radio host in Northern Ireland, refers to the prison ships for illegal immigrants moored on the Thames as 'floating concentration camps' (Grant 2019a, p. 255), echoing Francesca's use of the term in a way that increases the reader's uncertainty at what kind of mimesis this is which posits the notion of an Auschwitz in Britain. As these instances show, the novel relies on what might be called a realist allegory to generate its effects. It does so by blending the detail of actual affronts, such as the use of prison-ships in Britain as recently as 2006, and the introduction of a policy of deportation, using that very term, into British law in the wake of the referendum (Migration Observatory 2020), with projections of a bleak future.

A Stranger City is neither consistently counterfactual nor narrated in reverse, two strategies that have been used to reimagine the Holocaust to disruptive effect in contemporary fiction, in Roth's *The Plot Against America* and Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* (1991) respectively. It is rather that the novelistic projection of the 'terminal diagnosis', as Grant has called the Leave vote, entails a sense that time is 'spooling backwards' (Grant 2019b; Grant 2019a, p. 194). As if seen in reverse, Britain's constituent communities return to their countries of origin, including Gaby and her parents, who depart for Frankfurt, in acknowledgement that London has lost the status of a 'supra-state, beyond nationality' (Grant 2019a, p. 205) which had drawn them to live there. In its place, there risks persisting only a simulacrum of Britain, a 'lily-white National Trust mock-up', as another character puts it, during an argument with his wife about her having voted for the 'bloody racist' UKIP (UK Independence Party) (Grant 2019a, pp. 102, 135). It is the German Caspar who attempts to acknowledge the 'romanticism' that might have motivated support for a Leave position, including the 'emotions attached to landscapes, cultures and small things like the coins in your pocket and a particular biscuit' (Grant 2019a, p. 205). However, the terrible consequences of motives such as these, ranging from those reminiscent of Nazi

invocations of *Blut und Boden* to the bathetic biscuit, are most keenly felt by Younis, who notes that the Leave result was accompanied by 'a brief surge of what he considered to be *glee* amongst some of their neighbours' (Grant 2019a, p. 109). In a way that alludes all at once to Nazi Germany, late-1970s Iran and post-referendum Britain, he thinks that, 'The people had once again gone mad as they periodically did' (Grant 2019a, p. 90). 'The people' here has its Biblical resonance of the non-Jewish 'nations', conveying that, in *Stranger City*, the Jews' role is to anticipate that there will be new victims of such madness, as well as themselves, attempting an 'outrunning' of 'the next European genocide' (Maltby 2020).

4. Satirizing Populism: Howard Jacbson, *Pussy*

If *A Stranger City* blurs the distinction between realism and allegory in its representation of Britain's vote to leave the EU as a 'time-machine, taking us back to the past' (Grant 2019a, p. 154), Howard Jacobson's novel *Pussy* is a self-advertising broadside against Trump's electoral success. This is signalled by its title, which is a quotation, despite Jacobson's agent warning that such a choice would mean 'People aren't going to want to buy it, and shops aren't going to want to stock it', from Trump's notorious words of 2005 about his behaviour towards women (Gilbert 2017; Trump transcript, Bullock 2016). In addition, the novel's cover features an instantly recognisable caricature by the political cartoonist Chris Riddell of the president as a semi-naked infant, with 'hair the colour of lemon custard' (Jacobson 2017, p. 9) and clutching a Barbie-like plastic doll. Although the novel's form is that of a *Bildungsroman*, its tracing of an individual's education is undercut by the uneducability of its protagonist, Prince Fracassus, of whom one of his tutors claims, 'he was brilliant by virtue of all that made him stupid' (Jacobson 2017, p. 26). The reader is relied upon to supply the missing referents in the novel's scenario by recognizing the real-life originals of the Trump stand-in Fracassus, such characters as his mentors Caleb Hopsack (Nigel Farage, the leader of UKIP until 2016) and Philander (Boris Johnson, who became the British Foreign Secretary in 2016, and Prime Minister in 2019).

Jacobson has described writing his fable, in which Fracassus comes to rule over the Republic of Urbs-Ludus for the very reason of his unsuitability to do so, with 'the white heat of rage and disbelief' in the immediate wake of Trump's success (quoted in Cowdrey 2017). Such fury has a societal target, as Jacobson has claimed: 'No quarter [is] given, not only to Fracassus, but to the world in which his rise was made possible' (Picard 2017, p. 457). Yet, as critics have argued, it is hard to describe *Pussy*'s genre as straightforwardly either satire or comedy, since Trump's actual behaviour could often be said to exceed novelistic invention, and the novel's grotesque energy is more disconcerting than funny (Shriver 2017). It might seem that the novel embodies elements of Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, in its representing high and low discourses, 'top and bottom, face and backside, stupidity and wisdom', changing places (Haworth 2019). As Jacobson says, it is hard not to 'recall Rabelais when writing of the birth of a monstrous baby' (Picard 2017, p. 458). However, in the present case any carnivalesque opposition to the 'official and serious' realm (Bakhtin 1984, p. 4) is shown to have been thoroughly subsumed by the dominant hegemony. The apparently eager acquiescence of the people in such a co-option, as portrayed in Jacobson's novel, might suggest the snuffing out of carnival's potential for a positive sense of 'revival and renewal' (Bakhtin 1984, p. 7). It might even seem that right-wing populism is the present-day apotheosis of carnival's tendency to include the unleashing of a suppressed but nonetheless patriarchal rebelliousness that has often included violence against women and Jews (for opposing views see MacMillan 2017 on the carnivalesque propensities of the left-wing Podemos, Haworth 2019 on those of the right and Brexit).

Thus, the 'sense of the topsy-turvy' (Jacobson 2017, p. 72), as beloved by Fracassus, is not enacted in favour of what Bakhtin calls the 'body of the people', a communal entity that is 'continually growing and renewed' even in the face of individual set-backs (Bakhtin 1984, p. 19). Rather, the mechanism of reversal acts to shore up those individuals who, in a terrible symbiosis, have been granted power by their despised victims. Thus Hopsack is said to 'gulp [...] down the admiration of his followers like a shark swallowing down scampi' (Jacobson 2017, p. 84), while the inhabitants of Urbs-Ludus do not resent the ruling family's 'Palace of Golden Gates' but, instead, 'enjoyed looking up and feeling dizzy'

(Jacobson 2017, p. 18). In such instances, the hard reality of fixed status is affirmed, as Fracassus' father the Grand Duke is aware: 'those at the bottom of an empire expected disrespect from those at the top and even loved them for it' (Jacobson 2017, p. 39). In Hopsack's 'upside-down talk', any change of position is only seemingly so, leaving power relations untouched, as he tells the Grand Duke:

> 'Big/small, grand/common: these simple identities are over' [. . .]
>
> 'And what will the common people be then?'
>
> 'The aristocracy'.
>
> 'Leaving you [Hopsack] where?'
>
> 'Still leading the party'. (Jacobson 2017, p. 85)

Thus, Hopsack, the leader of the 'Ordinary People's Party' whose role as Fracassus' 'Twitter adjutant' underlies the pair's 'special relationship' (Jacobson 2017, pp. 82, 86), instructs Fracassus how to make 'ordinary people feel he was one of them', as Hopsack has accomplished despite his great personal wealth and habit of 'dress[ing] like a stockbroker's idea of a gentleman farmer' (Jacobson 2017, p. 83). Just as Hopsack appears to exist in both realms, as he puts it—'[The Plebs] need Caleb Hopsack to be ordinary and a toff at the same time' (Jacobson 2017, p. 84)—so Fracassus cannot be deposed nor his status overturned because he is already both 'fool and tyrant' (Jacobson 2017, p. 100). This is far from the scenario described by Bakhtin, in which 'clowns and fools mimicked [. . .] serious rituals' as 'the expression of folk consciousness', and in subversion of officialdom and sanctimony (Bakhtin 1984, pp. 6–7). Instead, in the novel's Duchy of Origen, folk consciousness has itself been enlisted to ensure the people's subjugation by a ruling class that subverts seriousness, as Fracassus is advised by an elder statesman's claim that 'the people [. . .] love a fraudster':

> 'If someone who wants the best for the people lets them down, they will never forgive him. But a joker who wants the worst for them, they will follow into hell.' (Jacobson 2017, p. 111)

This is a very different conception of a joker from Bakhtin's, one of clowns and fools who are 'representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season' (Bakhtin 1984, p. 8). The difficulty of knowing when Fracassus is serious, along with his claiming that his demands made on Twitter that refugees should be shot are jokes (Jacobson 2017, pp. 76–77), equally constitutes a dark version of Bakhtin's argument that the carnival fool is not playing a part but lives a reality, existing on 'the borderline between life and art' (Bakhtin 1984, p. 8). Fracassus' father therefore hails the successful transformation of his son from a 'rough buffoon' into a 'polished' one (Jacobson 2017, p. 159), an image suggesting that it is the self-presentation of a fool, rather than his foolishness, that is at stake.

It might seem that *Pussy* does not specifically address the effects on the lives of minorities, including the Jewish community, of Trump's election or the UK referendum, for which the events of the Holocaust are such a disquieting exemplar in Stoppard's play and Grant's novel. Indeed, the Jews, whose lives are usually the central focus of Jacobson's fiction, are mentioned in this novel only in passing, in the context of those who might be thrown to the lions in the real-life amphitheatre that Fracassus, a self-styled Nero, has built. As is evident in an exchange with his father, they are not even his first choice of victim:

> 'Who do you plan to kill there?' the Grand Duke asked [. . .]
>
> 'Christians', [Fracassus] said.
>
> 'Fracassus, this is a Christian country'.
>
> 'Jews, then. I don't know . . . Muslims . . . Humanitarians'. (Jacobson 2017, p. 76)

Fracassus' randomly listing potential victims suggests his sense that the act of identifying those to be targeted is more important than attempting to justify that choice, as suggested by the response to the Grand Duke's caveat that '"Humanitarians aren't a religion"' on Fracassus' part: '"We could

still throw them to the lions"' (Jacobson 2017, p. 76). For the satirist, it seems that an affront even greater than ideological malignity is Fracassus' crassness and his intellectual deficiencies. In such a way, despite *Pussy*'s apparently singular focus on Trump's electoral success, the UK referendum and the role of UKIP in its outcome is, as the appearance of Hopsack and Philander suggest, also central to the satire. Jacobson has claimed that, since 'Brexit, in a way, started it', meaning that 'Our populisms have embraced', his novel is also a belated response to the referendum outcome and the 'failures of democracy' it shares with that of the US election (Picard 2017, p. 461; Gilbert 2017). This is despite the fact that Fracassus' father cannot recall the name of the country 'that used to say it ruled the waves' (Jacobson 2017, p. 36), and that the Latin-tag-quoting Philander and 'strangely garbed and grimacing' Hopsack are, their status as populist role-models notwithstanding, inconsequential 'minnows' (Jacobson 2017, pp. 119, 189). The novel's target being that of populist political success itself, as much as specific individuals or nations, reveals the relevance of this story to the fate of the Jews, even in their absence from the narrative. It does so through its focus on a politics of this kind as a popular vengeance exacted against those regarded as elites, reminding the reader that the apparently unspecific nature of the term 'elite' itself, referring to a select and shadowy but influential group, allows it to function as a 'ready symbol' or tendentious code-word in antisemitic discourse as much as a class-based designation (Margulies 2018; Sales 2019). The very anonymity of the scapegoat here lays bare the predetermined nature of the right-wing ploy of constructing 'an external enemy in addition to the domestic elite' (Margulies 2018). In *Pussy*, according to the ominous advice received by Fracassus, a populist opponent of liberal democracy would be well advised to tell the people 'you're saving them from someone else [. . .] anyone you can come up with' (Jacobson 2017, p. 138).

5. Conclusions

It is hard to view Stoppard's *Leopoldstadt*, Grant's *A Stranger City* or Jacobson's *Pussy* in the terms of a literary warning, since the watershed events with which they are concerned have already taken place. Rather, the effect in each case is the defamiliarization of extraordinary situations that are in danger of being accepted as the new normal. Indeed, in all three texts the difficulty of distinguishing between fact and invention is a means of emphasizing the unbelievable quality of current reality.

While Stoppard's play and Grant's novel invoke the precedent of the Holocaust, as do other novels such as Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016) and Sarah Perry's *Melmoth* (2018), in responding to the UK referendum, it is rather the mechanisms of populist appeal that are central to Jacobson's satire. Yet the critique of twenty-first century trends, conveyed in terms of historical loss in *Leopoldstadt*, anguish in *A Stranger City* and 'enraged derision' (Picard 2017, p. 458) in *Pussy*, might each seem to include elements of compromise or contradiction. Stoppard's play is so consistently set in a past era that its conclusion seems to offer a look of mourning back at history, rather than one directed at the present. During his visit to post-war Vienna, Leo's questions about what became of his relatives are answered by his cousin Rosa's naming their place of death, in a haunting litany identifying the fate of the Merz family members, all of whom had been present on stage in earlier scenes:

> LEO: Bella.
>
> ROSA: Auschwitz.
>
> LEO: Hermine.
>
> ROSA: Auschwitz
>
> LEO: Heini.
>
> ROSA: Auschwitz.
>
> (Stoppard 2020a, p. 105)

In *A Stranger City*, a satirical view of certain kinds of nostalgia, summed up by what Francesca thinks of as 'mothballs and death' (Grant 2019a, p. 230), co-exists with an apparent scepticism about such contemporary phenomena as reliance on digital technology and social media, implying that

some kinds of regret for earlier ways of being are warranted. In *Pussy*, the critique of 'nationalistic and anti-intellectual populism' (Wally 2018, p. 64) is accompanied by a satirical view of other such developments as general as identity politics and as specific as examples of bestselling young adult fiction, while it sometimes seems that Fracassus' sexism and misogyny are ridiculed for their 'ugly' as much as their unethical enactment, as implied by the title's 'dual meaning', in casting its demagogue protagonist not only as the origin of misogynist utterance but also as himself the eponymous 'weak and insecure' individual (Picard 2017, p. 460; Freeman 2017). However, all three works succeed in making use of varied temporal settings, that of the historical past in Stoppard's case, the not-quite present in Grant's and a fabular contemporaneity in Jacobson's, as a way of holding up an unflattering mirror up to those readers or audience members who, in their guise as participants or bystanders, have been unable to prevent contemporary moral and historical calamities. As the discussion here has implied, the particular literary mode by means of which these texts represent the post-2016 era shares aspects of Michael Rothberg's multidirectional memory, in the sense of the layering effect in each case not only of elements of the past as they intrude into the present, but also those of a projected future. In this sense, as well as in their generic hybridity, these works mark a departure from pre-2016 modes of 'writing Jewish', in Ruth Gilbert's phrase for her study of British Jewish literature, with its emphasis on what she quotes Jacobson as calling a 'finely tuned accommodation' between Jewish and mainstream British culture (Gilbert 2013, p. 8). The fictive gaze in the present cases is one directed rather at Britain's relations with Europe, the USA and beyond, a scenario in which Jewish characters are 'metonyms of the wider liberal order' (Margulies 2018) that is under threat.

However, rather than the 'productive' potential of multidirectional memory as advocated by Rothberg (2009, p. 3), or indeed that of the palimpsest as analysed by Dillon (2007, p. 2), the three works under discussion here invoke past events and future consequences in opposition to shared forgetting and not different kinds of recall. While Rothberg's concern is with revealing the ways in which 'remembrance of the Holocaust intersects' with the legacies of 'colonialism and slavery and ongoing processes of decolonization', as part of his argument against competitive conceptions of collective memory, in the present examples, it is instead an amnesia about past atrocities that is exposed by reading contemporary events in relation to 'diasporic Jewish history' (Rothberg 2009, p. xiii). In the three works discussed here, it is not primarily the case that allusion to the Holocaust, antisemitism and mechanisms of scapegoating enables 'the articulation of other histories of victimization' (Rothberg 2009, p. 6). Rather, these allusions represent a fear of such victimization reappearing, despite the role of Holocaust history in both the UK and USA for anti-racist and citizenship education (Rauch 2021). In the present examples centring on post-2016 UK and USA, the spectre of 'relationality' (Dillon 2007, p. 4) or likeness is presented as a cause for profound dismay.

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