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'The last line of defence': The Politics of Border Control in Contemporary English Fiction

Despite its publication in 2003, when Brexit – both as a word and an idea – was blissfully inexistent, Tony Saint's novel *Refusal Shoes* throws into sharp relief many of the issues around which the social, political and cultural fragmentation in Brexit Britain have crystallised, most importantly of course the question of immigration, which Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson so successfully managed to heave onto the centre stage of public discourse in the run-up to the Referendum of June 2016.

Set among the Immigration Service at Heathrow Airport (a world which Saint as a former Immigration Officer knows all too well), the novel chronicles the attempts of protagonist Henry Brinks to keep both his personal and his professional life on the straight-and-narrow, a task significantly complicated by the institutional racism and private spitefulness of his colleagues. In the first part of my paper, I will illustrate how the novel anticipates contemporary discussions on, among other things, the free movement of European citizens, the question of what makes an individual into a legal or illegal immigrant, or what it takes to be 'real' Brit or Englishman.

In the next step, I will briefly illustrate how other pre-Brexit novels – Julian Barnes's *England England*, James Hawes' *Speak for England* and, most significantly, Rupert Thomson's *Divided Kingdom* – use the depiction of borders to identify the hitherto invisible faultlines in British society (along issues of age, location, privilege, lifestyle...), which Brexit eventually revealed in such spectacular fashion.

In the final part of my paper, I will look at how these issues are reflected in examples of so-called Brexlit, i.e. literature written after the watershed of June 2016. My main example in this context will be John Lanchester's *The Wall*, which symbolises the current nationalist Little-Englandism pervading British politics by way of a massive wall surrounding the 'precious stone set in a silver sea'.