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## Private Experience and Public-Spirited Critique: Brexit-Era Britain in the Recent Poetry of Vidyan Ravinthiran and Nicholas Hagger

### 1. Introduction

Five years after the initial referendum, at present neither have the international terms of a British departure from the European Union been finalised, nor does the cultural rift between Leavers and Remainers within the nation appear to have been significantly bridged. Brexit therefore remains topical, a subject of undiminished contention, and as such its presence in British literature has been increasingly remarked upon. In his introduction to *Brexit and Literature* (2018), Robert Eaglestone argues that literature “is an especially useful and appropriate way to address the political arguments about national identity which lie at the heart of Brexit” (1). There is ample evidence such potential has not been neglected, particularly in the realm of fiction; unsurprisingly, given Kristian Shaw’s observation that literature has always influenced “the perception of Britishness (or a narrower Englishness)” (Shaw 17) not only the work of British novelists but also that of British poets increasingly often either reflects the cultural climate of Brexit, or seeks to sublimate their lived experience(s) thereof.

Although W. H. Auden’s adage that “poetry makes nothing happen” remains eminently credible (Auden 743), there are also reasons to conclude that poetry affords a favorable medium for treating current events such as Brexit. Above all, the concision typical of (most) poetic formats allows for more rapid composition and therefore a more timely rejoinder than does the novel, having

lent the poet a modest claim to cultural leverage until at least the early 20th century. That being said, with the advent of electronic media, the same quality of concision has proven equally characteristic of the tweet, personal blog or social media posting, and with poetry having become a niche press, poetic pretensions to influence popular culture and public opinion may now seem little more than a velleity. Yet, although Rhiannon Lucy Coslett's contention that poetry sales have been "booming of late, aided by new audiences offered up by the internet and its shareability through social media platforms" may overstate the case (2019), overt poetic engagement with Brexit has ranged from multiple online initiatives to Carol Anne Duffy's "Shore to Shore" reading tour, the coincidence of which with the 2016 referendum Anne Varty perceives as having occasioned an "unforeseen compression between political upheaval and the public performance of poetry" (59). While Auden's implied caution that social efficacy cannot be poetry's *raison d'être* remains plausible, the examples cited above suggest such a categorical pronouncement may yet prove premature.

As with fiction, poetry volumes which reflect the political and societal context of Brexit-era Britain have become increasingly common. One example thereof is Vidyan Ravinthiran's *The Million-Petalled Flower of Being Here* (2019), which, while by no means primarily politically focused upon the Leave decision, in numerous instances depicts his personal experience of societal division as a second-generation British poet belonging to a racial minority. Questions of race and identity are conspicuously more externalized here than in Ravinthiran's prior collection, *Grun-tu-molani*. As will be seen, the changing cultural landscape of contemporary Britain has clearly (if perhaps involuntarily) pushed the poet in this direction. An interesting contrast is presented by the recent work of Nicholas Hagger, hailing from Essex. Hagger's British pedigree would satisfy even the most doctrinaire ethnic nationalist; his political perspective, on the other hand, would prove distasteful to such a reader. Having previously penned *The Dream of Europa: The Triumph of Peace* (2015), Hagger had already enthusiastically endorsed the European Union not merely as such, but also as prototypical forerunner of a future democratic world state. In *Fools' Paradise* (2020), Hagger offers a coherent poetic work in which the Brexit referendum figures not merely as background but rather as leitmotif. Both poets, like many a British writer with international convictions, ultimately incline to the side of the Remainers, yet a common trait of each is a laudable modicum of empathy and understanding for those of the opposition. What is more, a comparison of these two quite different works allows for an interesting rumination upon centrality and eccentricity, as well as upon each poet's mode of self-presentation as lyric subject and/or a "man of letters."

## 2. The Shape of All Our Talk: Brexit in Ravinthiran's Sonnets

When considering a collection of sonnets composed by a poet for his wife, such as that which comprises *The Million-Petalled Flower of Being Here*, the United Kingdom's recent decision to part ways with the European Union is by no means the first association which comes to mind. These are not primarily poems about Brexit (or any other recent political imbroglio), but rather they above all explore the relationship and everyday experiences of a modern literary couple. The current British sociopolitical context intrudes, however, due to the fact the poet is a first-generation Briton of Sri Lankan heritage. Ravinthiran and his wife (who also writes) are a mixed-race couple. The two were living in northern England at the time when the 120 sonnets were composed, and the surrounding atmosphere of politicization looms peripherally in the book, an inescapable element of the social milieu the two inhabit. What results is a book of poems which, while it does not treat Brexit-era Britain as such, does not shy away from transcribing specific experiences thereof when they impact Vidyan and Jenny's fledgling married life.

Ravinthiran is not an immigrant, but he is aware of his minority status. His heritage and ethnicity have already figured prominently in his work (in the wide sense that one's heritage, nation and family origin shape one's individual identity). Ravinthiran, who describes himself as "someone who occupies two positions ... [being] Sri Lankan and English" (2021a), identifies with both cultures. In contrast to his immigrant parents, "home" for the poet means the house in Leeds "my parents live in and where I grew up" (2019: 17). His embrace of British poetic heritage is readily apparent (this is reflected even in the choice of the sonnet format, with one title invoking the precedent of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's love sonnets to her husband). Yet Ravinthiran, whose parents in the past cautioned him that he "[would] have / to be twice as good as they are to achieve / what people in this country take / for granted" [italics original] (2019: 32), is also cognizant of his difference. As might be indicated by the two epigrams which open the book, one by Philip Larkin and the other a Tamil proverb, Ravinthiran's inquisitive mind both explores and synthesizes these two vectors of his heritage.

As regards his marriage, the situation is similar. The majority of these love poems are communiques to his wife which do not dwell upon race, yet the topic does recur. Occasionally, this involves introspection, as when the poet ponders whether his wife's past fascination with the "taboo allure" of a Muslim boy's curly hair in her school has somehow preconditioned her attraction to him; he then wonders what subconscious factors may underlie "[his] unfading passion for [her] pale skin" (2019: 19). More frequently, however, the impetus

for such considerations is the outer world. In Britain, Ravinthiran has noticed northerners staring at them for being together; in Sri Lanka, he also notes the “shameless, long / unbroken stare” his wife evinces when visiting a temple (2019: 31). When the poems do portray the societal landscape of Brexit-era Britain, it is characteristically via such inescapable intrusions of public into private life. Very rarely does an open confrontation result. More characteristic is when the couple digest an overheard tirade against Eastern Europeans on a train, or when the poet comes across a “rant” in a “tea-stained tabloid” to later mock in solidarity with his wife (39).

Of interest is how often the poet second-guesses himself, which reflects the studiously limited personal perspective. Ravinthiran does not come across as a person particularly hypersensitive to perceived slights or microaggressions. “Unlike some,” in particular, is wary of knee-jerk reactions. When a drycleaner proclaims “*I’ll need you to spell that out, pet!*” upon hearing Ravinthiran’s name, the poet does not detect a patronizing tone, but rather stridently appreciates her warmth: “Am I to believe this kindly Geordie is a bigot? / Her humour in this common circumstance / is as bright-shining a part of civilisation / as the David’s chiselled, white, not-quite fist” (2019: 41). Yet elsewhere matters are more ambiguous, and the poet’s doubt becomes cumbersome. After having moved into “[Their] first house,” Ravinthiran attempts to determine whether “in that area no one smiled at us” because of his race, or simply because they are the “only renters” in an upper class neighborhood. Prejudice seems more likely, given that passing youth shout “*Chopra!*” at him (the name of an English footballer of similar ancestry). Nevertheless, the poet appears to equivocate: “racist, I suppose / given his abysmal record for the Magpies” [emphasis added] (18).

By and large, these sonnets raise questions rather than proclaim answers, and for an unambiguous pronouncement upon Ravinthiran’s experiences one must ultimately have recourse to the poet’s interviews and prose articles. One of these, “Victim and Accused” (2021), serves to significantly clarify the situation in the aforementioned poem. Directly stating what could only be inferred from the sonnets, Ravinthiran relates how:

I had a period in my life of intense distress, which saw me take several months off work, then move to the Midlands from the North East, where—in the run-up to, and the aftermath of, the referendum vote—I experienced in the street the increasing racism of English culture. People didn’t look at me in the same way any more, nor, when I spoke, could they process what I was saying except through a scrim

of media-fermented resentments (or, the determination to not be like this, to smile and nod at whatever the brown man said).

The reason for the poet's apparent vacillation in the sonnet becomes more clear in light of this, as he goes on to reminisce about their newlywed life in their first neighborhood:

My wife and I had a terrible argument about house-buying, in the snooty area where we lived and no one spoke to us—where school-boys snickered as they passed me on the street. “It’s because we’re the only renters,” she said; I struggled to forgive her for disbelieving my alternative explanation. It seemed that we lived in two different worlds, that she couldn’t understand the changes in my life linked to seismic convulsions in national culture. (2019b)

Only now is the ambiguity resolved, with it becoming clear the modicum of doubt introduced in the poem is not subjective but interpersonal. Consistent with the premise of the sonnets, the immediate addressee remains his wife, as their differing interpretations have led to a temporary falling-out. The qualification “I suppose” now smacks less of resignation or hesitance than of sarcastic frustration, the husband having (thus far) failed to convince his partner he is seeing things in the neighborhood as they really are.

More often, the two either glean solace from each other when the public world intrudes, or the poem rues that their intimacy has been interrupted. The most direct engagement with Brexit is found in four sonnets towards the middle of *The Million-Petalled Flower of Being Here*. The first—and most overt—of these is simply titled “Brexit.” Once again, the poet does not seek out this theme but reacts to an everyday event. Awaiting a train at Durham station, the couple observe faces and wonder how different passersby may have voted. Upon seeing a white man “square up to a brown,” his wife questions whether she “*should ... have mentioned that*” [italics original]. Is she sure race is a factor, and that she is correctly reading the situation? Once again, the limited perspective leaves the reader similarly disoriented. Here, as elsewhere, Ravinthiran’s subsequent musing takes an unpredictable turn. No conventional moral railing against nationalism and bigotry ensues. Instead, the poem remains grounded in the personal, with Ravinthiran being led to contemplate how Remainer friends in the south are “mad / at finding themselves, all of a sudden, a minority / in their own country.” The British poet retains empathy for his wife’s (working class)

northern coworkers, who hail from such (in?)famously titled Durham villages as Pity Me and Killhope, and is open to the reflection that his southern friends' "conventional snobberies / concerning where I live are of a piece / with isms they'd disdain." The poem ultimately remains grounded in their own relationship, with the concluding lines regretting the fact that the Brexit context has become ubiquitous: such thoughts dominate "All our talk" (2019: 38).

There is, of course, a negative aspect to such equivocation, and the poet does elsewhere attest to a crisis of confidence having resulted from the changing cultural climate. In those same years, he claims: "I'd lost the confidence to draw [my students] out, [becoming] fiercely, determinedly passive. I wanted a conversation: they craved a mansplainer" (2019b). While this may not have played well in his classes, it suits the medium of his poetry. In particular, the limited, personal and contemplative ego of the sonnets allows Ravinthiran to elude a conventional dichotomy of admirable Remainers and reprehensible Leavers. The book eschews promulgating politics in favour of sharing experience. Ravinthiran's poetic authority blossoms when the sonnets become most personal. The topic for a sonnet is not, for instance, minority representation in the media; rather, the impetus is an overwrought newspaper column decrying Chinese and Indian characters to be introduced on *Thomas the Tank Engine*, which he cannot wait to "mock" with his sympathetic wife. Although the poet's political perspective can be inferred from his remark that "Gordon, Percy [and] our favorites / will keep their jobs," the sonnet is not a demonstration of this (or any) thesis. Logically enough for newlyweds, what follows instead is a tropism to children. Ravinthiran fondly thinks of his nephew Rahul, who as a child loved Thomas. The poet stridently proclaims his love for his nephew "in his big house in Ilkley and his golden mixed-race skin" (2019: 39).

### 3. The Poet as Pundit: "Your Poet's" Take on Brexit in Hagger's *Fools' Paradise*

A radically different treatment of Brexit may be found in Nicholas Hagger's recent *Fools' Paradise* (2020). Whereas in Ravinthiran's case politics coherently figure only inasmuch as they have become inescapable punctuations of everyday life, in Hagger's case politics as such are foregrounded. More precisely, Hagger exhaustively treats the political machinations connected with the Brexit referendum and negotiations. His intent is satiric, and the form is that of the mock epic. Continuing to mine a well of inspiration increasingly prevalent in his poetry since "Zeus's Ass" (2000), Hagger has in recent decades increasingly foregone what might be called his normative style (imagist metaphysical poetry,

usually in taunt iambic pentameter) to explore the use of a variety of traditional forms to engage with political or humanitarian concerns (court masques, verse history plays, epics, etc.). Here, adopting the heroic couplets and assured tone of Alexander Pope, Hagger proceeds to dissect what he deems “the most important political decision the UK has taken since the declaration of the Second World War” (2020: xvi).

As with Ravinthiran, the poet’s take on matters foregoes the obvious stance of either an elegiac lament for a united Europe or an invective against the pre-supposed bigotry of Leavers. He does reveal he feels the UK would have been better off within the E.U, even hazarding the prediction it may yet rejoin (the Law of History maintains that “no nation / can walk out of its own civilisation” (2020: 146)). That being said, the Brexit decision itself is less that to which Hagger takes exception than is the ineffective and haphazard way the referendum and negotiations have been carried out. Although the poem is public-spirited, the British public hardly figures at all. The work presents a tactical critique of parliamentary actors, the “fools” referenced in the title. As is stated in the preface, Hagger assumes the pose of a pundit or commentator who “reflects on what happens with a degree of objectivity” (xx). Leaving aside the decision as such, he above all offers a rueful take on lost prestige and “the Mother of Parliaments” / ... now seem[ing] a shambles of querulents” (97).

Both in terms of style and subject, this is self-evidently a less accessible book than is Ravinthiran’s sequence of love sonnets. However, within its particular remit *Fools’ Paradise* may represent a *chef d’œuvre* in a neglected poetic genre. Both Hagger’s academic background and his lived experiences (spanning multiple teaching posts abroad and a concurrent stint as an intelligence asset in Libya) bolster his credentials as a political analyst. The work which ensues is able to deploy a tantalizingly broad historical perspective, as when Hagger reflects on the long history of English insularity and exceptionalism: “The first Brexit was when the UK broke / With Rome, but not with Catholicism, spoke / In protest at the Roman Church’s costly / Corruption and distant authority / And for a free English Catholic Church” (2020: 34). *Fools’ Paradise* additionally invokes a meticulous, erudite knowledge of parliamentary processes and statecraft. Various passages do risk dryness and bathos: “Grieve’s amendment’s on the order paper, it’s been printed. Bercow’s ruled the motion can be amended / Although it included the word ‘forthwith,’ which means / To MPs ‘without debate” (2020: 102). This may be intentional, however, and the eye for detail is elsewhere more redolent of snarky television news satire, as when “May visits Berlin, and sees Merkel lurk / On a red carpet but can’t make the car door work. / She can’t get out of her car, let alone the E.U.” (2020: 94). The decision to confine

the scope to the period of Teresa May's premiership effectively lends the whole a narrative arc; the timeline of events from Cameron's 2016 referendum until Boris Johnson's resumption of stalled negotiations included as an appendix will undoubtedly prove helpful after the passage of a few decades (or for those not engrossed in British politics). Hagger's demonstrated prolificacy has clearly been a help, and the book's sixteen Cantos retain the topical air of a running commentary. There is undoubtedly something anachronistic in treating Brexit via the format of seventeenth and eighteenth century poetic satirists in the day of YouTube commentators, but *Fools' Paradise* does so convincingly and may well figure among Hagger's best work.

If Ravinthiran's work displays the poet's private self and life, Hagger's deploys the persona of a public intellectual. Consistent with what is ultimately, regardless of his minority status, an everyman stance, the former hesitates to make sweeping pronouncements. Hagger, on the other hand, presumes a Yeatsian involvement in public affairs. The ambitions of the poet (who has recently won a Gusi Peace Prize, authored a draft world constitution complete with the division of powers and submitted the latter to the U.N.) may be quixotic or utopian, but in any case Hagger does not refrain from exercising his authority as a man of letters. The supernatural machinery of his mock epic grounds this authority in Zeus, tongue-in-cheekily assuring the reader that Hagger is "wise" and has "been given a jar of 'Zeus honey,' / manna he's had with his breakfast muesli" (2020: 3). Perhaps more pertinently, Hagger repeatedly presents himself ("your poet") as a political insider, privy to contacts, gossip and inside information. While not an M.P., he moves in political circles, as when: "Your poet met Letwin at a dinner in / 2003, when he had just been / Made Shadow Chancellor, and asked him "Will you still / Do your morning job?" —he worked for Rothschilds till / Noon [...]" (103). What is more, "your poet" has access to both Labour and Conservative politicians, as in Canto IX, wherein Hagger cites his source as the sitting Home Secretary:

Your poet sips champagne with Priti Patel,  
 Who says ferociously in a hotel,  
 "We're not getting the Brexit we want, Great Britain  
 Will stay—remain—in the customs union.  
 May's lied to us. ...  
 She's disgusting. And two-fisted. She's toast.  
 It's shameful." (63)

While some may construe this as self-aggrandizement or name-checking, within the context of *Fools' Paradise* for Hagger to establish his "expert" status



is arguably crucial. “Your poet” speaks not as an everyman, but specifically as Nicholas Hagger, man of letters and of public affairs. This stance in fact gels rather well with the chosen format of a seventeenth or eighteenth-century satirical mock epic, as the ensuing persona comes across as a sort of contemporary courtier: operating in a similar relation vis-à-vis today’s elite, political class as would have Dryden or Pope to that of their erstwhile, more closely-knit Republic of Letters.

#### 4. Conclusion(s)

In today’s parlance, there is an obvious contrast to be drawn. Hagger speaks confidently from a place of privilege, whereas Ravinthiran exhibits the encumbered consciousness of peripheral minority. There is an element of truth to this, yet one might concurrently note that both poets elude ready-made frames, and that a great deal of the difference may also result from their respective aesthetic stances. For Hagger, the “traditional role of the true poet ... is a central, not a marginal or peripheral, figure” (2006: xxiv), and he effectively advocates for the return of a sort of Romantic poet-prophet figure. Ravinthiran is both more modest and his approach more in line with contemporary poetic practice. Tellingly, the title of his book is taken from Philip Larkin’s “The Old Fools”; Larkin’s influence is both sincerely acknowledged and also a source of bemusement to the poet (with one sonnet exploring the contradiction that one of his formative influences is simultaneously “that racist” (2019: 35). Hagger’s approach, in contrast, is reactionary, tending to tack against the dominant poetics of his times. In the “Preface” to his voluminous *Collected Poems*, Hagger explicitly engages with the Movement of 1956, opining that the dominant post-war trend in English poetry has been one which “emphasises ordinariness as in Larkin” and “makes sincere feeling or realistic description the test of merit” (2006: lvii). Thus, the same trend in British poetry which has greatly influenced Ravinthiran is that which Hagger deliberately rejects.

This difference is certainly partially attributable to generational differences, as Hagger is over four decades Ravinthiran’s senior. Yet Hagger was also Larkin’s contemporary, and Hagger’s aesthetic *parti-pris* has been as consistent, strident and articulate as have been his civilisational prognostications. The poet, in this view, is an exceptional figure whose current marginality is to be rued, and whose central civilisational import needs to be restored. Perhaps due to his diplomatic contacts, Hagger does not hesitate to presume such a pivotal role. To invoke one of Ravinthiran’s sonnet titles, on the other hand, “unlike some” the younger poet hesitates to speak for everyone or for the nation. Interestingly, Ravinthiran even goes so far as to explicitly draw a parallel between his minority

status and that of poetry as a niche press, wittily advising prospective poets that one “can get used to being part of a tiny, put-upon minority” (2021a). The tacit insinuation is that poets and British Tamils are, in a way, similarly marginal figures. Should this be the case, one might conclude the realistic role for poetry consists in sublimating and expressing one’s experience of Brexit-related tensions, rather than in serving as a vehicle for broad dissemination of one’s political and cultural rhetoric.

Nevertheless, one might also speculate that attributions of marginality and centrality are rarely so straightforward as they at first glance appear. Ravinthiran is presumably entering the promising middle phase of his poetic career, whereas Hagger has been writing since the late 1950s and is currently cultivating his archives at the University of Essex. One hesitates to say either poet has been neglected, yet Hagger’s contrarian poetic stance and academic sojourns outside the U.K. have arguably rendered him an outlier (or holdout) in the mainstream of contemporary British poetics. It might coherently be argued that the work of Ravinthiran, the demographic outsider, is paradoxically accessible, whereas that of Hagger, who presents himself as the political insider, is comparatively idiosyncratic. Ravinthiran’s sonnets open the bedroom window upon one quotidian couple’s lived experience(s) of Brexit’s mediatic and political fallout, whereas Hagger’s parliamentary critique chastises the political class via self-presentation as an erudite man of affairs. Paradoxically, then, it is the poet hailing from a demographic minority who implicitly summons the reader to an identification with himself as a representative everyman. The erudite traditionalist, on the other hand, articulates a perhaps quixotic position of satiric critique anchored in a (possibly outmoded) humanist, universalist optimism.

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## | Abstract

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### Private Experience and Public-Spirited Critique: Brexit-Era Britain in the Recent Poetry of Vidyan Ravinthiran and Nicholas Hagger

Two starkly different aspects of the Brexit phenomenon may be seen in the recent work of two British poets, Vidyan Ravinthiran and Nicholas Hagger. Ravinthiran's most recent book consists of love sonnets composed for his wife. These are addressed to an intimate "you" which, upon publication, is expanded to vicariously include his readership. In the course of their everyday life as a mixed-race couple in northern England, the context of Brexit occasionally intrudes. When it leads him to communicate something to his wife, the poet organically transcribes these experiences. While ultimately a secondary (if often inescapable) theme in Ravinthiran's sonnet sequence, the Brexit negotiations are the leitmotif of Hagger's *Fools' Paradise*. Taking his cue from the sixteenth and seventeenth century mock epic, the poet offers an erudite satire excoriating a short-sighted political class. Hagger appears to move easily in such circles, presumably due to the diplomatic and intelligence contacts in his past. Assuming the guise of an insider or pundit, "your poet" provides a meticulous, tactical critique of the inefficacy of foolish parliamentarians.

**Keywords:** Vidyan Ravinthiran; Nicholas Hagger; Brexit; love sonnets; satire; mock epic

| **Abstrakt**

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**Doświadczenie osobiste oraz krytyka społeczna na temat brexitu:  
Wielka Brytania czasów brexitu w najnowszej poezji Vidyana Ravinthirana  
i Nicholasa Haggera**

Dwa zupełnie różne aspekty zjawiska brexitu można dostrzec w niedawnej pracy dwóch brytyjskich poetów, Vidyana Ravinthirana i Nicholasa Haggera. Najnowsza książka Ravinthirana składa się z sonetów miłosnych skomponowanych dla jego żony. Są one skierowane do intymnego „ciebie”, które po opublikowaniu zostaje rozszerzone, aby zastępczo objąć jego czytelników. W trakcie codziennego życia tej pary mieszanej rasy, mieszkającej w północnej Anglii, czasami pojawia się kontekst brexitu. Chociaż ostatecznie jest to temat drugorzędny (choć często nieunikniony) w sekwencji sonetów Ravinthirana, negocjacje brexitu są motywem przewodnim *Fools' Paradise* Haggera. Wzorując się na poematach heroikomicznych z XVI i XVII wieku, poeta przedstawia erudycyjną satyrę, która potępia krótkowzroczną klasę polityczną. Wydaje się, że Hagger z łatwością porusza się w takich kręgach, prawdopodobnie z powodu kontaktów dyplomatycznych i wywiadowczych w przeszłości. Przyjmując postać znawcy, „twój poeta” zapewnia drobiazgową, taktyczną krytykę nieskuteczności głupich parlamentarzystów.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Vidyan Ravinthiran; Nicholas Hagger; brexit; sonety miłosne;  
satyra; poemat heroikomiczny

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