

# NON-NORMATIVE VICTORIANS: IAN MCGUIRE'S *THE NORTH WATER* AS A NEO-VICTORIAN NOVEL

Brno Studies in English

Volume 46, No. 2, 2020

ISSN 0524-6881 | e-ISSN 1805-0867

<https://doi.org/10.5817/BSE2020-2-6>

PETR CHALUPSKÝ

---

## Abstract

Although its roots go back to the 1960s, neo-Victorian fiction has particularly flourished over the past three decades. Naturally, the emerging genre has undergone some development in terms of its delineation. The original, restrictive definition of this fiction as one reflecting the Victorian narrative style and canonical texts, rendering real-life personalities of that age and its crucial socio-cultural issues, gradually gave way to a broader definition which stresses an alternative, non-normative (re)presentation and (re)vision of the Victorian era and also looks for connections and continuities between the period and the contemporary world. This broadening of the genre's scope opened it up to new, enriching contributions which have helped to fuel its internal dynamism. One such novel is Ian McGuire's *The North Water* (2016), the story of an ultimate conflict between good and evil on a background of the declining Victorian whaling industry. This paper attempts to show that the novel can be taken as a resourceful example of neo-Victorian fiction as it provides an unorthodox and authentic insight into the undersides of Victorian England in the form of the whalers' milieu, including their coarse speech, manners and values; and also, through the Conradian and Levinasian ethical queries and dilemmas of the main protagonist, the ship's surgeon Patrick Sumner, it effectively and inspiringly addresses concerns that are still topical for present-day readers.

## Key words

Ian McGuire; *The North Water*; neo-Victorian fiction; the Victorians; ethics; continuity

---

*The North Water* (2016) is set in East Yorkshire of the late 1850s and tells the story of a doomed whaling ship's voyage from Hull to the Arctic. Though it is not an exemplary representative of neo-Victorian fiction, it provides an ingenious variation on this genre, which strongly draws on literary traditions other than those of the Victorian novel. The fact that this novel was included in the 2016 Man Booker Prize longlist came rather as a surprise because its author, Ian McGuire (b.1964), had previously published only one work of fiction, a post-millennial campus novel entitled *Incredible Bodies* (2006), which, though relatively well-received by critics, did not achieve any wider public recognition. The author's shift from a satire of contemporary academia to a historical narrative proved to be fortunate, as *The North Water* appeared in *The New York Times* list of the ten best books of 2016, and was awarded the Royal Society of Literature Encore Award for best second novel in 2017. Due to the novel's critical acclaim and success with the reading public, a five-part TV series based on its story was broadcast by the BBC in 2019. McGuire appears to have found "his" genre in historical, or perhaps even neo-Victorian, fiction, as he claims to be currently

working on a novel about the Irish Republican Brotherhood's subversive activities in Manchester in the late 1860s.

Starting his writing career with a campus novel was quite natural for McGuire as for more than twenty years his professional career has been primarily academic. Holding a doctorate in 19<sup>th</sup>-century American Literature, he has taught American literature and creative writing at the University of Manchester and the University of North Texas. He is also the author of a scholarly monograph on Richard Ford's fiction, *Richard Ford and the Ends of Realism* (2015). Yet, as he admits, after *Incredible Bodies* he tried to start a few novels but each time failed to make headway; so, he eventually decided to follow an alternative path. Inspired by Colm Tóibín's novel *The Master* (2004), depicting the life of Henry James in the final years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, McGuire at first began a biographical novel about Herman Melville, whose work he had always admired; but, after about a year, despite extensive research and initial progress, he got stuck on this as well. During his research on whaling and Melville's years at sea, he came across a facsimile edition of the diary kept by 18-year-old Arthur Conan Doyle who, as an Edinburgh medical student, spent a summer as a surgeon on a Dundee whaling ship (Historia 2017). The diary itself does not mention anything horrifying or mysterious, but the very fact that it was written by the creator of Sherlock Holmes gave him the idea of writing a murder story set aboard an Arctic whaling vessel (Historia 2017). Yet, as McGuire asserts, *The North Water* is by no means a pastiche of Doyle's stories, since he tried to eschew the narrative strategies of conventional crime fiction (Steger 2017). The result is an engaging novel which uses the declining Victorian whaling industry as a background for its multifaceted exploration of issues and queries concerning both the historical period in which the story takes place as well as their connections with and echoes in the present-day. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate that, by doing so, *The North Water* represents a particular example of neo-Victorian fiction whose originality and resourcefulness contribute to the inner dynamism of this genre.

## Intertextual framework

Situating *The North Water* into a larger intertextual context must inevitably reflect its interweaving of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary tradition and modern sensibility. Indeed, when asked to describe his book in five words, McGuire replied: "Herman Melville meets Cormac McCarthy" (Historia 2017). The inspiration from Melville is understandable, given the fact that McGuire's original intention was to complete a novel about this author. Moreover, anybody who happens to write a novel about a whaling ship is bound to feel the presence of Melville and his *Moby Dick* (1851). Indeed, McGuire admits to having borrowed and reworked some scenes and motifs from Melville's work, but immediately adds that his aim was to write a whaling maritime novel which Melville could hardly have written – one that would be, at the same time, "reviving and pushing back against *Moby Dick*" (Steger 2017). He acknowledges the voluminous canon of adventurous seafaring yarns written in English and contributes to it a work that tries to present

a much cruder and grittier version of such stories, with most of the heroic and high-minded properties removed. Moreover, *The North Water* lacks both the comprehensive encyclopedism and philosophical contemplations and digressions of Melville's narrative, keeping instead to fast-paced, tightly-plotted action, with elements of a thriller. Therefore, McGuire likes to see the novel as "both a homage to Melville but also a kind of revision of *Moby Dick*" (RNZ 2017), which revivifies the classic with its cogent discourse and modern narrative style.

The contemporary influence which McGuire openly professes is the work of Cormac McCarthy, namely his 1985 novel *Blood Meridian*, and the opening line of *The North Water*, "Behold the man", is an allusion to the opening line of *Blood Meridian*, "See the child". McGuire admires how McCarthy's writing manages to focus on plot, style and theme in a balanced combination, and also how he switches between different kinds of language in different scenes, from a high and articulate register to a Hemingwayesque conciseness. Therefore, what he learned and borrowed from McCarthy is the way in which "in certain action sequences the novel is pared down rhetorically but then it switches into this much richer, more descriptive rhetoric" (Steger 2017). McGuire also admits that his novel owes its "thrillerish" quality to McCarthy, who was much on his mind while writing it (Hunt). It seems likely, therefore, that the character of the Judge, the ruthless and violent arch-villain from *Blood Meridian* who is simultaneously so looming yet elusive that he sometimes seems almost superhuman, could have inspired McGuire's antagonist Henry Drax.

Yet critics and reviewers have pointed to other possible influences and inspirations. Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey-Maturin series (1969–1999) of nautical historical novels suggests itself. Those who seek parallels with the Victorian novel and its rogues' gallery of characters hint at the influence of Charles Dickens, namely in the form of the vicious and sadistic figure of Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), who is as near as "Dickens ever came to creating a monster" (Forbes 2017). Those who tend to see *The North Water* as its author's homage to the sea-faring, tale-telling tradition mention the darker maritime fiction of Edgar Allan Poe and Jack London, "in which the savagery of nature is measured and found wanting next to the savagery of human beings" (Evans 2016). It is especially London's *The Sea Wolf* (1904) that seems to have influenced McGuire's novel in terms of its dismal atmosphere, salty language, and creation of the story's pivotal villainous force in the personality of Wolf Larsen. *The Sea Wolf* also tells the story of a decent, educated man who is forced, under extreme circumstances, to become tough, self-reliant and operatively pragmatic in order to stand up to extreme cruelty and mercilessness. Moreover, some traits of the titanic character of Larsen, whom London intended as a criticism of Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch*,<sup>1</sup> who thinks himself to be above the categories of good and evil and pursues his urges and appetites without remorse, can be clearly seen in the devilish Drax.

Regarding its ethical framework, McGuire's novel recalls the fictional world of Joseph Conrad, particularly that of *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and *Lord Jim* (1900).<sup>2</sup> Similarly to the latter, whose eponymous protagonist's abandonment of a ship-in-distress triggers his life-long nomadic and evasive existence, *The North Water's* Patrick Sumner is embittered and withdrawn as a result of a recent moral and

professional failure due to which he was publicly censored, dismissed from the army and deprived of the opportunity to become a medical doctor in England. With his career prospects in ruins, almost destitute and angry at his own weakness, Sumner is trying to escape his shameful past and tormented conscience by taking laudanum and volunteering for the ill-paid position of surgeon on an Arctic whaling ship called *The Volunteer*, where he believes his life will be of no interest to the rough and indifferent crew. At the same time, *The North Water* shares its metaphysical treatment of good and evil with *Heart of Darkness*. McGuire also takes his protagonist far away from his “natural” habitat, places him in extreme circumstances and exposes him to diverse forms of otherness, of which that of other human beings turns out to be the most difficult with which to cope. In Levinasian terms, both Conrad and McGuire subscribe to the conception of ethics as a relationship to the other, a generous and selfless act in the face of the insurmountable and ungraspable otherness of another person. Following Conrad, McGuire thus “suggests and dramatizes evil as an active energy [...] but defines evil as vacancy” (Guerard qt. in Paulson 2007: 215), that is, as the lack of an innate capacity for restraint, self-control and self-denial, which would allow one to resist the urge towards selfish, and often inconsiderate, gratification of one’s immediate needs and desires in favour of the other’s well-being.

### Contemporary Neo-Victorian fiction

Over the past thirty years, the genre of the neo-Victorian novel has established itself as an integral part of contemporary British fiction, or, to be more precise, fiction written in English. Although its roots go back to the 1960s with Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), the genre truly started to flourish from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, which in Britain can be, in part, interpreted as a cultural and philosophical response to the political, and thus pragmatically simplified and stereotyped, appropriation of the Victorian era and its ethos by Margaret Thatcher,<sup>3</sup> which moreover “coincided with the boom of the ‘heritage industry’” (Mitchell 2010: 53). The subsequent popularity of novels such as A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990), Peter Ackroyd’s *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace* (1996), Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs* (1997), Sarah Waters’ trilogy *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999) and *Fingersmith* (2002), Michel Faber’s *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), and Julian Barnes’s *Arthur & George* (2005), have helped fiction dealing with the Victorian times to reach a generic status and prestige and, from the outset of the millennium, considerable critical attention, not only in the form of reviews and scholarly articles,<sup>4</sup> but also monographs<sup>5</sup>, dealing at first with the emergence of the genre and later with its various aspects and transformations.

The position of neo-Victorian fiction has by no means decreased in the last decade, as can be seen from the popular as well as critical reception of novels such as *The Mistress of Nothing* (2009) by Kate Pullinger, *Florence and Giles* (2010) by John Harding, *The Asylum* (2013) by John Harwood, *The Essex Serpent* (2016) by Sarah Perry, and *The Silent Companions* (2017) by Laura Purcell. With each new

contribution, the genre gains in terms of the diversity and complexity of its forms and themes, and its ongoing popularity suggests that “the Victorians continue to have meaning for us today because we continue to grant them meaning. [...] These novels stress the importance of historical recollection itself, of remembering the past in its multiplicity of possible meanings” (Mitchell 2010: 62). After some 120 years, the reign of Queen Victoria still proves to be a period stimulating in its combination of otherness, familiarity and historical proximity. It is a period whose dominant values and preferences invite stereotypical representation; while, at the same time, its deceptively monolithic and homogeneous public image fuels our awareness of hidden, interior tendencies and phenomena that resisted mainstream ideological pacification. Our interest in the Victorians, thus, stems not only from the fact that we find their life fascinating in its obscurity and inscrutability, but also because it is relevant to our own in its resemblance, affinity and modern sensibility.

Although neo-Victorian fiction, in fact, evolved simultaneously with postmodernism, most of these texts avoid more radical postmodernist strategies and conclusions. One of the crucial reasons for this discrepancy is that the genre’s popularity is at times fuelled by a nostalgia for what present-day readers often idealistically and simplistically identify as the Victorian era’s universal attributes which they lack in their own lives, namely prosperity, order, a clear hierarchy and clearly identifiable, knowing authority. As these novels “celebrate to some extent the Victorian tradition, they cannot be deemed radically subversive” (Gutleben 2001: 218). Similarly, Victorian novels cater to readers’ desire for the distinct plotline, linear narration and developed, life-like characters they have been denied by postmodernist fictions. What mainly distinguishes neo-Victorian novels from postmodern historiographic metafiction is their specific and singular historical location, as a result of which they embrace and interrelate both a self-reflexive revision and traditional historical context. On the one hand, neo-Victorian fiction thus participates in the questioning of the very possibility of knowing and narrating the past; yet, on the other hand, it inevitably adheres to the historical tradition of Victorian novelistic narratives. Therefore, although a certain “metafictional mode” is “essential to the genre” (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 5), it is far more moderate in terms of its scope and ambition to challenge the narrative process and authority.

The crucial challenge regarding an emerging literary form is its definition – formal, thematic and aesthetic – which inevitably includes setting up its potential political agenda. Naturally, this requires some evolution of the genre over time, before it “settles down” and develops its fundamental idiosyncratic properties, as literary responses to any historical period may be diverse, differently motivated, and often contradictory or incongruous with one another. In the broadest sense, in order to encompass as many of these approaches as possible, neo-Victorian fiction can be defined as “contemporary fiction that engages with the Victorian era, at either the level of plot, structure, or both” (Hadley 2010: 4). However, Christian Gutleben has pointed out that one problem resulting from such a loose delineation is the appearance of fiction which deliberately recalls and confirms most of the long-established stereotypical perceptions and misconceptions about the Victorians. Although he admits that much contemporary fiction about the

Victorian period is essentially conservative, even in its attempts to challenge these stereotypes and clichés (2001: 7), the extreme conservatism of what he terms “retro-Victorian” fiction is not motivated by a desire to reveal to readers the past in an accessible and comprehensible manner, but to present an illusory, and therefore soothing, alternative to a present which is “deemed inadequate, wanting, deficient” (2001: 195). The determining driving force of this literary representation is a strong nostalgia. Yet, rather than echoing the distinctive nostalgia of Victorian literature, which was always “accompanied by a consciousness of the future [...] [of] how their own time would appear in years to come” (Chapman 1986: 7), this longing for a past that never was merely responds to readers’ dissatisfaction with the chaotic and disturbing present-day.

Therefore, primarily, the relationship between neo-Victorian fiction and the past it renders needs to be clarified: it must be dynamic and dialogical rather than static and detached, while aware of the inherent ambiguity of a “simultaneous longing and anxiety” (Arias and Pulham 2009: xv) at the very core of the genre. In other words, the Victorians in neo-Victorian fiction are both “in and out of history” – dead and distant in a bygone past, yet continually removed from their specific historical context (Hadley 2010: 8) for the sake of the contemporary readership. Though subsumed within historical fiction, neo-Victorian writers strive to make their approach to the past different from conventional historical narratives. During the 1980s and 1990s, drawing on the premise that the Victorians in many respects anticipated our modern social and cultural life and that their values and achievements are still visible all around us because they actually “built a world for us to live in” (Sweet 2001: 231), neo-Victorianism rejected the notion of the Victorian era as different and distant, and rather focused on the connections and continuities between the Victorians and ourselves.<sup>6</sup> Later development of the genre, however, has favoured a position somewhere between the two poles of absolute, smooth continuity and total divergence, claiming that we should acknowledge both familiarity and otherness with regard to the relationship between the Victorian past and the present. Therefore, most often “these texts contain traces of both alterity as well as of continuism. They produce both the shock of recognition and the fright of estrangement” (Mitchell 2010: 61), approaching the Victorians not only as our ancestors, “but also as our sometimes uncomfortable (and unforeseen) mirror-image” (Tomaiuolo 2018: 3). The dialogue neo-Victorian fiction tries to establish with the Victorian past is a two-way process and relationship through which it seeks to both explore the Victorians within their historical context and eliminate this context by making use of the Victorian experience and values for the sake of contemporary readership.

This dual character of the neo-Victorian literary approach to the past is aptly voiced by Heilmann and Llewelyn who define such texts as more than historical fiction set in the Victorian period for they “must in some respect be self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians” (2010: 4). By doing so, they “seek to advance an alternative view of the nineteenth century for a modern audience” (2010: 7). Neo-Victorian fiction points out analogies between the past and the present in which it privileges various deviant tendencies and phenomena from the canonically,

or even stereotypically, normative view of that age, that is, those themes which could not be explicitly, openly and entirely addressed by Victorian writers for reasons of appropriateness, decency and decorum. These themes include secret liaisons, prostitution, homosexuality and lesbianism, family problems,<sup>7</sup> outright racism, serial murders, brutal homicides, as well as other transgressive phenomena. These texts thus offer the “self-conscious rewriting of historical narratives to highlight the suppressed histories of gender and sexuality, race and empire, as well as challenges to the conventional understandings of the historical itself” (Kaplan 2007: 3). They attempt to reveal the more authentic face of the Victorian era behind the public image fostered by the official cultural production of that time and its nostalgic modern re-evocations.

However, reducing neo-Victorianism to mere sensational probing into the most obscure and perverted undersides of Victorian society would be inaccurate and misleading as it does not take into consideration its contemporary implications, connections and overlapping. As Saverio Tomaiuolo puts it,

the neo-Victorian ‘project’ is much more than an uncensored version of Victorian culture, because in satisfying a certain interest in unknown, or lesser known, aspects of Victorianism, it proves that by rewriting the lives and vicissitudes of our ancestors it is possible to rediscover ourselves, and to acknowledge – at the same time – that the seeds of many of our anxieties and issues were planted in the nineteenth century. (2018: 6)

It is the combination of a non-normative historical insight and present-day self-reflectiveness that makes this fiction intriguing and challenging for both readers and writers. Not only does it invite multiple ways in which to look at the Victorian era from new perspectives, but it also allows us, though often indirectly, to compare ourselves with the Victorians and their most particular traits. Therefore, as Marie-Luise Kohlke believes, just as Victorian novels are read as resources of information about their time, “neo-Victorian texts will one day be read for the insights they afford into twentieth- and twenty-first century cultural history and socio-political concerns” (2008: 13). Moreover, this delineation of neo-Victorian fiction sets it free from the still quite widely held, narrow-minded conception of the genre as a modern version of the penny dreadful.<sup>8</sup>

### **The North Water**

Despite being set in Victorian England, *The North Water* is not a prototypical novel to be squarely positioned within the domain of neo-Victorian fiction as it was established over the 1990s and 2000s, since it does not unequivocally meet any of what Louisa Hadley (2010: 4) identifies as the genre’s major defining principles: Firstly, it does not principally draw on the conventions of a characteristic Victorian narrative, as the novel is prevalingly concerned with action and vivid detail rather than character, setting, and description of the environment. Moreover, the novel avoids any explicit ethical framework: it appears that “no one on

the ship is going to learn anything, or change in any way” (Tóibín 2016), and even the main protagonist keeps abstaining from taking any unspoken moral stance, due to which he does not become integrated into society, which makes the ending of the story ambivalently inconclusive. Secondly, it does not directly relate to a Victorian intertext; it does respond to a number of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century novels, but these are either American (*Moby Dick*, *The Sea Wolf*) or already anticipate the modernist experiment and are clearly moving away from the Victorian tradition (*Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*). Thirdly, it does not engage with real historical figures of that time, as these are merely briefly mentioned in conversations about colonial India (e.g. John Nicholson and Charles John Canning’s roles in the Indian Mutiny of 1857). Fourthly, it does not explore any specific concerns central to a Victorian social and cultural sensibility, as these hardly included ordinary persons’ dismissals from the Army, Arctic whaling and insurance frauds; and, fifthly, it does not dramatise the relationship between the past and the present by the employment of a dual plot, as the story is wholly set in the late 1850s and early 1860s.

In spite of this, there are also some aspects of *The North Water* that resemble the Victorian tradition: the narration is predominantly straightforward and chronological, and there are no significant digressions, parallel plotlines or time inversions; all the important figures are introduced early in the story; it is more interested in action and all it subsumes than in character construction; even the two main antagonists are sketched rather instrumentally, without much psychological insight, so as to prepare the scene for their unavoidable conflicts; and the plot soon translates into a struggle between good and evil, or at least between an absence of evil and pure viciousness, with the latter being defeated in the end, thus making the “good” protagonist the sole survivor of the ordeals. There is, however, no lucky coincidence or unexpected turn of events which would assist him in his rightful struggle; and so, in order to achieve his “moral” victory, he has to resort to means unthinkable for his Victorian literary precursors.

However, as has been discussed above, most of the more recent neo-Victorian literature can be delimited in a broader manner, as deliberately revisionist texts seeking to offer an alternative, non-normative view of the Victorians and their era, so as to simultaneously address readers’ present-day concerns. McGuire’s novel is a clear example of this, since it evinces several features that various theoreticians of neo-Victorianism associate with this kind of historical fiction. Firstly, *The North Water* provides an unorthodox insight into the undersides of Victorian England, especially the world of seamen and hired sea hunters, featuring such extremities as fraud, drug addiction, rape, sodomy and serial murder. The very fact that the two main antagonists are far from conventional members of Victorian society – the decent and thoughtful Sumner is a conscience-hunted social wreck addicted to opium, and Henry Drax is an antisocial, unpredictable and irredeemable psychopath, a heavy drinking bully, rapist and murderer – suggests that readers can anticipate a conflict of a different nature and intensity than from a conventional Victorian novel.

Moreover, McGuire’s portrayal of the whaling crew is far more plausible and lifelike than any nineteenth-century literary account could have provided. These



hard and poorly educated men whose primary motivation for joining the expedition was to escape from their criminal history on the shore, are far from being principled and honest individuals. The captain himself, Brownlee, is a rather pitiable character with few, if any, qualities worthy of respect: having badly failed on his previous voyage, during which his crew either died or ended up penniless and disabled, he knows that his only chance of ever captaining a whaling ship is on one which is to be intentionally destroyed beyond the Arctic circle in order to get money from the insurance company. Baxter, the cunning and calculating owner of the ship, is well-aware that Brownlee has no other choice than to take part in the fraud and repeatedly points out to him that whaling is only a pretext for a far more important and shadowy enterprise. Brownlee is, thus, treated ironically from the very beginning: he is not allowed to recruit his crew, not even his first and second mates, as Baxter does it for him, deliberately choosing men suitable for his criminal plan rather than for successful whale-hunting; although Brownlee knows that the sabotage of the vessel will be his most crucial task, he cannot stop talking foolishly about all the whales hiding around the pole; and he praises himself for being “a fair judge of the human character” (*The North Water*<sup>9</sup> 13), only to fatally misjudge the personality of Henry Drax.

And so, instead of overloading the reader with the philosophical ruminations of an esteemed captain and lengthy and technical descriptions of the crew’s background, thoughts, beliefs, clothing, tools and work with the ship’s equipment, the narration offers a more vivid insight into their often crude speech, brutish manners, opportunist morals, and superficial values. Their behaviour is shown as rough and violent, their language coarse and abounding with vulgarisms and obscenities. It is the language the characters use that most clearly distinguishes the narration of the novel from its Victorian precursors. McGuire admits that he does not know how these whalers really talked, but it was certainly not literary speech. That is why he opted for a language somewhere between Dickensian and contemporary English spiced up with a great deal of inventive swearing (Hunt), one “unencumbered by Victorian-era expectations of propriety” (Rigsby 2016), yet making use of archaic expressions to give it a feel of historical authenticity. The fact that the narrative is devoid of long descriptive passages allows McGuire to foreground and isolate his characters, which gives them “a sort of purity of line” and “intensity in the way they live, breathe and respond to the world that etches them more deeply [...] on the imagination of the reader” (Tóibín 2016). Yet all these traits make these characters more relatable to the reader, not so much on the personal level, where they lack a deeper and more complex psychological portrayal, but rather on the level of their moral inquiries and dilemmas that result from specific events and situational contexts.

Apart from this, the novel also touches upon the atrocities committed by British colonialists, namely during the suppression of the Indian Mutiny of 1857, a theme that fiction of the time avoided almost completely. Although colonial India features as mere backdrop referent, the novel forcefully portrays the arrogant sense of racial superiority, cruelty, indifference and greed of the British, both those stationed in India as well as those who only learn about the situation there from newspapers, who believe that the “white man’s burden” is most

effectively carried by subjugating and, if needed, exterminating the backward natives. Later on, when Sumner is rescued by Inuit hunters and finds himself in a missionary station, a less severe and uncompromising version of the colonialist discourse is voiced by the English priest. Although he is essentially a kind-hearted man who is almost entirely dependent on the natives' helpfulness and mercifulness for his very existence in the inhospitable Arctic landscape and climate, he devotes himself obstinately to the mission of Christianising them, and cannot help complaining condescendingly that they are kindly but "very primitive and childlike, almost incapable of abstract thought or any other higher emotions" (NW 267). That is why, when the Inuit hunters invite Sumner to hunt with them as their magic totem to bring them luck with their catch, the priest exhorts him to teach them by acting "as a good example of the civilised virtues" (NW 276). However, the embittered Sumner, who has seen what "civilised" people are capable of doing under certain circumstances, irritatedly refuses what he sees as the priest's misguided requirement.

Another thing that distinguishes *The North Water* from being an imitation of a Victorian novel is that the story abounds with scenes of utmost coarseness, violence and brutality, rendered through cursing, obscenities and naturalistic details and images of blood, flesh, bodily organs, smells and excrements, which attempt to absorb the reader into the action and atmosphere; yet, the narration simultaneously manages to maintain a knowing distance from what it presents. The above-mentioned opening sentence establishes this detachment and gives a clear signal that the story is not going to be an imitation of a realistic Victorian narrative. In this it resembles its more famous precursor, Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White*, the opening line of which – "Watch your step. Keep your wits about you; you will need them" (2011: 3) – fosters the illusion of the story as a free-standing, independent reality fully in control of the narrator and, by doing so, exposes the reader to the playful nature of the narrative's (inter)textual and (meta)fictional properties. In addition, the fact that the narration tends to keep to the level of the action and does not explain and comment on the characters' psychological motives gives space for the reader to surmise them and makes him/her partake in the interpretation of the story.

It is this narrative self-consciousness and metafictionality that allows neo-Victorian fiction to abandon the prevailing nostalgic approach to the Victorian era as something irrevocably lost and therefore distant and instead to search for possible continuities, connections and familiarities between the present and the past. It is based on the premise that "the present moment has emerged out of the Victorian context" (Hadley 2010: 14), and that Victorian values and achievements have never really ceased to shape the subsequent development of British social, economic, political and cultural reality. As mentioned earlier, over recent decades most neo-Victorian texts have thus strived for a middle course, revealing both continuities and discontinuities between Victorian identities and experience and our own. *The North Water* works along this middle course: by taking the whaling industry as its framework setting, it portrays something unfamiliar that no longer exists, yet uses it as a stepping stone for the narrative to elaborate on aspects of human nature within a changing world that, in principle, has

remained unaltered and manifest. Just as the Victorians had to adapt to changes resulting from industrial, scientific and technological developments, so in the contemporary world analogous, yet far more rapid, advances continue to affect our social relations by transforming communication and information systems. The situation when petroleum and coal gas replaced blubber and made the whaling industry obsolete, thus threatening to ruin the shipowners' businesses and make many people jobless, is just one example of such a change. McGuire's novel not only shows how various kinds of people may have responded differently to such circumstances; but, by making their speech, behaviour and thinking raw and unembellished, it also effectively addresses present-day readers' sensibility and concerns.

The connective element which particularly relates the story of *The North Water* to contemporary readers' experience is its ethical dimension. Drawing on Conradian moral queries, contemplated especially in *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, and Emmanuel Levinas's conception of ethics as an "ethics of alterity", in or through which the self is "enlarged and enriched by the other and transcends its own egoistic limits" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 20), the novel pushes Conrad's, or Jim's and Marlow's, dilemmas further towards an extreme position: not only is Sumner given a "second chance" because he demonstrated his moral firmness and responsibility in the face of a villainous force, but he is also forced by circumstances to oppose acts of pure evil, of a viciousness and callousness beyond his previous experience and perhaps even beyond human understanding. In the character of Henry Drax, McGuire exposes his protagonist to an individual so totalising and uncompromising that he makes any attempt at being ethically encountered by another person impossible, as he immediately considers any form of kindness and altruism to be weakness and abuses it for his own purposes, which often involves disposing of that benefactor as an unwanted witness. Drax's callous, perverted, causal pragmatism, which places gratification of his needs and desires by any available means above any kind of law of human conduct, allows him to follow his inclinations without regard to their consequences. Goodness and evil are just empty words for him, not binding categories with which he should judge his acts, as they are justifiable solely through their usefulness in granting him immediate well-being. Moreover, he believes that all people are like that, which makes his "logic" incontestable by any rational argument and Sumner soon realises that, in a rather Nietzschean way, talking to Drax "is like shouting into the blackness and expecting the blackness to answer back in kind" (NW 192). The novel, thus, poses the question of how one is to respond to an evil and cruelty so bestial that it defies all rules of acceptable human coexistence without betraying one's own ethical principles.<sup>10</sup>

The novel also substantiates the observation that neo-Victorian fiction is obsessed with the spectacle of violence and thrives on the sensational aspects of suffering (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 8). Therefore, one of the preoccupations that neo-Victorianism adopted from postmodernism is the privileged trope of monstrosity which, as Andrew Gibson notes, (re)presents "that which is exiled by the normative judgements, [...] the otherness that undermines any concept of man as unitary, knowable being" (1996: 238–239). Violence of different sorts and

its spectacles permeate the story of *The North Water* – be it a trivial pub punch-up, harpooning a whale, clubbing baby seals, shooting a bear, rape or even homicide – and the narration teems with explicit descriptions of such acts. However, it is the monstrosity embodied in Henry Drax, a dangerous psychopath who is ready to abuse, assault and murder anyone who is an obstacle to the satisfaction of his brutish physical needs, that gives the novel its particular dynamism. Drax's acts are beyond the other characters' understanding because they are inherently inhumane and inhuman, as his mind is wholly devoid of the emotional and social properties that would instil in him a coherent sense of his self and consequently the self of another, which allows him to pursue his immediate impulses regardless of their consequences.

Hand in hand with the theme of violence goes that of crime and criminality, which is why neo-Victorian novels often resort to the genre of crime and detective fiction. Heilmann and Llewellyn suggest a few other reasons why neo-Victorianism functions quite easily with detection: historical fiction and detection resemble each other in terms of their processes of gathering evidence and searching for its correct interpretation; it was in the Victorian period that the first detective stories emerged; and it allows the narration to reveal the darker and unknown sides of Victorian society (2010: 16). Many of these novels point out that, at that time, modern investigation methods were still in their infancy; and they leave the case unresolved or let the investigator arrive at a wrong conclusion, as, for instance in Ackroyd's *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*. Moreover, the person who carries out such an investigation needs not be a detective or police inspector, as in Barnes's *Arthur & George*, in which much of the investigation is carried out by the writer Arthur Conan Doyle; nor does the investigated act need to be a crime *per se*, as for instance in A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, in which two academic researchers are on the trail of a secret love affair between two Victorian poets.

This is also partly the case with *The North Water*, which is not formally an example of crime fiction, since readers know from the beginning who committed the crimes, and there is no professional investigator to solve the fraud and the murders. However, Patrick Sumner, the ship's surgeon and the protagonist of the novel, is forced by circumstances to assume repeatedly the role of amateur detective and search for clues so as to disclose the identity of the culprits and the true nature of their offences: at first, to protect a sexually abused cabin boy from another assault, then to help a falsely accused member of the crew by proving his innocence and finding the real murderer in order to protect other potential victims on board, and eventually to save his own life when he becomes too problematic for the main architect of the insurance fraud. And so, although the novel employs elements of detection, it eventually assumes the character of a thriller. Having gained evidence about the insurance fraud involving *The Volunteer*, Sumner returns to Hull to confront Baxter with that evidence. The last three chapters – during which he kills Drax in self-defence, outwits and robs Baxter, and flees England for Germany to escape the police – are, thus, written in the form of a modern thriller rather than a Victorian adventure yarn.

## Conclusion

Within the recent development of neo-Victorian fiction, *The North Water* represents a notable contribution to the genre. Although it does not directly meet the earlier criteria set for such literature – namely, that it employs some conventions of Victorian narrative, has a relation to a specific Victorian text, and deals with an issue the Victorians found crucial for their social and/or cultural sensibility – it complies perfectly with the later delineation of the genre that stresses two crucial features: neo-Victorian fiction must explore concerns and phenomena which were either secret, unspoken or even taboo for the Victorians, or which Victorian writers could not address openly and explicitly; and it must make the story relevant for the reader by finding connections and continuities between the Victorian and contemporary eras. Rendering authentically the environment, manners and speech of the Victorian whaling community, especially through the characters of the various people involved in it – from ship owners and captains to harpooners and seamen – *The North Water* presents a raw world that Victorian middle- and upper-middle-class readers did not come across on the pages of their favourite novels. At the same time, McGuire writes with a modern sensibility: his style is uncompromising, avoiding archaisms and euphemistic expressions and almost revelling in countless images of violence, cruelty, pain and the body, while also providing vivid sketches of the vast and serene Arctic landscape. His characters, portrayed mostly through their acts and speech, add to the story's dynamism and, in their motives and reasoning, prove easily relatable for present-day readers.

The use of at times almost excessive violence in the novel is far from self-serving, as it is necessary for the construction of the story's ethical framework, for without the extremity of Henry Drax, Patrick Sumner would most probably not have found the strength to bring his numbed moral sense back to life. The aspect of the violent or the monstrous does not entail only ontological and epistemological questioning consequent upon an artistic representation of the Victorians and their world, but also invites ethical questioning regarding the limits of humanity and human conduct. By exposing its characters to diverse forms of social and moral deviance, neo-Victorian fiction functions as “an ethical reminder of the potential otherness of the human” (Gutleben and Wolfreys 2010: 67). This ethical dimension represents one of the crucial means through which these narratives address the readers' own values and preconceptions concerning their attitude to the other-than-self, and, thus, forces them to make meaningful connections and parallels between the historical period and their own. It is in this respect that McGuire's novel proves exceptionally consistent and articulate.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Paraic O'Donnell (2016) suggests a Nietzschean reading of *The North Water*, with the opening line as a reference to *Ecce Homo* (1898), the autobiographic summation of his philosophical project, relating Drax's vile acts to Nietzsche's “free spirits”, the “investigators to the point of cruelty” who have “dispensed entirely with obsolete notions of good and evil”.

- <sup>2</sup> This parallel with Joseph Conrad's fiction has also been suggested by other critics, namely Cartwright (2017), Dunmore (2016) and Forbes (2017).
- <sup>3</sup> See e.g. Hadley (2010: 6–15) and Mitchell (2010: 47–53).
- <sup>4</sup> The first issue of the *Neo-Victorian Studies*, a specialised inter-disciplinary, open-access journal hosted by Swansea University, was launched in 2008 (See <http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/>).
- <sup>5</sup> E.g. *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel* (2001) by Christian Gutleben, *Inventing the Victorians* (2002) by Matthew Sweet, *Victoriana: Histories, Fiction, Criticism* (2007) by Cora Kaplan, *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past* (2009) edited by Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham, *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us* (2010) by Louisa Hadley, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999–2009* (2010) by Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages* (2010) by Kate Mitchell, *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering* (2010) edited by Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, and *Deviance in Neo-Victorian Culture: Canon, Transgression, Innovation* (2018) by Saverio Tomaiuolo.
- <sup>6</sup> This approach also aimed to disprove the Thatcherite political appropriation of the Victorian era as a nostalgic return to the values of the good old times, that is to something gone or even lost.
- <sup>7</sup> Kohlke and Gutleben argue that much neo-Victorian fiction de-romanticises and de-mythologises the nineteenth-century family ideal, showing it to be “elusive, based as much on egoistic greed, competitive self-advancement or self-indulgence, and its utility to the status quo as on its support of the needs of all the unit's members equitably”, thus critiquing “the family's perpetuation of discriminatory sexual and gender politics, unequal distributions of rights and power within personal relationships and wider society, and coercive economic and ideological determinants on family forms” (2011: 10).
- <sup>8</sup> A satirical list of such so-called prototypically neo-Victorian essentials can be found on Miriam Elizabeth Burstein's blog *The Little Professor: Things Victorian and academic*, under the heading “Rules for Writing Neo-Victorian Novels”.
- <sup>9</sup> In references, henceforward abbreviated as *NW*.
- <sup>10</sup> For a more complex exploration of this theme, see Petr Chalupský's article “The Devil Inside that Won't Be Caged in or Fixed by Words: Fluidity and Ethics in Ian McGuire's *The North Water*”.

## References

- Arias, Rosario and Pulham, Patricia (2009) Introduction. In: Arias, Rosario and Pulham, Patricia (eds.) *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, xi–xxvi.
- Burstein, Miriam Elizabeth (2006) Rules for Writing Neo-Victorian Novels. *The Little Professor: Things Victorian and academic*. 15 March 2006. Accessed on 29 June 2019. [https://littleprofessor.typepad.com/the\\_little\\_professor/2006/03/rules\\_for\\_writi.html](https://littleprofessor.typepad.com/the_little_professor/2006/03/rules_for_writi.html)
- Cartwright, Justin (2017) *The North Water* by Ian McGuire review – a shocking evocation. *The Guardian*, February 5, 2017. Accessed on 15 April 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/05/the-north-water-ian-mcguire-review>
- Chalupský, Petr (2019) The Devil Inside that Won't Be Caged in or Fixed by Words: Fluidity and Ethics in Ian McGuire's *The North Water*. *Ars Aeterna*, in print.
- Chapman, Raymond (1986) *The Sense of the Past in Victorian Literature*. London: Croom Helm.
- Dunmore, Helen (2016) *The North Water* by Ian McGuire review – a voyage into the heart

- of darkness. *The Guardian*, February 19, 2016. Accessed on 15 April 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/feb/19/the-north-water-ian-mcguire-review>
- Evans, David (2016) Ian McGuire, *The North Water*: Subtle as a harpoon in the head, but totally gripping, book review. *The Independent*, February 9, 2016. Accessed on 15 April 2019. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/ian-mcguire-the-north-water-subtle-as-a-harpoon-in-the-head-but-totally-gripping-book-review-a6856011.html>
- Faber, Michel ([2002] 2011) *The Crimson Petal and the White*. Edinburgh: Canongate.
- Forbes, Malcolm (2017) *The North Water* review. *The Financial Times*, February 5, 2017. Accessed on 26 April 2019. <https://www.ft.com/content/3d37ccfc-c68c-11e5-b3b1-7b2481276e45>
- Gibson, Andrew (1996) *Towards a postmodern theory of narrative*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Guerard, Albert J. (1958) *Conrad the Novelist*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Gutleben, Christian (2001) *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel*. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi.
- Gutleben, Christian and Wolfreys, Julian (2010) Postmodernism Revisited: The Ethical Drive of Postmodern Trauma in Neo-Victorian Fiction. In: Kohlke, Marie-Luise and Gutleben, Christian (eds.) *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 37–72.
- Hadley, Louisa (2010) *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heilmann, Ann, and Llewellyn, Mark (2010) *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Historia Editor (2017) Historia Interviews: Ian McGuire. March 11, 2017. Accessed on 15 April 2019. <http://www.historiamag.com/historia-interviews-ian-mcguire>.
- Hunt, Drew (n.d.) Ian McGuire: Questions & Answers. *Foyles.co.uk*. Accessed on 3 May 2019. <https://www.foyles.co.uk/Ian-McGuire>
- Kaplan, Cora (2007) *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kohlke, Marie-Luise (2008) Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter. *Neo-Victorian Studies* 1(1), 1–18. Accessed on 29 June 2019. [http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/past\\_issues/Autumn2008/NVS%201-1%20M-Kohlke.pdf](http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/past_issues/Autumn2008/NVS%201-1%20M-Kohlke.pdf)
- Kohlke, Marie-Luise, and Gutleben, Christian (2010) Introduction: Bearing After-Witness to the Nineteenth Century. In: Kohlke, Marie-Luise and Gutleben, Christian (eds.) *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 1–34.
- Kohlke, Marie-Luise, and Gutleben, Christian (2011) Introducing Neo-Victorian Family Matters: Cultural Capital and Reproduction. In: Kohlke, Marie-Luise and Gutleben, Christian (eds.) *Neo-Victorian Families: Gender, Sexual and Cultural Politics*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 1–42.
- McGuire, Ian (2016) *The North Water*. London: Scribner.
- Mitchell, Kate (2010) *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- O'Donnell, Paraic (2016) *The North Water* by Ian McGuire review: the elements of style." *The Irish Times*, February 13, 2016. Accessed on 5 April 2019. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-north-water-by-ian-mcguire-review-the-elements-of-style-1.2532589>
- Paulson, Ronald (2007) *Sin and Evil*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Rigsby, Joshua (2016) *The North Water*: A Blood-Drenched Tale of Arctic Whalers. *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 3, 2016. Accessed on 10 April 2019. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-north-water-a-blood-drenched-tale-of-arctic-whalers/#!>
- RNZ (2017) A wild, dark whaling tale. *Rnz.co.nz*, March 11, 2017. Accessed on 6 May 2019.

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/saturday/audio/201836266/a-wild-dark-whaling-tale>

Steger, Jason (2017) How Ian McGuire wrote his acclaimed novel of a whaling ship full of dark deeds. *The Sunday Morning Herald*, February 9, 2017. Accessed on 6 May 2019. <https://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/how-ian-mcguire-wrote-his-acclaimed-novel-of-a-whaling-ship-full-of-dark-deeds-20170209-gu98pc.html>

Sweet, Matthew (2001) *Inventing the Victorians*. London: Faber and Faber.

Tóibín, Colm (2016) *The North Water* review. *The New York Times*, April 11, 2016. Accessed on 10 April 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/17/books/review/the-north-water-by-ian-mcguire.html>

Tomaiuolo, Saverio (2018) *Deviance in Neo-Victorian Culture: Canon, Transgression, Innovation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

PETR CHALUPSKÝ is Associate Professor at the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Education, Charles University, where he teaches courses in English Literature, Literary Studies and Literary Theory. His research and publication activities focus on contemporary British fiction. He is the author of the monographs *The Postmodern City of Dreadful Night: The Image of the City in the Works of Martin Amis and Ian McEwan* (2009) and *A Horror and a Beauty: The World of Peter Ackroyd's London Novels* (2016).

Address: Doc. PhDr. Petr Chalupský, Ph.D., Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Education, Charles University, Magdalény Rettigové 4, 116 39, Praha 1, Czech Republic. [petr.chalupsky@pedf.cuni.cz]



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-NC-ND 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as image or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.

---