The Animal That Remembers: History, Hauntology, and Animality in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers* and Ian McGuire's *The North Water*

> *While in life the great whale's body may have been a real terror to his foes, in his death his ghost becomes a powerless panic to a world … Are you a believer in ghosts, my friend? (Herman Melville)*
>
> *All stories are, more or less, ghost stories. (Julian Wolfreys)*

Introduction

In the last scene of Ian McGuire's gripping neo-Victorian novel *The North Water*, whaleship surgeon Patrick Sumner has an unsettling encounter with a polar bear at Berlin's *Zoologischer Garten*. Previously, cast adrift in the High Arctic, Sumner had killed a similar bear that would doubtless otherwise have killed him, using its carcass to provide himself with temporary shelter. Now he feels drawn uncannily to this one, just as it is drawn to him. Is he remembering, or is the bear? The text leaves the decision up to the reader. Advancing to the front of its cage, the bear pushes its nose through the bars and stares inscrutably at Sumner. Its gaze, we are told, "holds him tight. It snorts, and its raw breath brushes against his face and lips. He feels a moment of fear and then, in its wake, as the fear fades and loses its force, an unexpected stab of loneliness…" (326). And with this spectral encounter – delicately hinged on the recognition of shared creaturely need, precariously suspended between the realm of the dead and the realm of the living – the novel is brought to its appropriately inconclusive close.

Clearly, animals *do* remember, but their memories are also entangled with human memory. Drawing in part on Jacques Derrida's seminal hauntological work, Laura White suggests that if Derrida's specter serves as an aesthetic device which brings to light stories

that have either gone untold or are partly concealed in the telling, it also opens the door to other ways of being as well as telling; other ways for humans and animals to co-inhabit an ecologically damaged world (White 7-8; see also Derrida 2006, 2013). White's word for this phenomenon is "ecospectrality," which she defines as a composite term for the ways in which our environmental sins, past and present, are brought back to haunt us, revealing connections between local and planetary scales of operation as well as between the present and the past (3). Ecospectrality demands a recognition of the co-presence of others, nonhumans as well as humans, while it potentially enables the rethinking of human-animal relations in such a way as to acknowledge the violence inscribed by the one on the other, but also to envisage the futural possibilities offered by historical redress (165).[1]

Taking its cue from White, the main task of this essay is to look at the implications of entangled human/animal memory in two historical novels, McGuire's aforementioned *The North Water,* first published in 2016, and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers,* first published in 1863. The two novels, at first sight, may not appear to have a great deal to offer each other aside from the fact that both are reflecting on a bygone era. One, McGuire's, is *set* in the Victorian period and uses it to find connections between the Victorian and contemporary eras; the other, Gaskell's, is *written* in the Victorian period but looks back to a similarly unfinished past. However, we will seek in this essay to argue that the two novels are closely connected despite the historical distance that separates them. The most obvious link is that both are whaling narratives of a kind, but with a difference. The main difference is that whales, while fundamental to the lives and livelihoods of the characters, are only rarely encountered in the texts.[2] Both novels are influenced – haunted – by other popular whaling narratives, Melville's *Moby-Dick* inevitably among them, but also the accounts of William Scoresby Jr, the notorious nineteenth-century British whaler, whom Gaskell almost certainly met. But at the same time, whales are largely absent presences in the novels: they partake of

the realm of the spectral. Doubly so, perhaps, in so far as whales are themselves paradigmatically spectral creatures. Whales are rarely visible to the human eye, but that limited visibility merely reminds us of the enormity of the losses that surround them (Huggan 87). These losses can be seen in both human and animal terms, opening up a discursive space for more-than-human versions of multidirectional memory (Rothberg). The history of whaling, in this last sense, resonates with other violent histories: the history of slavery (Gumbs); the history of colonialism (Huggan); the enfolding of both of these into the history of capitalist modernity itself (Buller; Yusoff).

Animals in general, the film theorist Akira Lippit contends, have increasingly disappeared from the world even as they have become increasingly commodified. In so doing, they have become mere ideas of animals, spectral presences; and, much like films, they seem to "project from a place that is not a place, a world that is not a world" (Lippit 95). Yet animals materially remain, and even when they do not, their legacies are still very much with us. This is no more so than in the traumatic history of modern commercial whaling, which offers an object lesson on the need to remember animals that, even as the exploitative histories surrounding them are shrouded, are more than capable of remembering us. Spectral animals, in this last sense, force us to reflect on the systematic violence that the human world has historically inflicted on the nonhuman (Vinci 2); they also open up a colloquy with the dead, both human and nonhuman, that is as much a reckoning with the present as a confrontation of the past.

A second contention of our essay, following on from this, is that the two novels offer multispecies variations on the ghost story. Again, there is no obvious fit here with more conventional forms of the ghost story, though it is a form with which Gaskell was intimately familiar, and one which McGuire uses to particularly unsettling effect. Rather, the two authors use ghostly figures, both human and animal, to explore hauntology's disruptive

relationship to time (Davis; Derrida). Hauntology works most obviously to disturb chronological time, revealing the multiple ways in which the past secretes itself into the present. Jeffrey Weinstock describes this process well: the ghost, he says, is "that which interrupts the presentness of the present, and its haunting reveals that, beneath the surface of received history, there lurks another narrative, an untold story that calls into question the veracity of the authorized version of events" (63).

However, ghosts may also call into question the conventional categories used to separate the animal from the human. For Derrida, specters, which ostensibly demonstrate the visibility of bodies that "are not present in flesh and blood" ("Spectographies" 38), also enable the recognition of our shared animality, which exists in the "flesh and blood vulnerability of [all sentient] beings, whether human or not" (Pick 3). The term "animality" itself contains many of the contradictions that are brought to light by the multifaceted figure of the specter. As the anthropologist Tim Ingold wryly remarks,

> Every generation has renewed its own view of animality as a deficiency in everything that we humans are uniquely supposed to have, including language, reason, intellect and moral conscience. And in each generation we have been reminded, as though it were some startling new discovery, that human beings are animals too, and that it is by comparison with other animals that we can best reach an understanding of ourselves. (14-15)

The fundamental contradiction resides, Ingold contends, in the popular identification of the human *species* with the human *condition*, which is then ideologically opposed to an animal condition defined by brute instinct rather than by rational deliberation, and assumed to be lacking in any kind of socially sanctioned regulation or acquired moral constraint (21). Undoing this self-serving ideology, which has long been used to justify and perpetuate the species boundary, is a primary task for the contemporary academic field of animal studies, which repositions animal brutality as animal *vulnerability*, and which recodes animal

deficiency as animal *vitality*, the generative force that underpins the flourishing of biological life (Calarco; Pick; Waldau).

This essay brings history, hauntology, and animality together to reflect on the differences animals make to two ostensibly human-centred historical narratives, and what these narratives might say about the spectral relationship between animal others and human selves. It focuses mainly on whales, although (in *The North Water*) it also takes in other animals, and perhaps most of all it reflects, following Derrida, on the animals that we are ourselves (Derrida, *Animal That I Am*). The essay is in three parts although there are some overlaps between each part, and – as befits its ghostly subject – some inevitable repetitions. The first part develops the preliminary ideas we have been exploring so far around the relationship between hauntology and history, addressing the historical components of both novels, but also the stories they hide (which are nonetheless made visible) or consciously leave out. The second part is organized around the figure of the *revenant*, which is usually understood in terms of the dead body that physically returns, but can also play ironically on that assumption. The two main revenants in *Sylvia's Lovers* are both presumed dead, but are actually not – not that their return is a matter for rejoicing. On the contrary, as is often the case with revenants, the motif of fatal return is linked to broader cycles of violence and revenge (L. Morton; Shaw, "Fatal Return"). Similarly, *The North Water* is as much stalked by revenants as by more conventional ghosts (dead spirits that appear to the living), although the lines between the two, especially in the later stages of the novel, become increasingly blurred.

Finally, the third part of the essay looks more closely at the animal ghost/ghostly animal. Ghosts often take animal form, but our approach owes more to the hauntological figure of the spectral animal: more particularly the animal that remembers, and which forces us to remember, even as we strive to think "unhistorically" in relation to events we would

rather forget (Nietzsche). The argument threaded through this is that, through a hauntological approach, *Sylvia's Lovers* and *The North Water* can both be re-established as whaling narratives, albeit primarily in the spectral context of providing a salutary warning not to forget the dead. A secondary strand of argument is that "historiography is itself a form of haunting – of the past haunting the present, as much as it is the present's haunting of the past" (Blanco and Peeren, "Haunted Historiographies" 482). This has obvious implications for the historical novel, which may look to instal the gap between the past and the present, but is repeatedly reminded of the impossibility of doing so: a metafictional axiom that is arguably as much a property of the Victorian novel (*Sylvia's Lovers*) as it is of the contemporary neo-historical novel that looks to defamiliarize the Victorian past (*The North Water*).

Haunted Histories

Historian Ethan Kleinberg's provocation to unsettle "the way we 'do' history" encourages taking a hauntological turn which "engage[s] with and make[s] explicit the perturbations that the past returned convokes" (1). History, approached through a framework of this kind, gives the opportunity to consider "the entangled and unstable relation of presence and absence without privileging one over the other" (3). It offers space to consider the uncertain, to entertain the pluralities of history, to transcend linear temporalities, and to maintain the ongoing and layered effects of historical people, places, and events (Searle 15). In the context of writing about the historical exploitation of wild animals and the devastation of ecosystems, hauntology also offers a way to engage with the spectral presence and pervasive effects of uneasy histories and legacies that are not limited to those of human beings, and to follow the "traces of more-than-human histories through which ecologies are made and unmade" (Tsing et al. G1).

Published in 1863, *Sylvia's Lovers* takes the end of the 1700s as its setting, a moment that might be considered part of the "golden era" of Yorkshire's whaling industry. Set in Monkshaven (aka Whitby), one of the novel's opening scenes features returning whalers from the Greenland Sea, a place where bowhead whales were slaughtered in their thousands. However, while whaling provides one of several key backdrops to the novel, it never evolves into its major focus, and whales feature only sporadically in an essentially human-centred text. A more sustained engagement with the whaling trade can be found in *The North Water*, although McGuire's novel is written very much from the perspective of the early twenty-first century, and its apocalyptic narrative meditates on the broader existential implications of a fast-diminishing industry. While it begins in the murky streets of Hull, the most famous of the English whaling ports, the plot unfolds on the condemned ship the *Volunteer*, in the icy waters around Greenland, and around the "unmade" ecologies surrounding them – ecologies that bring the North of England and the Arctic together in a hallucinatory multispecies nexus of extraction and empire, sickening brutality and ultra-violent death.

Both novels fall into the genre of historical fiction if their approach, contemporary concerns, and crossovers with other genres widely differ. Alternately described as a marriage, protest, and romance story, "historical intrusion" has been seen as a major feature of *Sylvia's Lovers*, and it has rightly been understood as a historical novel, although it plays fast and loose with historical facts (Shaw, "Give Me Sylvia" 46; Shaw, "Then and Now" 37). Written at the height of Victorian realism and historical fiction in the mid-nineteenth century, Gaskell's novel explores the impact of national and international changes and events on everyday lives in a small whaling town in north-east Yorkshire (Bowen 244, 254-55). Also typical for its time is Gaskell's preoccupation with the past and its genealogical connection to the present (Gilmour 25; Bowen 244). Events are approached sixty years after the setting of the novel, and the time lag between the time of narration and the time of narrated events is

consistently, sometimes contemptuously, displayed throughout (Shaw, "Then and Now" 37). The novel is thus untimely in the sense that it instals a sizeable gap between the past and the present. However, it is also untimely in the equal and opposite sense, that it shows continuities between the past and the present – or, perhaps more accurately, it shows the instability of the living present from which it is narrated: a present which is no more reliable or substantial than the historical past it selectively invokes. *Sylvia's Lovers*, in this sense, is a *spectral* text that plays uncannily between the dead (whom its story brings back to life) and the living (who, in this story, have the pall of death cast over them). Its spectrality is both intradiegetic (that is, it operates within the narrative itself) and extradiegetic (that is, it functions as an effect of its ironic relationship to its own narrative voice).

In this and other respects, it is a precursor to the more obviously metafictional neo-historical novel, of which *The North Water* is a good recent example. More specifically, *The North Water* exhibits several of the characteristics of the neo-*Victorian* novel, which is usually more concerned with demonstrating the relevance of "Victorian" themes to the contemporary present than in exploring the Victorian past (Arias and Pulham; Kohlke and Gutleben). As Petr Chalupský suggests, *The North Water*'s main neo-Victorian quality consists in its grisly account of a deviant strand of the Victorian society that it powerfully re-imagines. For Markku Lehtimäki, on the other hand, "its affective realism and its powerful evoking of the actual historical past" (48) make it "difficult to read [*The North Water* as] pure fiction," even if the novel self-consciously draws on classic Victorian fictional tropes (47). The extent to which *The North Water* – and for that matter *Sylvia's Lovers* – can be considered "realist" is moot, and both novels deliberately stretch credibility to the limit, either by employing such stereotypical romantic conventions as coincidence, doubling, and dream sequences (*Sylvia's Lovers*), or by adopting postmodernist variations on the fantastic tale (*The North Water*). Neither novel, however, abandons the historical past; rather, both are

closely concerned with revealing hidden versions of it, while both are concerned as well with reflecting on unwanted links between the past and the present: links that emphasize the continuity of suffering (*Sylvia's Lovers*), or the butchery and violence that, so often displaced onto other times and places, are an integral part of modern "civilized" life (*The North Water*).

Both novelists carried out significant amounts of research to bring historical veracity to their stories. Each text has its own mixture of different layers of historical research and cultural influences, as well as passages inspired directly by famous literary works that had either come to shape popular imaginations of nineteenth-century whaling (*Sylvia's Lovers*) or what is now recalled as such (*The North Water*). *Sylvia's Lovers* was written when people from the late 1700s may still have been alive and able to remember that time, or their children would have known the stories. Several scholars have emphasized the importance of Gaskell visiting Whitby in November 1859, and of her conversations with local people who relayed the memories that haunted them about Whitby's whaling past. *Sylvia's Lovers* indirectly draws on some of these individual memories, as well as on collective accounts that had long since passed into the realms of folklore and legend (Shaw, "Then and Now" 41; Watson and Watson 83). As Clare Pettitt writes, "the uncomfortable semi-distance of two generations" must have made "it difficult for her first readers to gauge their distance from the action of the novel; it was both near and far, both within call and out of reach" (616).

Pettitt suggests that this choice points to a writer more "interested in the complex interplay between past and present than in 'history' as such" (617). Notwithstanding, parts of the novel explore and are inspired by real historical events, including press gangs at the time of war with France, whaleships gone for many months at a stretch, and riots against impressment. To cite just one example, in 1793, a protest against impressment resulted in the leader being hanged, just as Sylvia's father is in the novel (Shaw, "Then and Now" 38). Gaskell is also thought to have met William Scoresby Junior, the famous whaling captain

from Whitby, and it is assumed that conversations about his whaling voyages influenced her, while we know for sure that Scoresby's popular *Account of the Arctic Regions, with a History and Description of the Northern Whale Fishery* (1820) was a source she turned to in the writing of *Sylvia's Lovers*, supplying material for the boisterous whaling tales exchanged by Charley Kinraid and Daniel Robson in the text (Spufford 211; Twinn 38-39; see also introductory section above). Fiction is imbued here with the ghosts of real people and their stories and experiences, as well as the ghosts of real whales that were hunted and killed at the time. Indeed, it is possible – though the arrogant narratorial tone offsets this – to see Gaskell's novel as "an act of loving retrieval [that confirms] the lasting value of lost lives, like a geologist tracing fossils in quarried stone" (Uglow 506).

The North Water is similarly influenced by other writers whose presence can be felt in the text. Any reader familiar with Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) would immediately recognize aspects of it in *The North Water*, and McGuire himself has acknowledged its baleful influence, which registers in the reciprocal combination of hunting and haunting in the text (Chalupský 104). Indeed, it is near impossible to escape the specter of *Moby-Dick* when thinking or writing about whales and whaling: it is an archetypal ghostly text (Hoare; Huggan). Another self-confessed source of inspiration for the novel was Arthur Conan Doyle's diary, kept when he was the surgeon on an Arctic whaleship in 1880, which brings out the dangers of the voyage as well as some of the darker aspects of the whalers' craft. Taken together, *Sylvia's Lovers* and *The North Water* accumulate several major voices who have shaped historical and popular knowledge about whaling since the Victorian era. Both texts can be understood as an amalgamation of ghosts of real whaling voyages, people, marine mammals, hangings and press gangs, wars and shipwrecks.

Whaleships had been leaving from Yorkshire for more northerly seas since the beginning of the seventeenth century, with the industry accelerating in the 1700s. In Hull the

first ship left as early as 1598, while whaling did not begin until 1753 in Whitby. Hull may have been the more established whaling port, but Whitby quickly became a successful hub in Greenland whaling (Jackson; Dykes). In the opening pages of *Sylvia's Lovers*, Gaskell establishes the central importance of whaling to the town, its permeation through different strata of the human community, and its shaping of the visual and olfactory landscape. As the narrator tells us, "the great people of this small town" were not the wealthy landed gentry who held hereditary seats and stately homes, but rather those living by the sea, who participated in an "unsavoury yet adventurous trade which brought wealth to generation after generation of certain families" (5). Whaling was a livelihood that shaped the lives of men in Whitby, from their youth as apprentice sailors until they reached the class of captain in adulthood. Monkshaven is duly described in the text as having "an amphibious appearance, to a degree unusual even in a seaport. Every one depended on the whale fishery, and almost every male inhabitant had been, or hoped to be, a sailor" (6). The year was defined by the rhythms of whales and whaling, with active whaling during the six-month voyages to Greenland in spring and summer, then the "idle season," which involved the processing of the whales that had been caught (6). Many thousands of whales were killed and brought back by whaleships from Whitby and Hull between the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In 1814, Whitby's most productive year, eight ships caught 172 whales (Young 198). Hull's most successful year was in 1820, when 62 vessels caught 688 whales (Rowley 52).

Gaskell refers to Monkshaven's "melting-sheds" (6), where blubber and whalebone (baleen) were processed, and Whitby harbor was once the site of a number of large boiler houses, which plied a lucrative trade (Scarre 29). Thousands of tonnes of blubber and baleen extracted from the Arctic were transported to the shores of Whitby, with blubber rendered down into oil for lighting, and baleen plates turned into material for corsets, hat brims, and

riding crops. The narrator describes the stench associated with the process, one that Gaskell would not have experienced herself but which was an infamous aspect of this industry, as "almost intolerable," but adds that "on these unsavoury 'staithes' [wharves] the old men and children lounged for hours" (6). The wealth brought by this brutal industry made some families rich, financed buildings in Whitby, and helped it develop into the town that Gaskell experienced sixty years later. McGuire also draws the reader to the lingering presence of whales, even if there are few up-close encounters with them. For example, the narrator says that "Although the wind is freshening and the deck has been washed clean, there is a lingering smell of decay from yesterday's flensing" (177) while, nominally insulated from this in his below-deck cabin, Sumner writes "by the eggish light of a blubber lamp" (18). In both texts, then, even if there are few direct references to whales, their material ghosts provide a disturbing set of olfactory and luminous hauntings. The industry itself seems haunted, and indeed its very success would precipitate its downfall. Whalers from Yorkshire contributed significantly to the near extinction of bowhead whales. Both novels deal with this self-induced decline: the actual loss in *Sylvia's Lovers*, the impending loss in *The North Water*. At the time Gaskell was writing, Whitby had not whaled since 1837, when the last ships returned empty (Scarre 29). The absence of whales on board reflected the absence of whales in Greenland's whaling grounds, which were emblematic of the scars left in those distant waters. In 1863, Whitby was in its post-whaling era when the loss of the industry was likely still felt, and Hull's whaling days were numbered. While Hull's whaling endeavors would outlast Whitby's by several decades, in 1859, when McGuire's novel is set, the industry was in terminal decline, and this is central to the plot.

The North Water deals with falls of several different kinds, one of which is the anticipated end of whaling. There are several references in the text to the disappearance of whales in particular areas, forcing whalers to venture further north into more perilous

environments. As the *Volunteer*, its own days numbered, sails into the Greenland Sea, the specter of whaling and the havoc it has wrought hangs over the icy environment. The absence of whales is powerful. After the first and only whale is killed, the reader is left waiting for another hunt, but it never materializes. McGuire also foreshadows the further destruction of Arctic ecosystems. "At the top of the world," it is surmised at one point in the text, "there must exist a great ice-free ocean, a place not yet penetrated by man where the right whales swim unhindered in numberless multitudes" (103; see also 36). We are currently hurtling towards an ice-free summer in the Arctic in the next few decades because of warming oceans. What was once a nineteenth-century imagination of what lay at the top of the world is now the reality of a haunted future of environmental catastrophe. Arctic seas, like other marine ecosystems around the world, continue to be haunted by the legacy of whaling in tangible ways. Many populations have failed to recover to pre-whaling abundance, and some like the North Atlantic right whale remain critically endangered. Scientific research has highlighted that the loss of whales from whaling resulted in a huge loss of nutrients and energy as well as nutrient recycling, all of which has contributed to the declining carrying capacities of marine ecosystems (Roman et al.). This is exacerbated by warming oceans caused by the accelerating climate crisis. This feedback loop is one particular version of Kleinberg's "past returned," and it also speaks to Thom van Dooren's view that "[w]hen species are understood as vast intergenerational lineages, interwoven in rich patterns of co-becoming with others … then their departure from the world cannot help but be felt in a range of complex and drawn-out ways" (12), or White's aforementioned presentiment that the violence we do to others, and to the planet we share with them, will eventually rebound on ourselves.

The destructive legacies of whaling are as real for us today as they would have been at the time McGuire's novel is set and Gaskell's novel was published. However, in Gaskell's novel in particular, the die is cast but few are prepared to acknowledge it. Greenland is far off, and for Sylvia it is largely a place of the imagination, brought to life in the stories of the returned whalers. These, too, are ghostly tales, exchanged by the likes of Charley Kinraid, the "specksioneer" (harpooner), who carries the ghosts of previous hunted whales back to shore, and Sylvia's father Daniel, who conjures up ghosts from his own earlier whaling days, with both of them vying to tell their "polar yarns" (Spufford 211) to Sylvia. Daniel recounts a moment when he was thrown into the sea by the force of a whale's tail, a flashback to the freezing Arctic waters (and a retelling of a well-known passage from Scoresby): "First, I smarted all ower me, as if my skin were suddenly stript off me: and next, ivery bone i' my body and getten t' toothache, and there were a great roar i' my ears, an' a great dizziness i' my eyes." (91).

This harsh Arctic world swirls around the farmhouse in Monkshaven as Sylvia raptly listens, a thread between the distant polar regions and the homes of Whitby. In contrast, *The North Water* offers a more direct engagement with the perils of an Arctic world in which the greatest dangers are not those posed by the environment – though these are real enough – but by the whalers, some of them hardened criminals, to each other and themselves. However, like *Sylvia's Lovers*, The *North Water* is an "amphibious" text, and also like it, its mutual transfers from sea to land offer multiple hauntings. Sumner is haunted by the land while at sea; by the sea when he returns to land; but, most of all, by the malevolent spirit of his nemesis, the monstrous figure of the *Volunteer*'s chief harpooner, Henry Drax. While Drax, a pedophile and mass murderer, is finally dispatched, it is hinted in the text that he will continue to haunt Sumner's dreams; that he will continue to return to him. In this respect, Drax is merely one of several revenants in a text that works with the motif of vengeful return

on multiple levels. There are revenants in Gaskell's novel as well, notably Charley Kinraid and Philip Hepburn, Sylvia's eponymous lovers, and in the next section of this essay we turn to the theme of revenance, which helps account for the ghostliness – the spectrality – of the two primary texts.

Human Revenants

Revenants are not ghosts, though confusingly the French word for ghost is "revenant" (specifically a ghost, but also a more general figure for unwanted and/or unanticipated return). The most usual understanding of "revenant," at least in an Anglophone context, is a "dead spirit who returns in a physical body": a return often tied to violence, as in a victim of violence who "reanimates to continue a cycle of murder, terror, [and revenge]" (L. Morton 18). Revenants are not necessarily dead; rather they may be assumed to be, as is the case in *Sylvia's Lovers*, where both Charley Kinraid and Philip Hepburn return, with ruinous consequences, long after they have been given up for lost. As Marion Shaw shows in an insightful essay on the motif of fatal return in *Sylvia's Lovers*, the return from the dead – of those who are believed to be dead, but are actually not – is an "age-old theme" in literature, and Gaskell's novel plays on this theme in several ways that would have been familiar to her readers, lending the text an aura of legend that is embodied in the illustrative fable of Sir Guy, Earl of Warwick, who having been away for seven years is no longer recognized by his wife when he comes back (Gaskell 403; Shaw, "Fatal Return" 37, 43). As Francis O'Gorman implies in his introduction to the 2014 Oxford World Classics edition of *Sylvia's Lovers*, the novel's "return-from-the-dead vocabulary" is so ubiquitous that it risks becoming tedious, though it fulfils the wider purpose of blurring the boundaries between the dead and the living, and of asking the question of what it means to be alive "when one's heart has been crushed" (xx).

In this context, O'Gorman suggests, *Sylvia's Lovers* recalls the supernatural tales for which Gaskell was famous at the time, though he hesitates to call it a ghost story in its own right (xx). Perhaps a better designation would be *pseudo*-ghost story: a ghost story without actual ghosts, but which takes every opportunity to invoke the ghostly. (Charley Kinraid, Philip Hepburn, and Sylvia herself are all taken for ghosts at different points in the novel, while the narrative is littered with broken, half-dead creatures and infused with "strange feelings of dread" (224).) What the novel certainly *is*, is a meditation on revenance, which operates on at least three different levels: the return of those believed to be dead; a partial, if never total, unravelling of the mystery of disappearance; and – though this has several possible readings – a reanimation of legend that implicitly celebrates its capacity to endure beyond the historical past.

These three tropes all contribute in different ways to what might generally be called the spectral atmosphere of the novel: an atmosphere of high anxiety in which return is laced as much with fear as with happy anticipation. The first of the novel's returns, that of the sailors from the Greenland whaling grounds, is typical in this regard, prompting widespread unease among their land-based familiars and loved ones: "Who lay still until the sea should give up its dead? Who were those who should come back to Monkshaven never, no, never more?" (21). Anxiety of this kind is embedded within the community, which is both "rich in the dead," "the cold sea-winds bring[ing] in with them the dim phantoms of lost sailors who had died far from their homes, and from the hallowed ground where their fathers lay" (59), and prone to rumor and superstition of the kind that can easily turn unexplained disappearances into imagined deaths (204, 206, 219). It is also a restricted space, albeit one that opens out onto the "vast unseen sea" (43), and revenance belongs in this sense to a wider cyclical pattern that reinforces the circumscribed nature of people's existences: weddings and

funerals, weddings *as* funerals (296), but significantly enough not a great deal of evidence – Sylvia's daughter Bella notwithstanding – of reinvigorating births.

Revenance, in this respect, belongs to the general order of repetition: an order that is as much apparent in the aesthetic as the social composition of the text. Doubles and duplication abound: Charley returns not once but twice; he and Philip are competing revenants; Hepburn performs a double rescue (Charley and Bella); and names (Bella) are retained from one generation to the next. Perhaps the most noticeable instance of doubling in the text is the overlay of reality and dream, and several characters, Sylvia and Philip among them, are plagued throughout by dreams in which they either imagine the return of their former rivals (Philip) or lovers (Sylvia), or give ironic credence to tall tales in which dead spirits return to help the needy: "Philip's dead, and it were his spirit as come t' others help in his time o' need. I've heard feyther say as spirits cannot rest i' their graves for trying to undo t' wrongs they've done i' their bodies" (411).

Revenance functions as *repetition*, then, but it also functions as *interruption*, referring to specific moments when the general pattern is disrupted, usually with destructive effects. Charley's second return is of this kind, leading to a melodramatic confrontation between himself, Sylvia, and Philip in which each of them wishes, albeit with varying degrees of sincerity, that they were dead (330-332). Philip's return is no less fraught, triggering the sequence of events that brings the novel to its sad conclusion, and reinforcing what O'Gorman reads as Gaskell's "life-long concern with [the inevitability of suffering and] the sorrow of ordinary lives" (xi). In this context, it is difficult to see the novel, as some critics have done, as a celebratory reanimation of Sylvia's "dead" legend, whereby Sylvia is restored as the main, female protagonist of a story in which "the weight of tradition is on men's side" (Shaw, "Fatal Return" 53; see also D'Albertis, Stoneman, Uglow). Such feminist readings are possible, but they lack supporting evidence in a novel the very title of which suggests a life in

others' hands, and shaped by circumstances that are beyond its own controlling – a novel, moreover, that appears to confirm its narrator's view that, in Monkshaven, a "blight hung over the land and its people" (219). (This blight is by no means resolved by the novel's ironic, suspiciously artificial ending, which draws a less-than-dignified veil over Monkshaven, now "a rising bathing place," and "the tradition of a man [Philip Hepburn] who died in a cottage somewhere about this spot" (434).)

A hauntological approach to the text supports this view, not least by suggesting that its twice-told tales are part of an unfinished past that also disrupts the "presentness" of the present (Davis; Weinstock). Revenants, in this context, defy our capacity to forget, but they also remind us of the untimeliness of the present: a present into which the past repeatedly infiltrates, whether we like it or not. As Tom Gunning puts it, "the ghostly represents a fundamental untimeliness, a return of the past not in the form of memory or history but in a contradictory experience of presence contained … in the term *haunting*" (Gunning 232). A similar experience can be found in *The North Water,* which is a haunted text in several respects, not just in terms of its frequent references to ghosts, but also in its uncanny echoing of literary works from its own and other historical times. The first sentence of the novel, "Behold the man," is a clear nod to Cormac McCarthy, while other references range from the Ancients (Homer and Ovid) to the Moderns (Melville, Conrad, Conan Doyle). It would be easy enough to categorize *The North Water* as a postmodernist text, and it certainly features many of postmodern fiction's salient characteristics: a penchant for pastiche (combining elements of the adventure yarn, the novel of ideas, the *Bildungsroman*, and the crime thriller); belatedness with respect to its cultural precursors; and, most significantly, a questioning of explanatory narratives, not least those that assume "the possibility of knowing and narrating the past" (Chalupský 107). It is also very much a *present-day* text in spite of its Victorian setting and underpinnings, and as Petr Chalupský argues it both belongs and does not belong

to the subgenre of the neo-Victorian novel, offering "an alternative, non-normative view of the Victorians and their era so as to simultaneously address readers' present-day concerns" (110).

It is thus a very long way indeed, both in temperament and tone, from *Sylvia's Lovers*, though it shares Gaskell's concern for the difficulties of retrieving history and her melancholic understanding of the indivisibility of the present and the past. McGuire also shares Gaskell's interest in the figure of the revenant, and its two equal-and-opposite protagonists, the brutish harpooner Henry Drax and the cerebral surgeon Patrick Sumner, both offer classic examples of revenants who repeatedly return from near-death experiences, leaving a blood-soaked trail of violence and wreckage in their tracks. Drax and Sumner are more alike than the latter is prepared to admit, and both men are thoroughgoing materialists in a text that constantly challenges us to think what humans – but also other animals – are, other than material bodies; as Sumner despairingly asks, "The redundancy of flesh … The helplessness of meat; how can we conjure spirit from a bone?" (26). A related question the novel poses is whether return from presumed death can be considered to be anything other than happenstance survival; or whether returns of this kind – especially *repeated* returns – belong to a pattern of recurrence that has symbolic significance, and in which the life-death cycle points to a broader cosmological process where bodily corruption can be reconciled with the transmigration of souls.

This debate, which remains unresolved in the text, is conducted in large part through conversations between Sumner and the *Volunteer*'s German harpooner, Otto, in which the latter – an unreconstructed Swedenborgian – speculates that "[t]he bodies of the dead in heaven are the forms that their particular souls have taken," and fondly imagines the "Spirit Place where … dead souls gather before being separated out into the saved and the damned" (87-88). While Sumner has little time for Otto's mystical sentiments, at least some of these

are borne out in *The North Water*, notably Otto's romantic-idealist faith in dreams and visions (88), which act – much though Sumner himself tries to deny this – as powerful vehicles for recovered memory in the text. Sumner's own dreams and visions are a case in point, ranging from his feverish recall of the gruesome events of the siege of Delhi (62-84) to his nightmarish vision of the slaughtered cabin boy Joseph Hannah, in which he appears to take over Drax's memories of his own bloody exploits, seeing them through the eyes of his victims, whom death mysteriously transforms (118).

As the self-induced calamities that befall the crew of the *Volunteer* pick up pace, the visionary aspects of the text increase in intensity, culminating in what is probably one of the novel's most memorable episodes, in which – against all odds – Sumner pursues and kills a bear, then uses its hollowed-out corpse to protect himself against the elements: another example of his seemingly miraculous ability to save himself (269; see also introductory section above). The sequence flirts with surrealism, with the bear first disappearing altogether then reappearing "like a sudden ghost" (257). Eventually rescued by Inuit (Esquimaux) hunters, Sumner is credited by them with magical powers, though opinions differ on whether he is to be seen as a "spirit guide" (*angakoq*) or an "evil ghost" (*tupilaq*) (262). The most obvious interpretation here is that he is neither; what he is instead is a *revenant*, a bedraggled survivor with no otherworldly status, shamanic talents, or supernatural powers. Notwithstanding, the text never quite lets go of the hunters' views, or those of the shaman they consult, who concludes that Sumner is "indeed lucky … but his luck is of a particular, alien kind" (262). What *is* rejected is the view of the priest who later takes Sumner in, for whom *angakoqs* are "naught but conjurers and charlatans" (266); instead it is the priest himself who is made to appear a charlatan, and who requires Sumner's services – his material skills as a surgeon – to save his life.

It is then left to Sumner's nemesis, Drax, to supply McGuire's final thoughts on the ambivalent figure of the revenant: the ultimate survivor whose survival depends on the taking, not saving, of other people's lives. The plot may effectively come to an end when one survivor (Sumner) kills another (Drax), but we are left in little doubt that the destructive cycle will continue. Significantly, it is an *animal* revenant (a bear) that guarantees this. The bear that Sumner confronts at the end of the novel may not be the same one he killed before, but there is an associative link – an imagined transfer of souls – between them. A further associative link is that between the human-on-*human* violence – the mangled bodies of Greenland and India – that provide the material grounds for the text's haunting, and its human-on-*animal* violence – the mangled bodies of whales. The same questions that *The North Water* sets out with are thus the ones that are recycled at its conclusion. Is it possible to transcend one's body? Is it possible to die and come back again? Is it possible to die, but for the soul to live on and come back in a different body? And this talk of souls in turn raises the specter not just of human, but also of *animal* afterlives: an issue embodied in the visible/invisible figure of the animal ghost.

Animal Ghosts

In this final section of the essay, we return one last time to the polar bear encountered by Sumner at Berlin Zoo, whose "gimlet eyes" are described as being "like strait gates to a larger darkness" (326). This darkness reflects on the depravity of Drax and the manifest horrors of the whaling voyage, but it also links the bear to other bears in the text, such as the cub kept captive aboard the *Volunteer*, whose mother is brutally killed, strung up on deck, and skinned right in front of the terrified youngster's eyes (90-94). As Jennifer Ham writes of Nietzsche, whose *Untimely Meditations* were being penned at around the time McGuire's novel is set, the violence of animals comes from instinct, and therefore innocence, whereas

human acts of violence are often wilfully "immoral and perverse" (153).[3] McGuire renders three perspectives in the scene that bring Nietzsche's views into focus. The first is that of the twenty-first-century reader, for whom the violence is shocking; the second that of the nineteenth-century crew, for whom this is a normal part of their work. The third and least accessible is that of the cub itself. McGuire does not attempt to inhabit the animal's mind, but through Sumner's interactions with it and conversations with other crew members, key questions about human/animal suffering and memory are explored.

Peering into the darkness of its cage, Sumner comments that the cub "might die of heartbreak" before they get back to Yorkshire (95). Might the (male) cub be grieving the loss of his mother? Is he haunted by the memory of her violent death? In an upsetting scene, to quieten the screaming cub, some of the crew lower the mother bear's body onto the deck: "[The cub] sees his mother's body and rushes to it. He nudges its flank with his nose and starts to helplessly lick the smeared and bloodied fur … The cub whimpers, sniffs, then settles himself in the lee of the mother's corpse, flank to flank" (94). The first mate Cavendish summarily dismisses Sumner's concern about heartbreak: "He will forget the dead one soon enough. … Affection is a passing thing. A beast is no different from a person in that regard" (96). For Cavendish, it is not just that animals are incapable of remembering, but that humans are not haunted by the dead. But whereas the likes of Cavendish and Drax may shed memories of the dead – or at least believe they can – Sumner cannot, and he duly looks after the cub, taking increasing pity on him as his physical and mental condition worsens (130). Sumner himself keenly feels the haunting presence of the mother bear's death, and takes this up with Otto, who stresses in accordance with his Swedenborgian principles that "sin is remembering," and that "the most important questions are the ones we can't hope to answer with words" (131). Sumner counters that "words are all we have … If we give them up, we are no better than the beasts"; and yet, as he observes "the orphaned bear [pitifully] crouched

at the back of the cask, panting and licking at a puddle of his own urine," he wishes that he "would rather not think" – that there were no words, and he did not remember at all (132).

Later, when the *Volunteer* has shipwrecked, and the bear must be killed because he would only starve if he were released, Sumner misses his shot, distracted by thinking about what the bear might be thinking. Otto takes the outstretched rifle: "An animal has no soul," he gruffly says, 'but some love is possible nonetheless. Not the highest form of love, but still love" (194). Here, however, he has not remembered his Swedenborg correctly. "That every animal has a soul, is a well-known thing," the Swedish philosopher claims in *The Apocalypse Explained*, "for they live, and life is a soul" (157). Elsewhere in his work, though, he suggests that where humans and animals differ is that animals are not spiritual but "are born into … [their] knowledge" and "have no rational faculty," and their love – a lower form of love – comes unconsciously (*Heaven and Hell* 59). For Swedenborg, animals act after their deaths as representatives of human affections; it is humans that must endure their memories and suffer in the afterlife (*Heaven and Hell* 60).

While polar bears haunt through their presence in *The North Water*, it is through *absence* that we are made to feel the haunting of whales. There may only be one whaling scene in the text, but it is gruesome enough not to be forgotten, featuring a mix of visceral violence and Drax's unsettling sweet-talk to the whale before he triumphantly pierces its heart. As captured graphically in the powerful TV adaptation of the book, the explosion of blood from the blowhole spatters the surrounding whalers, who howl in delirious celebration (113). However, the contemporary reader is more likely to identify with the whale's final death-shudder, which offers a haunting reminder of the collective violence done to whales in the past (115; see also Hoare, White).

Like the crew of the *Volunteer*, the reader anticipates the arrival of more whales, but these never come and whales maintain a spectral aura throughout *The North Water*. Whales

feature even less in *Sylvia's Lovers*, where they are mostly conjured up through the stories told by the returned whalers, even as – uncannily mirrored in their own death-defying exploits (91; see also section 1 above) – the physical remains of whales caught are assiduously sorted and separated, stripped and boiled. These textual parallels chime with Nicole Shukin's ingenious account of the double meaning of "rendering," that is, telling a human story, but also slicing an animal body and melting it down (*Animal Capital* 20). In *Sylvia's Lovers*, the whalers live to tell the tale, the whales do not, but both are subject to rendering: yet another of the novel's spectral reminders that representations of violence may be echoed in the violence of representation itself.

While, on the one hand, whaling may just form a backdrop to daily events in the coastal town of Monkshaven, on the other Gaskell speaks to the material and immaterial afterlives of whales and the way their deaths permeate life on land (Nicolov). As the narrator reports, "[Even] twenty miles inland there was no forgetting the sea, nor the sea-trade; … The offal of the melting-houses was the staple manure of the district; great ghastly whale-jaws, bleached bare and white, were the arches over the gate-posts to many a field or moorland stretch" (8). These bones, while taken from contemporaneous whales, are also a monument to their increasing disappearance. *Sylvia's Lovers* makes it clear that, while human societies at the time were still being nourished by the industry, whale populations and the entire whaling culture that surrounded them were in steep decline. Half a century later, McGuire's whalers travel to an Arctic Ocean that has already been significantly depleted by Gaskell's whalers: the solitary whaling scene in *The North Water* speaks to this loss. As the novel strongly suggests to us, the mid-nineteenth-century Arctic marine ecosystem was already a ghostly environment, created by previous generations of whalers. As the owner of the *Volunteer*, Baxter, hammers home to the captain, Brownlee, about why they need to wreck the ship: "We *killed* them all … We had twenty-five fucking good years [but] the world turns and this

is a new chapter" (33; emphasis in the text). Baxter's sentiments are echoed later by Brownlee, though he puts a more positive spin on it by claiming that whales have moved further north to icier waters for their own safety (83-84).

Nietzsche wrote in his second untimely meditation that animals are "fettered to the moment and its pleasure or displeasure" (60). But whales, as we now know and as McGuire and, a century and a half before him, Gaskell both testify, are not wedded to the present in this manner. Nor, as Nietzsche believed, are they incapable of remembering; on the contrary, they are animals that remember, and their memories have been transformed into cultural knowledge which, shared across generations of whales and whaling cultures, still has remarkable resonance today (Whitehead and Rendell; see also Whitehead et al.). Moreover, the bodies of whales, past and present, carry the profound impacts of whaling on population levels as their genetic material carries the memory of pre-whaling abundance and diversity (Nicolov). The eco-philosopher Timothy Morton has written that "[e]cological awareness coexists, in thought and in practice, with the ghostly host of nonhumans" (303). Twenty-first-century whales carry the afterlives of whole populations with them, performing living reminders of the specter of Yorkshire's whaling industry. Whales, argues the environmental historian Bathsheba Demuth, potentially act as our judge, and the collective memories they carry are also our own memories, conjuring the continuing histories of injustice – of humans toward other animals, of humans toward other humans – that are embedded within the present, but are also revenants from multiple unfinished pasts.

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Notes

[1] For White as for Derrida, specters are figures of possibility rather than figures of fear, opening up ways of thinking and acting differently, and offering opportunities to redress social and environmental injustices. Specters, in this sense, belong as much to the present and the future as to the past; as Derrida himself puts it, living *with* them (rather than trying to dispel them) involves talking *to* them "out of respect for those who are no longer living, or for others who are not yet there" (quoted in Blanco and Peeren, "Introduction" 8).

[2] Admittedly, the *Volunteer*'s Arctic voyage in *The North Water* has little to do with whaling, which emerges as a false pretext. Once it has reached its northern destination – the Greenland whaling grounds – the ship is deliberately destroyed for the insurance, but like just about everything else in McGuire's novel, destruction only yields further destruction and many lives are pointlessly lost.

[3] See also Vanessa Lemm (2009), whose work has done as much as anyone's to underscore the centrality of animals to Nietzsche's philosophy. For Lemm (following Nietzsche), animality is integral to humanity rather than antithetical to it. Nietzsche correspondingly recommends that humans reconnect to the animal instincts they have lost in the process of becoming "civilized"; this is not to endorse brute violence, but to harness animal energy and vitality for creative ends. While *The North Water* may not make its debt to Nietzsche as clear as it does to some other writers and thinkers, Nietzsche's views on the relationship between humanity and animality operate as further ghostly presences in the text.

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