

ESSAY

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

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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, *Moby-Dick*

All stories are, more or less, ghost stories.

—Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings*

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In the last scene of Ian McGuire's gripping neo-Victorian novel *The North Water*, the 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, which would doubtless otherwise have killed him, and used 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 "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

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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 that brings to light stories that either have gone untold or are partly concealed in the telling, it also opens the door to other ways of being as well as telling, to other ways for humans and animals to cohabit an ecologically damaged world (7–8; see also Derrida, *Specters* and *Animal*). White's word for this phenomenon is *ecospectrality*, which refers to 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 copresence of others, nonhumans as well as humans, while it potentially enables the rethinking of human-animal relations to acknowledge the violence inscribed by the one on the other and to envisage the futural possibilities offered by historical redress (165).¹

Taking our cue from White, we consider here the implications of entangled human and animal memory in two historical novels—McGuire's *The North Water*, published in 2016, and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers*, published in 1863. The two novels, at first sight, may not appear to have a great deal in common aside from the fact that both reflect on a bygone era. McGuire's is *set* in the Victorian period and draws connections between the Victorian and contemporary eras; Gaskell's is *written* in the Victorian period but looks back to a similarly unfinished past. We argue that there is, however, an affinity between the two novels, despite the historical distance that separates them. The most obvious link is that both are whaling narratives of a kind; whales, though only rarely encountered in the texts, are fundamental to the lives and livelihoods of the characters.² Both novels are influenced—haunted—by other popular whaling narratives, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* inevitably among them, but also the accounts of

William Scoresby, Jr., the notorious nineteenth-century British whaler. But at the same time, whales are largely absent presences in the novels: they belong to the realm of the spectral. Doubly so, perhaps, insofar 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 human as well as animal terms, opening up a discursive space for more-than-human versions of multidirectional memory (Rothberg). The history of whaling, in this sense, can be understood in relation to 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, like films, they seem to “project from a place that is not a place, a world that is not a world” (95). Yet animals materially remain, and even when they do not, their legacies are still very much with us. This is nowhere truer 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 sense, provoke reflection 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 with the past.

A second contention of our essay 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 that 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, *Specters*). 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).

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" ("Spectrographies" 38), also enable the recognition of our shared animality, which exists in the "flesh and blood vulnerability of beings—whether human or not" (Pick 3). The concept of animality itself contains many of the contradictions that the multifaceted figure of the specter brings to light. 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 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-centered historical narratives and on 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 considers other animals, and perhaps most of all it reflects, following Derrida, on the animals that (therefore) we are (*Animal*). The first part of the essay develops the ideas we have been exploring 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. Yet their return is no 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, "Elizabeth Gaskell"). Similarly, *The North Water* is stalked as much by revenants as by more conventional ghosts (dead spirits that appear to the living), although the line between the two, especially in the later stages of the novel, becomes increasingly blurred.

Finally, the third part of the essay looks more closely at the animal ghost or ghostly animal. Ghosts often take animal form, but our approach owes more to the hauntological figure of the spectral animal: particularly, the animal that remembers, and that forces us to remember, even as we strive to think "unhistorically" in relation to events we would rather forget (Nietzsche, e.g., 61). The argument threaded through these readings is that, through a hauntological approach, *Sylvia's Lovers* and *The North Water* can both be reestablished as

whaling narratives, albeit primarily as salutary warnings not to forget the dead. A secondary strand of the 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 understanding of historiography has obvious implications for the historical novel, which may seek to install a gap between the past and the present but repeatedly evokes 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 neohistorical novel that looks to defamiliarize the Victorian past (*The North Water*).

Haunted Histories

The historian Ethan Kleinberg’s call to unsettle “the way we ‘do’ history” encourages taking a hauntological turn that “engage[s] with and make[s] explicit the perturbations that the past returned convokes” (1, 3). History, approached through a framework of this kind, offers an opportunity to consider “the entangled and unstable relation of presence and absence without privileging one over the other” (3). A hauntological approach provides 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 515). 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” (Gan et al. G1).

Sylvia’s Lovers takes as its setting the end of the 1700s, a moment that might be considered part of the “golden era” of Yorkshire’s whaling industry. The novel is set in Monkshaven (a fictionalized version of the town of Whitby), and one of its opening scenes features whalers returning from the

Greenland Sea, a place where bowhead whales were slaughtered in the thousands. However, while whaling provides a key backdrop to the novel, it never evolves into its major focus, and whales feature only sporadically in an essentially human-centered 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 ultraviolet death.

Both novels fall into the genre of historical fiction, although their approaches, contemporaneous concerns, and crossovers with other genres differ. While *Sylvia’s Lovers* has been described as a marriage story, as a protest story, and as a romance, “historical intrusion” has been identified as a major feature of the text, and it has rightly been understood as a historical novel, although it plays fast and loose with historical facts (Shaw, “*Sylvia’s Lovers*” 37; see also “Give Me” 46). 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 northeast 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). The story is set sixty years before the time of narration, and the narrator’s tone in referring to the time of the events narrated shifts between condescension and outright contempt (Shaw, “*Sylvia’s Lovers*” 37). The novel is thus untimely in the sense that it installs a sizable gap between the past and the present. However, it is equally untimely in the opposite sense, in 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 that is no more reliable or substantial than the 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 neohistorical 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 ostensibly Victorian themes to the present than with 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 reimagines. For Markku Lehtimäki, “its affective realism and its powerful evoking of the actual historical past” make it “difficult to read the novel only as pure fiction,” even if the novel self-consciously draws on classic Victorian fictional tropes (48, 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, and both are also concerned 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 various layers of historical research and cultural influences, as well as passages inspired directly by famous literary works that had come to shape either 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's visit to Whitby in November 1859 and of her conversations with residents who relayed haunting memories of 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, “*Sylvia's Lovers*” 41; Watson and Watson 83). As Clare Pettitt writes, “[T]he 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” (616–17).

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's being hanged, just as Sylvia's father is hanged in the novel (Shaw, “*Sylvia's Lovers*” 38). Gaskell is also thought to have met Scoresby, the famous whaling captain from Whitby, and it is assumed that conversations about his whaling voyages influenced her, while it is known for sure that Scoresby's popular *Account of the Arctic Regions, with a History and Description of the Northern Whale Fishery* (1820) supplied

material for the boisterous whaling tales exchanged in *Sylvia's Lovers* by Charley Kinraid and Daniel Robson (Spufford 211; Twinn 38–39). 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 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 a reciprocal combination of hunting and haunting in the text (Chalupský 104). Indeed, it is nearly 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 acknowledged source of inspiration for the novel was Arthur Conan Doyle's diary, kept when Conan Doyle 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, and the industry's growth accelerated 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 importance of whaling to the town, its permeation through various

strata of the human community, and its shaping of the visual and olfactory landscape. As the narrator recounts, “[T]he 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 trade that shaped the lives of men in Whitby, from their youth as apprentice sailors until they reached the rank of captain in adulthood. Monkshaven is described 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. 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 1820, when sixty-two 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, the blubber then rendered into oil for lighting and baleen plates turned into material for corsets, hat brims, and riding crops. The narrator describes the stench emitted in this process, a smell that Gaskell would not have experienced herself but that was an infamous part of this industry, as “almost intolerable” but adds that “on these unsavoury ‘staites’ [wharves] the old men and children lounged for hours” (Gaskell 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 knew 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 “[a]lthough 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 produce 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 collapse of the trade, already palpable in *Sylvia’s Lovers* and impending 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, an absence that was emblematic of the scars left in those distant waters. In 1863, Whitby was in its postwhaling 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 various 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 farther 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, “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 toward 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 their prewhaling 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 ocean warming 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 presentiment that the violence we do to others, and to the planet we share with them, will eventually rebound on us.

The destructive legacies of whaling are as real for us today as they would have been at the time in which McGuire’s novel is set and when 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, 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 had gotten t' toothache, and there were a great roar i' my ears, an' a great dizziness i' my eyes" (Gaskell 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* engages more directly with the perils of an Arctic world in which the greatest dangers are not those of the environment—though these are real enough—but those posed by the whalers, some of them hardened criminals, to one another and to themselves. However, like *Sylvia's Lovers*, *The North Water* is an "amphibious" text, and, also like Gaskell's novel, its passages between sea and land induce multiple hauntings. Sumner is haunted by the land while at sea and 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 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 lovers. We turn now to this theme of revenance, which helps account for the ghostliness—the spectrality—of the two novels.

Human Revenants

Revenants are not always ghosts; though the French word for ghost is *revenant*, the term can also refer more generally to an unwanted or unanticipated return. The most usual understanding of *revenant*, at least in anglophone contexts, is as a "dead spirit who returns in a physical body": a return often tied to violence, such as that of a victim of violence who "reanimates to continue a cycle of murder and

terror" (L. Morton 18). Revenants are not necessarily dead; rather, they may be wrongly presumed dead, 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 ("Elizabeth Gaskell" 43). This motif lends the text an aura of legend that is embodied in the illustrative fable of Sir Guy, Earl of Warwick, whose wife no longer recognizes him when he returns after an absence of seven years (43; Gaskell 403). 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 fulfills 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 way, 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 various points in the novel, while the narrative is littered with broken, half-dead creatures and infused with a "strange feeling of dread" [Gaskell 224].) The novel certainly is, however, a meditation on revenance, which operates on at least three levels: the return of those believed to be dead; a partial, if never total, unraveling 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 "rich in the dead," "as if the cold sea-winds must bring 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 the townspeople's lives: 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 apparent as much in the aesthetic as in 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' other's 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, marking moments when the general pattern is disrupted, usually with calamitous effects. Charley's second return is of this kind, leading to a melodramatic confrontation with Sylvia and Philip in which each of the three wishes, albeit with varying degrees of sincerity, that they were dead (330–32). 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 "lifelong concern with the sorrow of ordinary lives and the inevitability of suffering" (xi). In this context, it is difficult to see the novel, as some critics have, as a celebratory reanimation of Sylvia's "dead" legend, whereby Sylvia is restored as the female protagonist of a story in which "the weight of tradition is on men's side" (Shaw, "Elizabeth Gaskell" 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 Sylvia's control—a novel, moreover, that appears to confirm its narrator's view that, in Monkshaven, a "blight hung over the land and its people" (Gaskell 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 defy our capacity to forget, but they also remind us of the untimeliness of a present into which the past repeatedly infiltrates, whether we like it or not. As Tom Gunning puts it, "[T]he 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*" (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, Joseph 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 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).

The North Water is thus a very long way indeed, in both 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 inextricability 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 readers to think about 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. 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 the episode in which—against all odds—Sumner pursues and kills a bear, then uses its hollowed-out corpse to protect himself against the elements (269). The sequence flirts with surrealism, the bear first disappearing altogether, then reappearing “like a sudden ghost” (257). Eventually rescued by Inuit (“Esquimaux” [275]) hunters, Sumner is credited by them with magical powers, though opinions differ on whether he is to be seen as an “*angakoq*, a spirit guide” or an “evil ghost, a shabby *tupilaq*” (262). The most obvious interpretation here is that he is neither; he is instead 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." What is rejected is the view of the priest who later takes Sumner in, for whom *angakogs* 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, the ultimate survivor whose survival depends on the taking, not saving, of other people's lives, to supply the text's final thoughts on the ambivalent figure of the revenant. The plot may effectively come to an end when one survivor (Sumner) kills another (Drax), but readers 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 provides 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 after-lives, an issue embodied in the visible/invisible figure of the animal ghost.

Animal Ghosts

We return now one last time to the polar bear encountered by Sumner at the Berlin zoo, whose "gimlet eyes" are described as being "like strait gates to a larger darkness" (326). This darkness reflects 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 in front of the terrified youngster's eyes (90–94). Jennifer Ham writes that for Friedrich Nietzsche, whose *Untimely Meditations* were being penned at around the time in which McGuire's novel is set, the violence of animals comes from instinct, and therefore innocence, whereas human acts of violence are often willfully "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 is 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, the narrative explores key questions about human and animal suffering and memory.

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 cub be grieving the loss of his mother? Is he haunted by the memory of her violent death? In an upsetting scene, to quiet 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; even 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 he takes this up with Otto, who stresses, in accordance with his Swedenborgian principles, that "sin is a . . . forgetfulness" and that "[t]he most important questions are the ones we can't hope to answer with words" (132). 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 . . . crouched at the back of the cask, panting and licking at a puddle of his own urine," he says that he "would rather *not* think"—suggesting that it would be better if there were no words and he did not remember at all.

Later, when the *Volunteer* has shipwrecked, and the bear must be killed because he would only starve if he were released, Sumner cannot shoot, distracted by thinking about what the bear might be thinking. Otto takes the outstretched rifle: "An animal has no soul," he gruffly says, "[b]ut some love is possible nonetheless. Not the highest form of love, but still love" (194). Here, however, he has not remembered his Swedenborg correctly. "[T]hat 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, Emanuel Swedenborg suggests that where humans and animals differ is in that animals are not spiritual but "are born into . . . knowledge" and "have no rational faculty," and their love—a lower form of love—comes unconsciously (*Heaven* 59). For Swedenborg, in heaven animals act as representatives of human affections; it is humans that must endure their memories and suffer in the afterlife (60).

While polar bears haunt through their presence in *The North Water*, it is through absence that the haunting of whales is felt. There may be only 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 (*North Water*; McGuire 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 remain a spectral aura throughout *The North Water*. Whales feature even less in *Sylvia's Lovers*, where—uncannily mirrored in the death-defying exploits of the whalers (Gaskell 91)—they are mostly conjured up through the stories told by the returned whalers as the physical remains of those who were 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* as telling a human story and as slicing an animal body and melting it down (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 echo 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, "[F]or 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" (Gaskell 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 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, the mid-nineteenth-century Arctic marine ecosystem was already a ghostly environment created by previous generations of whalers. The owner of the *Volunteer*, Baxter, hammers home to the captain, Brownlee, 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” (McGuire 33). Brownlee later echoes Baxter’s sentiment, though he puts a more positive spin on it by claiming that whales have moved farther north to icier waters for their own safety (103).

Nietzsche wrote in his second untimely meditation that animals are “fettered to the moment and its pleasure or displeasure” (60). But whales, as is now known and as McGuire and, a century and a half before him, Gaskell both testify, are not wedded to the present in this manner. Nor are they incapable, as Nietzsche believed, of remembering; on the contrary, they are animals that remember, and their memories have been transformed into cultural knowledge that, 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—their genetic material carries the memory of pre-whaling abundance and diversity (Nicolov). The ecophilosopher Timothy Morton has written that “[e]cological awareness is coexisting, in thought and in practice, with the ghostly host of nonhumans” (318). Twenty-first-century whales carry the afterlives of whole populations with them, acting as living reminders of the specter of Yorkshire’s whaling industry (Nicolov 82). Whales potentially act as our judges, 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.⁴

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 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” (*Specters* xviii).

2. Admittedly, whaling turns out to be a false pretext of the *Volunteer*’s Arctic voyage in *The North Water*. Once it has reached its northern destination—the Greenland whaling grounds—the ship is deliberately destroyed for the insurance money.

3. See also Lemm, 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 its debt to some other writers and thinkers, Nietzsche’s views on the relationship between humanity and animality operate as further ghostly presences in the text.

4. See Demuth, “Do Whales,” “What,” and *Floating Coast*.

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Abstract: This essay compares two historical novels, one set in the Victorian period that suggests connections between the Victorian and contemporary eras and the other written in the Victorian period but looking back to a similarly unfinished past. The novels in question, Ian McGuire's *The North Water* (2016) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), are both whaling narratives of a kind, but whales feature only infrequently in them: they are largely absent presences—if also important vehicles for memory—in the texts. The essay takes a hauntological approach to explore how the figure of the spectral animal forces readers to reflect on the systematic violence that the human world has historically inflicted on the nonhuman; the texts also open up a colloquy with the dead, both human and nonhuman, that is as much a reckoning with the present as a confrontation with the past.