



Battersby, D. (2018). English Prize Essay Contemporary Realism, Postmodernism, and Bodily Feeling: Ian McGuire's *The North Water*. *English*, 67(256), 1-22. Article efy009.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/english/efy009>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.1093/english/efy009](https://doi.org/10.1093/english/efy009)

[Link to publication record on the Bristol Research Portal](#)  
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Oxford University Press at <https://academic.oup.com/english/article/67/256/1/4913677> . Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

## University of Bristol – Bristol Research Portal

### General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:  
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/brp-terms/>

## Contemporary Realism, Postmodernism, and Bodily Feeling: Ian McGuire's *The North Water*

Abstract: This article examines Ian McGuire's *The North Water* (2016) in the context of current debates about the novel after postmodernism. Scholars such as David James and Adam Kelly have influentially argued that a significant body of contemporary novelists are writing fiction which complicates and develops postmodernist concerns and techniques. These claims notably resemble McGuire's contention, in his recent academic monograph, that realism can 'offer its proponents an aesthetically and philosophically sophisticated way of engaging with and contesting the particularities of contemporary, even postmodern, experience'. This article focuses on McGuire's innovative techniques for representing bodily feeling. The central tension in the novel, between abstract concepts and the affective demands of the body, brings to mind J. M. Coetzee's claim that '[t]he body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt'. I argue that *The North Water* deserves substantial critical attention in its own right, but also that this important novel, with its intense preoccupation with bodily feeling and its anti-anthropocentric stress on the affinity between human and animal life, exemplifies significant trends in contemporary writing. The article concludes with the suggestion that McGuire's novel, alongside works by several other influential writers, represents, not a reactionary rejection of postmodernist scepticism, but an emerging mode of contemporary fiction that proceeds from the materiality of the body, and which is less concerned with exposing the absence of metaphysical foundations than with testing the value of particular human beliefs and sentiments.

Novelists and scholars of contemporary fiction alike have in recent years become increasingly preoccupied with the question of what kind of fiction can or should be written in the wake of postmodernism. In 2009, Ian McEwan described arguably his most successful novel, *Atonement* (2001), in typically understated terms, as an ‘attempt to discuss where we stand’: ‘We can’t retreat to the nineteenth century. We now have a narrative self-awareness that we can never escape, but we don’t want to be crushed by that, either’.<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Franzen has more scathingly claimed that ‘the essence of postmodernism is an adolescent celebration of consciousness, an adolescent fear of getting taken in, an adolescent conviction that all systems are phony’, and that his own fiction has moved from postmodern ‘depressive realism’ to ‘tragic realism—from being immobilized by darkness to being sustained by it’.<sup>2</sup> Such pronouncements have pushed many scholars to contextualize these authors’ works in what Adam Kelly calls ‘postmodernism, then’ critical narratives, which involve ‘identifying the predominant styles and concerns of the new generation, ... naming what it is these new writers are doing in their fiction, ... and articulating how they build upon and depart from their

---

<sup>1</sup> Ian McEwan, ‘The Background Hum: Ian McEwan’s Art of Unease’, interview by Daniel Zalewski, *The New Yorker* (23 February 2009). <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2009/02/23/the-background-hum> [accessed 7 September 2017]; Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Vintage, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Franzen, *How to be Alone* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), p. 268, p. 93.

canonical postmodern forebears'.<sup>3</sup> David James, for instance, has analysed some of the 'strategies by which contemporary writers attempt to make formal integrity viable again', taking Alan Hollinghurst as a representative example of 'a generation of writers working through and beyond the postmodern'.<sup>4</sup> Within the field of American studies, Kelly himself has influentially identified a 'New Sincerity' in the works of David Foster Wallace and his contemporary inheritors - a strain of writing which 'displaces metaphysics while retaining a love of truth, a truth now associated with the possibility of a reconceived, and renewed, sincerity'.<sup>5</sup> Though there are meaningful differences between these accounts (most obviously in their preferred critical terms), the common contention is that these contemporary novelists, rather than simply rejecting postmodernism, are writing fiction which complicates and indeed develops postmodernist concerns and techniques through a more recognisably realist mode.<sup>6</sup> In the context of these conversations between authors

---

<sup>3</sup> Adam Kelly, 'Beginning with Postmodernism', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 57.3-4 (2011), 391-422, p. 392.

<sup>4</sup> David James, 'Integrity after Metafiction', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 57.3 (2011), 492-515, pp. 493-4.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Kelly, 'David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction', in *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. by David Hering (Austin, TX: Sideshow Media Group, 2010), pp. 131-146 (p. 146).

<sup>6</sup> See: James, 'Integrity After Metafiction', p. 493; Kelly, 'Beginning with Postmodernism', p. 415. Irmtraud Huber similarly suggests that 'Franzen's realism is deeply informed by, and indeed based on, postmodernist insights'. *Literature After Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 6.

and critics, this article argues, firstly, that Ian McGuire's *The North Water* (2016) is an innovative work of fiction that deserves critical attention, and secondly, that, in its intense preoccupation with bodily feeling and its anti-anthropocentric stress on the affinity between human and animal life, this important novel exemplifies a significant trend in contemporary writing.<sup>7</sup>

Not coincidentally, the question of how novelists might move beyond postmodernism is at the heart of McGuire's recent academic monograph, *Richard Ford and the Ends of Realism* (2015), which presents a staunch 'defense of contemporary realist writing'.<sup>8</sup> In a similar vein to McEwan, McGuire suggests that it would be 'naive, if not absurd, in our post-Kantian, post-Wittgensteinian context to imagine that our knowledge of the world is ever unmediated or unproblematic' (*RF*, p. xiv). But unlike McEwan, who insinuates that nineteenth-century fiction was lacking in self-awareness, McGuire suggests 'that realism has *always* been more philosophically sophisticated than its recent critics give it credit for', and that it can continue to 'offer its proponents an aesthetically and philosophically sophisticated way of engaging with and contesting the particularities of

---

<sup>7</sup> Ian McGuire, *The North Water* (London: Scribner, 2016). Hereafter cited parenthetically as *NW*.

<sup>8</sup> Ian McGuire, *Richard Ford and the Ends of Realism* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2015), p. xi. Hereafter cited parenthetically as *RF*.

contemporary, even postmodern, experience' (*RF*, p. xviii, p. xi).<sup>9</sup> Drawing on the pragmatist tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, John Dewey, and, to a lesser extent, the neopragmatism of Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty, McGuire argues that Ford – along with other contemporary American novelists, including Franzen – practices:

a form of *pragmatic realism* in which the traditional realist claims to represent or grasp reality are maintained and indeed developed but are also carefully tempered by a pragmatic, antifoundationalist awareness that any reality that the realist grasps is only ever temporary and that any act of grasping is only ever partial. Ford's realism is in this sense inherently modest in its claims, but it is also inadvertently hopeful—there *is* a truth, it suggests, a truth that exists and can be usefully distinguished from error, even if that truth does not have timeless metaphysical foundations. (*RF*, pp. xvii-xviii)

---

<sup>9</sup> Peter Brooks, alluding to Henry James's quip that 'Balzac's great glory is that he pretended hardest', reaches a similar conclusion: 'James consistently insists that the serious novelist must play seriously and fully the game of pretending, must not ever give the impression of not believing in his created life. This may strike us postmoderns as a bit naive but it could be seen as definitional of the work of the realist. ... There is no way out of pretending: you are writing fiction. It is how you pretend that counts'. Henry James, *The Portable Henry James*, ed. by John Auchard (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 457; Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 228–9.

I am not particularly interested in defending McGuire's construal of pragmatism or postmodernism. Rachel Greenwald Smith has recently shown that postmodernism is more affective - and more affectively interesting - than recent critics like Franzen and McGuire suggest.<sup>10</sup> What I want to emphasize, and consider the implications of, is the close resemblance between McGuire's characterization of a contemporary realist mode that is acutely attentive to the prospect that 'truth is made and not found' (RF, p. xvii) and the critical accounts of David James, Adam Kelly, and other scholars of contemporary fiction.<sup>11</sup>

It might be tempting to contend that *The North Water* exemplifies the 'pragmatic realism' McGuire describes in his academic monograph. There is, however, a significant divergence between the way McGuire's novel invokes and responds to metaphysical scepticism, and the path he describes Ford taking, which is not 'to reassert the priority of a nonlinguistic reality but rather to suggest that, whether or not the solipsists like it or recognize it, they are elements of a larger social whole' (RF, p. xxvi-xxvii). *The North*

---

<sup>10</sup> Rachel Greenwald Smith, 'Postmodernism and the Affective Turn', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 57.3-4 (2011), 423-446.

<sup>11</sup> Ihab Habib Hassan describes a contemporary 'Aesthetic of Trust', Ramón Saldívar a 'Speculative Realism', and Robert Rebein a 'Dirty Realism'. Ihab Habib Hassan, 'Beyond Postmodernism: Towards an Aesthetic of Trust', *Angelaki*, 8.1 (2003), 3-11; Ramón Saldívar, 'Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction', *American Literary History*, 23.3 (2011), 574-599; Robert Rebein, *Hicks, Tribes, and Dirty Realists: American Fiction after Postmodernism*, foreword by Leslie Fiedler (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2001).

*Water* certainly does register the constraints imposed on individuals by their social contexts; but the emphasis in the novel instead falls on the description of embodied affect and the materiality of the body (McGuire's 2006 debut novel is notably called *Incredible Bodies*).<sup>12</sup> A more fruitful comparison is with J. M. Coetzee's well-known characterization of his early oeuvre:

If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not 'that which is not', and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt.<sup>13</sup>

*The North Water* is similarly animated by a tension between existential doubt and bodily feeling though, in McGuire's novel, pain is but one of myriad affects that stress the primacy of the body, and existential doubts are not so much countered as simply recede

---

<sup>12</sup> Ian McGuire, *Incredible Bodies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).

<sup>13</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. by David Attwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 248.



or subside.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, McGuire's explorations of contemporary experience are perhaps less anxious than Coetzee's, though no less serious or thought-provoking.

The portentous opening of *The North Water* playfully foregrounds its dual concern with language and bodily affect:

Behold the man.

---

<sup>14</sup> The affective turn in literary studies (and the humanities more widely) has resulted in a great deal of debate about what distinctions can or should be drawn between 'affect', 'feeling', and 'emotion'. Brian Massumi, Charles Altieri, and Fredric Jameson are only the most influential examples of the numerous scholars who have given a variety of different definitions. That, after two decades of sustained critical effort, no consistent set of definitions has met with any significant degree of consensus suggests that drawing strong distinctions is not a promising avenue along which to continue; as Derek Attridge points out, 'since each term functions differently in different grammatical contexts it's probably wise not to be too dogmatic about their meanings'. This article makes use of each term as and when its connotations seem most apt for the particular dynamic being discussed; the privilege given to 'feeling' is due to its rich indeterminacy between sensation and sentiment, and body and mind. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 27–28; Charles Altieri, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 48; Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 29; Derek Attridge, *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 261.

He shuffles out of Clappison's courtyard onto Sykes Street and snuffs the complex air—turpentine, fish-meal, mustard, black lead, the usual grave, morning piss-stink of just-emptied night jars. ... He senses a fresh need, small but insistent, arising inside him, a new requirement aching to be met. ... He peers around and for a moment wonders what it is. He notices the pink smell of blood from the pork butcher's, the grimy sway of a woman's skirts. He thinks of flesh, animal, human, then thinks again—it is not that kind of ache, he decides, not yet, it is the milder one, the one less pressing. (pp. 1-2)

McGuire has rather archly claimed that the first sentence is 'a direct allusion' to the opening of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985), 'See the child', itself a probable allusion to a line from Alexander Pope's 'An Essay on Man' (1734), 'Behold the child'.<sup>15</sup> That may well have been McGuire's intention, but the opening of *The North Water* is also, of course, a direct quotation from the King James Bible translation of Pontius Pilate's words prior to the Crucifixion, 'ecce homo', famously appropriated by Nietzsche in the title of his semi-autobiographical final work, *Ecce Homo: Wie man wird, was man ist* ('How to

---

<sup>15</sup> Ian McGuire, interview, *Foyles*. <http://www.foyles.co.uk/Ian-McGuire> [accessed 7 September 2017]; Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* (London: Picador, 2010), p. 3; Alexander Pope, *The Major Works*, ed. by Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 288.

become what you are’).<sup>16</sup> This profusely allusive sentence conspicuously registers the potential slipperiness of language, the way that words often fail to refer to a single, identifiable referent – and it does so whilst simultaneously invoking the most influential narrative account of metaphysics and morality in Western culture, and modernity’s most influential sceptic of metaphysical and moral foundations. But just as conspicuous in this short opening paragraph is the *performative* effect of the imperative, ‘Behold’, which, along

---

<sup>16</sup> *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, intro. and notes by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), John, 19.5; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How To Become What You Are*, trans. and intro. by Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Erica Wagner and Kenneth Champeon less plausibly claim that the beginning of *The North Water* refers to the opening of *Moby Dick*, ‘Call me Ishmael’, presumably because the first sentences of both novels contain three words and begin with an imperative. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, ed. by Tony Tanner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 1; Kenneth Champeon, ‘Into the Ice’, review of *The North Water*, by Ian McGuire, *BookPage*, 15 March 2016. <https://bookpage.com/reviews/19672-ian-mcguire-north-water#.WbEKj9OGNE6>. [accessed 7 September 2017]; Erica Wagner, review of *The North Water*, by Ian McGuire, *New Statesman*, 22 February 2016. <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2016/02/north-water-bloody-gripping-thriller-set-board-whaling-ship> [accessed 7 September 2017].

with the brevity of the sentence and the use of the present tense,<sup>17</sup> propels the reader into the highly evocative sensory description of the ‘complex air’ the man ‘snuffs’. The strangely cerebral first adjective – so at odds with the visceral ‘morning piss-stink of just-emptied night jars’ – anticipates the stress the novel places on the complexities of sensory experience. (The emphasis on smell, perhaps the most immediate and least epistemological of the senses, is similarly maintained throughout the novel.)<sup>18</sup> The second paragraph notably concludes with the man’s efforts to comprehend the ‘aches’ and ‘needs’ of his body – an activity which has a close bearing on the experience of reading McGuire’s work.

My claim that the cardinal interest of *The North Water* resides in its innovative modes of evoking bodily feeling should not imply that the novel is unaware of or unconcerned with the ways that bodies can be socially defined and codified. Later in the opening chapter, ‘the man’ introduces himself as Henry Drax, the narratorial omission of

---

<sup>17</sup> The use of the present tense is the most obvious way in which *The North Water* represents a distinctively contemporary form of realism. For an excellent overview of the emergence and increased dominance of this narrative form over the past few decades, see: Irmtraud Huber, *Present Tense Narration in Contemporary Fiction: A Narratological Overview* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014). Perhaps the most influential early example of present tense narration is J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* (London: Vintage, 2004) [1980].

<sup>18</sup> See: Laura U. Marks, ‘Thinking Multisensory Culture’, in *Art and the Senses*, ed. by Francesca Bacci and David Melcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 239–250 (p. 242).

his name up to this point again foregrounding the contingent relationship between language and the world. Drax considers the homeless black boy he has followed through the streets of Hull, shortly before he beats the boy into unconsciousness and rapes him:

The boy looks back at him speechlessly, like an animal surprised in its lair. The man notices he has no smell to him at all—amid all this filth he has remained somehow clean, unsullied, as if the natural darkness of his pigment is a protection against sin and not, as some men believe, an expression of it. (p. 8)

His likening the boy to an ‘animal surprised in its lair’ seems troublingly to affirm a racial stereotype that was pervasive in the nineteenth-century Europe in which *The North Water* is set, yet Drax’s sense of the boy’s physical and moral cleanliness runs counter to his culture’s equation of blackness and sin. Just as the novel foregrounds the non-essential relationship between language and reality, by mobilising a positive and a negative association of embodiment and (moral) character in close proximity, the passage brings into relief just how fraught the reading of bodies can be, exemplifying the seriousness with which the text reflects on the ethical stakes of its own descriptive strategies.

Over the course of the novel, which charts the disastrous voyage of a Greenland whaling ship departing from Hull in 1859, Drax rapes and murders a cabin boy, and kills the captain of the ship, the first mate, and two Inuit hunters, before being partially decapitated with a rusty saw blade wielded by the novel’s main protagonist, Patrick Sumner, in the dramatic penultimate chapter. As the above passages highlight, Drax is a creature of instinct, acting on his frequently brutal desires without regard to their moral, social, or even practical ramifications. Jason Stegner has aptly described him as ‘a sort of

berserk existentialist'; Drax believes that '[t]he law is just a name they give to what a certain kind of men prefer' (*NW*, p. 192), and that '[w]ords are just noises in a certain order and he can use them any way he wishes' (p. 142).<sup>19</sup> He is, in a sense, a nightmarish consequence of the contention that all truths are humanly created, a herald of how dangerous such a conviction might be in the wrong hands.<sup>20</sup>

Reviewers are right to suggest that *The North Water* is animated by the juxtaposition of Sumner and Drax, though the relationship is more complex than a

---

<sup>19</sup> Jason Stegner, 'How Ian McGuire Wrote His Acclaimed Novel of a Whaling Ship Full of Dark Deeds', interview with Ian McGuire, *The Sydney Morning Herald* (18 February 2017). <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/books/how-ian-mcguire-wrote-his-acclaimed-novel-of-a-whaling-ship-full-of-dark-deeds-20170209-gu98pc.html> [accessed 7 September 2017].

<sup>20</sup> McGuire certainly sees his novel's antagonist this way: 'Obviously Drax is a psychopathic murderer ... but the philosophy that drives him is this sense of "well, why is your opinion any better than mine, why are there laws?" ... If morals aren't rooted in human desire where do they come from? It's very hard to answer'. McGuire, 'How Ian McGuire Wrote His Acclaimed Novel'.

simple opposition between good and evil, or faith and doubt, as some have implied.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, much of the novel's interest lies precisely in the large accord between their philosophical outlooks, and the subtle but ultimately momentous differences between them. Sumner is a twenty-seven year old surgeon from County Mayo, Ireland, recently dishonourably discharged from the army after participating in an unsanctioned gold-raid into besieged Delhi on the orders of his superior, who later prosecutes him after the mission goes awry. When his unit are ambushed by enemy soldiers, Sumner befriends a young boy who brings him water and helps splint his shattered shin bone; the boy is subsequently shot through the heart by a British soldier when the pair rejoin the invading forces. These events, which emerge retrospectively through opium-induced flashbacks, give some narrative context to Sumner's sceptical, misanthropic, yet oddly liberated state of mind at the outset of the novel:

He is nothing now, admittedly (a surgeon on a Yorkshire whaling ship, what kind of reward is that for his long labours?) but to be nothing is also, looked at from a different angle, to be anything at all. ... Not lost then, but at liberty? *Free?* And

---

<sup>21</sup> Joshua Rigby, 'A Blood-Drenched Tale of Arctic Whalers', review of *The North Water*, by Ian McGuire, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 7 April 2016. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-north-water-a-blood-drenched-tale-of-arctic-whalers/> [accessed 7 September 2017]; Rohan Maitzen, "There Is No Why", review of *The North Water*, by Ian McGuire, *Novel Readings: Notes on Literature and Criticism*, 20 October 2016. <http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/novelreadings/there-is-no-why-ian-mcguire-the-north-water/> [accessed 7 September 2017].

this fear he currently feels, this feeling of perpetual uncertainty, that must be—he decides—just a surprising symptom of his current unbounded state. Sumner feels a moment of great relief at this conclusion, so clear and sensible, so easily and quickly reached, but then almost immediately, almost before he has a chance to enjoy the new sensation, it strikes him that it is a very empty kind of freedom he is enjoying, it is the freedom of a vagrant or a beast. ... And what does *free* even mean? Such words are paper-thin, they crumble and tear under the slightest pressure. Only actions count, he thinks for the ten thousandth time, only events. ... He feels, rising inside his chest, another warm swell of clarity and ease. It is the body, he thinks, not the mind. It is the blood, the chemistry that counts. (pp. 24–5)

In disparaging thoughts and words, and emphasising actions and events, Sumner articulates an outlook much closer to Drax's than we might expect ('I'm a doer not a thinker, me'; 'others will talk and plan, and make oaths and promises, but there are precious few fuckers who will *do*' [p. 192, p. 308]). Yet part of the comic irony of the passage is the intentness with which Sumner thinks about not thinking; only later does he recognize the implausibility of his own self-descriptions: 'I would rather *not* think ... [b]ut it seems I cannot help myself' (p. 132). Also note how Sumner's sense of being 'unbounded', of being freed from who or what he was, is rendered in insistently affective terms, through the fluctuations of fear, elation, dejection, and other less definable emotions. In this respect, the sequence of the final three sentences is particularly suggestive, the description of bodily affect ('rising inside his chest') giving way to the relatively well-defined feeling of 'clarity and ease', and finally crystallising into the thought



that might be taken as *The North Water*'s mantra: 'It is the body ... not the mind. It is the blood, the chemistry that counts'. The privilege afforded to the body, in focalised thoughts and experiential description, is characteristic of the novel's style, which exemplifies a significant trend in contemporary fiction.

Sumner continues to dwell dispiritedly on the body and the mind as he strolls along the streets of Hull, in a remarkable paragraph that is worth quoting at length:

The night sky is crammed with stars—the grand zodiacal sprawl and in between the densely speckled glow of unnameable others. *The starry sky above me and the moral law within*. He remembers, as he walks, the dissection hall in Belfast, watching that foul old blasphemous Slattery slice happily into a cadaver. 'No sign of this chap's immortal soul as yet, young gentlemen', he would joke, as he delved and tugged, pulling out intestines like a conjuror pulls flags, 'nor of his exquisite reasoning faculties, but I'll keep on looking'. ... The redundancy of flesh, he thinks, the helplessness of meat; how can we conjure spirit from a bone? Yet this street looks lovely despite all that: the way the dampened bricks glow reddish in the moonlight, the echoing clack of leather boot heels on stone, the curve and stretch of broadcloth across a man's back, of flannel across a woman's hips. The whirl and caw of the gulls, the creak of cartwheels, laughter, cursing, all of it, the crude harmonics of the night, coming together, like a primitive symphony. After opium, this is what he likes best: these smells, sounds and visions, the crush and clamour of their temporary beauty. Everywhere a sudden alertness that the ordinary world lacks, a sudden thrust and vigour. (pp. 26-7, italics in original)

There is more than a note of the sublime to the opening evocation of the ‘grand zodiacal sprawl’, the allusion to distant stars as ‘unnameable others’ heightening the suggestion of a vast and unknowable mystery. But the mood swiftly changes from the profound to the profane as Sumner recalls blasphemous Slattery at the dissecting table, farcically searching for corporeal evidence of the invisible human faculties posited by philosophers as he cheerfully disembowels a corpse. Whether or not a reader recognizes the quotation from Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason* (or the more obscure possible allusion to Emerson), the radically secular direction of Sumner’s thought is apparent - his pervasive scepticism about any claims for the existence of some transcendental human essence, or any origin of ‘thought and desire’ beyond the ‘redundancy of flesh’.<sup>22</sup> Yet the tone of the passage shifts again as Sumner’s focus returns to the ‘smells, sounds, and visions’ of his immediate surroundings, in a description of intensely felt sensory impressions, and stray,

---

<sup>22</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. by Werner S. Pluhar, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002), p. 203; Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 16 vols, ed. by William H. Gilman, Alfred R. Ferguson, George P. Clark, and Merrell R. Davis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960-82), Vol. 1 pp. 142–3.

fragmentary details, that might have come straight from Conrad, Joyce, or Woolf.<sup>23</sup> But then the penultimate sentence reminds us that this state of body and mind is brought on by opium, by chemicals in the blood, casting a rather different light on Sumner's 'sudden alertness' and feelings of elation. Despite its ironies, however, the passage is not quite, or not only, a satire on Kantian idealism and modernist epiphany; this is prose which luxuriates in the 'crush and clamour' of the senses in all 'their temporary beauty', but insists on the body as the locus of feeling, and resists any transcendental re-articulation of intense affect.

---

<sup>23</sup> The tonal fluctuations in the quoted passage, like much of *The North Water*, suggest both an admiration for and a mistrust of modernist formal strategies. David James and Urmila Seshagiri have coined the term 'metamodernism' to describe 'contemporary fictions distinguished by inventive, self-conscious relationships with modernist literature'. Elsewhere, I have argued that 'metamodernism' is more useful as a methodology than as a descriptive category, especially when it comes to more peripheral or abstract invocations of modernist aesthetics like John Banville's, or indeed Ian McGuire's. James has recently edited a special issue of *Modernism/modernity* which explores the affective implications of contemporary reanimations of modernism. See: David James and Urmila Seshagiri, 'Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution', *PMLA*, 129.1 (2014), 87–100, p. 88; Doug Battersby, "'The unbounded power of eloquence": Banville, Conrad, and Metamodernism', *Modernism/modernity (Print Plus)*, Special Issue: 'Modernism's Contemporary Affects' (forthcoming 2018); David James, ed., *Modernism/modernity (Print Plus)*, Special Issue: 'Modernism's Contemporary Affects' (forthcoming 2018).

Sumner maintains his sense of detachment from the lives of others throughout the first few months of his voyage on the *Volunteer*. Though the crew have a ‘kind of faith in him—foolish and primitive perhaps, but real’, for Sumner, ‘the men who come to him are bodies only . . . . Towards the rest of them—their moral characters, their souls—he remains solidly indifferent’ (p. 97). Indifferent, that is, until a cabin boy, Joseph Hannah, comes to him complaining of a ‘stomach ache’; on examining Hannah’s buttocks and sphincter, it becomes clear to Sumner that, though he denies it, the boy has been anally raped. Sumner initially decides to let the matter lie, and returns to his cabin to read the *Iliad*, but his belated ethical qualm, and his inability not to act upon it, marks a major turning point in the narrative: ‘He feels, despite himself, a tightening in his throat and a warm, liquid accumulation in his chest like the beginnings of a sob. He waits a minute longer, then closes the book and goes back out into the mess room’ (p. 102). In a narration that frequently stays very close to a character’s experience, the eschewal of direct description of Sumner’s thoughts, and even his emotions, is striking – indeed, the closest we get to a thought, ‘despite himself’, is about Sumner’s desire *not* to feel anything in response to Hannah’s mistreatment. The narrative implication of these sentences is generated through the description of Sumner’s bodily affect; the ease with which readers grasp their import brings into relief the degree to which we intuitively know how particular emotions physically feel. Though it is never explicitly stated, from the tightening of Sumner’s throat and the ‘warm, liquid accumulation in his chest’, we deduce that he is moved to act by feelings of distress, outrage, compassion, and perhaps a displaced sense of guilt for his failure to protect another boy from grievous, and ultimately fatal, harm. This surmise is supported by the surrounding narrative; what invariably provokes Sumner to act upon ethical sentiments is bodily suffering, and

especially the suffering of children, a predilection that the novel strongly implies is borne of his own experience of being orphaned and subsequently fostered by a kind but troubled surgeon. The degree to which Sumner is haunted by the corporeal vulnerability of children is foregrounded early in the novel, when he thinks to himself that his cabin in the *Volunteer* ‘has the dimensions of an infant’s mausoleum’ (p. 18).

Nonetheless, it is worth emphasising that Sumner is not an unambiguous exemplar of ethical determination. When he brings Hannah’s rape to Captain Brownlee’s attention, and is brusquely rebuffed (‘One boy has a sore arse ... but he will recover soon enough’), Sumner capitulates without much resistance (‘The boy will live after all’) (p. 109). Equally discomfiting is the way that the visceral disgust he feels for Hannah weakens his resolve; like his shipmates, Sumner is quick to dismiss the cabin boy as untrustworthy, immoral, base, a creature beyond the reach of ordinary empathy:

in truth, Joseph’s simpleton wretchedness is beginning to gall him. The boy is a hopeless case, he thinks: feeble-minded, a congenital liar according to Drax, prone no doubt to hereditary disease (both mental and corporeal) of every kind. ... Sumner tries to imagine inhabiting the mind of a boy like that, tries to grasp what it would feel like to see the world through Joseph Hannah’s sunken, shifting squirrel eyes, but the effort seems both absurd and faintly terrifying—like a nightmare of being transformed into a cloud or a tree. He shudders briefly at the thought of such Ovidian transformations, then, with relief, reopens the *Iliad* .... (pp. 117–118)

It is not difficult to see that Hannah lies about the rape because he fears reprisal – and with good reason, it turns out, given that Drax kills him shortly after Sumner begins his investigations. We have no evidence that Hannah is a congenital liar, and even less that he carries any hereditary disease (in fact, the only disease he seems to have is venereal, a product of the sexual abuse to which he has been subjected). But Sumner’s thinking of Hannah as animal-like – with its troubling echo of Drax’s contemplation of the unnamed black boy in the opening chapter – conspicuously enables him to avoid imagining the fear, pain, and distress he presumes the cabin boy suffers, to place him beyond the bounds of feeling life, and he turns ‘with relief’ back to his reading. The dark metafictional implication of the passage – that reading literature can be a way of refusing to engage with the feelings of others – brings into relief the ethical stakes of the novel’s mobilisations of affect.

This is also a small but significant example of how *The North Water* worries away at the question of what distinctions, if any, can be drawn between humans and non-human animals (a concern present from the first page, in Drax’s uncertainty about whether the flesh he desires is human or animal, to the novel’s momentous closing lines).<sup>24</sup> In tension with the way that the concept of animality enables Sumner to subdue or repress his acute awareness of what Hannah might be feeling is his strange attachment to a young polar bear, captured by the crew after they slaughter its mother. When Sumner remarks that the

---

<sup>24</sup> Cannibalism is a recurrent motif in *The North Water*. Drax is rumoured to have eaten people (pp. 143–4), and one short chapter is devoted to Brownlee’s vivid dreams of drinking human blood from a shoe (pp. 55–6), which we take to be traumatic flashbacks from when his previous ship was wrecked in the Arctic.

bear 'might die of heartbreak before we get him home', the first mate, Cavendish, retorts: 'He will forget the dead one soon enough ... . Affection is a passing thing. A beast is no different from a person in that regard' (pp. 95-6). The waning of Sumner's concern for Hannah would appear to affirm Cavendish's claim, yet the cabin boy is killed precisely when Sumner's interest diminishes, intimating that there might be some ethical value to resisting the passing of affection. Such faith in ethical sentiments is, however, conspicuously undermined later in the novel, in one of the many exchanges between Sumner and Otto, a Swedenborg-spouting harpooner on the *Volunteer*. When the ship is wrecked upon an iceberg, Cavendish tells Sumner that food cannot be spared, and that he should kill the bear himself to save it from starving to death in the wild. Sumner releases the bear from its cage and takes aim with his rifle:

Sumner wonders for a moment what the bear must be thinking and immediately wishes he hadn't. He lowers the rifle and hands it to Otto. Otto nods.

'An animal has no soul', he says. 'But some love is possible nonetheless. Not the highest form of love, but still love'.

'Just fucking shoot him', Sumner says. (p. 194)

The humour of the passage arises from the disparity or incongruity between Sumner's thoughts and feelings about the creature he has cared for and the philosophical concepts of 'love', 'the soul', and 'higher forms' that Otto clumsily applies. Note also that, as with Hannah, imagining what the bear might be thinking weakens Sumner's resolve. Inherited vocabularies of sentiment which suppose that benign intent is a sufficient ethical guarantee fair poorly in *The North Water*. The similarity to Sumner's feelings and actions

towards the cabin boy and the bear suggest that his emotional attachments to people are no more enduring or sophisticated than his attachments to animals. In this, we might place McGuire alongside several other novelists whose characters Sophie Ratcliffe suggests are better thought of as ‘creatures’, with the term’s fruitful refusal to distinguish between ‘man’ and ‘beast’.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout *The North Water*, the conversations between Otto and Sumner make explicit the philosophical concerns that the novel also registers and explores through characterization and experiential description. Sumner initially contends that it is language that separates humans from animals: ‘The words are all we have . . . . If we give them up, we are no better than the beasts’ (p. 132). This belief does not survive the events of the novel. In a later conversation, it becomes apparent that Drax, now exposed as Hannah’s killer, represents for Sumner a kind of extremity of brutality that confirms his suspicion that men possess no higher faculty or instinct (‘You think a man like Henry Drax has any spirit worthy of the name?’ [p. 172]). In the same conversation, Otto reveals his prophetic dream – that the ship will be wrecked, and that the entire crew will die in the Arctic, apart from Sumner, who ‘will be killed by a bear . . . [e]aten up, swallowed up somehow’ (p. 172). The first part of the prophecy is quickly realized, when Cavendish – promoted to captain after Drax murders Brownlee – steers the *Volunteer* into treacherous waters to wreck it deliberately, playing his part in the insurance fraud planned by Baxter, the ship’s owner. But the plan quickly unravels when Baxter’s second ship, which was supposed to rescue the *Volunteer*’s crew, is also destroyed, leaving them marooned and bereft of supplies as the arctic winter sets in.

---

<sup>25</sup> Sophie Ratcliffe, *On Sympathy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 54.



As the deprivation suffered by the crew deepens, the brutality escalates, and the prose becomes yet more visceral, bringing to mind a famous passage from Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980):

my torturers were not interested in degrees of pain. They were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well, which very soon forgets them when its head is gripped and a pipe is pushed down its gullet and pints of salt water are poured into it till it coughs and retches and flails and voids itself. ... They came to my cell to show me the meaning of humanity, and in the space of an hour they showed me a great deal.<sup>26</sup>

There is much one might say about this passage; here, I simply want to emphasize that McGuire and Coetzee are commonly preoccupied by the transience and vulnerability of abstract notions like 'justice' and 'humanity' when the body is placed under duress. Nonetheless, *The North Water* is engaged with a broader array of bodily feelings than pain

---

<sup>26</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, p. 126.

alone, and ethical notions are not so much forgotten by characters, but rather drift in and out of focus as the demands of the body assert themselves more or less intensely.<sup>27</sup>

This is most dramatically played out in those passages of the novel which lure readers into subtle but significant misreadings. Several days after the wrecking of the *Volunteer*, the crew are visited by two Inuit hunters, who trade seal meat for a rifle and a gold ring (the entirety of Sumner's profit from his misadventures in India). Drax, who has been kept handcuffed since murdering Brownlee, uses a file to free himself, kills Cavendish and the Inuit hunters, and escapes on their sled. This fresh violence leads some of the crew to believe that Drax is a devil who will revenge himself upon the camp, and a small band led by the blacksmith, Webster, take their share of the provisions and set off across the tundra in search of a whaling station, despite Sumner's insistence that they will die of cold before the second night. Shortly after their departure, Sumner's mind turns to his erstwhile companions whom he believes are already dead:

He thinks of Webster and the others walking west, and feels suddenly sickened and wretched at his core. He stops, groans, then leans over and vomits out gobbets of half-digested seal meat onto the frozen snow beneath. He feels a sharp

---

<sup>27</sup> That McGuire's treatment of bodily feeling is more equivocal and exploratory than Coetzee's is perhaps not surprising, given the centrality of the question of torture to *Waiting for the Barbarians*. David Attwell considers this aspect of Coetzee's novel at length in his two monographs, *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face to Face with Time* (New York: Viking, 2015), pp. 70–87, and *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, c1993), pp. 81–104.

pain like a lance jabbing in his stomach and releases an involuntary squirt of shit into his trousers. For a moment, he cannot breathe at all. He closes his eyes and waits, and the feeling passes. The sweat is frozen on his brow, and his beard is hard now with saliva and bile and fragments of tooth-ground meat. He looks up at the snow-packed sky and opens wide his mouth, but no sounds or words come out of it, and, after a short while longer, he closes it again and walks on silently. (p. 245)

Sumner's recalling his lost companions encourages us to read his being 'suddenly sickened and wretched at his core' as an evocation of his presumed feelings of pity, compassion, and grief. But the involuntary vomiting and diarrhoea then raise the possibility that we may have mistaken a literal bodily description for a figurative evocation of emotion, and, in doing so, been more concerned with Sumner's moral sentiments than his dire circumstances. Importantly, the passage prevents readers from finally determining whether Sumner's thinking about his friends brings on the convulsions of his body, or whether these convulsions forcibly interrupt his sympathetic thoughts. Either way, the opening of his mouth and the marked lack of words suggest a failed or aborted desire to articulate something about Webster and the others, once the punishments of his body have subsided. This is one of many such failures of articulation in the novel, failures which Sumner, with his short-lived belief that language sets humans apart from mere animal life, finds acutely distressing.

The example above notably anticipates the conclusion to *The North Water's* most dramatic sequence - Sumner's life-and-death struggle with the polar bear he pursues across the tundra. Several weeks after Drax's violent departure, Sumner discovers that a

bear has disinterred and partially consumed Cavendish's corpse. He uses the remains of the Inuit hunters as bait, but when the bear finally appears, his shot only wounds it; without thinking, Sumner picks up the rifle and follows it into the raging storm, comprehending his mistake only after struggling through the snow for several miles:

He realises that he has come too far, that even if he kills the bear, he will not be able to carry its meat back to camp. This truth disturbs him for a moment, but then, as he walks onwards, its power thins and fades, and all he is aware of is the lift and press of his feet across the snow and the hollow roar of his own quick breathing. (p. 254)

Even a truth about the fruitlessness of his present actions – and their likely fatal consequence – has only a weak claim on Sumner's conscious attention. Also note the material description of truth ('thins and fades'), and the conspicuous animalism to the 'hollow roar of his own quick breathing'.

Otto's prediction about the manner of Sumner's death ratchets up the tension of this already dramatic sequence, as does Sumner's realisation that 'he must kill [the bear] if he is to live' (p. 256). But Otto's prophecy is not yet realized, or realized in quite the way we might anticipate, for Sumner does eventually catch up with and kill the bear. Exhausted and delirious, he opens up its corpse, and drinks from and lathers himself in a pool of mingled 'blood, urine, [and] bile' (p. 258), before suffering a fit in which he bites off the end of his tongue:

When the fit passes, Sumner is lying prone and half covered by drifting snow. ... His mouth, teeth and throat are caked with blood, both animal and human. ... He looks down at the bear's eviscerated corpse, its split and opened ribcage yawning like an empty tomb.

He pauses a moment, considers, then, as if stepping into a bath, he bends and lowers himself down into the striated, crimson cavity. ... There is the clean, wet smell of butchery, a faint but marvellous residue of animal warmth. ... He is enclosed, encoffined, in a tight and vasculated darkness. Lying there, his mutilated tongue begins to swell inside his mouth, blood and saliva bubble out from his lips and dribble down into his beard. He wishes to pray, to speak, to make himself known somehow. He remembers Homer—a hero's corpse, the funeral games, the armour bent and broken—but when he tries to murmur out the opening dactyls, instead of words what burbles from his brutalised mouth are the inchoate grunts and gaspings of a savage. (p. 259)

There is an odd tension between the extremity of gore and the quotidian, even domestic, analogies that creep into the passage (most obviously Sumner's climbing into the corpse 'as if stepping into a bath'), further emphasising how removed this scene is from everyday life. The melding of his and the bear's mutilated bodies, the blurring of the human and the animal, seems to incite in Sumner the wish 'to pray, to speak, to make himself known somehow'. A few pages earlier, we read that Sumner cannot bear the bible's 'certainties, its rhetoric, its all-too-easy hope', and that his ritual recitations of the *Iliad* are 'as close to honest prayer as he is ever likely to come' (p. 246). His staunch atheism and the absence of any other creature on the tundra suggest that, in this moment, it is self-knowledge that

Sumner has lost and yearns to recover. Part of the oblique humour here is the way that Sumner turns to Homer to assert his humanity, apparently equating a very specific cultural heritage with something more universal. This Eurocentrism is picked up in the opening of the subsequent chapter, narrated from the cultural perspective of the Inuit men who find Sumner encased in the bear and bring him to a priest residing in a nearby whaling station. Characteristically, the novel describes how the damage done to Sumner's body prevents him from speaking in a visceral manner. But the extent to which this moment constitutes a major turning point in the narrative is conspicuously marked by the figuration of Sumner inserting himself into the bear's corpse as a kind of burial (the corpse being 'like an empty tomb' in which he is 'enconfined'), raising the possibility that Otto's prophecy *has* in some sense come to pass.

The subsequent description of Sumner being pulled from the bear's body, 'drenched and laved' in blood like 'a stillborn child newly pushed from his mother's womb' (p. 261), bolsters the supposition that Sumner has emerged from the bear transformed. As the unnamed priest attempts to nurse him back to health, Sumner perceives activities we tend to consider basic (or 'natural') to human life anew, and with profound suspicion and reluctance. When he senses his own hunger, Sumner recalls 'the particular, hopeful nature of its aching', and asks himself whether 'he [is] ready to return to all that' (p. 264). He tries silently to ignore the priest's ponderous and patronising proclamations about the native peoples ('they are very primitive and childlike, almost incapable of abstract thought or any of the higher emotions'), but is finally unable to hold back from speech:

he feels the words gathering inside him, dividing, accumulating, taking on strength and form. Soon, he knows, they will begin to rise up his throat, and then they will spill out onto his bruised and ulcerated tongue, and then, whether he likes it or not, whether he wants it or not, he will speak. (p. 267)

Note that speech is described here as another bodily urge, as involuntary as the squirt of shit. It might be tempting to read Sumner's encounter with the bear as a kind of death and rebirth, an eradication of his prior self-conceptions and his coming to a more truthful understanding as to the absence of any foundations to human character. But the novel in fact balances Sumner's changed relationship to human culture and bodily life against the distinct continuity to his sentiments, interests, knowledge, and predispositions. Unsurprisingly, it is the suffering of an Inuit infant that provokes Sumner into intervening, and later participating, in daily life at the whaling station.

Paradoxically, the trait that most markedly persists throughout the novel is Sumner's desire to believe in human purpose, however sceptical he professes himself to be. When the *Volunteer's* crew catch their first whale, Sumner feels 'a brief thrill of victory ... a sense of sudden, shared advantage, of obstacles overcome and progress made', and later 'feels again, and almost against his will this time, that he is part of something larger and more powerful than himself, a joint endeavour' (p. 115). This is echoed later in the novel when Sumner is taken on a seal hunt with the Inuit men who rescue him, and he again 'feels, deep in his chest, as if in answer to an unasked question, the flickering warmth of an unearned victory' (p. 280). To grasp what is at stake in Sumner's being drawn, despite himself, to feeling that a higher human purpose exists, consider the

distinction McGuire draws in *Richard Ford and the Ends of Realism* between Dewey's 'pragmatism' and Michel Foucault's 'postmodernism':

although the two thinkers have a great deal in common, there are also crucial differences of moral outlook or tone between them. Neither ... believes in a fixed human nature. Both emphasize that truth is humanly made. Yet while Dewey argues that the desire to create meaning is generally positive and progressive ... for Foucault that desire is inherently questionable ... . In some sense this difference is a small one, a matter of emphasis, but the consequences are nevertheless significant. (RF, p. 66)

Again, I am less interested in defending McGuire's characterizations of postmodernism and pragmatism than with exploring the implications of his emphasis on 'moral outlook' and 'tone'. Like Dewey and Foucault, Sumner is sceptical about the possibility of final truth or any fundamentally human essence; after his traumatic encounter with the bear, he conspicuously refers to 'better truths' (p. 284), and truths that will be more or less help to others (p. 297). But in *The North Water*, the desire to create meaning is neither '*generally* positive' nor '*inherently* questionable' – both presuppositions, after all, risking reinstating other essentialisms – but simply positive in some instances and negative in others. Both Drax and Sumner (at least in the latter part of the novel) are wary of notions of 'truth' and 'reality'; but Sumner *is* concerned with the material consequences of actions, and particularly those which might cause or reduce bodily suffering. In this limited sense, the novel presents the need to understand human endeavour as motivated, however



precarious and constructed such an understanding might be, as something potentially more ethically positive than mere philosophical naivety.

Sumner's more pragmatist relation to truth, as something made rather than found but which nevertheless has important human consequences, is characteristically brought out through an embodied evocation of emotion. At the beginning of the novel's penultimate chapter, Sumner returns to Hull to meet with Baxter, the erstwhile owner of the *Volunteer*. Sumner reassures him that he will keep the events in the Arctic to himself, because the truth would not help anyone, though when Baxter refers to them as a 'terrible accident', Sumner quickly corrects him: 'Some of it was accident and some wasn't ... . You know about the killings' (p. 298). He probes Baxter about whether he knew that Drax was capable of such brutality:

'Fuck, no. What do you take me for? The man was a great heathen, of course, but he seemed no worse than average for a Greenland harpooner and a good deal better than some I've known'.

Sumner looks at Baxter and nods. He remembers Joseph Hannah and feels a sudden tightening in his chest. (p. 298)

This deceptively complex passage subtly shifts between statement and implication, involving the reader in its series of assumptions, judgments, and felt responses. The movement from Baxter's excuse to Sumner's nodding, remembering Hannah, and feeling his chest tighten suggests that he is contemplating the consequences of Baxter's misjudgement – or dishonesty. The passage does not quite allow us to determine which it might be and, in a sense, it hardly matters; either way, we surmise, Sumner blames Baxter

for his part in Hannah's death. Importantly, it is only by reading Sumner as Sumner reads Baxter – sifting the more plausible from the less, without certainty – that readers make sense of the 'sudden tightening' of Sumner's chest. We cannot finally know what Sumner feels but, once again, we read the probable emotion between the lines of bodily description – as we have done throughout the novel.

With this in mind, I want to return to the matter of the distinctiveness of contemporary novels being written in the wake of postmodernism. In an influential recent article, 'The Affective Turn in Contemporary Fiction', Nancy Armstrong argues that, where the traditional novel facilitated readerly sympathy, writers such as Coetzee, Kazuo Ishiguro, and W. G. Sebald 'confront us with forms of human life so innovative as to make it next to impossible for us to recognize ourselves in them', an abandonment of identification which marks 'nothing short of a disconcerting sea change in the traditional subject of fiction'.<sup>28</sup> Taking *Never Let Me Go* (2005) as her exemplary text, Armstrong claims that 'Ishiguro creates a different basis of affiliation that forces us to engage with human beings ... in whom we cannot recognize the irreplaceable element of our own humanity'.<sup>29</sup> I am not convinced that Ishiguro's characters are as radically different from the characters of other novels as Armstrong suggests; it seems to me that part of why *Never Let Me Go* is so moving is that readers *do* recognize the humanity of the

---

<sup>28</sup> Nancy Armstrong, 'The Affective Turn in Contemporary Fiction', *Contemporary Literature*, 55.3 (2014), 441–465, p. 442.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p. 459; see Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).

‘donors’ as their society does not.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, Armstrong’s conclusion is pertinent and illuminating:

Ishiguro suggests ... that the novel must expand the readership’s sensorium beyond the limits of sympathetic identification; it must move us to acknowledge those with whom we share vital organs yet whom we exclude from the mirroring relationship of sympathy, as Adam Smith defined it. By forcing us to feel beyond the present limits of personhood, for all we know, contemporary novels may be developing a generation of readers with an emotional repertoire more attuned to the demands of our time.<sup>31</sup>

I am not convinced by Armstrong’s reading of *Never Let Me Go* and her suggestion that, in place of personhood, the sharing of vital organs might provide a new basis for

---

<sup>30</sup> The oddly affectless narrator of Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder* (2010), or the titular protagonist of Coetzee’s *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), would seem more promising examples for Armstrong’s argument. J. M. Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K* (London: Vintage, 2004); Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (Richmond: Alma Books, 2010). Attridge suggests that McCarthy complicates ‘expectations derived from traditional novels’ by presenting readers with protagonists who lack ‘psychological and affective depth’. Derek Attridge, ‘Tom McCarthy’s Modernism: Close Encounters of a Pleasurable Kind’, in *Modernism and Close Reading*, ed. by David James (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2018).

<sup>31</sup> Nancy Armstrong, ‘The Affective Turn in Contemporary Fiction’, p. 464.

intersubjective acknowledgement; the ethical crux of Ishiguro's novel is precisely about the need to recognize and empathize with those who do *not* (or shortly will not) have the vital organs most people taken for granted. Such a reading is in keeping with a discipline-wide tendency to overstate both the radicalism of contemporary fiction and the supposed conservatism of earlier novels. We might also want to question whether sympathy was ever as disembodied as Armstrong supposes; Adam Smith describes sympathy at the beginning of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* in unmistakably corporeal terms.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, Armstrong rightly highlights how the peculiar stress placed on both embodiment and the continuity between human and animal life in contemporary fiction demands that we rethink our vocabularies of feeling. McGuire's novel offers a particularly vivid example of this recent trend. Consider, for instance, the description of Sumner hearing the priest's 'howls of pain' and waking with 'his heart pounding and his own guts twisting in sympathy' (pp. 286–7), with its characteristic equivocation between

---

<sup>32</sup> 'Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. ... By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, *we enter as it were into his body*, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have thus adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and *we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels*'. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. by D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 9, emphasis added.

the human and the animal, and its conspicuous relocation of sympathy from its traditional locus in the heart to the guts. *The North Water* exemplifies how the complication of readerly identification in contemporary fiction marks, not an abandonment, but an extension of the affective resources of the form.

This is powerfully brought home in the haunting single-paragraph chapter with which the novel ends. In the tumultuous preceding pages, Sumner kills Drax, robs Baxter, and escapes England (and legal retribution) on a merchant ship. The final chapter finds Sumner in the Berlin Zoological Gardens, where he approaches a bear in a cage ‘no wider than the deck of a ship’ (p. 325), an observation which strongly brings to mind both the infant bear for whom Sumner cared and the bear in whose corpse he shrouded himself. Once again, Otto’s prophecy ratchets up the drama and tension of the scene, raising the possibility that Sumner might be more literally ‘swallowed up’ by this bear – and again this expectation is confounded:

It reaches the front of the cage and pushes its nose through the black bars as far as it can manage, until its narrow wolfish face is only three feet from Sumner’s. It sniffs the air and stares at him, its gimlet eyes like strait gates to a larger darkness. Sumner would like to look away, but can’t. The bear’s 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 and need. (p. 326)

The passage resonates with echoes from earlier moments in the novel. The bear’s staring eyes being ‘like strait gates to a larger darkness’, for instance, echoes Sumner’s sense of

dejection upon confronting a remorseless Drax about his abuse of Hannah (“Talking to Drax is like shouting into the blackness and expecting the blackness to answer back in kind’ [p. 192]), registering the centrality of reciprocity, or mutual recognition, to this scene. The description of how the bear’s ‘raw breath brushes against his face and lips’, with its subtly synaesthetic invocation of the smell of the food the bear has eaten and the concomitant suggestion of bodily revulsion, is characteristic of *The North Water’s* style. But then the final sentence falls back onto a descriptive mode which is more recognisably akin to other novels, explicitly denoting Sumner’s emotions through a bodily idiom (‘stab’), rather than suggesting emotion through bodily description, the juxtaposition bringing into greater relief the peculiarity, or distinctiveness, of the novel’s affective strategies. Also note how Sumner’s fear ‘fades and loses force’ in much the same way that, earlier in the novel, the truth he apprehends ‘thins and fades’, firmly presenting both truth and emotion as arising from human experience, and suggesting that truths have no intrinsically greater claim on our interests and intentions than emotions. Much of the power of the novel’s conclusion comes from the intransitive use of ‘need’, with its refusal to specify *what* it is that Sumner needs. But from the word’s conjunction with and proximity to ‘loneliness’, the fact that these feelings are prompted by the bear, and the use of ‘wake’ with its associations both of the sea and of mourning, what is surprisingly, poignantly suggested is that Sumner feels the loss of the fragile sense of community and purpose that characterized his past life aboard the *Volunteer* and in the aftermath of its wreckage. Despite the extremity of suffering and hardship McGuire’s novel depicts, its closing lines stress, not the fruitlessness or meaninglessness of human endeavour, but the resilience and intensity of the need to commune with others. Alongside works by Coetzee, Ishiguro, and other influential novelists, *The North Water* represents, not a

reactionary rejection of postmodernist scepticism, but an emerging mode of contemporary fiction that proceeds from the materiality of the body, and which is less concerned with exposing the absence of metaphysical foundations than with testing the value of particular human beliefs and sentiments.