

A TINY, UNRECOGNIZABLE SPECK:  
THE NEGOTIABILITY OF LITERARY EXPERIENCE IN  
IAN MCGUIRE'S *THE NORTH WATER*

NICHOLAS BIRNS\*

ABSTRACT. Ian McGuire's *The North Water* (2016) portrays a whaling expedition to the Arctic regions. Its protagonist, Patrick Sumner, is an Irish surgeon who has undergone a grim and self-compromising ordeal as he both participated in stealing jewelry from a dead Indian boy and was framed for perpetrating the crime exclusively by his commanding officer. For lack of a better alternative, Sumner agrees to serve as a doctor on the *Volunteer*, a ship commanded by the incompetent Arthur Brownlee and featuring the sinister harpoonist Henry Drax. The unexpected existential challenges and moral opportunities the voyage bestows on Sumner represent the narrative heart of McGuire's work. This essay looks especially at Sumner's reading of Homer's *Iliad* in Greek as a means by which literary experience can be negotiated into a larger, lived moral awareness. This work does not, though, just occur within the narrative, but also on the part of the reader, who is educated both into a confrontation with evil and a resultant moral enlargement by the book. That McGuire's narrative concerns an economic mode—whaling and whale fuel in the 1860s—on the verge of exhaustion, and itself participates in literary genres—the postmodern historical novel, the global northern—that are late in the arc of their flourishing, McGuire's novel thus self-reflexivity participates in the awareness of the Anthropocene and the exhaustion of the nonhuman as a category, even as its sense of the negotiability of literary experience leads to a taut, intense awareness of both the powers and limits of the human.

KEY WORDS: arctic, negotiability, literary experience, global Northern, Anthropocene

### Introduction

Ian McGuire's *The North Water* (2016) is a grim and exciting tale of adventure, ordeal, vengeance, and an intermittent astonishing altruism. Its delineation of a nineteenth-century whaling voyage to the North Pole is both redolent of the past, in all its historical trappings and vestments. Yet McGuire's novel is written in the light of twenty-first century concerns (or twenty-first century reanimations of concerns now visible as existing in the nineteenth century) such as the persistence of racial privilege and the dawn

\* NICHOLAS BIRNS (PhD 1992, New York University, New York) is Associate Professor of Literature in the Center for Applied Liberal Arts, New York University. E-mail: nb-2003@nyu.edu.

of the Anthropocene. In addition, these concerns are rendered in a taut and urgent prose.

This was all seen by reviewers of the book; but what they have not the time or scope to stress was the book's highlighting of literary references and its rendering of the experience of literature. This essay will concentrate on how recognizing the negotiation of literary experience in the novel, especially its chief character's practice of reading Homer, as a way to instance how *The North Water* reflects on and to a degree transforms the tacit genre it inhabits. This is seen in both its overt engagement of literature—for instance, its many references to Homer's *Iliad*—and the books it does not reference, but that the reader is reminded of, such as Melville's *Moby-Dick* and Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. *The North Water* also deploys literary suggestiveness in nonliterary situations, and to a degree to make nonliterary points, thus evidencing the reach of the literary by its very ability to touch areas where its overt influence is absent.

### **A Reader in the Arctic**

*The North Water* is centered on the experience of Patrick Sumner. Sumner is presented as a figure both wounded by and deeply implicated in the reach of British imperialism at its height. Originally from Ireland, he has served in India as an army doctor, but got into trouble during the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 when he colluded with other medical officers, including his superior, Corbyn, in looting jewelry from a deceased young boy after they had promised his father, Hamid, to save his son. The boy had been already dead by the time the British army doctors reached him, but the doctors' looting of the treasure after their promise to Hamid represented a betrayal. When all the other doctors except Sumner and Corbyn die, Corbyn then frames Sumner as the only culprit, and has him court-martialed in order to evade his own guilt. Thus Sumner is guilty, in one way, and innocent, in another; he is both malefactor and victim, and this dual consciousness enables him to survive the trauma we see him undergo in the novel, as he embarks on an Arctic whaling voyage on the ship *Volunteer* under the command of a man who makes Corbyn look like a reform parliamentarian in comparison, the sadistic harpoonist Henry Drax.

At the beginning of the novel, Sumner is rudderless and with a diminished sense of identity. "The world is enormous, he tells himself, and he is a tiny, unrecognizable speck within it, easily lost and forgotten. This thought, which would not be normally pleasing to anyone, pleases him now. His plan is to dissolve, to dissipate, and only afterwards, some time later, to re-form" (McGuire 2016: 14). A sense of near-obliteration, which in most people would represent an abasement of mental level, is a kind of refuge for Sumner, somewhat like J. Alfred Prufrock, who wishes to be "a pair of rag-

ged claws. Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.” Though Eliot’s persona shares, somewhat weirdly, the maritime orientation of McGuire’s thought, Sumner stoically and affectlessly embraces danger just as much as Prufrock shrinks from it, and takes refuge in teatime velleities. This is, though, less out of courage than a renunciation of affect. Sumner feels “free”, not out of any sense of positive liberty, but as a result of an “unbounded” condition that also makes him fear.

This sort of character—morally ambiguous; opportunistic; wounded; seeking almost to shrink himself into nothingness—does not seem like a typical reader of literature. And yet Patrick Sumner’s reading, and his experience of literature, will be a crucial determinant of his character as it is ramified in the novel; moreover, the novel calls out, in its reader, the reader’s awareness of previous works pertinent to the story, both in terms of being about the sea, exploration, or empire, and of containing the sorts of emotions and relationships canvassed by McGuire’s novel. Yet this does not mean the novel imposes a fatuous and pretentious literariness over Sumner’s lived experience. The literary in McGuire’s novel is not at all arty, nor is meant to impress the audience by anchoring the book in a pre-existing tradition. Sumner himself sets the tone quite nicely here. “He will have plenty of time on his hands, Brownlee made that plain enough. He will read widely (he has brought his dog-earned Homer). He will practice his disused Greek? Why the fuck not? He will have precious little else to do...” (McGuire 2016: 23).

The lack of literary pretension, or overt appurtenance of sensitivity, in Sumner’s response is one of the most noticeable aspects of his experience as a reader. Another is his choice of Homeric texts. One would expect a traveller and a seaman to choose *The Odyssey*, but he instead chooses the *Iliad*, which is entirely about the immobility of both of its sides, the Trojans because they are besieged, the Greeks because they are besiegers and, in the Homeric poem itself, conspicuously unsuccessful in their task. Why, then, does Sumner concern himself with what Simone Weil, speaking of the *Iliad*, called the poetry of force, and not the poetry of travel and mobility? Sumner’s choice of the *Iliad*, and through him McGuire’s, upends a certain supposition that might occur about the sort of travel associated with exploration and colonization. We might tend to see migration and the geographical mobility of the British people during the nineteenth century as a correlate of privilege. This would be a more Odysseus-like condition; although Odysseus wants to go home, it is his liberty and family life, not his very existence, which is imperilled. Instead, Sumner reads Homer because he has had to travel, to India and then to the Arctic, for Homer-like reasons, out of compulsion, and in contexts where he risks his life. By extension, colonial migration itself is hardly a lark or a whim; people engaged in it, even in

conditions where force was not literally invalid as in Australian convict transportation, were moving because economics or overpopulation compelled them to. It is true that explorers are seen differently in imperial taxonomy. They are endowed with a different valence than in colonizers as they are not trying to establish political domination over territory, but to gain access to resources and to extend scientific knowledge that will of necessity also be governmentally useful. But men such as Sir Martin Frobisher and Captain James Cook were middle-class Northerners who turned to the sea because British territory itself did not offer a *carrière ouverte aux talents*; even their sea-lives cannot be seen as totally voluntary. This reality renders the name of the ship Drax serves on, the *Volunteer*, heavily ironic, and makes Sumner's reading of the *Iliad* on the voyage frighteningly pertinent. Sumner reads Homer in Greek—this is what reading Homer meant in those days—which means a lot of exacting drudgework, not an easy or passive literary high. Reading enriches Sumner, but it is also a chore for him.

That Sumner remarks his choice of reading Homer is a result of having precious little else to do also makes us reconceive the whaling ship, usually seen as a dynamic space that is above all a mode of transit, as a static space, a space for repose and contemplation. As Hester Blum has pointed out, nineteenth-century ships, such as those that constituted the Franklin expedition, had their own newspapers. These newspapers, part of what Blum terms the “ecomedia of polar exploration” (Blum 2017), in effect local papers for a space that, though mobile, was only so very gradually, and in the long journey to its destination required and supported institutions similar to those required and supported by static communities. Notably, until the Arctic is actually reached, most of the action on board the *Volunteer* comes from motives not specifically nautical in conception or enactment. Drax and Cavendish plot to steal Summer's ring from India, which is both a sign of their greed and the product of an unconscious sense on their part of Sumner's dark and compromised past; as people with shame themselves, they are, beneath the level of knowledge, sensitive to shame in others. Later on, Joseph Hannah, a cabin boy, is sodomized; a sailor named MacKendrick is accused, but we soon find out the culprit is Henry Drax himself. The first hundred pages, far from being glamorous or exciting, are emotionally taxing in their grisliness and shadiness, their complete refusal to gild the story with an air of awe of sublimity.

Drax at first seems merely a rough-hewn seaman, vulgar and even vicious, but he is soon revealed to harbour a brutish evil so deep as to be barely human. McGuire manages to conjure so deep an evil without overdoing it or excessively foreshadowing the disclosure of this evil.

### The Global Northern

*The North Water* has to be seen as a relatively late instance of a few long-term trends in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century novel. First of these is the rehabilitation of the historical novel, in themed-twentieth century thought virtually obsolete, practiced only by obviously popular writers such as Kenneth Roberts or Samuel Shellabarger or quirky eccentrics like Alfred Duggan or David Stacton. Only in countries or regions with a quandary as to their historical definition, the US South of Allen Tate's *The Fathers* (1938), the Australia of Eleanor Dark's *Timeless Land* trilogy (1941-53) was the genre undertaken by highbrow writers. Generally, well-established writers in metropolitan countries such as Britain and the US avoided any novel set more than fifty years in the past, and indeed those novels seen as the most consummate examples of craft—Glenway Wescott's *The Pilgrim Hawk* (1940) or Kathrin Perutz's *A House on the Sound* (1965)—were set in the present and placed stylistic accomplishment and psychological nuance above all. But, by the 1980s, postcolonial writers such as Salman Rushdie, Michael Ondaatje, and Peter Carey were re-charging the form, and British writers like Sarah Waters, Iain Pears, and Rose Tremain achieved popularity in the 1990s in the historical form. Indeed, the Booker Prize, as an award, became more associated with the historical novel than any other genre. By the time *The North Water* appeared, the historical novel had been back in vogue in the Anglophone literary world for twenty to thirty years.

The second trend is something commented on by Alison Lurie in a 2016 review of Christopher Nicholson's *Winter*, a biographical novel about Thomas Hardy. Lurie, born in 1926, had witnessed both the modern and post-modern literary worlds. Her statement that the mid-twentieth century novel valued the *roman à clef*, or novel that alluded to real people while not actually naming them but disguising them with fictional names, whereas the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries leapt unambiguously into depicting real past individuals. A novel like *The North Water* takes a third tack: all of its personages are fictional, including the (anti-) hero, Sumner, and the villain, Drax. But they are not meant to be fictional disguises for real people: McGuire represents them as people who might have been real, except they are fictional. Still, the conditions—the whaling industry and the Arctic as they existed in the mid-nineteenth century—are real, and McGuire writes about these realities being of intrinsic importance in a way he would have had to be more apologetic for fifty years earlier. Moreover, McGuire's novel, in its engagement, on different levels, of Homer and Melville, is overtly intertextual in a way that the novel in the mid-twentieth century was supposed to renounce as part of its search for chastened self-discipline.

The third trend in which *The North Water* participates, the novel's specific setting in the Arctic, is the most central to understanding the literary posi-

tion of McGuire's novel. Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), in its overt engagement with the life and work of Flaubert, was one of the novels that made both intertextuality and overt citation of real people in fiction fashionable again. But *Flaubert's Parrot* contained this aside, that there should be a moratorium on fiction set in South America and novels "set in the Arctic and Antarctic should receive a development grant" (Barnes 1984: 112). Barnes no doubt meant this as no more than a quip, and a jab at the popularity of magical realism, but soon fiction set in these regions experienced an unprecedented boom. Previously only countries like Canada, with defined territory in the Arctic, had featured much literary exploration of this region, a great deal of this work participating in the tacit genre T. D. MacLulich called "the Northern", *i. e.* the Canadian equivalent of the Western, as seen in the fiction and nonfiction of Farley Mowat, who wrote about the Arctic long before Barnes's metaphorical development grant was allotted. But these writings were not only grounded in a highly local scene but were not written to sell globally. There is still a distinctively Anglo-Canadian literature of the Arctic, as seen in Ed O'Loughlin's 2017 novel *Minds of Winter*. Francophone Canadian writers have also approached the subject, as seen in Dominique Fortier's 2008 *Du bon usage des étoiles*, a novel of the waylaid, and in the end lost, expedition of Sir John Franklin in the 1850s. An interesting variant of the Canadian Northern was the work of the US writer Howard Norman, who set several books in Canada in order to project his literary vision northward and towards the awe and mystery of the Arctic.

It might be said that what distinguishes the genre of 'the global Northern' from the original Canadian Northern genre as represented by Mowat's work is the presence or absence of the very idea of Canada, and indeed *The North Water*, though set just after the constitution, in 1867, of the Dominion of Canada as a nation with incipient sovereignty over much of the Arctic, mentions Canada only three times and only incidentally. The rise of the "global Northern" as a genre occurred well outside Canadian national space. Indeed, the global Northern was established most decisively by the Danish writer Peter Høeg's *Smilla's Sense of Snow* (1992), premised on Denmark's continuing administrative role in Greenland, with a sense of foreboding in the Arctic intimately connected to the menaces of race, colonialism, economic greed, and colonial expectation: but also participating in, or constructing, a mystique of the Arctic as exotic and exciting. Andrea Barrett's *The Voyage of the Narwhal* (1996) was the first U.S. book to really participate in the global Northern. Barrett's novel concerns an expedition in the 1850s to rescue the expedition of Sir John Franklin. Barrett's novel, which gained all the international acclaim that a more Canada-centred (and admittedly later) narrative of the same subject, Fortier's, did not, is at once a revisiting of the thrill and danger of nineteenth-century Arctic exploration

and an investigation of why the Arctic suddenly mattered in the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War (which had kept the attention of the world on areas where there might be direct military conflict, or countries that were pawns in the larger power struggle) and the growing awareness of the perils of climate change and of melting icecaps and rising oceans. *The Voyage of the Narwhal* was not so much a novel of the past but a novel of the past in the present. As such, *The Voyage of the Narwhal* has an aspect of what Linda Hutcherson has termed “historiographic metafiction”, even though, unlike Hutcherson’s paradigmatic example of Graham Swift’s 1983 novel *Waterland*, McGuire’s level of literary self-consciousness is hardly flagrant, an austerity I would suggest partially comes from a deliberate awareness of the flagrant quality of earlier narratives such as Swift’s. Barrett, though, internally distinguishes her novel from a mere narrative “of memoir and adventure” (Barrett 1996: 263).

Ironically, Barrett has Zeke Voorhees, the novel’s main character, describe a planned book of his as “a sort of adventure tale” (Barrett 1996: 262). Barrett’s book is this as well, but also recognizes the impingements of force and the “instant exercise of extreme power” (Barrett 1996: 117), a phrase which could just as well encapsulate Henry Drax of the *Volunteer* in McGuire’s novel. Barrett’s novel is animated by the tension between the *Iliad*-like sense of force in the book and the more *Odyssey*-esque thrill of adventures in new and untamed lands. There is, in both Høeg’s and Barrett’s books, a sense of the North as the source not just of the obvious peril and risk faced by seamen on exploring expeditions, but a more ontological danger, of a hidden or occult power that voyaging to the North will unleash; something also seen, albeit in a fictional world, in the role of the North in George R. R. Martin’s fantasy sequence *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996-2011). The North is a place not just of uncanny distance and inconceivable cold but of force and menace that is ultimately of human, not chthonic or environmental origin: an Anthropocene violence.

We have been assuming so far that Arctic and Antarctic are equivalent. But, as the New Zealand poet Bill Manhire, who has seen Antarctica as New Zealand’s hidden hinterland, points out, there is a crucial difference between the Arctic and the Antarctic in that the Arctic, possessed by several sovereign nations, necessarily features issues of power and control, whereas the Antarctic novel tends to be more purely scientific and adventure-oriented in nature. The Antarctic voyage of Shackleton on the *Endurance*, as discussed in such twenty-first century books as Francis Spufford’s *I May Be Some Time: Ice in the English Imagination* (1996), portrayed as a deed of courage and peril lacking in the racially and territorially exploitative aspects of explorers of Africa such as David Livingstone. Antarctic novels do not as often have the sense of occult or ontological foreboding that we see in global

northern fiction, and this proceeds from the way that none of Antarctica is part of a sovereign space, although (and as Manhire does not note) certainly Argentina and Chile, and, in the 1982 Falkland islands War, Argentina and Britain, have waged sovereign disputes over territory very near to the Antarctic. Moreover, in a point Manhire does not make but which is nonetheless evident, the Arctic region has indigenous peoples, such as the Sami and the Inuit, whereas, unless one counts the Yaghan of Southern Argentina and the Mapuche of Southern Chile, the Antarctic region does not. Manhire takes rather lightly Barnes's metaphor of a development grant, but there is another side to Barnes's idea, one lying beneath the positive aspects of its eventuation, which include not only many entertaining and valuable books but a far greater attentiveness to the environmental stakes abiding in the polar regions, and the danger that anthropogenic climate change poses to them.

This darker side has to do with the racialization of the Arctic and Antarctic as (despite the aforementioned presence of indigenous people in or near both regions) as white, and their foregrounding in literature a riposte to the self-assertion of the Global South in the Latin American literary Boom and in the visibility of postcolonial literature in English. Genres such as the global Northern have the potential put the global South and the non-white world in pincers by foregrounding the snowy extremes of the world whose whiteness, in the sense of having snow and ice can also allude to whiteness in the racial sense. This is an association present in the literary world as early as Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, where at the end of a strenuous Antarctic voyage, and an encounter with the indigenous, non-white Tsalalians, there emerged a "shrouded human figure" whose skin colour is "of the perfect whiteness of the snow" (Poe 1838: 151). Moreover, the Northern is really a Northwestern; as, though Russia touches the Arctic, Russia is itself too Eastern to fulfil the whiteness-criteria of the Northern; so there can be the almost inherent shock of the title of Tété-Michel Kpomassie's 1977 nonfiction account *An African in Greenland*, although an African in the then-Soviet possession of Franz Josef Land, equally as Arctic, would have seemed less paradoxical. These are, of course, Western stereotypes, as the idea of a European in Greenland is no more or less inherently uncanny than an African; neither is indigenous.

McGuire, born in 1964, young enough to have still been an undergraduate when Barnes launched his idea of the Arctic/Antarctic development grant, is at once conscious of what earlier writers have done in the twenty-first century genre of the "global Northern" and wanting to make sure he is perceived at least to some extent as doing something different. This is most immediately visible in how the indigenous people are treated in the novel. Whereas Barrett uses "Esquimaux"—controversially as the Inuit

have made it clear they do not, in present or past, wish to be called that—and at times “Inuit”—anachronistically, as the people she chronicles would actually have said Eskimo—McGuire does not use either Inuit or Eskimo, only “Yaks”, a term for the Inuit often used by European whalers. But even “Yaks” only occurs in the narrative, never in direct dialogue. In direct dialogue, no appellation for the indigenous people is ever used; they are always “They”. “Esquimaux” is only used when it would have been used subjectively by the point-of-view the narrative is inhabiting. McGuire makes sure to refer to the indigenous people in direct dialogue just as they plausibly might have been referred to by Sumner and his shipmates if they had in fact existed, just as the term “the North Water” refers to today what we would call the Arctic Ocean. Using Inuit or even having the men themselves say “Yak” would be anachronistic or ahistorical. But by editing out the now-offensive epithet the men actually might have used, McGuire not only pays respect to twenty-first century sensibilities but also gives a sense of the Western experience of the indigenous people as laden with as much absence as presence.

McGuire also is circumspect in his allusiveness, as in his naming of indigenous people: indeed, the two varieties of circumspection could well be highly complementary. Both Barrett and McGuire, realize, for instance, that, even though both their narratives heavily allude to, and are in the shadow of, Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), to overtly cite the book would be both too obvious and—given that Melville’s novel was, as is well known, a commercial failure at the time that did not necessarily reach many readers, anachronistic. In *Voyage of the Narwhal*, though, Barrett alludes to *Moby-Dick en passant*, through the repeated references to “Melville Bay” off northeastern Greenland. McGuire operates differently, by referring to scenes and vistas that are clearly Melvillean, such as the “South Sea tattoos” and the ship “*Dolly*, out of New Bedford” mentioned on page 114. This give a small frisson of recognition on the part of the knowing reader, but McGuire knows that the allusions will fall flat if we do not care about the elemental situation; so instead of making the text more literary the allusions render the stark drama of the riveting and inescapable moral action of the text all the more compelling.

### **Whaling in Crisis**

*The North Water* differs from both *Moby-Dick* and *The Voyage of the Narwhal* in being about the whaling industry at its time of waning. Captain Arthur Brownlee tells Sumner that they will sight more whales when they get to the North Water, and Sumner ripostes that the North Water is the place to hunt for whales in the novel’s “now”—1869—Brownlee then says. “These days it is. Twenty years ago, the waters about here were full of whales too, but

they've all moved north now—away from the harpoon... They know they are safer where there is most ice, and where it is most perilous for us to follow them. Steam is the future, of course” (McGuire 2016: 83-84). Brownlee here sums up what we might call the transition from Melville's sea to that of Joseph Conrad: from sail to steam, and from whale oil to fossil fuel. The voyage of the *Volunteer* comes at the end of an economic paradigm, and that they have to go so far north indicates that whaling itself is at a point of crisis, if not obsolescence. This has considerable allegorical potential, not only for our own age, trying, however unwillingly, to make a transition from fossil fuel to more renewable forms of energy, but for the way McGuire's novel is at such a late point in the trajectory of the postmodern historical novel and the genre of the global northern as the voyage of the *Volunteer* is in the age of whaling.

Jacob Baxter, the absentee owner of the ship, is realized in *The North Water* as a figure whose invisible malevolence subtends the spectacularly visible malevolence of Drax. This marks out McGuire's novel as different from *Moby-Dick*, where the absentee owners, Bildad and Peleg, are not on-stage characters. Similarly, the *Pequod* in Melville's novel does not have a ship's doctor, although a ship the *Pequod* meets in the course of its voyage, the *Samuel Enderby*, does have a surgeon, Dr. Bungler on board. (Some might suggest that the *Pequod* itself is more in need of a psychiatrist than a surgeon) That both the figure of the absentee owner—the unnamed capitalistic ground of the graphic heroics figured by the whaling voyage—and the ship's doctor—who represents the presence of science and the possibility of the valuation of contemplation over action—are foregrounded might signify that we are at the dusk of the entire whaling world.

Yet the owl of Minerva can fly at dusk, and Sumner uses his crises to his own moral advantage. These crises include both the immediate crisis of the various levels of malevolence, visible and invisible, at play on the *Volunteer*, and the larger crises of imperialism and resources that the voyage images. Sumner reverses his moral situation by acts of radical empathy and by simply discerning, in spite of his own flawed character, that he is not as evil as Cavendish and, especially, Drax. Indeed, Sumner comes to being in any way good by realizing at first that he is the least of several multiple evils. That Sumner does not narrate the novel in the first person means that Sumner is not a character that improves as he tells his story, but a character that im-proves as we read his story. That we are willing to accept this cynical and flawed character as someone who can meaningfully care for others represents a growth for him and for us, but one which we are better equipped to articulate than he, and one in which it is more appropriate for us to commend than for Sumner himself to do so. Sumner, as a doctor, has necessarily always been a professional career, even though he has fallen

short, in the Indian incident with Hamid, the boy, and the loot, of the standards of medical ethics. He begins his mission of care on the *Volunteer* in a merely, if proficiently, clinical sense. “They come to him with wound and bruises, head-aches, ulcers, haemorrhoids, stomachaches, and swollen testicles. He gives them poultices and plasters, ointments and balms: Epsom salts, calamine, ipecac” (McGuire 2016: 79). Towards the sailors’ moral character, Sumner remains “solidly indifferent” (McGuire 2016: 79).

Otto, the other harpooner on the ship and the evil Drax’s moral opposite and complement, is Swedenborgian and believes there is “great evil is the absence of good” (McGuire 2016: 105). McGuire makes clear that the novel does not reflect Otto’s Swedenborgian idealism, but nonetheless Otto’s spiritual optimism is a viable counterweight to the expediency and exploitation of the other members of the crew. Moreover and refreshingly, McGuire does not attempt to expose or deny Otto’s idealism in the name of a superior knowledge of darkness. But Sumner’s own evolution shows that optimism in the book does not rely on a correspondence to a world above, but on earning a more benevolent outlook from suffering and experience that is so extreme as to be tortuous. At the beginning of the voyage, Otto rebuffs Sumner’s conclusion that he can only learn from what he has himself experienced. Otto says that if Sumner’s pragmatism and empiricism were all there was, then there would be no “growth or advancement” (673). By novel’s end, both men are proven right. Sumner learns from nothing but his own experience. But his own experience has taught him to be more altruistic and more radically solicitous of others, to be, out of his own coarse grain, more like Otto thinks all people are than Sumner had ever thought possible.

For Sumner, in the course of the novel, far exceeds his own estimate of himself. When he reaches the settlement of the Yaks, and finds a European priest, a “bright-eyed, wiry Englishman” (McGuire 2016: 205) there ministering to his sparse and in many ways culturally alien flock, the priest insists Sumner came there for a reason. But Sumner himself is highly sceptical. The priest realizes Sumner’s compromised moral past, and attempts to heal him, not just from the physical exertion of being dragged across the ice, but from Sumner’s own addiction to laudanum and the pain and self-mistreatment that lies behind it. Sumner, in turn, saves the life of the baby of the Inuit woman Anna (one of four children he saves in the course of the novel), and, even though he does not take seriously the belief of two Inuit seal hunters that he is some sort of totemic spiritual force that will help bring them seals, he agrees to come out hunting with them both in tolerance of their hopes, because “he has no better truths to tell them” (McGuire 2016: 221) and as an act of community service. Finally, Sumner saves the priest’s life by performing a harrowing and high-risk operation, which should not

have succeeded. The priest treats his own survival as a sort of miracle, and Sumner as an agent of the divine despite himself. But Sumner does not depart from his grim, Homeric posture, in which the divine is reluctant to interfere in human depths. Both with Otto and the priest, Sumner is negotiating with beliefs other than his own, negotiations which his experience of reading Homer provides him with the suppositional base to improve himself by engage with others, even if he will never agree with them.

Just as Drax instructs Sumner in his own developing moral good by being so evil as to make Sumner realize that he himself is not so evil as he thought he was, the priest makes Sumner realize that he can be an agent of good without subscribing to a metaphysical belief system or by having a megalomaniacal sense of his own benevolence. When Sumner returns to England, he finds both that Baxter has set up the expedition to fail—and that Brownlee had colluded in this scheme of deliberate mismanagement. This both, once again, foregrounds the operations of capital in the activities of whaling and indicates that Drax's evil cannot be called cured within a system which is itself corrupt. Baxter, indeed, intends to use Drax as a tool to kill Sumner, and then have Drax be killed himself by an agent of his named Stevens. But Sumner outfoxes Baxter's plan by having Drax kill Stevens, and then by killing Drax himself in a particularly raw and grisly way. Sumner escapes Baxter's grasp; but he also disqualifies himself from living in British national space.

The last scene of the novel, indeed, is in the Zoolischer Garten in Berlin. Sumner has found refuge in continental Europe, a place of sanctuary and repose where he can come to terms with himself. It is an incomplete sanctuary, though. The very idea of a zoo involves animals in captivity, which even if it is less brutal than the mass slaughter of whaling, still is anthropocentric and fetishizing. Moreover, Berlin is the capital of the German Empire, which was unified in 1871 as part of the same wave of modernity that saw the transition from whale oil to fossil fuel; and the twenty-first century reader knows what evil "will" come in the twentieth century from Germany.

But it is important that Sumner ends the novel outside British national space. As an Irishman, he is ipso facto marginal within Victorian Britain. But the novel also gives hints of a class and regional division. Drax and Cavendish, two of the novel's chief villains, have aristocratic names, Drax being associated with the Irish Plunkett family and Cavendish with the English Dukes of Devonshire. The climactic scene of the novel is in Hull, and we remember that the greatest English mariners, such as Captain James Cook and Sir Martin Frobisher, came from Yorkshire. To get to the far North of the Arctic, one has to go to the near North, the North of England. This is seen at the beginning of the novel. "They are only waiting for the tide now, and for the stream tug to pull them out into the Humber" (McGuire 2016:

23). This is a more mundane and nearer north than the “unicorn and sea leopard, the walrus and the albatross” (McGuire 2016: 23) of the North Water, but still the North. McGuire, himself working in Manchester, who has announced his next novel will be set there in much the same time period as *The North Water*, is clearly thinking locally as he plots globally.

The space of the global northern has always been transnational, from the works of Høeg and Barrett in the 1990s onward. While respecting Manhire’s differentiation between the Arctic as the sphere of sovereignty and the Antarctic as perhaps a post-sovereign space, the recent global literature of both poles has stressed their independence from national space, both as an instance of the thrill and sublimity of the un-governable, or not-yet-governable global, and as a metaphor for how the threats of global warming and climactic devastation, that could conceivably come from changes at the poles, will affect all humankind. McGuire, though, seems to be proposing a different sort of transnational space for the Northern: one less concerned with sweep and awe, qualities often lazily ascribed to Homer, than to those qualities actually in the *Iliad*: an empathy for human suffering and a scrupulous regard for the individual life of individual bodies, bodies which cannot be contained by national allegiance. McGuire thus negotiates both his character’s literary experience and our own to educate us into a space at once smaller, in allowing for less self-congratulatory expanse and sweep, than that to which we have been used, and larger, in allowing for a true change of heart in a person who could never be idealistic enough to diagnose that change within himself.

### Conclusions

The *New York Times* book critic Michiko Kakutani sagely characterizes *The North Water* as an allusion-filled novel that yet manages to seem original. We have often assumed that the novel’s discursive capacity to allude to its predecessors and its moral capacity to help us care about other people are antithetical, and that if one novel manages to both, it is either an accident or an instance of two parallel but not conjoint mechanisms working as they should. A shortcut to this, of course, would be to have Sumner learn to be a better person by reading literature. But not only is the *Iliad* only an intermittent resource for moral improvement, but enacting a moral process in this way in a novel is injurious in several ways. Firstly, it would usurp the reader’s prerogative to make this moral step for themselves. Secondly, it would make the character, Sumner, too much like his creator, McGuire. Thirdly, reading may not, actually, make us better. It might just enlarge our experience enough for us to be able to negotiate life more richly, with moral improvement a possible, but not necessary, after effect. This is why it is not

just literary experience in itself, but the negotiability of literary experience, that is salient in McGuire's text.

The postmodern embrace of intertextuality has led to a more erudite and culturally situated literature, but one ever further from urgency. It is the achievement of Ian McGuire in *The North Water* to negotiate literary experience in relation to the non-literary, and thus make the reading—of both his characters and his readers—something truly elemental.

## References

- Barnes J (1984) *Flaubert's Parrot*. London: Picador.
- Barrett A (1996) *The Voyage of the Narwhal*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Blum H (2017) The Ecomedia of Polar Exploration. Lecture at Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, November 13, 2017.
- Eliot T (1918) *The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock> [Accessed 22 November 2017].
- Hutcheon L (1989) Historiographic metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History. In O'Donnell P and Con Davis R (eds) *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 3-32.
- Kakutani M (2016) In *The North Water*, Journey to the Arctic Turns Cut-throat. *The New York Times*, March 31, 2016, p. C19.
- Lurie A (2017) Thomas Hardy: The Romantic Episode. *The New York Review of Books*, April 7, 2017.
- Manhire B (2014) *The Wide White Page: Writers Imagine Antarctica*. Wellington: Victoria University Press.
- McGuire P (2016) *The North Water*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.
- McLulich T (1977) The Alien Role: Farley Mowat's Northern Pastorals. *Studies in Canadian Literature* 2(2): 226-33.
- Poe E (1838) *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. New York, NY: Dover.
- Weil S (1965) The Iliad or The Poem of Force [translated by Mary McCarthy]. *Chicago Review* 18(2): 1-35.