DOI: 10.2478/aa-2021-0008

Neo-Victorian felony – Crime narratives in Graeme Macrae Burnet's *His Bloody Project* and Ian McGuire's *The North Water*

Petr Chalupský

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

Abstract:

The neo-Victorian novel has been one of the most significant branches of contemporary British historical fiction for the past three decades. Thanks to works like A. S. Byatt's Possession, Sarah Waters' trilogy Tipping the Velvet, Affinity and Fingersmith and Michel Faber's The Crimson Petal and the White, the genre has gained not only considerable popularity among readers, but also almost a canonical literary status. Although recent neo-Victorian fiction has been trying to find some new ways in which the genre could avoid stereotypical narratives, it still retains its most determining idiosyncrasies. One of them is an interest in the undersides of Victorian society, including the themes of violence and criminality, which is why these novels often resort to the genre of crime and detective fiction. This is also the case of Graeme Macrae Burnet's His Bloody Project (2015) and Ian McGuire's The North Water (2016), both historical novels set in Victorian Britain which were, respectively, shortlisted and longlisted for the 2016 Man Booker Prize. This paper attempts to show the different manners in which these two novels employ various forms of crime narratives so as to achieve their goal of presenting convincing and seemingly authentic insights into the more obscure aspects of the Victorian era.

The 2016 Man Booker Prize longlist included two interesting historical novels set in the Victorian era in Britain, namely Graeme Macrae Burnet's *His Bloody Project* (2015) and Ian McGuire's *The North Water* (2016). Although both were only the authors' second books, they received largely positive appraisal from critics and reviewers – *His Bloody Project* was even selected for the shortlist of this prestigious literary award, surpassing works by far more renowned authors such as J. M. Coetzee and A. L. Kennedy and reaching the highest sales of all the nominees, and *The North Water* appeared in *The New York Times* list of the 10 best books of 2016. Moreover, due to its popularity with readers, *The North Water* was made into a TV

series broadcast by the BBC in 2019.

However, regarding their subject matter and composition they represent two distinct types of historical narrative. *His Bloody Project* takes place in 1869 and tells the story of Roderick Macrae, a 17-year-old boy and member of a small and poverty-stricken crofting community in a remote Scottish Highland hamlet named Culduie, who slaughters three people in one of the neighbouring households and is subsequently incarcerated in the gaol at Inverness Castle and then tried and executed. The book presents itself as a dossier of documents related to this case, central to which is the culprit's memoir written in his prison cell shortly before the trial begins. This allegedly historical textual file is set into a contemporary framework story in the form of a short annotated Preface in which the author, who signs himself with the initials GMB, explains how he came across these documents at the Highland Archive Centre in Inverness while searching for information about his grandfather, Donald "Tramp" Macrae, who was born in a place just a few miles distant from Culduie. This authorial "Burnet" persona¹ describes how randomly discovered newspaper clippings gradually led him to the other materials and puts forth arguments why he is absolutely convinced of the authenticity of these documents, and the manuscript of Roderick's memoir in particular.² In this regard, the novel's composition resembles that of James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), though Burnet claims that if he were influenced by Hogg's text it was only subconsciously and in terms of certain themes that "the Scottish psyche" is typically drawn to, such as "the father-son relationship, doppelgangers and the misuse of power" (Scott, 2016).

Inspired by Colm Tóibín's novel *The Master* (2004) about the final years of Henry James, McGuire's original intention was to write a biographical novel about Herman Melville (Historia, 2017). Yet after about a year he got stuck with this, decided not to waste his extensive research into 19th-century whaling and so wrote a novel about a dubious whaling ship's voyage from the East Yorkshire town of Hull to the Arctic, set in the late 1850s and written in the third person. Knowing that the whaling industry has been in decline, Baxter, the artful owner of the ship called the *Volunteer*, plots a dangerous insurance fraud in which the captain of the ship, Brownlee, is to intentionally wreck the vessel beyond the Arctic Circle. The main protagonist of the novel is a young Irishman, Patrick Sumner, whose ambition to become a medical doctor was ruined during the Indian Mutiny of 1857, when he served as an army surgeon. In an act of greed he abandoned his post without permission and returned late and wounded. Dismissed from the army, unable to find a job as a doctor and having developed an addiction to opium, the embittered and resigned Sumner accepts the ill-paid post of surgeon on this whaling ship. He is unaware of the true purpose of its voyage, hoping no one will ask questions about his past and

that he will be able to alleviate his troubled conscience. However, matters get complicated when the crew is joined by the harpooner Henry Drax, a dangerous, heavy-drinking psychopath without any trace of essential humanity, a person who only indulges his needs and desires and is ready to mercilessly destroy anything and anybody that stands in his way. As the story proceeds, the action revolves around the conflict between the frustrated yet decent Sumner and the devilish Drax, and in the end between Sumner and Baxter.

Although different in their composition, narration and subject matter, both the novels work with the theme and motif of violence and crime. This paper discusses the phenomenon of the strong interest in violence, crime and other forms of monstrosity within the broader context of neo-Victorian fiction, showing how it complies with the genre's underlying principles. It also attempts to demonstrate how Burnet and McGuire employ various elements of crime fiction, including those of detection and investigation, in order to invigorate, or even spice up, their historical narratives.

Neo-Victorian crime fiction

Although its roots go back to the 1960s with the pioneering texts of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), neo-Victorian fiction has established itself as an integral part of historical fiction written in English over the past 30 years. Naturally, the genre has undergone its own development, namely from what Christian Gutleben terms "retro-Victorian" fiction, which, rather than desiring to present the past as it actually was is inspired by a strong nostalgia for the good old golden days of the country's glory, a perspective whose primary aim is to provide an escapist, illusory alternative to a troubling present which is "deemed inadequate, wanting, deficient" (2001, p. 195), to the more recent approach which attempts to undermine the commonly held conventional and stereotypical ideas and assumptions about the Victorians and reveal some as yet unknown, secret, unorthodox or otherwise unusual facts about this era and its ethos and sensibility. At the same time, these texts are aware that our modern era, to a large extent, emerged out of the Victorian experience, which is why the Victorians still have meaning for us today, and so they seek to disclose "both the continuities and discontinuities between the Victorian past and the present" (Hadley, 2010, p.14), stressing the "importance of historical recollection itself, of remembering the past in its multiplicity of possible meanings" (Mitchell, 2010, p. 62). It is precisely this multiplicity of possible perspectives that makes neo-Victorian fiction a fruitful field in terms of providing challenging and insightful historical narratives.

Neo-Victorian fiction is neither fiction that is merely set in 19th-century Britain, nor a

nostalgic literary monument to a conserved, distant past, but one that is “self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians” (Heilmann & Llewellyn, 2010, p. 4). The relationship between such fiction and the past reality it renders thus must be dual, dynamic and dialogical (Arias & Pulham, 2009, p. xx) bringing the Victorians back to life both “in history”, that is through their position within a specific historical context and narrative, and “out of history”, that is somehow removed from their historical context for the sake of contemporary readers and their imagination (Hadley, 2010, p. 8). In other words, it portrays these ancestors’ simultaneous strangeness and familiarity, distance and proximity. Interestingly, in spite of the proliferation of such novels over the past two decades, the reading public’s hunger for stories about the Victorian period and its people does not seem to have been satiated yet. One of the crucial causes of this unrelenting popularity is the fact that neo-Victorian fiction seeks to advance an alternative perspective of the past, a “non-normative view of assumed notions regarding the Victorian frame of mind” which proves that “the Victorian age was much more ‘deviant’ than it is actually depicted, perceived and supposed to be” (Tomaiuolo, 2018, p. 5). Their principal strategy rests in “self-conscious rewriting of historical narratives to highlight the suppressed histories of gender and sexuality, race and empire” (Kaplan, 2007, p. 3), one that is propelled by curiosity and a taste for the unknown and unexpected rather than by nostalgia.

Rather than bringing up new themes and issues, neo-Victorian fiction strives to explore those already treated before, often even by 19th-century writers, from new points of view which open precisely those possibilities which the Victorians could not have “entirely addressed for reasons related to moral decorum and opportunity” (Tomaiuolo, 2018, p. 6). Such an alternative view inevitably involves various forms of deviation from the normative, conventional and canonical perception of Victorian culture and society, often thriving “on the sensational aspects of suffering”, spectacle and trauma (Kohlke & Gutleben, 2010, p. 8), inevitably including those of crime, criminality and criminals. However, this concern with monstrosity is not solely motivated by a desire for sensation or deviance at all costs, but has a significant ethical dimension in that it represents a specific kind of otherness, which not only undermines the concept of a knowable human being, but also tests the boundaries of our capacity for unconditional and selfless relating to another person. As Gutleben and Wolfreys observe, “the monstrous represents not only an epistemological and ontological challenge to the humanity of the human but also an ethical reminder of the potential otherness of the human. In its fascination with monsters, neo-Victorian fiction once again follows the postmodernist trend and raises the ethical question of the limits of the human” (2010, p. 67). Moreover, as Gregoriou (2007, p. 91)

suggests, examining “abnormality can assist in the understanding of normal behaviour and the processes that govern it”. Along with sensation, thrills and excitement this fiction thus also provides a considerable potential for readers’ self-reflection.

The varied and active Victorian underworld offers “a very specific example of [...] social and cultural contradictions”, a particularly rich and inspiring material for adaptation, which “may in part explain the ongoing fascination with appropriating the modes of nineteenth-century fiction more generally in contemporary writing” (Sanders, 2006, p. 128). In its rendering of the deviant and monstrous, neo-Victorian fiction naturally relies on various forms of crime narratives, which allows it to look into the darker layers of Victorian society, including those of detection and investigation.³ Interestingly, the boom in neo-Victorian fiction to a large extent corresponds with the revival of crime and detective fiction which has, over the past few decades, enjoyed “a critical esteem in the ‘respectable’ marketplace”, asking to be treated as serious reading rather than as the popular “escape from literature” it was once expected to be (Priestman, 2006, p. 173). It is true that historical fiction in general easily incorporates the narrative of detection as it employs similar methods and processes, namely those of searching for clues and unknown facts and the subsequent reconstruction of past events and actions through (re)interpretation of the gathered evidence. Yet Heilmann and Llewellyn suggest that it works well especially with the Victorian context “partly because it was during that period that the detective stories really emerged” (2010, p. 16), which, among other things, reflected the recent rapid progress in developing effective investigation methods based on forensic science and trial by evidence (Marcus, 2006, p. 246).

On the one hand, this newly emerging fiction established the figure of the criminal, often the murderer, the Victorian evil other who with his/her unnatural and pathological acts threatens the society by causing disorder and panic. Such a guilty character functions as a site of horror and disgust onto which cultural anxieties and apprehensions can be projected (Plain, 2008, p. 14, Romero Ruiz, 2017, p. 43). On the other hand, it also offered a means of remedy and stabilization in the figure of the detective, confronting and eventually defeating the violation of societal and moral norms. This is one of the reasons why in the 1880s and 90s, in order to become a distinct literary genre, detective fiction strove to set itself apart from its earlier popular melodramatic versions, “denying its sensational heritage” and, instead, “grounding its literary status on its association with scientific method and highbrow literature” (Ascari, 2007, p. 1). This duality of contradictory impulses – the simultaneous desire for order, rational lucidity, firm hierarchies, as well as fascination with the destabilizing obscure and wicked other⁴ – are adopted by neo-Victorian fiction through the incorporation of crime narratives. Consequently,

in many such novels the boundaries between good and evil, particularly between the victim and the perpetrator, are blurred by attributing certain wrongdoing – acts of violence, injustice and/or disdain – to the representatives of the administrative, legal and investigative forces and institutions.

Although detectives formed only a small part of the police force during the Victorian era, their work and lives soon became a welcome subject matter for the press and literature. Therefore, “it is difficult to differentiate between their authentic life and what was written about them at the time, as their public image became an integral part of their history” (Shpayer-Makov, 2011, p. 2). The Detective Department, which was established in London in 1842, owned its fictionalization especially to Charles Dickens who was impressed by some of the Scotland Yarders and therefore modelled his Inspector Bucket from *Bleak House* (1852–53) on one of them.⁵ Another real-life inspector admired by Dickens, Jonathan Whicher,⁶ served also as an inspiration for Wilkie Collins’s Sergeant Cuff from *The Moonstone* (1868). However, a number of infamous cases⁷ which were not, in the eyes of the public, resolved satisfactorily or, quickly enough, and their critical coverage in the popular press and literature, negatively affected the perception of detective forces. This gradually resulted in the emergence in contemporary crime and detective fiction of gentlemen investigators and various kinds of private detectives, both amateur and professional, the most famous being Sherlock Holmes, who eventually outnumbered, and also outwitted, regular police inspectors. Consequently, it “took a number of decades for police detectives to be represented in popular culture as competent, even if often flawed, characters” (Krawczyk-Żywko, 2017, p. 5).

A specific body of crime narratives were stories in which the criminal features as a kind of hero. These were organically following the long tradition of countless outlaws, bandits, highwaymen and vigilantes whose adventures nourished the public imagination of and fascination with the criminal transgression of societal norms and conventions. Official Victorian literary criminals, however, scarcely reached the celebrity status of their renowned predecessors as accounts of their errant acts, trials and executions were meant to serve as a moral lesson to the audience so they would eschew such paths. Yet the situation was different in popular criminal fiction which was dominated by melodramatic narratives about real as well as fictitious villains, especially in the form of the Newgate novels, street ballads, penny press accounts and their stage adaptations. These stories tended to present their protagonists as victims of social conditions and other unfavourable circumstances, by which they “romanticised and glamorised crime and low life, and invited sympathy with criminals rather than with the victims of crime by making their criminal subjects the hunted object of chase” and “by focusing on their

motivation or psychology” (Pykett, 2006, p. 20). These criminals thus often “gained the admiration of readers as daring and adventurous, even if depraved and threatening” (Shpayer-Makov, 2011, p. 228), while the police and the justice system were portrayed as prevalingly heartless, repressive and corrupt. Similarly, contemporary crime fiction focusing on the murderer and his or her psychology distinguishes between crimes operating within a chain of some socio-economic causality, and those which resist an unequivocal causal explanation. It is the latter, falling into the category of “monstrosity” or “pure evil”, that readers find more interesting (Gregoriou, 2007, p. 60), as it offers an insight into the “sick mind”, the disturbed psyche, of the perpetrator.

The immense popularity of detective and crime stories during the late Victorian era⁸ has also been reflected in neo-Victorian fiction, and neo-Victorian cultural production in general, which often revolves around various criminal activities and the processes of their investigation or exposure. Some neo-Victorian novels, for instance Peter Ackroyd’s *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994)⁹ or Lee Jackson’s Inspector Web novels,¹⁰ thus portray criminal investigators using contemporary “modern” methods in order to solve their cases, which is also found in *His Bloody Project*. Others, for instance Julian Barnes’s *Arthur & George* (2005), feature amateur investigators¹¹ of crimes, which is also the case in *The North Water*.

His Bloody Project

Essentially, Burnet’s novel is a crime story. More precisely, it is a “whydunit” type of a crime story as we, from the very beginning, not only know what happened and when, but also who committed the offence. Moreover, the culprit does not try to cover his tracks in the least and artlessly confesses to the murders immediately. The only remaining question thus seems to be the reason why the 17-year-old boy brutally murdered three people, including a child and a girl he reportedly loved. After the already mentioned Preface, the book opens with another five-page section which consists of short statements given to a police officer by five inhabitants of the village on the second and third days after the horrible event. These are the man who was first at the crime scene, his wife, the local clergyman, the schoolmaster and a cousin of one of the victims. Though different in tone and sentiment, they all agree on the fact that Roderick was an odd, though intelligent, solitary person who avoided company, including that of his peers, and whose behaviour was considered eccentric or even foolish by some of the other Culduie residents. The reader then meets Roderick himself, sitting in his prison cell, waiting for the trial to begin, and writing his memoir at the request of his advocate Andrew Sinclair. In this memoir, however, the reader is confronted with a narrator who appears to be very much unlike the person

described in the opening residents' statements.

In his memoir, Roderick not only describes in detail the three homicidal acts, but also at length what in his view had led to such a hideous resolution. The text itself is noteworthy for its style given the fact that its author is a poorly educated highland peasant with a very limited life experience: it is written in a cultivated and eloquent style, his thoughts are clearly formulated, coherent and well-arranged. Another significant aspect of this narration is the straightforward and matter-of-fact manner in which its author recounts all the various events and incidents that preceded the fateful day. He talks about his unhappy childhood, marked by the loss of his beloved mother, the stern and distant upbringing he then received from his dour and obdurate father, the difficult living conditions of the destitute household which are made even more harsh by the malicious measures issued regarding their farming by Lachlan "Broad" Mackenzie, a bully serving as a local parish constable, who abuses his position to exact revenge on Roderick's father for a bygone dispute between their families. Roderick's narration is not only articulate, well-structured and endowed with a sense of detail, but it is also expressed in a rational-sounding, almost emotionless tone, which evokes a feeling of detached impartiality and, consequently, a degree of sympathy from the reader. And so, when he describes without any critical comment or hint of a grudge the relentlessly harassing measures "Broad" Mackenzie imposes on the docile Macraes, which make their very existence literally unbearable, the narration builds up an uncompromising logic that disposing of the despot "to deliver his father from the tribulations which he had lately suffered" (Burnet, 2015, p. 170) is called-for and inevitable.

The memoir, which is the longest of the documents in the "dossier", is followed by two substantially shorter yet, in terms of their meaning, significant texts – the medical reports on the state of the victims' corpses and the diary entries of the psychiatrist and criminal anthropologist James Bruce Thomson entitled "Travels in the Border-Land of Lunacy", describing his visit to Culduie where he interviewed a number of residents concerning the homicides and their perpetrator's personality and behaviour. The post-mortem reports describe the horrific state of the victims with a clinical brevity, facticity and precision which reveals Roderick's merciless and callous brutality. Thus, within the scope of a mere four pages, they make the reader realize the true nature of the offences committed and reassess their sympathetic or lenient attitude to the teenage murderer. This is further supported by some new facts Thomson learns about Roderick from his interviews with people who knew the boy well and had no reason to speak falsely against him, and which in his memoir Roderick mentions only marginally or omits completely. The most alarming one, stated by the Murchinsons, the

Macraes' kind and well-liked neighbours, is that Roderick suffered from some symptoms of mildly insane behaviour, such as muttering to himself, but that they also repeatedly caught him at night at the back window of their house where he was watching their sleeping daughters and masturbating. In the light of both these texts, Roderick's emotionless and detailed account of his murders no longer suggest an attempt at factual objectivity but much rather a deranged, psychopathic personality, and, in addition, a highly unreliable narrator.

This suspicion is eventually confirmed in the records of the trial, the final document of the file, which consist of expert opinions on the case and transcripts of a few more witnesses' testimonies, allegedly "compiled from contemporary newspaper coverage" (Burnet, 2015, p. 189). The most crucial testimony is given by a jovial young man named Archibald Ross who claims that he and Roderick were drinking companions. Moreover, he asserts that not only did Roderick have strong feelings for Flora Mackenzie, which was the actual reason why he did not go to study in Glasgow, but also that Flora did not return his affections, which Roderick did not bear easily. The latter fact then serves James Bruce Thomson as the main reason why he refuses to declare Roderick insane, which is what his advocate is trying to achieve in order to spare him the gallows. Thomson's arguments eventually convince the jury of the fact that protecting his father from Lachlan Broad's bullying was definitely not Roderick's only motive, that it was not even his principal one, and that his memoir, due to its inconsistencies and omissions, was meant to conceal what his true motive was rather than reveal what actually led to his act. And indeed, in hindsight, Roderick's account of the fateful visit to the Mackenzie homestead shows that Thomson's conclusions are substantiated: when Roderick is informed by Flora that Lachlan Broad is not at home, he does not go away but deliberately frightens her by telling her that he has come to kill her father, and when she in panic tries to run away he slaughters her cold-bloodedly. Consequently, framed by the opening statements on one side and especially by the medical reports, Thomson's diary and the trial transcripts on the other, Roderick's memoir, despite its stylistic and linguistic accomplishment, loses much of its persuasiveness and credibility.

The North Water

McGuire's novel, on the other hand, is not technically a crime fiction but rather a story which, among other things, features crimes. Although it opens with the brutal act of Henry Drax raping and murdering a young boy, this crime is neither investigated nor even mentioned again in the story, and serves rather as a lead-in for the characterization of this monstrous antagonist. Therefore, as the story of the inauspicious whaling expedition unfolds, the reader, unlike the

shipmates, has the benefit of this prior knowledge and can better anticipate Drax's further moves. Yet even though Drax's offences and victims pile up, he takes advantage of the ship's isolation in the desolate northern waters where he is free from any police intervention, and the prospect of a trial when the voyage is over is too remote and vague for him to worry about. Similarly, the intended insurance fraud with the ship's feigned shipwreck is revealed early in the story, and the plotline subsequently focuses on how the conspiracy is thwarted due to Drax's ability to control any situation by force, no matter how adverse for him it might have initially appeared. And so, as the original plan fails due to a number of circumstances and all the conspirators die, the fraud is not really investigated by the police and Baxter receives his money as if the *Volunteer* had suffered a regular shipwreck.

This does not mean that *The North Water* is devoid of any act of detection and investigation, only these are not carried out by professionals. The role of amateur investigator out of necessity is assumed by Patrick Sumner who is gradually woken from his apathy by the gruesome deeds committed aboard the vessel. Sumner remains content in his indifferent lethargy, spending as much time as possible alone in his cabin in the company of his diary and laudanum, but only until it becomes obvious that there is a cold-blooded rapist and murderer among the crew. After the corpse of the strangled cabin boy is found, on the basis of Drax's false testimony, the carpenter, McKendrick, is accused of the crime by the captain, though he repeatedly professes his innocence. Sumner strongly doubts the carpenter's guilt as his instinct tells him that McKendrick is not a person capable of a homicide and that Drax is not a person to trust. Uneasy and concerned that an innocent person is sitting handcuffed in the lower deck while the killer is moving freely on the ship, Sumner decides to "solve" the case and find evidence which would both clear McKendrick and prove the real culprit guilty.

In his investigation, Sumner makes use of his medical knowledge and professional curiosity. While interviewing McKendrick he finds out that the carpenter has a damaged hand, as a result of which he is not able to clench the fingers on it. This fact serves Sumner as the sought-for evidence as he had made several sketches of the cabin boy's corpse before it was buried at sea, including one of his finger-bruised neck, thanks to which he knows that the murderer had to use both his hands to strangle his victim, which is something McKendrick is not physically capable of. Based on this finding, the captain agrees to set McKendrick free, though very reluctantly as he was happy to have the case closed and, as a homosexual, the carpenter is a suspicious and dubious individual for him. Having cleared McKendrick, Sumner directs his suspicion towards Drax who had been so eager to persuade the captain of the carpenter's guilt. This time, however, a coincidence helps him when he accidentally finds a

piece of the cabin boy's tooth in an inflamed scratch on Drax's arm. Remembering that when he was inspecting the corpse he saw the boy had a broken tooth, Sumner knows that now he has irrefutable evidence against Drax (McGuire, 2016, p. 164), who then ends up handcuffed in the lower deck, though the act of overpowering and arresting the fierce harpooner cost the captain his life.

However, under worsening conditions when they find themselves shipwrecked high above the freezing Arctic Circle, sheltered in tents and with very limited supplies of food and kindling wood, the crew lose interest in bringing Drax to justice as their very existence has been reduced to a struggle for survival. This adventurous part of the story depicts the different ways in which Drax and Sumner manage to save their lives in such a hopeless situation. The narration thus returns to crime much later when Sumner gets back to Hull and, having revealed Baxter's fraudulent intention with the *Volunteer*, he confronts the advocate face to face with the aim of getting some financial compensation for the voyage's failure. Yet he soon understands that Baxter is not a person to trust and that his promise to give Sumner money in an outlying cabin in the docks at night is a mere pretext for getting rid of an uncomfortable witness. Knowing that Baxter is too rich and influential to be reported to the police by an insignificant and discredited whaling-ship surgeon in such a morally "unhinged, freefloating" world (McGuire, 2016, p. 318), Sumner decides to take justice into his own hands and outwit and rob the cunning and insidious advocate, which also requires the disposal of Drax whom Baxter has sent to kill the inquisitive surgeon. This difficult decision demonstrates that his lengthy transformation from being a person of resigned moral indifference to being one with a strong sense of responsibility, not only for himself but also for others, has been completed. The narrative of the last three chapters thus turns into that of a crime thriller as Sumner shifts from being an investigator to being an agent of retribution and eventually an outlaw who, under dramatic circumstances, is forced to transgress the law and flee the country in order to save his life and secure an unimpeded future existence.

Conclusion

Although *His Bloody Project* and *The North Water* may not at first sight appear to be prototypical representatives of neo-Victorian fiction, the first situated in a remote Scottish Highland village and the latter in the northern waters around the Arctic Circle, they in fact possess most of the defining features of the recent development of the genre. In the first place, they both provide a non-normative view of the frame of mind of people living during the Victorian era by focusing on selected deviant members of society while they also address,

though often rather implicitly, the issues of social hierarchy, sexuality, race and empire. At the same time, they do not bring up completely new themes and concerns as both maritime and crime stories were written by Victorian writers, but they address them from different perspectives than was customary and acceptable in the 19th century. And last but not least, they revolve around different forms of monstrosity and phenomena related to it, including crime and criminality, by which they also raise ethical questions such as those of the limits of human capacity for tolerance and forgiveness, or the nature of truth and how it can be biased and skewed in order to serve someone's personal objectives.

For their rendering of the above issues, both the novels employ various forms of crime narratives so as to make their stories more authentic, plausible and gripping. *His Bloody Project* is more consistent and complex in this regard as it is primarily a specific example of crime fiction. Although its form as a set of allegedly genuine documents related to a certain incident is not new and in fact can be traced almost two centuries back to James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, Burnet's novel is innovative in that it presents itself as a criminal dossier of an actual case found in the archives. The absence of an authorial text or commentary makes the reader rely on the individual documents, which represent different kinds of crime narratives, providing an account of the events in question from the perspectives of various people and in various forms and styles. These perspectives are those of insiders – the culprit and Culduie residents, and those of outsiders – the policemen, the doctor, the advocate and the criminal anthropologist. The forms and styles of these texts include witness testimonies, the residents' statements, a memoir, medical reports, an expert's diary, the trial records and the advocate's letter pleading his client's innocence. Each of these narratives offers a different point of view of the case and especially of the character of Roderick Macrae and the motive behind his dreadful deed. Therefore, the actual order in which the texts are "filed", and therefore read, plays an important role in how the reader attains a reliable account of what happened: Roderick's memoir is not only the longest document but also one of those that open the dossier, which may evoke some degree of sympathy for him in readers during the first half of the book. This, however, is then challenged by the shorter and also much less thought-out and smooth-tongued perspectives of witnesses, neighbours and experts, which gradually disprove the seemingly clear causal logic of Roderick's version and cast a less biased light on the true nature of his crime.

In *The North Water*, elements of crime narratives are employed occasionally within the framework adventure story of a failed whaling expedition. As the story introduces crimes that are happening right on the ship – rape, murder and fraud – a counter reaction in the form of

Sumner's investigation and the employment of the narrative of detection becomes a logical move as, in the volatile and morally fluid milieu of the ship, too distant from the instruments of law and justice of the mainland, he comes to understand that he desperately needs to act in order to save himself and the rest of the crew from destruction. Similarly, in the end, after Sumner discloses Baxter's fraudulent conspiracy behind the shipwreck and decides to take justice into his own hands, the narration briefly turns into that of a crime thriller. These instances of crime narratives spice up and invigorate the story which might otherwise have run the risk of falling into the category of a conventional seafaring yarn whose central concerns are a person's struggle with the elements and, alongside that, with the darker sides of their soul. Moreover, they allow McGuire to undertake a complex and profound elaboration of ethical questions from a perspective other than those of 19th-century authors. *His Bloody Project* and *The North Water* thus demonstrate that the use of crime narratives in neo-Victorian fiction is not merely a consequence of the genre's preoccupation with criminality and monstrosity, but that they also help make the stories set in the past more attractive and relatable to contemporary readers.

Endnotes

¹ Burnet was even originally thinking of making Roderick Macrae one of his relatives but later rejected this idea as too daring (Robinson, 2016).

² This strategy proved convincing since, after the novel's publication, some readers, reviewers and even booksellers mistook it for a true story (Major, 2017), in spite of the fact that the inscription "A NOVEL" is to be found under the title in the inside cover of the book.

³ This neo-Victorian fascination with criminal and detective genres has also successfully found its way onto the screen, especially in the form of popular TV series such as *Sherlock* (2010-), *Elementary* (2012-), *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher* (2010-14) and *Ripper Street* (2012-16).

⁴ By doing so, as Romero Ruiz suggests, Victorian and neo-Victorian detective fiction are closely related to the genre of the Gothic, and it is the Gothic other that tends to occupy a central role in neo-Victorian crime narratives (2017, p. 46).

⁵ The character of this literary detective was most probably based on Dickens's friend Charles Frederick Field (1805-74), who served as a chief of the Detective Branch and, after his retirement in 1852, became a private detective.

⁶ During his career, Jonathan Whicher (1814-81) had the reputation of being an excellent Detective Inspector.

⁷ The most famous of these are the Road Hill House murder of 1860 and the Whitechapel murders of 1888.

⁸ Most of them originally appeared serialized in popular magazines. Haia Shpayer-Makov notes that, for instance, in 1893, the *Westminster Review* estimated that some 240 out of the total 800 British weeklies featuring serialized stories published detective fiction (2011, p. 238).

⁹ *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* in fact follows the late Victorian tendency to present police detectives as rather sympathetic but incompetent since Chief Inspector John Kildare, put in charge of the Limehouse murders investigation, is not only unable to move forward with the case, he even dismisses one of Dan Leno's insightful suggestions which could have served as a useful clue in identifying the culprit.

¹⁰ Namely *A Metropolitan Murder* (2004), *The Welfare of the Dead* (2005) and *The Last Pleasure Garden* (2007).

¹¹ The genre which Suzanne Keen terms the “romance of the archive” can be taken as a specific variation of this kind of investigation, in which present-day academics or other literary enthusiasts assume the role of researchers trying to disclose some secret or lost information about the past. Their endeavour often resembles that of police detectives and in the end is rewarded by a successful solving of the case – “characters are transformed, wrongs righted, disasters averted, villains exposed, crimes solved” (Keen, 2001, p. 4). The most famous example of neo-Victorian romance of the archive is arguably A. S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990).

Works Cited

- Arias, R. and P. Pulham. 2009. “Introduction.” In: Arias, R. and P. Pulham (eds.). *Haunting and Spectrality in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Possessing the Past*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. xi-xxvi.
- Ascari, M. 2007. *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Burnet, G. M. 2015. *His Bloody Project*. Glasgow: Contraband.
- Gregoriou, C. 2007. *Deviance in Contemporary Crime Fiction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gutleben, C. 2001. *Nostalgic Postmodernism: The Victorian Tradition and the Contemporary British Novel*. Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi.
- Gutleben, C. and J. Wolfreys, 2010. “Postmodernism Revisited: The Ethical Drive of Postmodern Trauma in Neo-Victorian Fiction.” In: Kohlke, M-L. and C. Gutleben (eds.). *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, pp. 37-72.
- Hadley, L. 2010. *Neo-Victorian Fiction and Historical Narrative: The Victorians and Us*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heilmann, A. and M. Llewellyn, 2010. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Historia Editor, 2017. “Historia Interviews: Ian McGuire.” March 11, 2017. [cit. 15-4-2019]. Available at: <http://www.historiamag.com/historia-interviews-ian-mcguire>
- Kaplan, C. 2007. *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Keen, S. 2001. *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction: Representation, Nation, Empire*. Toronto: Toronto University Press.
- Kohlke, M-L. and C. Gutleben, 2010. “Introduction: Bearing After-Witness to the Nineteenth Century.” In: Kohlke, M-L. and C. Gutleben (eds.). *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma: The Politics of Bearing After-Witness to Nineteenth-Century Suffering*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, pp. 1-34.
- Krawczyk-Żywko, L. 2017. “Beyond Sherlock Holmes: An Introduction.” In: Krawczyk-Żywko, L. (ed.). *Victorian Detectives in Contemporary Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-11.
- Major, N. 2017. “Interview with Graeme Macrae Burnet.” *The Herald*, January 1, 2017. [cit. 15-4-2019]. Available at: http://www.heraldscotland.com/arts_ents/books_and_poetry/14996563.Angst_and_the_Man_Booker_Graeme_Macrae_Burnet_on_post_shortlisting_anxiety/
- Marcus, L. 2006. “Detection and Literary Fiction.” In: Priestman, M. (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 245-267.
- McGuire, I. 2016. *The North Water*. London: Scribner.
- Mitchell, K. 2010. *History and Cultural Memory in Neo-Victorian Fiction: Victorian Afterimages*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Plain, G. 2008. “From ‘The Purest Literature We Have’ to ‘A Spirit Grown Corrupt’: Embracing

- Contamination in Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction." *Critical Survey*, 20(1), 2008, pp. 3-16.
- Priestman, M. 2006. "Post-war British crime fiction." In: Priestman, M. (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 173-190.
- Pykett, L., 2006. "The Newgate novel and sensation fiction, 1830-1868." In: Priestman, M. (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 19-39.
- Robinson, D. 2016. "Interview with Graeme Macrae Burnet." *The Scotsman*, August 23, 2016. [cit. 20-5-2019]. Available at: <http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/culture/edinburgh-festivals/interview-graeme-macrae-burnet-on-his-bloody-project-and-man-booker-prize-nomination-1-4209947>
- Romero Ruiz, M. I. 2017. "Detective Fiction and Neo-Victorian Sexploitation: Violence, Morality and Rescue Work in Lee Jackson's *The Last Pleasure Garden* (2007) and *Ripper Street*'s 'I Need Light'." *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 9(2), 2017, pp. 41-69.
- Sanders, J. 2006. *Adaptation and Appropriation*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Scott, G. 2016. "Murder in the Highlands: Graeme Macrae Burnet on what inspired His Bloody Project". *The Herald*, September 17, 2016. [cit. 7-7-2019]. Available at: http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/14749071.Murder_in_the_Highlands__Graeme_Macrae_Burnet_on_what_inspired_His_Bloody_Project/
- Shpayer-Makov, H. 2011. *The Ascent of the Detective: Police Sleuths in Victorian and Edwardian England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tomauiuolo, S. 2018. *Deviance in Neo-Victorian Culture: Canon, Transgression, Innovation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Petr Chalupský
Department of English Language and Literature,
Faculty of Education
Charles University
Celetná 13
116 39 Praha 1, Czech Republic
petr.chalupsky@pedf.cuni.cz