DARKNESS AND DISORDER INSIDE HIM: IAN MCGUIRE'S *THE ABSTAINER* AS NEO-VICTORIAN CRIME FICTION

OSCURIDAD Y DESORDEN EN SU INTERIOR: *THE ABSTAINER* DE IAN MCGUIRE COMO FICCIÓN CRIMINAL NEO-VICTORIANA

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Abstract

Like its 2016 breakthrough predecessor, *The North Water*, *The Abstainer* (2016), Ian McGuire's latest novel, is set in Victorian England. It features a serial killer, a flawed detective protagonist in pursuit of the villain and a final thriller-like encounter between them. However, the genre of its narration differs —revolving around a police detective chasing a criminal— and so do the psychological profiles of the pursuer and the pursued, the motivation behind their acts and the mood of the story's resolution. Moreover, the employment of central adversaries who are, to some extent, similar to each other challenges a clear-cut borderline between good and evil, right and wrong. This article thus argues that, by subverting the generic schemes of the Victorian detective novel, raising ethical questions concerning the gulf between Self and Other, and addressing concerns relevant to present-day readers' sensibility, *The Abstainer* represents a noteworthy contribution to the body of contemporary Neo-Victorian crime fiction.

Keywords: Ian McGuire, *The Abstainer*, detective fiction, neo-Victorian fiction, ethics.

Resumen

Como su obra precedente más famosa, *The North Water* (2016), *The Abstainer* (2020), la novela más reciente hasta la fecha de Ian McGuire, se ambienta en la Inglaterra victoriana. La obra presenta a un asesino en serie, a un detective protagonista —marcado por sus propias imperfecciones— que persigue al villano,

y al encuentro final entre ambos con tintes de thriller. No obstante, el género de la narración difiere —al centrarse en la persecución de un criminal por parte de un detective— y también lo hacen los perfiles psicológicos de las figuras del perseguidor y del culpable, la motivación que impulsa sus actos y el tono de la resolución de la historia. Además, la inclusión de dos adversarios centrales que, en cierta medida, comparten rasgos similares cuestiona la existencia de una frontera nítida entre el bien y el mal, lo correcto y lo incorrecto. Este artículo sostiene que, al subvertir los esquemas genéricos de la novela detectivesca victoriana, esta novela plantea interrogantes éticos determinantes en torno al abismo existente entre el yo y el otro, y aborda cuestiones relevantes para la sensibilidad de los lectores contemporáneos. De esta manera, se puede concluir que *The Abstainer* constituye una aportación destacada al corpus de la ficción criminal neo-victoriana actual.

Palabras clave: Ian McGuire, *The Abstainer*, novela policíaca, ficción neo-victoriana, ética.

1. Introduction: Victorian Detectives, Detective Fiction and The Abstainer's Historical Authenticity

Although Ian McGuire (b. 1964) started his writing career in 2006 with a satirical campus novel, *Incredible Bodies,* it was his second novel, *The North Water*, released ten years later and longlisted for the 2016 Man Booker Prize, which won him recognition, not only among critics and readers, but also in academic circles.[1] In fact, he appears to have found 'his' medium in the genre of historical fiction, since his subsequent novel, *The Abstainer* (2020), is also set in the second half of the 19th century and, against the backdrop of real historical events, tells a fictitious story exploring various undersides of English life during the Victorian era.[2]

Besides the historical setting, *The Abstainer* shares other aspects with *The North Water*: it focuses on the underside of Victorian social life; it revolves around a series of murders that determine the course of the novel's action; its main setting is a place McGuire is well familiar with — Manchester, where he has lived most of his adult life;[3] the protagonist, although standing on the side of good, displays a flawed personality, haunted by his past misdeeds and prone to further wrongdoing; the central conflict between good and evil brings up ethical questions surrounding the protagonist's decisions and acts; and the thriller-like nature of this conflict involves a journey to a remote environment, namely to Pennsylvania, in the United States. However, *The Abstainer* is a different book from its predecessor as, in the first place, it is crime fiction, its protagonist being a police inspector who is investigating a case involving the Manchester

Irish Republican Brotherhood's clandestine activities. Also, the novel's main antagonist embodies a different kind of evil than the monstrous Henry Drax in *The North Water*, and it offers a less consoling resolution. The aim of this study is to demonstrate that, through its parallels between the man of law and the criminal, its ambiguously drawn borderline between good and evil and, consequently, between success and failure, and a distinct ethical dimension resulting from extreme forms of relation between the Self and the Other, *The Abstainer* addresses related present-day concerns, thus representing an enriching contribution to the body of neo-Victorian crime fiction.

The emergence of crime fiction as a distinct genre in England during the 1880s and 90s was a logical consequence of the development of the detective profession. Detective departments were established in England as independent branches of standard police forces during the Victorian era. With their growth in size, the rise of forensic science and the advancement of investigation methods and procedures, by the end of the Edwardian period police detectives came to be recognised as professionals whose reputation was comparable with that of their most renowned continental colleagues (Shpayer-Makov 2011: 4-8). The genre produced the comforting image of a rational crime-fighter always ready to confront trespassers of societal limits, and to restore order out of insecurity and disarray. At the same time, it created the figure of the villain —the criminal— as an embodiment of a threat to social order. Although the Victorians were already familiar with the figure of the "fallible hero" (Poore 2017: 3), it was used rather scarcely in the detective fiction published at that time.

The development of regional detective departments, with their members lacking in equipment and schooling, was much slower than in London. Therefore, provincial officers unable to solve a case turned to the Yarders for help, though often unwillingly and belatedly. A significant catalyst for Scotland Yard's becoming an epitome of the country's competence in fighting crime was the formation of the Special Branch, originally called the Irish Branch or Irish Brigade, in March 1883 — a special unit dealing with politically motivated criminal activity. The main impetus behind this step was the escalation of the Irish national movement's radical activities in London and larger provincial cities in the early 1880s, when "Irish extremists embarked on an intensive and indiscriminate campaign of terror on the British mainland, mainly concocted in the USA" (Shpayer-Makov 2011: 53).[4] However, the formation of the Special Branch was not enthusiastically welcomed by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) officials who were "unhappy with the expense involved, especially the cost of paying informers" and considered the deployment of clandestine methods as an unnecessary abandoning of the national tradition in favour of the "Continental system" (Shpayer-Makov 2011: 55).

The Abstainer is set against the backdrop of a real historical event, since it opens with the 1867 public hanging of the so-called Manchester Martyrs, who attacked a police van in order to free two leaders of the Irish Republican Brotherhood transported inside. The three men arrested were found guilty of a policeman's murder and sentenced to death. The outrage triggered by these Fenians' execution generates much of the plotline in the novel. The complicated case of the Brotherhood's retaliation for the three martyrs' lives offers the protagonist — the police detective James O'Connor— an opportunity to distinguish himself and atone for his past professional failure. The novel is pure fiction, but it demonstrates its author's intense struggle for a realistic and authentic historical depiction of Victorian England.

This way, the novel echoes the aforementioned tendencies: it is set in a period between the formation of detective branches outside London in the second half of the 1840s and the violent outburst of the Irish nationalist campaign in the first half of the 1880s; it faithfully depicts the environment of a provincial detective department; and it anticipates the need for a specialised unit to fight against organised crime. The novel's Manchester CID is a small squad whose methods are still closer to those of standard uniformed policemen than of trained undercover specialists. With his progressive approach, the Head Constable James O'Connor is a rare exception who understands the importance of a network of reliable informers for uncovering clandestine plotting by politically motivated criminal groups. His superiors and colleagues, however, scorn the informers, taking them as "parasites" (McGuire 2020: 8) who can hardly be trusted, only very reluctantly grant O'Connor funds to compensate informants for their services, and do not pursue leads from these informants seriously enough. The department is thus shown as ill-prepared to cope with organised crime, particularly when the local radicals start to cooperate with their American associates. Therefore, when O'Connor fails professionally and the main culprit manages to flee, Inspector Thompson from Scotland Yard is called up to take charge of the detective division. Also, the depicted operations of the Irish nationalists, spread throughout the United Kingdom and the United States, foreshadow their more menacing acts in the later years of the century.

2. Non-Normative and Ethical Neo-Victorian Subjects

For over three decades, neo-Victorian fiction's diversity and popularity have continued to prove that "the Victorians continue to have (multifarious, contradictory, contested) meaning(s) in our culture" (Mitchell 2010: 62). This genre strives to provide an alternative and non-normative view of the Victorian era, its ethos, values, aesthetic and its people's frame of mind, being

thus intentionally engaged "with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4), and contesting the stereotypical images of the period. That is why certain aspects of popular culture, such as detective and sensation fiction, have been playing "an increasingly prominent role in neo-Victorian critical debate" (Cox 2019: 7). Recent neo-Victorian fiction has attempted to reinsert historical characters into a realistic context which, however, anticipates and/or echoes the current world by examining "both the continuities and discontinuities between the Victorian past and the present" (Hadley 2010: 14). This is a dual, dialogical relationship that aspires more than merely to bring the Victorians back to life: rather, its intended outcome is to offer "productive and nuanced ways of unlocking occluded secrets, silences and mysteries" (Arias and Pulham 2009: xx) and, by doing so, to shed more light on the undercurrents of our social life.

By rediscovering overlooked histories that reveal that various forms of deviant behaviour did exist in the Victorian age, these texts present the Victorians as "our sometimes uncomfortable (and unforeseen) mirror image" (Tomaiuolo 2018: 3). The genre naturally embraces images of violence and villainy, and law-breaking is one of the subject matters neo-Victorianism likes to address. Heilmann and Llewellyn argue that there is a close association between historical fiction and detective work resting "in the similarities in the gathering of evidence and the search for the new (and hopefully correct) interpretation of that material" (2010: 16). This association is particularly strong in the neo-Victorian case, as this fiction often entails a process of revelation of what has been withheld and concealed, and it was in the 19th century that the genre of the detective story emerged. Moreover, the "displacement of murder and mystery" to a historical setting allows these criminal cases to "generate a different kind of fascination" and thus provoke less disquieting emotions in the reader (Cox 2019: 99). Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz also views the narrative of detection as a highly appropriate vehicle for neo-Victorian fiction, as they both combine "the quest for order, reason, and understanding, on the one hand, and the fascination with enigma, fantasy, and horror, on the other" (2017: 45), no matter how illusory such imposition of order and meaning ultimately is.

By rewriting the lesser-known and taboo aspects of the era, neo-Victorian fiction aims higher than to sensationally disclose the scandalous misdemeanours of the 'virtuous' Victorians. It strives to provide its readers with an opportunity to reflect upon themselves by showing that not only important developments, but also many of our collective traumas and anxieties were shaped during the second half of the 19th century. Another reason that undermines the misconception of neo-Victorian literature as sensation-seeking modern penny dreadfuls is its ethical focus that

allows it to "acquire the capacity 'to speak-for-the-other'" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010a: 20). Historical narration in general may function as an effective medium for an examination of contemporary ethical concerns by means of historical parallel and analogy, "taking people in the past as 'ethical subjects' — entitled to the same consideration for their actions and perspectives as we would hope to receive for our own" (Andress 1998: 240). Historical fiction thus speaks of and for the other through which the contemporary self, in accordance with Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of alterity, "is enlarged and enriched by the other and transcends its own egoistic limits" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010a: 20). For Levinas, the ethical relation is "concrete and personal. It is first and foremost an encounter with a face" (Gibson 2001: 63). Encountering and responding to (the face of) the other is to acknowledge the priority of this infinite and unmasterable otherness through an act of selfless giving. This generosity is carried out primarily through language, talking to the other without bias and preconception, which means refusing "to reduce the other to terms, to greet him or her in his or her difference" (Gibson 2001: 64). With its non-normative other, neo-Victorian fiction goes even further: it not only invites the readers to reassess their own identity and existence in the light of moral doubts and resolutions of the fictitious Victorians-like-ourselves, but also makes them aware of the extreme forms of otherness and raises "the ethical question of the limits of the human" (Gutleben and Wolfreys 2010: 67), particularly as regards how to adequately respond to otherness and doing so in a way that defies the prevailing conception of humane behaviour.

3. Evil, Villainy and Neo-Victorian Crime Fiction

What makes one disposed to evil is their propensity to submit to what Simone Weil terms "moral gravity" (in Dilman 2005: 131), which leads them to prioritise their own needs over a stance of moral responsibility towards the other. As this propensity varies from one person to another, evil is far from a uniform category. We can distinguish between 'pure' and 'instrumental' evil: pure evil means "malice for its own sake" (McGinn 2003: 63), being motivated by and deriving pleasure from causing pain and suffering. Instrumental evil refers to using malice "as a means to achieving some other goal" (63), that is, one's own benefit rather than the other's pain is the primary motive. While the latter follows a certain causal logic, the former tends to defy understanding and rational conceptualisation other than that of a manifestation of one's personal dispositions (Arenas 2011: 18). These evils meet the criteria of villainy. However, there is one special form of evil that exceeds this classification —monstrosity— which involves pathological inability to resist one's physiological needs and desires. The difference between a villain and

a monster is that the villain is "self-aware" and knowingly breaks the rules (Poore 2017: 20, 22), whereas monsters "react rather than rationally act" (Porter 2010: 544), unable to contemplate the consequences of their acts for others.

Neo-Victorian crime fiction has embraced all the above forms of evil and villainy, thus catering to our simultaneous revulsion against and fascination with criminals and their depravities. It may be taken as a response to metaphysical detective fiction, also known as anti-detective fiction, which, though first conceptualised in the early 1940s, gradually developed into a "distinctly postmodernist genre" (Arnautou 2019: 292). Metaphysical detective fiction "parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions" (Merivale and Sweeney 1999: 2), particularly the belief that reason and the analytical method can always untangle all mysteries, reveal the truth and solve the case, thus replacing the chaos caused by an unexplained crime with order. Metaphysical detective fiction reverses these expectations by violating the essential cause-and-effect principle of crime narratives and questioning the very possibility of finding out what happened. The borderline between the two constitutive storylines —that of the crime and that of the investigation— becomes blurred as there is "a flow between commission and investigation of the crime, if indeed a crime has been committed at all" (Kravitz 2013: 46). Instead of the conventional reassuring effect, the reader is provided with a sense of uncertainty, meaninglessness and absence of resolution and satisfactory closure. The genre is thus "not a continuation of but rather a 'transgression' against detective fiction" (Tani in Kravitz 2013: 47), whose purpose is, in accordance with the postmodernist preoccupation with metanarrative concerns, to reactivate the readers' "flabby habits of perception" (Holquist 1983: 173) at the cost of an insight into the detective's and the perpetrator's psychology.

By contrast, contemporary detective stories set in the Victorian era appear to saturate the readers' nostalgic longing to revisit a comforting past, such as that offered by the early and Golden Age detective stories, where the crime is solved, the evil eliminated, and the victims avenged (Krawczyk-Żywko 2017: 5-6). However, this claim should not be pushed too far, as neo-Victorian crime fiction tends to challenge the archetypes of traditional crime narratives whose criminal actions are driven by motives such as greed, revenge, jealousy and rage. Christiana Gregoriou distinguishes three modern criminal archetypes contemporary crime fiction readers are likely to expect: the "Born Evil" or the "Monster", innately evil and deviant since birth; the "Made Evil" or the "Vampire", whose actions are conditioned and/or justified mostly by means of their possibly traumatic childhood experiences; and the "Born and Made Evil" or the "Spoilt Child", whose actions are presented as both conditioned and innate, and who fail to take responsibility for their acts, acting abnormally because they find it thrilling and because they enjoy

violating societal norms (2007: 111-117). Moreover, contemporary crime writers often make the villain human-like through psychological insight and personal history, by which they are "in fact demystifying their criminal behaviour; they are justifying it, or putting readers in the position of sympathising with the criminal" (Gregoriou 2007: 90). Such a character loses some of the evil aura as their acts call for understanding explanation, and these stories thus violate what Benjamin Poore terms the "villain effect" (2017: 34). Consequently, the boundaries between the criminal and the investigator, and sometimes the victim as well, become indistinct as they all are shown to be prone to violent and ethically questionable responses under certain circumstances.

4. The Fallible Man of Law and the Undemonised Outlaw in The Abstainer

In *The Abstainer*, James O'Connor is essentially a decent and honest person who is haunted by his past failure and its consequences. His heavy drinking, a consequence of his tragic loss of a child and wife within the period of two years, costs him his position as a respected police detective in Dublin, although his superior gives him a last chance by arranging a secondment transfer to Manchester for him. Joining the Manchester police force is his final attempt to restart his professional career and restore his personal life, "to escape the darkness and disorder of the past" (McGuire 2020: 200). In O'Connor, McGuire creates an erring protagonist, a police inspector who is chasing a culprit as much as he is chasing away the shadows of his gloomy past, whose predicaments and path to moral awakening are shaped by highly convoluted circumstances.

As Christine Lehnen points out, O'Connor is a liminal protagonist who, being an Irishman working for the police of the British Empire, "straddles the identities of both coloniser and colonised" (2024: 2-3). His position in the Manchester detective squad is far from easy and pleasing. In spite of his reputation as an expert on the Irish question, he is often exposed to a mixture of disrespect and disdain from his colleagues and superiors because of his Irish origin. He has grown to endure this, as there is "nothing much to be gained by speaking out […] but plenty to be lost" (McGuire 2020: 9), but he cannot help but wonder at their ignorant self-importance. They pay little heed to what he tells them about the Irish nationalists' mentality, feeling they know 'their' Fenians better than some outlander from Dublin, assuming that all Irishmen are alike, those wearing a police badge included. He fails in his attempt to explain to them that displays of uncompromising force against the Irish Brotherhood do more harm than good since they only create martyrs out of murderers, realising that, blinded

by their conceitedness and prejudice, his fellow officers might never learn their lesson. The massive funeral parade held a week after the public execution only confirms O'Connor's beliefs, and he correctly interprets it as a "reminder that the hangings haven't cowed them" (McGuire 2020: 32), a portent of retaliatory counterstrike to come. This and other mentions of excessive and publicly visible violent measures used against nationalist fundamentalists can be read as a more general commentary on the harmfulness of such policies in the long run, no matter how attractive and effective they may appear to the uninformed populace. By disregarding the complex causalities behind terrorist acts, individuals behind these measures only intensify the tension between those who feel themselves oppressed and their alleged oppressors, which often results in their members' further radicalisation.

Although O'Connor struggles to appear oblivious and calm in his job, knowing how precarious his position within the department is, the actual state of his psyche is far from even-tempered. On the one hand, he is exiled from his home to an unfamiliar, unfriendly environment, while on the other, he knows that it gives him an opportunity to start afresh and free himself from his demons. Yet he keeps pondering "how long this balancing act can last and how it will end" (McGuire 2020: 35). First, his anger at how he is treated by his colleagues intensifies to the degree that he no longer feels in charge of his work. Second, the burdensome past is always at his heels, provoking in him feelings of insecurity and traumatic recollections. And so, when three of his informers and a fellow detective are killed and his superior blackmails O'Connor into using his own nephew to infiltrate the leading circles of the Fenian group, suggesting wilfully that the casualties are his fault anyway, O'Connor can bear it no more and resorts to drink. The alcohol releases in him the frustrations from "being pushed aside, passed over as if [he is] nothing" (McGuire 2020: 214), and he decides to disobey the order and follow his own lead in the case. However, his good intentions are gradually drowned in drink and self-pity, and his fatal neglect of duty prevents him from monitoring the prime suspects and, in consequence, from saving his nephew's life.

At first sight, O'Connor seems to be a figure from modern detective stories and crime thrillers: he is a loner, somewhat eccentric in the eyes of his colleagues, at odds with his superiors' conviction and demands, who eventually defies the authorities and takes the case into his own hands. On closer look, however, O'Connor does not fit into this 'lone wolf' category because he is not comfortable with the role assigned to him by the whims of fate. He is solitary because he finds himself in a hostile world. He does not enjoy being taken as an oddity; his opinions and methods are not unorthodox, but rather stem from his expertise,

experience and intuition; and his seniors' disapproval is indicative of their own narrow-mindedness rather than of his eccentricity. And he only resolves to ignore the investigation procedure because he is drunk and frustrated, which he comes to regret once he sobers and becomes aware of the impact of his decision. He is a type of neo-Victorian detective who is, in the first place, a relatable human being with strengths and weaknesses —one who keeps on struggling with life in spite of his unfortunate personal history and ill fortune— whose one-time mistake, though inexcusable, is to some extent understandable.

The central antagonist, Stephen Doyle —an Irish American veteran of the Civil War and a member of the secret American Fenian group— arrives from New York to seek revenge by assassinating the mayor of Manchester. There is something "dark and narcissistic" (Theroux 2020) in his mentality of a hired killer for whom the end always justifies the means. He joined the army because it offered him a livelihood and regularity at the time when his life was becoming wayward, and he grew to like being a soldier. Owing to his psychopathic disposition he feels no fear in situations others would regard as frightening: danger and violence thrill him, "the reason he still fights, the truest, deepest reason — [is] not for the cause or the glory, but for those moments out of time […] when the world beats its savage drum, and he —unthinking and heedless— steps to its measure" (McGuire 2020: 66), and what he feels when the fight is over is "not relief so much as grief and sadness" (172). For him, human life is of little value as it can be easily terminated, and far from unique as there is always "someone else coming after" (188). Doyle's inability to feel empathy, his utmost pragmatism and absence of belief in anything that transcends one's physical existence make him a particularly dangerous adversary.

Doyle is vengeful and neither forgets nor forgives anything he considers to be an injustice to himself, as can be seen when, after more than ten years, he visits the farm of Fergus McBride, his uncle who took care of him as a thirteen-year-old orphan. Two years into his time on the farm, McBride catches him masturbating over Anna, his housekeeper, while she sleeps, and gives him a severe beating, after which the humiliated Doyle runs away from the farm. Although Doyle deludes himself that as a mature man "he is no longer angry or ashamed" (McGuire 2020: 301), the opposite proves to be the case, especially when he learns that Anna and McBride are married with a son, and finds out that the sight of Anna's body still stirs in him "the turbid confluence of half a dozen nameless urges" (333). And so, when McBride reveals to him that he knows about the arrest warrant the British government has issued on him, Doyle mercilessly kills him with an axe. The rhetorical questions running in his mind right before this homicide —"How long have I waited? […] How often have I lived this moment out in dreams or masquerades and now it is arrived at last?" (340)— demonstrate how deeply

possessed he has been by the thought of taking revenge on his uncle for what he saw as an unforgivable wrong.

No matter how wicked his deeds are, the character of Stephen Doyle is not a monster but rather embodies the "Born and Made Evil" archetype whose criminal tendencies are both personally conditioned and innate. Most of his acts are examples of instrumental evil — he plans his actions, and they always serve some purpose, though mostly dubious or unlawful. This purpose, however, is the sole objective and driving force of his endeavour, one that must be accomplished at any cost, and he chooses his actions according to their effectiveness with regard to this aim. In the long run, such a strategy is unacceptable for the more patriotic members of the Brotherhood, such as his fellow New York Fenians who, out of honour and decency, argue that earning their victory by mere slaughter would taint and betray the struggle, which Doyle dismisses as sentimental and cowardly. Regardless of his proclaimed dedication to the Irish cause, his violent utilitarianism and worldview devoid of ethics will always make him a mercenary who is unable to understand the broader context of events he is a part of. In this sense, Doyle can be taken as the epitome of a radical, fanatical freedom fighter whose political and religious proclamations are mere pretext, which is to disguise his true, personal violent urges, and whose distinctive psychological drives need to be well taken into consideration by those engaged in systematic prevention of such individuals' acts.

Yet the novel problematises Doyle's position within the story by placing his agenda against the oppressive intra-European colonial system, represented by the haughty and self-opinionated English police officials. McGuire also makes his villain appear more human by briefly outlining Doyle's personal history. The reader learns how from age thirteen Doyle had to leave Ireland for America to live with his uncle, who had agreed to take in his orphaned nephew, and how the awkward nighttime incident, followed by the thrashing, brought about his departure from the farm. This was followed by years of aimlessness as a wage labourer marked by poverty, drinking, brawling and solicitation of prostitution before he met the recruiting sergeant from the Union Army, up to how he found out warfare gives meaning to his existence. His experience from youth taught him that "you must murder the softness in yourself […] because if you don't then you will pay the price later on" (McGuire 2020: 241-242). Although none of this justifies his later atrocities, the reader is at least invited to take his family tragedy and turbulent adolescence into consideration, all the more because the narration recurrently juxtaposes his fate with O'Connor's. These parallels between the detective and the criminal disrupt the conventional detective fiction's dichotomy between right and wrong and thus allow the reader to better perceive and engage with the ethical considerations of their acts.

Although O'Connor and Doyle stand on opposite sides of the law and their roles within the plot are antagonistic, there are in fact quite a few similarities between the two Irishmen. In the first place, they are both outsiders sent to Manchester as experts who are supposed to enhance the local units' functioning, and they are received with distrust and irritation. Moreover, as steadfast professionals in their respective fields, they come into conflict with their new associates: O'Connor's system of Irish informers and reliance on his familiarity with Irish mentality are met with incredulity from his colleagues, who regard their 'English' methods as more effective; Doyle is met with opposition when he wants to check out members of the Manchester Brotherhood's leading circles, claiming from experience that traitors do happen here and there, only to be reminded that "[i]n America they might, but not around here" (McGuire 2020: 22). Several times their opinions, based on their judgement or intuition, match, such as with the hangings — O'Connor sees them as unfortunate from the side of the British since they will only provoke anger and radicalise moderate members of the Brotherhood, which is what Doyle welcomes as a service the British did to the Brotherhood, or when they both disagree when O'Connor's nephew, Michael Sullivan, is described as smart and suitable for secret operations.

Most importantly, the two men have remarkably similar family histories: like Doyle, O'Connor was in fact orphaned at age thirteen with his mother dead and his father imprisoned for manslaughter, left in care of his destitute aunt in Dublin. In spite of poverty, he came to like the city where, like Doyle, he tried a series of occupations without much success until he joined the Dublin police, where he discovered the job he liked. Yet, at this point, their life trajectories began to diverge: while O'Connor chose to devote himself to preventing violence and protecting decent people's peaceful lives, Doyle grew into a cynical and hard-hearted combatant and a hired slaughterer who, in the name of a higher cause, finds gratification in exterminating enemies. McGuire further makes the difference between their personalities perceptible by transcribing some of their thoughts in italics, particularly those running through their minds in the painful and decisive moments of their lives, which allows the reader access to a more complex psychology of the central adversaries. O'Connor's much more numerous italicised lines reveal how deeply frustrated he is at the way the Manchester detective department treat him professionally as well as personally, and how intensely he is haunted by his past mishaps and misfortunes. Doyle's highlighted thoughts, by contrast, only underscore his pathological heartlessness and vengefulness without any hint of remorse. And so, while the main sequence of O'Connor's italicised thoughts shows the reader through the conundrum of his moral queries and pangs of conscience that precede his return to drink and disobedience of the order, Doyle's attest to the consuming satisfaction he feels when given a chance to dispose of someone who stands in his way.

Upon Doyle's arrival in Manchester, he and O'Connor soon form a peculiar unit moving "separated but together" (McGuire 2020: 27) along the bustling streets, one day the detective searching for the suspect, the other day the assassin shadowing the inspector. In this thrilling game, when they are one-upping each other with clever ruses and thwarting the opponent's moves, they develop a certain kind of mutual respect, based, in part subconsciously, on their resemblances. For Doyle, this feeling of respect is uncanny, as it overwhelms him precisely in the moment when he can easily kill O'Connor. Afterwards, he does not understand what stopped him, "[s]omething in the man's eyes, […] or in his face perhaps, some shade or sadness that gave him pause. Hard to believe. Strange to think of it" (242), but he assesses it as his misjudgement and swears to himself not to succumb to it if another such opportunity presents itself. This occurs in Pennsylvania, where Doyle murders O'Connor in an insidious way, proving that he has learnt his deviant lesson from that momentary weakness. Having carefully analysed the available findings, O'Connor tries to disprove his colleagues' conviction that Doyle is a mindless fiend with skewed vision by claiming that he is rather a human, "not so very different from you and me" (216), which is why his behaviour evinces a detectable logic whose disclosure might forestall his offence. With his systematic approach drawing on the informers' hints in order to compose the culprit's psychological profile and detect his motivation and potential causality behind his acts, the character of O'Connor anticipates methods and procedures used by modern investigative and intelligence services in dealing with organised crime and terrorism, which are often preferable to one-off repressive measures despite their non-public and long-term character, making them unsuitable as attractive political gestures.

5. Ethics and/or Justice in The Abstainer

Despite his propensity for drink when struck by misfortune, O'Connor is a conscientious and self-reflective person who always weighs his decisions and acts against his professional ethics and conscience. However, his superiors superciliously show him that he is not granted the privilege of atoning for his past, making use of his disgrace as a Dublin policeman to belittle his achievements and cast doubt upon his character, as starkly summarised by Inspector Thompson: "Once a man has lost his way like you did, he can't go back again. It's impossible. Once the weakness has revealed itself, there's only one direction he can go" (McGuire 2020: 270-271). In reality, O'Connor feels personal responsibility for everything that goes wrong in his cases, even when he is not directly responsible for it. As the deaths pile up, he begins to be swallowed by futility, all the more that his English

colleagues readily throw the blame on him, which only intensifies his despair and confusion. At night, his dreams are haunted by the voices of the recent dead, resonating in the expanding void of his soul, as if "the torrent of memory [is …] sweeping aside all that is solid and real" (323).

As his frustration is growing, he is troubled by doubts about his moral integrity. He recalls how, when unsettled from his father's recent death, he, as a patrolman, was provoked by an aggressive drunkard into delivering an unnecessary blow with his truncheon, pondering what hidden urge must have driven him into such undue action. And when he finds himself helpless in protecting his naïve nephew from being sent into a dangerous operation as a spy, he starts worrying that the checkered past he hoped he could get away from in Manchester may in reality be a consequence of some evil disposition in his character: "he wonders now if the darkness and disorder are inside him, if what he was trying to escape from is who he really is. He tells himself this isn't true, it can't be, but even the possibility of it fills him with a dreadful gloom" (McGuire 2020: 200). This self-doubt is what gradually brings him to apathy and resignation when, instead of covering his nephew's back, he is engaging in drinking and having sex with a prostitute. When he sobers up, he falls into a deep moral crisis with tormenting pangs of conscience. And so, when he learns that Doyle has fled to the States and the police have been unable to find even a trace of him, he resolves to hunt him down and kill him on his own.

Under Inspector Thompson nothing much changes in the workings of the department: just like before, nobody really cares about the person who killed the informers and a policeman on duty. They are happy to have dispersed the controlling unit of the local Irish Brotherhood, with two of its members dead and others under arrest —something tangible to serve to the media— and have no intention of searching for the long-gone assassin. O'Connor's abrupt status changeover from a CID detective to a prisoner and suspected traitor points to the ever-insecure position of a vulnerability-prone outsider within the 'grander' schemes of power struggles and politicking. "Everything different, […] but everything the same. Time becomes memory, and memory becomes the ditch in which we drown" (McGuire 2020: 288), sighs O'Connor, as if he was the only one to remember what preceded this 'achievement', the only one to feel obligation to those who lost their lives in the process.

What defines O'Connor's ethical being is his responsive relationship to concrete other people. Although they are often not much to his liking —his English colleagues, the informers, his nephew— he always tries to approach them in a humane manner, talking to them respectfully, feeling moral responsibility for them if his work interferes in their fates. His life and contentment have always been

determined by other people, like his wife and his similarly minded fellow Dublin policemen, and so his Manchester exile is marked by this need to gravitate towards the other. He is not very successful in this regard, though not always through his own fault: while in Fazackerley he fails to recognise a faithful comrade, falling prey to the prejudice that all his English colleagues are the same, with Rose Flanagan he does all he can, but is thwarted by adverse circumstances. With a series of failures behind him, afraid of further commitments, he temporarily reneges on his principles. He eventually finds the strength to resist the illusorily liberating promise of unconcerned solipsism, but only when far away from England. The final part of the novel, though initially revolving around O'Connor's self-imposed mission to find and destroy the runaway assassin, then turns out to reinstate the narrative's underlying ethical dimension.

In Pennsylvania, still filled with remorse for his past transgressions, O'Connor's moral obligation towards the other once again makes him sacrifice himself for the other, this time by saving a teenage orphan from slavery and becoming his guardian, giving the unfortunate young stranger priority over his own needs and intentions. In accordance with Levinas's ethics, the proximity of the other facing death summons O'Connor and requires him to take responsibility by making him realise that his indifference would make him an accomplice of that death. Thus, bad conscience raised by an encounter with the vulnerable other tears him from the solid ground on which he perseveres in his position (Levinas 1999: 24-25, 28) and prompts him to take action: "He asks himself sometimes why he has chosen to add to his troubles in this way, but he already knows the answer: Michael Sullivan is dead, but this boy is still living. He failed once before, and now has been given another chance" (McGuire 2020: 341-342). Gradually, the responsibility he feels for the neglected and illiterate boy gives his existence a new meaning and vivifies it with a grain of hopefulness.

With his new role and in the boy's company, O'Connor rediscovers the principles that once used to be paramount in his life and reassumes his former Levinasian humanity as "the return to the interiority of non-intentional consciousness, to bad conscience, to the possibility of its fearing injustice more than death, of preferring injustice suffered to injustice committed, and what justifies being to what ensures it" (Levinas 1999: 29). Consequently, he abstains from violence, coming to understand that looking after the innocent boy is of a higher value than killing a murderer. When he decides to report Doyle's presence to the police rather than completing his originally intended vengeance, he feels, despite his initial worry that "he has betrayed his own cause again" (McGuire 2020: 351), relieved and happy like "in he-doesn't-know-how-many-years" (352), indicating that the "darkness and disorder" which occupied his mind for so long has eventually been overcome

and that he is eventually ready to turn away from the past towards the future. His resolution thus "suggests that memory is productive when it prompts us to care for the living" (Lehnen 2024: 12). His feeling of joy and ease is the best answer to his doubts, making him an indisputable moral winner despite the tragic ending awaiting him in the hours to come.

6. Conclusion: The Abstainer's Neo-Victorian Underpinnings

The Abstainer follows the trend McGuire established in *The North Water*: it is a story set in the Victorian era dealing with a series of violent crimes, revolving around a conflict between two individuals — a flawed yet innately moral protagonist and a wicked antagonist, and culminating in a suspenseful chase that takes place far away from the English Isles. However, while *The North Water* is essentially an adventure story that incorporates aspects of crime narration,[5] *The Abstainer* is crime fiction that focuses on the work of a police detective department uncovering a clandestine criminal operation of a radical Irish separatist organisation. Its protagonist is an experienced detective and its central villain an intelligent yet deviant criminal.

In spite of its pivotal subject matter, *The Abstainer* defies classification as either a conventional detective story or metaphysical detective fiction. It has a clear detective plotline, revealed crimes and a conclusive closure. At the same time, the novel presents a fallible detective who is likeable but with an inclination to drink under stress; pays substantial attention to his family history and personal life; probes his insecurities, doubts and moral queries; and makes him fail at the least convenient time. Opposed to him stands a violent villain, yet with a dismal personal history, professionalism and strategic thinking similar to those of the detective, a person who at one point even seems noble-minded enough not to kill his pursuer when he cannot defend himself properly. In effect, the narration questions an unequivocal borderline between good and evil, making its characters difficult to fully identify with. Moreover, by having the villain engaged in the case of the Irish independence struggle and portraying the English policemen as arrogant and xenophobic, it further undermines the binary categories of the offender and the victim, fairness and injustice, success and failure. However, it is through the story's ethical dilemmas complemented by insights into the two adversaries' psyches that O'Connor and Doyle, "motivated by different senses of justice" (Greenwald 2020), are clearly distinguished in terms of their true character and humaneness.

This aspect is underscored by the bleak closing part of the story. *The North Water*'s ending is far from optimistic, but the wrongdoings and evil characters are punished. *The Abstainer* offers no such consolation, as its prime ethical subject is

brutally killed by a person who has intentionally numbed all his moral impulses for the sake of his twisted notion of the survival of the fittest. From the perspective of detective fiction, the novel's closure is far from satisfactory — the case is solved only partially, the main culprit evades arrest by fleeing the country and even murders the only person truly determined to bring him to justice. However, the protagonist's tough struggle with the shadows of the past and the unsettling present is eventually crowned by his strength to (re)assume a distinct moral stance stemming from the Levinasian ethical principle of generosity to and priority of the other regardless of one's own difficulties and discomforts. The novel's framework of meaning thus lies outside its detective plotline, within the domain of ethics, by which it transcends its manifest generic and historical setting.

McGuire's employment of the above-mentioned devices and strategies sets *The Abstainer* free from the restraints of genre fiction, be it detective or historical. The novel tells a detective story set in Victorian England but filtered through the present-day sensibility. Its blurred dichotomy between right and wrong and potent ethical dimension, together with implied questions embracing the inherent intricacies of ever-current concerns regarding systematic violence and criminality such as the devastating socio-cultural and psychological impacts of political oppression, the perilous consequences of radical freedom fighting, the legitimacy and effectiveness of demonstrative repressive measures for suppression of international terrorism and organised crime, and the ambiguous position of a liminal individual within the often-opposing currents of larger geopolitical affairs, thus make it a noteworthy specimen of contemporary neo-Victorian crime fiction.

Notes

1. The novel was listed by *The New York Times* as one of the 10 Best Books of 2016, and it also won the Royal Society of Literature Encore Award and Historical Writers' Association Gold Crown Award in 2017.

2. In his review of *The Abstainer*, Roddy Doyle (2020) even labels McGuire as "Dickens in the present tense, Dickens for the 21st century".

3. In *The North Water* it is Hull, the seaport town where McGuire grew up.

4. Apart from London and Dublin, targets of this campaign included Manchester, Chester, Liverpool and Glasgow.

5. For a more in-depth exploration of elements of crime narrative in this novel, see Petr Chalupský's article "Neo-Victorian Felony — Crime Narratives in Graeme Macrae Burnet's *His Bloody Project* and Ian McGuire's *The North Water*" (2021).

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