Short-Storying Neo-Victorian Contagion: The 1847 Typhus Epidemic in Andrea Barrett's 'Ship Fever'

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Abstract:
Andrea Barrett's neo-Victorian short story 'Ship Fever' (1996) portrays the catastrophic conditions on the Canadian quarantine island Grosse Isle in the St Lawrence River off the coast of Quebec in 1847 when hundreds of starving, typhus-infected Irish people, displaced by British colonial occupation and the Great Famine, arrived there in what came to be known as the coffin ships. By contracting the vast historical and geographical landscape of this episode of epidemic contagion to the small Canadian quarantine island and portraying it as the heterotopic mirror of Famine Ireland, the short story form enables a narrowing of focus on typhus as a little-understood infectious disease at a point of intensifying crisis. My close reading of the story traces the intertextual 'web of affinities' activated by the constellation of heterotopic sites, which also uncovers a link with George Eliot's writing on contagion in *Middlemarch* (1871-1872).

Keywords: Andrea Barrett, contagion, dirt, heterotopia, the Irish diaspora, the Irish Famine, memory, neo-Victorian short stories, truth-telling, typhus epidemic.

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> Any text, I learn each time, is a tissue of the imagination, in which facts, if we choose to embed them, rest safely encysted. (Barrett 2004: 18)

A number of neo-Victorian novels draw on the Great Irish Famine and diaspora (1845-1851) as a history of precarity, trauma, and displacement from a postcolonial revisionary perspective which centres marginal figures and their voices, notably Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1998), Peter Behrens's *The Law of Dreams* (2007), Paul Lynch's *Grace* (2017), Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* (2011), and Nuala O'Faolain's *My Dream of You* (2001). However, while these texts refer to the coinciding prevalence of epidemic typhus – also called 'Irish Fever' for its association with the Famine and 'Ship Fever' for its association with the emigrant ships – disease is not given prominence as theme and metaphor in the development of plot and character

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as it is in Andrea Barrett's short story 'Ship Fever' (1996).[1] The final and titular story in her National Book Award-winning collection of short stories, 'Ship Fever' portrays the catastrophic conditions on the Canadian quarantine island Grosse Isle in the St Lawrence River off the coast of Quebec in 1847, which saw the arrival of what came to be known as the coffin ships, carrying hundreds of starving, typhus-infected Irish people, displaced by British colonial occupation and the Great Famine. The condensed form of the short story enables this narrowing of focus on typhus as a little-understood infectious disease at a point of intensifying crisis, when the capacity of the quarantine, treatment, and burial facilities on the island are overwhelmed by the perpetual arrival of ships carrying sick and dying people – an index of the escalating human disaster in Ireland.

1. Past-Present Simultaneity and Heterotopic Locations

'Ship Fever' thus contracts the vast historical and geographical landscape of this episode of epidemic contagion to the small Canadian quarantine island as a heterotopic mirror of Famine Ireland to which it is linked by the similarly heterotopic coffin ships, carriers of both the disease and its survivors who constitute the Irish diaspora and immigrant settlement in North America. In their editorial introduction to the recent *Humanities* special issue on *Neo-Victorian Heterotopias*, Marie-Luise Kohlke, Elizabeth Ho and Akira Suwa point out that the "primary heterotopias identified by Foucault, including prisons, asylums, brothels, ships, and colonies, tend to feature prominently" in neo-Victorian texts (Kohlke, Ho and Suwa 2022: 1). In 'Ship Fever', the quarantine island, Famine Ireland, and the coffin ships are interlinked heterotopic spaces that demonstrate the critics' argument that "[n]eo-Victorianism's investment in memory and identity politics, including explorations and contestations of systemic historical iniquities", is often negotiated in relation to "heterotopic space" (Kohlke, Ho and Suwa 2022: 3-4). For the writer of neo-Victorian short stories who must contend with the formal constraints imposed by the genre's brevity, such densely encoded historical locations are especially useful to convey essential information implicitly and thus economically. To appropriate the medical metaphor Barrett uses in my epigraph to describe how facts are "embed[ded]" in fiction, taken from her essay 'The Sea of Information', heterotopic sites are "encysted" in the story's "tissue" (Barrett 2004: 18) like rhizomatic nodules

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that activate the past-present simultaneity on which neo-Victorianism's critical and readerly project relies.

In 'Ship Fever', the heterotopic locations create recognisable spatial parameters for Barrett's critical portrayal of the politicisation of the typhus epidemic as a systemic war on the impoverished immigrants. This campaign was motivated by an institutionalised and discursively entrenched racial prejudice against the Irish people, which originated from British colonial policies in Ireland that caused the Famine and instigated mass emigration. In the current post-pandemic, "dis-astered" world – a term I take from Marie-Hélène Huet's *The Culture of Disaster* (Huet 2012: 9) – readers of 'Ship Fever' are prompted to read recursively and relationally by their personal experience of the pandemic within a global context, in which escalating crises of human displacement and extreme poverty inflicted by political and environmental factors reveal pervasive intolerance and xenophobia exacerbated by fears of contagion. Since the publication of the story precedes the COVID-19 pandemic, the analogical dynamic it activates is not inscribed within the text but latent as an "invit[ation]" to the reader to "locate the lingering past at work within present-day social spaces, institutions, and government policy", a feature of neo-Victorianism which, Kohlke, Ho and Suwa argue, "renders the neo-Victorian text itself a kind of heterotopia" because of the past-present simultaneity it produces (Kohlke, Ho and Suwa 2022: 3). The critics substantiate this argument with reference to Michel Foucault's notion of "heterochronies" or "heterochronism", in his 1986 discussion of heterotopias in 'Of Other Spaces', which he explicates in structuralist terms as "the effort to establish, between elements that could have been distributed over time, an ensemble of relations that makes them appear as juxtaposed, opposed, implicated by each other", thus creating the impression of "a sort of configuration" or "network" (Foucault qtd. in Kohlke, Ho and Suwa 2022: 2).

This understanding of the neo-Victorian text's capacity to generate a network of associations external to but 'implicated' in the historical context it portrays underpins my post-pandemic re-reading of 'Ship Fever' under the rubric of neo-Victorian contagion. While it might be argued that all historical fiction holds this past-present associative potential, neo-Victorian fiction is by definition "critical f(r)iction", per Mark Llewellyn's terminology, for "the knowing and historicised, critical and scholarly perspective contained within the fictional text" (Llewellyn 2008: 170). Neo-Victorianism's self-

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consciously ethical commitment to a form of critical 'truth-telling' about the Victorians, I suggest, mirrors the nineteenth-century realist novel's similar preoccupation with veracity, albeit distinguished from its literary precursors by a postmodernist suspicion of categorical truth claims and historical certainty. Correlatively, my close reading uncovers an affiliation between Barrett's 'Ship Fever' and George Eliot's writing on contagion in *Middlemarch* (1871-1872), which forms one thread in the dense intertextual "web of affinities" in Barrett's story – a metaphor I take from Darwin (Darwin 2017: 469) echoed in Eliot's historical novel. Of relevance here is Maggie Awadalla and Paul March-Russell's suggestion that the short story form can be viewed as "a mirror image to the realist novel" because it inverts the typical narrative hierarchies that privilege the perspective of the upper- or middle-class narrator and protagonists to instead give preference to the experiences and points of view of minor, often working-class or outsider characters (Awadalla and March-Russell 2013: 4). This authorising of marginal voices and histories, which short stories share with neo-Victorianism, is concentrated in Barrett's use of free indirect speech to convey the outsider perspectives and interiority of the story's two protagonists whose lives briefly converge on Grosse Isle during the typhus epidemic. By thus becoming a "vehicle for different *kinds* of knowledge, knowledge which may be in some way at odds with the 'story' of dominant culture", 'Ship Fever' adheres to Clare Hanson's definition of the short story genre (Hanson 1989: 6, original emphasis).

By the same token, Barrett's text also embodies the kind of radically corrective 'truth-telling' associated with neo-Victorian fiction. Neo-Victorianism, according to Dana Shiller's original definition,

> explores the ground between writing as though there are no persisting truths, a way of thinking that gives the author tremendous latitude in reconstructing the past, and writing as though there is indeed a recoverable past, however attenuated. (Shiller 1997: 541)

This latter notion of truth, Shiller notes, is also "redemptive" (Shiller 1997: 558). Shiller's argument adds valency for my reading of 'Ship Fever' because she finds a correlation between Eliot's treatment of history in *Middlemarch* and "[w]hat the neo-Victorian novels do with history", based on how "[t]he

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past" in Eliot novel "pervades the present and irrevocably shapes it, just as the present shapes the interpretation of the past" (Shiller 1997: 540, 544). Like Eliot, Barrett "maintains a fidelity to documented events" while her "true focus is on those unhistorical acts that shape the public record in subtle and usually unnoticed ways" (Shiller 1997: 542). This is achieved in the highly concentrated, partial form of the neo-Victorian novel's humble counterpart, the short story, which has received little critical attention to date despite key writers in the field, like A. S. Byatt, Emma Donoghue and Michel Faber, also being acclaimed short-story writers.[2]

2. Intertextual Webs, Trauma, and Truth-Telling

The short story, as Awadalla and March-Russell point out, is "an expressive medium for themes of fragmentation, displacement, diaspora and identity" (Awadalla and March-Russell 2013: 3), all of which are themes in 'Ship Fever' that converge with the central theme of contagion or 'fever'. Portrayed from the juxtaposed perspectives of the young, newly appointed Doctor Lauchlin Grant and the typhus-infected Irish woman Nora Kynd, whom he saves from one of the coffin ships, the narrative is filtered through and inflected by the specificities of personal history, nationality, class, and gender. The relationship between doctor and patient, healthy and sick, and its later reversal, as Nora recovers and nurses Lauchlin when he becomes ill, hint at the gendered conventions of the traditional romance plot, but the story diverges from closure in marriage and Nora's assimilation into middle-class Canadian society. Seen from Nora's perspective, the final part of the story opens into movement and possibility as she continues her interrupted journey. After Lauchlin's death, when the influx of immigrants abates at the end of 1847, Nora leaves the island and travels via Quebec City to Detroit in the hope of finding her younger brothers from whom she had been separated on their arrival at Grosse Isle.

This forced separation initiates the theme of familial dispersion and loss caused by diasporic displacement that recurs in this collection of stories and in Barrett's subsequent *Servants of the Map* (2002). Nora re-appears in the latter collection in 'The Cure', again the last and longest story with a similar thematic focus on contagious disease, in this case tuberculosis and its cure, as the title signals. This story follows Nora's journey from Grosse Isle to Detroit and later in 1868 on her travels with her young son to the Adirondack village to which she had traced her brother Ned. She settles there,

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nursing the consumptive patients who flock to the area for the curative purity of the air and the treatments for tuberculosis offered. The entangled family histories that unspool from 'Ship Fever' and 'The Cure' subtly thread together characters and plot lines in the two short-story collections with those in *The Voyage of the Narwhal* (1998), the neo-Victorian novel they bookend, and in Barrett's more recent *The Air We Breathe* (2008), set in a tuberculosis sanatorium in the Adirondacks in 1916 before America entered the First World War. Spanning from the eighteenth to the twentieth century and crossing a wide geographical range, these narratives are all in one way or another concerned with what Barrett has described as "those places where science intersects with personal history" (Barrett 2002b: n.p.).

In 'Ship Fever', Lauchlin embodies this nexus as a medical doctor whose life had been shaped by the loss of his mother to the earlier cholera epidemic for which his father blamed the Irish immigrants. An implicit intertextual genealogy can be traced between Lauchlin and Tertius Lydgate in Eliot's *Middlemarch* who, one might argue, is relocated from provincial England in the late 1830s, at a point where the cholera epidemic is imminent but distant, to settler colonial Canada in 1847 at the height of the typhus epidemic when contagion is widespread and escalating. Kohlke's term "adaptive re-use" for the neo-Victorian "re-visioning of specific source texts" (Kohlke 2017: 169) is an apt descriptor for this repurposing of the canonical Victorian character on which the short story's dialogic intertextual relationship with Eliot's realist novel hinges. The theme of contagion at the centre of the 'web of affinities' traced here as a point of departure activates a proliferation of intertextual historical material relating to the Famine and diaspora, the coffin ships and the quarantine island, and the aetiology and treatment of typhus. The short story distils this material into fiction which becomes, as per the epigraph, a "tissue of the imagination" in which "facts" drawn from this archive are "encysted" (Barrett 2004: 18). This entanglement of fact and fiction typical of neo-Victorianism begs the question Mary Burgan asks in 'Contagion and Culture: A View from Victorian Studies': "How do representations of contagion cope with the facticity of disease, when all is said and done?" (Burgan 2002: 843).

There are compelling similarities between what neo-Victorian fiction self-consciously sets out to do as a mode of 'truth-telling' about the Victorians and the characteristics of literary realism, notably what George Levine describes as the latter's self-conscious "literariness" that "tends to be driven

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by a strong moral impulse (as well as an aesthetic one)" (Levine 2007: 15). *Middlemarch* exemplifies the realist novel's commitment to historical, contextual and psychological verisimilitude, conveying, as W. J. Harvey notes, a "sense of individuals enmeshed in their society" (Harvey 1989: 7).

An equivalence can be discerned in what neo-Victorian texts do when they appropriate both the "detailism" of their Victorian precursors and the latter's experiments with narrative point of view to "register the external real" simultaneously with "the interiority that perceives and distorts or penetrates it" (Levine 2007: 18, 16). Considering trauma's central role in the neo-Victorian creative and critical oeuvre, this often fractured and fracturing entanglement of exterior and interior worlds and the struggle to realise it in fiction epitomise the problematic of neo-Victorian 'truth-telling' as ethical endeavour. With reference to Alain Badiou's "ethic of truths", Christian Gutleben and Julian Wolfreys make the important distinguishing point that it is the process of postmodernist "deconstructing and reconstructing [of] truth as a plural concept" that is at stake in neo-Victorian 'truth-telling' (Gutleben and Wolfreys 2010: 66, 65). For them, this is most evident in the use of pastiche, "considered as a narrative and discursive form devoted to retrieving the lost truth of a singular voice" (Gutleben and Wolfreys 2010: 65). In this corrective of Fredric Jameson's critique of postmodernist pastiche, they endorse fiction's 'truth-telling' "purpose" and hence accountability (Gutleben and Wolfreys 2010: 65), drawing on Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's claim that bearing witness to trauma is "to take responsibility for truth" (Felman and Laub qtd. in Gutleben and Wolfreys 2010: 65).

3. A 'Web of Affinities' with *Middlemarch*

Gillian Beer observes in *Darwin's Plots* that "[w]eb imagery is to be found everywhere" in Victorian writing, illustrated by Eliot's use of and elaboration on Darwin's metaphor of the web in *Middlemarch* (Beer 2009: 156). Primarily associated with woven cloth rather than spider webs, the web was considered "as much [a product] of strain and conflict as of supple interconnection", Beer explains (Beer 2009: 156). It could therefore accommodate the apparently conflicting "imagery of interconnection and necessary sequence" and "that of divergence and incongruity" (Beer 2009: 155), as seen in Darwin's description of the "entangled bank" (Darwin qtd. in Beer 2009: 159) and in the correspondingly rich complexity of figurative variation and narrative form in Eliot's novel. The web is a central metaphor

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in Lydgate's musings about the "special questions of disease", deriving from Francois Bichat's (1771-1802) understanding of "living bodies […] as consisting of certain primary webs or tissues" (Eliot 1989: 177). In the context of the 1831 cholera epidemic that haunts the novel, the web as anatomical model of what Lydgate thinks of as the "intimate relations of living structure" reveals the terrifying infectious potential it implies (Eliot 1989: 178.). His ideas reflect the shift in how contagious disease was understood in the 1860s and 1870s at the time of the novel's writing and publication, when germ theory – which identified a specific microbe in the body or in human waste as the cause of the disease – replaced miasma theory – in which unhealthy environments were seen as causal (see Nixon 2020: 3). However, medical cures did not emerge until the early twentieth century.

Kari Nixon makes the important point that germ theory's basic premise that disease is spread by "the actual, physical connection between bodies" left the Victorians with an unsettling "awareness of their universal risk via their very connection to the world and people around them" (Nixon 2020: 3). Disease prevention and control consequently changed from "cleaning diseased spaces to cleaning or avoiding diseased people" (Nixon 2020: 3). This understanding of contagion instilled the kinds of social taboos that Mary Douglas identifies in *Purity and Danger* as fundamental to social control by imposing "certain moral values […] and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion" (Douglas 1966: 3). Existing prejudices were thus given moral purchase, which justified the targeting of the local poor and the scapegoating of the impoverished immigrant Irish, who were blamed for periodic outbreaks of epidemic cholera and typhus wherever they found themselves, as 'Ship Fever' shows.

Tertius Lydgate and Lauchlin Grant are both young physicians in their late twenties, who trained in Paris and whose progressive ideas alienate them from the professional and social communities they enter as outsiders. Though different in temperament, they are similar in being "most deeply beset by the intellectual and emotional problems" of the time in which each text is set, as Beer describes Lydgate (Beer 2009: 153). The science of medicine and its history at the centre of both Eliot's and Barrett's texts are narrowed down to the specificities of 'fever' and the protagonists' attempts to understand and treat it. In *Middlemarch*, set in England in the years leading up to the 1832 Reform Act, Lydgate's New Fever Hospital, which "was to be reserved for fever in all its forms", is a response to the "imminent horrors" of the 1831

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cholera epidemic (Eliot 1989: 493, 597). The hospital is also an expression of a broader interest in "the nature of fever or fevers" prompted by his studies in Paris (Eliot 1989: 177). There he had "followed many anatomical demonstrations in order to ascertain the specific differences of typhus and typhoid" by the renowned French physician and teacher Pierre Charles Louis, whom "he had known" and whose "new book on Fever" he is keen to read (Eliot 1989: 177, 193). His training enables Lydgate to correctly diagnose Fred Vincy's symptoms as typhoid fever. This causes further antagonism from the family doctor, who had misdiagnosed the illness, and from the other established country doctors, who distrust and fear Lydgate's reforming zeal. He successfully establishes the hospital, but his "scientific aspirations dwindle into a fashionable practice and a treatise on Gout", as Harvey points out, not only because of the "withering" effect of "provincial narrowness", but also because of his misguided and unhappy marriage to Rosamond Vincy (Harvey 1989: 13, 8). In the 'Finale', the narrator describes Lydgate ironically as becoming "what is called a successful man", but one who "always regarded himself as a failure" because "he had not done what he had meant to do" (Eliot 1989: 893). His premature death at fifty of diphtheria, another highly infectious disease, suggests, as Mary Wilson Carpenter speculates, that Eliot knew "that diphtheria causes death by a 'primary web' of thickening tissue that grows into the throat and suffocates the victim", an apt metaphor for "the chocking off of Lydgate's medical idealism by the web of provincial medical politics" (Carpenter 2010: 523).

In 'Ship Fever', Lauchlin too "studied with the famous Dr. Pierre Louis", and he is similarly at odds with the doctors in Quebec whom he regards as "old-fashioned, even ignorant" (Barrett 1996: 171). However, his research interest in chemistry, rooted in botany, differs from the more public scope of Lydgate's ambitious projects. Lauchlin studies "the nature and uses of alkaloids, those active principles isolated from plants", in the hope that "[a] substance as useful as atropine or quinine might reveal itself to him, if he were diligent" (Barrett 1996: 166). He is "bitterly" disappointed by his private practice, which he sees as "the least part of his professional life" and his most obvious failure (Barrett 1996: 167). Although admitted to the Quebec Medical Society, his colleagues exclude him because they disagree with his methods, and patients are not referred to him (see Barrett 1996: 167).

Like many of Barrett's male protagonists, Lauchlin is by nature and nurture an outsider and loner, shaped by the early loss of his mother and his

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difficult relationship with his father, a wealthy lumber merchant. He is burdened by the disappointed love he feels for Susannah, who had married his opposite in the socially and professionally successful Arthur Adam Rowley, a journalist whose letters and articles from Ireland are openly critical of British colonial policies. Lauchlin's "unwillingness to continue working at the immigrant hospital" that Susannah supports, because it "disrupted his research", is juxtaposed with her "immediate good works" and "embracing [of] the recent flood of immigrants", as he dismissively sees it (Barrett 1996: 166). However, as he admits to himself soon after their argument, "[h]is research had yielded nothing so far and his practice was dead" (Barrett 1996: 171). Judging himself to be as "useless" as he thinks Susannah finds him (Barrett 1996: 171), he sets in motion the process that will take him to Grosse Isle quarantine station. There, his life changes radically as he immerses himself in patient care and his research narrows to what is immediately relevant to the treatment and containment of typhus. Yet, although he now finds a sense of renewed purpose, he is also overwhelmed and exhausted by conditions on the island and his ongoing battle with the bureaucratic public-health system. On his deathbed he thinks, "I have done something wrong. I have come here out of envy and wounded vanity and have acted without understanding" (Barrett 1996: 235). In spite of his best efforts, Lauchlin ends 'infected' by a Lydgate-like sense of bungled opportunities and personal deficiency as much as by the disease he sought to overcome.

4. Facts Encysted in the Tissue of Fiction

In their introduction to *Neo-Victorian Tropes of Trauma*, Kohlke and Gutleben unpack the formal demands that fictional recoveries of histories of trauma entail and the different strategies authors use to meet or circumvent them. They argue that "[t]he very structures of the novels can be seen as metaphors signifying or imitating the features or symptoms of trauma" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010b: 28). The example they refer to for its use of narrative structure and point of view is O'Faolain's *My Dream of You*, discussed by Ann Heilmann in her essay in the same collection. Like Barrett's 'Ship Fever', O'Faolain's novel deals with the Great Famine, "Ireland's collective national trauma" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 29), which has in recent years been the subject of several novels and critical studies. In most such cases, fiction and criticism alike draw on trauma narrative theory, evident in Kohlke and Gutleben's argument that "any purely linear,

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chronological, or teleological account of trauma would be false, misrepresenting traumatic experience, as well as traumatic memory and the struggle of conscious recall" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 29). In words like "false" and "misrepresenting", the critics posit an achievable psychological veracity in the use of narrative fracture and incoherence as a 'truer' portrayal of traumatic experience. In criticism, O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* and Lynch's *Grace* appear as exemplary of such neo-Victorian experiments with structure and voice to convey the social and personal trauma of the Famine and its aftermath. Sylvie Mikowski, for instance, highlights the "systematic dislocation of language" used by Lynch to "reflect Grace's gradual psychic and physical decline" in an attempt "to find a new language to establish contact with the reality of past events" (Mikowski 2020: 153, 157). Aidan O'Malley pays comparable attention to "language and disjunction" in *Star of the Sea*, arguing that the novel "brings something of the famine home to the twenty-first century", one aspect among many being "the inexpressible distress of the victims" (O'Malley 2015: 138), discussed with reference to O'Connor's emphasis on "the language of wordlessness" in accounts of eye-witnesses (O'Connor qtd. in O'Malley 2015: 138).

Star of the Sea like 'Ship Fever' is set in 1847, or 'Black '47', and deals with Irish immigration to North America, thus showing similar thematic concerns. However, the two texts differ significantly in scope, form, and style: one is a densely populated novel in which realism segues into Gothic naturalism, while the other is a more conventionally realist short story. In contrast to the complex, overtly experimental use of narrative form and voice in *Star of the Sea*, 'Ship Fever' is structured into third-person sections in which free indirect speech predominates to give an alternating, bifocal view into the co-existing interior worlds of Lauchlin and Nora, filtering immediate experience and memory. It is only in a later section when Lauchlin is dying and Nora cares for him that the two separate strands of interiorised narrative are interwoven with each other in a hallucinatory meshing of consciousness that ends with Lauchlin's death. This leaves the single strand of Nora's perspective to continue towards the story's closure in her powerful directly spoken confirmation of existential survival in the final sentence – "'I am,' Nora said" (Barrett 1996: 254) – an open-endedness that leads to the continuation of her story in 'The Cure'. These third-person narrated sections include letters to Lauchlin and surround two first-person sections composed

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of his journal entries, spanning the period from 2 June to 3 July and from 28 July to 6 August.

While there is some overlap between the novel's and short story's content, the most significant difference is found at the level of plot and focus. While O'Connor's novel refers to typhus (see, for example, O'Connor 2011: xx, 2, 33) and the "tragedy" at Grosse Isle quarantine station is explained in a footnote by the journalist-author G. Grantley Dixon (see O'Connor 2011: 267), the epidemic is only a minor aspect of the novel. In contrast, Barrett's story is narrowly focussed on epidemic typhus as symptomatic of British colonial biopolitics and the inhumane exportation of starving, often typhus-infected people from one colony to another 'emptier' one under the rubric of 'progress' and 'charity'. Drawing the disturbing correlation between "human waste" being dumped in colonial 'wastelands' and what he terms "wasted humans" being similarly dumped, Zygmunt Bauman describes this practice as "the deepest meaning of colonization and imperialist conquest" (Bauman 2013: 5, 6). Informed by the pseudo-scientific logic of Malthusian economics, which equated the poor with overpopulation and saw famine as a natural if not divine corrective, British colonial policies treated the impoverished Irish as a "surplus" and "redundant" population to be "swept from the soil" by a programme of assisted emigration (Malthus qtd. in Brantlinger 2003: 105). First mooted in 1836, these policies, David Nally explains, were "tagged as 'ameliorative' but were later wielded as tools to radically restructure Irish society" between 1845 and 1851 by large-scale eviction of tenants, levelling of homes, and consolidation of farmland by colonial landowners, consequently setting about a million desperately poor people adrift and at the mercy of the Irish Poor Law (Nally 2008: 722; also see 730).

5. Poverty, Prejudice, and Contagion

The pseudo-scientific basis of the British treatment of Ireland is also evident in the colonial discourse, which described Ireland as a "social laboratory, the scene of daring and ambitious experiments" that would not be "contemplate[d] at home" in England, as W. L. Burn without irony proclaimed in 1848 (Burn qtd. in Nally 2008: 718). This treatment coincided with the pervasive racialised, dehumanising discourse that compared the Irish poor to "excrement" and "sewerage", illustrated by Patrick Brantlinger with examples of public pronouncements by a clergyman and an economist, amongst others (Brantlinger 2003: 104). That this is a well-known typical

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discursive mechanism in the machinery of colonialism and nationalism is indicated by Richard Kearney's example of "the English defin[ing] themselves for colonial purposes as an elect people (gens) over against the Irish considered as a 'non-people' (de-gens)" (Kearney 2003: 72). Upon these categories rests the justification of a multitude of brutalities, like the punishing conditions on the coffin ships that were "run […] like slavers", as Dr Jacques tells Lauchlin (Barrett 1996: 177). This throw-away comment surfaces historical congruences between the Black Atlantic of slavery, theorised by Paul Gilroy, and an Irish or Green Atlantic of Famine emigration recently explored by Ian Baucom and others in relation to current critical navigations of diasporic after-lives (see Baucom 2000: 112).[3] Implicit in the suggested parallel is also a reminder of the racist slurs that imperialist discourse levelled at both African and Irish colonial subjects in configurations of blackness, dirt, moral turpitude, and intellectual inferiority, illustrated graphically in *Punch* cartoons of the Irish as "the missing link between the gorilla and the Negro" during and following the Famine (*Punch* qtd. in Brantlinger 2003: 98).

The conflation of dirt and degeneration is overt in such depictions, registering anxieties about contagion and the spreading of disease through physical contact, which were fundamental to what Anne McClintock describes as the "peculiarly Victorian paranoia about boundary order" and purity (McClintock 1995: 47). She draws on Douglas's argument that "dirt is essentially disorder" in the establishing of social boundaries through rituals of inclusion and exclusion, according to which people considered "marginal" and "placeless", like the displaced Irish poor, are figured as "non-being[s]", "formless", and associated with "death" by their analogy with dirt (Douglas 1966: 2, 95, 5). With reference to historian Alan Kraut's term "medicalized nativism", coined to define how "the stigmatizing of immigrant groups is justified by their association with communicable disease", Patricia Wald explains that such conflation entails more than mere projection of prejudice onto a specific group; it also "implies the almost superstitious belief that national borders can afford protection against communicable disease" (Wald 2008: 8).[4] Because "disease is associated with dangerous practices and behaviors that allegedly mark intrinsic cultural difference" and are tagged as "primitive", it cues the inherent risk of refiguring the discriminated-against group as a collective of contagious carriers of the disease who must be kept at a distance from 'civilised' society (Wald 2008: 8). In the process, an

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understanding of poverty as the cause of these daily domestic practices and of disease itself is erased or manipulated to entrench prejudice. A *British Journal of Medical and Physical Science* editorial from July 1847, titled 'Public Health is Public Wealth', illustrates the endorsement of such prejudice as scientific prophylactic against contagion, stating that "[w]e think that the immigrants, under existing circumstances, should be debarred all communication with the citizens" (qtd. in George 1920: 551).

'Ship Fever' depicts the prejudice against the Irish immigrants as dirty bearers of disease as pervasive. However, it is the Rowleys' servant Annie Taggert, who had emigrated earlier from Ireland in the late 1820s, who represents its most virulent, personalised expression in her treatment of the newly arrived, young Irish maid Sissy. Annie's perpetual rebuke of the clearly traumatised and terrified young girl takes the form of a litany of abuse, in which the word "filth" is a constant reminder that she thinks the girl "[f]ilthy and stupid and good for nothing" (Barrett 1996: 168). For Annie, Sissy represents all the new arrivals who are "flooding this country" and are "[t]oo pathetic to help themselves", thus "making a mockery of the people already here", like her, who represent an entirely different category of Irishness, "poor but respectable" (Barrett 1996: 168). Annie dismisses Sissie's frequent crying with irritation, regards her apathy and exhaustion as laziness, and describes her maid as "sleeping under the table like a dog" (Barrett 1996: 169). Though having herself lost her family on the harrowing voyage, Annie shows no sympathy for Sissy's obvious displays of severe distress, and, as Nora later recognises with empathy, remains "all alone" because Annie "had lived, like her [i.e. Nora], somehow escaping the trail of bodies littered across the ocean" (Barrett 1996: 254).

Corinne H. Dale explains Annie's behaviour as related to the belief prevalent at the time that disease is "transmitted through dirt" and that Sissy's Irishness becomes for Annie the source of dirt and risk of contamination in the home (Dale 2000: para. 14). In neo-Victorian fiction, the female servant, often Irish, recurs as representative of marginal, silenced lives and histories given voice and agency, as is the case in Atwood's portrayal of Grace Marks in *Alias Grace*, who like Annie emigrated from Ireland to Canada before the Famine. Like Atwood, Barrett makes the usually invisible work of servants visible and by doing so in the context of the typhus epidemic and fears of contagion demonstrates that "[h]ousework is a semiotics of boundary maintenance", as McClintock argues, because "[d]omestic labour creates

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social value, segregating dirt from hygiene, order from disorder, meaning from confusion" (McClintock 1995: 170). Annie's war on dirt – which is also an act of self-definition by disassociation – extends to Susannah, her employer's wife, eventually infected by charity work with the Irish immigrants, and to Lauchlin who is similarly contaminated. Nonetheless, Barrett's portrayal of the character is sympathetic, endorsing her vigilance in making Susannah and Lauchlin strip and wash before entering the house and thoroughly disinfecting their clothes. It is a precaution she, like Nora, had learnt as a folk remedy in Ireland and which Lauchlin in turn learns from them and incorporates into his treatment of Grosse Isle patients. The fierceness of Annie's prejudices is imputed to her own infection during the 1832 cholera epidemic and the residual trauma and fear she still carries from waking in a quarantine tent "surrounded by the dying" and losing her close friend to the disease, as she tells Nora when they meet near the end of the story (Barrett 1996: 253).

This life-defining loss mirrors Lauchlin's loss of his mother. By drawing the previous epidemic into the lives of the two very differently situated protagonists as a shared history of traumatic loss, Barrett makes it explicitly personal, but also implicitly configures that history as the haunting precursor and uncanny double of the 1847 typhus epidemic. By implication, the story thus references the history of Grosse Isle as a quarantine station, its place in Canadian national identify formation, and the controversies surrounding its establishment by the Canadian government as a National Park in 1974, a National Historic Site in 1993, and "Grosse Île and the Irish Memorial National Historic Site" in 1996, the same year that *Ship Fever* was published (Holmgren 2015: 145-146). The island was declared a quarantine station in 1832 to prevent the spread of cholera from Europe, England, and Ireland into Lower Canada, threatened by an increase in immigrants, but failed to do so. Cholera swamped the island and the ill-prepared medical and other staff, causing the death of more than 3,000 immigrants on the island, with more deaths reported in Montreal, Quebec City, and the rest of Canada (see Holmgren 2015: 146). By February 1848, the typhus epidemic had caused still more deaths, as Henry Labouchère informed the British House of Commons:

> Out of 100,000 emigrants who during the last twelve months crossed the Atlantic for Canada and New Brunswick, 6,100

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> perished on the voyage, 4,100 on their arrival, 5,200 in the hospitals, and 1,900 in the towns to which they repaired. (Labouchère qtd. in Pagé 1931: 456).

Grosse Isle is both the burial site of at least 5,424 people, who died in the two epidemics, and a memorial to the estimated 8,000 who were buried at sea (see Pagé 1931: 455).

Commenting on the Montreal Ship Fever Monument, Colin McMahon notes that "commemoration, in which history and memory intersect," are important because they "bring new perspectives to our understanding of the past" (McMahon qtd. in Holmgren 2015: 147). These help us "gain insight into how social groups in changing socio-political contexts have used history to construct local, national, and transnational identities" (McMahon qtd. in Holmgren 2015: 147), an observation one might equally apply to neo-Victorian fiction generally and to 'Ship Fever' specifically. However, as Michele Holmgren shows, a more questionable element is highlighted by the "harsh irony" in Canadian poet Al Purdy's poem 'Grosse Isle' (1994), which exposes how this history of severe poverty is used to serve the purposes of "a prosperous Canadian present" (Holmgren 2015: 158). When suffering is marketed as a 'walk-in-the-footsteps-of' experience to tourists, historical sites like Grosse Isle consequently become what Pierre Nora terms "*lieux de mémoire"* or "sites of memory" that are severed from "spontaneous memory" because they become an "artifice", part of an industry of "the rituals of a society without ritual" (Nora 1989: 7, 12). They are thus antithetical to "*milieux de mémoire*" or "real environments of memory" (Nora 1989: 7), an argument that resonates with Fredric Jameson's critique of postmodernist uses of history as the "random cannibalization of styles of the past" (Jameson 1991: ix). This cluster of concerns raises questions more specific to the spectacularising of histories of trauma in neo-Victorian fiction, often coinciding with a turn to the Gothic, which tends to be the genre of preference in writing about contagion, as the December 2020 'CoronaGothic: Cultures of the Pandemic' special issue of *Critical Quarterly* demonstrates.

The portrayal of the typhus epidemic in 'Ship Fever' risks the contagion of spectacle by drawing on the repertoire of images generally used by writers to portray the Famine, criticised by Baucom for their "horrifying predictability" (Baucom 2000: 109). In these images, he observes, "the deaths we are given are not narratives of death but after-images of the dead"

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(Baucom 2000: 109), thus expressing a disquiet about the evacuation of "real environments of memory" (Nora 1989: 7). 'Ship Fever' opens with a letter from Arthur Adam in County Cork to Lauchlin, dated January 27, 1847, which the doctor reads to Susannah in censored form because the brief but graphic description of what Arthur witnesses there is not considered fit for a middle-class woman's ears. Barrett has explained that she uses the letter and journal form in short stories since it affords an "incredibly economical way to convey certain kinds of information" (Barrett qtd. in Murphey 2002: n.p.), and the brief description in the letter does indeed succeed in making Irish suffering immediate and real. However, to achieve this end she relies on the images of "iconographically grotesque death" that Baucom identifies in writing on the Famine, often "recycle[ed]" from Cecil Woodham-Smith's 1962 *The Great Hunger* (Baucom 2000: 109), an intertext Barrett acknowledges. Although 'Ship Fever' opens with such "*tableaux mordants*", to use Baucom's term (Baucom 2000: 109), that recur from time to time, Barrett avoids the foreclosure of Gothic spectacle by filtering the portrayal of the devastating scale of the Famine and the typhus epidemic as human disasters through the shifting singular consciousnesses of her two protagonists. These sections of the story favour the ordinary daily intimacies of individual suffering within the extraordinary overwhelming conditions that the characters inhabit and with which they must contend in some meaningful way. Reflecting on her aims as a writer of historical fiction, Barrett explains this concern with the singularity of experience as an attempt "to shape a narrative that allows a reader to *feel* what it was like to be a particular person, or set of persons, caught in a particular situation at a particular place and time" (Barrett 2004: 12, original emphasis). Somewhat counterintuitively, this very particularisation not only facilitates reader identification, but also the drawing of meaningful analogies between the 1847 epidemic and present-day pandemics.

6. Marginal Singularities and Narrative Point of View

Against this background, Kohlke and Gutleben's observation of "a metonymic principle" in neo-Victorian fiction that avoids "generalisations" to privilege the specificity of traumatic experience, with a particular character "standing for a whole class of people" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010: 29), can be seen to apply to Nora Kynd in 'Ship Fever'. The character's allegorically resonant surname sounds the story's concerns with kin, kinship, (human)kind,

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and kindness. At the level of national identity, Nora in her singularity embodies the vast numbers of Irish "'dis-astered' bodies" – the term Huet coins to describe the consequences of "modern perceptions of disaster" in which "individual lives tend to become an abstract concept, lost in the sheer magnitude of loss" (Huet 2012: 9, 201).[5] This embodied metonymic singularity is specifically *not* an erasure of difference. Nora's distinctiveness stands in for the distinctiveness of others like her in the face of statistical abstraction and erasure, while she also stands for kinship and kindness as her surname suggests and her healing work as nurse enacts.

She is introduced into the narrative from Lauchlin's perspective when he finds her body in the hold of the third coffin ship, the worst afflicted by typhus, on his first day on Grosse Isle. He initially believes her to be dead, counting hers as "the nineteenth body, almost crushed beneath the eighteenth", but discovers when he moves her hair from her face that she is just barely alive (Barrett 1996: 182). Touch triggers the memory of his mother's similar hair and the vivid flashback of her face in a rapid interiorised sequence that conveys how his current state of shock and disassociation reactivates the older traumatic wound of the earlier loss of his mother to cholera, thus implicitly linking the two epidemics. This sense of recognition and kinship prompts him to carry Nora from the ship despite the inspecting physician Dr Jacques's instructions to leave her because they had reached their quota of patients for the day and "there's no room" on the island (Barrett 1996: 185). At this pivotal moment in the narrative, Nora becomes separated from her two younger brothers, who are "almost healthy" and allowed to sail upriver, leaving no trace of their whereabouts for her to pursue when she finally recovers (Barrett 1996: 185). This, too, registers in the story as a fate she shares with countless other Irish immigrants who, like Nora, try to locate lost family members by advertising in newspapers, usually without much success.

By privileging Lauchlin's point of view through free indirect speech in the early section of the story, Barrett makes the reader both secondary witness to what he witnesses and primary witness to what his work does to him. Lauchlin functions as Nora's metonymic counterpart in that he represents the world of nineteenth-century science based on secular rationality in a situation which tests its basic tenets, because, as Huet points out, "[d]isasters outline the limits of secular rationality and its technical power over the social and physical world" (Huet 2012: 202).[6] This is conveyed by

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Lauchlin's increasing sense of shocked incomprehension, a failure of reason in the face of what he can only conceive of as "madness" since "[t]here was no way to make sense of this situation" (Barrett 1996: 181, 180). Going from the hold of one ship to another on his first day, "turn[ing] his eyes from one impossible sight to the next", language itself fails: "he said nothing" because "[i]t was impossible to guess the right things to say or do" (Barrett 1996: 180). The reader is taken with him into the ships' dark holds, "again, again" to the "rotting food, and the filth sloshing underfoot", the bedding "fetid" and "alive with vermin and everywhere the sick" and the dead (Barrett 1996: 181). The situation proves so existentially intolerable that his body rejects it by vomiting, since "[i]t was too much, it was impossible" (Barrett 1996: 181), a thought-feeling repeated numerous times in this section and elsewhere. Progressively traumatised, he wants to flee, thinking that "this was not what he had bargained for: this was madness, he could be no help"; though finally overcome by the realisation that "his theories and knowledge were worth nothing here" (Barrett 1996: 181), he continues nevertheless.

Writing about the 1832 cholera epidemic in western Europe and the United States, and the 1821 yellow fever epidemic in Barcelona that preceded it, Huet points out that they "yielded a view of disaster as administrative emergency" focused on "questions of control and containment" (Huet 2012: 57), concerns that also dominated the COVID-19 crisis. Consequently, the medical establishment recognised the politicisation of its role as it intersected with "government actions and conflicting interests" (Huet 2012: 57). This led to what George Rosen describes as "the administrative machinery for disease prevention, sanitary supervision, and, in general, protection of community health", in other words 'public health' as a system of population surveillance and centralised state control (Rosen qtd. in Wald 2008: 17). Not coincidentally, the recent pandemic saw the intensification of such state control in lockdown measures, leading to protests against 'nanny states' viewed as infringing on civil liberties. As part of the attempts to 'legitimate' such restrictions, health experts or health 'czars' regularly appeared alongside government leaders and top officials in regular press briefings. Arguably, the latter also sought to cast government efforts to contain the virus in a positive light as doing 'everything possible'.

What we see from Lauchlin's perspective, however, is the complete failure of the central state administration to support the medical staff on the island with adequate funds and resources to deal with the escalating crisis –

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akin to the inadequate response of governments, even those of wealthy 'developed' nations, in dealing with the recent global pandemic. Sent to Quebec City by his superior to ask for assistance from public administrators and politicians, Lauchlin realises the futility of the endeavour when he discovers that officials are diverting money away from the immigrants to treatment facilities for Canadian citizens, because they see the epidemic "not as a war against fever but as a war against the emigrants who carry it" (Barrett 1996: 200-201). The two senior doctors on the island, Dr Douglas and Dr Jacques (drawn from life and memorialised in the story by being named along with a few of the doctors who died there), must manage the situation as best they can by relying on the administrative numbers game of the public health system, in which the abstract logic of economic considerations and statistical counting discounts the singularity of human life and death.

In contrast, Lauchlin's incapacity to fit into this administrative machine is apparent from the start as demonstrated by his act of insubordination in removing Nora from the coffin ship. He is alienated from the other doctors, regarded as "a troublemaker" whose many questions challenge "the authority of the administration" and whose association with Nora once she has recovered and is allowed to nurse the sick is considered a dangerous breach of the separation between immigrants and Canadians (Barrett 1996: 200). This exclusion triggers Lauchlin's insecurities, causing him to act defensively and retreat further into his work. John Jameson, one of the doctors with whom he attempts to strike up a friendship, well-meaningly reminds him that the "island is a government installation, under military supervision – of course everyone's concerned with discipline, the chain of command, the appearance of propriety" since "[t]his is a political situation, at least as much as it's a medical emergency" (Barrett 1996: 199). Lauchlin's self-consciousness and instinctive resistance to the dehumanising logic of this system is juxtaposed with Jameson's compliance and successful integration into it. Unlike the anger of his friend and rival Arthur Adam, who can write with "[l]ots of details, very elegantly" about the horrors in Ireland (Barrett 1996: 188), Lauchlin's outrage spills over into social and professional situations in a way that is seen as inappropriate, separating him even more from his colleagues. An outsider-insider in this system, the protagonist's self-reflective ironies establish him as the never-indifferent ethical conscience and truth-teller of the story.

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7. Recounting Epidemic Trauma as Counter Narrative

During the conversation with Jameson, Lauchlin recalls Arthur's similar diagnosis of "the famine in Ireland [a]s political, not agricultural" and draws a correlation with the situation on Grosse Isle, which "has at least as much to do with government policy as with fever" (Barrett 1996: 199). This makes explicit the story's sustained, implicit configuration of the heterotopic quarantine island and Famine Ireland as doubled sites of unspeakable human suffering caused by British colonial policies that treat the Irish poor as "throwaway" bodies (Yaeger 2000: 68). Writing about the American South, Patricia Yaeger uses this term to describe "women and men whose bodily harm does not matter enough to be registered or repressed – who are not symbolically central, who are looked over, looked through, who become a matter of public and private indifference" (Yaeger 2000: 68). The description of Lauchlin's arrival at the island, before he boards the coffin ships, concretises the discursive conflation of Irish people with dirt in the metonymic shift from the discarded meagre domestic property of the immigrants, seen floating in the now murky river, to the thrown-away immigrants themselves. At first, he is unable to 'read' what he sees – "What *are* these? […] These … things?", he asks, although the items are clearly recognisable and Dr Jacques explains that the ships' captains "bully the passengers into throwing all their filthy bedding overboard, all their cooking utensils, the nasty straw" because there are no ablution "facilities, and the floors fill up with excrement and filth" (Barrett 1996: 177, original emphasis and un-bracketed ellipses). Lauchlin also misreads the "white banners fluttering" in a ship's rigging by relying on a familiar semiotic only "to realize the banners were tattered clothes, hanging out to dry" (Barrett 1996: 177). Barrett's portrayal of his shift into understanding is a subtle moving realisation of the desperation and courage of the Irish immigrants whose washing, "tattered" though it may be, flags their refutation of being categorised and treated as dirt. The clean washing momentarily ruptures the narrative layer of Lauchlin's point of view and alters the image we see with him, imbuing it with new insight.

Another, very different aperture is activated by the description of Lauchlin's arrival at Grosse Isle, which evinces the intertextual shadow of the English settler Susanna Moodie's autobiographical account of her arrival at the island on 30 August 1832 during the cholera epidemic. Titled 'A Visit to Grosse Isle', it is the first essay in Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bush*, first

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published in 1852, which recounts her experience of immigration with her husband and daughter and their seven and a half years of 'pioneering' in the "Backwoods of Canada" (Moodie 2007: 11). The emigration of the solidly middle-class Moodie family from England, although prompted by financial need, differs at all levels from that of the impoverished Irish. In 'Ship Fever', we see the extreme class discrepancies on board ship from Nora's perspective, as she recalls becoming ill and going on deck because there was "no bed for her to go to" in the hold (Barrett 1996: 183). There, she encounters a cabin passenger, "[a]n impossible figure, a gentleman", "neat and clean and well-fed sketching the sights on a pad", who, she thought with irony, was "someone who might save her, had he cared to" but "never noticed her" because to him she was invisible, his attention instead focused on the landscape, which to him was "paradise" (Barrett 1996: 183). Such class privilege and indifference – which are as inconceivable to Nora as is the abject condition of the Irish immigrants travelling in the ship's hold to Lauchlin when he first sees it – form the basis of Moodie's tirade against the Irish immigrants in 'A Visit to Grosse Isle'. Moodie relies on the familiar prejudices and insults to denigrate the Irish immigrants as a "motley crew" of "vicious, uneducated barbarians", "filthy beings who were sullying the purity of the air and water with contaminating sights and sounds" (Moodie 2007: 21). These "almost naked" and "partially clothed" people are not seen as "destitute" but as "destitute of shame", "savages" with no "sense of common decency", causing her to turn with "disgust from the revolting scene" (Moodie 2007: 21), which Barrett has Lauchlin turn towards

Moodie's descriptions of the immigrants and of her reaction to them reveal the ease with which "[b]odies in rags" are seen and treated as "closer to the limits of the human, closer to the body itself as rubbish or waste", as Yaeger argues (Yaeger 2000: 80). The critic stresses

> the power of cloth remnants, dirty or clean, for gathering a constellation of social problems, for calling up an atmosphere of neglect, desuetude, or dehumanization – foregrounding the background of a society that throws people away, that treats them as objects. (Yaeger 2000: 80)

Views like Moodie's are evident in the attitudes of similarly classed characters and others like Annie Taggert in 'Ship Fever' and underpin the

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policies of the administrative machinery against which the immigrants' enactment of self-worth remains ephemeral. Given the insufficient basic structures for the transportation and care of the sick and for the removal of corpses from the ships and their burial, it is in the treatment of the dead that the systemic 'infection' of metonymic substitution becomes most evident. It spreads from the human as/is dirt nexus through the discarded belongings in the river as register of the thrown-away bodies of the Irish immigrants to the processing of the dead as waste, "ropes binding the bodies into bundles", their "heads and limbs dangling, [let] down the side of the ship to the boats waiting below", hauled with "boathooks" when they fall into the river (Barrett 1996: 182). This process is not spectacularised as a horror-scene but instead conveyed in the conditional mode, which juxtaposes the careless handling of the bodies with Lauchlin's exhausted caring for the dead: "Had he seen that journey's last stage, he might not have been able to move, as he did, from berth to berth, gently turning bodies and closing eyes and lifting shoulders as Dr Jacques lifted legs" (Barrett 1996: 182). The remarkable restraint in the writing both inscribes and enacts the honouring of the dead in the simple ritual in which each body is counted and counts.

Lauchlin performs a similar memorialising ritual of care in his daily counting of ships and people and recording of names and lost names in his journal, which chronicles the quarantine administration's slide into chaos as more ships arrive with more sick and dying people, who cannot be accommodated, more dead for whom there are no burial places. Each day's weather is meticulously recorded because of its impact on the spread of the disease. Lauchlin marks the bravery and deaths of nurses and doctors. Though appalled by it, he understands why servants intentionally drop trays to get fired because they fear infection and why assistants for the same reason throw bread at the sick from a distance. With increasing horror, he writes of feral dogs scavenging in the cemeteries and prisoners brought to the island to bury the dead. He admits that he envies the policemen's drunken carelessness and describes what is happening to his own body – "hives that occasionally plagued him" (Barrett 1996: 188), eventually covering the back of his hands, his swollen and peeling feet, and his insomnia, all symptoms of severe psychological and physical distress. He also keeps a record of scientific books he is reading, possible remedies he discovers, his conversations with Nora about Ireland and treatments of fever there, and his thoughts of Susannah.

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Embedded in the third-person sections, the journals give an unmediated first-person account of the process of Lauchlin's physical and psychological decline caused by the administrative failures and frustrations from which he cannot distance himself. His fruitless visit to Quebec to secure funds for the station makes him feel "[d]efeated and obscurely ashamed" (Barrett 1996: 206). When the self-serving Bishop Mountain of Montreal visits the station, "making speeches and wrinkling up his fat face", Lauchlin finds his pompous arrogance at dinner with the physicians intolerable in its lack of respect for and acknowledgement of their desperate situation, the losses they have suffered, and the risk of infection they face each day. Exhausted, he loses self-control and, he writes,

> I rose from the table, spilling my wine; I shouted, I could not help myself – he had only to look at the haggard faces around our small table: where at our peak we were twenty-six, four are already dead and eighteen down with fever. There were four of us, only four, at that table. Count us, I said to him. Count us. (Barrett 1996: 233)

In the face of false charity that masks indifference, Lauchlin appropriates the statistical discourse of the public-health administration system and transforms it to insist on the validity of an oppositional ethics of care and accountability. On his deathbed soon after, when the urgency of his outrage has dissipated, Lauchlin recalls this incident and "understood for the first time that these people he'd been caring for were, if not exactly him, extensions of him, as he was an extension of them" because "[i]t was life, simply life, that they had in common" (Barrett 1996: 239). Barrett portrays his dying thoughts as a hallucinatory enlargement of consciousness, a softening of the edges of singularity in an oceanic merging with others, recalling Romain Rolland's description in a letter to Freud of "a feeling of something limitless, unbounded – as it were 'oceanic'", which he considered "the true source of religious sentiments" (Rolland qtd. in Huet 2012: 92). Yet there is no capitulation to mysticism in Lauchlin's final thought – "Count me, count them, count us" (Barrett 1996: 239) – or foreclosure of the singularity of individual experience, suffering, and death. Instead, singularity resonates in the oceanic metaphor's implicit memorialising of those counted and uncounted buried at sea during the Atlantic crossing.

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The intertwining of Lauchlin's and Nora's interior voices in this section of the story as she nurses him creates an ebb and flow of the doctor's memories and reflections with hers, which return to her own illness on the ship when there was not enough fresh water to drink, hardly any food to eat, and none of the supplies Dr Douglas gives her to ease Lauchlin's fever. She recalls this without resentment, tracing the cause back to "authorities in Quebec", "the landlords back home", "the passage brokers, the ships' captains, the government in England" at whose mercy her people found themselves (Barrett 1996: 234). Throughout the story, Barrett places Nora in situations in which she is either at the receiving end of unthinking prejudice or overhears talk that disparages or insults Irish people, often with little regard for her presence. At these points in the narrative, Nora's perspective is privileged to invert the dominant point of view as she reflects on those in power, whose contempt is exposed as ignorance and a failure of empathetic imagination. Nora's recollection of overhearing the medical staff and assistants on the island complaining about "the filth and poverty of her fellow travellers", who "contaminated the entire province", leads her to wonder – ironically with compassion for *their* exhaustion – at their inability to imagine "what the people they treated had been through" and hence to empathise with them instead of judging them (Barrett 1996: 234).

The callousness of such judgments and the absurd cognitive dissonance they represent are drawn into sharp relief with the example of one assistant's "puzzled and outraged" condemnation of the woman "whose only piece of clothing was made from a scrap of a biscuit bag" (Barrett 1996: 234). Echoing Susanna Moodie's misdirected moral outrage, the man asks, "how […] could a woman let herself come to this?" (Barrett 1996: 234). In an earlier incident, Nora thinks with horror that "[i]t was her and her kind they were talking about" when she overhears Dr Douglas refer to the immigrants as "half-naked, famished paupers" (Barrett 1996: 227), while he and Lauchlin are drafting letters of complaint about the government's lack of support to Lord Elgin and Earl Grey, Secretary of State for the Colonies. The word "kind" here invokes the affiliation of kin and kindred resonant in Nora's surname, but it also draws attention to the absence of any *kindness* towards her and her kind.

Nora's memories of Ireland and the stories she tells Lauchlin about her family and what she learnt from her grandmother's treatment of those sick with fever, which he in turn records in his journal and integrates into his

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treatment of patients, provide a corrective counter-narrative to the discursive 'Othering' of the Irish immigrants and an antidote to the insidious contagion of prejudice. In the postcolonial short story, Awadalla and March-Russell point out, "orality could be seen as evidence of cultural survival, acting as one of the contrary means by which the onslaught of colonization and the eradication of indigenous cultures are challenged" (Awadalla and March-Russell 2013: 4). A survivor of the Famine, the Atlantic passage, and Ship Fever, Nora is one of the "human carriers" of "cultural traditions and personal memories" that "migrate" with those uprooted and dispersed by disaster and "brought into new social constellations and political contexts", as Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad describe the movement and transformation of memories in a global age (Assmann and Conrad, qtd. in Boehm-Schnitker 2019: 88). In the context of global epidemic contagion, the word 'carrier' assumes sinister connotations associated with "the archetypal stranger", as Wald notes in relation to the Irish immigrant Mary Mallon, who was a cook and "healthy carrier" of typhoid fever in early twentieth-century New York (Wald 2008: 10, 68). Demonised as "Typhoid Mary", she is still "the most invoked symbol of the dangerous carrier of communicable disease" (Wald 2008: 68). For xenophobes and cultural purists, Assman and Conrad's use of the word 'carrier' would invoke the related risk of cultural contagion, which is always present in the discursive and actual scapegoating of immigrants, as demonstrated in Moodie's writing, the examples from 'Ship Fever' discussed above and, of course, racist attacks on those of Asian heritage in the USA and elsewhere during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Cabral 2021: n.p.).

Yet, the pendulum of the word's connotative weight swings in the opposite direction in Assman and Conrad's employment of it: implicitly, the root metaphor of diaspora as the scattering of seed is activated to suggest the simultaneous carrying of memories and cultural knowledge as seed to be sown in new ground. That such carrying is also a burden is conveyed by the interweaving of traumatic memory with cultural knowledge in the stories of remedy and loss Nora tells Lauchlin. "In my village half the people died, including my parents, two brothers and a sister, my mother's brother and sister, and many of my cousins. My grandparents, too", she tells him, as he attempts to sketch a family tree for her (Barrett 1996: 195). The "disappearance of communal and intergenerational ties" caused by the displacements of diaspora portrayed in 'Ship Fever' thus confirms how integral the telling of stories is to "the form of memory and anecdote within

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the exiled imagination" and how "memory inexorably becomes a political act" in such contexts (Awadalla and March-Russell 2013: 6).

8. Coda: Resisting Erasure

Resisting the bureaucratic erasure of singularity in official accounts of disaster, such counter-narratives perform the essential corrective function of "[n]arrative memory [which] seeks to preserve some trace of those others – especially victims of history – who would, if unremembered, be lost to the injustices of non-existence", as Kearney notes in relation to the scapegoating of the Irish and similar Othered groups throughout history, intensifying at points of crisis (Kearney 2003: 80). This scapegoating is, as shown by my reading of Barrett's short-storying of neo-Victorian contagion, premised on the implicit but necessary first principle of 'truth-telling' that neo-Victorianism shares with nineteenth-century realism. For as John Glendening argues, "neo-Victorian concerns with social justice" would be meaningless without "[c]onfidence in the possibility of telling the truth about Victorian history and culture" (Glendening 2013: 7). It seems no coincidence that during the recent pandemic, 'truth' and social justice once more became contentious commodities, repeatedly sacrificed on the altar of political and economic expediency. Based on the related ethical imperative of recognising the singularity of lived experience, specifically in the portrayal of histories of trauma, the aspiration to 'truth-telling' is what surfaces important questions about neo-Victorianism's uses of the past. Prompted by the urgency of our own situated concerns with which we attempt to come to terms, we turn to look back through a retrospective comparative lens, as has been the case during the recent pandemic.

In this context, Robert Peckham's essay 'COVID-19 and the Anti-Lessons of History' is a salient corrective to what he calls the "history-as-lesson approach which pivots on the assumption that epidemics are structurally comparable events, wherever and whenever they take place" (Peckham 2020: 850). While this might be "a compelling argument for why history matters", Peckham warns against analogical thinking that leads to "blind spots" and instead advocates the examination of "specific contexts of outbreaks" that "encompass these intermeshing social and political environments" (Peckham 2020: 851) – his use of the web metaphor once again resonating with Eliot's in *Middlemarch*. He argues that we should "challenge efforts to corral and straightjacket the past into summary lessons"

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and rather pursue "an anti-lessons approach" in an attempt "to ensure a strategic open-mindedness to emergent threats at a time when borders of many kinds are going up across the globe" (Peckham 2020: 851). His words serve as an apt reminder given the themes of forced diaspora and prejudice against immigrants in 'Ship Fever' that also pervade political discourse about the current conflict and economic migrant crisis. Barrett's imaginative recalibration of the past in the concentrated form of the short story to convey the complex networks of contagion in its various modulations provides an example of how neo-Victorian fiction can both inform and affect us without resorting to the foreclosures of easy didacticism or reductive historical 'lessoning'. Indeed, though published two decades before the COVID-19 emergency, part of the power of Barrett's story resides in its inadvertent prescience of concerns and anxieties surrounding contagion that resurfaced in and were exacerbated by the pandemic – and in its implicit plea to put humanity before national interests.

The narrative trajectory of 'Ship Fever' and Nora's affirmative "I am", with which the story ends and opens up into the future, confirm that the neo-Victorian writing of histories of trauma is also "always an overt or covert celebration of resilience", as Gutleben and Wolfreys propose (Gutleben and Wolfreys 2010: 69). That resilience goes hand in hand with Barrett's appeal to a compassionate ethics of care, which remains as relevant in the post-pandemic present as it was in 1847. 'Ship Fever' and neo-Victorianism's commitment to 'truth-telling' is therefore a fundamentally optimistic endeavour, evident in the histories of loss and suffering that Barrett recovers in her telling of Nora's and Lauchlin's stories as stories that count.

Notes

1. For an overview of the medical history of typhus, including the different aetiologies of typhoid and typhus, see Hardy (1988). For a history of the Famine and diaspora, see, for example, McGowan (2007) and Ó Gráda (1999).
2. Byatt's novels *Possession: A Romance* (1990) and *The Biographer's Tale* (2000), and the two novellas in *Angels and Insects* (1992) are preceded by her short story 'Precipice Encurled' in *Sugar and Other Stories* (1987). Faber published a collection titled *The Apple: Crimson Petal Stories* (2011) as a sequel to his bestselling novel *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002).

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Donoghue wrote the neo-Victorian novels *The Sealed Letter* (2008), *Frog Music* (2014), and *The Wonder* (2016), the latter of which is set in nineteenth-century Ireland, and her short story collections *The Woman Who Gave Birth to Rabbits* (2002) and *Astray* (2012) include several neo-Victorian stories. Barrett's oeuvre similarly contains neo-Victorian stories in addition to the novel *The Voyage of the Narwhal* (1998).

3. Pertinent to this topic is Elizabeth Ho's notion of "the neo-Victorian-at-sea", which she introduced in response to "a sea change in postmillennial fiction's treatment of the Victorian" (Ho 2012: 173). She categorises Barrett's stories and *The Voyage of the Narwhal* with Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers* (2000), Harry Thompson's *To The Edge of the World* (2003), and Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* (2008) as texts "fixated on and structured by the sea voyage rather than the more 'settled' locales" of neo-Victorian fiction (Ho 2012: 173-174). Ho terms "this new trend of oceanic travel and ship narratives as the 'neo-Victorian-at-sea'" intent on "establish[ing] the ocean, rather than Britain, as the liquid site of empire" (Ho 2012: 174). Ho's terms proved prescient, resonating uncannily with the impact on shipping and transport during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to widespread delays, material shortages, and logistic crises that underlined the "fluid" interdependencies of globalised economies.
4. A comparison with twenty-first century scapegoating of immigrant groups during epidemic outbreaks reveals a similar pattern, as Wald shows in her analysis of *Newsweek* accounts of the SARS 2003 outbreak, which, not unlike the later COVID-19 outbreak, fostered anti-Asian xenophobia, similar to the anti-African xenophobia sparked by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s.
5. As much was witnessed during the COVID-19 pandemic, with many countries, including the UK, publishing weekly infection rates and death figures that reduced individual suffering and lives to mere statistics. Collective, often grassroots-led projects, such as the National Covid Memorial Wall opposite the Palace of Westminster in London, push back against such abstraction by refocusing on the named individuals who lost their lives to the pandemic and/or inadequate care provision.
6. These limits in Huet's terms became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic that overwhelmed medical facilities and crisis management capabilities, even in developed countries. The same applies to recent natural disasters, such as the 2023 Turkey-Syria earthquake and the widespread devastation caused by storms and wildfires around the globe, as in the January 2025 fires in California.

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