Sentimentality, Sacrifice, and Oil: Reckoning with Offshore Extractive Trauma[1]

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As the offshore workers who made their careers in the 1970s and 1980s—the boom years of North Sea oil—have retired or are moving towards retirement, a new generation has started to reflect on what it means to have grown up with oil. It is a moment of introspection shared in particular by people in Norway and Great Britain—two countries whose development has been shaped by offshore extraction—and underpinned by scholarly and public interest in the subject. Besides academic and trade books analyzing the history and impact of North Sea oil and gas (e.g., Marriott/Macalister; Sæther; Hein), the last decade or so has seen the publication of personal memoirs looking back at the oil boom of the 1980s, including those by writer and intellectual Aslak Sira Myhre and artist Sue Jane Taylor. Concurrently produced TV documentaries, novels, poetry, and even a high-budget multi-part TV drama series,[2] indicate a widespread appetite to engage with the memories of the extractive industry during these foundational years and have produced in turn new scholarship on the aesthetic and narrative dimensions of specifically North Sea petroculture (Andersen; Campbell; Furuseth et al.; Furuseth; Leyda; Pitt-Scott; Polack/Farquharson; Ritson). In this article, I will look at intergenerational conflict in

1 Thank you to my friends in the Critical PetroAesthetics Collaboratory at the Oslo School of Environmental Humanities, who have contributed so much to my thinking in our many conversations over the past two years.

2 For example, the NRK TV documentary *Olje!* (2006) and the BBC TV documentary *Crude Britannia: The Story of North Sea Oil* (2009). The NRK TV drama *Lykkeland* (2018) was screened in the UK as *State of Happiness* in 2020 and a second season aired in 2022 in Norway. The film *Oljeunge* (*Oil Kid*) commissioned by and on show in the Petroleum Museum in Stavanger in 2016 gives an artful interpretation of how oil changed the local community in the 1970s, and what that legacy means now.

North Sea petrofiction from both Norway and Great Britain and explore the affective dimensions of reckoning with the legacy of the offshore boom years.

While the new extractive industry undeniably created employment opportunities, new infrastructure, and varying degrees of personal and national wealth, I will focus on the traumas that accompanied the drive to extract oil in the North Sea, in particular two major accidents of the 1980s: The capsizing of the Alexander Kielland platform in 1980 and the explosion on the Piper Alpha platform in 1988. The former accident occurred on the evening of 27 March 1980. The rig, which was being used as accommodation for offshore workers, initially tilted and subsequently capsized; safety provisions were poor, lifeboats inoperable, and weather conditions made it difficult to retrieve survivors from the icy waters. One hundred and twenty-three men lost their lives. Eight years later, on 6 July 1988, a ball of fire engulfed the Piper Alpha rig, the result of miscommunication and poor safety procedures; one hundred and sixty-seven men died, and many of the survivors were badly injured.

Besides recent books re-examining these disasters some decades later (McGinty; Tungland et al.), personal memories of these tragic events are becoming increasingly written at a generation's remove, replacing the survivor testimonies from the immediate aftermath. An example of this can be found in this 2020 text by the chemist Marc Reid, published in a surprisingly personal paper in the journal *ACS Chemical Health and Safety*:

> In my childhood years, I remember noticing that my father's hands appeared somehow older than they should be. To my young eyes, he had the hands of my grandfather, not the hands of a young man. I would later learn that the curious wrinkles on my father's hands were, in fact, skin grafts: an eternal reminder of the burns he endured during his escape from the burning Piper Alpha rig. In those earliest days of my life, I was too young to understand the accident or the struggles my father would later face. As I grew older and more mature, so too did the forthcoming details of my father's ordeal. (88)

Marc Reid's father survived the Piper Alpha explosion with injuries and later lost his life to alcoholism (as was reported in *The Scotsman*, "Marc Reid"); the paper written by his son introduces a note of sentimentality into an otherwise sober review of safety culture. Reid is not the only recent example of someone from the next generation looking for lessons to learn from the painful events of the 1980s oil and gas industry in the North Sea. Odd Kristian Reme, a trainee priest in 1980 and now a public figure in Norway, lost his brother in the Alexan-

der Kielland disaster and published a book about his search for answers about the accident in 2021 (Omdal).

This engagement with the disasters a generation after they took place is not confined to memoir but is also a feature of recent novels. In the following, I will explore two fictional works that engage with the oil industry during the 1980s, from opposite sides of the North Sea. The two novels are linked not just through their subject of the offshore oil industry but also through their portrayal of the Alexander Kielland and Piper Alpha disasters. Scottish author Iain Maloney published *The Waves Burn Bright* in 2016 and *Puslingar* by Norwegian Atle Berge was published three years later, in 2019.[3] In bringing together these two novels written in two different languages, I want to focus on the elements they have in common. Firstly, they take up the theme of the offshore industry and were written at about the same time. Secondly, they are (so far) unique as literary novels to imagine the real-life disasters of the 1980s; there have not been many—if any—direct portrayals of the Alexander Kielland or the Piper Alpha disasters in fiction before the turn of the millennium, although a few novels do make oblique references to the danger and the risks of offshore work.[4] Thirdly, both novels embed the offshore oil industry in a context of intergenerational conflict. The protagonists are children of offshore workers who were born during the boom years of North Sea oil. The key driver of the narrative in each of the cases is the difficult relationship between the generations of the fathers and those of their children. Fourthly, both narratives resolve through the protagonists overcoming trauma, rebuilding family relationships, and coming to terms with a difficult past. In this last point, the sentimentality of the texts is particularly clear; narrative closure is achieved, serving to assimilate the memory of the traumatic disasters into the lives of the protagonists, and by extension, into the wider culture.

Furthermore, both novels employ sentimentality, in particular in relation to what Alexa Weik von Mossner terms "strategic empathy," on different thematic levels. Indeed, readers are made to empathize with the victims of the accident and with the generation of children who grew up in its shadow, and,

3 Since I started writing this article, Maloney's novel has been republished under the new title *In the Shadow of Piper Alpha*; I will however in this essay refer to the original edition and title.

4 Ian Rankin's *Black and Blue* (1997) and Kjell Ola Dahl's financial thriller *Lindeman og Sachs* (2006) are examples of widely read fiction that reference the offshore industry in the North Sea and its safety record.

at least on occasion, with the environmental damage caused by fossil fuel extraction. In the chapter of her book *Affective Ecologies* entitled "Imagining the Pain," Weik von Mossner is concerned with narratives of environmental injustices that arise or endure through "a limitation of personal and communal agency due to class, gender, race, ethnicity and a range of other social markers" (78). The novels I examine in this article focalize on characters who are caught up in the immediate trauma and aftermath of offshore disasters, allowing the reader to identify with them in different positions within the unequal environmental risk culture, as victims, agents, and consumers of offshore extraction. Identification with these characters creates the affective investment that drives the narratives through cycles of conflict and trauma to a point of (healing) resolution. This ultimate narrative closure has implications for the way that environmental trauma is represented.

The fact that these texts were written and published so recently is important because of the context of greater awareness and criticism of the role of the offshore industry in generating not just wealth, but also enormous environmental damage. Graeme Macdonald writes of the "sense of an ending" that permeates North Sea petroculture, haunting efforts to extract the resource from the very moment it was discovered but intensifying along with discussions about climate change (62–3). As parts of the globe become uninhabitable and end of oil seems nigh, a kind of double trauma starts to become visible; the human suffering in the offshore accidents of the 1980s finds a long shadow in the specter of human and ecological suffering on a much longer timescale and across a much larger scope. Remembering the Alexander Kielland and the Piper Alpha accidents raises questions—how could they have happened, who was to blame, how should they be remembered?—that can be extended to the oil and gas industry as a whole, with its record of ecological negligence, poor safety, and human greed. Fiona Polack argues convincingly for offshore accidents as "ecological parables," repurposing a concept developed by Steve Mentz, for their ability to confront the limits to human agency in the North Atlantic (Polack 43). The difficult past that the texts are grappling with is not confined to the accidents that happened on the North Sea, but extends as synecdoche, I argue with Polack, to the business of petrochemical extraction itself.

The generationality of the novels is an important tool in integrating current awareness of the problematic nature of gas and oil extraction with the motivations and knowledge of those who worked offshore in the 1980s. Multiple generations are represented in the two novels: those who remember life

before the oil industry in the North Sea began (this generation features only in *Puslingar*); the generation active in offshore work in the 1980s; and those born in the early 1970s whose lives were deeply entwined with the oil industry and its effects. If we take the middle generation of oil workers in the novels—the fathers—as standing for the generation that embraced the offshore industry, then their children want to understand their role in relation not just to the human cost of oil, but also to the ecological cost. The constellation of fathers and children in the novels implies that it is up to a new generation to try and understand why their fathers threw in their lot with oil and to exonerate them or find them guilty.

The doubling of the questions of guilt and complicity, incorporating both human pain and ecological damage, is one of many ways by which contemporary literary novels can address issues of climate change and ecological justice without becoming explicitly "cli-fi," that is to say explicitly concerned with an environmental agenda. Amitav Ghosh has argued that formal aspects of the modern literary novel, in particular its focus on human agencies and timescales, make it an unsuitable vehicle for the deep time, uncontained stories of environmental change both slow and sudden, in particular for the agencies of oil (Ghosh 1992, 34; Ghosh 2016, esp. 98–108). Others, such as Adam Trexler (*Anthropocene Fictions*, 10) and Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller (*The Anthropocene: Key Issues for the Humanities*, 109) suggest that a formal innovation is necessary to encompass the multiple scales and challenges of the Anthropocene. While the modern realist novel has certainly played its part in obscuring the ecological dependences of human civilizations (Ghosh 2016, 20–37), I join Reinhard Hennig in expressing doubt that novels that are conventional in form are unable to engage some of the more complex entanglements of the Anthropocene (128). Those skeptical of the novel's form in relation to climate change have allowed little space for the agency of readers in bringing their own knowledge and concern to bear on the world of the novel, and it is in this space, between text and reader, that the novel unfolds its *affective* power. Emotions and feelings triggered by the reading of a novel, such as empathy, pity, shame, or nostalgia, shape responses to it, and sentimentality is an important tool in generating such affective reactions. Awareness of the fossil fuel industry that permeates contemporary society, coupled with strategic empathy with particular characters, allow for a nuanced reading of the novels I will discuss here and situates them as mediators in cultural responses to the Anthropocene.

As novels that center on traumatic experiences, *Puslingar* and *The Waves Burn Bright* can be analyzed with reference to the German concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, which refers to overcoming a (by implication) difficult or traumatic past. This term has been used in literary studies primarily in the discussion of literary texts that deal with aspects of Germany's role in World War II and the Holocaust, subsequently also in relation to the German Democratic Republic and the West German protest movements from 1968 (Eigler 10). Also in other national contexts, intergenerational conflict is a common feature of narrative fiction that seeks to discuss and assimilate different attitudes to historical trauma and questions of guilt, agency, memory, and forgiveness. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* interacts with the concept of collective cultural memory advanced by Aleida and Jan Assmann. In their understanding of the way that cultural memory is constructed and conveyed as something distinct from history, texts and media (including novels) play a key role in transforming events from social memories to cultural memories over generations and in creating narratives that are compatible with cultural and national identities and values. Aleida Assmann writes "[c]ollective memory […] depends on transitions from history into memory that involve the framing of historical events in the shape of affectively charged narratives and mobilizing symbols" (67). The novels here are affectively charged and contribute to the transition from history to an evolving cultural memory of the boom years and the trauma of oil and gas extraction in the North Sea.

The idea of working through the past in literature has until now been applied primarily to social and anthropocentric traumas to explore the difficult histories of totalitarianism and extremism and their ongoing legacy for subsequent generations. I extend its use here to cover both the anthropocentric trauma of offshore accidents and the ecological trauma that is at the heart of offshore extraction. The immediate violence of the accidents themselves is underpinned by the "slow violence" (Nixon) of oil spills, air pollution, and global heating, as the results of processes that started long before the 1980s and will continue for centuries to come across the globe. The diffuse and multigenerational nature of extractive trauma, difficult to comprehend in its entirety, lends itself to being approached through these short moments of crisis; working through these human-centered traumas in narrative form generates emotional responses. Sentimentality is employed as a way of creating narrative closure by means of an affective response on the part of the reader. Tropes of sacrifice and atonement in North Sea petrofictions allow for

the exoneration of the fathers whilst leaving open difficult questions about extractive guilt and complicity.

Puslingar

Atle Berge's novel *Puslingar* opens with the news of the Alexander Kielland disaster. The protagonist is Marita; at the beginning of the novel, she is a young child who is waiting for her father, Jonny, to come home to her remote house north of Bergen so that he can help her finish building a Lego pirate ship they started together. But he never returns.

The word *Puslingar* translates roughly as "puny little people" and is drawn from the opening of the 1882 novel *Garman & Worse* by the Norwegian writer Alexander Kielland, which is cited (in modern Norwegian) on page 44 of Berge's novel:

> Nothing is so boundless as the sea, nothing so patient. On its broad back it bears, like a good-natured elephant, the puny mannikins that inhabit the world; and in its cool depths it has place for all earthly woes. It is not true that the sea is faithless, for it has never promised anything; without claim, without obligation, free, pure, and honest beats the mighty heart, the last sound one in an ailing world. (44) [5]

In Berge's novel, this passage serves to link Kielland, the author, to the platform that was named after him, the Alexander Kielland that capsized into the (boundless, patient) sea on a stormy night in 1980. But the reference to *Garman & Worse* also calls to mind the tradition of social realism in Scandinavian novels of the later 19th century, with its intent to shine a light on the inequalities and hypocrisies of contemporary society. Berge's contemporary novel is very much a work of social realism in the Scandinavian tradition of writers such as Alexander Kielland. *Puslingar*'s focus on the social dimension of Norway's oil boom, however, is contextualized by a modern awareness of oil's problematic role in ushering in the Anthropocene.

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5 "Intet er så rommelig som havet, intet så tålmodig. På sin brede rygg bærer det lik en godslig elefant de små puslinger de bebor jorden; og i sitt store kjølige dyp eier det plass for all verdens jammer. Det er ikke sant at havet er troløst; for det har aldri lovet noe: uten krav, uten forpliktelse, fritt, rent og uforfalsket banker det store hjerte—det siste sunne i den syke verden."

The centrality of the Alexander Kielland platform accident is clearly signaled via this intertext, both through the references to *Garman & Worse* within the world of the novel, and less directly through the choice of title. (The cover design by Øystein Vidnes, showing a stylized platform capsizing into a stormy sea, also marks the accident as a central event in the novel). The historical moment of the accident is the motor that propels Marita through her *Bildungsroman*-esque development as a child and young adult. The narrative starts out from a distanced and uncomprehending perspective of the accident as experienced by Marita and her mother from their home in Nordhordaland. For two days they do not know whether Jonny was on the capsized platform or not, and no body is ever recovered. Subsequently the novel accompanies Marita in her quest to find out more about the father she idealizes, about the industry he worked for, and the accident that killed him. Marita starts to find answers once she is able to build a relationship with her father's best friend, Trygve, who survived the Kielland disaster and is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Conflict between generations appears in various constellations and captures the situation in Norway in the 1980s in relation to a new industry that was part of the transformation of the country from a poor nation largely dependent on farming and fishing to a wealthy and increasingly urban one (Ohman Nielsen 215–7). Marita realizes the extent of the transformation when she starts to feel sorry for her grandfather, Jonny's father: "She was very fond of her grandad, but God help us how old-fashioned he was! In a way it was a pity for him, she thought. Everything he knew was in the process of disappearing" (Berge 109; all translations from Berge my own).[6] The sense of something new arriving in the 1980s is evident in the characters of Jonny and Trygve, both country boys from the historically poor and remote region of Nordhordaland. They are presented as innocents who knew little about the oil industry other than that it offered good pay and prospects. The father of Marita's boyfriend, Vegaard Vaage, of the same generation as Jonny and Trygve, reveals a similar sense of innocence as he says to his son: "When I was your age, I was just confused. The only thing I knew was that I didn't want to be a farmer" (132).[7]

6 "Ho var svært glad i farfaren sin, men gud hjelpe meg så gammaldags han var! På en måte var det litt synd på ham, tenkte ho. Alt han kjente var i ferd med å forsvinne."

7 "Då eg va på din alder, va eg berre forvirra. Da einaste eg visste, va at eg ikkje ville bli bonde."

The innocence of the country boys who worked offshore is contrasted with unnamed and faceless Phillips executives who were so keen to restart production after the accident that they began drilling on Edda while recovery work was still ongoing, even dumping mud on the divers who were looking for bodies (147). The greed and negligence of those overseeing drilling operations offshore weighs on Trygve when he gives Marita his account of the accident. His anger gives way to Marita's frustration with the mistrusted official investigation, which ultimately decided that faulty construction work coupled with safety failures was responsible for the accident. Marita, determined to find a clearer cause for the death of her father, conscripts Trygve to speak to the media with her and to challenge the investigation's findings. Trygve tells journalists that he has been unable to work and has little support from the state:

> You can put this in. How little help we survivors got. It's only a couple of years ago that the state recognized that our psychological problems are work-related. I don't know if you know but they've done research, and the results show that a third of the survivors have been out of work since the accident. (187)[8]

Berge's emphasis on Jonny and Trygve as underdogs—uneducated men from Nordhordaland who were badly treated by industry bosses and the state alike—gives weight to the narrative of innocent workers who were sacrificed by state-sanctioned greed. Trygve gives his account of Jonny's last moments to Marita, bearing witness to his friend's near-drowning, the attempts of the half-frozen men in the lifeboat to resuscitate him, the excruciating pain of watching Jonny being winched into a helicopter to safety, only for his lifejacket to open and pitch him back into the sea (157–8). The tense narration of Jonny's death and Trygve's rescue, emphasizing the close bond between the two, draws the reader into empathizing with the pair and their tragedy. Jonny's life and Trygve's health have been sacrificed; implicitly, it is now up to Marita to ensure that the sacrifice was not in vain by fulfilling her childhood dream of getting a good education, becoming an engineer, and succeeding in Norway's new age of prosperity.

8 "Det kan du ta med i saka di. Kor lite hjelp me overlevande har fått. Først for eit par år sidan gjekk staten med på at dei psykiske problema våre er ein yrkesskade. Eg veit ikkje om du kjenner til det, men me har faktisk blitt forska på, og resultata viser at ein tredjedel av dei overlevande framleis ikkje er i jobb etter ulykka."

Marita is part of the new generation, but her mother, too, is experiencing a degree of social mobility. Generational conflict between mother and daughter arises along with class conflict when Marita's mother starts a relationship with Einar Sletten, a schoolteacher from Bergen. Upon moving in, Einar fills the house with books and challenges Marita on intellectual matters. Marita, who along with most of the children in her school, has started to speak a more urban version of Norwegian, "the Bergen-inspired dialect she had spoken since she started in first grade" (13),[9] reacts by reverting to the rural *strilamålet* dialect spoken by her mother and grandparents, and by Jonny when he was still alive. The tension between the rural working class and the limitations of relative poverty, and the possibilities of wealth and education brought about by Norway's investment in the oil industry is played out in Marita's family. The changing gender politics are also illustrated through intergenerational conflict: Marita's grandfather, proud of his *stril* background, religious, and prone to both racist and sexist comments, tries to persuade Marita that offshore is no place for a woman. Einar Sletten, urbane and detested by Marita, is the one who steps in to defend her interest in becoming an engineer in the oil industry. Marita, torn between loyalty to her roots and her ambitions as an emancipated young woman, takes her grandfather's side (Berge 110), but his death halfway through the novel clears the stage for Marita to unite both parts of her identity.

The fact that the generation that pioneered offshore extraction in the North Sea is represented by men is hardly surprising given the almost exclusively male workforce in the industry in its early decades. But the choice of a female protagonist in *Puslingar* (and also in *The Waves Burn Bright*) overlays economic and social progress with female emancipation. Marita grows up during a period of activism on behalf of women's rights to paid work outside the home and is able to take advantage of education to train as an engineer. By implicitly linking social and economic justice for women to the greater prosperity generated by oil wealth in Norway the novel adds weight to the narrative that the fossil fuel industry has been (and continues to be) a force for good.

Historian May-Brith Ohman Nielsen, writing about the offshore accidents of the 1980s, notes that the "the human and environmental costs were seen as a tragic price but almost unavoidable for a nation that wanted to live on oil"

9 "[…] den bergenskinspirerte dialekta ho hadde snakka sidan ho begynte i første klasse."

(215).[10] Marita struggles with the human cost of the oil industry—the loss of her father—whilst also negotiating her own identity as a member of the rural working class. It was mainly working class men who paid the price with their lives in the Kielland disaster and this awareness is what causes her to hold fast to her dialect and working class roots whilst still embracing the possibilities that oil prosperity afford her.

Conflicts about the environmental cost of the oil industry in the novel take place less along generational lines, and more along those of class. Marita's middle class school friend Settembrini and her de facto stepfather Einar Sletten have an agitated conversation about the greenhouse effect and the hole in the ozone layer and Marita immediately shouts them down: "[b]ut, Jesus Christ, lads! Your whole fucking lives are made of oil."[11] She goes on to list all the things that they depend on oil for:

> clothes, paint, plastic in all its many forms. Fertilizer and preservatives. Mamma's nail polish remover, my lego bricks, the chewing gum in your gob, Einar, the glue that's holding your stupid books together. Insulation, furniture, your cassette tapes and skis, Einar. And asphalt, for heaven's sake! Your father's credit card, William, isn't just full up with oil revenue from Lindås District, it's made of oil! Do you not know that? (Berge 123–4)[12]

Marita understands that the materials of Norwegian modernity—the materials that are building her future and are making others rich—are made of and paid for with oil; shame about this is reserved for those who do not acknowledge this dependence, who profess environmental awareness whilst profiting from oil. Within the text, the logic of both the Alexander Kielland disaster and the environmental costs of fossil fuel extraction and consumption as tragic but seemingly necessary sacrifices are upheld.

The novel steers against a contemporary current of "petro-guilt" in Norway identified by Ellen Rees and expanded upon by film scholar Julia Leyda (Rees

10 "Omkostningene i menneskeliv og i miljøbelastning ble sett på som tragiske omkostninger, men nærmest uunngåelige, for et folk som vil leve av olje."

11 "Men, Jesus, guttar! Hele fåkkings livet dåkkars e laget av olje!"

12 "Klær, maling, plast i alle mulige formar. Kunstgjødsel og konserveringsmiddel. Neglelakkfjernaren til mamma, legoklossene mine, tyggisen du har i kjeften, Einar, limet som holdar de jævla bøkene dåkkars sammen. Isolasjon, møblar, kassettar og skiene dine, Einar. Og asfalt, for helvete! Bankkortet til faren din, William, e ikkje bare fylt opp av oljeskattepengar fra Lindås kommune, det e laget av olje! Vet du ikkje det?"

45; Leyda 87) as part of the broader notion of "ScanGuilt" theorized by Elisabeth Oxfeldt (2016). Oxfeldt's work explores the guilt that Scandinavians feel as a result of their privileged positions globally as wealthy democracies with access to natural resources, generous welfare systems, and relatively conflict-free societies. Berge's novel tempers any guilt by stressing the importance of Norwegian modernization in raising the rural working class out of poverty. Marita's success in being proud of her rural roots and her dialect, her love for her family, coupled with her ambition and drive in pursuing the education and career options that are available to her generation trump any ecological or social concerns about oil amongst the characters in the novel. The novel ends as Marita moves to Trondheim—the location of Norway's primary university of science and technology—to start her studies. Marita experiences a moment of displacement; her dialect marks her, she thinks, as a rural outsider, and when she mentions the Alexander Kielland accident, her new city friends fall silent before changing the subject. She resolves to keep her mouth shut, concluding that her student friends do not want to think about the accident: "People who don't manage to forget, who can't forget, are unbearable. People want to forget, they need to, just like the nation has to forget in order to be able to keep going" (247).[13] In a way, the novel is a snapshot of the climate change paralysis in Norway in the early part of this millennium. This paralysis is described so well in Kari Norgaard's study of climate denial in Norway, with increasing awareness of global warming and ecological tipping points translating only into inaction and avoidance ("Prologue").

The novel contends that the sacrifices Norway and its people made for its prosperity and modernity—human *and* environmental—are too painful to dwell on for those who bear the consequences at first hand, but in the cultural memory of the nation, they are no more than a stumble on the irrevocable journey to modernity. Ultimately, the affective closure conveyed by ending the novel with Marita on the cusp of a brighter future in the fossil fuel industries relies on a sentimental and conventional sense of wrongs having been righted. In identifying with Marita, tortured country girl made good, the reader is encouraged to override any doubts about the ecological damage caused by oil. Marita's ability to assimilate the loss of her father and to reconcile within herself her working class heritage with the possibility and prosperity of modern Norway, confirm that the traumas caused by the extractivist offshore

13 "Folk som ikkje klarer å gløyme, er uuthaldelege. Folk vil gløyme, må gløyme, slik nasjonen må gløyme, for å halde ut seg sjølv."

industry, such as the Alexander Kielland disaster, have indeed been mostly integrated—and largely forgotten—in Norway's story of progress.

The Waves Burn Bright

The structure of Iain Maloney's *The Waves Burn Bright* is more complex than that of *Puslingar*, moving both back and forth in time and between different narrative focalizations, alternating between the stories of the main protagonists Carrie and her father Marcus. The novel centers on the relationship between daughter and father and the family ties and obligations within which they negotiate it. While the Piper Alpha accident is alluded to in the novel's original title (and made much more explicit in the republished version), it is less obviously a novel about the disaster itself: Wider themes range across deep-time geology, volcanoes, climate change, sexual politics, betrayals of various kinds, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Marcus' rescue from the burning Piper Alpha is the key crisis in the novel that propels father and daughter away from each other, with Marcus becoming an alcoholic and Carrie embarking on a career as a geologist that will take her as far from home as it is possible to go. To complete her alienation from her parents, the night of the Piper Alpha disaster is also the moment she discovers that her mother is having an affair with her colleague. The Piper Alpha explosion produces a metaphorical explosion within the family, propelling father, mother, and daughter in different directions, and leaving the reader the task of stitching together the chronologically disordered fragments towards the novel's closing pages of (partial) reconciliation and understanding.

The link that continues to unite father and daughter even after the accident is their love for geology, and in particular volcanoes. The novel opens with Carrie as a child, visiting Japan with her parents, where her father allows her to hike up a volcano. While Marcus' geology degree eventually brings him to work in the oil and gas industry, including trips offshore, Carrie becomes a professor of geology specializing in volcanology. She moves between Hawai'i, the USA, and New Zealand, careful to avoid returning to Scotland, while Marcus remains in Aberdeen, struggling with alcoholism, unemployment, and PTSD.

On a human level, generational conflict in *The Waves Burn Bright* is driven by moments of betrayal. Carrie feels betrayed by her parents in their failing marriage, giving her a childhood she describes as "fighting, affairs, divorce, recriminations" (Maloney 121). The Piper Alpha disaster compounds the situa-

tion; Marcus refuses offers of help with his PTSD and alcoholism and causes first Carrie's mother, and then Carrie herself to leave him. They both feel guilt for betraying him by not helping him in his recovery. Marcus' sense that he has betrayed his colleagues when he survived the disaster is indicated in the flashback during which the moment of the accident is recounted, focalized on Marcus but addressing him in the second person, showing his disembodiment at this moment of acute stress:

> It falls apart. Melted metal buckling, dropping into the sea […] You watch the accommodation block. The galley. All those men you left in there. You watch from the boat as it tilts, it slides into the sea and is gone.
> Were they still alive when it hit the water?
> What killed them?
> Smoke.
> Fire.
> Water.
> You.
> You're alive.
> You're alive.
> You left them. (79)

The intense focalization with Marcus suggested by this present-tense narrative fragment pushes the reader to identify with his immediate situation, employing strategic empathy as described by Weik von Mossner to present the disaster from the perspective of the victim. Marcus, however, does not see himself as a victim but aligns himself with the perpetrators; with his survival, he left the men behind and feels responsible for their deaths. Unlike Jonny and Trygve in *Puslingar*, Marcus is not working class or uneducated and has not gone into offshore work to lift himself out of poverty. Marcus understands something about the industry he is in. Moreover he is shown to be a drinker and a womanizer: Nothing about him is innocent. As Marcus develops through the novel, starting to overcome his PTSD in part through writing, he begins to see himself as part of the systemic failure to look after those who do the dangerous work on the oil rigs. Carrie discovers his anger at the treatment of workers in the oil industry, including himself, when she reads his account of the disaster: "Decisions about safety, budgets, cuts, were made onshore by people who would never be put in danger. *We treated them like faceless drones there to keep profits up and problems down*" (246; italics in original). Marcus understands that the industry in which he was complicit has a price, and this price has been paid by the Piper Alpha victims.

While Carrie is waiting at the hospital for news of survivors from the Piper Alpha, a man says to her: "[t]here's a decent living to be made out of the North Sea, God saw sure it was well stocked with things we'd find useful, but by Christ He made the cost too high" (59). The cost here refers to the human victims of the disaster, but as with *Puslingar*, it can be read as extending into the environmental and ecological costs of oil and gas extraction, as well as the historic risks involved in another extractive practice, that of North Sea fishing. The environmental damage caused by the oil industry is referenced in the text, both explicitly and implicitly through the portrayal of geological processes and forms. As Carrie flies "somewhere over Russia" in 2013, she ponders on the state of the planet:

> The face of Scotland is scarred by glaciers, geological wrinkles, gouged by rivers of ice advancing, retreating for millions of years. Over enough time these scars will disappear, worn down by weather, wind and rain turning rocks to sand, washing it into the sea, washing Scotland away.
> Given enough time everything erodes. The glaciers are still retreating, global warming melting the permafrost. Each summer more and more of Greenland is exposed. The scars, the wounds.
> Consequences.
> The end of the world. Not that climate change is the end for the planet. We're creating the conditions for our own extinction and no geological scientist would ever confuse the two. (29)

This passage exemplifies the way that the novel links the long processes of deep-time that created the oil deposits with the short moments of human time—such as the explosion on the Piper Alpha or Carrie's flight—during which millions of years of crushed sediment can be turned into carbon. It employs sentimental language in doing so, extending the physical and metaphorical scars that have blighted Carrie and Marcus' relationship to those borne by the Earth over time. The collapsing of victimhood here—from physical burns to second-generation trauma to environmental scarring—underlines the way in which texts like *The Waves Burns Bright* can "use readers' empathy strategically to make a moral argument" not only "about people who have been wronged" (Weik von Mossner 78) but also about the damaged planet.

The closing part of the novel, during which Carrie returns to Aberdeen and approaches reconciliation with her father, takes up explicitly the ecological impact of oil extraction. Carrie is in Aberdeen for a conference where she is due to deliver her paper on geothermal energy extraction and collateral seismic

events. It is clearly a moment of reckoning; Marcus recognizes the significance of her return to Aberdeen not just in terms of their personal history, but also in terms of Aberdeen's status as an oil city: "She'd come to Aberdeen to deliver bad news to the oil industry in person" (267). This prompts his reflection on the history of the oil industry over his lifetime: "How much things had changed. When he'd first got into the oil industry a lifetime ago, the only two questions asked about potential oil fields were 'how much oil?' and 'how cheap to extract?'" (168). Carrie's paper, when she delivers it, is direct and confrontational: "What my work shows, what the work of my colleague shows, is that the age of petroleum is over. Geothermal energy extraction is no longer a dream. It's a reality. And that reality means the death of the oil industry" (269).

Carrie's research confronts the double traumas of the oil industry—the human trauma of the Piper Alpha disaster that is represented through her troubled father and their damaged relationship, and the environmental traumas of extraction, pollution, and global warming. Her behavior enacts a form of atonement for the sins of her father by pushing back against the industry that destroys lives both directly and indirectly. Suggesting that her research might bring about the death of the oil industry implies a future break with a history of reckless extraction; Carrie also prepares to break with the history of trauma in her own family by deciding not to have children of her own (121), a decision that has both social and ecological overtones. While the novel does imply a future without oil, it still largely conforms to what Graeme Macdonald terms the "privatization of energy guilt, resting the primary burden of ecological response to the problems s/he sees as causing in the individual, in both their 'choice' of energy consumption and their 'green' ethical behaviour" (2). Marcus' suffering and Carrie's actions are an attempt to atone and absolve them both of their guilt from their continued complicity in petroleum wealth.

The novel ends as Carrie and her father finally approach each other on the shore of a lake in the Scottish mountains. As readers we do not witness the sentimental moment of their ultimate reconciliation, but the novel builds towards this picturesque scene when the two of them are finally making sense of the traumas that have haunted them, standing together "looking out over the shimmering mirror of the loch, the last of the sun blazing on the hills, the ground beneath their feet" (277). It is telling that this pastoral scene plays out inland, in the Cairngorms, and not on the Aberdeen coast with a view out to sea. Here, it seems, at least briefly, and away from the visible infrastructure of the offshore industry, there can be the possibility of a happy ending.

Sentimental Extraction

The two novels use affective strategies to reckon with the trauma of the 1980s offshore industry; in so doing, they engage with the cultural perceptions of both the disasters and the wider ecological consequences of extraction. The short and long-term processes set in motion by events in the North Sea in the 1980s are ripe for a literary reckoning in the form of novels, with generational novels as ideal templates for the kind of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* that I identify. Both novels use the immediate trauma of the two biggest petroleum industry accidents of the 1980s in the North Sea as a way to examine oil and gas extraction more generally, drawing the ecological and deep-time perspectives as well as the human cost of extraction into the cultural narratives they contribute to.

By and large, the novels do not question the role of oil directly, instead reimagining the traumatic events at the center of the early boom years of North Sea offshore extraction, and memorializing the lives and landscapes sacrificed in pursuit of oil wealth. *Puslingar* is critical of the greed of the oil companies, their disregard for the lives of the men who worked offshore but implies that the oil that fueled Norway's modern prosperity was and continues to be necessary. Berge's novel works to inscribe the pain of the accident into Norwegian literary culture, dwelling on the individual traumas and their long legacies, but the narrative closure effected by ending with Marita's pursuit of a career in the oil industry ultimately underpins the sense of innocent men sacrificed for a greater good. The characters in the novel are aware of the way that the oil industry has transformed Norway, including the ecological damage, but implicitly, ecological sacrifices have also been a necessary condition for the success of Norway's new generation.

The Waves Burn Bright goes a step further, taking a more nuanced perspective on the traumas inflicted by North Sea oil and gas extraction and the complicity of many who profited from oil wealth, while pointing towards a future possibility of atonement for the wrongs committed by the industry. The "end of the oil industry" (and the end of Carrie's family line), together with a move towards safer and greener forms of energy could allow an unburdened generation to come to terms with the pain and damage of the past. The novel is a pre-emptive strike towards a new cultural narrative, of a troubled oil and gas industry that lasted some fifty years before being thoroughly discredited and giving way to a more ecologically friendly and socially bearable energy regime. The fathers in both novels can be exonerated; the forces that are really to blame

for the accidents are only hinted at. Any stirrings of guilt or shame on the part of readers sensing their own complicity in an oil-rich society is left largely untapped as the generations of oil workers and oil children are reconciled.

Both novels remain ultimately incomplete attempts to come to terms with the past of oil. The complex ways in which people are complicit in the oil economy are hinted at by the characters and their feelings about the industry and its products but sealed within the world of the text by the (at least implied) happy endings. This is problematic for an industry which itself seems entirely resistant to closure. Simultaneously with the ongoing formation of cultural memory through narratives of human and ecological disaster, oil and gas continues to be pumped up from beneath the seabed. Offshore extraction continues apace in the North Sea and elsewhere, and "offshore petroleum exploration and production in the North Atlantic remain inherently risky" (Polack 41). And both slow and sudden traumas continue to leave their mark in other communities, too, the Deepwater Horizon disaster in 2010 being a case in point. A recent article profiles the PTSD of a survivor of the Deepwater Horizon accident, linking this to the "moral taint" of working in the fossil fuel industry amid the ecological damage caused by drilling in the Gulf of Mexico (Press). As new generations grow up and tackle the legacy of fossil fuel dependence, new narratives and new cultural memories will be required, and new generations of oil workers and beneficiaries will need to be held to account.

The novels are a contribution to the ongoing work of cultural and collective memorialization of offshore extraction on both sides of the North Sea; they represent a second-generation attempt to work through the traumas of the past and engage with their evolving status in cultural memory. The sentimentality of the novels lies in their affective strategies, with the model of intergenerational reconciliation suggesting that traumatic events—individual, collective, ecological—can (and should) be overcome. The generational conflict that drives the novels is resolved by the final pages, allowing the characters to move forward with their lives—even as the traumas at the heart of the industry continue—making it all too easy to overlook the ongoing fallout and intractable problems of continuing oil and gas extraction. As readers, we are invited to remember the disasters, recognize the pain and the trauma—and then shed a sentimental tear, and move on.

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