

I May Be Some Time: Ice and the Imagination

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1 One: "A different history for the poles"

- "Their presence is as astonishing as their astonishing surroundings, something to be wondered at" (1) – we don't sympathize with the adventurers
- "But then explorers are notoriously bad at saying *why*. Or perhaps they are notoriously good at avoiding giving a satisfactory answer" (2)
- "The guy ropes tying them to their time snap, and they float free, into a strange region of uncalendared events. The explorers hae Edwardian moustaches, Edwardian attitudes, Edwardian pasts in the cavalry or the Navy, but teh they appear to possess these things as purely personal characteristics, out of time and out of society, in a world peopled only by themselves. What's more, that world . . . is at times even structured like the world of myth, of legend, of moral tales" (3)
- "Perhaps this is why the stories have survived, why they have the power to cross the decades and still *work* for people very remote from the dead explorers. It is not at all certain that we would like them, if we were able to meet them off the page, away from the clinching immediacy of myth" (3)

- "But if we want to understand why, and how, real, historical Edwardian men participated in the Antarctic adventure, we need to know what *they* thought their exploring meant" (5)
- "... most of them knew nothing about polar exploration when they set out to do it. The English were uniquely unprepared for the job" (5)
- "And polar history, as it is usually written, is technical history. It recounts a sequence of expeditions" (6)
- **Robert Falcon Scott's** sister Grace Scott tries to reconstruct the range of RFS's motives
 - The motives are conventional and obvious
- "Almost the entire ecology of the Arctic was marine, and there was so *much* of it, species upon species of fish, ... and birds" (9)
- Drifting ice caused a lot of life / migration of fish (11)
- Bewick's *History of British Birds* – children book that became a classic
 - Jane Eyre read it as a picture book, missed the awe that was in the book
 - Bronte says that Bewick's writing is "not [in] the language of geography but of romance and fantasy" (12)
 - "It typifies, rather, a form of perception which belongs distinctly to the novel, that home of uncertainty and filtered truths. From being the language of pious geography, albeit heithened and intensified, Bewick's words *become* here the language of romance and fantasy" (13)
- "Heat and cold probably provide the oldest metaphors for emotion that exist" (13)

2 Four: "Damn the North Pole!"

- Sir John Barrow, whaling as a boy, set out the task of a number of expeditions to find the North-West Passage
- Three voyages made before 1822: John Ross, William Parry, and John Franklin

- Ross: first encounter with Inuit tribe; set the scene for imaginative meetings with the Inuit people wondering at the English
- Parry: established a tradition for overwintering: jolliness provided morale boost and enraptured the public
- "Franklin helped start the perception of polar exploration as an activity both physical and moral, dreadful and inspiring" (51)
- Even if the NWP existed, people already knew that it was too dangerous, so it was in effect purely for geographical discovery
- "But however loudly the cash-registers chimed in the minds of hopeful sailors, the embracing of discovery as an end in itself gave exploration a distinct imaginative status, backed by the apparatus of official publicity" (52) – "The social success of the explorers contributed to the imaginative visibility of exploration" (52)
- "For every enthusiast, there was naturally somebody to point out the absurdity of growing excited over an artificial point, a geographical construction" (54)
- "Cruikshank's print satirises two things: the inutility of exploration, which brings home such tawdry curiosities at the cost of so many noses, and the ignorance of the crowd, which believes that stars and poles might be portable" (56)
- Jack Frost???
- "Interestingly, therefore, this kind of excitement about the Arctic is in agreement ... with the common-sense refusal to be excited" (57) – both agree that it is not a practical endeavor
- "It can even be argued that the success and failure of different British expeditions of the period reflects the degrees to which they were, and were not, imaginatively captured by a vision of the Arctic as bleak, blank, hostile. Those explorers least able to perceive the Arctic as it was - indifferent rather than harsh, full rather than empty, a problematic dwelling space rather than a moral playground – were also least likely to survive there" (58)
- There is no paradox between thinking of the Arctic as both a hostile and wonderful place, such as in *Frankenstein*

- "Here is the Arctic consequence of a philosophy based on disembodied willpower: it proves to be an enemy to the human body, an invitation to beat the Arctic by out-freezing it, and abandoning the change and flow – the *mutability* – of emotions" (61)
- "The monster has named the only possible use for the North Pole that Mary Shelley is willing to endorse: it is for abnegation, expiation, death" (61)
- "Criticism of exploration would often suggest that science is no adequate motive for risking lives; indeed, that the demand it seems to make for Arctic sacrifices reveals a monstrous dimension to science" (61)
- Usually descriptions of the Arctic were given as complimentary pairings, whereas Shelley's depiction is one-sidedly negative
 - "She damned the North Pole by anatomising the attractions of emptiness of a particular male sensibility, Romantic, self-driven, and ever willing to exceed the limits of the human body; she damned it, without falling silent as common sense did before an enthusiasm that readily confessed its unreasonableness" (62)
- Symmes' idea of an "inner world" – the Earth being hollow, and the poles being holes
 - "But his instances were, exactly, detached: detached from the contexts that made sense of them, and wilfully re-arranged. Since the notion of probability had no place in his thinking, he compounded one improbably interpretation with another, and another, and another, to produce one mighty improbability. Throughout, he entirely misunderstood the nature of scientific method – which is not a game of assertions, but a way of refining probabilities" (66) – proof of impossibility rather than the other way around
 - Relationship between Symmesianism and American speculative-ness?
 - "Symmesian theory confesses a terrible sense of the insufficiency of the world as it has been reported to be" (71)
 - "What Captain Seaborn wants, Captain Seaborn must get, simply by virtue of wanting it" (72)

- Poe also took *Symzonia*'s idea of a new race in the poles in his novel, *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*
 - He also depicts the pole as a "whirlpool, cataract, and circular sinkhole are all tributes to Symmes" (76)
 - "You notice, though, that the holes Poe imagines suck at the traveller as Symmes' do not. They exert a lethal downwards pull. They compel surrender rather than inviting a new Columbus to probe them boldly. They may well close behind the unresisting bodies of the sailors they have captured" (76)