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HUM324 – Polar Imagination

9 / 18 / 21

The impracticality of exploration, and the class of the polar celebrity writer

Response to Spufford's *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the Imagination*

While originally under the pretense of searching for the fabled North-West Passage, an exploratory expedition of the North becomes more a status symbol than an attempt to provide any practical advancement to society. Those that explore are glorified by those that come before them (both those that do and don't return successfully), forming a framework for climbing the social ladder: their return is marked by treasure and hysterical celebration (Spufford 56), their writings are virtually guaranteed publication (Spufford 52), and they get access to the finer gardens of society (Spufford 52).

Contrast this with the whalers by profession, who in some sense condescend to the explorers. While the whalers may also have a stake in the wealth and recognition, they had at least the grounding of an occupation. Of the men who were purely explorers, "most of them knew nothing about polar exploration when they set out to do it. The English were uniquely unprepared for the job" (Spufford 5). Lopez also acknowledges this, as the whaling crews generally "viewed the British discovery expeditions ... as a pompous exercise in state politics, of little or no practical value" (Lopez 10). The simple fact is that even if its existence of the North-West Passage is proven, the intermediate icelands would be impassable anyways, which invalidates a claim of commercial benefit. To the working whalers, pure exploration is the prerogative of those who can afford the risk of adventure.

The explorers who return have an influential role akin to famous writers or poets. Spufford lays out several written works written by these famous explorers, including playful verses from Parry (Spufford 51) and Coleridge (Spufford 53). It's not a surprise that *Frankenstein's* Captain Walton was a poet before he turned to exploration. These explorers "could expect to see their narratives accepted by

prestigious publishers [and] there was regular coverage of expeditions in serious reviews” (Spufford 52), which is part of the aforementioned framework that allows the explorers to spread their recognition with a positive feedback loop. In addition to having a platform to spread their narratives, Spufford also describes a certain characteristic of the writings that make them so popular. Bewick’s *History of British Birds* exemplifies this: despite being a children’s book about birds, it is able to capture the awe of many British people and become a classic (even making its way into *Jane Eyre*). While it doesn’t fall into the genre of fiction (nor do the accounts of the other explorers), it is a suggestive tone mixed with the readers’ imagination that pushed it into the realm of the imaginary – “from being the language of pious geography, albeit heightened and intensified, Bewick’s words *become* here the language of romance and fantasy” (Spufford 13). As we already know from our previous readings, the “hype” of polar exploration is carried on by the narratives of explorers, but here we see that even a descriptive work of ornithological writing is sufficient to stimulate the imagination.

While much of the polar curiosity formed by this emerging body of literature is evocative and harmless, it arguably hurts the science. It is difficult to contest the words of explorers, and the scientific method is (apparently) not well understood. Spufford brings about the prominent example of Symmes and his theory of an “inner world” and “layers” within the earth with a polar entrance. Of course, this is crackpot science with no regard to logical methods (e.g., the misunderstanding that the lack of a counterexample is not equivalent to a proof), but it was able to gain the attention of a body of people and some votes in Congress to pursue his speculation. It is a conspiracy theory founded on the imprecise descriptions by explorers (and unrefuted due to lack of scientific evidence).

Lastly, I find the mention of a rebuttals against the Arctic fever a welcome relief. This is a logical skepticism not encountered in the earlier readings. We have the mockery of the hysterical return celebrations by Cruikshank (Spufford 56); Smith’s logic that “if you can revere a geographical concept, you must also be able to slander one” (Spufford 55); and the *Symzonia* in response to Symmes (Spufford 72). The disdain of the whalers is another form of healthy doubt.