

DAMN THE NORTH POLE!

kind of encouragement to the sailors: 'This ice is not made of such stuff as your hearts may be; it is mutable, and cannot withstand you if you say that it shall not.' 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. Then the monster, at the last, looking down at Victor's corpse, his revenge completed, announces that he will complete the voyage Walton is abandoning: 'I shall quit your vessel on the ice-raft which brought me thither and shall seek the most northern extremity of the globe; I shall collect my funeral pile and consume to ashes this miserable frame, that its remains may afford no light to any curious and unhallowed wretch who may create such another as I have been. I shall die.' 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.

Frankenstein exploits a number of devices which will become commonplaces in the imaginative rendering of the poles. There is the use of polar cold as a metaphor for human coldness, culminating in a complete, deathly departure from emotion at the North Pole. There is the contrast between ranging male explorers and stable women awaiting their return. 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. 'There is something frightful, inexorable, inhuman', wrote a reviewer in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1855,

in prosecuting researches, which are mere researches, after such a costly fashion . . . and when we hear of the martyrs of science, whether they perish among the arctic snow or on the sands of the desert, we begin to think of science herself as of a placid Juggernaut, a Moloch with benevolent pretensions, winning, by some weird magic, and throwing away with all the calmness of an abstract and impersonal principle, those generous lives, born to disregard their own interest and comfort, which might have saved a kingdom or helped a world.

Arguments from utility, and appeals to common sense, would always tell against polar ventures. But in another sense *Frankenstein*

was quite untypical of the century's responses to the poles, for all Mary Shelley's brilliant success at casting Romantic and Gothic views of ice and darkness into permanent, nightmare images. All those recurring staples of writing about the poles, present elsewhere in stories, songs, and dramas, tended, elsewhere, to appear in balance with one another. The waiting women matched the adventuring men, and confirmed their bravery; the dark of the poles evoked the light of home. The stark pyrotechnics of the aurora recalled water-colour English fruits and flowers: 'Farewell to mossy vale, and sapphire sky', began a student poem of 1852 on 'The Arctic Regions', farewell to

Green earth, and golden wood, and silver waves,
The lily, and the zephyr, and the rose!

All were largely taken as complementary pairings, structured into an imaginative economy of exploration, its rightful and reassuring context. Mary Shelley did something rarer. She damned the North Pole by anatomising the attractions of emptiness to 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. Perhaps this happened because she was quietly dissenting, in *Frankenstein*, from a state of mind that was domestically all too familiar to her, in the person of her husband, whose idealisms also brooked no thought of consequences. For her the pole was one of a number of symbols for destructive abstraction; and she incorporated it to chill the fancy, not to develop a topic of the times.

Her jagged-edged, uncomfortable novel stands apart from those slightly later works, and habits, of the imagination which took their starting point from the public spectacle of exploration. Mary Shelley in middle age would seem to observers to become a somewhat starchily early Victorian, her dissent from Romantic wilfulness blending into the respectability of the times; Mary Shelley at nineteen, the author of *Frankenstein*, was surrounded by a small wild world of private exaltations and private crises. It is worth remembering that Robert Walton is effectively alone in his confrontation with the Arctic: the

DAMN THE NORTH POLE!

proper poetic predicament for a Romantic soul. The Russian-speaking crew do not count as company; and no trace can be seen of exploration as the intensely social experience which would soon be familiar from the captains' reports. Party hats and amateur theatricals? Hardly. Even the loopiest polar fantasia tended to re-create the feel of exploration, as it could be garnered from available sources, in order to underpin the excesses that followed.

And certainly no other exercise in geographical fantasy ended, like *Frankenstein*, in demolishing the polar arcadia it proposed, and restoring endless ice. No other brought in the belief essential to fantasy as a subject for dissection; instead it was insisted on, played with, encouraged, primped, and sometimes adhered to with maniacal vigour. Polar emptiness, for the fantasists, remained a promising thing. There is something more than slightly polar about the chart presented by the Bellman in the century's favourite piece of radical nonsense, 'The Hunting of the Snark':

'Other maps are such shapes, with their islands and capes!

 But we've got our brave Captain to thank'

(So the crew would protest) 'that he's bought us the best –

 A perfect and absolute blank!'

On this count, the polar regions would of course make the best destination of all: a place where place itself would be almost abolished, with its shapes and its particularities. (Undescribed and indescribable, the North Pole can be claimed as an obvious Snark.) But even the crew of this least constrained of voyages collided to a degree with harsh physical fact, for when Lewis Carroll lands them to begin the hunt, 'at first sight the crew were not pleased with the view,/Which consisted of chasms and crags'. Such disenchanting moments could easily be avoided in a purely imaginary Arctic, despite reports that chasms and crags played quite a large part in the boreal landscape. Polar fantasists would also have parted company with the Butcher, the Beaver, and the Broker on a second point. They might be ditching the inconvenient facts about the Arctic, but they could not forego its essential Arcticness.

'What's the good of Mercator's North Poles and Equators,
Tropics, Zones and Meridian Lines?'

So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply

'They are merely conventional signs!'

The absurdity of lines and zones on blankness was crucial. The blander the map, the more cherishable were the conventional signs. They were the hook on which the fantasy hung. Conventional signs were very important indeed.

Take, for example, the case of John Cleves Symmes.

Symmes was born in New Jersey to an old settler family in modest circumstances. Largely self-educated, he joined the American infantry in 1802, and fought against the British in the war of 1812. It seems likely that he picked up some skill in surveying and military geometry. Not long after the peace, he resigned his commission (though the courtesy title of 'Captain Symmes' which he continued to use gave him a misleadingly nautical air) and retired to St Louis on the Mississippi. A friendly witness described him as 'of middle stature, and tolerably proportioned; with scarcely any thing in his exterior to characterize the secret operations of his mind, except an abstraction, which, from attentive inspection, is found seated on a slightly contracted brow; and the glances of a bright blue eye, that often seems fixed on something beyond immediate surrounding objects'. Symmes' eye fixed on something that could not have been further distant from the streets of St Louis. There, far from any sea, let alone from the polar regions, he began to issue geographical pamphlets at his own expense: they expounded a novel theory of the earth which, like his own appearance, made up for an unremarkable outside by hinting at secrets within. In 1819 he moved to Cincinnati, but the series continued. The seventh pamphlet was an 'Arctic Memoir', Symmes being a devoted reader of polar narratives and the Arctic having a special place in his geographical scheme. From 1820, he also lectured around Kentucky and Ohio. The audiences filled the halls he booked, though his voice was untrained and his manner peculiar; though his arguments were 'presented in confused array, and clothed in homely phraseology'. He lacked the temperament to be any sort of

DAMN THE NORTH POLE!

showman. People came to marvel at the earnest zeal with which he believed his own theory. They also came, it is true, just to laugh. But he did win disciples. For the purposes of demonstration, he had a large wooden globe on the stage at his lectures, specially constructed and intricately marked. Symmes' pointer would go up, down, around, and eventually inside. The globe was hollow, with countersunk holes at the top and bottom – as Symmes believed the earth to be.

'Symmes' hole!' was a common American jeer at anything quackish or fake throughout the 1820s and 1830s, and the theory would not have had the currency it did if it had not been easy to grasp Symmes' outrageous central claim, but detailed summary is hard. This is because the theory, of its nature, changed continually, veering this way and that to stave off attacks or to appropriate some new bit of 'evidence'. In the hands of Symmes' followers, some of whom were surprisingly eminent, the pattern was a wavering advance-and-retreat, from the fullblown Symmesian idea of a hollow and *habitable* inner world, to a modest fallback argument for an ice-free polar ocean. (The poles were supposed to be ringed by a northern and southern 'icy hoop' – both duly inscribed on the wooden model.) Symmesian claims could be curbed to suit the scepticism of the hearer, and of course not all hearers were automatically sceptical. Symmes' application to the US Senate in 1822 for a polar expedition to test his propositions received twenty-five yes votes. Such hedging, however, was foreign to Symmes' own absorption in proof and counterproof. In his hands the theory just grew. From a simple one-shell earth he progressed to an arrangement of seven nested spheres, each pierced at the poles, each – he calculated, sketching planes and angles – receiving enough sunlight to support life. (Though the air deep inside might be rather unhealthy.) And then it was reasonable to assume that every other planet in the solar system was contrived in the same way. It finally became necessary for him to refute Newton's law of universal gravitation, since a planet like a Chinese toy ought not to attract us to its surface with the force it does, if gravity is proportional to a planet's mass. He had not succeeded in doing so by the time he died, in 1829.

The intellectual background to Symmes' claims was not, itself,

utterly unrespectable. There had been a flow of reasonable speculation about the polar ice-caps for some time, and though Symmes was already a little late with his contribution, the geographical data was still patchy. Science theorised in the absence of sophisticated knowledge about currents, climate, and polar ecology. In particular, it was not yet clear just how the sea-ice that clogged the Arctic was formed. If, as one school argued, only a shoreline could birth the great bergs, then a landless central Arctic Ocean – correctly deduced from the common patterning of the Siberian and North American coasts – might well be free of ice. This was wrong, but reasonable.

It would be a mistake to think that people found Symmes' holes and hollownesses ridiculous because they could be absolutely certain he was wrong. As well as for *what* he said, he condemned himself as much for the *way* he said it. What identified his doctrine immediately as pseudo-science – and invited the ridicule of a continent to drop on his earnest head – was an attitude to proof, and a tone of voice. It is strange to read the Symmesians now, because their characteristic procedures and modes of assertion are so familiar from current paperback madness. Like Erich von Daniken, like the other believers in ancient astronauts and Aztec high-tech, Symmes could be said to have known quite a lot about his subject. He collected facts. He kept up religiously with explorers' reports. As a late defender of his reputation said, he amassed many 'detached instances' from different fields of inquiry, here a puzzling remark by an Eskimo, there a surprising bit of behaviour by the common herring. 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 improbable 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. Symmes never grasped that you were required to show likelihood before a theory was taken seriously; you had to demonstrate the congruency of polar holes with everything already known. Instead he assumed you only had to prove your theory was not impossible, and it then became the responsibility of others to disprove

if they could. To his continuing bafflement, nobody bothered to. He was waiting for an answer which did not come.

And all this could be heard in his voice, his 'peculiar manner'. There was a shoddy enthusiasm, a fascination with the details of his own inventions which far overran the perfunctory and muddled attempts at justification. There was endless reference to the work yet to be done – to the further magnificent elaborations the theory demanded – for it is an axiom of pseudo-science that the final substantiation, before which the learned will quail, is always located elsewhere. Not far away, to be sure, gentlemen, but always just outside the scope of our attention at this moment. There was an evasive waving of large words, and a corresponding delight in minutiae. There was an underlying void of meaning. Unlike other lecturers, Symmes had nothing, no thing, to report: no descriptions of sights seen, no records of experiments, only the single subject of his theory. In a sense he did not intend, he was on thin ice.

Symmes was single-minded. He had at least the disinterestedness which is one part of the scientific temperament. Whether lecturing, or lobbying Congress, his sole concern was the vindication of his theory; and he did not, unworldly man, grow indignant at the cat-calls raining down on him from the cheap seats of his rented theatres. Nor did he stray into fantasies about the silence of the scientific establishment. He wanted acceptance: scientific acceptance for a 'scientific' proposition. But his followers were not so chaste. They did speculate, with resentment and petulance, about the vested interests which must be blocking the new truth; they did make accusations, see hidden influences at work, and offer overtly unscientific commentary. From Cincinnati, in 1826, James McBride published *Symmes's Theory of Concentric Spheres: Demonstrating that the Earth is Hollow, Habitable Within, and Widely Open About the Poles*. Half-sceptical, as was characteristic of the secondary Symmesian literature, McBride's book nonetheless exhibits the state of mind of those contemporaries who wanted to believe Symmes. McBride's unscientific defences of Symmes are, in fact, statements of the imaginative attractions of the theory, hints why it might have flourished briefly in the wider worlds of culture and opinion while it failed to in the world of science.

I MAY BE SOME TIME

One set of reasons for backing Symmes was rooted in his followers' perception of their place and time, and most of all in their perception of themselves as marginal. Cincinnati in the 1820s was still a Western frontier town. It thrived, it was very willing to assert an American identity, yet it was conscious of being at the fringes of a country itself still at the distant edge of the European cultural mainstream. The breakthrough of an American school of writing lay ten years in the future; most books, from novels to scientific treatises, were imports. In the same decade as McBride picked up his pen, great offence was being caused to Cincinnati by Fanny Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. On the basis of her experience as a failed emigrant to their city, Mrs Trollope told readers that America was a cultural wasteland, a hellhole of spittoons and public swearing. McBride therefore nominated Symmes as a homegrown scientific genius on the unspoken grounds that America needed one. The title-page of McBride's anonymous text said it was by 'a Citizen of the United States', and the pages that follow are full of anxious national pride. It was plain to him why Symmes' theory met so much resistance.

I apprehend that we only lack confidence in our own abilities, to perfect and explain many things not dreamed of by the ancient philosophers. We are inclined rather to undervalue our own efforts; and, like our former opinions on manufacturing subjects, think we can never appear to advantage, unless dressed in a coat of foreign manufacture. It appears to savour of the doctrine, that no new opinion or proposition can merit attention or be adopted, unless it come from a European source. Had the proposition of concentric spheres, or a hollow globe, been made by an English or French philosopher, instead of a native of the United States, I very much question, whether so large a share of ridicule would have been attached to its author and adherents.

Besides giving a kick in the pants to European snobs if it proved true, there was something of profoundly American appeal in Symmes' idea that limitless new territories awaited discovery beneath the earth's crust. Promising another New World (McBride uses the phrase), he promised a repeat of the discovery of the Americas. Anyone who ventured successfully through the hole would be a new Columbus.

DAMN THE NORTH POLE!

The founding myth of the United States would be, so to speak, confirmed by repetition.

Indeed, in scope and influence Symmesianism was an almost entirely American madness. But if we turn to the attitude it involved towards specifically polar matters, we are on psychological terrain of no particular nationality, back among the absurdly appealing signs of latitude and longitude. Like his master, McBride was of course familiar with the narrative of Ross' expedition; inevitably, he offered a Symmesian gloss on the famous meeting with the Eskimos. The Symmes hypothesis, you might say, redoubled the romance and mystery of the encounter:

The Indians discovered by Captain Ross, on the coast of Baffin's Bay, in the summer of 1818, in latitude seventy-five degrees fifty-five minutes north, when interrogated from whence they came, pointed to the north, where, according to their account, there were 'plenty of people;' that it was a warmer country; and that there was much water there. And when Captain Ross informed them that he came from the contrary direction, pointing to the south, they replied, 'that could not be, because there was nothing but ice in that direction.' Consequently, these people must live in a country not composed of ice; for it appears they deem such an one uninhabitable. Hence we must infer, if the relation given by Captain Ross be correct, that, north of where they then were, the climate becomes more mild, and is habitable; a change, the cause of which is not easily accounted for on the old philosophic principles.

Not only are the Eskimos marvellously isolated; they are now wandering inhabitants of another world. Not only has their life a topsy-turvy orientation by the standard of our own; it now turns out to signal a revolutionary change in the meaning of north and south, cold and warm. Wait, though. By opting to make the Eskimos players in a lurid Symmesian romance, has not McBride actually abolished the romance Ross and his crew found in them? They were seen, in Ross' account, to be people so different from ourselves that they took ice for the norm and the glass of a binnacle for a weird aberration. Their strangeness lay in them being at home in the polar landscape, and the confusion about north and south meant that they judged the whole world, marvellously, by their knowledge of their own snowy hunting-

runs, an isolated microcosm in which more open water for seal-catching happened to lie to the north, not the south. McBride's Eskimos judge a 'country composed of ice' to be 'uninhabitable', so they are like us after all. Instead of witnessing to a different relationship between people and polar landscape, they only tell us that the ice is an obstacle. For a romance of human strangeness, McBride substitutes a geographical Big Secret, to which the Eskimos are incidental clues. The feeling of the encounter – all the dumbshow communication and the contagious laughter – gives way to an overriding appetite for large, crude wonders. The palate formed by the Symmesian fantasy proves unable to taste subtle flavours: the flavours, that is, of those things actually present in the scene Ross described.

But then, in a theory springing from a sort of geometrical fascination, produced by tinkering with oddments of signs and geographical symbols, it is only natural that information challenging the ideal emptiness of the poles should be displaced. McBride must refuse a reality to the place Symmes selected for its abstraction. Conspiracy theory being the handmaiden of pseudo-science, McBride casts his refusal to believe in the real conditions of polar exploration in the form of a paranoid insinuation about the British.

Ross and Parry have visited the arctic regions; and Parry now is out on his third voyage, as though there were some hidden mystery there, which the English government is anxious to develope. It is not likely that they would have fitted out, and dispatched four successive expeditions, merely to view Ice-bergs and Esquimaux Indians. As for the discovery of a north-west passage to the East Indies, that cannot be their sole object, as the continent of America has been explored by land to seventy-two degrees of north latitude; and, according to the old theory, beyond that latitude the seas are so encumbered with ice as to render their navigation extremely difficult, if not impracticable; from which, I am induced to believe, that they have discovered something in those regions which indicates a state of things different from that heretofore believed to exist.

Merely to view Ice-bergs and Esquimaux Indians: such disappointment behind those words. Symmesian theory confesses a terrible sense of

DAMN THE NORTH POLE!

the insufficiency of the world as it has been reported to be. It only makes sense to be hungry for a newer New World, through a hole in the poles, if it feels as if the present world, New and Old, from Peking to Ohio, has been exhausted; exhausted at least of the chance to be Columbus, and shape the sum of things anew. The idea that the world is worn out is a much older one; it flourished when the globe was dated by biblical chronology, and the educated agreed that God's creation must be on its last legs, 4004 BC being a long time ago. But here we see it surfacing in a quite different context, with a different meaning: as a callow impatience with the lack of mystery in everyday life, as a species of ennui in an era of scurrying expansion. Exciting news might be pouring in, but it was the wrong type of news, too concrete, too paltry. Unbearable, therefore, to think that the polar regions, the beckoning and blank polar regions, might be furnished like everywhere else just with flora and fauna and funny foreign customs. Only in some cultures, and at some times, was this a likely feeling. Here it is the detachment of English-speaking North America from the dense hubbub of Europe and Asia – from any proximate experience of abroad – that gives the impatient sense of a fully known world its particular form. But England too could be sufficiently isolated, by an imperious lack of interest in the doings of outsiders; and in any case an individual's angle of vision on the world is involved. It took an individual inattentiveness to feel this summary scorn for the rich world close at hand, and to invest what is far-off with proportionally lavish hopes. Introverts, adolescent boys, and fantasists were particularly prone to the feeling – and perhaps a substantial segment of the armchair fans of polar exploration, although not many of them hoped for Symmesian revelations. Symmes hoped to abolish polar ice, but for some people the ice itself was enough of a mystery, enough unlike the disappointing warm world. Ever and again, without the overtly foolish paraphernalia of holes and hollows, a shadow of this impatience will figure in excitement about the poles: a faint deadness of response to whatever is less stark than ice and darkness. Squint at the explorers' accounts, and you could make the details you disliked, at least, blur and vanish.

It was impatience with the actual that an anonymous satire of 1820

picked up on. 'Captain Adam Seaborn', the hero of *Symzonia*, has a rampant case of the disease. On the opening page he explains why he 'projected a voyage of discovery, to a new and untried world', and why he expected to succeed:

I flattered myself that I should open the way to new fields for the enterprise of my fellow-citizens, supply new sources of wealth, fresh food for curiosity, and additional means of enjoyment; objects of vast importance, since the resources of the known world have been exhausted by research, its wealth monopolized, its wonders of curiosity explored, its every thing investigated and understood!

The state of the civilized world, and the growing evidence of the perfectibility of the human mind, seemed to indicate the necessity of a more extended sphere of action. Discontent and uneasiness were every where apparent. The faculties of man had begun to dwindle for want of scope, and the happiness of society required new and more copious contributions.

I reasoned with myself as follows: A bountiful Providence provides food for the appetite which it creates; therefore the desire of mankind for a greater world to bustle in, manifested by their dissatisfactions with the one which they possess, is sufficient evidence that the means of gratification are provided.

The author's finger is firmly on the wish-fulfilment behind the Symmes scheme. What Captain Seaborn wants, Captain Seaborn must get, simply by virtue of wanting it. He 'reasons' into being a paradise of solipsism, where nature, and even the internal construction of the earth, exist to 'gratify' our needs. A dream of endless expansibility produces – endless expansion.

Stingingly accurate about Symmesian self-deception, *Symzonia* has nonetheless been mistaken at times for pro-Symmes propaganda. (One twentieth-century critic assigns its writing to John Cleves himself, crediting him with a sense of the ridiculous he certainly never possessed.) The only tribute *Symzonia* pays Symmes is a very American admiration for the author of an audacious hoax. But in the ambiguous position hoaxing occupies, somewhere between plain truth and straightforward lying, lies the cause of the error. *Symzonia* is a hoax too, with the outward look of an honest travelogue. Dashed off with journalistic speed, as it must have been, it was not just produced to pop the Symmesian bubble with a satirical pin, but quite as much

DAMN THE NORTH POLE!

because the hollow earth made for a good story. Indeed the primary appeal of the theory, after a while, was to writers and romancers, who did not have to find the idea true to develop its possibilities. Symmes' theory sounds like pulp fiction, cared as little for consistency as pulp fiction: real pulp fiction followed, until at last the only place the Captain's lifework endured was in the three-cent-a-line imagination of Edgar Rice Burroughs. *His Hollow Earth* was a canister full of steaming jungles and teeming native cities, where men were men and women wore little. You did not go there for scientific argument. Eighty years earlier, however, *Symzonia* took *Gulliver's Travels* as its model, and tried to make the 'Internals' Seaborn meets on the inside of the world beings of perfect virtue like Swift's Houyhnhnms. Like the rational horses, they were supposed to show up the defects of humanity, as represented by the traveller encountering them; like Lemuel Gulliver, Adam Seaborn is booted out of paradise. This was too much for the talents of *Symzonia*'s author, who only succeeded, witness the confused critics, in building a decent tall story. Of course, it is quite in the Swiftian tradition for readers to remember the tiny people, the huge people, or the 'Internal' people, and forget the satire.

But *Symzonia* gave the Internals a characteristic which seems to have caught the eye of a much more distinguished author, himself interested in Symmes and the poles. It makes them white, pure white, as white as the polar snows that Symmesian geography abolishes. It displaces the absent ice onto their hair and skins. When Seaborn, having sailed through the Antarctic hole and found his way to their island, encounters them for the first time, he recalls Ross' meeting with the Eskimos, whom he rightly surmises are the swarthy outcasts of Internal society. The Eskimos tugged their noses and shouted their astonishment; the Internals, he reasons, follow a civilised version of the same code. He advances, therefore, plucking his proboscis in the most refined manner imaginable, and is rewarded with the attention of an Internal, who

walked round, and surveyed my person with eager curiosity. I did the like by him, and had abundant cause; for the sootiest African does not differ more from us in darkness of skin and grossness of features, than this man did from

I MAY BE SOME TIME

me in fairness of complexion and delicacy of form . . . I shoved up the sleeve of my coat, to show them, by the inside of my arm, (which was always excluded from the sun,) that I was a white man. I am considered fair for an American, and my skin was always in my own country thought to be one of the finest and whitest. But when one of the internals placed his arm, always exposed to the weather, by the side of mine, the difference was truly mortifying. I was not a white man, compared to him.

Sixteen years after the publication of *Symzonia*, down in the slave state of Virginia where it was worse than mortifying not to be white, a pale young man became editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. Across Edgar Allan Poe's desk for comment and review came Symmesian literature, for his editorship coincided with the preparations for the first United States Exploring Expedition to the far South, and a charismatic Symmesian by the name of Jeremiah Reynolds was contending for command of it. Poe wrote trenchantly in Reynolds' support; and, without subscribing to the theory himself, suffused a group of his own stories with a dilute Symmesianism. He, as much as Symmes or McBride, was shaped by the provinciality of his America, though in a very different fashion. He was the product (Edmund Wilson has written) of the lonely genteel houses of the period; of nervousness secluded from the world by long baize drapes; of tea-parties among lumpen mahogany furniture which might look, at twilight, like crouching animals. Where the Symmesians were prosaic, Poe was Gothic. If their ideas were a fascination of his – among his other interests, in decapitation and the reform of prosody – it was not because he felt the attraction of overturning geography with Yankee motherwit. They conceived space differently. The Symmesians wanted new space to be Columbus in, and for the poles to open on fresh expanses. Never do they seem to have realised the claustrophobic potential of a hollow earth. To Poe on the other hand the space of the poles, beyond the curtains, beyond the familiar confines of Richmond, Va., was always a mental space, an inward territory. There, far away and very close within his own skull, impulses to violent action could play out against a backdrop of private blankness. One of these concerned race. Cued, perhaps, by *Symzonia*, he recast the dark and light of polar terrain into skin colours, and

DAMN THE NORTH POLE!

made the Antarctic the scene for a Virginian fantasy of race-war and racial degradation.

Like *Symzonia*, Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* poses briefly as an authentic document. Pym is supposed to have allowed Mr Poe of the *Messenger* to ghost-write his memoirs. In this case, though, the pretence is not given away by satirical digs in the text at 'the capacious mind' of 'that profound philosopher, John Cleve Symmes' (*sic*). The highly wrought, highly patterned terror of the book instead warns the reader that the *Narrative* has sailed into unreal polar waters. Ice hardly features: the sea grows blisteringly hot, and at 83° S the much-shipwrecked Pym and his companions discover an island of savages. The rock here is black, the sand is black, the birds, plants, and animals are all matte, absolute, midnight black. So of course are the people, from their skins inward to their hearts. (Even their teeth are coal-shaded.) They are treacherous and cruel, the worst Virginian fears about rebelling nigras personified; and Poe, for good measure, improvises a biblical curse on them, for their name, in dog-Hebrew, means dark. But once Pym has escaped the murderous fate visited on his shipmates, and fled the island in a stolen canoe, he sails southward on milky waves. Now the birds are 'pallid', blanched ash falls from the sky, and whiteness wins the war of colour, a supernatural white more potent by far than the ink-puddle behind. The pole approaches; a cataract, possibly Symmesian, opens in the albino ocean; Poe cuts short the log of Arthur Pym before the canoe can whirl down to depths unknown. But just before the vertiginous plunge, and the calculated sundering of the narrative, 'there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow.'

Who the figure is, and what it portends, remain mysterious. (Jules Verne was to offer a solution of sorts later in the century. Too intoxicated with volts and amps and Big Science to leave well enough alone, he proposed that the looming shape glimpsed by Monsieur Pym was – *a giant magnet*. Poe would not have been flattered by this assault on his deliberate indistinctness.) Racial overtones apart, though, the presentation of the pole in the *Narrative* recalls its treatment in Poe's

two other stories with a polar theme. The shrouded Aryan angel was not his only version of the mystery at the world's end. In 'Hans Pfaall' an aeronaut on his way to the moon has time to look down at the North Pole from a height of 7254 miles. The ice-cap, he sees, 'terminates, at the Pole itself, in a circular centre, sharply defined, whose . . . dusky hue, varying in intensity, was at all times darker than any other spot upon the visible hemisphere, and occasionally deepened into the most absolute darkness'. And in his very first story, 'Manuscript Found in a Bottle', the lost voyager whose last message the story signs off with his vessel in the grip of an Antarctic whirlpool, its enormous sides ever steepening. 'It is evident that we are hurrying onward to some exciting knowledge — some never to be imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction. Perhaps this current leads to the South Pole itself.' Whirlpool, cataract, and circular sink-hole are all tributes to Symmes; and it should be remembered that one advantage of the theory for story-tellers is that it provides for there to be *something* at the poles, some climactic *thing* commensurate with the finality of the poles, rather than an expanse of ice significant only by geographical convention. 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. They are, so to speak, holes with teeth. At the same time, Poe is not interested in what may lie beyond these menacing thresholds. His imagination hovers on the brink itself, exploring the sensation of a limitless fall — the moment when the attraction of the drop becomes irresistible, and the traveller is gone, the flash of a waving white limb lost in a limitless rush of foam. His holes promise a delicious dissolution, sex and death fused, not transit to Symzonia.

In one way, Poe's refusal of the part of the Symmes theory dealing with the lands beyond the holes was of a piece with the caution of the later Symmessians. While Poe looked on from Richmond, Jeremiah Reynolds was romancing the Congress of the United States. His seductive *Address on the Subject of a Surveying and Exploring Expedition* carefully foreswore hollow globes and concentric spheres:

DAMN THE NORTH POLE!

Reynolds claimed only that there was a reasonable chance of an open polar sea. He even went out of his way to quash the idea that the British had any secret motive for their Arctic endeavours. 'We answer that the question, *cui bono?* should never be put in affairs of this kind.' The spice of adventure was furnished by thrilling anecdotes about the bravery of American seamen in the South Seas. 'Dropping his spade, [Mr Jones] sprang over and through the astonished savages, with an impetuosity not to be resisted . . .'

But Poe's selectivity, when the suitcase of Symmesian wonders was opened for his inspection, really shows that he placed himself at a decisive distance from the pseudo-scientific tradition, with its literalism, and the deadening touch that turned everything it envisaged into Cincinnati. His sense of an annihilating nature that draws in the body does not belong to Symmesian romance; it stems from Poe's eccentric adherence to Romantic ideas of what it was to be a body amidst the natural world. The apparatus of Poe's polar stories may have been Symmesian, but the feeling was not. If Romantic reverence for the otherness of nature most often, in his work, curdled into terror, still the body was at the centre of attention – breathing, sensing, intimating mortality. We come now to a separate strand in the imagining of the poles: their minor use in Romantic writing. Few places could be more *other* than the Arctic or Antarctic. Nature there wore a cold face, according to the explorers' reports; a disinheriting countenance towards those who, in temperate lands, thought they had a compact with her. All the mild metamorphoses of winds and trees were absent there, yet wonders abounded. Auroras played, frost crystals scintillated, the sun quit its predictable passage across the sky and did strange things. This was a feast of phenomena sure to draw minds interested in perception and sensation; and it accorded, in a curious way, with inquiries into imagination, for here was a place where nature behaved like fantasy. Accuracy about polar conditions was not required, but by the same token neither were Symmes' holes, nor any especial rewriting of the ice. The true subject remained the consciousness of the observer. The fact that Poe, delirious on his deathbed in a New York hospital in 1849, was heard to shout 'Reynolds! Reynolds!', never surfacing again to explain his calls for

I MAY BE SOME TIME

Symmes' protégé, has allowed his biographers to speculate that deep inside his head, Poe may then have been feeling himself passing helpless over the lip of a polar maelstrom, a traveller reaching the last of the space within the skull, whirling away. But the name of a man whom Poe had probably never met face to face, was only a sign for the long-imagined, now-arrived sensation.

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