

ONE

A Different History for the Poles

We had better begin with the question asked by every reader of the standard accounts of the great expeditions, the urgent question that floats irresistibly to the surface of one's mind as the contrast grows stronger and stronger between the safe, sensible surroundings in which one is reading, and the scenes that are being described. It works like a charm, always. One is sitting down somewhere in the warm – perhaps it is sunny, perhaps it is a dark evening of a temperate winter and the radiators are on – and whatever one's attitude, whatever the scepticism one applies to the boyish, adventurous text in one's hands, into one's mind come potent pictures of a place that is definitively elsewhere, so far away in fact that one would call it unimaginable if one were not at that moment imagining it at full force. Perhaps the place is a howling trough between two huge waves of the Antarctic Ocean, where a twelve-foot open boat encrusted with ice and containing five men, one of whom has gone mad and won't move, looks as if it is about to founder. Perhaps the place is the foot of a cliff in the dark, so cold and still that the breath of the travellers crystallises and falls to the snow in showers, so cold that their clothes will freeze at impossible angles if they do not keep their limbs moving. Perhaps the place is the South Pole itself, an abomination of desolation, a perfect nullity of a landscape, where a party of people are standing in a formal group, one pulling a string attached to a camera shutter. One is there in imagination as one reads, but with the possibility of instant withdrawal; one feels for the human figures at the centre of the scene, but one is not exactly in sympathy with them, though it is through their eyes that one is seeing. Their presence is as astonishing as their astonishing surroundings, something to be wondered at. And one asks, of course, everyone asks, *why?* Why did they do these insane things?

Another scene, not famous, not potent, requiring to be searched for. The beige and cream, rattan and mosquito netting of the Base Hospital, Delhi, in February 1910; despite the best efforts of the staff, a little dust spangling the strong Indian sunlight that projects in blocks and bars through chinks in the shuttered windows. The light's like something solid. Sitting up in bed in his pyjamas, Captain Laurence Edward Grace Oates of the Inniskilling Dragoons, who will be staggering out into a blizzard in two years' time, is writing a letter to his mother on paper tiger-striped by sun and shade. 'Do not let the above address frighten you, I have merely drifted in here after eating a bad tin of fish on manoeuvres . . .' Scratch, scratch goes Oates' pen, which he holds like a schoolboy. He has just heard that he has almost certainly been accepted for Scott's expedition to the Antarctic. 'Points in favour of going. It will help me professionally as in the army if they want a man to wash labels off bottles they would sooner employ a man who had been to the North Pole than one who had only got as far as the Mile End Road. The job is most suitable to my tastes. Scott is almost certain to get to the Pole and it is something to say you were with the first party. The climate is very healthy although inclined to be cold . . .'

But then explorers are notoriously bad at saying *why*. Or perhaps they are notoriously good at avoiding giving a satisfactory answer. They laugh at themselves, they deplore the sensationalising of their expeditions, they say it all made sense at the time, they write books filled with practical detail which make readers ask *why* again. They decline to answer in terms that match a question arising as this one does. Maybe then the question is impossible, less of a real question than a gesture that a reader must make. It may be that no answer is really expected, that the question does all it is intended to do by registering astonishment, and signalling the difference between sensible us and mad them.

Sometimes that difference seems so wide that the histories of Antarctic exploration by the British in 'the heroic age' might as well be myths. Although it is easy to list and date the major expeditions - Scott's *Discovery* expedition, 1901-4; Shackleton in *Nimrod*, 1907-9; Scott in *Terra Nova*, 1910-13; Shackleton in *Endurance*, 1914-16 -

Another scene, not famous, not potent, requiring to be searched for. The beige and cream, rattan and mosquito netting of the Base Hospital, Delhi, in February 1910; despite the best efforts of the staff, a little dust spangling the strong Indian sunlight that projects in blocks and bars through chinks in the shuttered windows. The light's like something solid. Sitting up in bed in his pyjamas, Captain Laurence Edward Grace Oates of the Inniskilling Dragoons, who will be his mother on paper tiger-striped by sun and shade. 'Do not let the above address frighten you, I have merely drifted in here after eating a bad tin of fish on manoeuvres . . .' Scratch, scratch goes Oates' pen, which he holds like a schoolboy. He has just heard that he has almost certainly been accepted for Scott's expedition to the Antarctic. 'Points in favour of going. It will help me professionally as in the army if they want a man to wash labels off bottles they would sooner employ a man who had been to the North Pole than one who had only got as far as the Mile End Road. The job is most suitable to my tastes. Scott is almost certain to get to the Pole and it is something to say you were with the first party. The climate is very healthy although inclined to be cold . . .'

But then explorers are notoriously bad at saying *why*. Or perhaps they are notoriously good at avoiding giving a satisfactory answer. They laugh at themselves, they deplore the sensationalising of their expeditions, they say it all made sense at the time, they write books filled with practical detail which make readers ask *why* again. They decline to answer in terms that match a question arising as this one does. Maybe then the question is impossible, less of a real question than a gesture that a reader must make. It may be that no answer is really expected, that the question does all it is intended to do by registering astonishment, and signalling the difference between sensible us and mad them.

Sometimes that difference seems so wide that the histories of Antarctic exploration by the British in 'the heroic age' might as well be myths. Although it is easy to list and date the major expeditions - Scott's *Discovery* expedition, 1901-4; Shackleton in *Nimrod*, 1907-9; Scott in *Terra Nova*, 1910-13; Shackleton in *Endurance*, 1914¹⁶-

A DIFFERENT HISTORY FOR THE POLES

they can seem to shed their identifying marks of period as we read about them. The guy ropes tying them to their time snap, and they float free, into a strange region of uncalendared events. The explorers still have Edwardian moustaches, Edwardian attitudes, Edwardian pasts in the cavalry or the Navy, but 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 – at least as we experience it through print – is at times even structured like the world of myth, of legend, of moral tales. As it is often told, the story of Scott's last expedition divides cleanly into three parts. What more natural, when woodcutters always have three sons, when the third key always opens the secret box? The story begins with a perilous journey: the expedition ship *Terra Nova*, terribly overladen, flying the burgee of the Royal Yacht Club because it is too unseaworthy to carry the White Ensign, fights its way down through the mountainous waves of the Roaring Forties, almost sinking, until it reaches the shelter of the true South, where pack-ice calms the sea. Then there is the period of preparation, of loin-girding, of feats of arms: the explorers work in their hut by the hiss of gas-lamps through the long darkness of the Antarctic winter, readying equipment and sallying out on preparatory journeys. Finally there comes the climax, the resolution of the quest: the march on the pole, with the focus always narrowing as the supporting parties drop away, mounting to the magnified gestures and conclusive speeches of the disaster. This pattern is as satisfying as it always is. No tree decorates the bleakness of the landscapes, but the story clearly takes place on the traditional terrain of the magic wood, from which – this time – the trail of breadcrumbs does not lead the travellers back to safety.

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. There's a passage in *Our Mutual Friend* where Dickens describes a group of Thames watermen fishing a body out of the river. They despise Rogue Riderhood, the apparent corpse, but they try to revive him. 'No one has the least regard for the man: with

them all, he has been an object of avoidance, suspicion, and aversion; but the spark of life within him is curiously separable from himself now, and they have a deep interest in it, probably because it is life, and they are living and must die . . .’ We probably do not find ourselves repelled by the explorers. On the other hand it is not necessarily because we feel much personal affinity with them that we are drawn in so intensely. The deep interest of those who are living and must die is the permanent source for the effectiveness of myth. We die along with Scott and Oates and the others on the return from the pole; then we find that we have survived the experience. So it touches fundamentals.

And the stories do survive; Scott’s story in particular survives. Like any successful myth, it provides a skeleton ready to be dressed over and over in the different flesh different decades feel to be appropriate. It has changed many times over in the course of its transmission from 1913 to the present. In the postwar anomie of the 1920s, Apsley Cherry-Garrard published his memoir of the expedition, *The Worst Journey in the World*, as a lament for ‘an age in geological time, so many hundreds of years ago, when we were artistic Christians’; already the decade-long gap, the geological shift represented by the First World War, was a presence in the story, a source of astringency and sorrow. The 1930s saw the expedition’s concern with natural history fashioned into something congruent with *Tarka the Otter*, and rambling in shorts. The 1948 film *Scott of the Antarctic*, with John Mills as Scott, shaped it as a postwar fable of class integration, apt for the austerity era. The myth had a quiescent period in the 1950s and 1960s, when it held a secure if shrunken position as a perfectly typical subject for a Ladybird book for children. But it metamorphosed, rather than died, on the publication of Roland Huntford’s debunking biography *Scott and Amundsen* in 1979. It survived even Huntford’s devastating evidence of blundering. Even if you allow that the reverses on the homeward journey from the South Pole that killed Scott’s party were mostly his own fault, rather than tragic bad luck, still they occupy the place in this kind of story reserved for inevitabilities, whatever their cause; they come in as downward turns of events that seem almost stipulated by the story’s structure; while at the same time as you feel the approaching deaths to be inevitable, the perpetual

A DIFFERENT HISTORY FOR THE POLES

present tense in which the story happens every time keeps hope helplessly alive. Nor was the debunked version any less open to new cultural colouring. Huntford denounced Scott from the New Right, as an example of the sclerotic official personality; the playwright Trevor Griffiths, adapting Huntford's book as a TV drama, attacked Scott from the Left as a representative of privilege and the Establishment bested by a rather democratic, workmanlike set of Scandinavians.

It would be perfectly possible, in other words, to assemble a history of all the things that the Scott myth has meant in Britain in the twentieth century. 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. Myths, Roland Barthes pointed out, are a special kind of 'sign' in that they are not constructed from whole cloth, but from a set of elements that are already packed with meaning and association. As well as beginning a history, Scott's expeditions – and Shackleton's – consummated and effectively ended a much older tradition of British polar activity. We need to ask what that history, beginning a century and more before Scott sailed in 1901, did to load meaning into the ways of seeing, ways of being brave, and ways of being in company that later became the elements of myth.

First stumbling block: most of them knew nothing about polar exploration when they set out to do it. The English were uniquely unprepared for the job. Other nationalities, less friendly to amateurism, chose experts who, for example, knew what skis were before they travelled to the polar regions. 'I may as well confess at once', wrote Robert Falcon Scott in *The Voyage of the 'Discovery'*, 'that I had no predilection for Polar exploration . . .' Consequently, when he had the encounter in Buckingham Palace Road with Sir Clements Markham, President of the Royal Geographical Society, that led to his being offered the leadership of an expedition sponsored by the RGS, he was hardly able to be influenced by the history of exploration up till then. Having accepted, wishing to seize the kind of chance to distinguish himself that the peacetime Navy was unlikely to offer, he then read up on the achievements of previous explorers: Cook and Franklin, Ross and Nansen, Bellingshausen and the rest. He gave himself a technical education in the subject.

I MAY BE SOME TIME

And polar history, as it is usually written, is technical history. It recounts a sequence of expeditions. There is a degree of variety in the chosen starting point – does it begin with the semi-legendary classical navigator who first saw the sea turn stiff with cold, or with the Elizabethan venturers in search of the North-East Passage to China? or even with the narratives and origin-stories of the Eskimos? – but a great constancy of focus and emphasis thereafter. The different explorers form a chain of discovery. They map the fringes of the world, learn the proper techniques of ice-navigation and sledge-travel. Their achievement is measured easily by the distance they leave untravelled to the two poles: a sort of geographical determinism informs this history, causing judgements of failure and success to spring from, not hindsight, but an eerily perfect rationality. Gradually, gradually, the lines on the map representing the different expeditions – sometimes coloured, sometimes broken into different combinations of dots and dashes, making an urgent polar Morse – push towards the goal.

But there is a second kind of polar history, largely uncharted; an intangible history of assumptions, responses to landscape, cultural fascinations, aesthetic attraction to the cold regions. It comes into view in a passage of a memoir of her famous brother written by Grace Scott, in which she tries to reconstruct the range of his motives for accepting Markham's offer.

RFS had no urge towards snow, ice, or that kind of adventure, but he did realise that such an expedition could give the leader great interests and expansion of life with new experiences; a fact that was immediately apparent when the appointment came, for at once he came into contact with men of the big world, all sorts of experiences and interests. In addition, he felt in himself keenly the call of the vast empty spaces; silence; the beauty of untrodden snow; liberty of thought and action; the wonder of the snow and seeming infinitude of its uninhabited regions whose secrets man had not then pierced, and the hoped-for conquest of raging elements.

Grace Scott clearly did not think this was a surprising thing to write. She evidently saw no contradiction between Scott having 'no urge' towards exploration, and his feeling 'keenly' this very specific appetite for the romance of snow. Some part of the tone of the last sentence

A DIFFERENT HISTORY FOR THE POLES

may derive from the hindsight with which she wrote her memoir, the posthumous glory of 'RFS' colouring her presentation of his early life; yet she is, after all, making a fundamentally un-glorious point. Scott was not destined to be an explorer. His recruitment resulted, at least in some measure, from accident. He was not connected, by ancestry, by vocation, or by early influence, with the practical history of exploration. His 'additional' feelings, then, so strangely developed, so full a little agenda of romantic responses to the prospect of snowy places, represent a sensitivity of another kind. If he possessed them without an active 'urge', it seems unlikely that they were in a strict sense personal feelings. Grace Scott seems confident that she is naming well-known, indeed conventional stimuli to feeling when she mentions '*the call of the vast empty spaces*', '*the beauty of untrodden snow*' (my italics). If she had thought there were any chance of them not being recognised, she would not have said 'the'. We see here, I think, the accepted influence of polar material on the collective imagination at the turn of the century.

A history of this second kind – an imaginative history of polar exploration – would have to explain where Scott's feelings came from, how they got there and how they got to be too obvious to require comment or to elicit surprise. It would need a genealogy different from the simple chronological chain of events recorded by the first sort. It would require demonstrating, not that knowledge grew, or that one impression was succeeded by another, but that the means existed to make of the data of polar discovery a stuff of conventional imagination. While it is easy to uncover particular nineteenth-century manifestations of imaginative interest in polar matters – like, for example, the huge Arctic diorama created in the Vauxhall pleasure gardens in the summer of 1852, to give the public a topical thrill at the height of the search for the missing explorer Sir John Franklin – it is far harder to trace a line of influence on from them. 'Influence' is necessarily impalpable. But by the same token, it does not have to be proved that (for example) Scott was himself aware of particular books, plays, or fashionable enthusiasms, so long as the styles of feeling they gave currency to survived, and flourished, without marks of origin, in the repertoire of the obvious.

This book is an attempt to construct an outline of such a history. Implicit in it is the assumption that ideas lose their form when they decay, yet do not necessarily lose their place in the mentality of an age. They turn to imaginative compost. Complex reasoning lives on, perhaps, as a couple of self-evident maxims. A taste it took a book to establish, and many more to justify, becomes the single word 'attractive' in a tourist guide. Schools of thought, life's-works, artistic endeavours, all find their ultimate destination in a habit of vision scarcely worth discussion. So each chapter is intended to correspond to a particular area of unattributed, unexamined thought in the minds of those who, like Oates in Delhi, could perhaps scarcely say why exploration 'is most suitable to my tastes'. Each chapter is an archaeology of one aspect of the hazy love affair between the ice and the English. As Apsley Cherry-Garrard said of a book by a fellow veteran about the life of penguins, 'It is all quite true': except that in the next-to-last section of the final chapter, which pieces back together the story of Scott, I had to describe events for which there can be by definition no written evidence. That section is pure invention.

Before going into the thick detail of exploration's imaginative history, let me give one instance of it – an unusual one, because it allows the passage of a single, very powerful imaginative impression to be traced the whole way from the obscurity of a factual appendix, to the collective consciousness of an age, via a famous novel. This particular contribution to polar sensibility has to do with seabirds; or at least it did in the beginning, in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The British whale-fishery off Greenland was then reaching the peak of its productivity. At the same time the Admiralty, largely at the suggestion of an activist Secretary, Sir John Barrow, who had served as an apprentice on a whaler as a boy, was starting to use the manpower left spare after the Napoleonic wars to mount naval expeditions to the Arctic. Between whaling captains with a bent for natural philosophy, like the remarkable William Scoresby of Whitby, and the naturalists carried northward by the Navy, some surprising information began to accumulate about the wildlife of the Arctic. Nothing much lived on land. 'The antiseptical property of frost is rather remarkable,' wrote

A DIFFERENT HISTORY FOR THE POLES

Scoresby. The cold that killed bacteria would kill most other forms of life. His account of Spitzbergen, *faute de mieux*, deals mostly with the island's geology. However, he points out, 'though the soil of the whole of this remote country does not produce vegetables suitable or sufficient for the nourishment of a single human being, yet its coasts and adjacent seas have afforded riches and independence to thousands'. (His comments on the sciences of life reveal Scoresby at his most business-like. He reserved his passionate enthusiasm for the study of ice-formation, and the earth's magnetic field.) Almost the entire ecology of the Arctic was marine, and there was so *much* of it, species upon species of fish, uncountable billions of one-celled creatures for the fish to feed on – and birds. For the first time, this biological skew – an essential feature of the polar landscape – was given systematic scrutiny. Though the naval expeditions showed a great appetite for shooting and eating their discoveries, the reports published after each returned usually included an ornithological appendix. In 1821, a 'Memoir on the Birds of Greenland', by Captain Sabine, appeared at the back of Edward Parry's *Journal of a Voyage for the Discovery of the North-West Passage*.

Sabine's work found an avid reader in Thomas Bewick, the engraver and natural historian. Bewick's *History of British Birds* included a large number of migrants, birds that only visited Britain en route from somewhere to somewhere else. Using Sabine he could establish, to take one case, that the gull-billed tern (place of breeding unknown) was probably the same bird as Greenland's glaucous gull, and the empire of knowledge expanded its boundaries a trifle. But he also took from his reading of Sabine's practical text a vivid visual idea of the Arctic; and here the details of the glaucous gull's beak-size fall away into insignificance beside Bewick's evident fascination with the peculiarity of a place where teeming wings co-existed with utter emptiness. In a way the Arctic represented the nemesis of ornithology. At some especial spot in its cold expanses lay breeding-grounds apparently out of reach for ever, a dreadful thought but a striking one to a man as mindful of Providence as Bewick.

Bewick carefully explained the thinking behind his *History* in a preface to its sixth edition (it was extraordinarily popular). 'When I

first undertook my labours in Natural History, my strongest motive was to lead the minds of youth to the study of that delightful pursuit, the surest foundation on which Religion and Morality can efficiently be implanted in the heart, as being the unerring and unalterable book of the Deity.' He had set out to create, in fact, an improving children's book. Probably the reason that children actually liked it so much was the obvious delight Bewick himself had felt at his subject; and, 'the more readily to allure their pliable . . . attention to the Great Truths of Creation', he had filled it with small woodcuts, some accurate pictures of birds, others '*Tale-pieces of gaiety and humour*'. It was thus with an audience very different from Sabine's in mind that he put his perception of the strangeness of the Arctic into words, striking a consciously attractive note of grandeur. For reasons that will shortly become clear, reasons connected with the next stage in the process of transmission and adaptation, it is worth quoting Bewick at length. He is moving on from a quick survey of the bird-life of what might be called the Near North:

Other parts of the World – the bleak shores of Lapland, Siberia, Spitzbergen, Nova Zembla, Iceland, Greenland, &c with the vast sweep of the Arctic Zone, are also enlivened in their seasons by swarms of sea-fowl, which range the intervening open parts of the seas to the shoreless frozen ocean. There a barrier is put to further enquiry, beyond which the prying eye of man must not look, and there his imagination only must take the view, to supply the place of reality. In these forlorn regions of unknowable dreary space, this reservoir of frost and snow, where firm fields of ice, the accumulation of centuries of winters, glazed in Alpine heights above heights, surround the pole, and concentrate the multiplied rigours of extreme cold; even here, so far as human intelligence has been able to penetrate, there appears to subsist an abundance of animals, in the air, and in the waters: and, perhaps, it may not be carrying conjecture too far to suppose that every region of the earth, air, and water, however ungenial the clime appears to us, is replete with animals, suited, each kind, to the place assigned to it.

Certain it is, however, that the deeps of the frozen zone are the great receptacle whence the finny tribes issue, in so wonderful a profusion, to re-stock all the watery world of the northern hemisphere; and that this immense icy protruberance of the globe, this gathering together, this hoard of congealed waters, is periodically diminished by the influence of the unsetting

A DIFFERENT HISTORY FOR THE POLES

summer's sun, whose rays being perpetually, though obliquely, shed, during that season, on the widely extended rim of the frozen continent, gradually dissolve its margin, which is thus crumbled into innumerable floating isles, that are driven southward to replenish the seas of warmer climates.

Amidst these drifts of ice, and following this widely spreading current, teeming with life, the whole host of sea-fowl find in the waters an inexhaustible supply of food: for the great movement, the immense southward migration of fishes is then begun, and shoal after shoal, probably as the removal of their dark ice canopy unveils them to the sun, are invited forth, and, guided by its light and heat, pour forward in thousands of myriads, in multitudes which set all calculation at defiance. The flocks of sea-birds, for their numbers, baffle the power of figures; but the swarms of fishes, as if engendered in the clouds, and showered down like the rain, are multiplied in an incomprehensible degree: they may indeed be called infinite, if infinity were applicable to any thing created.

About twenty-five years after *British Birds* first appeared, when it was an established classic and an ornament to any educated household, the many real children who had read it were joined by a fictional child. Hidden behind the curtain of a window-seat in the breakfast-room, the young Jane Eyre picks it up because it is 'stored with pictures', and hopes to find something in it that will carry her away from her misery in the household of her Aunt Reed. She does not read the opening pages as Bewick intended: she does not feel the intended awe at the great beneficent design by which the polar ice-cap supplies the world with fish, nor respond with enthusiasm to the suggestion that, in the eyes of God, every clime has a certain genial usefulness, whether we perceive it or not. She scarcely even notices that she is being told about seabirds. Her attention is caught only by the core of Bewick's perception of the Arctic, which feeds a mood he certainly did not anticipate, and his pictures, whose 'gaiety' and 'humour' elude her completely.

I returned to my book – Bewick's *History of British Birds*: the letterpress thereof I cared little for, generally speaking; and yet there were certain introductory pages that, child as I was, I could not pass quite as a blank. They were those which treat of the haunts of sea-fowl; of 'the solitary rocks and promontories' by them only inhabited; of the coast of Norway, studded with

isles from its southern extremity, the Lindeness, or Naze, to the North Cape . . . Nor could I pass unnoticed the suggestion of the bleak shores of Lapland, Siberia, Spitzbergen, Nova Zembla, Iceland, Greenland, with ‘the vast sweep of the Arctic Zone, and those forlorn regions of dreary space – that reservoir of frost and snow, where firm fields of ice, the accumulation of centuries of winters, glazed in Alpine heights above heights, surround the pole, and concentrate the multiplied rigours of extreme cold’. Of these death-white regions I formed an idea of my own: shadowy, like all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children’s brains, but strangely impressive. The words in these introductory pages connected themselves with the succeeding vignettes, and gave significance to the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray; to the broken boat stranded on a desolate coast; to the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars at a wreck just sinking. Each picture told a story; mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting . . . With Bewick on my knee, I was then happy: happy at least in my own way. I feared nothing but interruption, and that came too soon.

Where are we now? Not sailing up the Denmark Strait, off the coast of Greenland, with a telescope in one hand and a fowling-gun in the other, set upon scientific taxidermy; nor in the geographical limbo of Bewick’s prose, where, without being there, we may examine the northern zone of the globe and see divine schemes and reliable functions, mysteries and details. We are indoors, sitting between the window and the curtain, between the ‘raw twilight’ of an English winter evening and a house that is chilly too, though physically well heated. Perhaps this seems obvious, but it makes something different of the North Pole to bring it into a domestic interior. For Bewick ‘imagination’ had had to replace real scrutiny; now the Arctic has become voluntarily imaginative, a picture in the mind, purely internal. It is close at hand – ‘*these* death-white regions’, in here, not ‘*those . . . regions*’, away at a far distance – and available for contrast and metaphor as it was not when Sabine and Bewick gave it a geographical location.

One critic of the novel, interested in the ice and fire that figure so often in Jane’s descriptions of herself, has commented that the striking sentence Brontë quotes from Bewick is written ‘not [in] the language

A DIFFERENT HISTORY FOR THE POLES

of geography but of romance and fantasy'. This surely confuses Bewick with the use made of him in *Jane Eyre*: a justifiable confusion, perhaps, since Charlotte Brontë does not re-write Bewick, and hardly even seems to gloss him. But it might be better to say that she does not need to re-write him. The circumstances of Jane's reading, and the kind of reading that it is, already change the import of the quotation completely. Jane, as she tells us, takes from Bewick 'an idea of [her] own', born of a 'half-comprehension' which amounts to no simple misunderstanding. 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 heightened and intensified, Bewick's words *become* here the language of romance and fantasy.

Psychological fantasy, moreover, of the most obviously compensatory kind, serving the needs of the child, relieving the pressure of actuality on her. It even makes her happy, 'at least in my own way' – a rather alarming contentment. Each of Bewick's phrases has an application to Jane's situation. She is forlorn, she is in dreary space herself. Centuries of time are not in prospect; but time does pass for her without the promise of change, made limitless by lack of hope, and by a child's inability to see beyond present misery. She knows about 'multiplied rigours', and all her perceptions are 'concentred' (a word used repeatedly by Coleridge in his self-investigations) in a miserable isolation. But the most important part of Bewick's evocation of the pole – and the reason that it offers an arctic satisfaction to her – must be the cold, the extreme cold.

Heat and cold probably provide the oldest metaphors for emotion that exist. Charlotte Brontë is not original in her use of them, though she does so with a romantic violence that it is rare to find within a Victorian sensibility; and it is not usually little girls whose inner life is thought to warrant imagery of scorching and freezing. Jane's constricted life moves, however, between emotional dangers that Brontë can best illustrate with fire and ice. 'A ridge of lighted heath, alive, glancing, devouring, would have been a great emblem of my mind when I accused and menaced Mrs Reed,' thinks Jane two chapters later; 'the same ridge, black and blasted after the flames are

dead, would have represented as meetly my subsequent condition, when half an hour's silence and reflection had shown me the madness of my conduct, and the dreariness of my hated and hating position.' The polar imagery does not receive the same explicit rebuttal, but Jane's satisfaction in the imagined cold contains its own warning.

Jane has been ejected from the drawing-room, where Mrs Reed and her own children are gathered in a family circle, presumably around the warmth of a fire. By finding a refuge in a cold deeper than the one imposed upon her, in rigours worse than her rigorous rejection, she makes imagination outbid actuality. Better absolute zero, runs the dangerous logic of her position, than fears renewed again and again; better ice imagined in solitude, cold enough to freeze all feeling, than feeling sensitive to slights in hostile company. Jane's consolation in ice is definitely morbid – Bewick had not coloured 'death-white' the wastes that supported such surprising life. Like the blazing heath that consumes itself, the glazed ice provides an injurious satisfaction. One may perceive a certain rightness in imagining oneself as something so extreme – in committing the self to an absolute – but the ice too is a 'great emblem' of a state of mind it cannot be safe to continue in. Here, unexpectedly, lies the continuity between Bewick and Brontë that might seem to be utterly absent. What is transmitted down the line from Sabine to *Jane Eyre* is a thought about the relation of the poles to life. Sabine simply records bird-life. Bewick wonders at the generosity of nature that allows life to exist abundantly in desolation. Brontë, abandoning the marvel of the glaucous gull, points to the life that the pole can have in a desolate mind, integrating it, not into an ecosystem, but into the systems of images by which a person helps or harms herself. She shows, like Sabine and Bewick, that the Arctic has a place in the world of life; she conveys, enormously changed, the same astonishment that the polar wastes are connected to life we recognise.

Charlotte Brontë did not invent the use of the poles as a metaphor of this kind. Medical discourse, for example, had given heat and cold permanent seats in the human anatomy, and figured some states of mind as results of hot or cold disorders of the system. The early travellers, to take the question from a completely different angle, had, too, almost all anthropomorphised the ice, seeing its bleakness as a kind of

A DIFFERENT HISTORY FOR THE POLES

geographical misery afflicting the extreme ends of the earth. But Jane Eyre's brief imaginative sojourn at the North Pole is both a fuller, more elaborated expression of the possibilities of the metaphor, and an influential exploitation of it in the form – the novel – from which readers would most readily expect to take information about the human soul, and the unexpected shapes into which it might mould itself.

Scott's men had *Jane Eyre* in the Antarctic with them in 1910–13, as part of a useful cabinet library of classics donated by a sympathiser. It was not a favourite book. They were much more enthusiastic when they found, 'encased in ice' at a previous expedition's hut, 'an incomplete copy of Stanley Weyman's *My Lady Rotha*; it was carefully thawed out and read by everybody, and the excitement was increased by the fact that the end of the book was missing' (Cherry-Garrard). That does not matter, when the fame of the novel ensured that its heroine's dangers and exhilarations permanently modified the nineteenth century's conception of 'romance and fantasy'. Many metaphors, many fragmentary perceptions informed the explorers' attitudes to their labours. But among them, buried when the work was successful, revived when it was not, was a consistent conviction of the perversity of being where they were, a sense, worthy of Charlotte Brontë, that their presence might be dangerous to themselves, and not just physically. The explorers moved through landscapes conventionally used to signify psychological extremes.

Lieutenant Edward Evans, afterwards Admiral Evans, was invalidated home from the Antarctic in late 1911 aboard the expedition ship *Terra Nova*, returning with it a year later to find Scott dead. He organised the final departure, and described it in his *South with Scott*:

Early on 26th January [1913] we left these inhospitable coasts, and those who were on deck watched the familiar, rocky, snow-capped shores fast disappearing from view. We had been happy there before disaster overtook our Expedition, but now we were glad to leave, and some of us must have realised that these ice-girt rocks and mountains were not meant for human beings to associate their lives with.

Yet they had: an association prepared for, warned against, prefigured, and underwritten by many histories of feeling.