Johan Wijkmark

“One of the Most Intensely Exciting Secrets”

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“One of the Most Intensely Exciting Secrets”
– The Antarctic in American Literature, 1820-1849

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Abstract

This study examines a small body of 19th-century American literature about the Antarctic: Adam Seaborn’s (pseud.) *Symzonia* (1820), Edgar Allan Poe’s "MS. Found in a Bottle" (1833) and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), Peter Prospero’s (pseud.) "The Atlantis" (1838-39), and James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Monikins* (1835) and *The Sea Lions* (1849). These were written in a transitional phase in the history of the Antarctic. At the start of the period, the region was almost completely unknown. Towards the end of the period, however, the region had been mapped in its essence, and the existence of an Antarctic continent had been verified. For complex reasons, the region came into cultural focus in the U.S. during the 1820s to 40s, culminating in the first major American scientific expedition in 1838-42 to explore the South Seas and the Antarctic.

The study is primarily historical, tracing ideas to their historical contexts in order to determine what these authors used the unknown space of the Antarctic for. These texts were written in imaginative response to contemporary notions of the Antarctic, which is reflected in the mode of representation. The literature is in the mode of speculative fiction—most of texts imagining a tropical, inhabited Antarctic—up until the region is explored, at which point it turns to realism. The texts fall into three categories: the utopian, liminal, and realistic. The utopian texts—*Symzonia*, *The Monikins*, and "The Atlantis"—are works of social criticism, using the blank space of the Antarctic to treat a diverse range of issues, including politics, evolutionary theories, race, and gender. Poe’s "MS" and *Pym* represent the liminal category; they dramatize the anticipation of an imminent Antarctic discovery, narrating up to a point of revelation, only to stop short. *The Sea Lions* is the only realistic text, coming after the Antarctic is explored. Here the knowledge of the Antarctic has solidified into the environment we know today, but with religiously symbolical overtones.
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INTRODUCTION

The title of this study is taken from Edgar Allan Poe’s novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1837), in which the eponymous narrator-protagonist prides himself on having opened “to the eye of science one of the most intensely exciting secrets which has ever engrossed its attention” (17.12). The secret he refers to is the mystery surrounding the Antarctic, and especially the question of the existence of an Antarctic continent. The statement may seem surprising to readers who recall that one of the most celebrated explorers of all, James Cook, had already declared this issue as definitively settled sixty years earlier. In 1775, as he reflects on his accomplishments and experiences during his second voyage to the Antarctic, he states assertively:

I can be bold to say, that no man will ever venture farther than I have done and that the lands which may lie to the South will never be explored. […] Thus I flatter my self that the intention of the Voyage has in every respect been fully Answered, the Southern Hemisphere sufficiently explored and a final end put to the searching after a Southern Continent, which has at times ingrossed the attention of some of the Maritime Powers for near two Centuries past and the Geographers of all ages. (Cook 412, 414)

Cook knew what he was talking about; for the past three years he had charted the Antarctic seas with this one purpose in mind. In the process, he had reached further south than anyone before, 71°10’S—a point often referred to as Cook’s *ne plus ultra*, because many (including Cook himself) believed it unsurpassable—and he had completed the first circumnavigation of the Antarctic, without finding any opening in the massive ice barrier. Poe, however, lets Pym gloss over Cook’s claim of finality in relation to the Antarctic, in effect refuting what Cook had written. Since Pym’s phrasing “engrossed its attention” is such a close parallel of Cook’s “ingrossed the attention,” it is not unlikely that Poe had Cook’s passage in mind when he composed *Pym*, and was thus writing a direct rebuttal of Cook’s assessment of the Antarctic. But even though Pym’s paraphrase glosses over Cook’s, it is significant that, as in a palimpsest, the traces of Cook are still clearly discernable. Explicitly or not, Cook’s shadow looms large over Antarctic exploration, fictional or actual, in the early 19th century. William E. Lenz notes that exploration narratives were immensely popular in the early Republic, and Cook’s were the most widely diffused of

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1 Cook’s idiosyncratic spelling has been retained in this and all following quotes from his journals.
these, becoming a minor industry with a steady stream of new editions (Poetics xxi, 10). What Cook had said about the Antarctic thus in many ways set the conditions for American Antarctic exploration. If the Antarctic was to be productive again as a site of exploration or speculation, it could only be done by proving Cook wrong, which Poe was evidently perfectly aware of. He transforms Cook’s claim that the southern continent will never be explored into an exciting promise of further discovery: “So tempting an opportunity of solving the great problem in regard to an Antarctic continent had never yet been afforded to man [...]” (17.12).

Poe’s literary strategy is a mise en abyme of a larger historical development in early 19th-century America, where Cook’s Antarctic assessment was challenged in order to make the region productive again, both for literary speculation and economic expansion. As Elizabeth Leane observes: “The hostile environment encountered by Cook became, in this formulation, merely a façade, a screen, or a veil to be lifted” (151). But as the example from Poe’s Pym shows, there is a measure of anxiety of influence in the way that Cook’s presence is still detectable, even though it is negated. Such hauntings, not only from Cook specifically, but from the British crown that he represented, are a recurrent theme in the texts of this study. To a large degree, the American literature investigated here is written in opposition to the British and reflects a desire among Americans to reject their colonial history and have the nation assume its rightful place in the international community of nations, a parallel development to the 19th-century American desire for creating a national literature that would stand up to international standards.

One of the overarching aims of this thesis is to demonstrate how statements such as Pym’s above were not ahistorical fantasies, but logical products of a historical development that set in play a wide array of geographic speculations, some realistic, some less so. Poe’s radical revision of Cook’s statement of finality is symptomatic of how a distinctly American discourse on the Antarctic was created in the early 19th century, a discourse that was extended into the literature under study here. This is important to realize: when Poe wrote Pym, the Antarctic really had become a source of mystery again, and many Americans hoped that it would be revealed as a new territory for economic expansion. Some went further and took reports of ice-free Antarctic waters as indications that exploration would uncover a region of temperate climate, or even reveal an opening into the interior earth. In the second half of the introduction, I will outline this historical transformation of how the Antarctic was conceptualized in greater detail, and present some of its principal
actors. During the first half of the 19th century, the Antarctic became an American intellectual colony. In 1836, Samuel L. Southard, Secretary of the American Navy, captured the sentiment perfectly, calling the unexplored Antarctic a “theatre [...] peculiarly our own, from position and the course of human events” (269). Instead of an icy waste, it transformed into a productive site for Americans to project desires for national distinction, and exploration was the means to achieve this. The American sealer and explorer Benjamin Morrell employs similar patriotic rhetoric in his bestselling *A Narrative of Four Voyages* (1832): “To the only free nation on earth should belong the glory of exploring a spot of the globe which is the *me plus ultra* of latitude, where all the degrees of longitude are merged into a single point, and where the sun appears to revolve in a horizontal circle” (67-68). But time is of the essence, there are others who might claim the prize: “The vassals of some petty despot may one day place this precious jewel of discovery in the diadem of their royal master. Would to heaven it might be set among the stars of our national banner!” (Morrell 68). It is not just a race for the pole, it is a battle between two opposing worldviews: the republicans vs. the royalists. Another central figure in the development of Antarctic exploration into an American national concern is Jeremiah N. Reynolds, who reported to the House of Representatives in 1828 that the Antarctic is “truly our field of fame” (230). The Antarctic represents a historical opportunity for the former colonial subjects to shine.

In this study I will focus on a small body of American literature about the Antarctic produced in anticipation of the final discovery of Antarctica, as well as one written directly in its wake. The texts are Adam Seaborn’s (pseud.) *Symposium: A Voyage of Discovery* (1820), Edgar Allan Poe’s “MS. Found in a Bottle” (1833) and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), Peter Prospero’s (pseud.) “The Atlantis: A Southern World,—Or a Wonderful Continent,—Discovered in the Great Southern Ocean” (1838-39), and James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Monikins* (1835) and *The Sea Lions; Or, The Last Seals* (1849). In broad terms, I will explore how these texts relate to the subject of the Antarctic, and how they opt to signify this both real and imaginary place. My selection is restricted to American literature for the simple reason that all Antarctic fictions in English from the first half of the 19th century are American, and are part of a distinctly American historical development. In other words, this is not a

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2 The only other work of fiction from the first half of the 19th century that I know of that contains Antarctic material is Jacques Collin de Plancy’s *Voyage au centre de la terre* (1821). But this is actually a satire of the ideas of John Cleves Symmes. This is an extremely rare book; what little I have been able to find out about Voyage is from Peter Fitting’s *Subterranean Worlds: A Critical Anthology*, which includes some very brief excerpts in English translation. Plancy is mostly known for his work in demonology, especially the notorious *Infernal Dictionary* (1818). *Voyage* begins with a
selection of texts, but the entire body of Antarctic fictions in English of this period. It is no coincidence that the Antarctic became the setting of choice for these American authors. I have chosen this period because it clearly represents a transitional moment in Antarctic history, which is also reflected in these texts. There is no American Antarctic literature prior to this period, and after Cooper’s *The Sea Lions* it would be over thirty years before there was another instance.

During the period in question, the Antarctic went from being an almost completely unknown geographic territory to being known essentially as we know it today. The Antarctic was primarily brought into American public consciousness by the U.S. Exploring Expedition (1838-42), which discovered the continent in 1840. The fictional development of the Antarctic theme closely follows this trajectory from unknown to known, reacting to a relatively well-defined series of historical events. It begins with a statement of John Cleves Symmes in 1818 that beyond the ice barrier that thwarted Cook’s progress, there was a huge hole-in-the-pole that opened up to the interior earth. The first fiction of the study, *Symzonia* (1820), is a direct response to Symmes’s theory as the title implies. The historical transformation of the Antarctic can be said to end with the publication of the narrative of the U.S. Exploring Expedition in 1845, making the Antarctic known to the American public for the first time. The Antarctic representation of the last fiction of this study, *The Sea Lions* (1849), is directly modeled on the findings of that expedition. Prior to the discovery, when Antarctica was still just a hypothesis, speculative fiction

shipwreck off Greenland where the survivors are subsequently sucked into the hollow earth through a northern polar opening, landing on an interior planet. They encounter several civilizations in conventional utopian fashion, and finally return to the earth’s surface through a southern polar opening. The novel opens with an explicit reference to Symmes: “There were numerous derisive comments a few years ago when an American announced that he wanted to go to the North pole to find a great opening through which he hoped to reach the center of the globe in search of habitable lands. This project was in no way ridiculous, and the success of the voyage that we are publishing here proves it. And one day this American will return from his expedition to explain to sceptical Europeans that one should not judge too lightly matters that they know little about” (qtd. in Fitting 135).

I have excluded two other works that could possibly be labeled Antarctic fiction: the British Thomas Enskine’s *Amnath: A Fragment* (1817) and the American Robert Montgomery Bird’s short story “The Ice-Island” (1828). The Antarctic status of Amnath is dubious, however, for two principal reasons: firstly, we are only told that the protagonist’s ship is caught up in a channel somewhere off the coast of Australia (a hotspot for utopian shipwrecks), and, secondly, this channel leads not to the Antarctic but to the an extraterrestrial planet called “Deucalix.” It does therefore seem to be part of an older utopian tradition, a planetary romance owing much to Margaret Cavendish’s *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (1666). I concur with Elizabeth Leane, when she opts not to classify Amnath as an instance of Antarctic literature, because of the “lack of specificity, and the fact that the vast majority of the action takes place on another planet” (153). “The Ice-Island” is excluded for similar reasons. It relates the story of a man marooned on an iceberg, but from what little can be gathered from the texts, this takes place somewhere in the Southern Indian or Pacific Oceans, so it is really only the berg that comes from Antarctica. It is interesting, however, insofar as it relates how there are rocks and a pine tree embedded in the ice—common elements found in arguments for tropical polar regions.
explored its imaginative potential. In this period we encounter texts of utopian communities and temperate Antarctic regions. Immediately after the discovery, the conceptualization of the region is transformed in literature as well, which now represents the region in realistic terms. The shift from a fantastical to a realistic mode of Antarctic representation occurred in perfect synchronicity with the empirical discovery of the continent.

Taken together, these texts present an opportunity for studying a relatively defined development of a literary theme in dialogue with its historical context. However, these Antarctic texts do not trace a continuous evolution of a literary theme since there is no visible continuity between them. They do not react to each other; the development they represent is determined by their relation to their contexts. Each invents the Antarctic anew, filling it with a wide variety of material. A unified methodological approach is therefore not possible, since the texts are so disparate, sharing only nominally a space of projection. This is especially apparent with the utopian texts, since they are not so much envisioning the Antarctic as engaging with the American society symbolically through the Antarctic. As David Fausett remarks on the study of the literary utopia, it needs to be approached from several non-literary perspectives, since a “purely literary one is inadequate because utopia was always marginal to literature, as much involved with ethnography or with politico-economic or religious theory as with literary aims” (8). Consequently, my analytical approach has been to apply broad historical readings in order to find out how these texts interacted with their contemporary contexts. My most general objective has been to investigate how the Antarctic is configured and put to use in each text. In most of them, the Antarctic is made a symbolic site where contemporary social or ideological issues are acted out. The object of this study is thus not primarily the influence of the Antarctic as an actual geographic site on literary fiction, but rather what the region was made to represent. As Stephen Greenblatt points out, European travel writing of the New World might not tell us all that much about that new world, but we can be certain that “European representations of the New World tell us something about the European practice of representation” (7). Likewise, the texts in this study, with the exception of The Sea Lions, tell us little about the Antarctic itself, but a good deal about the expectations on the Antarctic, and about the society in which they were produced. The 19th-century American conceptualizations of the Antarctic were closely connected to contemporary ideas of nation building. The Antarctic was seen as a natural extension of national interests, a proto-version of Manifest Destiny transposed to the Antarctic but relying on the same
kind of expansionist rationale. But in these fictions this national interest is
doubled, since they use the unknown space of the Antarctic to project domestic
social concerns. Several of the Antarctic fictions make the voyage to the
extreme end of the earth only to reconstruct a version of home, acting out
familiar American themes such as republicanism, independence, religion, and
race.

The first five texts—Symzonia, The Monikins, “MS,” Pym, and “The
Atlantis”—were written during a period when knowledge about the Antarctic
was largely based on scattered rumors or speculations. These are all therefore
quite naturally speculative fictions that utilize the blank geographic space of
Antarctica as a site of projection where they exploit the outer realm of
possibility in a playful manner. The Antarctic is merely a geographic empty
space over which a speculative topography is superimposed, whether a hollow
earth or temperate countries inhabited by supreme races of humans or
monkeys. But it is not a space that is completely removed from reality; the
Antarctic represented a discovery that was just over the horizon. In the case of
Pym and “The Atlantis,” this is especially apparent, since they were written in
the same moment as the U.S. Exploring Expedition launched into the
Antarctic, both referring directly to its departure. This anticipation of imminent
discovery creates an epistemological tension that is exploited imaginatively.

After the speculative period of Antarctic fiction, however, when we
arrive at Cooper’s The Sea Lion, the Antarctic is completely different from that
of the previous texts. It is written when the existence of the Antarctic continent
and its environmental conditions had been established by exploration, and as a
direct consequence it is realistic, with a specific Antarctic setting of a much
more material quality. What all these texts have in common, whether written
before or after the discovery of the Antarctic continent, is that they are all
imaginative responses to the changing sign of the Antarctic. In one sense, the
Antarctic functions in some of these texts as a generic signifier much in the
same way as, say, utopia or Atlantis. Symzonia, Monikinia, or Atlantis—the
utopian regions of Symzonia, The Monikins, and “The Atlantis” respectively—
could have been located just about anywhere without it affecting their utopian
content. But, significantly, they were not. The Antarctic represented something
special to these authors and their readers, either an exciting unknown space of
vast imaginative potential, or the newest acquisition of science—and, no less
importantly, in that capacity it also possessed perceived marketing potential. It
is this sense of excitement before something new that is the common
denominator of these texts, rather than any specific set of literary themes.
Based on their treatment of the Antarctic, these texts fall into three distinct categories that I have opted to label as the utopian, the liminal, and the realistic. The utopian texts—Syzygia, The Monikins, and “The Atlantis”—proceed beyond the farthest point of known geography, and depart radically from probability. All of these involve elaborate imaginary communities, inhabited by exalted humans, highly evolved monkeys, and dead prominent historical personages respectively. These are largely conventional texts; members of a long tradition of utopias and satirical travelogues, including works such as Lucian’s The True History (2nd century CE), Thomas More’s Utopia (1516), and Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels (1726). Since these are in a genre that engages in social criticism by definition, this is where we find most of the historical parallels to American society and politics. In the study of these texts, my primary aim is to analyze the contents with which they fill the emptiness of geographical space that the Antarctic represented.

The liminal category consists of Poe’s Antarctic fictions, “MS” and Pym. Here it is apparent that my categorization does not describe a strictly chronological development since “MS” is written before The Monikins, and Pym before “The Atlantis,” but Poe’s approach to the Antarctic is different from the other pre-expedition texts. “MS” and Pym both dramatize the limits of geographical knowledge, simultaneously figuring as the possible limit of human understanding. The narrators are able to transcend these limits, but not to report what lies beyond. They never positively take the imaginative leap beyond the known empirical territory, but it is suggested as a further possible plotline that stretches beyond the scope of the text. In this sense, both these texts stage the anticipation of an imminent Antarctic discovery that characterized the American 1830s. Instead of projecting possible revelations, as the utopian texts do, they narrate up to the point of revelation only to suspend the narrative there indefinitely. In a poignant scene of “MS,” the narrator describes the suspense of the ending as if being “doomed to hover continually upon the brink of eternity, without taking a final plunge into the abyss” (143). This is an arresting image of the effect achieved in both these texts. In Pym, it is primarily brought about by the lack of a conventional ending. The narrative is interrupted in the most climactic scene, just on the brink of Antarctic discovery, leaving the reader with a dead narrator but with the prospect of complementary chapters that may yet be recovered.

The realistic category includes only The Sea Lions. Here the Antarctic has transformed from a temperate region inhabited by lost tribes or new races into the frigid and hostile environment we know today. The main features of the
Antarctic in *The Sea Lions* are drawn from contemporary narratives of polar exploration. Importantly, however, this is not to say that it is entirely naturalistic—in the sense of being explainable through natural and scientific laws. For all its realism, Cooper’s novel is devised to point beyond empirical knowledge once again, but this time not to an unexplored geographical region, but in a metaphysical direction. The Antarctic becomes a sublime symbol of human transience, a manifestation of the ineffable knowledge of God, a region in which the righteousness of the sealers is put to the test. The novel is a spiritual allegory conveyed through a historical romance of sealing. This text may be the least fantastic of all the texts discussed but it is still the most mystical, as the sublimity of the Antarctic landscape is constructed as a gigantic apparatus for spiritual trials.

The individual readings of these texts will lead in several different directions where, predictably, thematic kinships between them can be traced via America rather than Antarctica. Like the view of the Antarctic, the U.S. was of course also in a state of transition politically, geographically, and socially in the early 19th century. After the Revolution and the War of 1812, the American republic took form both politically and geographically. The Louisiana Purchase (1803) more than doubled its territory, and by the claim of the Oregon Country the nation had extended from the Atlantic to the Pacific. But there were also several other revolutions taking place during this period, albeit in more limited fields. The first half of the 19th century saw the emergence of a variety of modern scientific disciplines, such as geology and paleontology, both powered by early conceptions of evolution and leading up to its definitive formulation by Charles Darwin in 1859. These new sciences brought with them the controversial and widely discussed insight that the earth was much older than had previously been supposed. They also made evident that species were not fixed categories that had existed in the same form since creation, but had developed over immense stretches of time in adaptation to their environment, or had even become extinct if they failed to adapt. It was also a period when attempts were made to introduce racialist ideas into anthropology in a systematic fashion. It was a foregone conclusion that races other than the Caucasian were inferior, and various attempts were made to prove this empirically. At the same time, the institution of slavery was becoming an increasingly critical source of conflict between slave states and free states, and the union more volatile as a result. The role of women in society was also in the process of being redefined. Even though female suffrage was not ratified until 1920, the progress towards women’s rights started in the early 19th century with
the establishment of the first colleges for women in the 1820s and a general
discussion of women’s legal and political rights. All these tensions and conflicts
are represented in most of the Antarctic fictions of this study in one form or
other because the Antarctic is not the desolate landscape that we are used to,
but is used as a space of social projection.

The earlier fictional explorations of the Antarctic are parts of the nascent
genre of science fiction, which also explores the outer realm of possibility.
_Symzonia, The Monikins_, and “The Atlantis” have a direct link to science fiction
in that their plot developments rely on some advance in technology to
overcome the previously impassable boundary of the Antarctic, and to convey
both protagonist and story into the unknown. In the present context, however,
the technological focus of science fiction is rather peripheral, just as it is in the
texts. While _Symzonia_ and “The Atlantis” feature societies with technology far
more advanced than that of the period—dirigibles, jet propulsion, magnetic
drive, and tank-like vehicles—these are not integral parts of the plot, but figure
primarily as markers of the attainments of higher states of civilization. I will
therefore use the more general term speculative fiction in relation to these texts.
Of course, speculative fiction specializes in such blank surfaces just beyond the
empirically known, such as the Antarctic represented in the early 19th century,
whether these are located in unknown terrestrial or extraterrestrial space, in the
future, or in alternative realities.

Even though the speculative fictions of this study are expressly
fantastical, they playfully exploit the fact that they cannot be definitively refuted
by their contemporaries other than on circumstantial grounds. To be sure, the
texts were certainly challenging the reader’s credulity, but it can be argued that
such literature rather delights in challenging knowledge and reason with
“improbable possibilities” as Miriam Allen deFord has termed it (qtd. in Aldiss
and Wingrove 165). Darko Suvin has aptly described this as the “‘it ain’t
necessarily so’ aspect of SF,” since it offers the possibility of alternative realities
(x). Consequently, in order to study texts of an imaginary kind that might
appear fantastical in retrospect but still seem to refer to a common reality, we
need to put them into their historical and ideological context to establish the
conditions for their speculations. Suvin also points out a further function of
speculative fiction that is relevant in the present context: “SF is not only ‘it ain’t
necessarily so’ but also ‘things could be otherwise’” (xi). This points to one of
the most frequently recurring themes in speculative fiction: utopianism and its

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3 Suvin’s “SF” denotes science fiction, but as it is equally applicable to the broader term speculative
fiction, I choose to disregard the specificity, and exploit the fact that the abbreviation can refer to
both.
inherent social criticism. Suvin uses Ernst Bloch’s famous categorization of science fiction as an “as if” relation to reality, and widens this to include literary utopias as well, pointing out that both forms are “exploratory organ[s] based on the ‘lateral possibilities’ of history-making” (42).

The term utopia, coined by Thomas More, invokes two Greek homophones: eu-topia, “good place,” but also eu-topia, “no place.” This indicates a central characteristic of utopian fiction: it was often projected on a region just outside the realm of geographical knowledge, a simultaneous nowhere and somewhere. But a central characteristic of the genre was to locate these utopias with geographic and temporal specificity, as an integral part of their playful apparatus of verisimilitude. Due to its geographical remoteness and mythical status, the legendary unknown continent in the south, terra australis incognita, provided fertile imaginary space for utopian fiction for a long time. But terrestrial utopian space was becoming scarce as the world was explored. Antarctica was essentially the last place on earth in this regard. David Fausett has surveyed imaginary voyages to utopias of “the Great Southern Land” in texts from the 17th and early 18th centuries. He addresses precisely the gradual depletion of imaginary spaces available for utopian projection:

Utopian societies before the nineteenth century were often set in unknown regions to the south of the Old World, especially in the legendary Great Southern Land. They developed an ancient link between fiction and places that, before they became empirically known, were literally “u-topian.” Growing familiarity with the Far East and the Americas turned the focus to terra australis incognita, which continued to provide a rich source of imagery. In the end this last earthly unknown would be lost with James Cook’s exploration of the Antarctic latitudes in 1772-1775. Its demise coincided with that of utopian writing in its original (geospatial) sense. (Fausett 1-2)

Fausett describes a gradual decrease in the unknown physical territories of the earth and postulates that Cook’s second journey finally filled in all existing blanks on the maps, leaving no more unknown physical territory on which the

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4 Suvin actually claims that utopia is to be regarded as a sub-genre to science fiction (Positions 42). But this seems to me to exclude utopias that have little or no emphasis on science and technology. The term speculative fiction, however, seems to envelope both forms, while indicating the similarity of their propositional approach to reality.

5 See entries in OED for “Utopia” and “Eutopia”; More used the word eutopia in reference to Utopia in a letter that was used printed as a preface to the book. But he seems to have had mainly “no place” in mind as he sometimes referred to his book by the Latin equivalent Nusquama, meaning nowhere. But the pun on eu-topia might also have been present (More ed. note). This was also picked up in a later installation of the genre, Samuel Butler’s Erewhon (1872), which is quite logically a dystopian inversion of the utopian theme.
classical form of utopia can be projected. This might be true within the scope of Fausett’s investigation into the utopias of *terra australis incognita*, which is limited to utopias that he locates to Australia. He claims, however, that Cook’s discovery of Australia and exploration of the Antarctic was the end of the geospatial utopia altogether. But earthly utopias showed more resilience than that; they just moved further south. This is proven by the existence of *Symqonia, The Monikins*, and “The Atlantis,” to name only those under discussion here, and which are undoubtedly instances of the classical utopia. For all his thoroughness, Cook had actually not managed to sight the Antarctic continent and establish its existence with certainty before he had to turn back. This, together with other scattered observations about the conditions in the Antarctic region, provided the necessary loopholes for the imagination, not only in utopian literature but also in science and exploration. Cook’s Antarctic writings became contested, and the unknown region in the south was reopened for utopianism.

As can be inferred from the above, the search for a southern continent has two distinct phases. The first phase is concerned with the European discovery and exploration of the Australian continent in the 18th century, which was thought to be a part of a larger southern continent, the *terra australis incognita* before Cook proved it could be circumnavigated. The second phase begins with the realization that Australia formed a continent of its own, which was logically termed *terra australis* for a period before the name Australia caught on in the 19th century. After Australia became known, the search for Antarctica began. A new final terrestrial blank space thus opened up for speculative writing, reviving the southern utopia. Even though Fausett’s assessment of the death of the geospatial utopia is contradicted by the American utopias in this study, his general observation about the correlation between the state of geographical knowledge and the fiction produced applies. As long as Australia only existed as possibility, with scattered reports of its existence, it was a productive site of utopian projection; however, “utopia, in its classical form, would lose its relevance once the world became fully known and give way to other forms of fiction, notably the modern realist novel” (Fausett 9). That describes precisely the development from utopianism to realism that is found in the American Antarctic literature of the early 19th century.

* Terra australis incognita is consequently not always the same as Antarctica, which is the reason why I have excluded one text that superficially looks as if it should have been included as a primary text in this study: Baltimore minister Jonas Clopper’s *Fragments of the History of Bawfredonia: Containing an Account of the*
Discovery and Settlement, of That Great Southern Continent; and of the Formation and Progress of the Bauifridonian Commonwealth (1819). This utopian satire does not qualify as Antarctic literature for the simple reason that it is not set in Antarctica, nor does it relate to the idea of the Antarctic in America at the time; the “great southern continent” of the title refers to Australia.6 Although written in 1819, Clopper’s novel is really an atavism of the imaginary travels of the 17th and 18th centuries that Fausett studies, which were responses to scattered reports of sightings of land, shipwrecks, and marooned sailors among exotic tribes from what would become known as Australia. Some elements are even older than that—Clopper’s protagonist refers to the ancient idea of Antarctica when he builds his hypothesis of a southern continent on the reasoning that “it would be most unreasonable to suppose that there should be so much land on the north side […] and none but small islands to the south” (17-18); an idea that I will have occasion to return to in the sketch of the history of Antarctica below.

Phillip E. Wegner suggests another aspect of the historical function of utopias, which I think is equally applicable to any kind of geographical speculation in that both invoke a virtual space that will inevitably be supplanted by empiricism. He invokes Frederic Jameson’s term “vanishing mediator” to describe the transitional function of utopias as “cultural interventions that in retrospect appear as bridges […] between different organizations of social life, and whose particular effectivity disappears once these transitions have been accomplished” (10). This marks a point of similarity between the utopian and Antarctic themes, which converge in Symzonia, The Monikins, and “The Atlantis.” At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Antarctic was just such a site of “crisis, conflict, change, and open-ended potentiality” (Wegner 10). The Antarctic map was in the process of being drawn, but the nature of the Antarctic regions was contested: Cook had urged future explorers to disregard the region altogether as barren and useless, but there were dissenting voices. Reports of more temperate climates beyond Cook’s furthest point appeared, which seemingly refuted his claim that the Antarctic was an impasse. These contesting views opened up the region for speculative potential. Several Americans perceived this new “open-ended potentiality”—Symmes and Reynolds, to name but the most ardent figures—to be valuable as an instrument to envision national expansion and distinction.

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6 Incidentally, it is thus evident that not even Australia ceased to be a site for utopian communities with Cook’s discovery; proving, if nothing else, that literature rarely lets itself be contained in categorical statements.
As geographical speculations, the Antarctic fictions discussed in this study also function as “vanishing mediators” in that their existence is naturally ephemeral. They occupy a position that will be supplanted by empirical knowledge, but which is at the moment open for speculation. Again, the point being that, as the term “mediator” suggests, they are not wholly fantastical projections, but extrapolations of existing ideas, albeit with extreme license. This might also explain the vanishing interest in such works, as they can no longer appeal to the curiosity of an audience that is already in possession of the facts. In Wegner’s terms, their “particular effectivity” had disappeared (10). This might also be reflected in their publication histories. Except for Poe’s Pym and “MS,” which have both taken a central position in the Poe canon, the other texts have remained relatively obscure. Symzonia has only been reprinted once, in a limited run, and is again out of print. “The Atlantis” has only been partially reprinted as a curiosity in the periphery of Poe scholarship. Although Cooper’s other writings are part of the American canon, The Monikins is all but forgotten and is not currently in print in a regular edition.

Readers of H. P. Lovecraft will recognize the literary strategy of projecting a narrative on a surface just beyond empirical knowledge from one of the classics of Antarctic literature, “At the Mountains of Madness” (1936). Lovecraft fills in the blanks left to explore in the interior of the Antarctic continent, just as it stood on the verge of being fully charted by Richard Byrd from the air. In precisely the same way, the speculative pre-exploration fictions of this thesis anticipate an Antarctic discovery that was believed to be close at hand. We are so accustomed to think of the heroic exploits of the likes of Roald Amundsen, Robert Falcon Scott, Ernest Shackleton, and Byrd, during the first decades of the 20th century, that it is easy to forget that what had actually been charted of the continent was even then only a fraction of the vast space of Antarctica. But the early 20th-century explorers knew essentially what they would find when they ventured to Antarctica. Roll back the clock a century and no one had any clear idea what was beneath Cook’s furthest south, 71°10’S. Indeed, the Antarctic Circle (appr. 66°S) had still not been crossed for nearly 340 degrees of longitude (Stanton 16). That means that there was an unknown part of the world of a magnitude that could easily accommodate a continent the size of Europe or Australia—or, for that matter, a gigantic hole.

The vastness of this unknown space is one of the most crucial aspects to bear in mind when investigating the idea of the Antarctic in the first half of the 19th century. Furthermore, it represented a region just beyond the limits of empirical knowledge, the last earthly unknown, the discovery of which was
generally considered to be imminent. It can perhaps best be understood in comparison with a parallel phenomenon of the 20th century. In our own time, the planet Mars seems to occupy the same position just over the horizon; it is not yet exhaustively investigated, but it is the focal point of exploration, and steadily on its way to become known territory. Every once in a while, a vague outline of some unidentifiable object on a grainy photograph sets off a wave of speculations about alien civilizations and governmental cover-ups. Predictably, this has spawned a wide array of film and literature projecting diverse visions onto the Martian surface. In a very similar way, reports of open polar seas, mild polar climate, and tropical seeds embedded in icebergs stimulated speculations about the Antarctic in the early 19th century. And just as the great southern continent served as the isolated space for utopian fiction in the late 17th to early 19th centuries, Mars has hosted utopian fictions in the 20th. There are actually more links between Mars and the Antarctic than one would assume; the one superseding the other seamlessly in the same structural position as the next frontier. In Gustavus W. Pope's Journey to Mars (1894)—to my knowledge the first Martian fiction—the planetary voyage commences in Antarctica. Interestingly, this future trajectory was outlined already in 1820. In Symzonia, the protagonist predicts that, after the Antarctic and the regions beyond are fully explored, “we should then have to look to the moon or some of the planets for room for further discoveries” (220).

Previous Research

The studies that have specifically looked at Antarctic fiction from this period are relatively few. All of them are produced within the last fifteen years, however, so perhaps we are seeing a burgeoning interest in the Antarctic literature of this period.

The historian Stephen Pyne devotes a chapter of his book The Ice: A Journey to Antarctica ([1986] 1998) to art and literature with Antarctic subject matter. For the early 19th century, Pyne exemplifies with the contrasting Antarctic visions of Poe’s Pym and Cooper’s The Sea Lions, noting that both, in their own separate ways, construct the landscape as “moral universes” (153). Pyne emphasizes the important influence of real exploration narratives and reports from the Antarctic on the literature that was produced. He also

7 Ray Bradbury’s The Martian Chronicles (1950) is perhaps the best known, and one of the more elaborate is Kim Stanley Robinson’s utopian Mars Trilogy: Red Mars (1992), Green Mars (1993), and Blue Mars (1996). Robinson—who followed up his Martian trilogy with the novel Antarctica (1997)—lets his Martian settlers in the Mars Trilogy spend their selection and training period in Antarctica.
observes that the early 19th century saw a growing interest in the Antarctic since reports that contradicted Cook’s findings of an icy waste began to appear, thus opening up the region for speculation (Pyne 163).

In an unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Antarcticas of the Imagination: American Authors Explore the Last Continent 1818-1982* (1995), Elena Glasberg makes a selective journey through American Antarctic texts. Her primary focus is Poe’s *Pym*, but she discusses Cooper’s *Sea Lions* and Seaborn’s *Symposia* as well, before moving forward to Ursula K. Le Guin’s short story “Sur.” One of the major points that Glasberg makes, which corroborates my contention in the present thesis, is her reading of *Pym* and *The Sea Lions* as “bookends” to the U.S. Exploring expedition. Poe anticipates the expedition by deferring the Antarctic revelation into an unspecified future, and Cooper closes the books on further speculation by representing the Antarctic in realistic terms, as something already explored (90).

In *The Poetics of the Antarctic: A Study in Nineteenth-Century American Cultural Perceptions* (1995), William E. Lenz traces the cultural significance of the Antarctic during the same period as this thesis. Most of the book is devoted to James Croxall Palmer’s *Thulia: A Tale of the Antarctic* from 1843 (I discuss *Thulia* briefly in Chapter Five). But he also includes brief discussions of all the primary texts included here, with special emphasis on Poe’s *Pym*. Lenz demonstrates how profoundly the idea of Antarctic exploration affected the Antarctic literature of this period, connecting this to a general cultural sense of urgency. He even states “A belief in the power and significance of exploration characterized nineteenth-century American culture” (Lenz, *Poetics* xxii). In support of his claim, Lenz exemplifies with an impressive catalog of book titles on exploration. Lenz also notes how the Antarctic discourse develops from its visionary origins into being perceived as “a means to confirm national identity” (*Poetics* xli).

Elizabeth Leane has taken an inventory of 19th-century utopian fiction set in the Antarctic, “Romancing the Pole: A Survey of Nineteenth-Century Antarctic Utopias” (2004). Leane mentions or briefly discusses all the texts covered here. One of the major points she makes is that Antarctic literature is a specific type of fiction, with its own sets of representational conventions, essentially different from Arctic literature. Hence we miss a meaningful difference if Antarctic fiction is labeled only as polar literature, as is often the case. In analogy with David Arnold’s concept “tropicality,” Leane suggests we term this differentiating characteristic “Antarcticality” (148). She notes that the prevalence of Antarctic utopias is grouped around the historical moments of
Antarctic exploration, first in the first half of the century, and then is revived towards the end of the century when the Antarctic comes into focus again.

The subject of David Fausett’s *Writing the New World: Imaginary Voyages and Utopias of the Great Southern Land* (1993) is not Antarctic literature per se, but rather early literature set in the unknown of Australia, and what he terms the “Austral theme” (2). But even so, this is essentially an earlier manifestation of the Antarctic theme, which makes his study very useful to my work, especially its demonstration of how the austral fiction exploited the geographic uncertainty of the Australian continent during the 17th and early 18th centuries, which seems to me to describe precisely the role of the Antarctic enigma in the early 19th century. Fausett also demonstrates how closely the Austral theme is used to engage with social concerns, including politics, race, economy, exploration, colonization, religion, and sexuality, which correspond to my findings here. To some degree, the present study can be seen as a continuation of Fausett’s since he claims that the geospatial utopia ceased to exist after Cook, but I will show that it reemerged again further south.

One last source deserves mention, even though it is not a book or article: Fauno Lancaster Cordes’s on-line database “Tekeli-li” or Hollow Earth Lives: A Bibliography of Antarctic Fiction. For students of Antarctic literature it is an invaluable go-to source for references or general orientation.

What has been missing is a study that treats the American Antarctic literature from the beginning of the 19th century as a body, and one that provides elaborate readings of these texts in relation to their historical context. My hope, of course, is that the present thesis will bridge this gap. However, before taking on those texts from the perspective suggested here, it is necessary to outline the history of the idea of the Antarctic in order to better understand the forces that made the region the signifier it was for these authors, and especially in order to understand how it came to be an American national project.

**Antarctica: The History of an Idea**

Antarctica as we know it today is the most extreme and hostile environment on Earth. Even with modern knowledge it seems alien. Temperatures regularly fall to -89°C (Fogg and Smith 15). It receives very little precipitation; in some areas no rain has fallen for thousands of years, making it technically the world’s largest desert. In fact, the conditions in some Antarctic areas so much resemble the Martian climate that NASA has tested equipment for Martian exploration
there. Robert Falcon Scott succinctly described his South Polar experience:
“Great God! this is an awful place” (376). The geographical poles in themselves
are not features of the landscape; they are just the theoretical spots where all
meridians intersect. After his first flight to the South Pole, Richard Byrd
reflected on his reasons for doing so: “The Pole lay in the center of a limitless
plain. [...] And that, in brief, is all there is to tell about the South Pole. One gets
there, and that is about all there is for the telling. It is the effort to get there that
counts” (342). Winnie-the-Pooh learns the same thing when he asks
Christopher Robin what exactly the pole is that they are searching for. Robin
answers evasively: “It’s just a thing you discover” (Milne 101)—a telltale sign
that A. A. Milne had been thoroughly fed with numerous accounts from the
Heroic Age of Antarctic exploration, and perhaps did not really see the point in
risking lives to attain a meaningless spot.

In view of what we know of the Antarctic today, it seems an unlikely
candidate for projections of earthly paradises and temperate climates. But such
it has been from at least the 4th century BCE, when Aristotle projected a
continent there to balance that landmass in the northern hemisphere (Gurney
3), and well into the 19th century. The name Antarctica derives from an early
geographical/cosmological concept of the ancient Greeks in which the world
was divided into hemispheres. The northern hemisphere was called Arktos, the
Greek name for the northern star constellation Ursa Major ‘the Great Bear,’ and
the southern consequently Antarktos. The southern hemisphere was envisioned
as an inaccessible “torrid zone” separated by the “burning line” of the equator.
This imaginary space has undergone many transformations since then. The
most momentous occurred in the first half of the 2nd century CE when Ptolemy
created his defining geography. He depicted the inhabited world, the eikoumenē,
but he also included a great southern continent, joined to Asia and Africa into
one super-continent (Headland, Chronological 52). When the Greek cosmography
was picked up by the Romans, however, the legendary continent was renamed
terra australis incognita, which would be the general name until the end of the 18th
century.

The first mention of an actual Antarctic explorer is apocryphal. In the
oral tradition of Ratotonga, the capital island of the Cook Islands in Polynesia,
a legend relates that, ca. 650 CE, chief Ui-te-Rangiora ventured as far south as
into the icy seas in a canoe (Headland, Chronological 52). In the 16th century, the
first recorded explorers started to navigate the South Seas. In 1520, Ferdinand

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8 The first recorded appearance of the word “Antarctic” in English is from 1366, in a translation of the
travels of John Mandeville (OED).
Magellan sailed through the straits connecting the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, thereby proving that South America was not attached to a southern continent—the first in a long line of voyages to limit the possible size of the mythical continent. In 1578, Francis Drake made the first recorded incursion into the Antarctic Ocean when he was driven south of Tierra del Fuego by a storm. There he met a vast expanse of open sea, disproving the notion that those islands formed the northernmost tip of a large continent (Fogg and Smith 16-17).

Towards the close of the 17th century, another important idea surfaced that would become closely linked to the Antarctic and which has been the stimulant of much speculative fiction ever since: the hollow-earth theory. In 1692, the Royal Astronomer Edmond Halley (of comet fame) postulated that the earth was hollow with two shells and a solid sphere in the center, which would account for magnetical variations that had been observed. He hypothesized that the interior atmosphere consisted of luminous gas that periodically escapes through openings at the poles, causing the phenomena of aurora borealis and australis. He even allowed for the possibility that the interior could be inhabited. But he never managed to persuade the Royal Geographic Society to support an expedition to verify his theory.

Another explorer of this period, Yves Joseph de Kerguelen-Tremarec, serves as an example of the potentially deceptive attraction of the idea of the terra australis incognita. In 1772, he discovered the Kerguelen Islands at the approximate point where the cartographer Oronce Finé had projected the coastline of the southern continent on a famous map in 1531 (Fogg and Smith

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9 Johannes Kepler might actually have been the first to propose that the earth would consist of several concentric spheres. James McBride quotes from Rees Cyclopaedia: “Kepler, in his Epitom. Astron. Copern. (as after him Dr. Halley, in his enquiry into the causes of the variation of the needle, Phil. Trans. No. 195.) supposes our earth may be composed of several crusts or shells, one within another, and concentric to each other” (McBride 131n). McBride also mentions another hollow-earth theorist following Halley’s lead in the 18th century, the Swiss mathematician and physicist Leonhard Euler: “Euler was also an advocate for the theory of Dr. Halley. He believed, with him, that the earth is hollow, with a ball, or nucleus, included in the centre; he, however, differed from Halley as to the nature of the nucleus. Halley believed it to be constituted of the same materials of the exterior crust of the earth. Euler believed it to be a luminous body formed of materials similar to the sun, and adapted to the purpose of illuminating and warming the interior surface of the crust, which he supposed might be inhabited equally with the exterior surface” (132; see also Standish 48-49). McBride concludes, however, that neither Kepler, Halley, nor Euler left any polar openings through which the interior could be explored and that their theories, therefore, had to remain conjectural (132n, 133). In 1665, Athanasius Kircher had also proposed a related theory in his Mundus Subterraneus, but in his case the earth was not as much hollow as it was honeycombed by a network of subterranean tunnels through which the ocean waters circulated (Standish 22-23). Thomas Burnet also proposed that the earth was hollow in his The Sacred Theory of the Earth (1681), but that it was filled with water, a fact which would then account for the immense amount of water that would be needed for the biblical Flood (Standish 24-28). Interestingly, both Kircher and Burnet imagined that the surface water of the earth flowed through its interior through an immense opening, or vortex, at the North Pole and emerged from an opening in the South Pole (Standish 22-28; Godwin 106-08).
16). Perhaps deceived by the coincidence of the map and the general hopes for the discovery of a prosperous continent, Kerguelen-Tremarec suppressed the desolation and frigidity of the islands. On his return to France he gave an optimistic account of what he called *La France Australe*, which he claimed to be “an extensive southern continent suitable for colonization” (Headland, *Chronological* 74). As Bertrand observes: “in 1772 there was general belief in a large, still-undiscovered continent in the southern hemisphere suitable for European settlement” (2). The example of the New World led many to wish for a discovery similar to that made by Columbus, and hence the seductive power of a temperate southern continent was perhaps greater than it might otherwise have been. This might explain why Kerguelen-Tremarec was able to convince French authorities of the glorious prospects he presented. He was soon dispatched on another expedition with the objective of colonizing the new acquisition. But this time he could no longer delude himself nor anyone else about its desolation and frigidity. On his return he was court-martialed, discharged, and imprisoned (Fogg and Smith 17).

The legendary southern continent also attracted the colonial minds of Britain during the 18th century. Its primary champion was Alexander Dalrymple, fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, who seemed somewhat obsessed by the idea of finding the mythical continent. He built a grandiose hypothesis of a continent that would stretch to “a greater extent than the whole civilized part of Asia,” calculating that it could have more than fifty million inhabitants, which could replace trade with those unruly subjects of the American colonies: “the scraps from this table would be sufficient to maintain the power, dominion, and sovereignty of Britain by employing all its manufacturers and ships” (qtd. in Gurney 17). Dalrymple almost got the chance to test his theory in 1769, when the transit of Venus was to be observed for the second time.10 But his stubborn insistence on the search for a southern continent disqualified him from the task since he refused to acknowledge that observing the transit was the primary objective (Gurney 18).

Dalrymple’s dismissal provided a career-making opportunity for a young James Cook, who took over command. The explicit purpose of the voyage was the astronomical observation of the transit of Venus, but the Admiralty also

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10 The whole project was the brainchild of Halley. He had predicted that transits of Venus across the Sun would occur in 1761 and 1769, and that careful observations of these could be used to measure the distance to the sun. It was an immense international project in scope. For the first transit on 6 June 1761, a hundred and twenty observers from nine nations observed the transit from pre-established positions around the globe. The first attempt was a disappointment, however, as numerous unforeseeable factors, including war, weather conditions, and inaccurate instruments, rendered the observations insufficient. All efforts were directed towards a more successful observation of the second transit in 1769 (Gurney 17).
enclosed secondary instructions to search for a continent south of Tahiti (Fogg and Smith 18). Cook followed his orders to the minute and returned to England three years later to report his findings. The journey had been an incomparable success in all departments, especially in natural science and geography. But for our present purposes, its most interesting result was that “great slices have been taken off any theoretical southern continent; five thousand miles of new coastline have been surveyed, with New Zealand and the east coast of Australia firmly marked on the world’s maps” (Gurney 20). Cook was lionized, and the Admiralty, the Royal Society, and the whole of England were ecstatic. Not so Dalrymple, however, who fumed that Cook had lacked in perseverance and left the primary question unanswered: “whether there is or is not a SOUTHERN CONTINENT?” (qtd. in Gurney 21).

In 1772, Cook was dispatched on a second voyage to the Antarctic, this time with the specific objective to reach as far south as possible. This voyage effectively cut down Antarctica to roughly the size we know it today. On 30 Jan. 1774, he reached the furthest south recorded up to that point, 71°10’S. Despite his efforts to keep close to the ice barrier, however, he never managed to get a sighting of the actual continent (Fogg and Smith 18). He refused to regard this as a failure, however, feeling that he had done all that could be done in the dangerous conditions of the Antarctic:

the greatest part of this Southern Continent (supposing there is one) must lay within the Polar Circle where the Sea is so pestered with ice, that the land is thereby inaccessible. The risk one runs in exploring a coast in these unknown and Icy Seas, is so very great, that I can be bold to say, that no man will ever venture farther than I have done and that the lands which may lie to the South will never be explored. Thick fogs, Snow storms, Intense Cold and every other thing that can render Navigation dangerous one has to encounter and these difficulties are greatly heightened by the inexpressible horrid aspect of the Country, a Country doomed by Nature never once to feel the warmth of the Suns rays, but to lie for ever buried under everlasting snow and ice. (Cook 412)

He concludes that continued exploration further south under such conditions “would have answerd no end whatever, or been of the least use either to Navigation or Geography or indeed any other Science” (Cook 413). A couple of weeks later, he returns to the subject in his journal, as if to reassure himself of having made the right decision in turning back. He evidently considers himself as having finally refuted the ideas of a terra australis incognita in general,
and Dalrymple’s great temperate continent in particular: “I had now made the circuit of the Southern Ocean in a high Latitude and traversed it in such a manner as to leave not the least room for the Possibility of there being a continent, unless near the Pole and out of the reach of Navigation” (Cook 414). This is also where he writes that his voyage meant “a final end put to the searching after a Southern Continent,” which was discussed in the beginning of my introduction (Cook 414). As can be seen from these excerpts, Cook’s account of the Antarctic leaves some ambiguity on the point of the existence of a southern continent. He only infers its existence, based on the correct assumption that ice only forms by land, without being able to verify it by observation. But he forcefully denies the idea that a search for such a continent can be a productive route for further exploration—Antarctica is a dead end. As Nathaniel Philbrick writes: “when Cook voyaged beyond the Antarctic Circle and found only icebergs and whales, the figment of Terra Australis Incognita appeared to have vanished forever” (19).

This concludes the European history of the search for the southern continent. No new major discoveries on the scale of Columbus could be expected, ones that could affect the prosperity of nations through trade, migration, and colonization. In fact, there seemed to be no more uncharted terrestrial territory for such discoveries to be made at all. There the whole matter could have rested if it was not for a rather unlikely series of events that managed to throw out Cook’s icy continent and put the Antarctic on the agenda anew—this time in the entrepreneurial United States.

**The American Antarctic Project**

On April 10, 1818, the following pamphlet, sometimes titled “Circular No. 1,” was sent to all major American academic and political institutions, as well as to numerous distinguished individuals and selected institutions in Europe:

**LIGHT GIVES LIGHT, TO LIGHT DISCOVER—“AD INFINITUM.”**

ST. LOUIS, (Missouri Territory)
North America, April 10, A.D. 1818

TO ALL THE WORLD!

I declare the earth is hollow, and habitable within; containing a number of solid concentrick spheres, one within the other, and that it is open at the poles 12 or 16 degrees;11 I pledge my life in support of this truth, and am

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11 According to James McBride, Symmes estimated the diameter of the northern polar opening to 4,000 miles, and the southern to at least 6,000 (28).
ready to explore the hollow, if the world will support and aid me in the undertaking.

JOHN CLEVES SYMMES
Of Ohio, late Captain of Infantry.

N.B.—I have ready for the press, a Treatise on the principles of matter, wherein I show proofs of the above positions, account for various phenomena, and disclose Doctor Darwin’s Golden Secret.12
My terms, are the patronage of this and the new worlds.
I dedicate to my Wife and her ten Children.
I select Doctor S.L. Mitchell, Sir H. Dasy and Baron Alec. de Humboldt, as my protectors.
I ask one hundred brave companions, well equipped, to start from Siberia in the fall season, with Reindeer and slays, on the ice of the frozen sea: I engage we find warm and rich land, stocked with thirsty vegetables and animals if not men, on reaching one degree northward of latitude 62; we will return in the succeeding spring.

J.C.S.13

The pamphlet was also widely reproduced in magazines on both sides of the Atlantic in the years that followed.14 It was the work of the retired army captain John Cleves Symmes, who now devoted his time to this project despite his having no formal scientific training. He wisely chose to attach a verification of his sanity (Stanton 9). To little avail it would seem, as E. F. Madden writes: “His theory was at first received with universal ridicule; the French Academy declared it unworthy of serious consideration, and a petition to Congress […] was disregarded. Symmes was held to be little better than a lunatic” (741). Symmes and his advocates took the opposition as the token of a misunderstood genius, pointing out that not even such important figures as Pythagoras, Copernicus, Galileo, Columbus, or Newton were initially well received (McBride 18-20). Philip I. Mitterling writes that Symmes himself claimed that he had not heard of any other hollow-earth theorists—such as Kepler, Halley, Kircher, Burnet, or Euler—before he devised his theory (75). But David Standish notes that he might have become familiar with Halley’s ideas through Cotton Mather’s widespread The Christian Philosopher (1721),15 or through the

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12 This alludes to Erasmus Darwin’s The Botanic Garden (1791), in which the phrase refers to the mysterious source of winds. Darwin proposes that with knowledge of how they originate, winds could be controlled by human agency. He writes of how nature may “disclose in this inquiring age [his] golden secret to some favour’d sage” (1: 111, 3: 319-20).


14 For instance in 1820, in Shollo and Reuben Percy’s The Percy Anecdotes: Original and Select (173-74); in 1822, in the article “New World about to be Discovered” (119-20); and, in 1823, in the article “The North Pole” (393).

15 In an essay on magnetism, Mather recapitulates and discusses Halley’s work on magnetism and theory of a hollow earth: “Sir Isaac Newton has demonstrated the Moon to be more solid than our Earth, as nine to five; why may we not then suppose four Ninths of our Globe to be Cavily? Mr.
work of the Scottish John Leslie in the beginning of the 19th century (46-50). Symmes most original contribution, however, was the contention of the vast holes in the poles, which could be passed through to access the interior (ill. 1).

![Image](image_url)

**Ill. 1. Hollow earth: American Symmes’s illustration of his father’s theory**

In 1820, Symmes started lecturing on his theory, equipped with a model globe with the poles sawed off. During the early 1820s, he also made several fruitless petitions to Congress to arrange an expedition like the one suggested in his pamphlet. Although nothing came of these petitions, they were evidently debated extensively enough to incense some commentators. For instance, *The North American Review* writes about the narrative of the Long expedition to the disputed territory of the Louisiana Purchase, but which had been restricted due to financial concerns. The author argues that the expedition could have been successful if only allotted “One half of the wages of the members of Congress for the hours they have sagely devoted, from time to time, to the nauseous projects and petitions of Colonel [sic] Symmes and his moon-stricken disciples” (“Long’s Expedition” 268). This alerts us to the fact that Symmes had some level of legitimacy, cautioning us from assuming in retrospect that he was merely a curiosity on the fringe of 19th-century science. Symmes’s theory appealed to many; he was even dubbed the “Newton of the West” (N. Philbrick 19). His theory got its most elaborate exposition to date in James McBride’s

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*Hailey allows there may be Inhabitants of the lower Story, and many ways of producing Light for them... The Diameter of the Earth being about eight thousand English Miles, how easy 'tis to allow five hundred Miles for the Thickness of the Shell! And another five hundred Miles for a Medium capable of a vast Atmosphere, for the Globe contained within it! But it's time to stop, we are got beyond Human Penetration; we have dug as far as 'tis fit any Conjecture should carry us!' (Christian Philosopher 116-17).*

*16 At one point, Symmes’s theory also attracted the attention of the Russian Chancellor under Tsar Alexander, who tried to recruit Symmes for a polar expedition (Griffin 390). He did not accept the*
book Symmes’s *Theory of Concentric Spheres; Demonstrating that the Earth Is Hollow, Habitable within, and Widely Open about the Poles* (1826). McBride points out a central idea in Symmes’s theory, which will recur frequently throughout this study, that the polar ice is only a barrier surrounding the poles: “The whole appears to strengthen the opinion, that there is a barrier, or circle of ice, about where the whalers go to fish; but, when that is passed, we come to an open sea, and a more temperate region” (78-79). Thus the idea of a temperate Antarctic region that Cook thought he had laid to rest is resurrected.

Symmes certainly left a lasting impression on the American public consciousness.17 The appearance in 1820 of the novel *Symzonia*, which takes its name in honor of Symmes, testifies to that. Robert F. Almy observes that George Tucker’s *A Voyage to the Moon* (1827) also contains a reference to Symmes (230). During the moon-voyage, its protagonist seizes the opportunity to turn his telescope towards earth and study the region “near the Poles, with a view of discovering whether its form favoured Captain Symmes’s theory of an aperture there; and I am convinced that that ingenious gentleman is mistaken” (ch. 5). Even as late as 1853, the editor of *Harper’s* clearly expects the reader to be able to decode the passing reference to Symmes in a raillery on American entrepreneurship: “A railroad to the moon, or a proposal to drain the Polar Sea through Symmes’ Hole, would be fancy stocks of a very pretty character and huge fortunes might be made out of such substantial projects, if the wheel was only made to turn” (“Editor’s Easy Chair” 843). Symmes’s theory arrived in a period when it was common to complain that the steady progress of science meant that the world was rapidly losing imaginative territory. As a response, his theory promises to literally open up that closing world to reveal a new vista of possibility. Like a conjurer, he promised to summon up a second world—perhaps even additional ones since initially Symmes conceived of the earth as a series of concentric spheres (Griffin 385)—where only one had existed before.

In time, Symmes won some proselytes as well; the most notable was Jeremiah N. Reynolds who “understood the uses of publicity much better than he, and one who was to become in turn his disciple, chief publicist, bitterest enemy, and successor” (Stanton 13). Initially, however, Reynolds was so taken by the idea that he devised a nationwide lecture tour for Symmes and himself to spread the word of the theory. They started out in 1825 and Reynolds was especially adept in captivating his audience (Mitterling 82-90). One newspaper

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17 As the example of Plancy’s *Voyage* shows, he made an impression in Europe as well (see note 1).
editor, who had admitted initial skepticism, reported that Reynolds supplied them with convincing “facts, the existence of which will not admit of a doubt, and the conclusions drawn from them are so natural, so consistent with reason, and apparently in such strict accordance with the known laws of nature, that they almost irresistibly enforce conviction on the mind” (qtd. in Stanton 14). In 1826, fifty members of the Pennsylvania legislature were so inspired by one of Reynolds’s lectures on Symmes’s theory that they addressed an open letter to Reynolds, expressing their support for further application to Congress, since they regarded “that feature of the new theory which proposes further discovery, quite as reasonable as that of the great Columbus, better supported by facts, and though to test its truth by a voyage of discovery, is sufficiently hazardous to those who may embark in it, it is more promising than was that of the discovery of the new world” (Roberts et al. 428).

During the collaborative years, however, Symmes and Reynolds’s views started to diverge. Reynolds urged Symmes to ameliorate the theory somewhat, a pawn sacrifice for the sake of their prime cause, which was to get the means of “testing the truth of the Theory” (qtd. in Stanton 15). One specific point of contention between them was whether to explore the Arctic or the Antarctic regions. Symmes had projected a land-borne expedition that would travel by foot and sled from Siberia and further into the Arctic polar opening. Reynolds, on the other hand, realized that the present public and political interest lay in exploring the Antarctic (Mitterling 85). This was the region most trafficked by the American fishing fleet and, importantly, “That was where the seals were” (Stanton 16). Symmes refused to accept any restrictions or alterations, however, and the two parted ways. Symmes’s health declined soon after, and he died in 1829.

Almy observes that already in his first published work, “Remarks on a Review of Symmes’ Theory” (1827), Reynolds distanced himself from Symmes:

He had no intention of convincing the world at that date that the earth was hollow; he was content to show that “it might be so,” and then went on to defend his own “bold proposition”—namely, that there was apparently an icy circle, both to the North and to the South, “which being once passed, the ocean becomes less encumbered with ice, and the nearer the pole the less ice.”

(232)

This latter point was made with support mainly from the observations of the British sealer James Weddell, who had reached a record breaking 74°15’S on 20 Feb. 1823, while reporting that “NOT A PARTICLE OF ICE OF ANY
DESCRIPTION WAS TO BE SEEN” (qtd. in Gurney 207). Weddell’s accomplishment was a momentous event for the American discourse on the Antarctic. This indicated that Cook had been mistaken—there was more to be found in the Antarctic. As Reynolds expressed it:

The testimony of Weddell, who pierced to the highest parallel of south latitude known to have been attained by man, is decidedly at variance with the opinion of Captain Cook, respecting the extent of impenetrable ice to the South Pole. […] Nothing can be more encouraging than this gentleman’s statements, to those who hold the belief that the Pole can be attained. (Address 93-94)

There was also another crucial point that could be extracted from Weddell’s account: he stated that the temperature was mild in the extreme south (Reynolds, Address 94). This corroborated both the theories of Symmes and more moderate theories of open polar seas. The notion of a temperate Antarctic runs as a theme through all of the fictions in this thesis, with the significant exception of Cooper’s The Sea Lion.

Left to his own devices, Reynolds toned down the ridiculed parts of the theory—i.e. the holes-in-the-poles and the interior inhabitable worlds. He had considerable success in winning the sympathies of the public and press, managing to deflect the image of the project from a pure quest for knowledge into a matter of economic utility and national distinction: “The newspapers were applauding it not without digs at the federal government for sitting back in republican lethargy while the ships of England, France, and Russia were crushing through the ice floes in the race for empire” (Almy 235). It seemed a politically opportune point to make at the time. When John Quincy Adams assumed presidency in 1825, he had an ambitious plan of improvement of the arts and sciences. In his first Annual Message, on 6 Dec. 1825, he discussed the benefits to global science and the treasuries of the nations of Europe that had been the results of expeditions of exploration:

The voyages of discovery prosecuted in the course of that time at the expense of those nations have not only redounded to their glory, but to the improvement of human knowledge. We have been partakers of that improvement and owe for it a sacred debt, not only of gratitude, but of equal or proportional exertion in the same common cause. (qtd. in Watts and Israel 58)

Adams did not expressly indicate any particularly desirable field of exploration, but since Reynolds’s Antarctic project would fit the bill perfectly it is easy to see why Reynolds would choose to refashion Symmes’s visionary project in more
pragmatic terms as a national affair. That he was successful became evident in 1828, when Reynolds was employed in an extensive governmental project to collate data about the Antarctic by interviewing whalers and sealers. The resulting report is concluded with an argument for an expedition since all information shows “how much remains to be done in that portion of the globe,” claiming that this latent stock of knowledge has given the U.S. a head start in the pursuit over all European nations, making this the American “field of fame” (“Report” 230).

Reynolds’s efforts to get a bill passed for exploration almost came to fruition in 1828, but it would not happen just yet. Approved in the House, the bill was delayed in between sessions in Senate, and ultimately killed when Andrew Jackson took office in 1829 (Reynolds, Address 30; N. Philbrick 24). Detractors gleefully proclaimed that the “South Sea bubble” had finally burst (Sachs 131). Reynolds quickly changed direction and, together with some of the sealers he had met during his previous research, organized the private South Sea Fur Company and Exploring Expedition. It departed in 1829, but left nobody satisfied: “It proved to be too much of a commercial venture to accomplish much science, yet too much of a scientific journey to return much profit” (Griffin 392). Many of the disgruntled crew deserted and the whole expedition had to be aborted. This interlude had mainly one memorable result, Reynolds’s “Mocha Dick, the White Whale of the Pacific” (1839), which is a likely source of inspiration for Herman Melville’s whale.

The most influential document of this period in American Antarctic history is Reynolds’s Address on the Subject of a Surveying and Exploring Expedition to the Pacific Ocean and South Seas (1836), delivered in the House of Representatives on 3 April 1836. As shall be discussed in Chapter Four, Poe treated the address both in fictional and non-fictional form. In the address, Reynolds endeavors to construe the expedition as a national concern that will affect the future of America, partly by providing economic opportunities for expansion, and partly by giving the nation an opportunity to assume rank among nations of scientific import. As Mitterling describes it: “The propagandist’s most persuasive arguments were patriotic presentments in which he attempted to make the exploring expedition a national duty” (88). One of the first points Reynolds has to clear out of the way is the obvious: why should America direct its efforts to the south, when all European exploratory nations were currently searching for the Northwest Passage? His answer is straight to the point: “Let them proceed. We yield them the north. For us a wider range, a nobler field, a prospect of more comprehensive promise, lies open in the south” (Reynolds, Address 22).
The rhetorical choice of expressing it in martial metaphor is certainly no coincidence; exploration, like war, is a way for nations to expand territories and win distinctions. The implication is that America may have to default the battle of the Arctic, but might yet win the war of the Antarctic. Reynolds’s main argument throughout the address is that America is already deeply involved in the south through whaling and sealing. American interests being already staked out there, it is therefore a matter of maximizing those profits. He also argues that the European explorers had already almost depleted the possible discoveries of the Arctic (Address 22); no further glory there. If the U.S. wants to direct its attentions usefully somewhere, it should be to the south.

All traces of Symmes’s hollow-earth theory, which was after all the origin of the Antarctic project, are thoroughly excised from the address. Reynolds had been bothered by the connection before, and the Antarctic project was still viewed by many as too fanciful. At one point, he was viciously attacked in a letter-to-the-editor (probably written by Charles Wilkes the future commander of the U.S. Exploring Expedition), which stated that the notion of sending him, a Symmesian “proselyte,” as a “diplomatic agent to Symmesonia” was too absurd to abide (qtd. in Stanton 25). Moreover, in the document of the final passage of the bill concerning the expedition, we get a brief glimpse of what had transpired during the House debates: “It had been pronounced a visionary project, and one gentleman had compared it to an expedition to the moon” (Reynolds, Address 281).

Against such opposition, Reynolds had to perform a delicate balancing act, projecting the expedition both as entirely practical and non-visionary, and as a grandiose project that would put the U.S. on par with the Old World. In order to accomplish the first, he points out the full extent of the dependency of the American economy on the maritime industry, and that “nearly one-tenth of the whole tonnage of the United States” is currently employed in the fisheries in the South Seas. In addition to this there are all those who are indirectly dependent of the fishery, refining and transporting oil and skins (Reynolds, Address 43). In order to accomplish the second, Reynolds intones with a rhetorical strategy borrowed from President Adams’s Annual Message: “Have we not shown, that this expedition is called for by national dignity and honour? Have we not shown, that our commanding position and rank among the commercial nations of the earth, makes it only equitable that we should take our share in exploring and surveying new islands, remote seas, and, as yet, unknown territory?” (Address 70). Making the same appeal to national dignity, Reynolds integrates Adams’s argument that America owes it as a “sacred debt”
to contribute to the community of nations. Against this appeal to national pride, Reynolds also invokes its dark shadow: national shame. Seemingly, Reynolds refers right back to the American foundations by invoking John Winthrop’s warning in *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630) that the American colonies could “be made a story and a by-word through the world” if not properly managed (180; II). Reynolds seems to imply that Winthrop’s warning might have been realized, but that he provides the means to amend that: “If we have been a by-word and a reproach among nations for pitiful remuneration of intellectual labours, this expedition will afford an excellent opportunity of wiping it away” (Reynolds, *Address* 73). Lenz observes on this aspect of the address that “The importance of a United States expedition to the Antarctic to the American mind, to a self-conscious and visionary view of American history, and to expanded notions of manifest destiny is clear: The Antarctic is a new American frontier, an analogous and imaginative New World” (“Poe’s *Pym*” 33). Just as America had been offered to the pilgrims in a time of persecution, as the story goes, the Antarctic offers an arena for Americans to redeem themselves.

Towards the end of the address, Reynolds arrives at the question that is clearly the closest to him—attaining the South Pole: “What! extend our researches to regions surrounding the South Pole! And wherefore not? […] Will you not allow us some scope for high and daring adventure?” (*Address* 86). But, as the shrewd lobbyist he has become, he realizes that the request must be couched in more practical terms:

That the ninetieth degree, or the South Pole, may be reached by the navigator, is our deliberate opinion […]. That an expedition should be dispatched from this country for the sole purpose of ascertaining the practicability of attaining it, is not, perhaps, to be expected; but that the effort should be allowed to be made, in connexion with the other great objects of the enterprise, is perfectly in accordance with the most prudent policy. (Reynolds, *Address* 97)

He concludes his address by allowing himself to envision the glorious prospect of reaching the real *ne plus ultra* of the world and claim it for the republic: “to circle the globe within the Antarctic circle, and attain the Pole itself—yea, to cast anchor on that point where all the meridians terminate, where our eagle and star-spangled banner may be unfurled and planted, and left to wave on the axis of the earth itself!” (Reynolds, *Address* 99). Plant the flag on what? Reynolds is admirably vague on the subject; if they should be able to sail all the way to the pole, then there would obviously be no land there. At any rate, there
is no hole. Reynolds formulates the issue as a suggestive ultimatum: either the
nation acts resolutely to penetrate the frigid barrier in quest for the Pole in
order to restore its masculinity, or it will remain stationary and commence
“down the precipitous descent, into the depths of effeminacy” (Address 87).
Such rhetoric was certainly in the spirit of the times, as Lenz describes it:
“Exploration was a defining habit of self-conception, a ritual of rejuvenation, a
sign of American cultural health” (Poetics xxii). By turning its attentions
outwards, the nation would realize itself.

On 9 May 1836, one month after Reynolds had delivered his address in
the House, a bill was finally passed to outfit an expedition to explore the South
Seas and the Antarctic. Initially, Reynolds was appointed as its “corresponding
secretary and commercial agent,” and also hoped to be the one to write the
official account upon its return (Stanton 38). The latter was arguably one of the
more honorable positions since the historiographer would shape the image of
the expedition for posterity. President Jackson had also expressed his support
for Reynolds in a note: “It will be proper that Mr. Reynolds go with the
expedition. This the public expect” (qtd. in Stanton 37). Despite his popularity,
however, Reynolds was ultimately outmaneuvered from the expedition only five
days before its departure, much to the chagrin of himself and others (Stanton
68). This was the result of a long struggle by the Navy to gain control over the
expedition and minimize civilian participation.

When the expedition finally stood out to sea on 18 Aug. 1838, it had
been mismanaged in every conceivable way, and all political scheming and
delays turned the public opinion against it. It went from a high-profile national
project to something few cared about any longer (N. Philbrick xix). Even
former president Adams, who had been one of the first supporters, finally
declared: “all I wanted to hear about the exploring expedition was, that it had
sailed” (qtd. in N. Philbrick 41). To exacerbate matters, as a direct response to
the American expedition, France had acted quickly to mount an expedition of
their own. Due to the American delay, it actually departed first, despite the late
start in preparations. The French explicitly framed it as a contest to the South
Pole, with increasing rewards for every point past 75°S it managed to press on;
should they make it to the pole itself, the king declared that “every thing will be
granted to the sailors that they may demand” (qtd. in Stanton 51). Suddenly, the

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18 One of the applicants was Nathaniel Hawthorne (Stanton 306), and, according to Lisa Gitelman,
both Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper were suggested (361).
19 Poe expressed his respect for Reynolds and his indignation over the treatment he received in this
matter in several articles and also in Pym (see ch. 5).
Americans had to accept that Antarctica was not just theirs for the taking; there were other players on their prospective field of fame.

In the end, however, the Americans did beat the French to it and could claim the discovery of the Antarctic continent, but it was a close call. Wilkes had declared the discovery made on 30 Jan. 1840 (N. Philbrick 175). When they arrived in Sydney to tell the news to the world, however, they found that the French claimed to have sighted the continent already on Jan. 19. It was only after Wilkes prompted one of his officers to recall that he had mentioned sighting the continent on the morning of the 19th that the victory went to the Americans again (N. Philbrick 183). Wilkes was later suspected of having doctored the logs in order to validate his claim to the discovery of Antarctica.

On his return in 1842, Wilkes was court-martialed and one of the many counts was that he had been deliberately misleading about the sighting on Jan. 19 (N. Philbrick 320, 323). This was a grave matter, indeed: “Two years earlier President Van Buren had staked the reputation of the nation on Wilkes’s claim by officially announcing the discovery of a new continent. If Wilkes had lied, he had dishonored not only himself but the entire United States of America” (N. Philbrick 323). He had thus jeopardized that very national dignity that had been the rationale of the whole American Antarctic project. Ultimately, however, national honor was saved. Wilkes was acquitted of all charges, except for illegal flogging of the crew for which he received only a public reprimand (N. Philbrick 329).

As it turned out, Wilkes’s creative reconstruction of the events on 19 Jan. 1840 had been unnecessary. Two lower officers on one of the other ships of the expedition had sighted Antarctica on Jan. 16 already, but their superior had neglected to log this, and it did not become known until the trials (N. Philbrick 184, 324). Even so, it little mattered in the long run. Antarctica had in fact been sighted three times already in 1820: on Jan. 27 by the Russian Thaddeus Bellinghausen, on Jan. 29 by the British Edward Bransfield, and on Nov. 16 by American sealer Nathaniel Brown Palmer (Gurney 159-60). None of these could be confirmed at the time, however, since it only became clear in the early 20th century that the sighted lands were in fact part of the Antarctic Peninsula (N. Philbrick 14-15). Thus, in one of the ironies of history, Antarctica had actually been sighted well before Sygmaon was published, and before Symmes and Reynolds had started their tour to spread the word of the hollow-earth theory.

When the expedition returned, it excited minimal interest (N. Philbrick 303). To be sure, they had indeed discovered the Antarctic continent, but its icy
desolation was a discovery of very limited practical use, and not very exciting to
the imagination either. Thus the 19th-century American conception of
Antarctica went from a visionary beginning that contradicted Cook’s
assessment, only to ultimately concur in his findings.

There is, however, one additional aspect of Antarctic history that needs
to be addressed as well. Even though the history of the Antarctic centers mainly
on heroic explorers and large-scale projects, in the early 19th century the
Antarctic Ocean was predominantly navigated by sealers, and to a lesser degree
by whalers. The sealers, however, kept their discoveries of new sealing grounds
in the Antarctic as close secrets, since the competition was fierce and the seals
were growing scarce. As Reynolds remarked after having discovered that sealers
were much less forthcoming as interviewees than whalers: “In the history of the
seal-trade, secrecy in what they know, has been deemed a part, and a most
important part, too, of their capital” (“Report” 228). To this day, therefore, we
do not know for certain whether a sealer was not the first to sight the Antarctic
continent. But we do know that, despite the fact that the purely scientific
interest had radically diminished since Cook, there was an intense activity in the
region. R. K. Headland lists hundreds of voyages into the Antarctic during the
first decades of the 19th century, and there were probably even more than
those officially recorded. Most of these were in search for seal and most of
them were American.

The American sealing industry was a natural extension of the whaling
industry, which had long been an important part of the New England economy,
and was also the first to go into the extreme south, although not as far as the
sealers would go. Edmund Burke praised the relentless spirit of American
whalers in his speech On Conciliation with the Colonies (1775), and cited its
economic potential as an argument in favor of conciliation. In a passage that
was often reproduced in American newspapers, magazines, and political
speeches, he pictures how they brave even the Antarctic in search of game:

Whilst we follow them among the tumbling mountains of ice, and
behold them penetrating into the deepest frozen recesses of
Hudson’s Bay, and Davis’ Straits, whilst we are looking for them
beneath the Arctic Circle, we hear that they have pierced into the
opposite region of polar cold, that they are at the antipodes, and
engaged under the frozen Serpent of the south. (Burke,
Conciliation 17-18)

But for all their efforts, the supply of whales did not meet the growing demand.
Whalers were therefore encouraged by the owners to engage in sealing as well,
and at the Falkland Islands, the potential of sealing was discovered: “Hair, fur and elephant seals occupied the beaches in great numbers in the breeding season. The blubber of the elephant seal produced an oil almost equal to whale oil” (Bertrand 20). A much needed and lucrative alternative to whaling had been discovered, as Gurney reminds us: “in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century whale and seal oil lubricated machinery, lit town and city streets, lit the lamps of home. This was a society dependent upon whale oil” (152). The trade virtually exploded following the discovery of the rich sealing grounds of the South Shetlands in 1819. Headland lists at least 44 vessels working the islands the following season and at least 91 the one after that (Chronological 112). The sealing was “sufficiently intense to be commonly referred to as like a ‘gold-rush’” (Headland, South Georgia 43)

The American sealers had one decided advantage over the British sealers: they could also sell their furs in China for huge profits. This was a significantly less lucrative trade for British sealers, since it required two expensive licenses, one from the British South Sea Company and one from the East India Company (N. Philbrick 5). Weddell, a British sealer, also adds that Americans were paid more for their skins due to better procedures for preparation: “the Americans were carrying from Georgia cargoes of these skins to China, where they frequently obtained a price of from $5 to $6 apiece. It is generally known that the English did not enjoy the same privilege, by which means the Americans took entirely out of our hands this valuable article of trade” (qtd. in Bertrand 28). All this certainly acted as a very material influence on the conception of the Antarctic as the American field of fame. The progressive movement further and further south also had very material causes. The rapid expansion of the trade led the populations of seals on the Antarctic islands being exploited to the point of extinction; sealers could work an island for one, maybe two seasons, before they had to push on south into increasingly perilous waters in search for new sealing grounds (Gurney 147-48, 182). At the same time, the competition grew fiercer and the trade grew more secretive. This historical situation forms the immediate context for the American economic interest in the region, and is also present as a background for several of the fictions in this study.

Chapter Overview

As I hope to have conveyed, the fictions that I will discuss appear in one of the most defining moments in the history of the Antarctic. During this period, the
idea of Antarctica solidifies into reality. As we have seen, this solidification was
more of a gradual process than a sudden revelation, being pieced together from
the scattered reports of whalers, sealers, and explorers. The fact that the
Antarctic continent was actually sighted three times even before Symmes issued
his “Circular No. 1,” shows that compiling and interpreting geographic
information was a complicated process. In part this was caused by the scarcity
of information, but it was also because the Antarctic became a receptacle of
desires of national ambition, making it appear more promising than it really
was. Each of the texts in question envisions the Antarctic in a unique way,
without any apparent links to the other ones. However, they all partake in the
evolution of the American Antarctic discourse, which, as I have sketched it
above, is the basis for all the more or less fantastical projections that follow.

The first three chapters form a section treating Antarctic utopias, but for
presentational purposes I have decided to keep them separate, with one primary
text per chapter. As regards genre, thematic contents, and relation to Antarctic
knowledge, the similarities between these texts place them in a category that is
clearly separate from the others. In the first chapter, I look at the beginnings of
American Antarctic fiction with the novel *Syzygynia*. It is a utopian fiction that
utilizes the theories of Symmes to envision a new world, but which is yet a
mirror of American society. All the foundational political principles of the U.S.
can be recognized in the Symzonian society, albeit in condensed form. I read
the novel’s representations of race and gender as utopian resolutions to the
complications caused by these categories in real society. Chapter Two treats
Cooper’s satirical novel *The Monikins*, which is also in the utopian genre,
although here in its dystopian form. I trace the novel’s satirical strategies, which
are primarily directed towards Britain and the U.S. through two satirical
monkey communities. The novel sparked a controversy, which to a limited
degree might have been the result of the overt political satire. However, my
contention is that it was also sparked by the fact that Cooper engaged in a
contemporary controversy over evolution, centered on the idea of the great
chain of being, in creating a race of monkeys evolved from humans that inhabit
the Antarctic. Chapter Three reads Prospero’s “The Atlantis” as a utopian
realization of the full potential of the U.S. It engages with pressing problems
within the American union of the 1830s. Even though it is superficially a
timeless utopia, I read it as a political treatise for unionism, a premonition of
the escalating internal conflicts that would become further exacerbated during
the decades to come. Its primary way of achieving this is to invoke voices from
the past, which is possible due to the special nature of the Atlantian utopia, where all the deceased prominent persons exist in a preliminary afterlife.

Chapter Four focuses on the liminal texts of this study, Poe’s “MS” and *Pym*. Both these texts are incomplete projections of the Antarctic, dramatizing the liminal position of Antarctic knowledge in the period that follows the fantastic speculations of Symmes, and in anticipation of actual Antarctic exploration. Both texts are literary gestures towards an ultimate discovery of the enigma of the Antarctic, but one that never arrives as the communication is interrupted. I also analyze the representation of a tribe of Antarctic savages in *Pym* and the racial issues it raises by relating it to other, non-fictional representations of aboriginal natives. Finally, I read the final image of the novel with its enveloping whiteness as an integral part of an artistic vision to represent a region that is not yet known, in which Poe reproduces textually the anticipation and mystery of Antarctic discovery.

In the final chapter, the speculative imagery of a temperate Antarctic has given way to realism in Cooper’s *The Sea Lions*, largely influenced by the recent account of the returned U.S. Exploring Expedition. The novel is also read in terms of a historical romance of sealing, where Cooper restores a part of the Antarctic history that had been almost completely absent in the previous fictions. Despite its realistic framework, however, the novel is primarily an allegorical spiritual drama, enacted with the Antarctic as a sublime backdrop. In this sense, it is more mystical than the other texts, as it does not propose new discoveries in this world, but asserts the existence of a world beyond the phenomenal.
CHAPTER ONE

Hollow Earth Utopia: The White Continent Discovered in Symzonia

The first American work of fiction about the Antarctic is the novel Symzonia: A Voyage of Discovery (1820), published under the pseudonym Captain Adam Seaborn. As the title suggests, Symzonia is a utopian fantasy inspired by the hollow-earth theory of John Cleves Symmes.1 The novel narrates Seaborn’s combined voyage of sealing and exploration to the Antarctic, where he is able to enter the interior earth through a southern polar opening. There he discovers a country inhabited by a white-robed, white-skinned people who are more peaceful, intelligent, moral, and physically able than ordinary humans. Seaborn is allowed to stay in this country, which he calls Symzonia in honor of Symmes, to study its society where everything is marked by utopian moderation and harmony. After about a year, however, Seaborn is expelled from the country because the Symzonians have learnt about the customs of the humans of the external world, and now fear that they will become contaminated by their degraded morals.

This chapter will primarily focus on the utopian aspects of the novel. After a general discussion of the utopian genre and the role of utopian fiction in its contemporary context, I will analyze the Symzonian society by drawing parallels to the historical ideals of the early American Republic and the conflicts and desires in the contemporary society, especially as regards issues of political representation, social stability, gender and race. The chapter is concluded with a brief discussion of how the novel problematizes the fundamental conflict of motives behind exploration.

By using Symmes’s theories in combination with the Antarctic, the author of Symzonia actually anticipates Jeremiah N. Reynolds opportunist strategy of a few years later (see introduction). The author combines the lure of the Antarctic with the “holes-in-the-poles” theory, and projects a utopian vision where the public eye was already directed. Even if the novel seems to have made little impact at the time,2 it made it into the history of the U.S. Exploring Expedition when Reynolds was derided in an open letter for his association

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1 Literary precursors to the subterranean world of Symzonia can be found in Robert Pallock’s The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins (1751) and Ludvig Holberg’s Niels Klim’s Underground Travels [alt. transl. Journey to the World Under Ground: Being the Subterraneous Travels of Niels Klim] (1741).
2 The only known review is “A Voyage to the Internal World” in The North American Review (July 1821). Actually, it is more of a riff on Symmes and the hollow-earth idea than a book review; the reviewer only makes a few passing references to the novel.
with Symmes, claiming it to be absurd to send him as a “diplomatic agent to Symmesonia” (qtd. in Stanton 25). It is clear that neither the reference to Symmes or to Symmesonia is meant to inspire confidence.

It has often been assumed that the novel was not only inspired by Symmes, but also written by him. The only modern edition establishes this on the title page: “By Captain Adam Seaborn, Pseudonym of John Cleves Symmes.” J. O. Bailey, the editor of this edition, argues in the introduction that the attribution is correct, mainly based on the assumption that the book is a sincere hollow-earth treatise. There are several compelling indications that this attribution is incorrect, however. The most significant are the inconsistencies between Symmes’s theories and the novel; most conspicuously that Symmes did not think it feasible to enter the earth’s interior through the southern polar opening. As stated, for instance, in his “Circular No. 1,” his intention was to approach the northern polar opening on foot from Siberia or Alaska (see Madden 740). This would seem to disprove Bailey’s suggestion that “The evident intention of the book is to ‘prove’ Symmes’s theory in a matter-of-fact record of discovery of the internal world” (Intro.). As Hans-Joachim Lang and Benjamin Lease have pointed out, Seaborn even disputes some of the propositions of Symmes in the novel (243). In addition, there are factual errors that would seem to rule out Symmes as author. For instance, when Seaborn departs from America on 1 August 1817, he says he is equipped with Symmes’s “Memoirs, and printed Lectures” (20), but these writings were actually not published until the year after, between April 1818 and August 1819 (McBride 162). It seems unlikely that Symmes himself would have made that type of mistake.

Lang and Lease remark that Bailey’s assumption that the novel is “dull and earnest” seems to understake its comical and satirical aspects—possibly in order to make it more congruent with the character of Symmes’s other writings (244). It announces itself as a tall tale right from the start when Seaborn refers to a problem straight out of one of the more fantastical literary adventures: “I remembered the misfortune of the discoverer Sindbad, whose ship, when he approached the magnetic mountain, fell to pieces, in consequence of the iron being all drawn out of it. To guard against a similar disaster, I fastened my vessel first with tree-nails, and then throughout with copper bolts firmly riveted and clenched” (16). The character of Seaborn also seems counterproductive as a spokesperson for hollow-earth exploration: in the course of the novel, he

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3 Some recent examples: David Seed writes that Symmesonia “is now accepted to have been written by Symmes himself” (77), and David Standish that it “is universally attributed to Symmes” (63).
proves to be duplicitous, greedy, and even a thief. Moreover, as Henri Petter observes, when the novel references Symmes’s “sublime theory” (vi, 77) there is a decided touch of irony that becomes problematic if we assume Symmes to be the author (163n). In fact, as I will attempt to show, the novel rather reads as a critique of the idea of exploration and expansion, which was hardly an effect that Symmes would have tried to achieve. All these things taken together make it unlikely that Symmes was also the author of *Symzonia*. Despite attempts to identify the author no other candidate has been established, so the actual author remains unknown.\(^4\)

It seems as if most critics agree that *Symzonia* is rather to be regarded as a satire of Symmes, even if it is not very pronounced. Despite its title, however, *Symzonia* is only marginally concerned with the hollow-earth theory, so it would be incorrect to assume that its sole object was to satirize Symmes—even if it may be suspected that a calculated side effect was to take advantage of his notoriety.\(^3\) Once Seaborn advances into the earth’s interior, it is solely a utopian fiction with only a few scattered references to Symmes. Rather it is a speculative fiction that seizes on the imaginative potential of Symmes’s vision, extrapolating a new space for utopian projection. As Francis Spufford describes *Symzonia*: “it was not just produced to pop the Symmesian bubble with a satirical pin, but quite as much because the hollow earth made for a good story” (72-73). In the new space of the hollow earth, a wide range of topics is broached, and the hollow-earth theory is merely the vehicle to accomplish this. If Symmes’s theory seems strange, it is less strange that it would become the material for a work of speculative fiction. In its historical context, the theory was certainly unique by the sheer scope of what it proposed. In a metaphorically suggestive way, the world is no longer capped at the poles by ice, thereby no longer filling in the last blank on the map and putting an end to discoveries. Instead the poles are kept free of ice, opening up to whole new spheres of unknowns. Uncapping the world in such a way was of course crucial to the whole theory, as is clear from Reynolds’s heated response to a critic of Symmes: “I have no objection to your writing as many reviews and criticisms as you please about the New Theory […] but don’t block up the Polar regions with ice” (qtd. in Sachs 128).

In *Symzonia*, the discussion of whether the world is indeed fully explored provides the catalyst for the action. Seaborn feels the dejection of such a

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\(^4\) Lang and Lease have suggested that the novel be attributed to the author Nathaniel Ames, but the case is largely circumstantial.

\(^3\) See Introduction for a discussion of the reception of Symmes. Petter also notes two early novels that both take satirical slabs at Symmes: Robert Walin’s *The Hermit in America* (1819) and George Watterston’s *The L— Family at Washington* (1822) (164n).
historical impasse, in which 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” (13). In his view, this has brought the American culture to stagnation and degradation: “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” (14). Seaborn’s analysis of both personal and societal discontent equates expansion of knowledge and economy with spatial expansion—a prototype of the expansionist logic that would be termed Manifest Destiny in the 1840s. It defines the U.S. not by its borders, but by its continuous growth. It therefore becomes less of a spatial nation than a metaphysical one, which is continuously realizing its full potential.

In order to break this historical stasis, Seaborn invokes a providential model to reinterpret the discontent as the impetus of progress: “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 dissatisfaction with the one which they possess, is sufficient evidence that the means of gratification are provided” (14). The desire in itself—interpreted as an extension of the divine plan—justifies expansion, and also guarantees its success. Some sixteen years later, in his address to Congress on the subject of an American exploring expedition, Reynolds uses similar providential rhetoric: “Who so presumptuous as to set limits to knowledge, which by a wise law of Providence, can never cease? As long as there is mind to act upon matter, the realms of science must be enlarged; and nature and her laws be better understood, and more understandingly applied to the great purpose of life” (Address 70). James McBride uses Symmes’s theory to reason along similar lines as he writes of the effects of such an innate drive to progression, which is necessary for cultural development:

Without it we should still remain destitute of many of the greatest advantages we enjoy. Without the advancement of new principles, and speculative ideas, neither ourselves, nor any other people, could ever have emerged from a state of savage barbarity. Without it, what purpose could our reason serve, which, under proper regulations, and by a gradual progress, is capable of contributing so largely to the general good of society. (22)

As in Seaborn’s case, cultural retrogression looms as a threatening possibility, should the domain of reason cease to expand. A culture that is driven by such compulsory desire for expansion, however, seems doomed to never attain
satisfaction. As we shall see, the utopian society of Symzonia has resolved this problem by denying social progress altogether. Having attained the highest pinnacle, no further development is considered possible.

The fundamental assumption in these visionary conceptions of the world is, as Seaborn writes, that Providence has arranged the state of things so that there is no waste. This is clearly exemplified in McBride’s defense of Symmes’s theory, where he states “that matter and space are never uselessly wasted, is an axiom, not only of sound philosophy, but of natural religion, and of common sense” (130). Arthur O. Lovejoy terms this mode of thinking “the principle of plentitude,” derived ultimately from the Platonic idea that it is in the nature of the creator to create, and that the most fundamental characteristic of the creator is fullness (Great Chain of Being 52). Hence, there could be no gaps in creation, no vacuity, no wasted space—a type of reasoning that can also be seen in the idea of a Great Chain of being, which I will return to in chapter two. Symmes’s theory of the hollow concentric spheres was a logical extension of this assumption of divine economy, which led him to assume, as Halley had before him,6 that the creator could not be as wasteful as creating a solid globe of merely inert matter. As McBride relates Symmes’s reasoning:

Turn your attention to the general economy of nature throughout her works, and you will perceive in various and almost innumerable substances that she forms hollow cylinders or spheres in the room of solid ones. [...] Symmes’s theory, would display the highest possible degree of perfection, wisdom, and goodness—the most perfect system of creative economy—and […] a great saving of stuff (53-56).

Lovejoy writes that this is a type of argument that presupposes “the plenitude of the creation and the inconceivability that the Author of Nature could have wasted matter by leaving any great portion of it untenable by human beings” (Great Chain of Being 138). If the earth’s interior was indeed habitable, it was a providential fact that it should also be populated. Consequently, McBride writes that Symmes’s theory, if proven correct, would entail that the “habitable superfices of our sphere would not only be nearly doubled; but the different spheres of which our earth is probably constituted, might increase the habitable surface ten-fold” (129).

6 Halley: “Since we see all the parts of the Creation abound with Animate Beings […] why then should we think it strange that the prodigious Mass of Matter, whereof this Globe does consist, should be capable of some other improvement than barely to serve to support its Surface?” (qtd. in Standish 32).
In the novel, Seaborn feels the full weight of this potential as he thinks of himself as having made a discovery that will “unfold to the vain mortals of the external world new causes for admiration at the infinite diversity and excellence of the works of an inscrutable Deity; to give to them fresh motives for adoration, and hopes of continued advancement in discovering the infinite works of God” (96). His discovery not only enlarges the physical world, it also restores hope to humanity by proving the abundant resourcefulness of God, and that Creation is structured on a rational principle of economy. In this context, the inevitable reference to Columbus appears again. His accomplishment in discovering the New World (which turns out to be a discovery of a new world in name only) is dwarfed in comparison to Seaborn’s hollow-earth discovery:

The voyage of Columbus was but an excursion on a fish pond, and his discoveries, compared with mine, were but trifles; a summer sea and a strip of land, where common sense must have convinced any man of ordinary capacity that there must be land, unless Providence were in that one instance more wasteful of its works than in all its other doings. His was the discovery of a continent, mine of a new World! (97)

The break with James Cook’s assessment of the Antarctic as a frigid dead end for exploration could not be more radical. Symmes’s theory has evidently thawed the ice and opened up an ocean of imaginative potential to be explored. In the same vein of humorous hyperbole, Seaborn appeals to the nationalistic fervor of his crew to brave the unknown: “my lads, what Yankee sailor would hesitate to expose himself to be roasted or frozen alive to accomplish that which the British tars have endeavoured in vain to do?” (40-41).

A complementary context of the novel is the economic exploitation of the Antarctic seas. The period saw an increasing presence among the peri-Antarctic islands, predominantly of American sealers, which made it a logical route of expansion in order to sustain commerce. As mentioned in the introduction, the unsustainable exploitation during this period rapidly decimated the population of seals and drove the sealers further south in search of new hunting grounds. This is foregrounded in the novel when Seaborn remarks on the scarcity of seals on one South-Sea island: “The frequent visits of sealers from the United States had either destroyed or frightened most of them away” (29). But he is convinced that his application of Symmes’s theory will amend this situation: “I concurred in the opinion published by Capt. Symmes, that seals, whales, and mackerel, come from the internal world through the
opening at the poles; and was aware of the fact, that the nearer we approach those openings, the more abundant do we find seals and whales” (29). The novel can therefore be said to be part of a general historical current towards the south. Not only does Seaborn propose to solve the scientific issue of the Antarctic, but also the more practical issue of the dwindling supply of seals and whales. This was no inconsequential matter. By the early nineteenth century, a substantial part of the U.S. economy was based on the whaling and sealing industry. The demand for whalebone, ambergris, seal fur, and oil was steadily increasing at the same time as its source was becoming scarcer. Seaborn’s assertion is a good illustration of how the text responds directly to a contemporary situation, and a kind of trope that will be seen repeated throughout the utopian discussions.

**Utopia**

*Symzonia* is firmly rooted in the utopian tradition with its construction of an imaginary community isolated from the surrounding world. The term utopia invokes two Greek homophones: *eu-topia* ‘good place,’ but also *ou-topia* ‘no place.’ The co-presence of these two layers of meaning, where the latter negates the former, seems to cancel out the idea that a perfect state can be created. To distinguish between positive and negative utopias, the terms *eutopia* and *dystopia* are frequently used. Lyman Tower Sargent defines these simply as being intended as considerably better or worse than the society of a contemporaneous reader (9). This makes clear an important point about literary utopias: they are written in dialogic relation to the real society from which they emanate. This becomes even more apparent as Sargent adds some further distinctions to the typology of literary utopias that are of relevance to the present discussion of *Symzonia*. The first of these terms is “utopian satire,” which he defines as “a non-existent society described in considerable detail […] that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of contemporary society” (Sargent 9). The second of Sargent’s definitions that apply to *Symzonia* is that of the “critical utopia,” which “the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as better than contemporary society but with difficult problems that the described society may or may not be able to solve and which takes a

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7 A report dated 7 February 1835 by the Committee on Commerce, included in the documents section of Reynolds’s *Address*, estimates that ten thousand men are employed in the trade (245). In the address itself, Reynolds estimates that it involves “nearly one-tenth [of] the whole tonnage of the United States” in the South-Sea fishery and “the capital dependant on it at sixty millions of dollars” (43-44).
critical view of the utopian genre” (Sargent 9). But how to assess even what is a eutopia or dystopia? The concept of intentionality, which Sargent uses as a basis of classification, is of course not unproblematic—in the case of Symzonia we do not even know who wrote it, much less that person’s intentions. The most workable approach is to try to understand utopias as they would have been understood in their own time. Phillip E. Wegner notes that narrative utopias “are influential public interventions in their own moment,” and therefore demand to be read in their own historical context to a larger extent than many other forms of literature (3). The intention of the work has to be estimated within the framework of the text and in relation to a social context.

In the following discussion, I will read Symzonia as a genuine eutopia with certain elements of utopian satire and, to a lesser degree, critical utopia. The eutopian aspects of the novel, mainly the exalted and moderate nature of the Symzonian society and its members, are contrasted with the licentiousness and greed of ordinary humans and their institutions. At certain points, however, the novel takes on the characteristics of the critical utopia since there turns out to be certain limitations and fissures within the Symzonian community, which indicate that it has social problems of its own. As noted previously, the novel can be regarded as a satire of the hollow-earth theory of Symmes, but this satire belongs primarily to the narrative frame, not the description of the utopian community. The utopian satire is directed towards the contemporary American society, but also towards Britain or humanity in general. This satire is primarily conveyed through Seaborn, who functions as a Gulliverian unreliable narrator. In his eagerness to impress his utopian hosts, he frequently causes the opposite effect. As Harry Levin remarks, the utopian encounter with the rational Symzonians contrasts “unfavorably upon the irrationality of the North Americans, and supplies much opportunity for Swiftian satire” (119). Spufford reasons along similar lines: “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 traveler encountering them” (73). But, as in the case of Gulliver, Seaborn’s unreliability goes further, since an ironic distance is signaled between him and the authorial level of the text, often catching him in contradictions between what he says and what he does. I will return to this in the final section of the chapter.

The distinctions outlined above indicate the most fundamental function of the literary utopia: it should be read in relation to the culture of the intended reader. It is in this specific context that we can study more precisely the nature
of their political involvement. While utopias may envision a nowhere of the imagination, they are still firmly grounded in a here and now; they are reactions to specific historical contexts, and engage the reader in this interaction, thereby “offering a mechanism by which people will invent anew the communities as well as the places they inhabit” (Wegner xvi-xvii). The function of the utopia is both to exteriorize the present society to the reader, and provide critical material (satirical or exemplary) to rethink that same society. Drawing on the work of Louis Marin, Susan Bruce suggests that “the utopia is a reconstruction of its author’s reality, which displaces aspects of its own world into the fictional world it represents, and in so doing foregrounds the social and economic contradictions lived by its writer and his contemporaries” (xiv). Each utopian text is a response to specific shortcomings or desires of the society in which it is created.

Narrative utopias can thus be seen as opening up dialogues with a contemporaneous social context and engaging with its concerns. Anne Cranny-Francis also emphasizes the importance of reading utopias “within the political practice of the text,” which entails reading it against a present society: “As each detail of the social structure of the utopian figure is logically described, the implicit comparison with that of the reader’s own society is made. In this way a detailed (re)vision of the reader’s society is constructed within the text—and this is the focus and function of the utopian text” (110-11). This should not be taken to mean that the narrative utopia as a form is inherently a progressive type of social critique. In fact, one of the most common features of utopian societies is cultural stasis, what Nina Baym describes as “a vision of a thoroughly rationalized society that has escaped temporal uncertainty” (xxiii). This captures the relation between history and utopia precisely. The utopian ideal represents the desire for stability and for an escape from history and the flux of values. Many utopian narratives, Symzonia among them, express a desire, not for radical progression from a present situation, but for a regression to a previous state of being. This nostalgic drive is often realized in pastoral terms, with people living a more content life under simple conditions. Such a reactionary tendency often manifests itself as cultural stasis, even to the point of utopian societies being devoid of a progressive history. We have this in Symzonia, where there are no examples of historical events except for a conflict with another country several thousand years ago. The utopian ideal seems to be to put an end to historical change by severing the ties to the surrounding world. The utopian society has by definition reached its summit and perceives itself as
in no need of development, indeed, cannot even acknowledge the possibility of social progress.

The social critique of the utopia of Symzonia is primarily directed towards the early 19th-century American society. But it is not a total rejection of American ideals, only the way in which they have been realized. Arguably, the utopian agenda of the novel is conventionally nationalistic and ultimately confirms the American ideology. My most basic observation on the utopianism in the novel is that the ideological foundations on which the American Republic was originally conceived can be found resonating in the utopia of Symzonia. As William E. Lenz observes: “Led by Captain Adam Seaborn, Americans can achieve through Symzonia a second opportunity for perfection, a goal as old as the New World itself and one intimately connected to American myths of cultural redemption and regeneration” (Poetics 45). The Revolutionary Era is invoked as a parallel to the myth of the Golden Age from which the contemporary world has degenerated. I take it as sign of the times that in the same year Symzonia appeared, Thomas Jefferson wrote that everything that “the generation of 1776” had fought for was jeopardized “by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons” (“To Holmes” 22 April 1820).

The connection between Symzonia and the early history of the American Republic is established through allegory. In the same way that America declared and fought for its independence, the Symzonians had to shake off the oppressive yoke of Belzubia, another internal nation; it is in this claim to independence that the utopian isolation of Symzonia originates. Symzonia and Belzubia once engaged in trade but the Symzonians realized that it made the people “poorer, more addicted to idleness, and given to the indulgence of many inordinate desires and extravagant vanities” (166). We are reminded of the Revolutionary warnings against European depravity, such as Thomas Paine’s “if ye wish to preserve your native country uncontaminated by European corruption, ye must in secret wish a separation” (48; App.). The Symzonians do wish for a separation, but the Belzubians “had become so depraved and sordid, by their addiction to traffic, and were so puffed up with the idea that they were the most powerful nation of the two, that they resolved to maintain a commerce with the Symzonians by force [...]” (167). Furthermore, there are several direct similarities between the details of the Symzonian-Belzubian conflict and its British-American counterpart. For instance, the Symzonian government exhorts its citizens to “abstain from the use of the things brought by the Belzubians” (167). This was also the first strategy attempted by the
American colonists when faced with the British Coercive Acts in 1774, creating extra-institutional congresses and prohibiting “merchants and citizens from importing or consuming British goods until Parliament repealed the Coercive Acts” (Stout 282). The American boycott proved futile, of course, and so did the Symzonian. Instead the Belzubians used force to “compel the Good men and the people to submit to the contaminating intercourse demanded by their cupiditas” (167). The Symzonians had something the American revolutionaries lacked, however: a decisive technological advantage in their “engine of defence,” which is so intimidating that they never even have to use it since the Belzubians are so terrified that they retreat and have never bothered the Symzonians again (168-73). Indeed, considering that Symzonia was written less than five years after the termination of the last war with the British, such a definitive resolution reads like utopian wish fulfillment.

But as mentioned, Symzonia is primarily a critique of the contemporary society and its artificiality, which becomes apparent in the manner in which the narrative sets up the voyage to the utopia. Following a common convention in literary voyages, Seaborn’s incentive is grounded in his discontent with the current state of his home culture. This initial rejection sets the scene for the utopian encounter. James Duncan and Derek Gregory point out that such rejection of home is typically constructed as an irrational impulse that undermines the rationalization of exploration: “Romanticism marked a post-Enlightenment remapping of the space of representation: it de-throned the sovereignty of Reason and glorified unconstrained impulse, individual expression and the creative spirit” (6). The kind of Romantic protagonist that was thereby created had profound influence on travel writing: “By the nineteenth century its most characteristic figure was the young bourgeois fleeing the dull repetitions and the stifling mundanity of the bourgeois world” (6). The motivation for such voyages is thus not primarily curiosity and

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4 The Coercive Acts—or as they became known in America, the Intolerable Acts—were responses to civil unrest in the American colonies, and attempted to coerce the colonists into submission. The acts stipulated that no colonial government post was any longer appointed by election but by direct power of the Seal of Great Britain, the port of Boston was to be blockaded until damages were paid to the East India Company, and that troops could be quartered in any dwelling whether inhabited or not (Brogan 161).
5 Or, I should say, the Americans did have something similar in 1820. As Henri Petter notes, the name of the inventor of the engine of defence, Fultria, suggests that he is the Symzonian version of the American inventor Robert Fulton (164n), mostly known for his work on steam ships, but who also developed machines for naval warfare. In 1814, as a response to the British naval blockades of the cities on the eastern seaboard, Congress authorized Fulton to build “a huge, 247-ton steam frigate, heavily planked and armored, to serve as a floating battery in New York harbor as a defense against British naval attacks” (Sale 158-59). The war ended before it was put to use, but it was tested and worked satisfactorily (Sale 171). This is what Seaborn refers to when he boasts that the Americans have an engine of defence of their own, and are presently “secure from [British] attacks, by an invention for blowing them into the air, if they ventured to assail our shores” (179).
discovery but escapist and estrangement. Such is the case with Seaborn. Even his name signals that he is destined to break up from a terrestrial—as in landlocked and mundane—existence and return to sea. In an essay on Herman Melville, D. H. Lawrence writes about this impulse, incidentally using the same term: “The sea-born people, who can meet and mingle no longer: who turn away from life, to the abstract, to the elements: the sea receives her own” (140). Melville’s own Ishmael is perhaps the epitome of this impulse.

The abject state of his culture, as Seaborn sees it, seems not only to be morally detrimental, but even physically so. This is apparent when he decides to stay for a brief period on the Falkland Islands, the place Edmund Burke had identified as a token of the hardiness of American whalers and sealers:

“Falkland Island, which seemed too remote and romantic an object for the grasp of [British] national ambition, is but a stage and a resting-place in the progress of [the Americans’] victorious industry” (Conciliation 18). For Seaborn the stay entails more than just a place of recuperation and replenishment, however; for him it is an opportunity to purge himself of the debilitating evils of civilization: “Here I had determined to pass a month for the benefit of my health, which a short passage by water had not completely restored, from the debility occasioned by the vexations and anxieties of business in those retrograde times, and the pernicious habits of living, common among civilized men, upon food rendered palatable by a skilful admixture of poisons” (22). His description of the detrimental effects of the refinements of civilization and capitalist society corresponds to frequently heard distress calls that republican core values were lost to European influences. A typical example is the following oration as early as in 1787: “LUXURY, LUXURY, the great source of dissolution and distress, has here taken up her dismal abode [destroying] that simplicity of manners, native manliness of soul, and equality of station, which is the spring and peculiar excellence of a free government” (qtd. in Wood 418). In the American Revolutionary discourse, republicanism was specifically intended to counteract such tendencies, but, according to Seaborn’s description, this had evidently not succeeded. The Symzonian community, however, can be said to be a successful implementation of such simplistic republican ideals. Seaborn’s purging becomes a rite of passage, suggesting that he needs to cleanse himself of the complexities of civilization in order to be admitted into Symzonia. This becomes the conventional utopian exposition, outlining the state of the present from which the hero attempts a symbolic escape in the utopian vision.
Utopian Containment: Social Stability through Paradigm Maintenance

The geographic location of utopias makes them naturally isolated, both literally in their most common form as remote islands and metaphorically as autonomies. In More’s *Utopia*, King Utopus conquers the country Abraxa, which is not then an island, but his very first action is to “cut a channel fifteen miles wide where their land joined the continent, and caused the sea to flow around the country” (31). This is a foundational utopian gesture in that it not only creates a geographical separation, but also facilitates an ideological containment that will make it possible to achieve and maintain social stability. This insularity is essential for utopian existence, which makes the relation to the outside world problematic: utopian societies are often depicted as fiercely fighting off intruders or banishing subversives to retain their homogeneity. Early utopias in particular are envisioned as monocultures; heterogeneity and democracy are often perceived as threats rather than beneficial to the maintenance of society. The fundamental values of a utopian community are local, but have to be perceived as universal. This is the point where utopia frequently turns dystopian: totalitarianism is necessary for the preservation of a monoculture.

A utopia can be regarded in terms of a signifying system whose core principles cannot be challenged if systemic stability is to be maintained. A fundamental condition for such homogeneity is that all citizens experience themselves as partaking in the community on equal terms. This requires an powerful unifying nationalist narrative that inoculates the members of the community with the sense that “they all share some deep, transhistorical bond,” despite individual differences (Wegner xvi). In Symzonia, this is achieved by means of their political system, which can be seen as a totalitarian democracy that works by suppressing heterogeneity. Such a description, however, would have greatly upset someone of the Revolutionary spirit. As an indignant John Adams points out: “a democratic despotism is a contradiction in terms” (qtd. in Wood 63). This is rationalized by the fact that the original republican idea really admits no rights beyond that of the people as a community, the rights of the people as individuals were secondary. As Gordon S. Wood describes the idea: “For the republican patriots of 1776 the commonweal was all-encompassing—a transcendent object with a unique moral worth that made partial considerations fade into insignificance” (61). The Symzonian people are

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10 Faussett discusses how the “Australians” in Gabriel de Foigny’s *The Southern Land Known* are constantly fighting off other peoples to preserve their society intact. In the last in a long series of wars against the “Fundians,” the “Australians” finally succeed in annihilating their antagonists in a war that spirals into a holocaust and also obliterates even the island that the “Fundians” inhabited (135-136).
the perfect embodiments of this political ideal, acting as one homogenous mass, even dressing uniformly.

The Symzonian system lets every citizen be part of the political community as long as he (it is always a he) conforms to preestablished ideals; non-conformists are excluded by various means. Following the convention of the classical utopia, Symzonia depends on its total geographical and ideological insularity in order to maintain social stability. A utopia can be defined as an ideology that has been realized in a geographical space where every individual embodies the social ideal, and thus creating a completely homogenous society with no internal conflicts. It is exactly this monolithic drive that enables the utopian society to define itself as utopian. But by the same process it also reveals itself as dystopian, at least to a modern reader: the homogeneity is achieved by repression and exclusion.

On Seaborn’s first encounter with the Symzonians, the whole scene seems to be a confirmation of the idea of a paradisiacal state. He meets them “with no more sense of fear than might be excited on going among the spirits of the blessed; so perfectly did the appearance, manners, conduct, and expression of countenance of this people accord with my ideas of purity and goodness” (117). His first view of their city reinforces his first impression. Manifesting the best of both worlds, it is both pastoral and “highly cultivated” (118). Leo Marx uses Lovejoy’s term “semi-primitivism” to describe such an ideal blend of nature and culture that is both bridging the gap between, and “yet in transcendental relation to, the opposing forces of civilization and nature” (23). Marx also notes three closely related fundamental components of the American pastoral ideal in the late 18th and early 19th centuries: “the landscape, agriculture, and the general notion of the ‘middle state’ as the desirable, or at any rate the best attainable, human condition” (88). As will be seen, the Symzonian landscape and gardens are only the outward manifestations of the Symzonian way of life, which can be summed up as a “middle state,” or the classical golden mean. Even the topography and architecture of the city read as transparent signs of utility and moderation:

No crowded cities, the haunts of vice and misery, hung like wens upon the lovely face of nature. An appearance of equality in the condition and enjoyments of the people pervaded the country. The buildings were all of them large enough for comfort and convenience, but none of them so large, or so charged with ornament, as to appear to have been erected as monuments of the pride and folly of the proprietor. (118)
The Symzonians themselves seem no less purposeful: its “active inhabitants all seemed engaged in something useful” (119). As becomes increasingly clear, Seaborn is describing an American utopia, a pastoral idyll unburdened by the follies of the Old World civilization. In fact, this was how America had been imagined from the very beginning, not only by Americans themselves but also by European liberal intellectuals, who imagined a New World that differed radically from the Old: “Mired in what the Enlightenment believed to be a decadent feudal society debilitated by oversophistication and cultivation, the European illuminati came to see in the Americans, ‘this enlightened people,’ as Guillaume-Thomas Raynal called them, all those ‘robust, nay virtuous,’ qualities their own countries lacked” (Wood 98). In the light of these glorious prospects, it is deeply ironic that Seaborn is banished from Symzonia for his greed and licentiousness, while protesting that his people style themselves “emphatically the most enlightened people on the face of the earth” (199).

As Fausett observes, antipodean fictional worlds often “signify a revolution in moral values” (6). Symzonia is literally antipodean, and there is some reversal of values on minor things, such as the relative worth of materials, which is a conventional feature in utopian writing. For instance, there is gold in abundance, but it is not highly valued since it can be of little practical use. As in More’s Utopia, Symzonians make domestic utensils of silver and gold (186). But the reversals in Symzonia are restricted to such superficial items and do not signify a complete reversal of moral values. Rather its society stands as a nostalgic realization of American values. Such an exaltation of the idyllic perhaps reveals an anxiety about the U.S. entering modernity: the pastoral scenery of the newfound land had started to give way to industrialized metropolitan areas where life is increasingly complicated by politics and commerce, and the horizontal organization of an agrarian community had started breaking up into hierarchic structures of labor- and merchant classes.

Symzonia reads like an allegory of the newly founded American Republic that both reaffirms its original ideology and criticizes its practical realization. In many senses, Symzonia is the spirit and ideas of 1776 frozen in time. This is almost tautological because, as Wood notes, “the Revolution represented much more than a colonial rebellion”; even from the beginning it “represented in fact a utopian effort to reform the character of American society” (395). But the republican experiment had not succeeded in rectifying all the social problems it had attempted to redress. Therefore Symzonia performs one of the main

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11 James Fenimore Cooper’s Leaplowan monikins are likewise “invariably calling [themselves] the most enlightened nation on earth” (286).
objectives of imaginary communities: it functions as a correcting mirror in which the deformities of reality are reshaped and reorganized into harmonious symmetry. In a reversal of Plato’s allegory of the cave, the subterranean Symzonia is the ideal realized, with the U.S. as the imperfect shadow. In Symzonia, even visual distortions due to atmospheric conditions are absent—possibly a biblical allusion: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Cor. 13:12). The Symzonians are able to see their world in absolute clarity:

No fogs or vapours obscured the charming prospect, nor formed in wainrows to ornament the scene, the mild influence of the sun not being sufficient to produce rapid exhalations, nor the nights cold enough to condense them into vapour. Nature’s fairest landscape requires no mantle to obscure its beauties, or to heighten their effect. (118-19)

Once it has been established that Symzonia is an earthly instance of paradise, the similarities, but also differences, to the U.S. become apparent. The Symzonian political system closely resembles the American system in its ideal form, thus constituting a utopian affirmation of the system itself. But this is also the most crucial point of social critique: the Americans have failed to realize the utopian potential of the republican form. Thus it is not the system itself that is deficient but the human factor, a problem that affects the Symzonians only to a limited extent, and which they have strategies to counter. Americans, on the other hand, did not adapt to republican existence quite as smoothly. In 1786, George Washington—somewhat disillusioned by the troublesome first decade of the republic—expressed his mind on precisely this issue: “We have probably had too good an opinion of human nature in forming our confederation. Experience has taught us, that men will not adopt & carry into execution, measures the best calculated for their own good without the intervention of a coercive power.” It is hard to tell, however, whether Symzonia promotes maintaining the Revolutionary values, or laments that such perfect ideals cannot be applied to such imperfect humans.

Just like the American Republic, the Symzonian political system is based on the most fundamental of republican principles: “in Symzonia all power emanated from the people” (119). For Symzonians and American Revolutionaries alike, this principle safeguards against tyranny and corruption. The egalitarian principle of a nation truly ruled by all its citizens is familiar from Paine’s utopian construct from the opening of Common Sense. Here Paine
attempts to derive the just origin of government by hypothesizing a new nation in the process of being formed in isolation from the rest of the world. Being a community in its purest form, these people will take the first tentative steps towards building a society:

Some convenient tree will afford them a State-House, under the branches of which, the whole colony may assemble to deliberate on public matters. It is more than probable that their first laws will have the title only of REGULATIONS, and be enforced by no other penalty than public disesteem. In this first parliament every man, by natural right, will have a seat. (Paine 6; sn. I)

Paine’s thought experiment of a republican society in its most condensed form reflects one of the predominant concerns in U.S. politics: how to strike a balance between the power of the state on the one hand and the rights of individual on the other. For the American Revolutionaries, it was self-evident that political power emanated from the people according to the simple model Paine visualized above, with every citizen in principle having the right to legislate. This would be positively utopian, had it been possible. But as Wood writes, quoting some voices from the early republic, “this equal and perfect system of legislation is seldom to be found in the world, and can only take place in small communities.” Whenever the inhabitants of a state grew numerous, it became “not only inconvenient, but impracticable for all to meet in One Assembly” (164). From this followed out of necessity the practice of representation, but this was never more than a barely acceptable compromise for Revolutionary thought. As stated in an instruction concerning the Virginia Constitution in 1776: “It is incontestable that the freedom of a Community is reduced in proportion to the power conferred to a small number of its Members, and that such reduction of freedom is a necessary evil in an extensive Country, where all the people cannot meet at one place to transact their public concerns” (qtd. in Wood 363).

The issue of just representation having been central in colonial American politics, it is not surprising that we encounter it in Syngonia, a text that seems to re-enact the early period of the American Republic. As Wood observes: “No political conception was more important to Americans in the entire Revolutionary era than representation” (164). For instance, Paine writes that “there is no political matter which more deserves our attention” than the issue of “large and equal representation” (43; sn. IV). Discontent over political representation had been the igniting spark for the struggle for independence, especially the issue of taxation without proper representation. The Americans
tried as best they could to find a sustainable compromise by drastically enlarging the membership of their new houses of representatives, in many cases even two or three times their pre-Revolutionary legislatures (Wood 167). The question was how far to take this principle in practice. As John Adams asked: “Shall we say that every individual of the community, old and young, male and female, as well as rich and poor, must consent, expressly, to every act of legislation?” (qtd. in Wood 182). In the U.S. this meant in practice that the representatives were from a fairly narrow demographic: male white landed gentry. In Symzonia, however, this social dream of truly just representation is realized. The Symzonians have resolved the issue by creating an all-inclusive democracy: all men of mature age who have not disqualified themselves from political life are part of the grand council (125). This obviously excludes women and certain other social groups, which will be discussed below. Since Symzonia is such a homogenous society, this practically means that they have bypassed the problem of representation almost entirely: every man represents himself. In this respect, Symzonia is a radical Whig utopia. Even though Symzonia must be a fairly large country (we are never told any specifics), they have maintained the republican utopian idea of having all citizens meet in one assembly, gathered every four years under festive forms (126-27).

In the U.S. and Symzonia alike, the government is organized with a head of state and a bicameral congress. Notably absent here is a Symzonian equivalent to the Supreme Court. This is due to the fact that, as I will discuss below, Symzonia has no constitution or laws and consequently no need for a judiciary body. The American President, Senate, and House of Representatives are mirrored in the Symzonian “Best Man,” “ordinary council,” and “grand council.” The ordinary council consists of one hundred “Worthies”—the Symzonian title of public distinction, those who are worthy of taking part of public life—and a grand council of the rest of the Worthies. There is also an executive branch, “the EFFICIENTS,” that is subordinated to the political power of the councils (122-23). The American suspicion of hereditary succession in general and monarchy in particular is readily discernible in the Symzonian head of state, “the Best Man”—a title that in itself is anti-monarchical in its implication that the one who holds the position has qualified as the best man for the job, not been born into it. The Best Man holds “his situation for life, unless impeached of crime; but whose issue was considered

12 Thomas Paine, for instance, formulated this critique in Common Sense by dubbing the concept of monarchy “the most prosperous invention the Devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry” (11; sn. II). He also adds: “To the evil of monarchy we have added that of hereditary succession” (Paine 15; sn. II).
ineligible to the same office for one generation after his decease” (119). In Symzonia, the Best Man is not only elected into office, but this has to be done by “unanimous vote of the grand council” (120). The perfect consensus ensures the total equity of the political system. In any other society, the demand for a unanimous vote for a leader would create a democratic impasse. While it is true that George Washington had been unanimously elected in 1789 and 1792, no other president had been so since. This might then be another instance of a nostalgic idealization of the early years in U.S. history. In Symzonia, however, dissent is not a problem since every member of society is a micro-level reproduction of the dominant ideology, so that what one person thinks, everybody thinks.

The Symzonian society regulates the behavior of its citizens by controlling social mobility. There is an important passage on the manner in which the Symzonian citizens are expected to exert self-discipline by emulating the good example of people above them on the social ladder. It is assumed that everyone looks up to the privileged position of the Worthies: “seeing the happy condition of the Worthies, and being extremely desirous to partake of the refined enjoyments of the grand assemblage” (131). The primary motive for Symzonian citizens to submit to the reigning order is the desire to rise in society and be accepted into the core of the community. This in turn leads to self-regulation among the citizens. As Paine expressed it in his outline of a primal society, the citizens are governed by “public disesteem.” The Symzonian social hierarchy seems to be the Whig rhetoric of a natural aristocracy realized. The Whigs, who to a large extent provided the ideology of the American Revolution, never really thought that authority—or “necessary subordination,” as one republican commentator had it—should be dispensed with altogether (Wood 71). Inequality was rather construed as a socially cohesive element, since this would make citizens desirous to do good by good example. As John Adams expressed it in 1776: “There must be a Decency, and Respect, and Veneration introduced for Persons in Authority, of every Rank, or We are undone” (qtd. in Wood 67). This in itself would entail that “people would naturally be more willing to obey their new republican rulers,” and that the “elected republican magistrate would be distinguished not by titles or connections but by his own inherent worth […]” (Wood 67). But, as Wood, points out, it is not enough to simply change the system, “The people themselves must change as well” (Wood 68). On this particular point, utopian communities have a decided advantage over real ones: they have utopian citizens, whose only purpose in life is to live out the utopian dream.
The Worthies of Symzonia, i.e. those that qualify for public life, are divided into three orders: “the GOOD,” “the WISE,” and “the USEFUL.” The GOOD are those who have shown outstanding benevolence, exemplary conduct, etc. until they have “obtained an expression of the public voice, that they are superior to the generality of men” (120). The WISE are those who have made useful improvements in science and advancement of knowledge. The USEFUL are those who have made useful practical inventions or improvements. It is hard to see how such elitism as the division into different classes of men complies with the values of an egalitarian regime such as the Symzonian claims to be. The solution is simple: in Symzonia these classes are not arbitrary categories into which people are admitted through birth, wealth, or political manipulation. They are conceived of as natural classes into which citizens are admitted on the grounds of their true characteristics. Such fantasies of naturally grounded hierarchies are commonplace in utopian writing. For instance, we find it in Book IV of Gulliver's Travels, where we learn that certain colors of the Houyhnhnms denote a lesser beauty and rational capacity and “therefore continued always in the condition of servants, without ever aspiring to match out of their own race, which in that country would be reckoned monstrous and unnatural” (207). The key to successfully maintaining a natural aristocracy is made explicit by Swift here: the citizens themselves must internalize the idea of hierarchies so that they can exercise self-regulation. Societies such as these do not obliterate social inequality but make it unproblematic since the hierarchy refers to and gets its authority from an external truth that is independent of the social order.

The similarities between Symzonia and Gulliver in this regard can almost certainly be traced to a common source in Plato’s Republic, in which the citizens are divided into similar categories as the Symzonians but under different names: “guardians,” “auxiliaries,” and “workers” (115-20; bk. III). In the Republic, however, this order is revealed to be a fiction, a “noble lie,” created to maintain social stability, and which is thus ultimately for the good of society. Socrates suggests that citizens are to be trained as youths into their social classes and then be told that their indoctrination “happened to them in a kind of dream-world,” and that they had actually been “formed and nurtured deep inside the earth” (118; bk. III):

“Although all of you citizens are brothers,” we'll continue the tale by telling them, “nevertheless, during the kneading phase, God included gold in the mixture when he was forming those of you who have what it takes to be rulers (which is why the rulers have the greatest privileges), silver when he was forming the auxiliaries,
and iron and copper when he was forming the farmers and other
workers.” (119; bk. III)

Here Socrates sums up the most essential characteristic of utopian social
engineering. It needs a unifying narrative—what Wegner termed a
“transhistorical bond” (xvi)—that unites the citizens, but it also needs to deny
the contingency of that fundamental narrative and act as if it were a
transcendent truth. It is fundamental to the preservation of the social order that
power appears to emanate from some indistinct yet incontrovertible source, as
if it were just an extension of a natural order. The Symzonians have precisely
such a formative tale in the narrative of the ancient conflict with the
Belzubians. There seems to be some confusion, however, as to whether this
episode belongs to history or myth:

Three or four thousand years had now passed away, and doubts
were entertained whether this were matter of genuine history, or
an ingenious allegory, intended to present to the people a glowing
picture of the evils which might follow a gross departure from
purity of life and rectitude of principle. (174)

The implications here are doubly suggestive. There is the possibility that the
Symzonian utopia has been so successful in isolating itself that the existence of
such otherness is no longer conceivable. But it might also suggest that the
ideological utopian machinery has worked out a way to keep its members in
check by constructing an idea of an Other that serves as a template for self-
discipline. What better name than the infernal Belzubia to embody the idea of
the frightening Other? The “ingenious allegory” mentioned in the quote above
seems related to Plato’s “noble lie,” which was explicitly devised to keep the
social compact unified by creating a nationalistic, transhistorical bond. In a
further parallel between the Symzonians’ “ingenious allegory” and Plato’s
“noble lie,” Socrates also proposes that the fiction should concern a defining
event in an indefinite past that forges a link between the members of a
community and unites them against everything external (Plato 118-19; bk. III).

In their style of all-inclusive democracy, the Symzonians have
purportedly solved the republican problem of the individual versus the state by
making the state and individual one and the same. Every citizen embodies the
ideology of the state, and thus the state represents the ideology of its citizens in
a utopian circular logic. Consequently, the proper distribution of power is
unproblematic. Similar conceptions of the role of the individual versus the state
can also be found in the rhetoric of the early American Republic. While it is
true that power is supposed to emanate from the people, Wood points out that

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it was equally clear to the founding fathers that the individuals were expected to relinquish their individual rights to the state (Wood 61). “A Citizen owes everything to the Commonwealth” wrote Samuel Adams, and Benjamin Rush was even more explicit: “Every man in a republic is public property. His time and talents—his youth—his manhood—his old age—nay more, life, all belong to his country” (qtd in Wood 61). As it turned out, the American people did not conform to the Whiggish republican agenda so easily; political faction and rebellions were frequent occurrences in the early republic. The Symzonians, however, have managed to ward off faction and keep its citizens in check. The key to their success has been their creation of a completely transparent political system with a one-to-one correspondence between the representative and the represented. The eutopia of Symzonia relies on this idea of transparency, of representation that is not representation, and of natural states. And, even more importantly, it relies on the Symzonians’ uniform belief in the validity of such a system, and their willingness and ability to comply with its regulations.

A central characteristic of the Symzonian community can be described as a suspicion of representation. Whether in politics, religion, law, or economy, this is manifested in the idea that everything represents only itself. This seems to be the most central tenet of Symzonian ideology. This postulates, in semiotic terms, a direct correspondence between signifier and referent, which bypasses the order of the signified altogether and, consequently, creates a sign that is stable and immune to slippage. Indeed, it is not conceived of as a sign at all, but part of the thing in itself. One instance illustrates this especially clearly. At one point one Symzonian pundit proposes to formulate Symzonian morality in a written code of law, arguing that it “would conduce to the welfare of society, by enabling every one to know, with technical precision, what he might and what he might not do” (191). His proposal is promptly rejected, however, on the grounds that no law is needed as “public opinion, the established principles and habits of the people, the prevalent sense of rectitude and benevolence, had been and still was sufficient” (191). A written codex would only introduce a distorting layer of language on the received morals of society:

The whole subject was at present plain; technical phrases would but darken and perplex it. Language was imperfect; words had different meanings; those who violated the spirit of these laws would contrive to evade the letter; the people would disagree in their judgments; the influence of public opinion would be destroyed; bad passions would be generated; more laws would be required; contest, disorder, and innumerable evils would be the consequence. (191)
The more something is described in language, the less clear it becomes, setting off a process of linguistic degradation. As with the manifest clarity of the Symzonian landscape, their morality is likewise thought to be unaffected by obscurity. By this slippery-slope argument it is clear that the Symzonians are well trained in system maintenance, realizing that if one aspect is admitted to be contingent, the stability of the whole community is threatened. Their fear is that the linguistic formulation of the implicit values that constitute their laws would shift the focus from “the examples of the Good, the dictates of enlightened consciences, the sense of accountability to God, the simplicity, temperance, and practical piety of the people” towards the code itself (192).

This could have been construed as a utopian realization of a society where “the laws of nature and religion” (130) really are self-evident. But considering the existence of the proposition to put the laws in writing in the first place, it is evidently not self-evident to a Symzonian citizen “what he might and what he might not do.” So there is already some instability in the system even before it is translated into language. Consequently, then, the apprehension seems to be that the formulation of the laws would expose the values of the unformulated legal system to be ungrounded. And if these values were open to question, it would amount to an admission that public morality is created ad hoc, and as such would threaten the foundations of society. Utopian stability can only be upheld as long as its core values cannot in themselves be questioned. Therefore they have to remain unformulated or unrepresented. The anxiety of linguistic contamination is thus more far-reaching than just the conventional critique of the unstable condition of language. This is one of the few points where Symzonia appears as something less than a genuine eutopia, and where the novel takes on the characteristics of a critical utopia. The Symzonians closely guard the idea of one-to-one correspondence because it is crucial for maintaining social stability.

Exclusions from Society

The conventional geographical isolation of the utopian community is a symbolical representation of its ideological isolation. The utopian borders serve to keep out external influence since these are potential threats to the social order or cultural stasis. But sometimes even the utopian citizens fail to embody the utopian standards, thereby positioning themselves outside the community. To handle such dissidence, the Symzonian community has devised various explicit and implicit strategies of utopian paradigm maintenance that involve
different degrees of social exclusion.

By defining its boundaries through exclusions the Symzonian absolute democracy is revealed to be superficial, and the utopian veneer starts to crackle. “[A]s with many other literary utopias,” Gretchen Murphy writes, “Symzonia’s perfection seems contingent on a system of rigid restrictions that stifle human complexity. When individual self-regulation fails, the Symzonians preserve their purity and seclusion by banishing or censuring citizens […]” (264). There is even one whole group, women, that is silently excluded, a topic I shall return to below. First, however, I will discuss the official Symzonian statutes for debarring unwanted members from the councils, five of which are presented to Seaborn. The first four concern different ways in which a man can render himself unworthy and excluded from politics for life: by being “sain” (as in being politically ambitious), “deceitful,” “tyannical,” or “hypocrical” (122-23). These four seem reasonable enough since they relate to political sincerity and, by extension, political ability. The fifth statute, however, is more circumstantial, making it apparent that the tolerance of society towards its individuals is limited:

5th. All persons guilty of crimes, all who infringe the rules of virtue and morality, all who lead irregular lives, or who set a bad example in society, are forever excluded from a place among the worthies. The last clause of this rule is understood to include old bachelors [sic]. (122)

This statute indicates that “the people” from whom the Symzonian power supposedly emanates are not the actual citizens, but those who embody the idea of a Symzonian citizen. Since the Symzonians have no ordinary legal system, it is not even clear what constitutes a crime. These rules reveal an additional, implicit, system of values that wedges itself between the idea of an all-inclusive and therefore true democracy and its realization. In order to be allowed to partake in the democracy, your lifestyle must first be approved. The final amendment about the “bachelors” seems curious, but different kinds of disciplinary measures directed towards unmarried old men had real precedents. In England, for instance, an income tax act of 1798 stipulated that unmarried men be subject to heavier taxation. The most obvious threat to the social order that elderly unmarried men pose is that they do not procreate and therefore do not participate in the perpetuation of the utopian society, thereby disturbing the equilibrium of the utopian community, which depends upon cultural stasis. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that the Symzonians give tax relief for citizens with young children in order to reward and stimulate reproduction.
(163). If each generation follows the other without interruption everything will be interchangeable, as if time does not pass.

The most glaring omission from the list of exclusions from the Symzonian community, however, is women. They are not allowed to partake in political life, either by vote or office. But their predicament is different in that it is not officially regulated, and in that their exclusion is not a punishment for some social transgression. Neither is it because of any stated deficiency since Seaborn expressly writes of their social rank: “The women of Symzonia are not regarded as inferior in intellectual capacity, or moral worth, to the other sex. The female character is there respected, for the qualities of the female mind are developed and employed” (184-85). This could be construed as a comparative observation on the unequal situation of women in America: Symzonian women are not regarded as inferior while, by implication, American women are. But this only serves to make the exclusion of Symzonian women even more problematic. Had the women been regarded as inferior as their American counterparts the exclusion would have been logical, but since they are considered equal to men in all these respects, the exclusion instead becomes arbitrary. They are equal but are not entitled to equal rights, and since the grounds for exclusion are not formulated, there is nowhere to direct criticism.

Instead of reproducing the egalitarian gender situation in Symzonia, as he claims to be doing, Seaborn reveals a structural inequality that divides society in half, and which is passed over in silence. The patriarchal hierarchy in Symzonia is apparently so self-evident that the exclusion of women, in contrast to the socially disruptive elements, from public life demands no qualification. Since the Symzonian democracy works by almost universal representation, women are in effect denied full citizenship. Typically, Seaborn proceeds directly from his encomium on female intelligence to describe the women in ornamental terms: “Their personal beauty exceeds my powers of description. I can liken their complexion to nothing but alabaster slightly tinged with rose” (185). Instead of access to the political sphere, women are relegated to the domestic sphere of food preparation, sewing, and gardening. Since these domestic duties are not very time-consuming they devote most of their time to the “instruction of their children, the improvement of their own minds, religion, and social intercourse” (186). Even the improvement of their minds and religiosity seem to be functions of their child-rearing capabilities rather than a goal in itself. In order to make the debarment of women from political life appear unproblematic, it is of course essential that they are portrayed as being content with their station in society. The women of Symzonia carry out their
duties in a paradisiacal fulfillment: “To arrange their basins of milk and honey, and set out their baskets of fruit for a family united in esteem and love, is a pleasurable exercise” (185). Since they are apparently uniformly happy, the system is not challenged. There is no mention of a woman who has chosen to pursue a life outside of the normative gender roles, so it can be assumed that these stereotypes are so deeply ingrained that not adhering to them would be unthinkable.

What is reproduced here in utopian form is, of course, a fairly conventional view of the role of women in 19th-century American society. As Maldwyn A. Jones writes: “The position of American women was paradoxical. Men treated them simultaneously as superior beings and as helpless subordinates. Nowhere in the world were women so idealized, deferred to, protected. Yet they were uniformly denied social and political equality […] [since] a woman could neither hold office nor vote” (Jones 168-69). But there were of course voices of protest. In an article from 1845, “Wives and Slaves: A Bone for the Abolitionists to Pick,” the author gives a view of the situation of American women with many points of intersection to the women of Syzmonia. Using the analogy of slavery to point out that Northern abolitionists, while criticizing slavery in the Southern states, keep their wives in a similar condition at home. It compares various legal rights of slaves and wives and finds no difference between them. Debarment from political life is not restricted only to married women, however: “In our republic […] it is not thought proper to entrust her, whether married or single, with the least degree of power. It is considered inconsistent with feminine delicacy to admit women to the ballot box or the legislative bench” (W. J. F. 272). In an argument that was sure to resonate poignantly in any American reader, it is stated that men are effectually abusing the very natural rights of woman by “taxing her without representation.” The author offers ironic solace: “Let it be woman’s consolation under this restraint, that what she loses in freedom she gains in delicacy, as the eastern odalisque finds the softness and fairness of her complexion improved by the protection her prison curtains afford” (W. J. F. 272). Like the women of Syzmonia and their alabaster complexion, American wives are ideal ornaments. As is evident, then, the role of women in American society was in a state of reconstruction during the first decades of the 19th century. Mary Wollstonecraft’s Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) was widely distributed and debated. There was also a plethora of other publications aimed towards women—not merely with reactionary messages. During this period, women were also admitted into higher education for the first time.
Evidently, the role of women in society was undergoing a slow revolution in the early 19th-century U.S. As Bruce reminds us, “the utopia is a critique of dominant ideology, offering to its readers an imaginary or fictive solution to the social contradictions of its own time. But utopia’s critique […] can never be total, for utopia too is a product of history and immersed in it, unable to stand outside it” (xv). The utopia will not only propose solutions to social conflicts of the society it criticizes, it will also reproduce them. In the light of this historical development, the unproblematic role of women in Symzonia should perhaps be interpreted as a nostalgic utopian longing, or utopian wish-fulfillment, and another example of a real social complication that is implicitly stabilized in the utopian fictional construct.

In the cases of exclusion discussed so far—women, political scoundrels, and old bachelors—repression has been a sufficient strategy in maintaining social stability. But there is one social group where such efforts of system maintenance are insufficient and for which the disciplinary measures have to become more radical. For most Symzonians, the willingness to become a model citizen is enough to ensure behavioral self-regulation. But those who fail to embody this utopian ideal are banished from the country and become “outcasts.” These are simply impossible to contain within the homogenous Symzonian society, because their behavior subverts all its core ideals:

giving way to their carnal appetites and passions, [they] fell into intemperate indulgences, whereby they produced disease to their bodies, and a necessity for much labour to supply their unreasonable consumption, and at the same time an aversion to the performance of the labour which is necessary to the preservation of health […] the constant exhortations and efforts of the Worthy were found insufficient to restrain some of the youth from forming such pernicious habits, so that before they were sufficiently taught by experience and the examples before them, that to be good is to be happy, they degenerated into vice. This too often led to crime. To support their wastefulness, they infringed the rights of others. (131-32)

This is one of the most important passages in the novel since it defines the Symzonian society by negation. It is crucial to note that these people are not presented as products of a deficiency in the social design. They are conceived as inherently vicious and afflicted with a degeneracy that cannot be rectified

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13 The revolutionary implications were made explicit by a women’s rights convention in Seneca Falls, 4 Jul. 1848, which adopted a “Declaration of Sentiments.” Appropriating the language of the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal […] The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.”
despite the efforts of society. They are not only diseased in themselves, but they become tumors on the social body that have to be removed.

This type of thinking about society and its relation to its individual members would have been familiar in an American Revolutionary context. The republicans came to understand the community as a homogenous organic body in which all members were linked together, making dissenters into social bodily disorders: “In light of the assumption that the state was ‘to be considered as one moral whole’ these interests and parties were regarded as aberrations or perversions, indeed signs of sickness in the body politic. […] Men lost control of their basest passions and were unwilling to sacrifice their immediate desires to the corporate good” (Wood 58-59). By their licentiousness these individuals threaten to split society into factions, destroying the unity of purpose that is the source of social stability: “For most Americans in 1776 vicious behavior by an individual could have only disastrous results for the community,” because this caused the individual to lose the connection to the social body (Wood 69). For the Symzonians, the licentiousness of the subversive elements is relatively unproblematic. These elements are instantly recognizable since they are also literally afflicted with disease, a physical manifestation of moral degeneration, and can be dealt with decisively. Giving in to “carnal appetites” is not only a transgression on the individual moral plane, but threatens the equilibrium of society as well since they “endanger the morality and virtue of the whole community” (166). By presenting their condition as an innate moral affliction, and not the result of inadequate socialization, the burden of guilt is wholly put on the outcasts. Society as such is blameless.

The Symzonians seem to embrace a conception of innate depravity of a decidedly Puritan flavor. By giving in to sin the reprobates only prove that they were not of the elect in the first place, and therefore disqualified from the authentic community, i.e. a community covenanted by God. This type of rhetoric is familiar from, for instance, the divinely ordained state Winthrop outlines in “A Model of Christian Charity.” Here we find a similar imagery of how sinners fail both as individuals and as citizens by embracing “this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us; be revenged of such a perjured people and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant” (179, II). For Winthrop and the Symzonians alike, denying the sufficiency of this world is not only morally reprehensible for the individual, but also socially corrosive since it is in breach of the supreme source of social authority. Hence Winthrop imagines the American colonies to be as the biblical
“city upon a hill” that cannot be hid from view (Matt. 5:14). Failure will entail both the withdrawal of divine protection, and ignominy in the community of nations: “we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world” (180; II).

Unlike the interventionist God of the Puritans, however, the Symzonians take care of their own banishments, but their punishment seems no less infernal:

When such men became, in the opinions of the select worthies, incorrigible and dangerous to society, they were transported to a land far distant to the north, the extreme limit of the world, where a part of the year the heat is intense. There they continue in their vicious course, pursuing the gratification of their sensual appetites, and are punished with diseases of body which enervate their faculties, inordinate passions which torture their minds, and fierce desires which are incapable of being satisfied. (132)

The Symzonians strike a perfect balance between their own temperance and the temperate climate of their country. By their rationality and moderation, they are able to create for themselves a pre-lapsarian existence in which the fruits of nature come without much toil. This is absolutely not a land of Cockaigne, however, where the abundance of the country meets any indulgence; Symzonia is only a paradise if moderation is exercised: “the labour necessary to procure all the essential comforts and rational embellishments of life, in this fruitful country, and with the temperate habits of the people, required but a small portion of the labour which could be performed” (126). This should be compared to the biblical injunction that was the result of the fall: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread” (Gen. 3:19). The outcasts of Symzonia have also lapsed and been sentenced to just such an existence, where their increased appetites create “a necessity for much labour to supply their unreasonable consumption, and at the same time an aversion to the performance of the labour” (131). They are doomed to be tortured by their own intemperate and irrational passions, and by desires they cannot satisfy.

In line with the historical development of the Puritanism of Winthrop’s generation into the deism of the early republic, reason rather than faith is the foundation of Symzonian religion. The key to Symzonian happiness thus lies in two related concepts: temperance and rationality. When Seaborn analyzes Symzonian existence, he sees Nature and Religion as given entities that will formulate laws to a rational mind: “I saw that the internals owed their happiness to their rationality, to a conformity with the laws of nature and religion” (130). The laws are an intrinsic part of creation, and it is up to the rational mind to decode and live by them. Rationality is therefore the defining
trait that allows the Symzontians to strike a balance and live in harmony with their environment. Thus the banishment of the outcasts is also a banishment of irrational impulses in society. Allowing them to continue to exist within society would be to risk contamination, not only of the morals of others, but of the system in itself. In the utopian fantasy, these elements have transgressed a tangible moral boundary and, as concrete evidence of a moral order, their punishment is not abstract and spiritual, but concrete and physical. Their vice “produced disease to their bodies” and they live in misery (131). The physical manifestation of their innate degeneracy becomes a very convenient way of establishing a practice in a natural order that would have seemed to be merely despotic under any other circumstances. Furthermore, as soon as the outcasts are exiled from the benevolent influence society may have had on them, they rapidly degenerate even further, losing “their fairness of complexion and beauty of form and feature. They become dark coloured, ill favoured, and mis-shapen men, not much superior to the brute creation” (132). Just like the Symzonian citizens embody the utopian dream, these outcasts embody its nightmare.

White Supremacy

A visible sign of the Symzontians’ utopian purity and moral superiority is their exquisite whiteness—they even dress exclusively in white. The problem of finding an objective basis for racial ranking is resolved in utopian wish fulfillment. The supremacy of whiteness is revealed to be absolute and thus capable of stabilizing the racial sign in a self-evident hierarchy. Jared Gardner notes that the “revisionist drive of the period—in its desire to recover the ‘original’ purpose of the nation—collided with the rhetoric of race and the repressed facts of African American slavery” (115). Freeing slaves resulted in a real social problem of how to deal with a mixed community of racial difference, or, perhaps even worse, miscegenation. In Symzonia, Gardner finds “a useful example of the way in which […] utopian projects of the period imagined the erasing of racial difference” (116). It would perhaps be more appropriate to say that the Symzontians have erased the problem of racial difference by creating a totally racially homogeneous society. Since racial difference is very much in operation in Symzonia, only it has been successfully externalized.

14 Gardner gives examples of two historical utopian attempts: Fanny Wright’s Nashoba Commune, “which practiced amalgamation through miscegenation,” and “the American Society for Colonizing the Free People of Color, which worked to purge the nation of free blacks, the impulse behind much of the reform of the period was anxiety about the rising population of blacks in the United States” (115).
Seaborn's first encounter with the Symzonians causes a shock of otherness as he realizes that “the soottiest African does not differ more from us in darkness of skin and grossness of features, than this man did from me in fairness of complexion and delicacy of form” (108). This seems related to Gulliver’s “horror and astonishment” when he recognizes in a Yahoo “a perfect human figure” (Swift 186). Gulliver endeavors to show the Yahoons that he is not one of them by rolling up his sleeves to show his “naked arms and breast”; with moderate success, though, as he is almost immediately violated by a young female (Swift 214). Seaborn goes through the same uncovering ritual in order to prove his whiteness: “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” (110). Seaborn’s display is no more successful than Gulliver’s, however: “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 mortifying. I was not a white man, compared to him” (110).

Scott Trafton notes that Seaborn’s encounter with the Symzonians “inverts his place in the schemes of European racialized hierarchies,” which comes “not only by a shock to his racialized expectations but by a shock of perfect inversion—which turns, perfectly, on an axis of black and white” (101). The Symzonians are undoubtedly superior according to the racial logic of appearances that Seaborn himself subscribes to. Applying this, he sees himself as the Symzonians see him: “it was my dark and hideous appearance that created so much distrust amongst these beautiful natives” (107).

But Seaborn’s shock of otherness is far from producing an upheaval of the racial hierarchy. Instead the hierarchy is confirmed, which is its primary utopian function. Trafton reads the subterranean voyage of the novel as an allegorical journey to find a center to the racial sign: “The earth itself is the object of the voyage of expedition; it is given interiority as a means by which the colonialist adventure and its panicky denotations can remain infinitely in play […] the earth is now the secret, racialized space” (102). As an imaginative response to the racial crisis, Symzonia envisions a new geography that will provide what the old one was unable to: an absolute racial order. This fantasy of a revelation of an absolute racial order is a response to the crisis of race in 19th-century America. The Symzonians’ exquisite whiteness marks them as the purest form of the racial sign, signifying higher moral, mental, and physical capacity. However, since the sign is not binary, but a sliding scale where it is possible to approach either end, the inevitable corollary is that “the soottiest
African” is as inferior to Seaborn as Seaborn is to a Symzonian. At this level, the utopian construction confirms a commonplace racialist view of the world, betraying an anxiety to create and maintain an absolute racial division grounded in Nature. Indeed, Seaborn knows that there is a race of people who are superior to him, but this is of no real consequence once he returns home, forever debarred from any interaction with the Symzonians. At home he is the confirmed crown of creation, by the sole virtue of skin complexion.

Such longings for absolute racial difference, of which skin complexion is just the visible manifestation, had been expressed before. The perhaps most influential example is Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia*, where he discusses the political, physical, and moral objections to racial co-existence. As in Seaborn’s inter-racial encounter, Jefferson claims that “The first difference which strikes us is that of color,” and proceeds with some speculations on its origins and results:

> Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and scarf-skin, or in the scarf-skin itself; whether it proceeds from the colour of the blood, the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature and is as real as if its seats and causes were better known to us. And is this difference of no importance? Is it not the foundation of a greater or less share of beauty in the two races? (145, Query 14)

The logical leap Jefferson makes in proceeding from an observation of appearance to an aesthetically based hierarchy is indicative of just what is at stake for Seaborn when the color of his skin slides down a few rungs on the monochromatic scale. Jefferson proceeds to catalogue the ways in which blacks are inferior to whites, but his Enlightenment spirit requires more tangible evidence: “To justify a general conclusion, requires many observations, even where the subject may be submitted to the Anatomical knife, to Optical glasses, to analysis by fire, or by solvents” (150). Because of this, Jefferson is

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15 Or, as Pelter formulates it: “negro : white man” as “white man : Symzonian” (164n).
16 Jefferson was by no means alone in his desire to establish the exact nature of blackness and finding a tangible racial difference. A letter to *The New England Magazine* in 1831—occasioned by the arrival of Benjamin Morrell in New York with two savages kidnapped from a South-Sea island—puts forth a theory about the essence of physical blackness: “The black color of the skin results from a carbonaceous deposite upon the mucous tissue under the cuticle. […] This deposite is made for other human races in the organs of respiration, and is immediately elicited by expiration, as a carbonic acid gas” (*Miscellanies: Savages, etc.”* 364). Stephen Jay Gould also cites S. A. Cartwright, a prominent Southern physician, as an opponent of the same, rather surreal, idea. Cartwright traces the fact of black mental inferiority to an imaginary respiratory deficiency: “It is the defective […] atmospherezation of the blood, conjoined with a deficiency of cerebral matter in the cranium […] that is the true cause of that debasement of mind, which has rendered the people of Africa unable to take care of themselves” (qtd. in Gould, *Mismeasure* 102-3).
ultimately unable to assess racial difference in definite terms and therefore advances “as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind” (150-51). His zeal in the cause and his conviction that there is a black essence to be found that will account for the perceived differences indicate how deeply felt the racial anxiety was.\textsuperscript{17} The Symzonian utopia accomplishes precisely what Jefferson sought to do—to find an absolute order that allows ranking and brings stability to the racial sign.

The category of race in Symzonia is not genealogical, however, but social and environmental, a product of the system of outcasts. As noted, under the influence of their unbridled passions and the climate, these undergo a process of racial degeneration in which they lose the Symzonian pure white complexion, and become dark-skinned and brutish (132). Thus the darkness of skin, the absolute on which racial categories depend for their construction, is only the visible manifestation of a moral failure, rendered conveniently visible. Blackness is thus a degenerated form of whiteness.

The idea that whiteness is the ur-color from which all others have degenerated was not original. For instance, Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon—French 18th-century naturalist whose ideas were widely discussed in the early American Republic—speculated on the effect of the environment on complexion: “White then appears to be the primitive colour of Nature, which climate, food, and manners, alter, and even change into yellow, brown or black […] Nature, in her full perfection, made men white […]” (Buffon 4: 324-25).\textsuperscript{18} Unsurprisingly, he found his own climate to be “where the human form is in its greatest perfection; and where we ought to form our ideas of the real and natural colour of man” and also where “the inhabitants are the most beautiful people in the world” (Buffon 4: 350). This environmentalist theory was also the basis of Buffon’s claim of American degeneracy, which will be discussed in the following chapter. It is likely that some of Jefferson’s reasoning in \textit{Notes} were

\textsuperscript{17} This was evidently a resilient issue as well. Cotton Mather had tried to dispel notions such as Jefferson’s in his pamphlet \textit{The Negro Christianized} (1706). Here he addressed some “idle and silly cavils” of his times, especially doubts whether “Negroes have Rational Souls” and whether their skin complexion was a sign of moral degradation and inevitable perdition: “As if the Great God went by the \textit{Complexion} of Men, in His Favours to them?” (15-16). Of course, Mather argues as a missionary of Christian ideas, not as an abolitionist. He wanted to convert slaves to Christianity. Indeed, as Dana D. Nelson relates, some of his parishioners purchased Mather a slave of his own very soon after (29).

\textsuperscript{18} In the omitted sections of the quotation, Buffon tackles the phenomenon of albinism, which was problematically ambiguous as it both signified perfection and degeneration. Obviously, this could complicate the issue for someone who wanted to maintain the supremacy of whiteness. He writes that such whiteness sometimes reemerges but should not be mistaken for the real thing, as it is “by no means equal to its original whiteness.” Whiteness is nature in the highest state of perfection and, in the albino, nature comes full circle: “reduced to the last stage of adulteration, she renders them white again” (Buffon 4: 324-35).
adopted from Buffon’s argument of the beauty of whiteness and its corollary, the ugliness of blackness. Some thought, however, that the degenerative effects of the environment were reversible under the influence of a more temperate climate. David Ramsay, for instance, criticized Jefferson’s treatment of Africans in *Notes on the State of Virginia*: “I think you have depressed the negroes too low. I flatter myself that in a few centuries the negroes will lose their black color. I think they are less black in Jersey than Carolina, their [lips] less thick, their noses less flat” (qtd. in Semonin 224).

Indeed, there had been proponents of the creation of such a white supremacist utopia as Symzonia in America. In *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind* (1755), Benjamin Franklin observes—in a controversial passage expunged from later editions—that “the Number of purely white People in the World is proportionably very small”:

I could wish their Numbers were increased. And while we are, as I may call it, Scouring our Planet, by clearing America of Woods, and so making this Side of our Globe reflect a brighter Light to the Eyes of Inhabitants in Mars or Venus, why should we in the Sight of Superior Beings, darken its People? why increase the Sons of Africa, by Planting them in America, where we have so fair an Opportunity, by excluding all Blacks and Tawneys, of increasing the lovely White and Red?

In the utopian version of America, the Symzonians have the means to act on exactly such a “fair opportunity,” and maintain the racial purity of their nation by purging their nation of blackness. Their exclusion of unruly members of their community is morally justified by the absolute link between moral degeneration and skin complexion. The moral degeneration is externalized not only in skin color; the exiles also quickly deteriorate physically: “One of the pure race, it was believed, was able to lift three times as much as any one of the degenerates, or to leap three times as high” (133). In short, Symzonia is everything racist theorists such as Buffon, Jefferson, or Franklin could have wished for.

Others believed the problem of blackness would take care of itself. We saw Ramsay express the opinion that blacks would lose their skin color and coarse features as they became acclimatized and acculturated in a white society. Others were less optimistic and predicted that freed slaves would be unable to survive in a white society. One of those who made this argument was James Fenimore Cooper, whose *Notions of the Americans* (1828) discusses the issue:

One must remember how few marriages take place among these
people; their moral condition, their vagrant habits, their exposure, their dirt, and all the accumulated misfortunes of their race. I think it is quite fair to infer, from these statements, that freedom is not favourable to the continuation of the blacks, while society exists under the influence of its present prejudices. […] There is no doubt that the free blacks, like the Aborigines, gradually disappear before the superior moral and physical influence of the whites […] (112-14)

It is clear from all these examples that race was perceived as a problematic category and that many struggled to make sense of a system of racial ranking that they knew intuitively was right. This reaction should probably be regarded as an effect of the gradual, but inevitable, abolition of slavery. These were not defenses of racial ranking as justification of slavery, but rather attempts to negotiate the problem of keeping blacks inferior even as freemen. Cooper continues his reasoning on the future of the black race, by pointing out that miscegenation was unlikely to resolve racial issues. His main argument, like Jefferson’s, is aesthetic: “matrimony is very much an affair of taste; and, although there well may be, and there are, portions of the world where white colour is not greatly admired, such is not the case here. The deep reluctance to see one’s posterity exhibiting a hue different from one’s own, is to be overcome, ere any extensive intercourse can occur between the blacks and the whites” (Nations 249). Consequently, there is really no uncomplicated way of achieving coexistence. I think that it is in this social context that the racial utopia of Symzonia should be placed. It provides an answer to the nature of blackness—it is after all a visible sign of moral degradation—and thereby restores order to the racial sign. It also makes the case that the way to achieve a community without conflict goes through homogenization and exclusion.

Knowledge and Greed

As was prefigured in his first name, Adam Seaborn is ultimately expelled from the paradise he found. The Symzonians deal with him as any other social aberration: by exclusion. He is banished from the country and told to warn his fellow external beings that the engine of defence awaits anyone who tries to approach Symzonia again. Based on what the Symzonians have read in the books Seaborn has brought them—including Shakespeare, Milton, and books on modern history (175)—the Best Man has come to the decision “that the safety and happiness of his people would be endangered by permitting any further intercourse with so corrupt and depraved a race” (197). As Murphy
remarks: “The Symzonians perform a kind of postcolonial reading of these
great Western texts, and instead of being impressed are horrified by evidence of
External intemperance, selfishness, slave holding, and imperial ‘addiction to
traffic’” (263). But the Best Man is given other opportunities to evaluate
Seaborn in person in two conversations they have, in which the contemporary
American and Symzonian societies are contrasted. While the Best Man is
horrified by most of what Seaborn relates, he significantly thinks the American
Constitution a “scheme well calculated for a very virtuous and enlightened
people” (148), furthering the idealization of the early American Republic.

David Seed observes that the audiences with the Best Man parallel
Gulliver’s conversations with the King of Brobdingnag (78), to which might be
added Gulliver’s conversations with his Houyhnhnm Master. Like Gulliver,
Seaborn repeatedly finds himself unintentionally horrifying his listener with
accounts from his home world. Even though he takes “especial care to speak
only of the habits of the most virtuous, enlightened and truly refined people
of our external world,” the Best Man extracts enough to be filled “with disgust
and pity” (149). Even so, Seaborn then suggests that a trading scheme between
Symzonia and the U.S. be established. Eager to realize this lucrative
proposition, Seaborn assures the Best Man that any hardships would be of little
consequence to the externals since “in the pursuit of gain, they defied plague,
pestilence, and famine” (201). Of course, this rhetoric of daring enterprise only
proves to the Symzonians that he does indeed belong to a race “inordinately
addicted to traffic” plagued by an “inordinate thirst for gain” (196-97). In these
instances, as Seed notes, “utopia is used directly to criticize the values of
contemporary America, and to destroy Seaborn’s self-image in the process”
(78). Even Seaborn realizes this and becomes “petrified with confusion and
shame, on hearing [his] race thus described as pestiferous beings, spreading
moral disease and contamination by their intercourse […]” (198). However, as
he continues, the biggest setback is seeing all of his “hopes of unbounded
wealth at once laid prostrate” (198). When he is granted his wish to bring some
Symzonian manuscripts back “to instruct the externals in the wisdom they
contained” (203), he seems incapable of separating knowledge and commerce
as he immediately turns this into an economic transaction: “I felt sure of
instructive and profitable employment for life in translating these productions
for the benefit of my fellow externals […]” (203).

Once Seaborn realizes that the expulsion is irrevocable, his external
nature returns with a vengeance. He is overcome by compulsory greed and even
betrays the trust of the Best Man by stealing a handful of pearls, an act that he
is certain he will “be excused by [his] external friends, when they remember that [he has] been much addicted to commerce, and consider the force of habit, and the security with which the operation could be performed” (212). He thus confirms the Symzonians’ initial suspicion that his imperfect whiteness reflected an imperfect moral constitution. His dejection of having been found unworthy soon disperses as he is reminded that he has left a sealing party whose cargo of skins will make him a wealthy man. It is as if his temporary exaltation into the utopian community and the subsequent abrupt expulsion has left him schizophrenic. Seed reasons along similar lines: “Seaborn’s departure from Symzonia becomes tantamount to an expulsion from paradise although even here his gaze wavers between worlds” (78-79). Seaborn does wrong by compulsion simultaneously as he has been made aware of the immorality of his actions. He is the savage who has been cultivated just enough to despise his origins, only to find out that he is constitutionally unable to be accepted into the superior culture.

When a storm besets them on their homeward passage, every single piece of evidence that Seaborn has visited regions beyond the reach of empirical knowledge disappears, not only the Symzonian manuscripts, but also all scientific specimens from the Antarctic (226-32). The return voyage is presented in terms of a moral test that Seaborn fails. He stows the specimens poorly in order to free up space for as much of the conventional articles of Asian trade, “teas, nankeens, and silks, and as much china as was necessary for dunnage” (223). As in all moral tales, Seaborn is punished for his greed. The thirst for gain is not compatible with the attainment of knowledge. But, as Lenz remarks, in the early 19th century these two were typically regarded as inseparable: readers of travel narratives “characteristically viewed commercial voyages as voyages of exploration and voyages of exploration as surveys for commerce” (Poetics 18). The novel is subtitled “a voyage of discovery,” but by failing to negotiate the conflicting motives of commerce and science, Seaborn perverts the fundamental idea of exploration: to contribute to a cumulative stock of knowledge. He even persuades his crew to keep secret all of their discoveries in order to maximize and monopolize his gain instead of disseminating the knowledge (219). In this period especially, accurate information about the Antarctic waters was not a matter of knowledge for the sake of knowledge but of safety. In poetic justice, Seaborn’s ship is lost in a later voyage due to the lack of up-to-date charts (241). He is a rich man when he returns to America, having been able to trade sealskins in China for luxury goods to import, but he is swindled of his fortune soon after, and sentenced to
debtor’s prison. The only reason that he chooses to come forward with his narrative is that he realizes money can be had from it. In the end he is left bankrupt, financially and morally.

Seaborn is not just an isolated literary example of such conflicting motives. However reprehensible Seaborn’s behavior and treatment of the crew might be, the author of Symzonia highlights a central conflict of motives in early 19th-century exploration in America, and actually anticipates a major problem with the liberal idea that economical and scientific interests were one and the same. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the South Sea Fur Company and Exploring Expedition that Reynolds ventured on in 1829 failed precisely because commerce and science proved incompatible. Symzonia can be said to dramatize the fundamental incompatibility between these two goals. Moreover, Seaborn’s initial, expansionist logic of exploration—that the world would provide him with “new sources of wealth, fresh food for curiosity, and additional means of enjoyment” since the old sources had been exhausted (13)—is deconstructed as an insatiable greed that knows no bounds.
Chapter Two

Monkey Utopia: James Fenimore Cooper’s The Monikins

After Synezenia, it took fifteen years before another American utopian fiction was set in the Antarctic: James Fenimore Cooper’s novel The Monikins (1835). The only other Antarctic fiction published between them is Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “MS. Found in a Bottle” (1833), which is discussed in Chapter Four. Like Synezenia, The Monikins is written in anticipation of a conclusive exploration of the Antarctic with the remoteness and mystique of the region again providing an ideal space for utopian projection. However, whereas Synezenia was predominantly a genuine utopia with some elements of satire, The Monikins is satirical through and through. Moreover, the utopias described are not peopled by exalted human beings, but by monikins, a monkey-like species that has actually evolved from humans. The English nobleman Sir John Golden calf and the American sealing captain Noah Poke are engaged in a rescue mission to take a group of monikins, accidentally stranded in the human world, back to their home, which is located in the unexplored extreme southern latitudes of the Antarctic. The two monikin nations that they visit, Leaphigh and Leaplow, turn out to be satirical renditions of England and the U.S. respectively. At the end of the novel, however, after having killed and eaten their monikin guide, Golden calf is abruptly transported back home from the monikin world, suggesting that the whole adventure might have been nothing but a delirium.

In this chapter I will first situate the novel with respect to what was known about the Antarctic at the time, relate this to how the region is represented. Then, using the novel’s reception as a point of departure, I will explore two main lines: First, I will look at the ways in which the utopian communities of the novel relate to immediate historical and political contexts. I will then devote the largest part of the chapter to the evolutionary theme of the novel, tracing its origins back to the notion of the great chain of being, a notion that also spills over into the representations of race and class.

The literary silence during the 1820s on the topic of the Antarctic corresponds to a lull in public interest during the same period. Since the grandiose theories of John Cleves Symmes, nothing of any real significance had transpired, even though there were voices advocating Antarctic exploration, most notably Jeremiah N. Reynolds. During the administration of President Jackson, however, the prospect of a governmentally funded large-scale expedition started to seem realistic, culminating in the passing of a bill to that
effect in 1836. Even though the expedition was delayed until 1838 it was a much-debated topic both in politics and in magazines before its departure (see Intro.). *The Monikins* appears during this period of renewed interest in South-Sea exploration, and takes advantage of this focus of public attention in order to develop themes of social criticism. Cooper had used similar tactics before, in *The Prairie* (1827), where, as Gardner observes, the transposition of the Leatherstocking sequence from upstate New York to the Missouri Territory can be seen as a response to the Louisiana Purchase and more specifically the ensuing Missouri Crisis (104-05). In both *The Monikins* and *The Prairie*, the setting is that part of the American frontier which was in public focus at the time.

The imaginary voyage of *The Monikins* goes to a couple of utopian communities located in the unknown region in the vicinity of the South Pole, which is inhabited by a race of monkeylike beings, the monikins, who have evolved from humans. Generally speaking, *The Monikins* appeared at a transitional moment in history when both human and natural history underwent major revisions as it became increasingly plain that creation was not static; natural states and beings disappeared and new ones appeared in their stead in a continuous succession. The 19th century saw the emergence of disciplines such as geology, biology, and paleontology, all of which had in common that they observed historical changes over vast time spans. The question of how living beings had developed to their present state and the place of the human species in relation to the rest of animate nature were especially urgent concerns. Although, this scientific revolution would culminate with Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution as he proposed it in *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871), it had been the topic of debate for decades. On a cultural level, Cooper’s dethronement of mankind in *The Monikins* can therefore be seen as a symbolic enactment of this process and of the anxiety it created. As we shall see, the novel itself caused a great deal of anxiety by foregrounding these issues. The portmanteau construction “monikin”—possibly a combination of the words “monkey” and “manikin,” diminutive of “man”¹—announces the evolutionary and controversial theme from the very start.

¹ James S. Hedges and James C. Clees both suggest the possibility of “money” as well, as this would fit the allegorical implications (Hedges xix, Clees 101n). Scott Michaelsen suggests it is a wordplay on “moniker,” which prefigures the problem of naming that he argues runs as a theme through the novel (97). The exact origin of the word can only be a speculation. The first time Cooper mentions the title to his publishers, he refers to it as “Monnekin” (Letters 2: 258). It seems also as if Cooper, at an early stage, had a variation of the title that was similar to mannequin, judging from what a correspondent wrote to him in 1832: “By the by, passing through the Palais Royal to-day I saw in the window of a bookshop, a book called the Mannequin [...] will not this interfere with your
Before the novel makes the transition into the utopian realm, however, the actual Antarctic, as far as it was known, is present for a brief moment. This is the only portion of the text where some of the nautical representations that Cooper had become associated with through his sea novels appear, although here carried out in an uncharacteristically humorous tone. In this passage, the descriptions are essentially realistic, albeit relying on some conventional Romantic tropes to describe the scene, as can be seen in the following excerpt from Goldencalf’s first encounter with the ice:

There we had it, sure enough! I can only compare the scene which now met my eyes, to a sudden view of the range of the Oberland Alps, when the spectator is unexpectedly placed on the verge of the precipice of the Weissenstein. There he would see before him a boundless barrier of glittering ice, broken into the glorious and fantastic forms of pinnacles, walls and valleys; while here, we saw all that was sublime in such a view, heightened by the fearful action of the boisterous ocean, which beat upon the impassable boundary, in ceaseless violence. (214)

In order to accurately comprehend the Antarctic, the reader is first asked to imagine a precipice in the Alps, an almost archetypal Romantic scene, conventionally linked to the idea of sublimity. From the precipice in the Alps, however, the reader is then asked to import a vision of a violent sea to complete the imagery. Thomas Philbrick points out that Cooper drew on his own experience for this scene. In *Sketches of Switzerland* (1836), Cooper recounts how he encountered an unexpected view of the Oberland range from the Weissenstein and, interestingly, describes its sublimity in terms of “the waves of a colossal ocean” (qtd. in Philbrick 226). The intermediation of a series of relations completes “a triad of associations: the sea, the Alps, and the glittering polar ice, all linked in sublimity” (Philbrick 226). Cooper’s description of the Antarctic ice barrier in *The Monikins* should perhaps be seen primarily as a rhetorical device illustrating the inability to convey powerful experiences through language, or more specifically, a rhetorical device employed to reproduce the Romantic convention of sublimity, suggesting that the experience bypasses the rational and linguistic levels and communicates directly on a visceral level. Goldencalf construed the message transmitted as a manifest warning not to proceed beyond the ice barrier. He asks Poke why they cannot

*Title?* (Cooper, Correspondence 1:294). The American Quarterly Review announced Cooper’s forthcoming publication in a similar manner in June, 1835: “We hear that he is engaged upon a satire to be entitled THE MANNIKINS” (qtd. in Clees 107n).

2 See, for instance, Caspar David Friedrich’s paintings of this motif, *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) and *Chalk Cliffs of Rügen* (1818).
simply go around the icy mountains and gets the reply: “Because they go round the ‘arth, in this latitude” (214-15). This seems to invoke a passage from Benjamin Morrell’s A Narrative of Four Voyages (1832) in which he writes that many mariners thought the Antarctic to be guarded by “an impassable bulwark of indissoluble ice; on which it is written, ‘Thus far shalt thou come, but no farther; and here shall thy proud course be stayed’” (29). I will have occasion to return to the Antarctic sublime and Morrell’s passage in the chapter on Cooper’s The Sea Lions (1849).

The presence of the American sealer Noah Poke, “native of Stonin’ton, in the state of Connecticut, in old New England” (106), serves as a reminder that the Antarctic was still predominantly a sealer’s business, especially one of American origin. It is only fitting that it is Poke, who “had passed half his life in poking about among the sterile and uninhabited islands of the frozen ocean” (195), that pokes a hole in the ice barrier. Stonington, where Cooper himself had lived, was one of the major American ports for sealing vessels (Philbrick 215).3 It is known for the sealing fleet that set out for the South Shetland Islands in 1820, consisting of sealers whose names, like Noah Poke’s, had “a sonorous, New England biblical ring” (Gurney 174).4 Poke proves himself to be a worthy member of this proud sealing tradition at several points in the novel. For instance, he shows an ardent interest in the mystery enshrouding the Antarctic when he enquires of the monikins whether they live “south’ard of the belt of ice that we mariners always fall in with somewhere about the parallel of 77° south latitude” (184). When the novel was published in 1835, no one had yet managed to get further south than the British sealer James Weddell, who reached 74°15’ S in 1823, but Cooper has Poke suggest that sealers routinely went beyond that. No less significant, in passing beyond the ice barrier, Poke also upstages James Cook—a looming figure in this respect—and disputes his claim that the risks involved in Antarctic navigation are so great that it will never be fully explored. This motif of American sealers defying the British Admiralty also returns in The Sea Lions. Poke’s hint that his knowledge of the Antarctic goes beyond official records is actually a perfectly reasonable proposition. Sealers were conducting their business in the Antarctic in utmost secrecy because of the dwindling stock of seals and rising competition from other sealers. Steeped in this practice as he is, it is the prospect of new sealing

3 Robert D. Madison suggests a rather tenuous historical source for Poke in Nathaniel Palmer (1799-1877), also of Stonington Connecticut: “Noah Poke, [is] based extremely loosely on Antarctic explorer Nathaniel B. Palmer” (371). The connection is perhaps strengthened by the fact that Palmer was in fact a sealer, like Poke, not an explorer (Gurney 174).

4 The connection to his biblical namesake is further pursued as all sailors onboard Poke’s ship have to dress up as diverse animals in order not to offend the delicate monikin sensibilities (210).
grounds that appeals to Poke the most in regard to their Antarctic voyage. He is told that he will be the first to learn “the secret of new sealing grounds,” and since Golden calf waives his right of ownership, “he might turn these discoveries to his own private account” (196-97). A little further on, Poke draws a map onboard the ship, with one important and deliberate omission: “The region near the south pole, however, he left untouched; intimating that it contained certain sealing islands, which he considered pretty much as the private property of the Stunin’tunners” (212). As will be seen, Cooper returned to this theme of clandestine sealing in *The Sea Lions*.

Poke is also the center of a rather intricate Antarctic joke that Cooper sets up. Poke makes a point of intuitive navigation, which proves to be a very precise method. When the ship has entered into the Antarctic region, Poke gives their position to be 79° 36’ 14”, but when Golden calf takes the position by solar observation it is found to be 79° 35’ 47”. This puzzles the old sailor who finally comes to the conclusion: “Ay, I see how it is […] the sun must be wrong—it should be no wonder if the sun did get a little out of his track, in these high, cold latitudes” (225). This might seem like merely a humorous instance of Poke’s unwillingness to admit to an error; Golden calf and Reas on obviously think so. But the joke is on them. Poke the commonsensical American is actually correct; the sun does appear in a different position in polar climates. This is due to the optical phenomenon of refraction—the light ray changing direction—that occurs when light passes between media of different densities. This is especially apparent in the cold, rarefied polar atmosphere and causes anomalies in solar observation. It is clear that Cooper feels some affection for this colorful character from Stonington. As Thomas Philbrick observes, he is in many respects a “comic preliminary sketch” of the sealers in *The Sea Lions* (214). It is also the practical resourcefulness of Poke that enables the ship to cross the ice barrier of the Antarctic. He has invented “ice-screws,” which are devised as an exterior ribcage to the hull, made up of a system of heavy spars suspended around and under the ship (221-24). This invention prevents the ship from being trapped in the ice and crushed by its colossal pressure. Cooper would recycle this tactic to avoid the problem in a related scene in *The Sea Lions*.

When *The Monikins* was published in 1835, the American literary establishment was scandalized. The consensus seems to have been that Cooper’s talents had waned after his initial novels, most notably *The Spy* (1821), *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Pilot* (1823), and *The Red Rover* (1828), all of which had been received very favorably. With his “European” novels, *The Bravo* (1831), *The
Heidenmauer (1832), and The Headsman (1833), and especially A Letter to His Countrymen (1834), critical opinion turned. With the appearance of The Monikins, it became openly hostile. One reviewer writes: “of late, the powers of our author appear to have been rapidly declining. The ‘Bravo’ was worse than any of its predecessors; and the ‘Heidenmauer’, and ‘Headsman,’ baffled the exertions of many a professed novel-reader. Now comes the ‘Monikins.’ It is worse, incredible as this may seem, than Cooper’s ‘Letter to his Countrymen’” (Review A 136). A Letter to His Countrymen had been a two-pronged attempt by Cooper to address both political and personal grievances. His first target was the current political situation in general and the Jackson administration in particular. His other goal had been to seek redress for the negative critical reception of The Bravo and The Heidenmauer, by chastising American journals for uncritically adopting opinions from Europe. He closed A Letter to his Countrymen by declaring his decision to “lay aside the pen” because he found it impossible to write in such a narrow-minded literary climate (342).\(^5\) Predictably, the strategy failed to win him many supporters. One reviewer went so far as to declare: “If the old saying be true—that whom God wishes to destroy, he first deprives of his wits—we advise Mr. Cooper to make his will and set his house in order, for his time is at hand” (Review B 175).

Consequently, when Cooper decided to break his self-imposed literary exile with The Monikins only one year later, he had not exactly set himself up for a positive reception. Nor did it help that The Monikins was polemical as well, in the same vein as A Letter to His Countrymen. As James S. Hedges writes, it seems intended “as partial answer to the continued criticism” that he was subjected to (ii). Few of the reviewers even felt obliged to substantiate their critique by actually discussing the text. The reviewer of the New England Magazine is notable for making an effort:

> Some hundreds of pages are taken up with describing the men, manners, and institutions of the kingdom of Leaphigh, and the adjacent republic of Leaplow—or, in other words, with satirizing, or attempting to satirize mankind. The author, in following the trait of Swift, probably forgot that, although he possessed an abundance of dull malignity, he had neither the sparkling wit, the keen sarcasm, nor the polished style of the English satirist. But,

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\(^5\) The decision seems to have been a long time coming, however. Already, in a letter of 15 July 1830 he wrote that The Bravo would be his last book: “I have now the means of doing something else, and I have never liked the employment, except as a ready resource against poverty” (Cooper, Letters 1: 424). Three years later, in June 1833, he wrote: “The tales are done. There are a few half finished manuscripts on other subjects to finish, and I turn sailor again—or something else” (Cooper, Letters 2: 384). If he really intended to quit the profession, he failed miserably. He went on to write twenty more novels as well as numerous works of non-fiction.
having once embarked in his hazardous speculation, our author
blunders on, pell-mell, striking prodigious blows to the right and
left, but, unfortunately, never hitting anything but himself.
(Review A 136)

When one reviews the contemporary reception of The Monikins, the vehemence
of the criticism seems oddly disproportionate. It appears that Cooper had
become fair game for critical attack, or even ridicule with little more than
passing references to the text itself. One critic went as far as to claim that
Cooper had “committed literary suicide,” and that his “literary existence
properly terminated with the publication of The Monikins, a novel of which it
is not possible to say much, as we have never read it, and never met with any
individual who had” (Review C 121-22). Another review, signed G. W. P.,
added that “It has long been a desideratum with a portion of the city press to
ascertain where there can be found a person who has read [The Monikins]”
(413). Yet another declared that its “puerile and unintelligible nonsense, endless
and most laborious jokes, sublimated absurdity, seem to us altogether
unparalleled in the written language of any age or nation” (qtd. in Clees 102).

Whether The Monikins was read or not, it certainly was not silently
ignored. Indeed, it even seems to have acquired the position of being the
quintessence of bad literature, as exemplified by the short story “Nineteen
Hundred” (1847) about a future American dystopia when “The works of art;
the investigations of science; the creations of fancy, and the elaborations of
intellect, had passed into oblivion. […] The only effort of fiction that was now
read, was The Monikins” (451). Cooper might have felt ambivalent about the
distinction. In a review of Cooper’s The History of the Navy of the United States of
America (1839), Edgar Allan Poe confirms that Cooper’s literary reputation had
declined during the 1830s:

A flashy succession of ill-conceived and miserably executed
literary productions, each more silly than its predecessor, and
wherein the only thing noticeable was the peevishness of the
writer, the only thing amusing his self-conceit—had taught the
public to suspect even a radical taint in the intellect, an absolute
and irreparable mental leprosy, rendering it a question whether he
ever would or could again accomplish any thing which should be
worthy the attention of people not positively rabid. (Essays and
Reviews 473)

Hard to believe, but this was actually the preamble to a favorable review.
However, the mere fact that such a hard judgment is even included is indicative
of Cooper’s status at the time.\(^6\) As a counterpoint to all this negativity, however, it should be noted that *The Monikins* was reprinted at least three times between 1850 and 1860, making it doubtful that it was neglected to the extent the reviewers imply. Perhaps it can be inferred that the dust needed to settle a bit before it could find its audience.

**Utopia: Political Satire**

To some degree, the hostility that *The Monikins* was received with can be explained by Cooper’s ongoing feud with the American intelligentsia, the nebulous quality of the book itself, and the fact that it was a marked departure from his previous writings and therefore failed to meet the expectations of his audience. Several reviewers particularly complained that it was not another Leatherstocking-volume: “Hundreds of persons imagined that the “Monikins” were a tribe of hitherto-unrecorded Indians, and anticipated a treat such as they had before enjoyed” (qtd. in Clees 106). However, one review especially singles out the political satire in *The Monikins* as the main reason the novel failed: “It is the unhappiest idea possible, to suppose that politics can be associated, in any effective way, with romance or fiction. One is the reality, the other the ideality of life. Cohere, they cannot [...]” (Review D 183). One can trace in this, perhaps, a type of distinction of the proper domain for the writer of romances—which in this context means historical romances—that Cooper had himself provided in his original preface to *The Pilot*: he “is permitted to garnish a probable fiction, while he is sternly prohibited from dwelling on improbable truths” (3). Of course, Cooper transgresses this point in *The Monikins*. But this is not a historical romance; most of the offensive political satire of the novel is presented in the utopian genre. This makes the demurring review even more conspicuous—the utopian genre obviously had a tradition of long standing, with social and political satire as its most defining characteristic.

When Cooper himself described how he envisioned *The Monikins*, he wrote to his publisher that it would be a “*comico-serio, romantico-ironico* tale” (*Letters* 2: 258). That is indeed a description that captures the sprawling and frequently contradictory qualities of the work. It can also be described as a Swiftian satire in the vein of *Gulliver’s Travels*; the animal satire certainly seems to

\(^6\) It probably tells us a lot about Poe’s opportunism as well. Three years earlier, in the editorial capacity at the *Southern Literary Messenger* he had requested a contribution from Cooper as they were assembling “a number of the Journal consisting altogether of articles from distinguished Americans, whose names may give weight and character to this work. To aid us in this attempt would cost you no effort, as any spare scrap in your port folio would answer our main purpose and to us your aid would be invaluable” (*Cooper, Correspondence* 1: 356).
derive from Swift’s Houyhnhnms and Yahoos, while the general structure of the journey to the monikin region is similar to Swift's satirical rendition of England and France as Lilliput and Blefuscu. A large portion of The Monikins is devoted to satires of British and American political and social phenomena as represented in the monikin nations Leaphigh and Leaplow. Lyman Tower Sargent suggests the term “Gulliveriana” for narrative utopias with “non-humans as central protagonists,” which certainly seems to apply to The Monikins (13). James C. Clees has traced many of the connections between Swift and Cooper, but he has also convincingly demonstrated Cooper’s indebtedness to Ludvig Holberg’s The Journey of Niels Klim to the World Underground (1741) (116-36). As can be expected in thinly disguised satires of Britain and America, it is primarily their respective political systems that get ridiculed. Cooper’s approach is to use the utopias as distorting mirrors, in which all the flaws in society are isolated and magnified. The location of the monikin world in the Antarctic seems to be an integral part of the satire since, as Elizabeth Leane points out, “Cooper presumably chose to set his utopian satire in Antarctica because of its ‘bottom-of-the-Earth’ location, which underscores the inversions of the world depicted” (156). By its antipodean connotations, the Antarctic is used as a signal of carnivalesque reversal rather than as a device of verisimilitude.

In Leaphigh (England), the social organization is conceived of as a tripod whose legs are supported by the King, the nobles, and the people: “On the summit of this tripod was raised the machine of state” (403-04). This is the theory, but it turns out differently in practice: “The King, having his stick all his own way, gave a great deal of trouble to the two other sets of stick-holders […] the nobility, who for their own particular convenience, paid the principal workmen at the base of the people’s stick to stand steady, set about the means of keeping the King’s stick, also, in a more uniform and serviceable attitude” (404). This maneuver has the result that the King and Queen are always represented by a deputy (297). So when Poke unwittingly offends the King

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7 Edward Wagenknecht has his opinion clear: “The Monikins is Cooper’s Gulliver’s Travels, Book IV” (qtd. in Clees 112).
8 There are actually more monikin nations—“Leapup and Leapdown; Leapover and Leapthrough; Leaplong and Leapshort; Leapground and Leapunder” (315)—although none of these are visited.
9 Some of the most striking similarities that Clees finds include the fact that Holberg’s Niels Klim also encounters a monkey civilization, called Martinia, a name that resembles the monikin world, Monikina. Like the monikins, Holberg’s monkeys also pride themselves on the appearance and ornaments of their tails. Another instance is the Martinian lawyer’s moral relativism, which they see as a point of distinction, and pride themselves on showing “how ingeniously they can change black into white” (Holberg 252). In The Monikins there is a debate in the Leaplow Legion where the different parties argue for or against the proposition that black is white (ch. 26).
during an audience, “The Majesty of Leaphigh stood aghast, by proxy!” (300). But the convolution of power does not end there. The whole hierarchy is reversed as it becomes obvious that the monarch does not rule through his deputy, but the other way around. Golden calf observes the King’s first-cousin approach the King: “while he had the appearance of listening with the most profound attention to the instructions of the King of Leaphigh, [he] was very evidently telling that potentate what he ought to do” (305). Thus the aristocrats maintain a simulation of a definite site of power, as it is still nominally vested with the monarch, while retaining actual power for themselves. But the convolution of power is even more intricate. The monarch is not only rendered powerless by being reduced to ceremonial functions, but is actually removed altogether.

Formerly there was a King in Leaphigh and one who governed, as well as reigned. But the nobles and grandees of the country, deeming it indecent to trouble His Majesty with affairs of state any longer, took upon themselves all the trouble of governing, leaving to the sovereign the sole duty of reigning. […] After a time, it was found inconvenient and expensive to feed and otherwise support the royal family, and all its members were privately shipped to a distant region […] (342-43)

This invokes the English adage, “the Queen reigns but does not rule,” which originated in the wake of the Glorious Revolution when the English monarchy relinquished much of its executive power to the Parliament. The Leaphigh king is removed but the institution, the metonymical throne, is maintained so as to give the people a virtual site of power and national identity to which they can direct their wishes and fears: “In what way could the grandees cry out that the throne is in danger, if there were no throne?” (343). The aristocracy keeps up the idea of monarchy, but the throne is just an empty signifier, merely fulfilling the function of simulating absolute authority. In essence, Leaphigh is not a monarchy since the aristocrats have usurped the power.

Cooper had discussed the dangers of usurpation of the executive power only a year before *The Monikins* in non-satirical form. In *A Letter to His Countrymen*, he uses England as a warning example for a similar development in America:

The laws are still administered in the name of the king it is true, his signature is necessary to certain acts, and he is yet called the

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10 Clees notes that this is a further structural parallel between *The Monikins* and Gulliver’s *Travels* as “Gulliver is forced to leave Lilliput and Pocks to leave Leaphigh because each has offended the country’s queen” (125).
head of the church and state; but aristocracy has cast its web about him with so much ingenuity, that the premier conducts his hand, the chancellor wields his conscience, and parliament feeds him, until he is reduced to the condition of a well dressed lay-figure. [...] Parliament has seized upon the executive powers, and rendered the king a cypher; it yields the prerogative in his name [...] (317-18, 333)

Cooper defines the royal prerogative in a monarchy to be power (Letter to His Countrymen 320). The plasticity of the royal prerogative is satirized extensively in Leaphigh, especially in the court-scene where Johnson’s Dictionary is resorted to in the discussion of the substance of the term—which is especially curious as English is not spoken in Leaphigh (329-30). At this point, Leaphigh and England seem to be momentarily conflated. Leaphigh is England, Cooper seems to say—in the unlikely event that anyone has missed the point.

Leaplow is an equally transparent satire of the U.S. As in Leaphigh, their machine of state is also conceived of as a tripod, but in reverse with the people at its base as support and the machines of state separated on top of the beams. Their primary political institutions are the “Great Sachem,” “Riddles,” and “Legion” (or “Bohees”), corresponding to the President, Senate, and House of Representatives respectively (407). They also have a version of the Supreme Court in “the Supreme Arbitrators,” whose main purpose is basically the same as their real counterparts: to check unconstitutional practices with reference to their “Sacred Allegory” (408).

Just as America gained its independence from England, Leaplow is an offshoot of Leaphigh, devising its social system in dialectical opposition to the latter: “As a people, we are a hive that formerly swarmed from Leaphigh; and finding ourselves free and independent, we set about forthwith building the social system on not only a sure foundation, but on sure principles” (278). Just as in their historical counterparts, however, there are two conflicting historical narratives on the reason for this migration. The Leaplowers themselves maintain that “certain monikins, who were too good to live in the old world, emigrated in a body, and set up for themselves in the new.” Leaphighers, on the other hand, claim to have “peopled the new countries by sending all those of their own communities there, who were not fit to stay at home” (315).

In order to prevent any inequality of the kind encountered in Leaphigh where some pride themselves on having longer tails than others, or even multiple tails, the Leaplowers have decided that all shall have theirs cut to uniform length:
Nature has dealt out these ornaments with a very unequal hand [...] We agree that the tail is the seat of reason, and that the extremities are the most intellectual parts; but, as governments are framed to equalize these natural inequalities, we denounce them as anti-republican. The law requires, therefore, that every citizen, on attaining his majority, shall be docked agreeably to a standard measure, that is kept in each district. Without some such expedient, there might be an aristocracy of intellect among us, and there would be an end of our liberties. (284)

Since the tail is the seat of reason, the operation is in effect mandatory lobotomy. As Clees observes, “This amputation, of course, represents democratic leveling at its extreme point” (Clees 91). Cooper here voices a common critique of the American intellectual climate where, as the argument goes, individual efforts are sacrificed for a culture of conformism where egalitarianism had led to anti-intellectualism. This takes literal form in Leaplow as the severed tails “are sent to a great intellectual mill, where the mind is extracted from the matter, and the former is sold, on public account, to the editors of the daily journals” (285). This is a continuation of Cooper’s criticism in *A Letter to His Countrymen* of the American press for its sheep-herd mentality and lack of originality or substance.

Most of the satire is more specific, however, targeting president Jackson and his administration. For instance, the Leaplow head of state is called the Great Sachem, which was a common appellation for a North-American Indian chief. Of course, Jackson had a reputation as a great Indian fighter during the Seminole Wars, 1817-18, and as an enforcer of the Indian Removal policy during the 1830s. Consequently, the title Great Sachem for the leader of an allegorical America is infused with irony, especially considering that Cooper was most famous for his empathetic, albeit romanticized, portrayal of Native Americans in his frontier novels. Many of the ridiculed follies of Leaplow can be traced to Jackson’s politics. The guiding political practice in Leaplow, for example, known as “the Rotatory Principle,”11 promises total equality since every political appointment is made by chance: “We have in Leaplow two enormous boxes made in the form of wheels. Into one we put the names of the citizens, and into the other the names of the offices. We then draw forth, in the manner of lottery; and the thing is settled for a twelvemonth” (276). As Clees remarks, this refers to the system of rotation in office, a product of the “spoils system” that was a central feature of Jackson’s presidency (89-90). The system

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11 “Your pardon, Commodore;—we call the word rotary, in English.”

“Sir, it is not expressive enough for our meaning; and therefore we term it ‘rotatory.’” (279-80)
was Jeffersonian in origin, but it was Jackson who made it into central policy to reward loyal supporters with official positions. He was severely for this because it gave the president the power to appoint officers as he saw fit, which, opponents argued led to corruption and undemocratic homogenization of power. Jackson’s view, of course, was the opposite; he argued that rotation in office “was a leading principle of republicanism” (qtd. in Jones 140). The periodical replacement of office-holders would “check corruption, ensure against the creation of an entrenched bureaucracy, and enable more citizens to participate in public life” (Jones 140). This explains the satirical inclusion of laymen in Leaplowian politics, even to the point where Goldencalf, Poke, and a cabin boy are elected into the Legion, the Leaplowian counterpart to the House of Representatives. No political aptitude is required, although they have to pass a litmus test of democratic values: the proper use of the word “our” (366). This is also a parody of the spoils system and Jackson’s rationalization of it. As Jones writes, Jackson’s administration was characterized by a “suspicion of experts” and this “prompted the President’s avowal that official duties were ‘so plain and simple that men of intelligence may readily qualify themselves for their performance’” (140).

One critic of the policy of rotation in office claimed that it had the effect that “office-seeking and office-getting [became] a regular business, where impudence triumphed over worth,” and that it lowered the standards of civil service (qtd. in Jones 140). Judging from The Monikins, Cooper would have agreed in that critique since ambitious Leaplowers scamper to be as close to the source of power, the two wheels, as possible, “for, although every thing was, beyond all question, managed with perfect republican propriety, yet, somehow, and yet he did not know exactly how, but somehow, those who are on the spot always get the best prizes” (352). Even though chance should be the ultimate democratic principle, something is not quite right with its implementation.

Jackson was the first popular president in the literal sense of the word, as his democracy gained voters primarily from the newly enfranchised populace. But, as Vernon Louis Parrington remarks, this caused social and political tensions: “In drawing together mechanics and frontiersmen, the new party inevitably became a lower-class instrument, offensive to gentlemen of the old school of politics” (Parrington 146). The main cause of such social leveling was that most states had relaxed the property restrictions for voting, which gave people without much property political influence over those who had. Hedges

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12 By 1828, all states except South Carolina had adopted popular vote for the Electoral College. Previously, this had been done in the state legislatures (Jones 136).
argues that *The Monikins* reveals Cooper’s “fears that the republican form of
government in America might revert to an undesirable system of social
leveling” (xiv). Clees has traced Cooper’s stance on the issue “whether or not
political equality […] tends to level all members of a society to a common
denominator of mediocrity” and found that it shifted from one extreme to the
other within a relatively short time span (20-22). In *Nations of the Americans*
(1828), he viewed the matter with optimism: “It is this elevation of character
among the middling, and even among the more inferior classes of our
community, which chiefly distinguishes us from all other nations” (123). By
the time of *The Monikins*, however, he is evidently disenchanted with the potential
democracy and the effects of social leveling. Poke’s observation about
Leaplow puts this anxiety into figurative language, as it seems to him that the
whole society “had been rolled down by a great political rolling-pin” (388). In a
note to *Gleanings in Europe: France* (1837), Cooper reveals how he experienced
the social change that had occurred during his eight-year long sojourn in
Europe upon his return to America in 1833, immediately before he started on
*The Monikins*:

> Every one was telling me that I should find the country so altered
>[…] that I should not know it. Altered, indeed, I found it; but not
>quite so evidently improved. It struck me that there was a vast
>expansion of mediocrity […] which was so overwhelming as
>nearly to overshadow every thing that once stood prominent, as
>more excellent. (51n)

The major events that had taken place during those years were, of course, the
elections of Jackson in 1828 and 1832, and the resultant democratic policy that
had transformed the political landscape drastically. On the whole, Cooper's
Leaplowian satire reads as a Whig’s dystopian vision of the effects of
democratization, where anti-intellectualism and anti-aristocracy result in a
society where nobody is allowed to excel. It should be remembered that *The
Monikins* emerges from the exact historical juncture that also saw the
establishment of the Second Party System, which resulted as the opposition
against Jackson and the Democrats organized themselves into the Whig Party in
1833.

On one point, however, Cooper seems to side with the Democrats: on
the status of the Constitution, which was not as clear in the 1830s as it had
formerly been. Scott Michaelsen relates how the debate raged over the practices
of constitutional interpretation:

> for the Whigs, the “sacredness” of the contracting parties’
intentions was the key consideration in the judging of private contracts, but was only minimally useful for purposes of understanding the Constitution. And, for the Democrats, the sacredness of the Constitutional Convention’s intentions was much more important than that of partners in business, or debtors and creditors. (7)

The Constitutional Convention’s intention can be found, for instance, in The Federalist Papers. Alexander Hamilton writes in no. 78 that the Constitution is the extension of the people and therefore it “supposes that the power of the people is superior to both [the judicial and legislative powers], and that where the will of the legislature, declared in its statutes, stands in opposition to that of the people, declared in the Constitution, the judges ought to be governed by the latter rather than the former” (439). For Federalists and Democrats alike, there was no ambiguity here: the Constitution was the supreme source of authority. To weaken its construction would, as one critic phrased it, reduce it to “a plastic mess in the hands of the Supreme Court to mean anything or nothing” (qtd. in Michaelson 4).

It is precisely such constitutional plasticity that is ridiculed in the Leaplowian construction of the significance of “the Great and Sacred National Allegory” in practical politics. If the royal prerogative was the central satirical absurdity in Leaphigh, the Sacred National Allegory has the same function in the satire of Leaplow. Shortly after the arrival of Golden calf and co. in Leaplow and their election into the Great Council, they are called on to debate a resolution from one of the political parties: “Resolved, that the color which has hitherto been deemed to be black, is really white” (413). Golden calf thinks he can easily settle the issue with reference to a clause in the Great National or Sacred Allegory, which unambiguously states: “The Great Council shall, in no case whatever, pass any law, or resolution, declaring white to be black” (420). But when he adduces this in the Council he causes an uproar; the Allegory cannot be alluded to in that manner, never mind Golden calf’s protest that it is sacred:

Sacred, sir, beyond a doubt—but in a sense different from what you imagine—much too sacred, sir, ever to be alluded to here. There are the works of the commentators, the books of constructions, and especially the writings of various foreign and perfectly disinterested statesmen,—need I name Ekrub in particular? (421)

13 For thematic similarities with Holberg’s Niels Klim, see note 9.
As in the case of the Leaphigh monarch, the Sacred National Allegory is “something to which one refers figuratively, but no longer a real referent” (Michaelson 7). The not so subtle reference to Burke indicates a connection to a recurring complaint of Cooper’s: the American dependence on foreign opinions, either in politics or in the press. In A Letter to His Countrymen, he contends that a strong construction of the Constitution is the “only safeguard” against “the downfall of the system; but as soon as innovation shall make any serious inroads on these sacred limits, the bond which unites us will be severed” (316). He argues that this is a fallacy of imitation of “English reasoning,” modeled on the practices of the English parliament and English political theorists, and needs to be remedied by recourse to the supreme power of the Constitution: “Before we are Burked out of our constitutional existence, let us at least make an attempt to try some of the expedients of our own system” (Letter to His Countrymen 336). This section of The Monikins can be regarded as part of Cooper’s personal allegory, in which he fictionalizes situations that he had been involved in himself. Like Golden calf, he had also been chastised for trying to lecture his countrymen on constitutional matters in A Letter to His Countrymen. One reviewer writes sarcastically that it “is a sort of political essay […] written apparently with the amiable purpose of enlightening the people of the United States, who have hitherto had no better teachers in constitutional law, than such shallow tyros as John Marshal, Joseph Story, Daniel Webster, and others” (Review B 176).

The Leaplows custom of trading in public opinions from Leaphigh is another instance of Cooper’s personal allegory as well as a continuation of the critique of the American dependence on foreign opinions. He writes, for example, in the opening to A Letter to His Countrymen.

The practice of quoting the opinions of foreign nations, by way of helping to make up its own estimate of the degree of merit that belongs to its public men, is, I believe, a custom peculiar to America. […] destructive of those sentiments of self-respect, and of that manliness and independence of thought, that are necessary to render a people great, or a nation respectable. […] it is my intention, while I endeavor to do myself justice, to make an effort to arrest the custom to which there is allusion […] (269-70)

This strategy evidently failed, as the criticism against him continued with unabated force and with as much transatlantic importation of opinions as ever. Consequently, Cooper resorts instead to the use of satire in The Monikins. In Leaplows they value foreign opinions so much that even the value of their domestically produced opinions is raised when they have been exported to
Leapgh and then imported back again (412). Cooper was by no means alone in this critique of the American press; this was a common and uncontroversial opinion in itself, and most critics sided with him on this specific issue. 14

Ironically, however, one of those imported opinions was the increasingly harsh criticism of Cooper himself. As one reviewer points out about the American reception of A Letter to His Countrymen: “when the tone of foreign criticism was changed, by acts and opinions of his which should have banded the whole American press for his defence, he was assailed here in articles which either echoed the tone, or were actual translations of attacks upon him by foreigners” (“James Fenimore Cooper” 4).

In the previous chapter, I discussed the utopian convention of isolated communities, and how the Symzonians had devised systems of protection against both external and internal contamination by superior war machines and expulsion. The monikins, however, have no such need to actively protect the boundaries of their utopia, since their region is naturally isolated from the world by the Antarctic ice barrier. Monikin tradition relates that the Antarctic was reserved for them exclusively—the last vacant space on earth for the last earthly species:

Nature had reserved the polar regions for the new species, with divers obvious and benevolent purposes. […] From the appearance of animal nature on the earth, down to the period when the monikin race arose, the regions in question were not only uninhabited, but virtually uninhabitable. When, however, Nature, always wary, wise, beneficent, and never to be thwarted, had prepared the way, those phenomena were exhibited that cleared the road for the new species. (182)

Because of the harsh Antarctic climate, the monikin region was not habitable or even accessible before the creation of the first monikin: “This was a wise provision of Providence to prevent a premature occupation of those chosen regions, or to cause them to be left uninhabited, until mind had so far mastered matter, as to have brought into existence the first monikin” (180). Until two centuries before this genesis, the pressure of steam inside the earth had built up until it erupted through the crust at the South Pole. This seems to be a reference to Edmond Halley, who thought the earth to be hollow and emitting luminous gas at the poles, thus accounting for the phenomenon of aurora australis and borealis. Halley, like the monikins, also believed the earth crust was thinnest at the poles due to the oblate shape of the earth, which Newton

14 An extensive treatment of Cooper’s place in the debate over American literature and the call for a cultural nationality can be found in Clees (2-13).
had established (A. Cook 347). According to the monikins, the heat and vapor of the escaping steam thawed the Antarctic ice and made the climate temperate and fertile (183). The resulting ice barrier, however, is still intact and effectively prohibits humans from crossing it. The motif of a forbidding barrier of ice, also alluded to in *Symzonia*, is here combined with the implication of a divinely ordained boundary of ice as protection for the chosen species, a possible allusion to the previously cited passage by Morrell. Whether he got it directly from Morrell or not, Cooper takes an already existing and familiar idea of the Antarctic and gives it a humorous spin.

In the monikin utopian paradigm, the world is construed as a teleological machine that uncovers—literally, as the steam melts the ice sheet of the Antarctic—new territory to accommodate the new species. The creation of the monikin world seems designed to evoke narratives of American exceptionalism as it had developed from its Puritan origins and as it had been used in the revolutionary era. For example, Thomas Paine writes in *Common Sense*: “We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birth-day of a new world is at hand, and a race of men […] are to receive their portion of freedom […]” (53; app.). The new race of the monikins was also given a similar chance of a new start in a new world, but only managed a fiasco on an epic scale. The allegorical alignment suggests that Cooper felt the American experiment, despite its glorious prospects, had gone the same way.

**The Great Chain of Being: Evolutionary Satire**

The defining feature of the novel is of course the monikins themselves, and the suggestion that they have evolved from humans. This theme is connected to contemporary evolutionary ideas in general, and the link between humans and apes in particular. In the early 19th century, this link was a matter of much controversy, and some found Cooper’s monikins hard to stomach. This is evident in one of the early reviews, which finds the premise of the novel “positively offensive. The idea of taking us to a nation of monkeys, with all that it involves, is of necessity coarse. But here it is carried out with a coarseness exceeding Swift’s *Hynnyhyns* [sic], since monkeys, are not imaginary creatures, and the fancy refuses to consider them such; and it is not redeemed by Gulliver’s wit, eloquence, and point” (G. W. P. 413). Leaving aside the qualitative assessment, with which few would argue, there is a very suggestive point in the argument made about the appropriateness of using monkeys as
characters of an animal satire. The reviewer connects Swift's strategy of
defamiliarization in the fourth book of *Gulliver's Travels* with Cooper's in *The
Monikins*, achieved through the radical shift of perspective that is the
conventional premise of utopian literature: the visitors discover that their own
culture is not the highest. Once this difference is established, negotiation
between the real and the imaginary communities can begin. In *Gulliver* and *The
Monikins*, defamiliarization is taken to its extreme by the demotion of the entire
human species from its position as the crown of creation: it is no longer about
the relative merits of different human cultures, but of different species. The
reviewer's contention that Cooper fails because monkeys are real and cannot be
construed as imaginary creatures is so illogical that it exposes only its own zeal
to keep monkeys and men separate. Are we to understand that horses are less
real than monkeys? Furthermore, in what we can only surmise is a willful
misreading to keep Swift as the model of proper literature, the reviewer also
conveniently disregards the fact that the Yahoos are degenerated humans who
have turned into apelike creatures, and that both a monkey in the court of
Brobdingnag as well as a female Yahoo mistake Gulliver for one of their own
and try to nurse him or copulate with him respectively (97-99, 215).

It seems as if the real issue is that the dividing line between human and
horse is uncontested, whereas the possible evolutionary link between human
and ape was one of the most controversial ideas of the period. The thought of
rational, talking horses is apparently easier to digest than imagining the same
about apes. Paradoxically, a naturalist convention of the 17th and 18th centuries
had been to describe the anthropoid apes anthropomorphically. They were
regarded as practically human save for the absence of the faculty of speech, and
often they were depicted in fully erect posture, frequently with a branch in hand
like a walking stick to reinforce their humanoid features (Mizelle 148, 159-60).
Also, the common name for the orangutan well into the 19th century was *homo
sylvestris*, “man of the woods.” Yet such anthropomorphism was projected
from the safe distance provided by a belief in an absolute difference. It is not
until the link between species becomes genealogical that the line is truly
contested. The metaphorical buffer is lost when the human being goes from
being like an ape to being a primate.

With *The Monikins*, Cooper thus exploits a contemporary anxiety about
the possible relation between humans and other primates: a highly controversial
topic in the early 19th century and beyond. Well into the 18th century, the

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15 According to the OED, this is a direct translation from the Malaysian words orang and utan “man of
the woods” (“Orang-outang”).

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dominant mode of thought on the structure of creation had been Platonic essentialism. The basic idea was that every creature belonged to an immutable class; no new species could come into existence and none could become extinct. All creatures were thought to be organized into a natural hierarchy, most commonly referred to as the “great chain of being,” connecting all beings in a rising order of complexity and extending into the spiritual realm. Naturally, humans were placed at the top of the worldly order, succeeded by the spiritual order with different strata of angels and with the Supreme Being uppermost. As far as it concerns the spiritual realm, there is a possibility of ascension for the human soul, but not in any evolutionary sense as worldly creatures.

In the first epistle of Essay on Man (1732), Alexander Pope provides a famous formulation of the chain of being: “Vast chain of being! which from God began, / Natures ethereal, human, angel, man / Beast, bird, fish, insect, what no eye can see, / . . . From Nature’s chain whatever link you strike, / Tenth or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike” (8; LVIII). Arthur O. Lovejoy, who has studied the development of the idea, gives an account of how it became central to 18th-century naturalism:

It was in the eighteenth century that the conception of the universe as a Chain of Being, and the principles which underlay this conception—plentitude, continuity, gradation—attained their widest diffusion and acceptance. […] Next to the word “Nature,” “the Great Chain of Being” was the sacred phrase of the eighteenth century, playing a part somewhat analogous to that of the blessed word “evolution” in the late nineteenth. (Great Chain 182-84)

In this chain, every link needs to be occupied and occupied once only, resulting in a continuous and stationary order. With reference to Plato, this idea was commonly expressed in the notion that nature does not make leaps—famously

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16 The metaphor itself probably stems from Homer’s Iliad, where Zeus displays his power relative to the other gods by stating that if they suspended a chain from heaven to earth, carrying all gods and lower creation, he would still be stronger than all of them together. Lovejoy implies that this metaphor was taken up by Macrobius in the fifth century and through him transmitted to medieval writers: “the attentive observer will discover a connection of parts, from the Supreme God down to the last dregs of things, mutually linked together and without a break. And this is Homer’s golden chain, which God, he says, bade hang down from heaven to earth” (qtd. in Lovejoy 63).

17 For instance, the Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola develops a related idea when he combines it with the image of Jacob’s Ladder (Gen. 28:12): “there is a ladder extending from the lowest earth to the highest heaven […] with the Lord seated at the top, and angels in contemplation ascending and descending over them alternately by turns” (Pico 229). In 1711, Joseph Addison reasons along similar lines as he outlines “the progress of a finite spirit to perfection” (qtd. in Lovejoy 247). This progress does not imply any evolutionary potential, however. It primarily describes the relation of humans to the spiritual world. Of the creatures of the worldly order, humans alone have the ability to transcend their station.
stated by Linnaeus in *Philosophia Botanica* (1751) as “*natura non facit saltum.*” Even if humans and other primates occupy adjacent positions in such a structure, the immutability of the system itself made it uncontroversial: all creatures had been created independently of one another and placed in a natural hierarchy. This static Linnean view of creation was the premise of 18th-century natural science, which did not allow for the creation of new species.19

During the 18th and early 19th centuries, this paradigm started to collapse under the accumulated weight of empirical counterevidence. Bones and fossils of extinct animals were being discovered all over the world, which seemed to necessitate a revision of the concept of static creation. “[F]or nature,” wrote the American naturalist Benjamin Smith Barton in 1805, “it would seem, is much less anxious to preserve the whole of her created species than some illustrious naturalists have supposed” (98). This is a crucial point, which I would like to illustrate by taking the discussion back to a related episode in *Syrtaria*. Before Seaborn and crew proceed to the subterranean utopia, they briefly pause to survey a stretch of land that they have discovered in the Antarctic. There they find “fresh tracks of some huge land animal,” of which Seaborn remarks: “Whether they were those of a white polar bear as big as an elephant, of a mammoth, or of some other enormous non-descript animal, I could not guess” (*Syrtaria* 65). That is a puzzling remark. Why would fresh tracks in Antarctica belong to an extinct mammoth? The answer lies not in the Antarctic but at home. At various sites in America, beginning in the early 18th century, enormous “mammoth” bones of had been found, but for a long time no one had any clear idea of the animal they had belonged to. The bones were associated with the mammoth for two main reasons: their size and because they seemed to be related to prior findings of bones of the Siberian mammoth. It was soon established, however, that it differed from the Siberian mammoth so for a while it was simply referred to as the American *incognitum*. In 1806, Georges Cuvier gave it its scientific name, mastodon; although it was another three years before Cuvier’s identification and naming was known in America (*Semonin* 354-56).

18 Nature might not make leaps, but the monikins have made leaping into a lifestyle. When Goldencalf first encounters the monikins they make prodigious “saltations” (also the evolutionary term for mutations in species, from one rung of the ladder to another) and the name of every monikin nation is a variant on Leap-. Leptow has also implemented complicated “saltations” and “evolutions” as part of their political system. The monikin species in itself defies the idea that nature does not make leaps, as their species have made just such an evolutionary leap. Clees suggests that this might be derived from *Gulliver’s Travels* where Lilliputian ropedancers and political candidates are made to perform acrobatic leaps in competition for governmental posts (124).

19 Linnaeus was concise on the matter of species in *Systema Naturae* (1735): “There are no new species” (qtd. in Nicols 10).
Paul Semonin demonstrates how the bones of the mastodon occupied American intellectuals for more than a century and became something of “a national symbol in the eyes of the founding fathers” (101). This had its origin in the theories of Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon—a name that, as will be seen, is frequently encountered in the American scientific discourse of this period. Buffon had proposed an environmentalist theory of American degeneracy, in which he argued that the intemperate and humid American climate caused the inhabitants to “shrink and diminish under a niggardly sky and an unprolific land” (qtd. in Semonin 6). Needless to say, Americans took this as an ignorant affront, and Thomas Jefferson promptly set out to refute Buffon in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787). To this purpose he adduced the mastodon as proof that the American climate was capable of producing not only large creatures, but the largest of all: “The skeleton of the mammoth (for so the incognitum has been called) bespeaks an animal of five or six times the cubic volume of the elephant, as Mons. De Buffon has admitted. [...] to whatever animal we ascribe these remains, it is certain such a one has existed in America, and that it has been the largest of all terrestrial beings” (Jefferson 46, 47; Query 6). In Jefferson’s opinion this provided incontrovertible evidence against Buffon’s claim of American degeneracy. According to Semonin, Jefferson’s discussion of the mastodon was one of the most “widely reproduced passages from his *Notes* and was instrumental after the war in creating the symbolic meaning of the *incognitum*” (183).

Seaborn is fully aware of the contemporary interest in the remains of mammoth creatures as he discovers and secures “some enormous bones”: “As they were very large, I called them mammoth bones of course, had them all carefully taken on board, and packed in boxes, as an invaluable acquisition to the scientific world” (*Syngnoria* 69). But then, suddenly, a living specimen of this “enormous animal” appears and drives them off the shore and into their launch:

The huge beast walked to the edge of the water at a moderate pace, and stopped to survey us new comers with great composure. I ordered [...] to give him a shot from a three-pounder, mounted in the bow of the launch, and at the same time gave him a volley of musketry. Whether the shot took effect or not, could not be discovered. He returned to the woods without haste or fright, and thus deprived me of the pleasure of securing his skin and skeleton, for the examination of the learned, and the benefit of Scudder’s Museum. (*Syngnoria* 69-70)

It is significant that Seaborn’s immediate reaction is to try to secure the animal
for Scudder's Museum. This shows that he was well aware of where the principal audience was to be found, could he pair the bones with the body of such an animal. The first decades of the 19th century saw the emergence of the American museum culture, and some of its most central and spectacular items on display were precisely such bones. Furthermore, from the late 18th and early 19th centuries, it had been commonly assumed that the mastodon was a ferocious predator, a “flesh eating elephant” (Semonin 403). In ca. 1802, an advertisement for an exhibition of a mastodon skeleton at Peale’s Philadelphia Museum invokes a fearsome past where such creatures existed: “Forests were laid waste at a meal, the groans of expiring animals were every where heard; and whole villages, inhabited by men, were destroyed in a moment” (facs. in Semonin 329). With such accounts making its rounds in magazines and newspapers, it is small wonder that Seaborn and crew take to the boats. By the time of *Symzonia*, most naturalists classified the mastodon as an herbivore (Semonin 354-55). This was evidently not universal knowledge, however. In 1816, Édouard de Montulé visited Peale’s Philadelphia Museum where a complete “mammoth” skeleton was on display (ill. 2).

![Ill. 2. Flesh-eating elephant: Montulé’s sketch of Peale’s mammoth (1816)](image)

According to Semonin, “The great beast’s tusks remained downturned for more than a decade, owing to Rembrandt Peale’s belief that the animal was a ferocious carnivore” (364). And, as late as 1831, *The Imperial Magazine* reports on the excavation of mastodon: “This animal as much surpassed the mammoth in size as the elephant does the ox, and was of the carnivorous species” (295).

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20 Scudder’s Museum went on to become the American Museum under the ownership of P. T. Barnum, who also acquired and merged the entire collection of the Peales’ Museum to his.
One of the major issues raised by the findings of the remains of the *incognitum* was the uncomfortable fact that it seemed to confirm that species could become extinct. Semolin reminds us “that the American *incognitum,* or mastodon, was one of the first animals to be definitively declared an extinct species” (4). Ashton Nicols points out that such “empirical observations came into direct conflict with religious beliefs. What was the connection (if any) between the Biblical flood and fossil remains? Was the world as it now appeared unchanged since ancient times?” (4). A literal reading of the Mosaic account of creation and the Flood did not allow for the extinction of any creatures, yet here were bones but no living animal. A common American interpretation of the disappearance of the mastodon had integrated this into the narrative of American exceptionalism: “the ferocious beast’s disappearance was God’s blessing on the promised land” (Semonin 3). The American author John Filson gives an illustrating example of this reasoning in 1784: “Can so great a link have perished from the chain of nature? Happy we that it has. How formidable an enemy to the human species, an animal as large as the elephant, the tyrant of the forests, perhaps the devourer of man!” (qtd. in Semonin 200). Rembrant Peale expresses a similar point: “If this animal was indeed carnivorous [sic], which I believe cannot be doubted, though we may as philosophers regret it, we cannot but thank heaven that its whole generation is probable extinct” (qtd. in Davidson 625). He also hints that some catastrophic event, such as the Flood might have been the cause: “We are likewise sure that they must have been destroyed by some sudden and powerful cause; and nothing appears more probable than one of those deluges, or sudden irruptions of the sea […]” (qtd. in Davidson 625). This is a very telling early attempt to negotiate the contradictions between faith and the accumulating body of scientific knowledge. Here, an extinct species is reconfigured into proof of the very thing it seems to refute, i.e. that the creation is still intact, but with the exception made to accommodate the chosen people.

Still, the concept of extinction could not easily be fitted into Christian doctrine or the scientific theories based on it. Finding a living mastodon in Antarctica would solve a pressing dilemma in the intersection between science and faith since it would mean that it would not be necessary to accept extinction as a scientific fact. Indeed, some did not accept it. Jefferson, for instance, thought that living specimens of the mastodon could still be found in the as yet unexplored Northwestern territories and even included it in his tables of existing American animals:

It may be asked, why I insert the Mammoth, as if it still existed? I
ask in return, why I should omit it, as if it did not exist? Such is the oeconomy of nature, that no instance can be produced of her having permitted any one race of her animals to become extinct; of her having formed any link in her great work so weak as to be broken. (55; Query 6)

Jefferson here and Filson above both allude to the idea of a great chain of being. Its fundamental assumption was that “in a well-conducted universe, every species must be constantly represented” (Lovejoy, Great Chain 243). The chain could not be considered to be broken since that would necessarily put the perfection of God in question. Therefore Jefferson is unwilling to accept that the mastodon was extinct; he even proposes that it might still be found in the unexplored interior of the American continent (Semonin 304-05). He therefore put his hope in the Lewis and Clark-expedition to provide “further information of the Mammoth” (qtd. in Semonin 344). The expedition returned without having found a living mastodon, and, since large portions of the Northwestern territory were now charted, the possible habitat had shrunk considerably. But Seaborn extends it again by transposing it to the Antarctic where he does indeed find a living specimen. Thereby two of the great American enigmas of the period—the Antarctic and the mastodon—are fused together, possibly as a response to the broader discussion of the extinction of species.

Nevertheless, the amassing empirical evidence spoke of extinction as something that had to be accounted for. It seemed incontrovertible that the chain of being could in fact be broken. With this momentous shift, the foundation was laid for evolutionary theories proper. A key actor in these first steps towards a revision of the view of creation was Buffon. He was one of the first to suggest that the different members of the Linnean genera had been spontaneously generated in response to the environment, although limited to variations of a specific set of ancestors. Significantly, he is mentioned in The Monikins in tandem with Moses as examples of prominent human historians (169)—the unlikely duo explicitly signaling the underlying conflict that the novel exploits. Even though Buffon was by no means the only one to think in these terms, he became something of a figurehead for the controversy. Cooper had already satirized the doctrine of Buffon through the caricature of the naturalist Doctor Battius in The Prairie. Battius nearsightedly mistakes his own donkey for an unknown species, the “Vespertilio Horribilis Americanus,” which would have provided the sciences with “an important link in the great animated chain which is said to connect earth and heaven, and in which man is thought to be so familiarly complicated with the monkey” (959). Apart from
providing comic relief, Battius' scientific teachings are there to provide an opportunity for Natty Bumppo to repudiate them, claiming that it is “neither more nor less than mortal wickedness” (Prairie 1082).

Another important figure in the rethinking of the chain of being was Jean-Baptiste Pierre Antoine de Monet, Chevalier de Lamarck. According to him, every being was constantly striving upwards, as on a ladder, and the resultant vacancies towards the bottom were immediately occupied by spontaneously generated primitive organisms (Bowler 86-95). Lamarck’s was the first comprehensive attempt at a theory of evolution. It postulated an alchemical “complexifying” force that pushed organisms upwards, the infamous notion of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, and an environmental adaptive force that operated through “use and disuse” of characteristics (see Gould, Structure, 174-92). As we shall see, the latter idea plays a central role in the monikin evolutionary theory.

With the evolutionary context in mind, the causes of the controversy of The Monikins appear more clearly. Cooper takes the most controversial questions of the day, evolution in general and the link between ape and human in particular, and makes fun of the whole affair. Perhaps his levity on this grave matter was sufficiently irreverent in itself to stir a controversy: keeping monkeys and men distinct was a matter of human dignity. Just how offensive this was perceived to be can be seen in one early review that betrays its emotion in attacking Cooper ad hominem:

Every thing is cloudy, distorted, and unnatural. Man is degraded to a monkey, and made to play such antics as could scarcely be conceived of, except by one of the race. The author has become a convert, we should fancy, to the theory of Buffon: at least he has furnished, in the production of this work, the most plausible and practical illustration of the Frenchman’s hypothesis, that we have ever met with. (Review D, 183)22

The reviewer immediately associates the novel with the ideas of Buffon, and it is evidently not an honorable connection, probably as much because of his theory of American degeneracy as for his evolutionary work. The vehemence of the American criticism is actually prefigured in the text, where Captain Poko, the token American, claims that in the metonymic “streets of Stuin’tun […] such doctrine would not be tolerated any longer than was necessary to sharpen

21 The most famous example is the giraffe that stretches its neck to reach the foliage often enough to pass this on to its offspring in the form of a longer neck (Wilson 438).
22 The rhetorical strategy of linking the person to apes is familiar also from the satirical cartoons of Charles Darwin either as a monkey or in the company of monkeys that circulated in the press in response to On the Origin of Species (1859).
a harpoon, or to load a gun” (175). But it is not only the fact that Cooper establishes a link between humans and monkeys, or that “Man is degraded to a monkey.” To add insult to injury, the monkey is upgraded to a human, as it has taken over the latter’s privileged position as the crown of creation.

It is not immediately apparent why Buffon would have come to be thus associated with the idea of a link between human and ape; several others made stronger statements of the supposed link. In 1735, Linnaeus grouped “humans and apes together in the order of Anthropomorpha, or primates”; in 1774, James Burnett, Lord Monboddo, suggested that “the apes might represent the earliest form of humanity”; and, in 1809, Lamarck first suggested “that the human species was descended via the apes from the lower animals” (Bowler 51). It is true that Buffon had mused on the similarities between ape and human upon observing an orangutan: “This orang-outang is not only in effect a brute but a very singular one, which man cannot look upon without contemplating himself, and being convinced that his external form is not the most essential part of his nature” (9: 110).23 But, in arguing against the validity of dividing nature into families, he contends that such classification has the preposterous consequence that “we may say […] that the monkey belongs to the family of man, and he is a man degenerated, that man and the monkey had but one common origin […]” (Buffon 5: 184). It is clear that Buffon “accepted a physical resemblance between apes and humans but insisted that this was as far as it went” (Bowler 51). One wonders, however, if Buffon’s last passage might have suggested to Cooper the idea of letting his monikins be the descendants of humans, rather than vice versa.

In this context, it should also be noted that not only did Linnaeus group humans and apes together in the order of Anthropomorpha, he also introduced a tripartite division of the human family. Apart from Homo sapiens, there was also an elusive species he called Homo troglodytes. But it is the third member of the family that is most suggestive in the present context. In a footnote he adds the possibility of a third species: Homo caudatus ‘man with a tail.’ This species was described as an incola oris antarctici ‘inhabitant of the Antarctic,’ which, if it existed at all, was so rare that he declared himself unable to determine “whether it belongs to the human or monkey genus” (qtd. in Gould, Flamingo’s Smile 265). It would not seem altogether unlikely that Linnaeus’ infamous note served as another source of inspiration for the monikins.

23 But so had Linnaeus who wrote in a similar passage: “I cannot discover […] the difference between man and the orangoutang, although all of my attention was brought to bear on this point, except for laying hold of some uncertain characteristics” (qtd. in Stepan 7).
The evolutionary account of the monikins seems modeled on the revised version of the great chain of being, especially as Lamarck envisioned it, where all creatures strive upwards. The monikin species, like the proto-evolutionary theories discussed, seems to have sprung directly out of the Age of Reason. It is no coincidence that the first spokesmonikin in the novel is named Reasono since much of the satirical thrust is reserved for reason. To further signal the satirical intent, Reasono carries the honorary titles F.U.D.G.E, M.O.R.E, and H.O.A.X (269). When Reasono relates the monikin take on the chain of being, the connection to contemporary evolutionary theory is clear. He lists some animals from bottom to top in this hierarchy: “Sponges, oysters, crabs, sturgeons, clams, toads, snakes, lizards, skunks, opossums, ant-eaters, baboons, negroes, wood chucks, lions, esquimaux, sloths, hogs, Hottentots, ourang-outangs, men and monikins are, beyond a question, all animals” (162). (I will reserve the blatant racial implications for a separate discussion and here pursue the evolutionary line.) This organization of creation resembles Buffon’s, who started his ladder from the top, “by taking the material part of man for the first level” and then followed the rest of the animals in order of resemblance to humans (qtd. Roger 242). We also see that orangutans and men are adjacent on the scale, accounting for the striking similarities in appearance that Buffon had found. Reasono’s arguments about the classification of animals in a hierarchic structure seem related to Lamarck’s proposal that all life forms had an innate drive to progress upwards (see Gould, Structure 174-92).

The monikins add to the Lamarckian model, however. They propose the possibility that beings can remain stationary, or even descend the ladder of being, and that all of creation can be categorized accordingly into the three great families of the improvables, the unimprovable, and the retrogressives” (162-63). According to monikin natural philosophy, the improvables continuously ascend through the material realm, passing from humans to monikins until they, in monikin shape, evaporate “into the immaterial world, completely spiritualized and free from the dross of flesh” (168). This makes the monikins the intermediate form between the material and the spiritual realms, a position usually reserved for mankind in the traditional conception of the great chain of being (Lovejoy, Great Chain 189-95).24 The unimprovable have reached a kind

24 This did not necessarily entail that human beings were halfway between the lowest rung on the ladder and infinity. On the contrary, most 18th-century thinkers held that humans were found towards the lower end, with an infinite number of intellectual beings above but only a finite number of sentient beings below. John Locke, for instance, writes that “we have reason to be persuaded that there are far more species of creatures above us, than there are beneath; we being in degrees of perfection much more remote from the infinite Being of God, than we are from the lowest state of being, and that which approaches nearest to nothing” (qtd. in Lovejoy, Great Chain 190).
of evolutionary stasis, whereas the retrogressives are actually degenerating to
the point where they lose all spiritual content and become pure matter. Reasono
argues that the fossils and bones of extinct creatures found are no more than
the vestiges of such retrogressive animals “in which matter has completely
overcome its rival, mind” (173). This is an interesting passage in the light of
what we saw earlier, that the existence of fossils of extinct creatures falsified the
original conception of the great chain of being or Christian orthodoxy. In the
monikin account, the fossil record rather confirms the spiritual dimension since
unworthy creatures give up their spirit and revert to pure matter, as far removed
from the Supreme Being as is conceivable. Cooper clearly relishes the
opportunity to satirize a heated contemporary debate.

From the monikins’ view of progression and regression above, we can
deduce that they are avid anti-materialists. This becomes even clearer when
Reasono claims that men are lower on the ladder due to their greater size,
which indicates that “the physical part of man is much greater in proportion to
the spiritual, than it is in the monikin; his habits are grosser and less intellectual
[...]” (173). Ascending the ladder is tantamount to shedding the body and this
leads logically to anti-materialism. The monikins reason that the larger the
creature, the more it is trapped in material existence and consequently the
further from God. We recognize this thought also from Symzonia, where the
exalted Symzonians are shorter, more slender, and require less food for
sustenance than humans. The Symzonian outcasts, on the other hand, rapidly
grow in size and grossness as they succumb to their sensuous appetites. As a
result they lose their spiritual component and become brutes, mere instinctual
creatures.

One of the recurring topics in the novel, also related to proto-
evolutionary theories, is the presence, absence, or length of tails. According to
monikin philosophy, the “most infallible sign of the triumph of mind over
matter is in the development of the tail” (167). As humans have evolved into
monikins, the brain has been set free from its confinement in the skull and, like
the monikins themselves, migrated southwards: “It is the monikin tradition that
our species is composed of men refined, of diminished matter and augmented
minds, with the seat of reason extricated from the confinement and confusion
of the caput, and extended, unraveled, and rendered logical and consecutive in
the caudel” (174). In a pun on straight or crooked thinking, Reasono argues the
advantage of having a tail for brains: “If you examine the human brain, you will
find it, though capable of being stretched to a great length, compressed in a
diminutive compass, involved and snarled; whereas the same physical portion
of the genus gets simplicity, a beginning and an end, a directness and consecutiveness, that are necessary to logic […]” (171). If we link this to the Lamarckian idea of use and disuse of characteristics, the implication is clearly that the human mind is not used very much anyway. Because of this progression, with the human as an undeveloped form only, the monikins refer to the human state as the “chrysalis condition” (324). Of course, metamorphosis has often been used as a metaphor to describe the spiritual transformation of humanity, but not as a preliminary stage to becoming monkeys.

In a continuation of the centering of mankind in the novel, Reasono and Golden calf also discuss the nature of the human tailbone, which has conflicting interpretations in the human and monikin perspectives. In an attempt to defend human superiority, Golden calf adduces that “an eminent writer, at no great distance of time, has laid it down as incontrovertible, that men once bad caudae” (174). He is referring to the environmentalist theory that humans once had tails, but lost them in the course of evolution as they became redundant. The human tailbone in this view is only a vestigial structure from this previous state. Golden calf’s implication, of course, is that humans have evolved from monikins, not the other way around, which would reassert the anthropocentric evolutionary narrative. The “eminent writer” referred to is probably Burnett, who theorized that the human tailbone proved a link to the other primates. Lovejoy writes that Burnett’s contention was that the human tailbone “is plainly nothing but a rudimentary and abbreviated tail, and that the civilized man thus carries about upon him a tell-tale member which hopelessly betrays the secret of his ancestry” (“18th-Century” 339). The tailbone might betray his ancestry, but it still indicated an evolutionary direction that put mankind in a privileged position. This anthropocentric hierarchy is completely reversed in the monikin paradigm, however; the monikin head is as abortive an appendage as the human tailbone. Reasono’s reinterpretation proposes a counter-narrative, in which the human tailbone is not vestigial but a “prophetic glance into the future” of monikin existence: the human philosopher “has unluckily mistaken a foundation-stone for a ruin!” (174).25

25 Adrian Velicu has pointed out to me in conversation that Charles Fourier had a quaint idea of the future state of the human tailbone in The Theory of the Four Movements (1808). In a future utopian age of harmony, Fourier predicts that the human body will undergo radical transformations, one of which is the growth of the tailbone into a “Harmonian arm or archibas […] a tail of immense length and with 144 vertebrae [that] terminates with a very small elongated hand” (qtd. in Beecher 340). The archibas is incredibly strong and allows humans to swim like fish, and can be used, among other things, as a powerful weapon or as whip and rein when plowing. Fourier’s work remained relatively obscure until the early 1830s, when it entered the public consciousness and his idea about the archibas became notorious (Beecher 485). It should be noted that this coincides with Cooper’s stays
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe had a related theory in 1820 about the development of the human head, and how this signified human superiority over the rest of the animals. He saw an ascending directionality of the human vertebral structure that indicated progressive development. Rudolf Steiner explains how Goethe envisioned the structure: “The brain represents merely a spinal cord mass raised to its highest level of perfection. Whereas in the spinal cord those nerves end and begin that serve primarily the lower organic functions, in the brain those nerves begin and end that serve higher (spiritual) functions, pre-eminently the sense nerves.” Goethe also proved that the skull was a fusion of three different vertebrae, similarly developed and refined, serving as a protective casing of the brain. In retrospect, the composite structure is read teleologically, as Steiner remarks: “The whole head appears in this way to be prefigured in the bodily organs that stand at a lower level.” Goethe writes that this reflects a natural hierarchy since the animal brain “has no more scope than is necessary for the functioning of the animal spirits and for directing a creature whose senses are entirely within the present moment” (qtd. in Steiner). This is in stark contrast to the human structure where “the whole form stands there as supporting column for the dome in which the heavens are to be reflected” (qtd. in Steiner).

Of course, in the monikins, Cooper performs a satirical reversal of such anthropocentric glorification of the head. As for its elevation, Reasono dismisses it by stating that “a monikin can carry his tail as high as a man can possibly carry his head [...] it costs us no effort to be on a level with human kings” (170). The perfection of the skull is equally chimerical as it houses “a reason undeveloped, imperfect and confused; cased, as it were, in an envelope unsuited to its functions” (170). To illustrate this new hierarchy, human ineptitude is comically realized in Goldencalf’s failed attempts to outreason Reasono—“for no man likes to be beaten in a discussion of this sort, and more especially by a monkey” (172)—and Poke’s repeated suggestions that they reclaim human authority through violence (171, 175, 176, 220). To the latter suggestions, Goldencalf sensibly points out that “any display of brute force would militate directly against our cause; as the object, just at that moment, was to be as immaterial as possible” (171), i.e. to be as high on the scale of being as possible.

in France, 1826-28 and 1830-33. It is of course impossible to say whether Fourier’s archibras influenced Cooper’s monkin tail. But, even if there are many differences between the two, the similarities—i.e. evolved humans who develop superhuman posterior appendages—are striking enough to deserve a mention.
One of the most critical aspects of the paradigmatic revolution that the new evolutionary theories represented was the theological implications, especially as the challenge posed to the Mosaic account of creation. This controversy is also represented in the novel. When Goldencalf is presented with the monikin theory of origins, his first reflex is to counter this by inquiring whether the monikin “tawnts receive the Mosaic account of the creation or not” (177). He can accept what Reasone says as long as it does not contradict this fundamental truth. Reasone answers, however, that they acknowledge it “As far as it corroborates our own system” (177), thus removing the Mosaic account from its privileged position.

This monikin dethronement of Christian orthodoxy continues on a more detailed level. Their system actually has many similarities to orthodox accounts of the age of the world, which was given to be approximately 6,000 years by biblical computation. The most famous calculation was Archbishop James Ussher who gave the very specific time of creation as midday Sunday, October 23, 4004 BCE (Bowler 29). Monikin tradition is close to this, having the world originating around 4500 BCE, with the addition that “Man is thought to have made his appearance, so far as our documents go to establish the fact, about the year of the world one thousand and three” (179). Ussher also dated the Exodus to 586 BCE, which should be compared to the time of the first monikin being created by sublimation about 500 BCE and hence starting the monikin exodus to the region that had now become accessible and habitable (180). Monikin tradition also states that an eruption of steam caused the climate to be temperate, thawing the Antarctic region and making it habitable for the monikins. This possibly refers to the second account of creation in Genesis 2:6, where, in preparation for the creation of mankind, “there went up a mist from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground.” This reconfiguration of Mosaic history is part of the whole recasting of the human history of the world with apes in the leading roles. Human history becomes a primitive version of monikin history, just as humans are imperfect monikins. Still, The Monikins is hardly seriously polemical about either the Mosaic account of creation or the relationship between apes and humans, especially if we consider the orthodox Christian belief Cooper expresses elsewhere in his works, such as the Christian

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26 Jacques Roger writes, “Biblical chronologies are founded on the succession of the generations since Adam, as described in Genesis. There have been a great number of chronologies. [...] That of the Anglican archbishop James Ussher (1580-1656) was the most generally accepted one of the seventeenth century” (97n).

27 The first monikin was created in year 4017 of the world; the monikin region was prepared “about the year 700 before the Christian era commenced, or some two centuries previously to the birth of the first monikins”; and the time of the great explosion is given to year 3007 of the world, 317 years into the “Monikin Epocha” (180-86).
allegory of *The Sea Lions*. But Cooper’s irreverent treatment of the issue of faith certainly seems devised to offend as many as possible. He even manages to squeeze in a sacrilegious pun on the monikin Archbishop, “the Primate of all Leaphigh” (309).

As regards evolutionary theories, it seems clear that *The Monikins* is devised as a satire, even though one critic accused Cooper of being a disciple of Buffon. Even the monikins themselves are debating whether they are related to the monkeys of the human world, but in reverse order. According to the monikins, “the monkeys which frequent the other parts of the earth are their descendants, who, stunned by the shock, have lost their reasoning powers, while, at the same time, they show glimmerings of their origin” (190). The progressive direction of evolution is tied into a logical knot worthy of M. C. Escher: monkeys evolve into men, who evolve into monikins, who devolve into monkeys, with no possible point of origin. Cooper seems to satirize the conflicting claims of the leading evolutionary theorists at a time when naturalists such as Lamarck, Buffon, and Burnett could not agree whether humans were descended from apes, apes from humans, or not related at all. Considering his relentless satire of Doctor Battius—disciple of Buffon who cannot tell his ass from a monster—in *The Prairie*, I think that it is safe to conclude that Cooper was no subscriber to evolutionary theory.

*The Great Chain of Being: Race and Class*

The application of the great chain of being was not limited to the organization of species; however, the human races were also ranked in a similar hierarchy. This becomes clear in Reasono’s ascending list of beings: “Sponges, oysters, crabs, sturgeons, clams, toads, snakes, lizards, skunks, opossums, ant-eaters, baboons, negroes, wood chucks, lions, esquimaux, sloths, hogs, Hottentots, ourang-outangs, men and monikins […]” (162). There are two main factors to consider in this list: first, the separation of the Negro, Eskimo, and Hottentot from humanity; and second, the fact that these are positioned even below many animals in the hierarchy. The obvious implication is that these groups are not considered proper human beings.

Cooper’s racist joke needs to be understood in a contemporary context of habitual racial ranking. During the 18th century, Africans in general and Hottentots in particular, together with Inuits, had found themselves in the demeaning position of being regarded as the missing link between the animal and human orders. Indeed, even Reasono’s manner of dividing the human
species and ranking some beneath animals is not an absurd exaggeration. As Brett Mizell writes: “Debates raged throughout the eighteenth century as to the proximity of the higher primates to man, and as to whether some races of man (such as the ‘Hottentot’) should be considered inferior to the human-like ‘orang outang’” (163). The logic behind this reasoning was that the lowest form of life in one species is only marginally different from the highest of the one below. Lovejoy terms this Aristotelian line of reasoning “the principle of continuity” (Great Chain 55-58). This principle postulated that there could be no gaps between different species, but rather seamless transitions that made two individuals of different species almost indistinguishable. Lovejoy quotes two instances of this kind of reasoning that provide a context for Reasono’s classification. The first is from a British periodical, The Lay Monastery (1714):

The Ape or the Monkey that bears the greatest Similitude to Man, is the next Order of Animals below him. Nor is the Disagreement between the basest Individuals of our species and the Ape or Monkey so great, but that, were the latter endow’d with the Faculty of Speech, they might perhaps as justly claim the Rank and Dignity of the human Race, as the savage Hotentot, or stupid native of Nova Zembla 28. (qtd. in Lovejoy, Great Chain 234)

The second is from the British writer Soame Jenyns’s “On the Chain of Universal Being” (1782), which discusses the gradation of animals. He suggests that the chain reaches a rudimentary level of reason in the dog and the monkey, where it “unites so closely with the lowest degree of that quality in man, that they cannot easily be distinguished from each other. From this lowest degree in the brutal Hottentot, reason [...] advances, through the various stages of human understanding, which rise above each other, till in a Bacon or a Newton it attains the summit” (qtd. in Lovejoy, Great Chain 197). As the Hottentot and Inuit signify the nadir of human potential, Bacon and Newton were often regarded its zenith. It can also be added that Cooper satirized this type of reasoning in The Prairie, where Doctor Battius claims:

Man may be degraded to the very margin of the line which separates him from the brute, by ignorance; or he may be elevated to a communion with the Great Master Spirit of All by knowledge—nay, I know not, if time and opportunity were given him, but he might become the Master of all learning, and consequently equal to the great moving principle. (1082)

28 Novaya Zemlya, an archipelago in the Arctic Ocean to the Northwest of Russia. The author is probably referring to some Inuit population, although no such permanent settlement has existed there.
This shows that Cooper was very familiar with this type of discourse. But it should be noted here that the parody targets the idea of mobility—which leads to Battius’ claim that it is possible to approach divinity—rather than the notion of a hierarchic organization of nature as such.

It is easy to see how these conceptions of the great chain of being can be effortlessly adapted to racial ranking. The link between ape and human is apparently no longer in dispute; instead it is productively reconfigured to substantiate a racial hierarchy by which the “lower” races of mankind are realigned to function as a buffer between animals and the Caucasian. This application of the chain of being, which already had obvious racialist potential, had profound influence on the scientific discourse on race in the early 19th century. As Nancy Stepan explains, the conception of the chain of being correlated so well with ideological motives that it became a central concern: “Via the great chain, man’s place in animate nature was affirmed, while the European’s presumed mental, moral, and physical superiority, and the Negro’s presumed inferiority and closeness to the ape, were made to seem ‘natural’” (Stepan 8).

Reasono’s hierarchic list also classifies the human races as different species altogether. This was a central tenet of the racialist theory of polygenesis, which had an upsurge in the first half of the 19th century. This theory held that different races of mankind had different origins and were therefore not genealogically related to each other any more than to any other species. Polygeneticism came to be a predominantly American discipline, so much so that it was referred to as the “American school” of anthropology (Gould, Mismeasure 74). The scientific idea of separate creation culminated in the work of Louis Agassiz and Samuel George Morton during the 1840s and 50s, and abated with the widespread acceptance of the idea of Darwinian evolution (Gould, Mismeasure 62-104). The unity of the species of Homo sapiens had begun to be doubted during the late 18th century: “More and more scientists, especially those on the continent, were willing to embrace the religiously unorthodox, but deeply appealing view, that the human races were separated from each other by such profound mental, moral and physical differences as to constitute separate biological species of mankind” (Stepan 2). Obviously, the ultimate appeal of such a view was that it could keep the European race superior and untainted by association with lesser beings. In Reasono’s racial ranking, the human races, it is implied, are so dissimilar to each other that even species of animals can be interpolated between them. Or, indeed, they might be separate species altogether.
Reasono also argues that the varieties within the species are only approximations of an ideal form: “There are entire races of both our species, too, as the Congo and the Esquimaux, for yours, and baboons and the common monkeys, that inhabit various parts of the world possessed by the human species, for ours, which are mere shadows of the forms and qualities that properly distinguish the animal in its state of perfection” (166). This addition to the great chain of being refers to an Aristotelian concept of the inherent potential in life forms. This potential was realized to various degrees as every creature is subject to “privations,” the innate degree of imperfection in a given species. All beings can be organized into classes according to their level of privation, or their maximum potential: “there are superior levels of being, which, by virtue of the specific degree of privation characteristic of it, it is constitutionally incapable of attaining” (Lovejoy, Great Chain 59). In Reasono’s argument, the European and the monikin are the closest to the ideal of their respective species. On this occasion Goldencalf asks if the monikins are not part of the family of monkeys in the human world, to which Reasono responds: “No more, sir, than you are of the same family as the flat-nosed, thick-lipped, low-browed, ink-skinned negro, or the squalid, passionless, brutalized Esquimaux” (166-67). The African and Eskimo are indeed of the human species, albeit a little less so as they are but imperfect approximations of the true human potential and thus certainly not of the same family. We find the same reasoning exemplified by 19th-century biologist William Lawrence, who gives a similar racial characterization as Reasono, the only difference being that he substitutes the Calmuck, a branch of the Mongolians, for the Eskimo: “the mind of the Negro and the Hottentot, of the Calmuck and the Carib, is inferior to that of the European and also their organisation is less perfect […] the Negro structure approximates unequivocally that of the monkey” (qtd. in Stepans 15). It is to be noted that Lawrence is not arguing that the Negro is a monkey, but that the simian resemblance affirms an absolute inferiority since this is the human form that approaches the closest to the animal order according to the principle of continuity.

The increased presence of ideas of racialization, especially in science, coincides with a period when abolitionism was gaining ground in Europe (Stepan 1). In Britain, for instance, the slave trade was declared illegal in the Slave Trade Act (1807), and slavery in the Slavery Abolition Act (1833). In the U.S., however, things were obviously very different, despite a large, early
abolitionist movement. By 1804, slavery had been abolished in all the northern states (Brogan 280). In addition, Article 1, Section 9 of the Constitution placed a moratorium on the government not to prohibit the importation of slaves until 1808. This was a compromise by the Constitutional convention; in reality it meant that importation would be abolished by 1808, which is also exactly what happened. Slaves could still be traded within the union, however.

This historical context is reflected in the novel when Goldencalf decides to purchase slaves as a consequence of his “social-stake theory.” His project takes ludicrous turns as Cooper satirizes the theory of stake-in-society, by which the stake-holder, in this sense an owner of property, will have a stronger incentive to take an interest in society than one without. This leads him into a series of contradictory decisions, one of which is to engage in slavery: “The question of slavery had agitated the benevolent for some years, and finding a singular apathy in my own bosom on this important subject, I bought five hundred of each sex, to stimulate my sympathies” (94). Some time later, the overseer of his plantation in Louisiana reports that smallpox has ravaged the slave-stock and that it will be necessary to make new purchases (123-24). In reference to the prohibition of international slave-trade in 1808, he adds “that the laws of America prohibited the further importation of blacks from any country without the limits of the Union, but that there was a very pretty and profitable internal trade in the article; and that the supply might be obtained, in sufficient season, either from the Carolinas, Virginia, or Maryland” (124). Goldencalf is even able to select from a wide variety of different slave stocks with different characteristics. In other words, the embargo on importation is a compromise without much actual effect since the domestic breeding is already sufficiently large to meet the demands.

Goldencalf’s business venture is clearly intended as a vehicle to convey the double standards of the protagonist and the flaws of the social stake system. But the counter-example is equally morally unsound, as becomes immediately evident in the mirror-passage when Goldencalf eases his conscience by making

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29 Thomas Paine’s article “African Slavery in America” (1775), advocating emancipation of slaves and abolition of the institution of slavery was perhaps the first really influential treatise on the subject. “To Americans,” he starts, “that some desperate wretches should be willing to steal and enslave men by violence and murder for gain, is rather lamentable than strange. But that many civilized, nay, Christianized people should approve, and be concerned in the savage practice, is surprising; and still persist, though it has been so often proved contrary to the light of nature, to every principle of Justice and Humanity, and even good policy, by a succession of eminent men, and several late publications.” He also points out the fundamental inconsistency of this practice with the libertarian principles that were in sway, and would one year later be the founding idea of the republic: “If the slavery of the parents be unjust, much more is their children’s; if the parents were justly slaves, yet the children are born free; this is the natural, perfect right of all mankind.”

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investments in the “Philo-african-anti-compulsion-free-labour Society” (125). This charitable society turns out not to be above opportunism, however, as they propose to set up a factory just outside the slave-holding states for the refinement of palm-oil and gold dust, presumably with inexpensive labor from emancipated slaves. Such a scheme would “equally benefit trade and philanthropy,” with the result that “the black man would be spared an incalculable amount of misery, the white man a grievous burthen of sin, and the particular agents of so manifest a good might quite reasonably calculate on making, at the very least, forty per cent per annum on their money, besides having all their souls saved, in the bargain” (126). The “Philo-african-anti-compulsion-free-labour Society” seems meant to suggest an actual abolitionist society of a similar name, “The Philo-African Society,” later “The New England Anti-Slavery Society.” It was established in 1831 by William Lloyd Garrison and went on to become one of the most influential voices of the abolitionist cause (Zorn 159-60). But there were other similar societies and there is no reason to assume that Cooper intended Garrison’s society specifically. The satirical corruption of its name suggests that it is used metonymically for the whole movement. His portrayal of such a society as ruthless profiteers at the very least indicates that he was not sympathetic to their political agenda. He thus parodies both slaveholders and abolitionists, undermining any effort to extract a decisive moral position.

In Notions of the Americans, we find Cooper’s most extensive treatment of the issue of slavery. Adopting the character of an Englishman traveling in America, he there develops a moderate stance on slavery; it is an unsound institution, but it “is an evil not to be shaken off by sounding declarations, and fine sentiments, any man, who looks calmly into the subject, must see” (Cooper, Notions 244). It needs to be dismantled gradually and with great deliberation. Regarding the European criticism of the American political system because of slavery, he points out: “It is manifestly unsafe to found any arguments concerning the political institutions of this country on the existence of slavery, since the slaves have no more to do with government than inanimate objects” (Cooper, Notions 107n). This takes us to the heart of the matter. While

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20 Garrison is also known for his abolitionist journal The Liberator, and his work with Frederick Douglass.

21 The Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, founded in 1775, was the first, and The American Anti-Slavery Society, founded in 1833, perhaps the one most known to posterity with Douglass as one of its primary spokesmen.

22 Further on, he formulates the criticism himself: “It has been often said, that a people, claiming to be the freest of the earth, ought to have brought their practice more in conformity with their professions, and to have abolished slavery at the time they declared their independence” (Cooper, Notions 242).
he admits that slavery is a moral issue, it is first and foremost a question of the right of property, and much of Southern property consisted of slaves.33 He claims to take a practical view of the matter, to “regard life as it actually exists,” pointing out that neither the federal nor state governments have any control over the rights of property, and that slaves can only be set free by their masters, which presents the central economic problem: “the difficulty of making two or three millions of people, under any circumstances, strip themselves, generally of half their possessions, and, in many instances, of all” (Cooper, Notions 242-43). His most heated argument is reserved for those who are vocal in their opposition to slavery:

Although an ardent wisher for the happy moment of general emancipation, I always turn with disgust from those cold and heartless paragraphs which occasionally appear in the northern journals of this country, and which, under a superficial pretension to humanity, trifle with the safety and happiness of two of their fellow citizens in order to give an affected aid to the undoubtedly righteous cause of one black man. If this species of irritating language did good, if it did no harm by hardening men in their opinions, it would be disagreeable; but under the actual state of things it is far worse than useless. (Cooper, Notions 254)

The satire of the “Philo-african-anti-compulsion-free-labour Society” in The Monikins seems to be a continuation of the critique of misguided philanthropy expressed in the quote above.

Slavery does not figure directly in any of the monikin nations, although they do have “menials.”34 But when Reasono returns to Leaphigh, he proposes a regular slave-trade scheme to the Leaphigh academy by sending expeditions to seize monkeys from the human world. These monkeys are believed to be the “Lost Monikins,” monikins who have been scattered over the earth and knocked senseless by a gigantic explosion, “retaining much of the ingenuity and many of the spiritual notions of their origin, but with their intellects sadly blunted, and perhaps their improvable qualities annihilated” (265). The plan is that the lost monikins “might found a race of useful menials, who, while they would prove much less troublesome than those who possessed all the knowledge of monikins, would probably be found more intelligent and useful than any domestic animal which they at present owned” (265-66). The proposal

33 By Cooper’s own estimation, based on figures of the census of 1820, there were 1,750,000 slaves in the US in 1828, most of them, of course, in the Southern states. The white population he estimates to 10 million of which 3.5 million reside in the Southern states, giving almost a 2 to 1 ratio of whites to slaves (Cooper, Notions 240-41).

34 It should be noted that when Cooper uses the word menial in Notions of the Americans, it is as a synonym with slave (249).
is received with the unanimous approval of the academy. The familiar rationale of institutionalized slavery is there, with the racial hierarchy as its justification and foundation. The lost monikins are considered to be lower on the chain of being, occupying a position between animals and monikins, making them fair game for exploitation.

This highlights the central problem the reader is presented with in trying to fuse all these contradictory statements into a coherent reading. As was seen in the discussion of the reception of The Monikins, contemporary readers expressed bewilderment over Cooper's method of “striking prodigious blows to the right and left” in an all-encompassing satire (Review A 136). This certainly seems a fit description of the novel's frequently contradictory statements about slavery. However, it would be possible to say that he has captured perfectly a time of upheaval and negotiation with many inherent contradictions on the issues of slavery and race. It seems a perfect illustration of this confusion that The Monikins was banned in the South due to its satire of slavery.\(^{35}\) To give but one notorious example of someone who embodied the same contradictions as Cooper, we can go to Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia. Here Jefferson takes an unambiguous abolitionist stance because “The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other” (168; Query 18). Yet, notoriously, he kept slaves himself throughout his life. For Jefferson, of course, this was not really that much of a contradiction, since he believed in the inferiority of blacks. In order to prove this inferiority for a fact, he adduces the idea of the chain of being. In an insidious rhetorical strategy, he claims that blacks themselves subscribe to their inferiority by “their own judgment in favour of the whites, declared by their preference of them, as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black women over those of his own species” (145; Query 14).\(^{36}\) Again, the link between ape and human is used to uphold the notion of a racial hierarchy as part of a natural order. As all beings strive to ascend the scale of being, blacks and apes alike aspire towards the next step. We are to understand from this example that the distance between white and black is as absolute as that

\(^{35}\) Beriah Green claims in the abolitionist speech “Things for Northern Men to Do” (1836) that The Monikins was one of several literary works that were banned in the South for their alleged critical depiction of slavery (16-17). Unfortunately, Green does not go into specifics on how this ban was put into practice. The examples he gives, however, seem to indicate that it operated through the pressure of informal networks rather than through institutionalized channels.

\(^{36}\) Here, Jefferson is actually only repeating a frequently occurring notion. For instance, Buffon cites several travel narratives that make similar claims, that orangutans “are passionately fond of [black] women, who cannot pass through the woods they inhabit, without these animals immediately attacking and ravishing them” (vol. 9, 155-56).
between black and ape, putting the black race in a half-simian, half-human state. Consequently, even the human status of the black race is disputable. With a pointed reference to the great chain of being Jefferson asks rhetorically: “Will not a lover of natural history then, one who views the gradations in all the races of animals with the eye of philosophy, excuse an effort to keep those in the department of man as distinct as nature has formed them?” (151; Query 14).

The idea of a chain of being as a means to keep beings hierarchically ordered and compartmentalized can also be traced in the various treatments of class in the novel. Even in its higher evolutionary state, the monikin society in Leaphigh (England) is far from operating on egalitarian principles. In fact, it has institutionalized the class system even more rigidly than has its human counterpart. All Leaphigh citizens are tattooed with a number indicating their class and a color signifying the inherent quality of that class; for instance, “No. 8,020 office-color” (233-36). The social stratification of Leaphigh is closely connected with the spiritual order. The archbishop proves only moderately interested in whether mankind is religious or not, but upon hearing that like the monikins humans also have “a hierarchy,” i.e. a class system, he exclaims “with holy delight”: “men or monikins, it can make no great difference, after all. We shall meet in heaven; and that, too, in the upper mansions!” (314). This might, perhaps, come as a consolation to the reader who feels dejected for having to relinquish the crown of creation—social stratification will set all right in the end.

But it is in the character of Dr. Etherington, a staunch defender of the class system and opponent of the French Revolution, that social stratification is mainly satirized. He sees the mobility of the new moneyed class as socially corrosive and justifies the gradation of the class system with an analogy to the different orders in the divine realm: “society was of necessity divided into orders; that it was not only impolitic, but wicked, to weaken the barriers by which they were separated; that Heaven had its seraphs and cherubs, its archangels and angels, its saints and its merely happy, and that, by obvious induction, this world ought to have its kings, lords and commons” (57). The reasoning is familiar from Pope’s Essay on Man, which also grounds earthly inequality in an absolute universal order. In the first epistle, Pope invokes the great chain of being to illustrate the fixed position of mankind in relation to the universe. In the fourth epistle, he extends that argument to the social order, which is equally naturally hierarchical: “Order is Heaven’s first law; and this confest, / Some are, and must be, greater than the rest, / More rich, more wise” (27; IV). In the closing aphorisms, it seems as if Goldencalf has adopted
the learning of Pope and Etherington as his own: “That nature has created inequalities in men and things, and, as human institutions are intended to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak, ergo, the laws should encourage natural inequalities as a legitimate consequence” (489). This clearly satirizes the typical aristocratic social organization. Immediately afterwards, however, the social leveling of egalitarianism is equally satirized: “That, moreover, the laws of nature having made one man wise and another man foolish—this strong, and that weak, human laws should reverse it all, by making another man wise and one man foolish—that strong and this weak” (489). Goldencalf has in fact become a peculiar political animal, oscillating wildly between ludicrous and contradictory statements of European aristocratic conservatism and extreme American republicanism—the two things Cooper had been most vocal in criticizing in A Letter to His Countrymen.

Given all the various forms in which the great chain of being and evolutionary theory appear in The Monikins and also The Prairie, it is safe to say that Cooper was familiar with the topic and its controversies. But how did such a seemingly abstruse philosophical notion as the great chain of being and its developments ended up in a work of popular fiction? The fact is that the notion was not limited to an intellectual realm, but was an idea with the widest cultural diffusion. Nowhere does this become more apparent than with the business savvy of P. T. Barnum. He transformed the chain of being into a marketing ploy for his exhibits of missing links at his Barnum’s American Museum, one of the major American cultural establishments of the mid-19th century. In 1842, he advertised curiosities such as his newest acquisition, the infamous “Fecjje Mermaid,” or several other specimens such as “the Ornithorhincus [platypus], or the connecting link between the seal and the duck; two distinct species of flying fish, which undoubtedly connect the bird and the fish; the Siren, or Mud Iguana, a connecting link between the reptiles and fish […] with other animals forming connecting links in the great chain of Animated Nature” (qtd. in Lovejoy, Great Chain 236).

The connection between all Barnum’s missing links is that they exploit the fascination with and anxiety produced by categories. Such was certainly also the case as regards the division between human and ape. As Mizelle writes, in the late 18th century, Americans had only been able to encounter the human-like apes through numerous accounts in newspapers and magazines. At the turn of the 19th century, however, they were offered the opportunity to actually see

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25 Barnum’s most famous humbug: it turned out to be the mummified torso of a monkey and rear body of a big fish botched together.
these animals in various traveling shows and exhibits. Here the animals were displayed as curiosities and their extraordinary resemblance to humans was the key to their entertainment value. A 1799 advertisement for an exhibit at the Peake’s Museum of an “Ourang Outang, or Wild Man of the Woods” clearly demonstrates this. It lures prospective visitors with the promise that “This Curious Animal, so nearly approaching to the human species as to occasion some Philosophers to doubt whether it was not allied to mankind, is now in this useful repository” (qtd. in Mizelle 162). Indeed, an educational children’s book about different nationalities, People of All Nations (1807), inserted the “Ouran-Outang” between the Norwegian and the Russian (Mizelle 166-68; ill. 3).

Ill. 3. Orangutan: Spread from People of All Nations (1807)

It certainly did not end there either. In 1860, Barnum launched his infamous What Is It? exhibit, which toured the U.S. continuously until 1924 (Adams 36-37). It displayed a black man with a tagline that piqued the interest of the audience with generic uncertainty: “Is it a lower order of MAN? Or is it a higher order of MONKEY? None can tell!” (qtd. in Adams 37).

If we take this context with its latent anxieties over how mankind fit into animate nature in general and in the order of primates in particular, the controversy surrounding The Monikins becomes more comprehensible as a product of an early 19th-century cultural milieu, exemplified by the claims of the reviews quoted previously that “monkeys, are not imaginary creatures, and the fancy refuses to consider them such,” or that Cooper had “become a convert […] to the theory of Buffon” (G. W. P. 413; Review D, 183). Both these fail to acknowledge that the monikins are simply literary devices in the same satirical
vein as Swift’s Houyhnhnms. Following the conventions of animal satire, as Clees remarks, the function of the monikins is to “take on accentuated human traits so that they can expose human frailties” (149). They perform an allegorical substitution, but do not necessarily suggest an actual relation. But Cooper’s reviewers refused to accept this—to them it was the very association between monkey and man that was offensive. The controversy sparked by the novel was in all probability due to the fact that it arrived at that exact juncture in time when the categories of ape and human were being negotiated. The anxiety about this relation is voiced by Goldencalf, who feels the mounting pressure of Reasono’s arguments, which demote mankind from its honorary position in the scale of things. He exclaims to Poke: “This matter is getting serious, Noah, and I am filled with an esprit de corps. Do you not begin yourself to feel human?” (158). When the most fundamental assumption about human identity, the anthropocentric organization of the world, is challenged, Goldencalf is filled with humanity for the first time, just as nationalistic fervor rises in response to external threat.

The Food Chain of Being

The evolutionary and utopian themes in The Monikins are closely interlinked. As Hedges remarks: “Having established the theme of evolution, Cooper continues to press the theme as he develops the satire in the lands of the monikins, taking basic elements from English and American society and politics and developing an ultimate evolutionary position for each” (xix). This can be seen as the typical function of the traditional dystopia, which Sargent describes as “an extrapolation from the present” that involves a warning (8). The originating society is usually condensed into the monikin dystopia through a few central characteristics that are magnified and satirically distorted. In Cooper’s version, however, this is not so much about societies evolving as devolving. Thus the fact that monkeys are the apex of this development is not as controversial as it might initially seem—the monkeys are the crown of creation in a world that is rapidly declining, a manifestation of a highly unnatural order of things.

This brings us to the twist at the end of the novel when Goldencalf and Poke are able to reassert human authority, albeit at the expense of the very principles that define their humanity, one of which being the ability to restrain animal impulse. They are overcome by brute carnivorous cravings, and feast on their Leoplowan cicerone, Downright, in a feeding frenzy. By this point, the
reader has known Downright—sometimes referred to by Golden calf as “brother Downright”—as the genuine voice of reason for almost half the novel. Golden calf describes the feast as the result of an irresistible impulse: “I was fain to abandon philosophy, and surrender to the belly. I descended incontinent to the kitchen, guided by a sense no more spiritual than that which directs the hound in the chase” (467). As he literally descends to the kitchen, he figuratively descends the scale of being and becomes an animal. When he tries to justify the act to the reader afterwards, he does so by way of the great chain of being in the hope “that a slight difference in species may exonerate [him] from the imputation of cannibalism” (485). There is a contradiction in this that is not easily resolved. It is his status as human that makes the act of eating justifiable, but the same by the same act he has also proved his animal nature. In sharp contrast to the carnivorous humans, the monikins adhere to a strict vegetarian principle, a feature of many utopian communities. The Symzonians, for example, who find it brutalizing to eat the flesh of other living creatures except for oysters, which rank so low on the scale of being as to be considered practically vegetable (192). Reasono similarly adduces human carnivorism as a main argument for monikin superiority, stating that “the physical part of man is much greater in proportion to the spiritual, than it is in the monikin […] he eats flesh, a certain proof that the material principle is still strong in the ascendant” (173-74). When Seaborn disqualified himself from Symzonian, he was also unable to resist his human impulse of greed. In other words, he was too human. With Golden calf and Poke it is the other way around, they are not human enough.

When Golden calf sees Downright’s “face that seemed looking at [him] with melancholy reproach” (468), the shock of recognition, both of Downright and of what he has done, sends him back from his feverish hallucinations about the Antarctic and the monikins. In his feverish state he has seen the resemblance between himself and the monkey and this cannot easily be shaken off. But the act of monkey-eating remains, and the troubling identification is not quite resolved. It is Poke who has eaten a monkey, as we were told already in Poke’s letter to Cooper in the introduction, and the unsettling resemblance caused a feeling of cannibalism: “It was not bad food to the taste, but it was wonderful nervous to the eye. I r’ally thought I had got hold of Miss Poke’s youngest born” (xi). His vision of devouring his own offspring is reminiscent of Buffon’s musing that the ape is a singular creature that “man cannot look upon without contemplating himself” (9: 110). For all theoretical difference, the experience of similarity—or family resemblance—is inescapable. Cooper has
found a brilliant way of condensing the whole issue of delimitation and categorization into a simple litmus test: can it be eaten without feelings of guilt? In the light of the contemporary uncertainty about the categories of human and ape, this seems to be the most subversive scene of the novel by far. Monkey-like though they are, the monikins are still allegorical creatures, but this concerns actual monkeys.

*The Monikins* is a utopian satire in the same tradition as *Gulliver’s Travels*, but the satire is diffused to such a degree that the connection to the object of satire is sometimes lost. Cooper’s contemporaries professed similar consternation; as one reviewer put it: “one knows not what is intended to be satirized, or where the satire is to stop; it has no substratum of sense […]” (G. W. P. 413). This is only the case, however, if we assume that the intended target of satire in *The Monikins* is a particular nation, society, or social practice. Although it is all these at certain points, it has no “substratum of sense” only because it criticizes everything without proposing a positive alternative. It could be argued, however, that the absence of a readily discernable moral signals a superordinate theme of radical misanthropy, which would definitely upset a 19th-century reader’s expectations on edifying literature. I think that we should regard the dense pessimism of *The Monikins* as a kind of literary revenge by which Cooper takes the reader on a voyage of Antarctic exploration. However, it is not the region in itself that is explored but the ridiculousness of humanity. As we shall see, when he returns to the Antarctic in *The Sea Lions*, it is with a very different object in mind—humiliation is still a central feature, but there as a preparatory stage to redemption, which is there intrinsically linked to the Antarctic environment.
CHAPTER THREE

A New American Utopia: Peter Prospero’s “The Atlantis”

The first installment of the serial novel “The Atlantis: A Southern World,—Or a Wonderful Continent,—Discovered” was published in the *American Museum of Science, Literature, and the Arts*, Sept. 1838. Its fifteen extant chapters, spanning over one hundred twenty-two pages, were spread over seven issues through June 1839. We have no way of knowing its planned length since it was never completed, at least not in published form, and no additional material giving any indication has been located. Presumably, “The Atlantis” was abandoned simply because the *American Museum* ceased to exist with its June 1839 issue. The text is a classically inspired utopian fiction, relating how one Peter Prospero sets out, on Independence Day 1836, to explore deep into the Antarctic in search of a lost mythical region that he predicts must be located there. During the Antarctic passage, the ship runs into a belt of poisonous gas, rendering all aboard unconscious only to be revived in a country called Atlantis, located within the unknown geographic space of the Antarctic. Atlantis is inhabited by all the deceased good or prominent persons throughout history, its current form of government modeled on American republican ideas. During his stay, Prospero converses with literary giants, and discusses politics with influential political philosophers and statesmen. Since the story was never finished, there is no account of how or when Prospero returns from Atlantis.

In this chapter I will trace the literary sources Prospero draws on as the basis for his Antarctic utopia, because this is an extremely literary text. I will then historicize its vision of a utopia, which is in the most literal sense an embodiment of American republican ideology. The ideology of the text reads as propaganda for the preservation of the union in a time when it was in a state of crisis. I will specifically look at two aspects of how this is manifested in the text: its argument against nullification and secession, and its argument for maintaining the institution of slavery. Finally, as a continuation from the previous chapter, I will analyze the text’s attitudes towards various scientific disciplines and ideas.

“The Atlantis” was published under the pseudonym Peter Prospero. Who was behind that pseudonym is not known, but some scholars have attributed it to Edgar Allan Poe.¹ Arthur Hobson Quinn was the first to make a

¹ Another possibility is that the story was authored by one of the magazine’s editors, Nathan Covington Brooks or Joseph E. Snodgrass. Publishing contributions by the editorial staff pseudonymously was common practice (see Quinn 757-61).
tentative attribution, tagging it as “a possible new Poe satire” (757). Poe was, indeed, a multiple contributor to the American Museum; during its brief existence, he published two short stories, some light literary criticism, and a poem in the journal. But all these were in his own name, so it begs the question why “The Atlantis” in that case is not. In Quinn’s opinion, however, the “evidence for Poe’s authorship is largely internal” (757). He points out several similarities in details between “The Atlantis” and instances in Poe’s writings, such as the use of “Nose-ology” in Atlantis and “Nosology” in Poe’s “Lionizing” (Quinn 757-60). Several minor themes in “The Atlantis” were also used by Poe later on, such as craniology, mesmerism, and a balloon-voyage to the moon (Quinn 761). We may also add to Quinn’s list the debate between proponents of Baconian or Aristotelian epistemologies, which Poe used in “Mellonta Tauta” (1849). Sam Moskowitz does not commit himself on Poe’s authorship, but he does include “The Atlantis” in his collection of pieces by Poe, or thought to be by Poe. He cautiously introduces it as a text that “Poe authorities have seriously considered as possibly his under a pen name,” and states that it has “the most Poe-esque flavor” (12). Even though Poe’s authorship is highly dubious, it is certain that this tale would have remained in obscurity, had it not been for the Poe connection; especially since the only republications are of the first four chapters in Moskowitz’s A Man Called Poe (192-211) and a brief excerpt in Quinn’s Poe biography (757-59).

“The Atlantis” is different from the previous texts. While it is explicitly utopian, Atlantis is not really part of this world but located in a sort of limbo between life and death. It has its physical location in the Antarctic, but is inhabited by the dead, apparently in preparation for their final destination. The central literary strategy of the tale is to invoke authoritative voices from the past in various types of discourses, such as politics, science, literature, and religion. Its mode may best be described as a sort of literary banter, with no consistent narrative pattern. The structure is rather episodic and conversational, quite literally since the whole of the Atlantean episode is enacted in conversations at dinner parties, audiences, or social calls. Unusually for a utopian narrative, few

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2 The short stories “Ligeia” and “Psyche Zenobia,” the criticism “Literary Small Talk,” and the poem “The Haunted Palace.”

3 Quinn advances two possible explanations: either because the editor felt that Poe’s quota in the magazine, with the pieces mentioned above, risked being overfilled; or that Poe was unconvinced about the artistic integrity of the piece (761).

4 In “Mellonta Tauta,” Poe’s narrator writes from a perspective a thousand years in the future of the ancient dispute between Aries Tottle’s “deductive or a priori mode of investigation” and Hog’s “a posteriori or inductive” (1285).

5 If I were to speculate, I would say it is not Poe’s since, on the whole, “The Atlantis” simply seems so uncharacteristic of him. Nowhere else in his writings does he get involved in political issues to the extent found here.
of these conversations detail the political or social structure of Atlantis. When such themes are brought up, it is more often than not someone in Atlantis who is curious about the state of affairs in the U.S. But this is not done in the conventional satirical manner in which the utopian visitor unintentionally horrifies his interlocutor. As David Seed observes, Atlantis “is used to juxtapose the best elements of past and future which at no point are brought to bear confrontationally on the narrator as happens repeatedly in Syzygia and its precursor text Gulliver Travels” (Seed 80). This is a function of the fact that the manifest purpose of the text is not to direct social critique, but to provide patriotic self-reflexion.

A Literary Antarctic

Just like Seaborn in Syzygia, Prospero prides himself on the prospect that his Antarctic discovery will overshadow even that of Columbus: “I should become the projector and executor of a great undertaking by which a new world, more extraordinary than America, would be revealed to mankind […]” (1: 44). But Prospero takes this connection one step further: the ship’s captain is Alonzo Pinzon, a direct descendant of Martín Alonzo Pinzón, captain of the Pinta on Columbus’s first voyage to the New World. We are clearly supposed to infer that the narrator is a new Columbus. But, in contrast to Columbus, Prospero finds exactly what he set out to find. The proper way to accomplish this turns out to be to observe the British—and then do the exact opposite: “As I had seen all the expeditions to the north fitted out by British liberality for similar purposes, defeated, or limited in their success, by the extreme cold of those climates, I had concluded, that if ever the Polar seas were explored, it must be by steam ships, or some mode of navigation which is preferable to these” (1: 44). Prospero, like Jeremiah N. Reynolds, turns his attention to the south instead.

In “The Atlantis,” we can see that the idea of a protective boundary surrounding the Antarctic—which Benjamin Morrell claims was part of sailors’ lore (29)—has become a staple of Antarctic fiction. Prospero boasts that he will surmount “those hitherto impassable barriers […] which preclude our access to the Southern and Northern Pole” (1: 44). In “The Atlantis,” however, the barrier is not only conceived of as a circle of ice around the pole, but also as a belt of noxious atmosphere:

From a region of intense and intolerable cold and tempestuous weather, we were transported to a thick and murky atmosphere,
in the gloomy and darkened state of which, we found respiration
difficult, all our senses seemed disordered, and through the
gloom every frightful and fantastic form floated that could be
conceived as crude and monstrous. During our passage through
this tract of ocean, all our usual prescriptions were suspended,
and we sank into what appeared an incurable slumber, or
delirium. (1: 46).

The similarity with the ending of Poe’s Pym is striking, a text I will treat more in
depth in the following chapter, where the main characters fall into a stupor
amid fantastic phenomena as they drift further and further south. However, the
unprecedented velocity of Prospero’s ship allows them to break through this
barrier so quickly that it only has a soporific effect on them: they fall asleep and
wake up in Atlantis (1: 46). We might recall how the utopian world of James
Fenimore Cooper’s The Monikins utilized a similar oniric narrative device, since
Goldencalf’s whole adventure appeared to be the product of a feverish dream.
Since “The Atlantis” was never completed, however, we have no way of
knowing whether the author intended to employ this convention by implying
that it had all been a dream, but the text certainly seems set up for such a
device.

The author of “The Atlantis” also uses the motif of polar lodestones,
from which the earthly magnetic fields emanate, as seen on the maps of
Mercator,6 used in Robert Paltock’s Peter Wilkins, or in the adventures of
Sindbad, whose ship disintegrated when the magnetism pulled the iron nails
from the shipboards. We may also recall that Seaborn takes precautions to
prevent a similar disaster by using wooden and copper bolts (Symponia 16). The
technology that takes Prospero to Atlantis harnesses the power of polar
magnetism in some manner. Prospero is understandably vague about its details,
but it involves wheels that “move of themselves,” powered by the magnetic
field that attracts the ship as if “by magical influence” towards the Antarctic (1:
44, 45). In this context, the American inventor Robert Fulton appears once
again—he was mentioned both in Symponia, where he had a central position,
and briefly in The Monikins. Fulton seems to have become a symbol of the

6 See for instance Michael Swift’s Mapping the World (106), or Ashley and Miles Baynton-Williams
New Worlds: Maps from the Age of Discovery (54-55). Incidentally, this might be an argument
against Poe’s authorship of “The Atlantis.” In the very last version of “MS. Found in a Bottle,” from
1850, Poe appended a note stating: “The MS. Found in a Bottle, was originally published in 1831
(actually 1833); and it was not until many years afterwards that I became acquainted with the maps
of Mercator, in which the ocean is represented as rushing, by four mouths, into the (northern) Polar
Gulf, to be absorbed into the bowels of the earth; the Pole itself being represented by a black rock,
towering to a prodigious height” (146). The latest edition that did not carry this note was published in
1845. This would indicate that Poe did not know of the tradition of polar lodestones at the time “The
Atlantis” was written. But, then again, we cannot take for granted that he was telling the truth.
American entrepreneurial ethos, primarily for his application of steam power to navigation. It seems to have become a compulsory patriotic gesture to refer to him whenever steam-powered navigation is mentioned. Prospero too pays homage to him, even though his ship is not propelled by steam: “Our ship […] appeared to claim the homage which is due to the great genius of Fulton, to whose exertions are mankind indebted not only for the invention of the steamboat, but for all those improvements in navigation and locomotion which shall arise out of it” (1: 45). As Prospero’s ship runs into the Antarctic icebergs, they are able to take full advantage of the invention: “Being able to advance or recede at our pleasure, we eluded the attacks of these formidable enemies […]” (1: 45). Like the author of *Symzonia*, the author of “The Atlantis” anticipates the type of technology that needed to be developed in order to explore the high southern latitudes. Sailing was simply an outdated and insufficient technology in this respect since it was too slow, and required large stretches of open water. All vehicles in Atlantis, either carriages, omnibuses, ships, or dirigibles are propelled by the same technology. It is clear, however, that Prospero is not interested in realistic pretense. “The Atlantis” is rather a hodgepodge of ideas in an attempt to establish a humorous rapport with the reader in heaping up improbabilities in the manner of classical satirical travelogues such as Lucian’s *True History*. As is signaled in the soporific Antarctic barrier, this is a utopia in its most basic sense, what Lyman Tower Sargent calls simply “social dreaming” (1). Prospero signals that it would be just plain misguided to approach the text with rational skepticism; the Antarctic and the technological aspects are merely vehicles for the social symbolism of the utopia.

Prospero’s version of the Antarctic is thus not based on the conventional apparatus of verisimilitude, with reports of previous explorers and serious geographical speculations, but is a purely literary construction. In the exposition of the tale, he begins by relating how his desire to explore began in his early years when his parents “allowed an unrestrained indulgence of [his] ardent propensity for reading” (1: 42). Starting thus with an exposition of how literature instilled curiosity and a desire for travel and exploration was a conventional feature of travel writing, both real and imaginary. Reynolds, for instance, even prefaced his address to the House with the statement: “At an early period of my life I imbibed a relish, perhaps accidentally, for books of voyages and travels, when I had not as yet seen the ocean” (5). But Prospero takes the convention one step further and quixotically creates a world from his sources. The text thus flaunts its own literariness from the very beginning. Even Prospero’s name indicates that what we read is his creation, and that he might
eventually break his staff, drown his books, and end his fiction about this brave new world. The exposition of the narrative only occupies five pages before Prospero arrives in Atlantis, and out of those five pages only half is concerned with the actual voyage itself, while the rest is devoted to a jocular apparatus of verification in literature.

The utopian theme is announced from the beginning through various literary allusions, starting already in the rather unwieldy synoptic title:

“The Atlantis: A Southern World,—or a Wonderful Continent,—Discovered in the Great Southern Ocean, and Supposed to Be the Atlantis of Plato, or the Terra Australis Incognita of Dr. Swift, During a Voyage Conducted by Alonzo Pinzon, Commander of the American Metal Ship Astrea.” (42)

As the title signals, this is a literary work in the most literal sense: the tale's point of departure is Plato's Atlantis7 and Swift's Tale of a Tub. Prospero then begins the narrative by stating that he has imbibed the ideas of Ultima Thule and the land of Ophir from his readings of classical authors. In Plato, he “found it stated as a fact” that there had been “a large and populous island, denominated Atlantis, which lay in the Western Ocean, and had been inhabited by a great and powerful nation” (1: 43). To these “indications, denoting the existence of some wonderful community in the southern and western world” he adds the information found “in the authentic memoirs of the “Tale of a Tub”” about “an immense continent, designated as the ‘Terra Australis Incognita’” (1: 43). From these literary hints, Prospero draws the “definitive conclusion, that the voyages of Columbus and his rivals in navigation, had not completed the discoveries to be made in the Southern Hemisphere” (1: 43).

Terra australis incognita is mentioned twice in Swift’s Tale of a Tub. The first time is not actually within the text but in the list of previous titles of the same author, where the title in question is an ingenious reversal of the traditional utopian perspective: A Voyage into England, by a Person of Quality in Terra Australis Incognita, Translated from the Original (242).8 The second occurrence is to illustrate the ruthless greed of Lord Peter, the satirical personification of the Catholic Church, who is able to sell and resell terra australis incognita since no one who goes there survives to claim ownership (Swift 298). In Swift’s satire, this continent is identified with the Catholic doctrine of purgatory, and its practice of selling letters of indulgences. The way Swift sets it up, we are supposed to infer that purgatory is of equally doubtful existence as terra australis incognita. But

7 Plato describes Atlantis in Timaeus and Critias.
8 These were all non-existing titles, although Landa writes that it seems as if Swift actually did intend to write this narrative (Swift, Tale 519n).
the region, even as a fiction, is of too great financial importance to be questioned: it is sold and resold even though no one is sure of its existence. It is probable that the basic precept for “The Atlantis” echoes Swift here, in a playful literal misreading, since Prospero’s Atlantis is a kind of intermediary location between earthly existence and the afterlife, performing some purgatorial function. What we are told, for instance, by a set of historical arch villains that Prospero meets—Nero, Tiberius, Borgia, and Ravaillac—indicates that this is the case: “we have just been released from very severe punishments to which we were condemned for the parts we performed in our former state of being” (1: 49). In their opinion, there is nothing utopian about Atlantis, it is rather “the most outlandish and detestable abode that ever gentlemen were constrained to inhabit” (1: 49).

But Atlantis is not primarily purgatorial; it is as Elizabeth Leane notes, “Part utopia, part paradise and part purgatory” (157). The “two superb lighthouses” (1: 47), suggesting the Pillars of Hercules, that mark the entrance to Atlantis are perhaps a signal of the double functions of utopia and purgatory. In Timaeus, Plato locates Atlantis beyond the Pillars of Hercules (Dialogues 24c); but in Dante’s Inferno, the pillars mark the entrance to Purgatory, which Ulysses unsuccessfully tried to reach (XXVI). With the aid of his technology, Prospero is more successful than Ulysses in the exploration of the world beyond. A further parallel to Inferno is the Atlanteans’ mode of punishing sins committed in their former existence, which seems to be a diluted version of Dante’s contrapasso, i.e. the punishment is individually adapted to the sin; for instance, Henry VIII is now a menial in the household of his second wife, Anne Boleyn (1: 422).

“The Atlantis” is also laden with mythological references that signal its utopian theme. The voyage is accomplished in the ship Astrea, a name with classical origins. In Greek mythology Astrea, “the star-maiden,” was the daughter of either the gods or Titans. She personified justice, and was the last of the divines to leave earth as the degraded state of mankind of the Iron Age began, according to the classical notion of the Ages of Man. She is also referred to in the preface to Tale of a Tub: “That all are gone astray: that there is none that doth good, no not one; that we live in the very dregs of time; that knavery and atheism are epidemic as the pox; that honesty is fled with Astrea” (269). This reference prefigures the theme of escape from the low state of the human world into the region of the blessed that is the precept of “The Atlantis,” seen also in its epigraph from Virgil’s Georgics that continues the theme of Astrea and the Ages of Man: “Hail, great mother of harvests! O land of Saturn, hail! /
Mother of men! For you I take my stand on our ancient / Glories and arts, I dare to unseal the hallowed sources” (74; bk. 2). This prophetic passage heralds the return of the Golden Age when Saturn shall again rule the earth. Virgil referred to this also in “Eclogue IV,” but with the clarification that this age also means the restoration of Astraea: “Justice [Astraea] returns to earth, the Golden Age / Returns” (18). Consequently, the classical mythological references signal that the Antarctic region has become the place where the Golden Age is restored, which is marked by the name of the capital, Saturnia.

With all these literary references already from the outset, it is not surprising that Atlantis is inhabited by the finest of authors, philosophers, statesmen, etc. All these “improve the happiness of the human family— bringing with them the wisdom and learning they had accumulated in the lower world” (1: 51). Like the Antarctic was reserved for the moniks, who were an evolved version of humans, the Atlanteans are the revised and improved “second editions” of their earthly incarnations (1: 427). It is a region of fulfilled potential, the Atlantean Benjamin Franklin tells us, “after which, in the former world, the philanthropist aspired, the patriot toiled, and the hero encountered sufferings and death, while its ideal image occupied the meditations of philosophers, the visions of poets, and the hopes of Christians” (1: 51).

Since everybody from the past exists simultaneously in Atlantis, they are able to fulfill every literary historian’s fantasy: to have direct access to a dead author for reference. Prospero is told, for instance, about a discussion of Aristotle’s dramatic unities and whether they should be regarded as inviolable, as the classicists argue. Samuel Johnson maintains that they should, but Alexander Pope interjects that he has actually consulted Aristotle himself on this very topic and that “he denied having ever maintained this doctrine to the extent which it has been ascribed to him by his followers and admirers” (1: 63). Prospero is also able to meet authors in person and ask them questions that have puzzled him in their works, for instance, inquiring from Shakespeare whether Hamlet was really mad—he was not (1: 337). Some are either too stubborn or too theoretically sophisticated, however, to accept the authority of the resurrected author. Shakespeare admits defeat before two especially strong-minded critics: “I myself cannot convince Johnson and Warburton that they were not always right. They know more than I do about my own performances” (1: 335). Since the authors in Atlantis are second editions of their former selves, they also revise their previous works to fit their new and

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9 In “The Atlante,” given in its original Latin: “Salve, magna Parens frugum, Saturnia Tellus; / Magna virum; tibi res antiquae laudis et artis, / Ingredior, sanctos ausus recludere fontes” (1: 42).
exalted context. We are told, for instance, how Shakespeare has subjected his works to the “correction, improvement, and expurgation from impurities, which he had singularly neglected during life [...]—not a word or thought was now found in it, to which the most delicate lady could object” (1: 236). It is up to the reader to decide whether this is utopian or dystopian.

The voyage down south to a region of the dead is of course also a variation of the classical descent into the netherworld. But there are none of the infernal aspects of the classical narratives here; rather it is primarily a kind of angelic utopia or a preliminary paradise. Even though “The Atlantis” signals that it is a satire through the references to Swift, and through its insistence on its own literariness, it is actually not very satirical. There are some instances of genuine satire—mainly of evolutionary theories, popular journalism, pseudoscience, and atheism—but the utopianism of the story is mainly a glorification of the U.S. and a rhetorical vehicle to advocate the case for unionism.

American Utopia: The Triumphant Republic

When the utopian visitors regain consciousness after having passed through the soporific barrier, they find themselves in a utopian world, which is not only manifested in politics but in nature itself, which appears to be “elysian or Paradisal” (1: 47). When they get their first view of the cultivated countryside, everything is “laid out in the chastest simplicity and most correct taste” and in “the highest state of improvement and perfection” (1: 47). Just like in Symzonia, the atmospheric conditions and the regularity of the land- and cityscapes signal a utopia based on manifest rationality with distinct religious overtones: “In this climate, there appeared to be a calmness and serenity in the atmosphere, and a mitigated splendor in the rising sun, which were peculiarly favorable to devotion, and which led one by a kind of instinctive appetency towards a mental audience and high converse with Heaven” (2: 365).

It quickly becomes clear that Atlantis is a new America. In conversation with Benjamin Franklin, Prospero is informed that the Atlantean “republic is exactly conformed in its structure to that of the United States, with some slight modifications arising out of the peculiar circumstances of the country, or which were deemed improvements upon the American scheme” (1: 60-61). Even the landscape reminds Prospero of America, the river that leads into the country is “like the Hudson” (1: 47). There is also “a college and observatory, more lofty than we had ever beheld, and whose tops appeared at the moment, to be lost
amidst the clouds” (1: 48), which seems to be a reference to John Quincy Adams’s ridiculed ambition to erect astronomical observatories, or as he called them, “light-houses of the skies” (Watts and Israel 59). Though Adams never managed to realize his ambition in life, here in Atlantis it stands, albeit somewhat removed from reality high up in the clouds. Throughout the tale, Prospero is so enraptured by every scene he takes in that he almost loses his senses. To Prospero, everything suggests “the image of the New Jerusalem, as depicted in the Revelations, and threw [him] in to an ecstasy of enjoyment” (1: 48). The implication is that this is the earthly city of God reserved for the chosen people. Of course, the New Jerusalem had been an established trope for America since the Puritan settlement of the colonies. To Prospero, this becomes a type of homecoming and wish fulfillment in one, which might explain his excitement.

What has restored justice and brought back the Saturnian age is nothing less than the revealed supremacy of American republicanism. Atlantis is Reynolds vision of the Antarctic as the American “field of fame” realized (Reynolds, “Report” 230). The Antarctic is not only the manifest destiny of America in terms of territorial expansion; the Antarctic has become a New America colonized by the worthy, and in which all conflicts in the old America have been resolved. Against the national inferiority complex towards the Old World, the republic ascends triumphantly in the utopian world beyond, and that in competition with all other forms of government throughout the entire history of humankind. The political system is the outcome of a long series of evolutions: it has “been subjected to all the several modifications of the patriarchate, aristocracy, monarchy, and despotism […] until Washington, Franklin Jefferson, Adams, and their compeers of America, had made their appearance, at which time it was newly constructed upon our federal organization” (1: 60). Unsurprisingly, their presidents since have been only founding fathers (1: 61). Like Symponia, this is a patriotic utopia that seems to have as its primary purpose to confirm the superiority of home. Their Constitution is similar and the territory is divided into autonomous states with a federal government. In short, Atlantis is a slightly improved and adapted version of the U.S.

The utopian verification of American republicanism works also in a direct manner, by invoking the persons who were influential in the creation of the system in the first place. For instance, Prospero is questioned about the present state of the American Republic by Edmund Burke, in the company of
Montesquieu, and Benjamin Franklin—an impressive triumvirate of political philosophers who were influential in the early republic. Prospero replies:

I informed him of the admirable harmony which prevailed in our councils, of the growing attachment of the people to their Union, of their ready submission to the laws and their glowing enthusiasm for their free institutions, as well as settled determination to maintain them at all hazards, and through all extremities, these three illustrious men [...] seemed to derive equal satisfaction, and expressed a most ardent wish that our great experiment would lead to the most important and glorious results in the history of human affairs. (1: 58-59)

Prospero’s description of the growing unity of the American people is a glorified, revisionist version of the actual state of the union in the late 1830s, with its increasing sectional division between the North and the South. Besides the mounting differences between the states on the issue of slavery directly, there were other crises within the union in the 1830s that only concerned slavery indirectly. For instance, the “Nullification Crisis” (1832-33) when South Carolina claimed the right to nullify the federal Tariff Acts of 1828 (also known as the “Tariff of Abominations”) and 1832, declaring them unconstitutional since the acts mainly protected the interests of the northern states. The acts were mainly devised to protect the tariffs on raw materials used by manufacturers in the industrialized North, while imposing heavier duties on the international cotton trade on which the South depended. The opposition from South Carolina was ultimately connected to the institution of slavery; for South Carolina this was a way to test the limits of federal power. Abolitionism was gaining ground and the state had the largest population of slaves in the union. If South Carolina could reject federal power on this issue, they might also be able to defend the institution of slavery in the future. John C. Calhoun, then the Vice President, supported South Carolina’s claim to nullification, regarding the Tariff Acts as direct attacks on the Southern way of life since the cotton economy “provided a paying occupation for the slaves. It underpinned the peculiar institution, which most Southerners now agreed was the only possible system by which the two races could live together. So the tariff was denounced as a threat to slavery as well as to prosperity” (Brogan 295). The unionist Daniel Webster, on the other side, argued that nullification was treason and would lead to civil war (Jones 143). The Nullification Crisis was actually on the verge of

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10 Donald S. Lutz has shown by a survey of citations in political writings in the late 18th century that, “If there was one man read and reacted to by American political writers of all factions during all the stages of the founding era, it was probably . . . Montesquieu” (190). Citations are especially frequent in “pieces dealing with constitutional design” (192).
becoming an armed conflict, with South Carolina threatening to secede from the union and even marshalling a volunteer army. President Jackson had to ask Congress for a “force bill” to allow him the use of armed force to enforce policy on the dissenters (Jones 142-45). Prospero’s description of the “admirable harmony” and “growing attachment of the people to their Union” thus constitutes a grave revision of history. We might reasonably suppose that Prospero errs on the side of glorification in eagerness to impress his exalted hosts—the contemporaneous readers would certainly appreciate the irony of his response. But, nevertheless, the emphasis on the importance of maintaining a strong confederacy in “The Atlantis” betrays the critical condition of the union; a historical context that gives the text shape without being formulated.

In various forms, all political discussions in “The Atlantis” return to the same argument of unionism. This becomes clear immediately after Prospero’s reassuring words on the state of the union, when Montesquieu elaborates on the subject by stating that, if the union is maintained, he regards the republic to have better chances of longevity than the classical republics:

he considered the American confederacy as a new and interesting experiment, which had no archetype in the ancient or modern world, inasmuch as the system was unheard of, much more wisely adjusted in its several parts, than any previously organized, and made a much nearer approximation to the stable forms of government than any of the democracies of antiquity. (1: 59)

But, on the other hand, “were the states in the Union in a condition of separation from each other, they would speedily undergo all those changes, and experience all the evils to which the republics of Greece and Rome were subjected” (1: 59). Gordon S. Wood notes that, since the early republican era, Americans had been fond of making such references to antiquity; not as a model, however, but to find instructional examples of failed attempts at statehood:

to discover, in Montagu’s words, “the principal causes of that degeneracy of manners, which reduc’d those once brave and free people into the most abject slavery,” the Americans’ view of antiquity was highly selective, focusing on decline and decadence. “The ‘moss-grown’ columns and broken arches of those once-renowned empires are full with instruction” for a people attempting to rebuild a republican world. (51)

The political tendency of “The Atlantis” thus reads as an explicit argument for republicanism and unionism. The function of the utopia here is to invoke the
most authoritative figures on a contemporary topic to use them as mouthpieces. It is as if the author of “The Atlantis” invokes all these voices from the Revolutionary era to remind the contemporary readers of the ideological foundation of the American republic. Unprompted, as if sensing the lacunae in Prospero’s report that all is well in the republic, Montesquieu, Franklin, and Burke even launch into a discussion of the rights of states to nullify acts and secede from the union, the two most pressing issues in the conflict between South Carolina and the national government. According to Montesquieu, the idea of secession and nullification subverts the Constitution, converting “this firm and admirable contrivance into a mere rope of sand, and utterly incompetent to the great and sublime purposes for which it was instituted” (1: 60). Franklin simply denounces such ideas as unpatriotic, and Burke asserts that the idea “was subversive of all government whatever” (1: 60). This utopian dream team of political philosophers thus engages directly with a very tangible internal crisis in contemporary America, and adamantly advocates the conservation of the present political equilibrium. By way of these three, the author of “The Atlantis” denounces the advocates of nullification as unpatriotic anarchists, on much the same grounds as Webster had. In case the reader has nodded off during these pompous political discourses, needing less intellectual suasion to be stirred with the proper amount of patriotism, “The Atlantis” includes a sentimental scene in which Prospero is approached by “the families of those soldiers who fought our battles during our revolutionary war” (1: 321). These reiterate the same unionist mantra: “Tell our friends, said they, the States must remain united; if they separate, they will lose the boon for which we contended and soil their honours in the dust” (1: 321). Prospero, of course, is “delighted with this inartificial display of patriotism and enthusiastic attachment to freedom” (1: 321).

The political message of unionism is the most frequently recurring and forms the only really sustained theme in the tale. A little further on, the Atlantean Thomas Jefferson falls into the same rhetorical line, cautioning against the dissolution of the confederacy, arguing that such a course would bring “endless miseries and irretrievable ruin” (1: 224). The historical Thomas Jefferson was likewise concerned about the stability of the union, connecting this to the sectionalism that arose on the issue of slavery. His concern was made clear in his famous letter to John Holmes in 1820, which was widely reproduced after Jefferson’s death in 1826. The letter was occasioned by another critical juncture, the Missouri Crisis, which revealed the deep sectionalism of the union to Jefferson. As he related to Holmes: “this
momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union.” He continues by giving a striking image of the precariousness of the question of how the nation would be able to extricate itself from the institution of slavery: “we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. [J]ustice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other” (“To Holmes”). In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he not only spoke for the inevitability of the dismantlement of the institution of slavery, but also argued that the practice was degrading for both master and slave, and that the whole issue was above both state and federal powers: “Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever […].” (Jefferson 169). Jefferson thus did not doubt that slavery was unjust and needed to be abolished—despite the well-known paradox that he was a slave-owner throughout his life—the question was how this could be effected.

But “The Atlantis” skew[s] the historical Jefferson’s views. Though it clearly adopts a unionist stance as regards nullification and secession, which ultimately hinged on the issue of slavery, it does not criticize slavery as such. Rather the opposite, in fact, since The Atlantean Jefferson’s argument for unionism is extended to support the preservation of the institution of slavery. Consequently, when Jefferson argues about slavery in “The Atlantis” that nothing can “be more evident, than that this is an affair which ought to be left entirely at the disposal of the slaveholding States themselves […]” (1: 224-25), it is implied that he has crystallized and improved his opinions since arriving in Atlantis. He has rid himself of his previous earthly ambivalence, and come to the moderate, pro-slavery conclusion that on this matter the states are as autonomous as European nations (1: 225). As was seen in the previous chapter, this policy was also expressed by Cooper, particularly in *Nations of the Americans*. According to this view, it is strictly a matter of state rights vs. the national government. On the one hand, there are Constitutional issues, including nullification and secession, which are the domain of the national government. On the other hand, the rights of property, under which slavery falls, are entirely a matter of the states and the slave-owners themselves. A state cannot interfere in another state’s internal matters. By thus transferring the whole issue from the federal to the state level, the source of conflict is removed in theory. “The Atlantis” thus uses the utopian form to make an explicit, partisan political argument.

The issue of slavery is also covered from the perspective of religion in “The Atlantis”. Alexander Hamilton gets involved in the discussion of slavery
in “The Atlantis” by stating that he has heard rumors from recent arrivals in Atlantis that the “abolitionists, besides resting their claims upon the foundation of the equal rights of mankind, are inspired with a religious fanaticism […]” (1: 225). Here we should probably think of the zeal of the new kind of abolitionism that arose in the 1830s, which demanded immediate emancipation without compromises and, crucially, without compensation to the slave-owners. It was primarily influenced by people like William Lloyd Garrison who claimed moderation and gradualism was simply unacceptable: “No! no! Tell a man, whose house is on fire, to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen; but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present!” (63). Furthermore, in 1833, Garrison drew up a Declaration of Sentiments for the American Anti-Slavery Convention, in which he stated that slavery was in violation of the Declaration of Independence and the principles of Christianity: “all those laws which are now in force, admitting the right of slavery, are therefore, before God, utterly null and void; being an audacious usurpation of the Divine prerogative […]” (68-69). For slaveholders, such language must have seemed fanatic, indeed, a direct attack on their institutions and way of life. As a part of the pro-slavery argument of “The Atlantis,” Hamilton turns to the theologian Samuel Clarke, who is conveniently present, in order to ascertain whether such abolitionists have God on their side as they claim. Clarke is asked to give an exposition of the biblical view of slavery, especially the question whether Christianity and slavery are incompatible as alleged. While admitting that “slavery is at variance with the spirit, although not the letter of the Gospel,” Clarke states that “Christ and his apostles, who professed that their kingdom was not of this world, did not attempt to intermeddle in this affair, regarding it as a part of civil regulation […]” (1: 225). Consequently, even in the case of earthly and heavenly states, there are discrete dominions of state rights and federal power that should not be meddled with. And, importantly, slavery is an institution of this world and its alleged immorality does not seem to be held accountable in the next.

The Missouri Crisis (1819-20) and the Nullification Crisis in the 1830s both brought the deep underlying conflicts of the union into the open, and both ultimately hinged on the issue of slavery and how to maintain political balance between two such radically different paradigms as the Northern and the Southern. The utopia of “The Atlantis,” light entertainment though it may be, has a clear political agenda: to argue the case for state sovereignty and unionism, both linked to the issue of slavery. This is perhaps only what could
be expected; *The American Museum* was a Southern journal,\(^{11}\) and we can assume its demographic was primarily educated slave-owners or slavery supporters. “The Atlantis” was the type of self-affirming message, in combination with a sprinkle of intellectualism and literariness, that this audience would want for entertainment. Prospero’s silence on the recent crises in the union, as discussed above, might have something to do with the intended readership as well. Supporters of nullification and secession were concentrated to the South, and the author might have opted not to refer to actual people or issues in order to avoid controversy.

The primary function of the “The Atlantis” is to give utopian confirmation to the federalist version of American politics. But it also has the less idealistic function of fulfilling desires for revenge for injuries inflicted on the national dignity. At one point Prospero is taken aside by a menial who turns out to be Benedict Arnold, also a historical figure. In 1780, Arnold had schemed to surrender the very important stronghold at West Point to the British in exchange for a large sum of money. The plan was discovered before its completion, however, when his British co-conspirator was captured and summarily executed. Arnold had time to escape and defected to the British army where he was given a position of command, and then actually fought against the Americans. Understandably, this won him little sympathy in the new republic. He became something of a personification of treachery, like the Norwegian Quisling, and his act of treason resonated long after.\(^{12}\) Here, in utopian form, the restitution that had not come in the real world is given. Arnold now declares that he “would willingly make any atonement in his power for the injury he had done his country” (1: 254). He describes his miserable existence in Atlantis:

> he had now sufficient cause of regret and repentance for that act of treachery which he committed at that time, as he found himself in universal disrepute and contempt, and subjected to every humiliation that could be conceived, insomuch that his life was a burden, and were he not apprehensive of augmenting his guilt and punishment in a future state, he should long since have committed suicide. (1: 255)

The utopia becomes a fulfilled revenge fantasy, reminding us that this is also a variation of the classical descent into the underworld. It is decidedly less graphic than is Dante’s version, but we can infer from other examples in

\(^{11}\) Published out of Boston, Maryland.

\(^{12}\) A *N.Y. Times* article from 1894, with the headline “Benedict Arnold, Traitor,” concluded with the pronunciation that he would be “execrated and despised for all time.”
Atlantis that Arnold has had to suffer some earlier punishment as well. For instance, Nero, Tiberius, Borgia, and Ravaillac stated that they had “just been released from very severe punishments” (1: 49). The main function is for the American reader to get the vicarious satisfaction of imagining the reprobate receiving the punishment he did not get in life as well as hearing him repent.

If the political organization of Atlantis is a utopian refinement of American foundational ideology, the rest of the social organization has similar conservative tendencies. This is especially visible in the representation of the role of women in Atlantis. Women who fail to adhere to the strict standards of dress and composure “are soon banished by the good sense of the community” (1: 62). This does not entail removal from society altogether, as in the case of the Symzonian outcasts, but merely that they are ostracized from the more refined social circles. The Atlanteans have devised a system of social labeling of women in order to enforce these standards: “Ladies too prodigal of their charms, in the public eye, are branded with the appellation of Armidas, and avoided by all decent people, while the Erminas alone are tolerated in good company” (1: 62). Presumably, this is a reference to Torquato Tasso’s Jerusalem Delivered, where Armida is a wicked enchantress and Erminia is a fair maiden who dresses like a peasant in order to evade her enemies. Whereas the Symzonian women were considered to be equal to men in intelligence, but still excluded from politics, the Atlantean women are explicitly regarded as mentally inferior. Their primary functions are to be wives and mothers: the Atlantean “schemes of education, if they do not recognize in woman precisely the same intellectual powers as are found in man, regard her as endowed with all those ornamental qualities which are calculated to render her his rational companion, and an able instructress of his children” (1: 62). Women are therefore instructed in “elegant literature, as well as the elements of those departments of science which are ornamental and more readily attained” (1: 62). While some prominent women are allowed to observe the proceedings of the Philosophical Society from the galleries in the quality of “honorary members,” and have their papers read (but not by themselves), it is only after “they had been previously examined and approved by a standing committee, appointed for that purpose” (1: 53).

As in Symzonia, this can be regarded as a utopian response to the steady progress of women’s liberation in the U.S. at the time, and the anxiety generated by this restructuring of the social order. The roles in their respective societies allotted to the women of both Symzonia and Atlantis correspond very well to the widespread contemporary American idea of the “true woman.” Nina
Baym writes that the “taxonomy of the ‘true woman,’ derived from advice books published in the Jacksonian era, involved as key attributes piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity—traits that made its exemplar a “hostage in the home”” (xxxix). This idea of true womanhood found its expression in the commonly used phrase “cult of domesticity,” which in its distilled form held that women achieved fulfillment through marriage and motherhood (Baym 26). The representation of women in “The Atlantis,” with its emphasis on woman’s place as ornamental appendage to her husband with only enough education to instruct her children, seems almost a program statement for the cult of domesticity. One should note, however, that the Atlantean women are allowed an education, which, of course, was far from the norm in America. But it is an education with restrictions, and it does not raise them to the level of men. Such ambivalence in the role of woman was part of the rhetoric of the cult of domesticity:

by assuring woman that she was a far more intelligent, resolute, and able person than was traditionally supposed, the cult, while imposing a heavy burden of good behavior on her, bolstered her self-esteem, supported her inclinations toward self-fulfillment, and justified a search for means of exerting influence that were compatible with her woman’s nature. (Baym 29)

In “The Atlantis,” this is also manifested in the fact that, while not allowed to take part directly in the scientific world, they hold literary salons where they discourse on appropriate topics. Consequently, just as “The Atlantis” argues for conservation of the union and against federal interference in the issue of slavery, it argues for the preservation of women’s relative position in society. In a utopia where everything is elevated, women are also allowed higher attainments in keeping with the relative distance, but are still in the fixed position of inferiority.

**Science and Religion**

A similar conservative slant as can be found in politics in “The Atlantis” is apparent also in its treatment of science and religion. In Atlantis, all prominent scientists and philosophers “unite the labours of their genius in the structure of science” (1: 51). Their leading figures in this endeavor are Bacon and Newton. But it soon becomes clear that there are strict limits to what constitutes proper science. In “The Atlantis,” the author takes the opportunity to have the revived Bacon comment also on controversial theories in the early 19th century and
declare such modern inventions as evolution, paleontology, and geology to be fallacious. Notable here is that these are all scientific disciplines that acknowledged the concept of deep time, studying natural changes over seemingly infinite time-scales that stood in stark opposition to the finite histories of Christian orthodoxy. Bacon adduces no particular evidence in his argument against these disciplines; the sole weight of the refutation lies in the entertaining fact that it is Bacon that utters them. In this context, Bacon throws the audience at the Philosophical Society into fits of laughter when he ridicules the theories of Buffon who, as mentioned earlier, was unpopular in the U.S. for his idea of American degeneracy (1: 55).

However, most of the allegedly pseudo-scientific disciplines in Atlantis are associated with the Scribleri family, who live in a gothic mansion on the outskirts of the regular community. These are the only characters in Atlantis who are not also historical figures, but a continuation of the satire from which they derive their name: The Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus (1741). It was the collective work of the Scriblerus Club whose members were Swift, Pope, John Gay, Henry St. John, Thomas Parnell, and John Arbuthnot, with the latter doing most of the writing. The Atlantean version of Swift complains that, in spite of the efforts of the club to satirize bad taste and false science out of existence, “the same faults are incessantly repeated, the same round of follies compassed, and the same specimens of writing circulated and approved” (1: 335). As examples of the disciplines he thinks are “indulging all the contemptible whims and practicing the disgraceful arts” of the Scribleri, he mentions “geologists, phrenologists, or the geographical surveyors of heads, animal magnetists, and magnetical somnambulists” (1: 335). The list is a fascinating snapshot of the state of early 19th-century science. We can see that geology, which in this context specifically concerns the various theories of how the earth could be dated by the study of stratification or deposits of fossils, was still a somewhat suspect discipline, primarily because its results disputed the orthodox accounts of creation. Phrenology and craniology were similarly in their nascent stages as scientific disciplines, but both would become established in the near future, before reverting to pseudoscientific status.

Prospero pays a visit to the Scribleri Mansion whose “architecture promiscuously blended together in its structure, with rather a predominance of the gothic” and adorned with “grotesque figures,” as if to “prevent the approach of a sound science and correct literature” (1: 427-28). Even in the enlightened state of Atlantis, there is a dark undertow of Gothicism that thrives in spite of the efforts to exorcize it. Gothic here seems to have its pejorative
sense of something uncouth and in poor taste, the exact opposite of the Atlanteans’ rational classicism. “The Scriblerian community,” complains Richard Steele to Prospero, seems to have “permanent duration. It would appear as if this was a race which, like noxious animals, it is impossible either to tame or exterminate” (1: 430). The Scribleris seem to function as the irrational shadow of the otherwise thoroughly rationalized Atlantean community. During this visit to the Scribleri, the classification of geology as a pseudoscience is reiterated. Here, it is Martin Scriblerus himself who claims to have invented geology, as well as studied the fossilized footprints of gigantic prehistoric birds during a brief sojourn in America:

he paid a visit to these sons in the great republick, during which time he made many wonderful discoveries; as for example, proofs [...] from the prints of bird’s feet in rocks and sandstones, that [...] birds once lighted upon them, that were higher than the steeples of the largest churches; and from the fossil remains of mammoths and other strange animals not now living, that this earth must have existed millions of years. (1: 439)

We have already seen how the findings of skeletons of “mammoths,” or more properly, mastodons, caused fascination and consternation in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In 1838, it was more or less established that these remains belonged to an extinct species whose history predated that of humankind. This had two necessary implications: the world was much older than what a literal reading of the Bible gave at hand, and it was not now the same as when created, species could become extinct and the great chain of being could be broken.

The mention of the “prints of bird’s feet,” as most other things in “The Atlantis,” has its historical origin. In 1836, Edward Hitchcock had written an article on “Ornithichnology,” his neologism to designate the science of bird tracks, where he described a variety of fossilized tracks that appeared to be from very large birds (see Semonin 380-81, 397-98). The tracks indicated that whatever left them had been enormous; Hitchcock writes: “Indeed, I hesitate not to say, that the impression made on the mud appears to have been almost as deep, indicating a pressure almost as great, as if an Elephant had passed over it” (319). As to its height, he conjectures that its head “must have been elevated from twelve to fifteen feet above the ground!” (Hitchcock 333n). Of course, these were actually dinosaur tracks, but this was before the knowledge of such creatures had been generally diffused. Hitchcock’s most controversial claim, however, was that “in these simple foot marks, the existence, and some of the habits, of an interesting class of animals is proved, at a period so remote, that
the entire population of the globe has since been changed, at least once or twice, and probably several times more” (Hitchcock 337). He immediately had to defend himself from an attack in the press by an anonymous critic who simply claimed that the whole thing was a figment of Hitchcock’s imagination due to “early disadvantages” in his education (qtd. in Hitchcock, “Orni. Def.” 289). In “The Atlantis,” Prospero is handed a satirical treatise on “Noseology,”13 written by the Atlantean Swift, in which we find a similar attack on Hitchcock but in fictional form. In the treatise, Swift dismisses “Ornithicknology” as a “too egregious folly and trifling with our understandings, to find any abettors or apologists, among an educated and intelligent community” (2: 38).

The ulterior motive for all these attacks on sciences that suggest a reevaluation of the earth’s history, becomes explicit in the treatise, where Swift states:

I know of no doctrine which could be broached, within the pale of the christian church, more favorable to the system of Atheism, than that which is entertained in late treatises upon Geology, that the Creator has from the beginning, put forth repeated successions of animals and vegetables, each last series of which, are improvements upon the former. (2: 37-38)

Geology is thus condemned as a fundamentally atheistic doctrine, since its findings of discontinuities question the principle of plenitude and the perfection of the creator. Swift continues by disqualifying all the results of the new sciences: in his view, there is nothing that can be inferred from empirical observations that supports the notion “that the species of animals now subsisting upon the earth, are not precisely the same as have occupied it from the creation.—There is the strongest reason for the opinion, that nature has never yet allowed a species to become extinct” (2: 38). Arthur O. Lovejoy writes that this line of reasoning had been around since the early 18th century as a counterargument to “the incipient science of paleontology. The view that fossils are remains of actual organisms now extinct was combated on the ground that, in a well-conducted universe, every species must be constantly represented” (Great Chain 243). Allowing for extinction would be atheistic

13 This seems to be a comical signification of the medical discipline nosology, which is concerned with the classification of disease (from Greek nosos, “disease”). There seems to have been no earnest science of the noses, in analogy with phenology and craniology, but during the first few decades of the 18th century, a whole genre of literary spoofs on the topic blossomed, possibly sparked by Tristram Shandy. In addition to “The Atlantis” and Poe’s “Lionizing,” the OED entry on “nosology” cites articles in Blackwood’s Magazine, 1819 and 1822, as well as C. Westmacott’s English Spy (1825) as examples.
because, as the botanist John Ray wrote, “the Destruction of any one Species [would entail] a dismembering of the Universe, and rending [sic] it imperfect; whereas they think the Divine Providence is especially concerned to secure and preserve the Works of the Creation” (qtd. in Lovejoy, Great Chain 243). According to Swift’s treatise in “The Atlantis,” these are clearly questions that the finite human intellect cannot encompass. He sets the limits for the proper study of mankind, which is a variation on Pope’s answer: “Man” (10; II.1). Sciences of the mind or descriptive natural sciences are acceptable, but not speculations on “cosmogony, or the form in which the earth was created, and the changes it has undergone, which are evidently above the reach of the human mind” (2: 38). Earlier in the tale, in the session of the Philosophical Society, Bacon similarly ridicules the new scientific disciplines that see historical progress in the succession of species or in geological specimens:

Nor did he treat with much less severity, the schemes of Burnet14 and his followers, and of those numerous philosophical romancers who imagine that they can trace the earth to an aqueous or incandescent state, and amidst the various forms of its fossil remains, both in the animal and vegetable kingdoms, presume to discover indications of progressive stages in improvement, during the successive generations of men and animals. Bacon maintained in this treatise, that upon no principles of the inductive philosophy, have we reason to conclude that the order of nature and its laws were ever materially different from what they are at present. (1: 55-56).

The last sentence is a classic argument for the great chain of being: that the world has been the same since creation. This is a version of the biblical “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun” (Eccl. 1.9), a common orthodox argument against evolutionary theories. In its reactionary protestations, “The Atlantis” seems to betray a certain amount of anxiety before these new scientific disciplines and the radical shift in temporal perspective they brought.

Even though religion evidently plays an important role in defining the Atlantean way of life and view of knowledge, it is not further described other than as a kind of pious rationalism: the Atlanteans adhere to a strict model of reason insofar as it does not contradict Christian doctrine. However, in much the same manner as Atlantean science is defined by a long list of negations of

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14 Thomas Burnet, theologian and natural philosopher, mostly known for his Sacred Theory of the Earth (1681).
what is not accepted, religion is similarly described in its negated form. Atlantis has its own set of atheist and deist dissenters who have been allowed to establish a colony, called “Eldorado,” where “they have made an experiment of the practical efficacy of their principles” (1: 332). Of course it fails on an epic scale. As they can no longer refer to divine authority to sanction their laws, morality had rapidly declined and “dissolved the very bonds of their society” (1: 332). If the rest of Atlantis is a utopia, Eldorado has degenerated into a dystopia: “No man among them is certain that his children are his own, property is insecure, adulteries, murders, and suicides common, and licentiousness universal” (1: 332). The members of Eldorado have therefore decided either to terminate the experiment, or reform and coalesce with the rest of Atlantis. It is yet another orthodox dream fulfillment through utopia by letting one’s opponents prove their own theories useless in practice. Prospero’s smug response is telling: “—Ha, ha, ha—this is excellent. Then this fraternity have practically refuted their own doctrines, and infidelity gone out in smoke” (1: 332). The Atlantean utopia has thus resolved the problem of faith, not by proving the existence of God, but by demonstrating by experiment the impossibility of maintaining social order without divine authority. This is precisely what the leader of Eldorado, Voltaire—whose priestless utopia in Candide was named El Dorado (62)—has realized, as he now holds religious services of his own (1: 333). This seems to refer to the real Voltaire’s statement in his poem “Epistle to the Author of the Book, The Three Impostors” (one of the books found in the Scribleri library, see below): “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.”

In the episode when Prospero visits the Scribleri mansion, the themes of nullification, abolition, pseudoscience, and irreligion converge. It is noted that among the collections of the Scribleri, holding works of “astrology, demonology, alchemy, cosmogony, crabology, animal magnetism and necromancy. […] as well as an edition of the false gospels, and the three impostors,”15 is also found a collection of “English travels in the United States, nullifying pamphlets, and abolition tracts”—the latter three linked through their corrosive effects on the American way of life (1: 440-41). The satirical method here can best be described as guilt by association. Scriblerus has even invented a subversive ointment that will effect an immediate emancipation of the slaves in America since it “completely changes the complexion, makes black people white and enables them to transmit their new complexion to their posterity” (1:

15 This refers to The Treatise of the Three Impostors, probably from the beginning of the 18th century. It professed to detail how the three impostors Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad had twisted the truth about events in their lives.
444). He even intimates that this medicine had already been placed in circulation before he died. While it is clearly intended as a railly on the rambling mind of Scriblerus, it also invokes a nightmare for slave-owners, in which their slaves may suddenly pose as whites. Indeed, in the mind of slave-owners this was exactly what abolitionism would entail: slaves would be emancipated and given the full right of citizenship on equal terms with the white population. The racist satirical thrust seems to lie in the absurdity of the idea itself—emancipation is as unrealistic as any ointment since blackness is more than just the complexion of the skin, the racial essence will remain unaffected.

In Anticipation of Exploration

“The Atlantis” is written in anticipation of the U.S. Exploring Expedition (1838-42). In fact, when the first installment appeared in Sept. 1838, the expedition had already departed. Since Prospero is now an experienced Antarctic explorer and has knowledge of the noxious belt surrounding the Antarctic, he sees fit to issue a word of warning to the officers of the expedition:

Let captain Wilks [sic], the commander of the squadron just dispatched to these regions by the American government, and his assistant officers, who are to conduct this exploration of the South Seas, to whom we have communicated these facts, take warning from our experience, and be upon their guard against fatal disasters, when they shall pass beyond the latitude of seventy degrees south. (1: 46)

This also indicates that the author had, indeed, planned to bring back Prospero from the Antarctic before the expedition departed in 1838. In other words, Prospero was not dead during his sojourn in Atlantis, which would not have been an unexpected plot development, given the fact that he is gassed unconscious and wakes up in a region where everybody else is dead.

The author of “The Atlantis” thus exploits that space of anticipation that precedes discovery, and claims to be in possession of knowledge that will be vital for an actual expedition that is just about to be launched. In 1838, it was generally expected that the U.S. Exploring Expedition would annex the Antarctic to the realm of empirical knowledge, and the region would thus be exhausted as utopian territory. Since “The Atlantis” is written in precisely the same historical moment that the Antarctic was in the process of being explored,
it can be said to revel in the opportunity of creating the last Antarctic utopia, using the unknown geographical space to project its unionist, pro-slavery, and anti-evolutionary agenda.
CHAPTER FOUR

Narrating the Limits: Poe in the Antarctic

The texts in focus in this chapter are Edgar Allan Poe’s two Antarctic fictions, “MS. Found in a Bottle” (1833) and The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (1838). These mark a departure from the utopian texts I have discussed so far in the way the Antarctic is represented. Poe chooses to approach the Antarctic enigma from a different direction: by dramatizing the limits of empirical and geographical knowledge. Instead of posing an Antarctic region that is fully revealed in the course of the narrative, as in the utopian texts, Poe’s fictions approach the limit but are interrupted before the discovery can be communicated. His narratives focus on this pivotal point rather than on what might lie beyond, which can be said to be a symbolic recreation of the general sense of anticipation in the 1830s before an imminent exploration that would finally put an end to centuries of Antarctic speculation. When he wrote Pym, the U.S. Exploring Expedition was in its final preparations, and was expected to depart for the Antarctic at any moment. Poe lets his text interact with this historical moment by locating his narrative in precisely the region where the expedition was headed, playfully setting it up so that the function of the expedition is to verify Pym’s fantastical tale. The strategy is made explicit when Pym frets about the credibility of his narrative:

a narrative, let me here say, which, in its latter portions, will be found to include incidents of a nature so entirely out of the range of human experience, and for this reason so far beyond the limits of human credulity, that I proceed in utter hopelessness of obtaining credence for all that I shall tell, yet confidently trusting in time and progressing science to verify some of the most important and improbable of my statements. (4.4)$^1$

Poe knows that his audience anticipates a conclusive exploration of the Antarctic and that his fiction will soon be superseded by fact, but it is precisely this epistemological tension that precedes the exploration that he exploits. Impishly, he lets Pym profess confidence that real exploration will corroborate his most unrealistic statements.

In this chapter I will first discuss “MS” and its depiction of the Antarctic as a mysterious and possibly supernatural region that does not offer any definite conclusion or final revelation of what lies at the South Pole. The strategy of

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$^1$ I follow Burton R. Pollin in giving the references as (chapter.paragraph).
non-closure that Poe uses in “MS” is in many ways a preliminary to Pym. When I turn to Pym, I first argue that Poe’s decision to locate the second half of the novel in the Antarctic was calculated to capitalize on the contemporary public interest in that region. As an effect of this decision, he builds his novel from a variety of sources, primarily ones on Antarctic exploration. The Antarctic that Poe creates is charged with faint echoes of mythological sources that suggest various modes of reading, but the sources are never affirmed. I then relate the representation of savages in the novel to contemporary descriptions of South-Sea islanders in exploration narratives. The inconclusive ending of the novel is read in terms of a polar optical phenomenon: the whiteout. I conclude the chapter with a note on Poe’s brief return to polar regions in Eureka.

A Letter from the Verge: “MS. Found in a Bottle”

“MS. Found in a Bottle” was first published in the Baltimore Saturday Visitor, on October 19, 1833, as the award-winning entry in a prize competition. In many ways it can be regarded as a preliminary sketch to Pym, in which many of the themes and motifs are recycled in a more expanded format. With “MS,” as perhaps in Pym, the text is a dramatization of the limits of human knowledge and this limit is intrinsically connected to the mystery surrounding the Antarctic. The tale is the final message of its unnamed narrator, who is involved in a shipwreck in the South Seas. He survives, but since the ship is rudderless there is no way of directing the course. In a raging storm a phantom ship bears down upon the wreck, but the narrator is miraculously cast aboard the other ship. He soon realizes he cannot communicate with the ghostly crew, however, leaving him as a spectator as the ship sails into a vortex at the South Pole. He encloses his narrative in a bottle just before they go down, which makes it impossible for him to reveal the secret of the pole.

The tale revolves around the distinction between the realistic and the fantastic, especially the problem of representing the seemingly irrational while maintaining verisimilitude. This theme is activated immediately as the narrator perverts one of the basic realistic gestures of travel literature, that of situating its point of origin in a specific time and place. His very first statement is: “Of my

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2 It was also one of the tales that can be attributed to the projected Tales of the Folio Club with certainty. The premise was a literary society that gathers for dinner and reading of tales of their own composition. Each composition was then to be followed by a critical discussion, intended as “a burlesque upon criticism.” Poe informed J. T. Buckingham in a letter. In a draft for the prologue that would frame the tales, Poe describes the establishment: “The Folio Club is, I am sorry to say, a mere Junto of Dunderheadism. I think too the members are quite as ill-looking as they are stupid. I also believe it their settled intention to abolish Literature [sic], subvert the Press, and overturn the Government of Nouns and Pronouns.”
country and of my family I have little to say. Ill usage and length of years have
driven me from the one, and estranged me from the other” (135). No more
specific indication of the time of action is given than that he “sailed in the year
18—” (135). Instead of a realistically defined individual he becomes a
disconnected symbol of rationalism. In one of his few personal statements, we
are given the impression of a world-weary, intellectual aristocrat: “Hereditary
wealth afforded me an education of no common order” (135). He works hard
to project this self-image, describing himself as rational almost to a fault: “I
have often been reproached with the aridity of my genius; a deficiency of
imagination has been imputed to me as a crime” (135). In order to make sure
that we understand that he is not susceptible to Romantic fancy, he tells us that
he takes pleasure in the study of “the German moralists [...] not from any ill-
advised admiration of their eloquent madness, but from the ease with which my
habits of rigid thought enabled me to detect their falsities” (135). “Upon the
whole,” he concludes, revealing the ulterior motive of all this prefacing, “no
person could be less liable than myself to be led away from the severe precincts
of truth by the ignis fatuus of superstition” (135). The whole preliminary section
of the text seems devised to assure the reader, in Jon Hauss’s paraphrase, “Don’t
Worry! I have no imagination!” (141). Of course, his insistence on the stringency of
his reason and his truthfulness prepares for the irony of the encounter with the
ghost ship. Where the earlier texts rely on a sort of realistic gesture in gaining
access to the Antarctic mystery, Poe here chooses a decidedly preternatural
device, the legend of the Flying Dutchman, to convey his hero to the unknown.
In his introduction to the tale, Mabbott points to a passage in Walter Scott’s
Rakeby: “She is distinguished from earthly vessels by bearing a press of sail
when all others are unable, from stress of weather, to show an inch of canvas”
(131). This should be compared to the narrator’s first view of the ship: “what
mainly inspired us with horror and astonishment, was that she bore up under a
press of sail in the very teeth of that supernatural sea, and of that ungovernable
hurricane” (140). The ironic humor of a narrator carried by a vessel of legend
into mythical regions while protesting his own rationality is rich, indeed.

The supernatural portion of the tale is located in the unknown space of
the Antarctic. When their ship is reduced to a floating wreck, the narrator and
an old Swede, the sole survivors, drift uncontrollably without any means of
estimating time or position. Nevertheless, they are “well aware of having made
farther to the southward than any previous navigators, and felt great
amazement at not meeting with the usual impediments of ice” (139). The latter
phrase we recognize as a signal of the conflicting accounts of the Antarctic.
James Cook had been obstructed by dense pack ice from making further progress, but James Weddell had made it past this point without finding any such ice. The narrator confirms the removal of this boundary, and the Antarctic is literally laid open to speculation. It is also probably a reference once again to the theories of John Cleves Symmes, who predicted that the polar regions would be free of ice. The story reads as a combination of Symmes’s holes-in-the-poles and a classical descent into Hades or the Inferno. Robert F. Almy points out that “the polar regions in Poe’s early tales strongly resemble the image publicized by Symmes and Reynolds” (238). J. O. Bailey, on the other hand, has suggested that the Symmesian traces in “MS” are transferred by way of *Syzygia* (“Early American” 293). Poe would allude to Symmes later on as well: possibly in the ending of *Pym*, but certainly in “The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall” (1835) as Almy observes (231). In the latter, Pfaall undertakes a voyage to the moon in a balloon and while ascending directly above the North Pole he is able to observe, from a vantage point beyond the “limit of human discovery in these regions,” how the earth’s normal oblate shape is covered by a cap of ice until, “finally, becoming not a little concave, it 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 blackness” (418).

When the narrator of “MS” has been thrown aboard the ghost ship, he secrets himself in the hold to avoid detection. As a stow-away—prefiguring Pym—it takes the narrator a while to realize that, ironically, he is nothing but a ghost to the ghosts—they cannot see him. Without any means of communicating with the crew, the rationalistic narrator is trapped in a situation that defeats reason:

> A feeling, for which I have no name, has taken possession of my soul—a sensation which will admit of no analysis, to which the lessons of by-gone time are inadequate, and for which I fear futurity itself will offer me no key. To a mind constituted like my own, the latter consideration is an evil. I shall never—I know that I shall never—be satisfied with regard to the nature of my conceptions. (141)

The horror lies not in any definite danger but in the impossibility of rationalization, of achieving closure that will make the experience meaningful. There seems to be a pattern, a purpose, behind the course of the ship and the actions of the ancient mariners with their “decayed charts of navigation” and
“mathematical instruments of the most quaint and obsolete construction” that lay scattered all over the ship (141-44). Despite the immediate appearance, these cannot be simple symbols of the futility of reason; after all it seems as if the mariners have reached some anticipated destination in the final paragraphs. Their purpose, however, eludes the narrator. This dreaded indefinite is of course also the text’s final twist: if the narrator will not reach a conclusion, neither will the reader. Thus the tale turns into perhaps the first race to the pole, albeit a very singular one, with the suspense being shifted from what marvels will be found at the South Pole to the question of which will come first: the revelation or the end of the text.

The lack of closure is linked to the mystique of the Antarctic. There, it is implied, the journey will reach its termination. Despite his fears, the narrator feels “a curiosity to penetrate the mysteries of these awful regions” (145). But it is a conclusion that cannot be communicated: “It is evident that we are hurrying onwards to some exciting knowledge—some never-to-be-imparted secret, whose attainment is destruction. Perhaps this current leads us to the southern pole itself. It must be confessed that a supposition apparently so wild has every probability in its favor” (145). This rationalistic narrator has obviously not been an adherent of Symmes’s wild suppositions, or theories of open polar seas. It is implied that there is something at the Pole, or even the Pole itself, that is the secret, which prefigures the significance it would be given also in Pym. We never learn what awaits the ghost ship at the South Pole, only that it is something that makes the ghost crew restless and gives “their countenances an expression more of the eagerness of hope than of the apathy of despair” (145). Apparently, they at least expect some resolution. If this ship really is the Flying Dutchman as implied, then this might be their final destination when the curse that has doomed them to roam the seas is lifted. Whether that ultimate destination is reached remains unresolved, as the story ends in an accelerating vortex, evoking both a Symmesian hole and the maelstroms of Athanasius Kircher3 and the conical structure of Dante’s Inferno. “Oh, horror upon horror!—the ice opens suddenly to the right, and to the left, and we are whirling dizzily, in immense concentric circles, round and round the borders of a gigantic amphitheatre […] The circles rapidly grow small—we are plunging

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3 James McBride connects the maelstrom outside the coast of Norway to Symmes’s concentric spheres: “the peculiarities of the tremendous whirlpool on the coast of Norway, called the Maelstrom, which sucks in, and discharges the waters of the sea with great violence” (106). In ‘A Descent into the Maelström’ (1841), Poe links the idea to primarily to Kircher rather than Symmes: “Kircher and others imagine that in the centre of the channel of the Maelström is an abyss penetrating the globe, and issuing in some very remote part—the Gulf of Bothnia being somewhat decidedly named in one instance” (583).
madly within the grasp of the whirlpool […] oh God! and—going down!” (146).

The Antarctic exerts an irresistible attraction throughout the text; the narrator gravitates towards it involuntarily by a complex series of events. First there is the force of a storm that renders the ship useless, reducing him and the old Swede to passive spectators as they drift further into the Antarctic. Then, as the phantom ship bears down upon them, the narrator is suddenly inspired to preserve himself, leaving it undecided whether it is by an intentional act, fate, or chance:

At this instant, I know not what sudden self-possession came over my spirit. Staggering as far aft as I could, I awaited fearlessly the ruin that was to overwhelm. […] The shock of the descending mass struck her, consequently, in that portion of her frame which was already under water, and the inevitable result was to hurl me, with irresistible violence, upon the rigging of the stranger. (140; my italics)

As the italicized portion shows, there seems to be some external force acting on the narrator, pushing him on. His assertion that he is overcome with self-possession appears oxymoronic: to be overcome with self-possession seems to signify just the opposite, to be possessed by something other than oneself. The ship then proceeds on “her terrific course due south” (143), blown by a steady northern wind augmented by “some strong current, or impetuous under-tow” (144), as if gravitating southwards. But the southern pull starts much earlier. For all the narrator’s initial protestations, in typical Poe-fashion, he is under the ghostly influence of irrationality. In the same romantic tradition as Seaborn and Ishmael, he sets out to sea with “no other inducement than a kind of nervous restlessness which haunted me as a fiend” (135). As William E. Lenz remarks: “The impulses of compulsion and pursuit are perfectly matched, internal and external motivations and states, synchronous” (“Poe’s Pym” 31). Thus his decision to leave home is less a conscious choice than an irrational impulse; already from the very beginning he is involuntarily pulled towards the Antarctic as if by some irresistible law of attraction. It seems then as if the narrator is relentlessly—to use what seems a fitting metaphor considering the ending—sucked down the drain.

In a further development of this theme of involuntary action, there is also the curious scene where the narrator paints the sail. The passage seems designed to give the impression of his being caught up in a chain of events over which he exerts no conscious influence: “While musing upon the singularity of my fate, I unwittingly daubed with a tar-brush the edges of a neatly-folded
studding-sail which lay near me on a barrel. The studding-sail is now bent upon the ship, and the thoughtless touches of the brush are spread out into the word “DISCOVERY” (142). The placement of that specific word, normally signifying a positive assertion of the human will, is highly ironic as it is the product of automatic writing, as if the narrator is channeling something else. A discovery of what and by whom? A discovery in the discourse of exploration is not complete until it is communicated, but the boundary that is transgressed here is one-way. It cannot simply be read as a message from the narrator’s own unconscious, as suggested by, for instance, Albert J. von Frank (2). The brush did not actually trace out “DISCOVERY,” since the narrator tells us he only applied paint to the folds of the sail—it does not become a word until the sail is unfolded. Consequently, the meaning must be external to the narrator, precluding the possibility of a psychological reading. But how is such a thing even possible to imagine? It is an image that defies visualization—one of Poe’s trademark mystifications. “Are such things the operation of ungoverned chance?” the narrator asks (142). It seems not; rather it is the inescapability of predestination that directs the course of action. The paradox that is presented to us is that discoveries are not volitional, but a revelation over which the subject has no control. Even though the writing is not a subjective act, we should ask ourselves, however, if the reading might not be? If the paint is only applied to the folds, the unfolded result must necessarily be a dotted outline of the word and it is the narrator who connects the dots meaningfully; an ironic cognitive compulsion to make sense of a situation without sense. As Jon Hauss remarks: “Meaning is a kind of sudden geography, a drawing of multiple, more or less distant parts into a single interrelated picture. The word that the ‘MS.’ uses for such moments is, of course, ‘DISCOVERY’—the word itself ‘discovered’ within exactly the experience it names” (144).

It appears that Poe is making use of a kind of providential discourse, where the action unfolds as if by divine plan, but it is transformed from the optimism of the Puritan imagination into a terrifying descent into a hellish unknown. As von Frank has argued, by its allusion to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s albatross, the Christ-like “pious bird of good omen,” and Alfred Tennyson’s sea-monster in “The Kraken” (2), the tale can be said to vacillate between two different significations of the Antarctic. The narrator is literally tossed between these two nodes of signification: “At times we gasped for breath at an elevation beyond the albatross—at times became dizzy with the velocity of our descent into some watery hell, where the air grew stagnant, and no sound disturbed the slumbers of the kraken” (139). The albatross, in this
poetic discourse, signifies angelic, redemptive potentiality, whereas the awakened kraken, both in Norse mythology and in Tennyson’s combination with Christian eschatology, portends the end of the world. In the end, since Poe always leaned more towards Gothicism than sentimentalism, he sends the ship into the abyss.

In Poe’s version, the Antarctic is not there to be discovered by even the most determined explorer; it is a metaphysical interface between this world and the beyond. The tale is perhaps a literary conundrum more than anything else—a fiction of deferred resolution, whose terminating point lies beyond the scope of the text. Poe would reuse this device in *Pym*, although with a slight variation since there we know that the narrator returns. A significant point to be made in this context is that Poe’s evocative use of the Antarctic reveals that it still functions as a space of mystery and imagination in the early 1830s. Indeed, Poe’s Antarctic geography seems more metaphorical than anything else, even though it consists of realistic components. The black night and water around the ship is flanked by “stupendous ramparts of ice, towering away into the desolate sky, and looking like the walls of the universe” (145). The suggestive sublimity of the imagery is not only an effect used to accomplish an end; the effect is an end in itself.

As in the previous texts, the Antarctic symbolizes a human boundary in “MS,” but here that boundary cannot be breached: attaining the pole will entail the destruction of the knowing subject. There is none of that optimistic rationalism of the persistent explorer who is able to push on through to uncover new territory, as exemplified by, for instance, Benjamin Morrell’s promethean vision of a time, close at hand, when the “much desired object” of Antarctic exploration would be attained: “when the people of our enlightened age would have had laid open to them the mysteries of the south pole—mysteries which have been concealed from man since the Almighty first laid the foundations of the earth” (68). Instead of a Symmesian hole of the kind envisioned in *Symzonia*, this is rather a black hole that attracts and consumes all that comes near. The narrator makes an attempt, however, to communicate with the reader: “At the last moment I will enclose the MS. in a bottle, and cast it within the sea” (142). But the gesture is futile, as it will be dispatched before the terminus of the voyage; and the final revelation of the Antarctic secret—if there is one—cannot be communicated. What does it matter that the message survives, when its content is incomplete? The MS. literally becomes a floating signifier that only gestures towards that which it is not able to communicate. As Hauss remarks, “The edge of Poe’s cartography is unmarkable: not even ‘this
way monsters': but only 'this way . . . something beyond what is for us thinkable'” (148). The Antarctic here represents something that is undiscovered, indeed, not even discoverable. What “MS” reveals is a secret, not a solution to a secret. Dramatically, the tale is all about the mystery, not about its solution, which we will see is a narrative technique that Poe will reuse when he returns to the Antarctic in *Pym*.

**A Second Attempt at the Pole: The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym**

Poe’s only finished novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838), was not originally conceived as such. The first portions of the text, corresponding to the first three and a half chapters of the book, were published already in 1837, in the January and February issues of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. In the following, I will argue that Poe’s choice of once again using the Antarctic as a setting is linked to his first stab at the popular literary market. The story tells of the young Arthur Gordon Pym who stows away on a ship his friend Augustus Barnard sails with. Even before Pym comes out of hiding, however, there is a gruesome mutiny onboard, which Pym, Augustus, and Dirk Peters, one of the crew members, manage to resist. The ship is almost immediately reduced to a wreck in a storm, leaving them to drift the seas without food or water. Only Pym and Peters survive to be rescued by the British *Jane Gey*, headed for the South Seas and Antarctic in search of commercial opportunities. They penetrate further into the Antarctic than any navigator has done before, finding an inhabited island with natives that at first seem friendly, but who later turn on them and kill all the crew of the *Jane Gey* except for Pym and Peters who manage to take a hostage, steal a canoe from the natives, and escape the island, deciding to set course south since the climate seems milder in that direction. As they approach the region of the Pole, they drift faster and faster towards a white vapor on the horizon, and are pulled towards a chasm, but just before they go down, a gigantic human figure rises before them. At this climactic point, the narrative is interrupted by an editorial note, informing the reader that Pym has died in an accident that probably also destroyed the conclusion to the tale.

*Pym* is linked to “MS Found in a Bottle” through more than its common motifs. “MS” was one of the tales that was supposed to be included in the projected *Tales of the Folio Club* and most biographical facts indicate that it was the failure to get this published that led to Poe’s decision to rework the two
installments from the *SLM*. The rejection from Harper and Brothers is especially relevant in that they specify their grounds of refusal in such a manner as to also suggest what kind of text they *would* publish. Significantly, it was Harpers who eventually published *Pym*, which indicates that Poe had adapted and delivered a product to their specifications. First of all they wanted something that was not previously printed, which the majority of the tales in the *Folio Club* had been. Second, they did not want “detached tales and pieces,” since readers “have a decided and strong preference for works, (especially fictions) in which a single and connected story occupies the whole volume, or number of volumes.” The third reason was that the tales were simply “too learned and mystical.” In a creative turn they tell Poe: “it was for your own interest not to publish them. It is all important to an author that his first work should be popular. Nothing is more difficult, in regard to literary reputation, than to overcome the injurious effect of a first failure” (Harpers to Poe, 19 June 1836).

Even more specific advice had been given to Poe in more informal correspondence with James Kirke Paulding, author and bureaucrat, who had approached Harpers on Poe’s behalf a few months before Harpers’ letter of refusal. In a letter of 17 March 1836, Paulding analyzes the current literary market and suggests that Poe should act pragmatically:

I think it would be worth your while, if other engagements permit, to undertake a Tale in a couple of volumes, for that is the magical number. There is a great dearth of good writers at present both in England and this country, while the number of readers and purchasers of Books, is daily increasing, so that the demand is greater than the supply, in mercantile phrase. […] I am of opinion that a work of yours, would at least bring you a handsome remuneration, though it might not repay your labours, or meet its merits. (Paulding to Poe, 17 March 1836)

Other developments would indeed permit Poe to act on Paulding’s and Harpers’ advice to write a book-length narrative some time later. As of January

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4 As early as May 1833, in a letter to Joseph T. and Edwin Buckingham of the New-England Magazine, Poe sent “Epimenes” as a first sample of the Folio Club, with the intention either to have the whole sequence published or just this tale. At this point, he had projected only eleven tales (Ostrom 53: 37). Then in November 1834, Poe tried the publisher Carey and Lea for his *Tales of the Folio Club* (see Silverman 102), from whom he tried to get an advance through the agency of John P. Kennedy (Ostrom 54: 38). In a letter to Kennedy of September 1835, Poe writes that Thomas White (owner of the SLM) has agreed to print it, and he wonders if Kennedy can persuade Carey and Lea to stand as publisher (Ostrom 73-74: 50). Also there is his previously mentioned proposal to Harrison Hall in the letter in September, 1836, from which we have most of the information on his intentions for the Folio Club (Ostrom 163-165: 74). The final publisher that he tried seems to have been Harpers.
1837, Poe was dismissed from his editorship at the *SLM* by the owner, Thomas W. White (Silverman 128). The grounds for dismissal are not entirely clear: either it was the harshness of Poe’s literary criticism,5 his inability to control his drinking, or a combination of both. For some reason, White decided to publish Poe’s “The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym” after his departure, even though it was unfinished (but then the readers would not know that). The second installment ends with a cliffhanger: the mutineers aboard the *Grampus* have gained the upper hand, while Pym is still hiding in the hold. Ridgely suggests that White might simply have wanted to cut his losses with Poe by publishing work that he had already paid for, or that “he recognized the value of Poe’s name—for in an editorial he credited ‘Arthur Gordon Pym, a sea story’ to Poe and also placed his name beside the title in the table of contents. This attribution would force Poe to devise a convoluted ‘explanation’ of the ‘true’ authorship in the preface to the book version” (“Growth of the Text” 31). Consequently, in the beginning of 1837, Poe was without a position and with the publishing houses refusing his writings. Around this point the idea must have formed to turn the two installments from the *SLM* into a book-length narrative. The exact growth of the text remains conjectural, but somewhere along the line he must also have decided that it would be an opportune idea to return to the Antarctic for market appeal, combining it with the purported accessibility of the novel form. After all, the setting had served him well in the prize-winning “MS.”

Despite the fact that a substantial part of his career was spent working as magazine editor or literary critic, Poe is not usually associated with such material concerns. Parrington writes, for instance, that “The problem of Poe, fascinating as it is, lies quite outside the main current of American thought, and it may be left with the psychologist and the belletrist by whom it belongs” (58). This is symptomatic of a persistent view of Poe as the archetypal troubled Romantic genius, hopelessly out of step with his time, and therefore not to be

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5 At this point, Poe had become notorious for his rancorous literary criticism, as is illustrated by the assessment of Poe as critic in a rival magazine: “The critic of the Messenger has been eulogized for his scorching and scaringly abilities, and he thinks it incumbent upon him to keep up his reputation in that line, by sneers, sarcasm, and downright abuse” (qtd. in Moss Norman Leslie Incident 288). The expectations on Poe as a critic are confirmed by Francis L. Hawks who tries to induce him to come to work for the New-York Quarterly Review: “I wish you to fall in with your broad-axe amidst this miserable literary trash which surrounds us. I believe you have the will, and I know well you have the ability” (Hawks to Poe [1837-38]). In addition, White worried over the sarcasm with which Cooper had been treated in Poe’s “Autography” series, and also that his review of the novel Norman Leslie was so contemptuous as to be “possibly libelous” (Silverman 127). Poe wrote, among other things, that it was “the most inestimable piece of balderdash with which the common sense of the good people of America was ever so openly or so villainously insulted” (Review of Norman Leslie 56). The “Norman Leslie incident,” as Sidney P. Moss calls it, set off one of the first literary feuds between American periodicals (293).
read in a broader cultural or material context—an image Poe himself helped to promote. Terence Whalen argues with this scholarly tradition by demonstrating that Poe was very sensitive to magazine trends and tried to adapt to the literary market as best he could. In Whalen’s Marxist reading, the gatekeeper standing between Poe and success was the “Capital Reader,” the embodiment of the tangible functionaries of the publishing industry, but also the intangible influence of taste, both acting on each other in difficult to predict ways (9-11). In Harpers’ refusal (discussed above), Poe encountered the stated values of this Capital Reader in its most direct form. As an analogy, Whalen points out that “Berenice” (1834), one of the tales that established the myth of a Poe obsessed by morbidity, was actually the result of a bet.7 When Poe applied for a position at the SLM, he responded to the criticism of the excessive grotesquery of “Berenice” by stating that whether it was in “bad taste is little to the point. To be appreciated you must be read, and these things are invariably sought after with avidity.” He then makes a proposal that explicitly signals his intentions of adapting to the demands of the literary marketplace: “I propose to furnish you every month with a Tale of the nature which I have alluded to. The effect—if any—will be estimated better by the circulation of the Magazine than by any comments upon its contents” (Poe to White, 30 April 1835). As Whalen remarks: “Coming from someone who was purportedly unfit for commercial society, this is a startling declaration” (8).

What Whalen clearly demonstrates is Poe’s deep entanglement in the publishing industry, even to the point of singling out capital as “the enemy that would haunt Poe throughout his career as a commercial writer” (57). Whalen’s choice of the word “haunt” in combination with a materialistic concept is probably quite deliberate, as he tries to separate Poe from a tradition that has explained his writings primarily as products of various psychological hauntings, such as family losses, mental conflicts and anxieties, or manias induced by excessive drinking. Adding “capital” to the long list of hauntings provides a valuable perspective on Pym, making it appear more clearly in its historical context, especially as regards the inclusion of Antarctic material. As Lenz remarks: “Poe is best known for his depictions of extreme states of consciousness. It is easy to forget that he was a successful exploiter of

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6 In the article “Poe and Magazine Writing on Premature Burial,” J. Gerald Kennedy argues a similar point in relation to the prevalent theme of premature burial in Poe’s writing: it should not be explained, as it often has been, as a personal phobia of Poe’s, but as the result of a contemporary cultural fascination in the phenomenon. Accounts of premature burials could be found in abundance in contemporary periodicals, and Poe saw that there was clearly a market here.

7 Poe writes in a letter to Thomas White, on 30 April 1835: “The Tale originated in a bet that I could produce nothing effective on a subject so singular, provided I treated it seriously.”

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contemporary cultural attitudes and popular literary conventions” (“Poe’s Pym” 30). In this way, Poe functions “as a barometer of contemporary attitudes. Always quick to exploit incipient fashions and trends,” in Pym “he explores the quest motif characteristic of exploration narratives [...] and identifies the national quest with the exploration of the Antarctic” (Lenz, Poetics 41). The point of the whole discussion of Poe’s involvement in the literary marketplace is of course to suggest that his use of the Antarctic in Pym was an attempt to create fictions to meet contemporary demand, what Burton Pollin calls “a very vendible piece of literary merchandise, drawn from a variety of sources” (“Poe’s Narrative” 38). In relation to this, Alexander Hammond observes that the move to Harpers is in fact a “transfer, in mid-composition, from one marketplace to another” (154). The target audience of the SLM was a relatively homogenous group of subscribers, whereas Harpers’ targeted a more “general reader in a much more profit-oriented marketplace” (Hammond 154). It is after this transfer that Poe’s narrative takes a turn to the south. Occupying the unfamiliar position of a novelist at the mercy of the market, Poe thus attempts to capitalize on the contemporary fad for Antarctic exploration.

The sources Poe draws on reflect, and probably decide to some degree, the new narrative direction into the Antarctic; in particular Morrell’s Narrative of Four Voyages and Jeremiah N. Reynolds’s Address.8 But influences can also be readily detected from John Lloyd Stephens’s Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land (1837) and Alexander Keith’s Evidence of the Truths of the Christian Religion (Am. ed. 1836). Common to all of them, as Whalen observes, was the fact that they were published by Harpers (163). As concerns Stephens’s Incidents, Whalen has found intriguing correspondence between the author and the publisher that demonstrates Harpers’ pragmatic approach to the literary market. Initially, Stephens did not want to write the book since he had not taken enough notes during his travels. Harpers’ response is a telling indication of the authenticity of the booming genre of travel writing: “We have got plenty of books about those countries. You just pick out as many as you want, and [...] you can dish up something” (qtd. in Whalen 163). As a further illustration of this, it may be added that Morrell’s Narrative was in fact ghostwritten by the dramatist, journalist, and poet Samuel Woodworth (Pollin, “Narrative of Morrell” 168). Pollin also gives an account of the accolades with which Morrell’s book was initially received (“Narrative of Morrell” 162-63). One effect of Poe’s extensive borrowing is of course that such sources lent some degree of

8 Daniel J. Tynan has added Reynolds’s Voyage of the Potomac as a probable influence; and Richard Kopley argues that Poe drew on Reynolds’s “Leaves from an Unpublished Journal” for central scenes in the Antarctic portion of Pym (212).
authenticity to the novel in its realistic descriptions and history of Antarctic exploration. However, in consideration of Harpers' pragmatism in the case of Stephens and Morrell, it is also probable “that Harpers encouraged or at least condoned Poe's extensive borrowings from Morrell's narrative, for this would ‘fill out' Pym with market-tested material that the firm already owned” (Whalen 163). Poe thus found himself involved in a game of maximized profits by recycled intellectual material. And it was an extensive recycling, either through verbatim quotations, both acknowledged and unacknowledged, or extensive paraphrasing. Pollin has collated the source material that scholars have been able to identify, and estimates that the novel consists of about one fifth derivative material, mainly in its Antarctic portion (“Sources” 17).

The imaginative potential of the Antarctic was by no means a given for Poe, however. In 1836, one year before the publication of the first installments of “Pym,” he reviews a recent American edition of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe. Poe reminisces nostalgically over the wondrous reading of his boyhood, lamenting how the world had since depleted its imaginative territory:

Alas! the days of desolate islands are no more! “Nothing farther,” as Vapid says, “can be done in that line.” Wo, henceforward, to the Defoe who shall prate to us of “undiscovered bournes.” There is positively not a square inch of new ground for any future Selkirk. Neither in the Indian, in the Pacific, nor in the Atlantic, has he a shadow of hope. The Southern Ocean has been incontinently ransacked, and in the North—Scoresby, Franklin, Parry, Ross, Ross & Co. have been little better than so many salt water Paul Prys. (Review of Defoe)

Evidently, during the following year he reconsidered and came to the conclusion that the Antarctic still had sufficient mystique to provide an imaginative surface for projection that would be marketable. In little over a year, he moved from describing the Antarctic as being “incontinently ransacked” to teasing the reader in Pym with the “opportunity of solving the great problem in regard to an Antarctic continent [...] one of the most intensely exciting secrets” (17.12). We can see the imprints in Pym of two momentous events in the intervening period that explain this reconfiguration of the Antarctic: Reynolds's address to the House of Representatives on the subject of a South-Sea expedition in April 1836, and the passing of a bill to make such an expedition a reality a month later. In locating the action of Pym, and “MS” before that, in the Antarctic and making titillating promises of a solution of the Antarctic enigma, Poe channels a larger national discourse of Antarctic exploration.

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As has been discussed at length in previous chapters, Antarctic exploration was mainly for commercial purposes, though, as we saw in Reynolds’s address, the project was also construed as an international contest to uncover one of the greatest mysteries of the times. By charting the Antarctic and settling the question of the existence of a continent, the U.S. would make its first major contribution to the accumulated knowledge of the world, thereby effectively placing itself on the world map as a nation of international import. Immediately before he started writing Pym, Poe showed that he was deeply interested in the realization of the U.S. Exploring Expedition—which was at this point already a political fact, since a bill was passed to outfit it in May 1836. In two lengthy articles he promoted Reynolds’s views on the goals of the expedition. In the first, reviewing Reynolds’s report for the Committee of Naval Affairs (1836), Poe appeals to patriotic sentiments to argue the case that the expedition must be properly conducted and awarded sufficient funds:

> It is our duty, holding as we do a high rank in the scale of nations, to contribute a large share to that aggregate of useful knowledge, which is the common property of all. […] Let it not be said of us, in future ages, that we ingloriously availed ourselves of a stock of scientific knowledge, to which we had not contributed our quota […] We have followed in the rear of discovery, when a sense of our moral and political responsibility should have impelled us in its van. (1231-32).

We can see that Poe, via Reynolds, has adopted the rhetoric of John Quincy Adams, who argued that America had benefited from the scientific improvements of the European nations, and therefore “owe for it a sacred debt, not only of gratitude, but of equal or proportional exertion in the same common cause” (qtd. in Watts and Israel 58). Some months later—in fact in the same issue of the SLM that featured the first installment of “Pym”—Poe wrote a laudatory review of Reynolds’s Address. Poe continues along similar patriotic lines as the previous article: “In matters of mere nautical or geographical science, our government has been hitherto supine, and it is due to the national character that in these respects something should be done. We have now a chance of redeeming ourselves in the Southern Sea. Here is a wide field open and nearly untouched” (“South-Sea Expedition” 69). Antarctic exploration becomes a project of national distinction, a means of becoming accepted in the community of nations—a 19th-century version of the cold war space race where the dignity and maybe even the identity of a whole nation depended on the claim of primacy.
By this time, Reynolds had become something of a front figure of Antarctic exploration. In fact, Poe identifies the whole idea of the U.S. Exploring Expedition with Reynolds: “He is the originator, the persevering and indomitable advocate, the life, the soul of the design” (“South Sea Expedition” 68). Poe had been an avid Reynolds supporter from the beginning and he would continue to defend him later on as well, after Reynolds had been dismissed from the expedition. In “A Chapter on Autography” (1841), he writes that Reynolds “occupied at one time a distinguished position in the eye of the public on account of his great and laudable exertions to get up the American South Polar expedition, from a personal participation in which he was most shamefully excluded.” As late as 1843, when reviewing a brief preliminary account of the returned U.S. Exploring Expedition, he was still championing Reynolds’s cause, obstinately renaming it “the Reynolds Expedition of Discovery” and condemning “the scandalous chicanery practiced in the outfit of the Expedition […] to thrust from all participation in the enterprise the very man who gave it origin, and who cherished it to consummation” (Review of Brief Account 164). The reason that I have lingered on Reynolds is of course because Poe drew heavily on him for Pym, both with and without acknowledging his source. When he is introduced into the novel, Poe pays him homage, echoing the words from the review: “Mr. J. N. Reynolds, whose great exertions and perseverance have at length succeeded in getting set on foot a national expedition, partly for the purpose of exploring these regions” (16.3). Robert L. Rhea has demonstrated that almost half of chapter 16 is derived from Reynolds. Daniel J. Tynan has traced significant influence also to Reynolds’s Voyage of the Potomac (35-36). Not quoted directly by Poe, but certainly relevant to Pym, is Reynolds’s bold assertion, “That the nineteenth degree, or the South Pole, may be reached by the navigator, is our deliberate opinion (unless intercepted by land)” (97). This possibility is in fact the basic premise of Poe’s novel.

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9 By a strange twist of fate, Reynolds has also been integrated into the legend of Poe’s mysterious death. As the legend has it, during his final night, Poe repeatedly called out, “Reynolds!” This has led scholars and biographers to make imaginative connections between Poe’s standing on the brink of life and death and the Antarctic boundary in Poe’s fictions. Arthur Hobson Quinn, for instance, writes of Poe’s cries for Reynolds: “Perhaps to his dim and tortured brain, he seemed to be on the brink of a great descending circle sweeping down like the phantom ship in the Manuscript Found in a Bottle” […]. It would have been natural enough for his favorite theme, the terror of the opening chasm, to lead his thoughts to that other story, Arthur Gordon Pym, and from that to Jeremiah Reynolds, projector of the voyages to the South Seas, whose very language he had used in that tale” (640). William T. Bandy has argued convincingly, however, that this persistent myth is only just a myth and originated in an erroneous account of Poe’s death from Dr. Moran, who was the only one present at the deathbed (32-33). According to Bandy, it is even uncertain whether Poe had even met Reynolds. Robert F. Aime and Aubrey Starke both admit there is no record to prove it, but think it likely that they knew each other nevertheless. But Poe did at least imply in his review of the South-Sea address that he was personally acquainted with Reynolds.
At the very beginning of the introduction, I discussed the quotation in which Pym alludes to the “great problem of an Antarctic continent,” and claims that he had “been instrumental, however remotely, in opening to the eye of science one of the most intensely exciting secrets which has ever engaged its attention” (17.12). I read this as an intertextual haunting that reveals a national anxiety of inferiority with respect to the former colonial parent. This intellectual conflict with the British resurfaces at a few instances in the novel. At one point, Pym even takes direct issue with the most honored English scientific institution of all, the Royal Geographical Society, on the interpretation of the discoveries made by John Briscoe:

These particulars being made known to the Royal Geographical Society of London, the conclusion was drawn by that body “that there is a continuous tract of land extending from 47° 30′ E. to 69° 29′ W. longitude, running the parallel of from sixty-six to sixty-seven degrees south latitude.” In respect to this conclusion Mr. Reynolds observes, “In the correctness of it we by no means concur; nor do the discoveries of Briscoe warrant any such inference. It was within these limits that Weddell proceeded south on a meridian to the east of Georgia, Sandwich Land, and the South Orkney and Shetland Islands.” My own experience will be found to testify most directly to the falsity of the conclusion arrived at by the society. (16.10)

It is no wonder that Pym sides with Reynolds since Poe derived much of the chapter directly from Reynolds’s Address. But the point is that this makes explicit how Poe participates in a larger debate on the nature of the Antarctic—a fictional continuation of his two articles on Reynolds. For Reynolds’s vision of the American field of fame, it was vital to refute the idea that the Antarctic was occluded by a landmass. Extrapolating from this, Poe keeps his Antarctic seas open, and takes the opportunity to provide fictional support for Reynolds against the British. Towards the end of the novel, Pym remarks on the open polar waters they have encountered: “In coming from the northward in the Jane Guy we had been gradually leaving behind us the severest regions of ice—this, however little it may be in accordance with the generally-received notions respecting the Antarctic, was a fact experience would not permit us to deny” (24.1). It is probably no coincidence either that, while the Antarctic journey is undertaken on a British ship, it is Pym’s boldness and perseverance that convinces Captain Guy to press on, despite warning signs of ice and scurvy: “I confess that I felt myself bursting with indignation at the timid and ill-timed suggestions of our commander. I believe, indeed, that what I could not refrain
from saying to him on this head had the effect of inducing him to push on” (17.12). Or, indeed, that the whole British crew is slain in the attacks by the Tsalalian natives, but the two Americans are saved, as if by providence.

As he wrote *Pym*, Poe was expecting the much publicized U.S. Exploring Expedition to set sail any day, but the departure was delayed. Worthy of notice is that neither of the two original installments in the *SLM* contains any reference to Antarctic exploration; that is an entirely new plotline introduced in the novel. It is unclear exactly when the novel was finished, but in May 1837, Harpers’ announced that it was “nearly ready for publication” and on June 10 the title was registered for copyright, so it would seem likely that the bulk would have been ready by then (qtd. in Ridgely “Growth of the Text” 35). The exact reason why the publication was delayed for a year is impossible to tell. But it is known that the financial panic in 1837 forced the publisher to put on hold any books that were not sure to yield immediate returns, and *Pym* might have fit that bill (Ridgely “Growth of the Text” 35). However, Ridgely suggests another possibility: that Poe and/or the publisher planned “to tie *Pym* in with the excitement created by the formation of the United States Exploring Expedition” (“Growth of the Text” 30). The novel was eventually published in July 1838 and the U.S. Exploring Expedition departed only a month after. The synchronicity is certainly suggestive, especially for a book that seems to have been ready for the press for over a year. Either alternative, or a combination of both, seems viable. At the very least, it can be said that the novel taps into the anticipation stirred by that massive public event. Hence the author of the final Note regrets the loss of the final chapters in the accident that killed Pym since “the statements of the author in relation to these regions may shortly be verified or contradicted by means of the governmental expedition now preparing for the Southern Ocean” (Note.3).10 It is impossible to ascertain how

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10 On July 19, 1838, the same month *Pym* was published and exactly one month before the departure of the U.S. Exploring Expedition, Poe again corresponded with James Kirke Paulding. At this point, however, Paulding had been appointed Secretary of the Navy. This put him in a central administrative role in the organization of the Exploring Expedition; in fact, he was the one who issued its final orders. The previous years had been a low point in Poe’s career and he wants to show Paulding that he has made amends in regard to his intemperance: “I have been fully awakened to the impolicy and degradation of the course hitherto pursued, and have abandoned the vice altogether.” This in order to be able to make the request that occasioned the letter:

> Could I obtain the most unimportant Clerkship in your gift—any thing, by sea or land—to relieve me from the miserable life of literary drudgery to which I now, with a breaking heart, submit, and for which neither my temper nor my abilities have fitted me, I would never again repine at any dispensation of God. I feel that I could then, (having something beyond mere literature as a profession) quickly elevate myself to the station in society which is my due. (Poe to Paulding July 19, 1838)

Whether he pressed his former acquaintance for an actual position in relation to the expedition, is impossible to tell.

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strong public sentiments had become on account of the expedition, although Poe claimed that the “public mind is at length thoroughly alive on the subject” ("South-Sea Expedition" 69). At least his own excitement was unmistakable: “We look forward to this finale—to the published record of the expedition—with an intensity of eager expectation, which we cannot think we have ever experienced before” (Poe, “South-Sea Expedition” 70).

That either Poe or the publisher considered the Antarctic material to be the main selling point of the novel is evident from the title page, with its enticing mix of mutiny, shipwreck, famine, rescue, and massacre, in combination with a promise of a record-breaking incursion into the Antarctic. Even though only the final twelve chapters are actually enacted in the Antarctic region, this is what is emphasized in the synoptic title and the preface. It should also be noted that the final promise of “incredible adventures and discoveries still farther south” is never actually fulfilled, an odd instance of false advertising that can perhaps be understood in this context of Antarctic commercial potential:

THE NARRATIVE
OF
ARTHUR GORDON PYM.
OF NANTUCKET.

COMPRISING THE DETAILS OF A MUTINY AND ATROCIOUS BUTCHERY
ON BOARD THE AMERICAN BRIG GRampus, ON HER WAY TO
THE SOUTH SEAS, IN THE MONTH OF JUNE, 1827.

WITH AN ACCOUNT OF THE RECAPTURE OF THE VESSEL BY THE
SURVIVORS; THEIR SHIPWRECK AND SUBSEQUENT HORRIBLE
SUFFERINGS FROM FAMINE; THEIR DELIVERANCE BY
MEANS OF THE BRITISH SCHOONER JANE GUY; THE
BRIEF CRUISE OF THIS LATTER VESSEL IN THE
ANTARCTIC OCEAN; HER CAPTURE, AND THE
MASSACRE OF HER CREW AMONG A
GROUP OF ISLANDS IN THE

EIGHTY-FOURTH PARALLEL OF SOUTHERN LATITUDE;

TOGETHER WITH THE INCREDIBLE ADVENTURES AND
DISCOVERIES

STILL FARTHER SOUTH

TO WHICH THAT DISTRESSING CALAMITY GAVE RISE.

Pollin observes that the title as a whole is redolent of Morrell’s A Narrative of Four Voyages (215n), which is organized in a similar typographical fashion, contains similar wordings, and also pairs voyages in the South Seas with “new and valuable discoveries, including the Massacre Islands, where Fifteen of the author’s crew were massacred and eaten by cannibals.” Apart from these
specifics, this is a fairly generic title of the period. As a matter of fact, the first edition of Pym had fourteen advertisements for other titles from Harpers, and
seven of these (Morrell is one) use the same title format, i.e. A Narrative of . . .
(see Pollin 215n). These titles were usually non-fictional, however, which
prompted a contemporary reviewer of Pym to point out that despite its
“circumstantial and veracious looking length of title, the work is all fiction”
(Review in New York Review 51). With reference to the ending of “MS,” Hauss
observes also of the title page of Pym that “the poetic configuration of lines on
the page mimics a maelstrom’s terrible funneling” (149).

Drawing on the Antarctic for material, Poe turns his narrative into
speculative fiction of the kind that extrapolates from empirical knowledge and
projects this beyond the point of the already known. Poe employed the same
strategy elsewhere as well, for example in “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains”
(1843), with the difference that in “A Tale” the uncharted territory is not
geographical but the human psyche. Dr. Templeton prefaces his revelations in a
way that places them within the realm of possibility: “Let us suppose only, that
the soul of the man of to-day is upon the verge of some stupendous psychal
discoveries. Let us content ourselves with this supposition” (Poe, “Tale” 948).
Antarctica was also such a space coming into being, and its imminent
exploration was even more momentous for being thought of as the last of the
earthly frontiers.

When Poe plots the itinerary for the Jane Guy below the Antarctic Circle,
his deliberately dovetails with recent advances in Antarctic exploration. The ship
approaches the Antarctic along the 43rd western meridian (18.2), approximately
the same course pursued by Weddell when he managed to get further south
than anyone before, passing through what has since been known as the Weddell
Sea. It was of course impossible for Poe to know that the latitudes the Jane Guy
reaches along this longitude lie well onto the Ronne Ice Shelf or even the
Antarctic mainland. Weddell’s account of open waters had been crucial to both
Symmes and Reynolds in rewriting the Antarctic landscape in opposition to
Cook’s. Morrell confirmed Weddell’s observations when he entered the
Weddell Sea as far 70°14’S along the same meridian, almost equaling Cook’s
furthest south, while finding open and temperate waters. Morrell even claimed
he “should then have been able, without the least doubt, to penetrate as far as
the eighty-fifth degree of south latitude” if shortage of fuel and provisions hade
not stopped him (67). Given the prospect of potentially navigable waters, there
was room for a national project of Antarctic exploration, and Poe sees the
speculative potential in this, sending his own fictional ship along the same route

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to surpass even Weddell's and Morrell's points of return. Morrell's claim that he would have been able to reach at least 85°S might have influenced the location of Tsalal at 84°S, which is also highlighted on the title page. This would be unexplored territory but, according to Morrell's authority, still within the limits of the verisimilar. It is below 84°S that “the incredible adventures and discoveries” of the title page are to be found.

**A Region of Novelty and Wonder**

Poe's version of the Antarctic, especially the Tsalalian episode, is a virtual palimpsest of layers upon layers of mythological material. As Walter E. Bezanson remarks, the “long episode on the tropical polar island” seems to be “a curious melange” of primitive savages, pseudo-archeology, and American racial stereotypes (169). With the profusion of critical interpretations of different mythical themes that have been suggested without any one of them amounting to an exhaustive reading, I think it is safe to assume that the text precludes such closure. As Whalen notes, “Symbolic meaning presupposes the existence of a relatively stable interpretive context or tradition” (177), but Poe's novel signals so many connections that interpretation short-circuits by overdetermination, becoming what John Carlos Rowe calls “a machine for the production of surplus signifiers” (117). It seems as if the function of the profuse mythological material is to suggest, in Pym's phrase, “a region of novelty and wonder” (24.4). In the same manner as Tsalal is littered with debris that might be ruins, and covered with fragmentary writings, the text itself is loaded with fragments of myth, which readers have tried to locate and identify with various degrees of success.

Many readers have found biblical allusions throughout the Antarctic portions of the narrative. Most suggestive are the engraved message on the wall in the Tsalalian cave windings (23.7-10), and the mock-biblical final sentence of the novel: “I have graven it within the hills, and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock” (Note.9). As Pollin points out (362n), there is a vague echo of Job 19:23-24 here: “Oh that my words were now written! oh that they were printed in a book! / That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock for ever!” Moreover, the cries of both the birds and the natives in the Antarctic, “Tekeli-li,” has been seen as a reference to the writing that appears on the wall at the feast of king Belshazzar: “TEKEL; Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting” (Dan. 5:27). This would then signify a test of worthiness of some kind, which the Tsalalians fail since Nu-Nu dies before they enter the
polar chasm. As a further biblical reference, Pollin has suggested that the “serpents of a formidable aspect” to which the natives pay no attention (19.3), indicate that Tsalal is an “inverted Eden” (325n). During the writing of Pym, Poe reviewed Stephens’s Incidents, which brings up several pertinent points for the novel. Here Poe finds that the biblical regions Stephens visits—partly at the “Lower Cataracts” of the Nile (353)—are providentially preserved in order to remain a stable point of reference for “the important purposes of biblical elucidation” and in the recreation of our origins (355). As Richard Wilbur remarks, Tsalal carries faint traces of this biblical mythology (xv). Both the arrested development of the natives as well as the surroundings are reminiscent of the biblical prophecy of the divine curse on Edom, or Idumea (Isaiah 34:10-11), which Poe quotes: “from generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever. / But the cormorant and the bittern shall possess it; the owl also and the raven shall dwell in it: and he shall stretch out upon it the line of confusion, and the stones of emptiness” (Review of Stephens 358). On Tsalal, it will be remembered, Pym and Peters encounter a “large black bird of the bittern species” (22.8, 23.1).

In the review of Stephens, Poe also cites another reviewer who confirms his contention that biblical travels like Stephens’s provide “graphic descriptions, ground plans, and elevations showing the actual existence of all the heretofore vague denunciations of God against Edom” (Review of Stephens 357n). The identification of the Tsalalians with the Edomites (Wilbur xv), or at least their kinship, becomes more evident as Pym learns that Tsalal is only one island in a group, subjected to the rule of a “common king, named Tsalmon or Pashmon” (24.5). Edom was a vassal state to Israel during Solomon’s reign and thus came under his common rule. In addition to this, Tynan quotes a passage in Reynolds as a parallel to Pym: “The idea of Sumatra being the land of Ophir, whither Solomon sent his fleets for the precious metals, is too vague even for conjecture, and the mountain bearing the name of the island was doubleless given to it by modern writers. In the original Hebrew, the word signifies ashbel” (Reynolds Voyage 132-33). Tynan suggests that this might be the origin of the mysterious powder at the bottom of the Tsalalian chasms, as well as the ashes that fall at the polar chasm (36). It does not seem unlikely that some such reference is being made since the inclusion of the name of the Tsalalian king comes at a very suggestive moment in the narrative, and is foregrounded in a way that clearly provokes interpretation.

One mythological subtext that, to my knowledge, has not been explored involves the traces of giants in the text. The most obvious instance is the
“shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men” that appears at the polar chasm (24.14). But the first reference might be in the first sighting of land in unknown geographical territory, when the ship notes a “low rocky islet” in the vicinity of Tsalal: “In approaching it from the northward, a singular ledge of rock is seen projecting into the sea, and bearing strong resemblance to corded bales of cotton” (17.10). The description and choice of simile seems too pregnant with meaning and too foregrounded to be taken simply at face value. Consequently, several critics have argued along the lines of Jared Gardner, who states that the cotton simile underscores that “this south is meant to allegorize an American South” (146).11 With this as a point of departure, a diversified range of critical readings construes the Tsalalian episode as an allegory of American race relations. Gardner, for instance, reads the episode as a nightmare “vision of the future South” where “a race war of apocalyptic proportions” is enacted (146). As will be discussed below Pym is very much about race relations, but this passage need not be limited to the American South or slavery. I would like to suggest an additional cultural reference that might have struck a contemporary reader, and thereby make an effort to integrate it into the theme of gigantism that I have started to trace. This passage might be the first in a series revolving around ruins of gigantic structures. The combination of “a singular ledge of rock […] projecting into the sea” and the simile “corded bales of cotton” might allude to a much-discussed geological formation whose nature intrigued the early 19th century: the Giant’s Causeway in Ireland (ill. 4).

11 For instance, Sidney Kaplan (xvii) and Kenneth Silverman (135). Numerous others see the Tsalalian episode as an allegory of racial conflict in the American South (see Harvey 144-50). Leslie Fiedler, for instance, professes not to be deluded by Poe’s hoax in Pym, in which the voyage goes “not to the South Pole, but to the American South” (398).
The resemblance between cotton bales and the Giant’s Causeway did occur to the editor of the Knickerbocker Magazine in 1846, who used the same simile when describing a bustling urban scenery, with “streets strewed with cotton-bales, placed in just such harmonious confusion as the Giant’s Causeway in Ireland” (“Gossip” 268). The Giant’s Causeway was a common feature in magazines in the early 19th century, together with similar geological formations in the U.S. The 1816 article “Basaltic Columns” in The North American Review, for example, makes the following comparison: “On the west side of Mount Holyoke, three miles from Northampton, is a series of basaltic columns, in some measure like those of the celebrated Giant’s Causeway, in Ireland” (337). The fact that a domestic natural feature is referred to by way of a foreign one indicates how familiar the Giant’s Causeway was at the time. Poe may thus have been acquainted with it from any number of sources. According to the legend that has given the Causeway its name, it is the ruin of a bridge between Ireland and Scotland, built by the Irish giant Fionn mac Cumhaill. Poe’s use of it here would then imply that they have now entered a region that was previously inhabited by a race of giants.

That there were regions of giants was a persistent myth, especially in Patagonia, where Magellan claimed to have encountered them in the 16th century (Lamb 46). In 1766, Commodore John Byron (grandfather of the poet)

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12 One certifiable contact is through Richard Adams Locke’s “Moon Hoax,” where some geological formations on the moon are compared to those at Staffa in Scotland, identical to those found in the Giant’s Causeway in Ireland. The publication of this piece coincided with “Hans Pfaal,” prompting Poe to prove that his tale was not derivative of Locke’s by adding a long note with a discussion of how Locke’s hoax failed (428-33).
stirred a controversy when he returned from a voyage to Patagonia with reports of men of “gigantic stature” who “seemed to realize the tales of monsters in a humans shape” (Hawkesworth 34). In the preface to the 1785 edition of the narrative of Byron’s voyage, the compiler, James Hawkesworth, sees fit to defend the proposition by bringing “together the whole of the evidence on the question” in a review of the giant tradition (x). Together with the veracious accounts of Byron and his officers, he feels that this “will put an end to all the doubts that have been hitherto entertained of their existence” (xx). When James King prefaces his compilation of the narrative of James Cook’s last voyage, he is positive that the existence of a race of Patagonian giants, “whose stature considerably exceeds that of the bulk of mankind, will no longer be doubted or disbelieved” (qtd. in Lamb 47). Poe would certainly have encountered the debate on Patagonian giants in either King’s preface to Cook’s journals, or in Morrell’s Narrative. Morrell’s theory is that the Patagonians were indeed once a gigantic race, but that they had degenerated by being oppressed by European conquerors: “They are now but the scattered fragments of a colossal fabric—the ruins of a pastoral nation” (Morrell 248). He claims to have visited gravesites where he has seen the skeletal remains of such giants. Anticipating that this account will be questioned, he remarks:

I sincerely regret that after thus violating the sanctity of their final resting-place, I had not silenced skepticism by taking possession of one of these gigantic skeletons, and bringing it to the United States. Such an acquisition to a museum would be a very suitable accompaniment to the mammoth, and such a one shall be exhibited if I ever visit Patagonia again. (Morrell 248).

We are reminded of the contemporary interest in gigantic creatures that we saw in Symzonia, where Seaborn had similar regrets for not being able to bring a mammoth skeleton back to an American museum. But it is when Pym and Peters emerge on the Tsalalai plateau that the most suggestive instance of gigantism occurs:

The place was one of singular wildness, and its aspect brought to my mind the descriptions given by travellers of those dreary regions marking the site of degraded Babylon. Not to speak of the ruins of the disrupted cliff, which formed a chaotic barrier in the vista to the northward, the surface of the ground in every other direction was strewn with huge tumuli, apparently the wreck of some gigantic structures of art; although, in detail, no

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13 Byron’s account of the giants was ridiculed by many. Horace Walpole, for instance, wrote a satire called An Account of the Giants Lately Discovered (1766).
In this region they also encounter “immense scorpions” (23 bis.5). Poe’s insistence on the proportions in these cases seems significant. Pym’s hesitancy about whether these structures are man made seems to be because there are two possible interpretations. Either they are natural formations that resemble human artwork, or they are of such immense proportions that they cannot be artifacts on a human scale. This is linked to the confusion whether the cave writings are to be regarded as natural features or meaningful artifacts. Pym’s reference to the “site of degraded Babylon” implies that the gigantic structures might be the vestiges of an ancient civilization. Add to this what appear to be colossal rock carvings that are so uniform that neither Pym nor Peters “believe it altogether the work of nature” (23.7). Poe apparently wants to make certain that he gets this latter point across to the reader since this idea is repeated with variations several times: the caves are outlined with “perfect regularity” and the walls were “entirely uniform in substance, in colour, and in lateral direction, the material being a very black and shining granite, and the distance between the two sides, at all points facing each other, exactly twenty yards” (23.7). Poe seems to imply that Tsalal exhibits vestigial evidence of prior inhabitants who displayed a higher cultural level than the present ones. He seems to want to carry the idea across that the Antarctic has an ancient history, only visible through tracings.

There is a classical account of gigantism that bears resemblance to certain aspects of Pym: the story of the war of the giants in Ovid’s Metamorphoses. The episode relates how the earth used to be populated by giants, who challenged the gods by building a pathway to Olympus “by piling mountain on mountain” (Ovid 12). But the giants are punished for their hubris by Jupiter who buries them underneath their mountains:

When, crushed by the mass they had raised, those fearsome bodies lay prostrate, Mother Earth, as the story continues, now steeped and drenched in the blood of her offspring, gave fresh life to the seething liquid. Unwilling that all the fruits of her womb should be lost and forgotten, she turned their blood into

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14 Pollin points out in a note to the novel that this might be borrowed from Keith’s Evidence where it is stated that the degraded biblical region of Edom, or Idumea, is swarming with “enormous scorpions” (347n).
15 Carol Peirce and Alexander G. Rose III suggest that Pym is modeled on Arthurian legend, and that “Tsalal may be the once-fertile wasteland itself, degenerating with a degenerating king, no longer aware of the meaning of its stones or of their connection to the White Goddess and to the Grail” (70). They associate the “huge tumuli” Pym and Peters find with “ancient Stonehenge” (72). This illustrates that while readers may differ in specifics, the general direction of the interpretations are basically the same.
human form; but the new race also looked on the gods with contempt. Their passionate lust for ferocious violence and slaughter prevailed. You’d have known they were born of blood.

(Ovid 12-13)

It is no far stretch to compare the spawn of the blood of the giants, prone to violence, with the Tsalalian natives as Pym describes them: “the most barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty wretches that ever contaminated the face of the globe” (20.9). Their determination to destroy anything that is white is equally explained as a constitutional hatred, if we accept the analogy. Critics have read the “singular character” of the purple Tsalalian water as referring to blood of some kind (Wilbur xvi, Bezanson 169). Overall, commentaries have been profuse on the topic of the water, which is only to be expected as Pym signals that it carries an important clue to the subsequent events: “The phenomena of this water formed the first definite link in that vast chain of apparent miracles with which I was destined to be at length encircled” (18.9). The phrase “first definite link,” however, seems to have as its sole purpose to mock attempts at definitive readings.

Moreover, in Ovid, when the gods have quenched the giants’ insurrection, they retreat to their dwelling in heaven, which has to be approached by “the Milky Way, well known for its brilliant whiteness” (13). During the final stage of Pym’s journey towards the mysterious, God-like figure, the water becomes progressively more milky: “its colour was undergoing a rapid change, being no longer transparent, but of a milky consistency and hue” (24.6), “its milky hue was more evident than ever” (24.9), until “from out of the milky depths of the ocean a luminous glare arose” (24.13). All these faint traces of mythology, even if they are not specific enough to allow for definitive links, seem designed to suggest an underlying or prior narrative that portrays the Tsalalian natives as innately lusting for blood, accursed to reenact an archetypal opposition between good and evil, white and black. In infusing his narrative with such a rich subtext, Poe gives the stereotypical, realistic reports of South-Sea islanders a mythical dimension that indicates that he has decided to depart radically from the conventional voyage narrative. The Tsalalians are set off from realistic, historical time, part of a mythical, cyclic time.

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16 Walter E. Bezanson, for unclear reasons, thinks that “the use of the word ‘veins’ to describe its peculiar structure suggests a fantasy on negro blood” (169).
Arrested development

The representation of the Tsalalians as vicious brutes, despite its comic-book one-dimensionality, is a fairly conventional depiction of South-Sea islanders of this period, only transplanted to a tropical island in the Antarctic. As Whalen remarks, critics have read the treacherous Tsalalians as evoking historical Southern slave insurrections in the 1830s, especially Nat Turner’s; he comments on this that it “is an intriguing suggestion, but it must also be recalled that organized treachery by South Sea natives was standard fare in exploration narratives” (178). The literature of exploration abounds with examples of tribes seemingly living in a state of arrested development, and, what is more important, who are potentially violent. As Pollin points out, Morrell’s Narrative has certainly inspired many of the events on Tsalal, especially Morrell’s account of the events at Massacre Islands where the natives attempt a “diabolical scheme of treachery” (“Narrative of Morrell” 164-65; Morrell 413). The synoptic title of Morrell’s chapter underscores the insidious nature of South-Sea islanders:

Massacre Islands—Commence building a House—A Garden planted—Friendship of Hennec, the Island Chief—Friendly Disposition of the Natives—Precautions against Surprise—Symptoms of Perfidy, Duplicity, and Dissimulation—Drawn into an Ambuscade—Disarm a Host—Amity and Confidence restored—Specious but hollow Professions of Good-will—The Alarm—The Massacre—The Battle—The Rescue—Cannibalism—Deplorable Situation of the Survivors—Sail from the Islands—Arrive at Manila. (403)

With only minor alterations, this could have served as a recapitulation of the Tsalalian episode, with its duplicitous islanders who secretly plot the destruction of the whites.

Morrell is far from an isolated example of such representations of South-Sea islanders. In October 1837 The North American Review, for instance, carried an article directed towards the organization of the U.S. Exploring Expedition that was then in its preparatory stages. It emphasized the need for heavily armed ships in order to rescue Americans stranded on South-Sea islands with hostile natives, a “prime object of the voyage, —we do not know if it should not take the precedence of all others” (371). According to the article, the following was what could be expected of the natives of the islands of the South Seas:

It is on the small and scattered islands where shipwrecks are most frequent, that those frightful examples of cruelty occur, of which
we sometimes hear. The natives, commonly few in number, are there sunk in the lowest degradation; the social feelings, which are always in some degree excited in large aggregations of men, are in them weakened, if not entirely dormant. No right, but that of the strongest, prevails; and the moral sentiments, with the exception of some dim glimmering of religious feeling, appear to be utterly extinct. The fate of the captive in such hands is of course deplorable. [...] It must be remembered that most of the larger islands are densely inhabited by a treacherous and warlike race, who unite to all the craft and cruelty of our own aborigines, a shrewdness and intrepidity which the latter do not possess.

(372-73)

Indeed, in the discourse of exploration, the unpredictability of the different tribes of South-Sea natives was the subject of a great deal of concern, even to the point of paranoia. When Reynolds catalogued South-Sea islands in his report in 1828, a typical entry would read: “Savage island. The natives are warlike; great caution necessary in landing” (“Report” 217). Reynolds also stressed the mission of a national exploring expedition “to succour the unfortunate of every nation, who may be found on desolate islands, or among hordes of savages” (Address 74). Reynolds told the House that “The oft told stories of mariners shipwrecked in the South Seas are no fictions. Would to Heaven that they were!” and proceeds to catalogue such instances (Address 46). Some involve treacherous natives, such as the “recent and most distressing murder” of almost the entire crew of the ship Awashonks by natives of the Fiji Islands, who behave “in the most friendly manner” one moment only to turn hostile and murderous the next (Reynolds, Address 48). The moral of the story is clear, as the Nantucket Enquirer reports the event: these “lawless, perfidious, and incensed barbarians” cannot be trusted (qtd. in Reynolds 47n). Reynolds claims that the problem is so common that “[a]lmost every arrival from the Pacific brings some melancholy intelligence of shipwreck, mutiny, or massacre, among the South Sea islands” (Address 51).

It is against racial representations such as this, marked by a fear of the radically different and incomprehensible, that Poe’s natives should be read. Accounts such as these inspire Pym’s romantic visions “of shipwreck and famine; of death or captivity among barbarian hordes; of a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears, upon some gray and desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown” (2.1). In Symzonia, the intercultural encounter was with a more highly developed community. As Gardner observes, Tsalal is its exact opposite (146). Both, however, share the condensation and
confirmation of the issue of racialization. In Glasberg’s phrasing, both Pym and Symzonia “race” the pole, using the blank space of the Antarctic “to invent races and racial genealogies” (127-28).

Tsalal and Symzonia also have in common that they seem to be static societies where no development takes place. But the similarities end there: Symzonia is a highly developed utopian community whereas the Tsalalian community seems trapped in a primitive state of nature. This might also be suggested in the name of the principal Tsalalian village, “Kloak-Kloak,” which Pollin observes might be “intended to make an ironic point about a village outside of time” (322n). The primitive state of the Tsalalians is signaled in a variety of ways. The Tsalalian langue, for instance, seems to be preserved in a natural state. Their cries of “Tekeli-li!” upon seeing anything white (22.12-3, 24.7) is echoed by the “pallidly white birds” at the polar cataract (24.14) and the ts phoneme, as in Tsalal, “was given with a prolonged hissing sound […] precisely the same with the note of the black bittern” (24.5). Significantly, Pym and Peters whose language is more cultivated find this sound “impossible to imitate” (24.5). The philologist Charles Anthon—with whom Poe corresponded when preparing his review of Stephens’s Incidents—wrote about a proto-language, finding strong indications that “a primitive and common language must at one time or another have existed,” which would be instantly recognizable “by its numerous instances of what grammarians term onomatopoeia, or the adaptation of sound to sense” (qtd. in Whalen 171). We cannot know for sure whether Poe had Anthon’s or similar theories in mind when he described the Tsalalian language, but the implication is clear nevertheless that their language has never progressed beyond a primitive state of nature. The Tsalalians’ use of dugout canoes is similarly associated with the most rudimentary stages of human development, and identified as one of the more basic skills acquired by early humans, enabling them to disperse by sea.

Charles Darwin writes, for instance, about the canoes of the Fuegians, who are generally identified as the lowest human beings in the literature of exploration:

“their skill in some respects may be compared to the instinct of animals; for it is not improved by experience: the canoe, their most ingenious work, poor as it

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17 Bailey has suggested that the Tsalalians could be the Symzonian outcasts, as these had succumbed to vice and brutality, and that Pym is therefore to be seen as a kind of sequel to Symzonia (“Sources” 517). The two texts do share the dichotomic construction of whiteness and blackness. An indication that Poe might have intended the Tsalalians as the outcasts is the strong taboo against everything white, and the associated fear of the region to the south. If they were the same outcasts, these two facts would make sense as they would not be allowed back into Symzonia, which is through the southern polar opening, and the white-clad, pale-colored Symzonians would be the ones to enforce this. But any such speculations will remain conjectural in absence of textual evidence.
is, has remained the same [...] for the last two hundred and fifty years” (Beagle 199). As we learn towards the end of Pym, however, the Tsalalian canoes are not even of their own making (24.2), the implication being that they are not even sophisticated enough to master that rudimentary craft. As Gretchen Murphy remarks, this illustrates “both the islanders’ primitiveness’ and their natural disinclination to explore” (274). Moreover, the Tsalalians’ primitive shelters, where they “nestled,” are simple lean-tos of branches or simply holes in the ground. Also these are reminiscent of the Fuegians, whose typical home, Darwin tells us, “merely consists of a few broken branches stuck in the ground” (Beagle 196). The Tsalalian homes are equally construed as tokens of their degraded state: “The dwellings were of the most miserable description imaginable, and, unlike those of even the lowest of the savage races with which mankind are acquainted, were of no uniform plan” (19.2). These are no ordinary savages, we are told, but lower on the chain of being than any heretofore known.

As in Symzonia, where Seaborn discovers a world of unambiguously embodied racial purity, so too is the Antarctic in Pym reduced to sharply contrasted monochrome: Tsalal is pure blackness and the South Pole is pure whiteness. It seems as if Poe relies on the almost intrinsic moral symbolism in those colors, or color-states, to convey a meaning of the infernal and the angelic. Teresa A. Goddu notes a letter in which Poe discussed Matthew “Monk” Lewis on the dramatic effect of skin complexion:

> Monk Lewis once was asked how he came, in one of his acted plays, to introduce black banditti, when, in the country where the scene was laid, black people were quite unknown. His answer was: “I introduced them because I truly anticipated that blacks would have more effect on my audience than whites—and if I had taken it into my head that, by making them sky-blue the effect would have been greater, why sky-blue they should have been.” (qtd. in Goddu 72)

But, as Goddu observes, the signifying power of blackness is not merely formalistic: its effect is intrinsically tied into “ideologies of race” (73-74). The Tsalalian natives are not sky-blue, but the blackest imaginable; even their teeth are black (24.10). In their single-minded determination to exterminate all the civilized men they encounter, they seem in many ways to be the grim negation of the idea of the noble savage. Pym’s initial assessment of the Tsalalian women certainly seems to stem from the discourse of the noble savage: “They were straight, tall, and well formed, with a grace and freedom of carriage not to be found in civilized society” (19.4). His idealizations are abruptly shattered,
however, when he learns that the natives who had treated them so well in every respect had secretly planned their destruction: “the islanders for whom we entertained such inordinate feelings of esteem were among the most barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty wretches that ever contaminated the face of the globe” (20.9). Towards the end of the Tsalalian episode, all romanticization is thoroughly excised: “In truth, from everything I could see of these wretches, they appeared to be the most wicked, hypocritical, vindictive, bloodthirsty, and altogether fiendish race of men upon the face of the globe” (23 bis.10). W. C. Harris states that, as “even a casual acquaintance with The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym […] makes clear, blacks are considered by Poe to be brutal, inferior, and appropriately subjugated” (31). If we accept that equating the political views of a text with those of its author is a valid strategy, in all probability a correct assessment in this case. What is more to the point is that Pym’s descriptions of the natives are part of a larger discourse of racial signification, in which natives were habitually ranked lower because of their base or even degraded condition. Furthermore, they are perfect embodiments of the stereotypical South-Sea islanders in the genre of exploration narratives that Poe mimics.

Such racial skepticism was not limited to South-Sea islanders, but a part of the stereotypical categorization of native tribes. We can again take Stephens’s Incidents as an example since we know that Poe had read it and was influenced by it as he was composing Pym. When Stephens relates his approach to Petra in biblical Edom, he describes the nomads that inhabited this region in similar terms: “The Bedouins who roam over the land of Idumea […] were a most savage and treacherous race,” and that “the opposition and obstruction from the Bedouins […] resembling the case of the Israelites under Moses, when Edom refused to give them passage through this country” (235). A reviewer of Stephens’s Travels commends the author for his objective and unsentimental descriptions of the Bedouins: “He tells us of the misery and degradation of the savage state, and opens our eyes […] to the absurdity of those visions of enthusiastic dreamers, who would have us believe that the state of nature, as they strangely miscall the wretched condition of the savage, is a state of primeval innocence and patriarchal simplicity” (248). It would seem that Pym’s narrative is intended to have the same sobering effect.

This kind of racial representation is endemic to the genre of travel and exploration writing that Poe adopts in the novel. All exploration had as its ultimate goal to expand the commercial bounds of the nation. While lamenting “the destruction of poor naked savages […] in the course of these expeditions,”
Hawkesworth also identifies its inevitability in the colonial logic: “this however appears to be an evil which, if discoveries of new countries are attempted, cannot be avoided: resistance will always be made, and if those who resist are not overpowered, the attempt must be relinquished” (xxi). When Poe discussed the natives of the South Seas in his Reynolds-review, he agrees with Reynolds: “The savages in these regions have frequently evinced a murderous hostility—they should be conciliated or intimidated” (“South-Sea Expedition” 68). From this racial conflict—Gardner aptly describes it as a “race war” (147)—going on in the South Seas follows the necessity of heavily armed ships. The article “The South Sea Exploring Expedition” claims this a necessity in order to establish “amicable relations” with such savages: “and nothing will more contribute to it, than a proper idea of our immense superiority as well as our good disposition toward them,—the former to be evinced by an imposing display of strength and vigor, and the latter by a plentiful distribution of the kind of presents which to them are wealth” (373). The dangers of South-Sea navigation figured in all discussions of South-Sea Exploration, especially those regarding the U.S. Exploring Expedition. *The Washington Globe*, 13 July 1836, expressed its consent to the selection of a frigate as the main ship, since it would “impress on the minds of the natives a just conception of our character, power, and policy” (qtd. in Reynolds, *Address* 299). This is reflected in the novel where Pym discusses the requirements of an exploring ship: “It is absolutely necessary that she should be well armed”; the *Jane Guy*, however, “was not altogether as well armed or otherwise equipped as a navigator acquainted with the difficulties and dangers of the trade could have desired” (14.1). Here the novel engages directly in the debate on the proper composition of the U.S. Exploring Expedition. Disaster results because the British *Jane Guy* is not adequately armed for South-Sea exploration; the obvious implication is that an American expedition should be.

Several critics have defended Poe against allegations of racism, and explored all the elements in the novel that seem to subvert racist hierarchies. Paul Rosenzweig, for instance, argues that “to take Pym’s evaluation of the inhabitants of Tsalal […] at face value or as the author’s discrimination on racial grounds, is to miss comparison with the similar treacherous mutiny accomplished earlier by a largely white crew” (143). But, in that case, it should be remembered that the black cook, “who in all respects was a perfect demon,” was the most brutal of the mutineers (4.3-4). There are no instances that I can detect that would allow a reading of *Pym* as not being part of a racist paradigm. The two most cited examples—the fact that Captain Guy is equally deceptive as
the Tsalalians since the ship and crew are armed, and the fact that Pym and
Peters are in fact cannibals—are not specific to Poe, but generic traits. As we
have seen, in the conventional exploration narrative, South-Sea trade was a
matter of imposing commercial schemes, by force if necessary. And
cannibalism, in the genre of the shipwreck narrative, is not an unforgivable
atrocitv. Instead it is recast as a providential survival strategy, where someone
has to make the ultimate sacrifice to save the others.18 This model narrative
allows Pym to participate in the killing and eating of Parker in one chapter and
express his disgust with the sharks that consume Augustus’s corpse in the next
with no apparent contradiction (12.9, 13.11).

Whiteout

There is a progressive polarization between whiteness and blackness as the
novel approaches the pole. As the editor of the final note observes: “Nothing
white was to be found at Tsalal, and nothing otherwise in the subsequent voyage
to the region beyond” (Note.8). At Tsalal, where the color white appears to be
taboo, the Tsalalians refuse to approach “several very harmless objects—such
as the schooner’s sails, an egg, an open book, or a pan of flour” (18.8). The
Tsalalians seem to kill the white crew precisely because they are white: “It was
quite evident that they had never before seen any of the white race—from
whose complexion, indeed, they appeared to recoil” (18.6). In fact, it seems as if
the absence of whiteness is not only a cultural taboo but a natural condition
since nothing else on the island (except for the arrowheads) is white, as Pym
remarks in a note: “The marl was also black; indeed, we noticed no light-
coloured substances of any kind upon the island” (23 bis.5n). Further south,
however, the dichotomy seems to be reversed, as the canoe enters an area of
complete whiteness within which it appears nothing black can exist. Nu-Nu is
struck with convulsions before falling into stupor in the bottom of the canoe,
murmuring despondently the Tsalalian mantra, “Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!” (24.7). He
perishes in terror upon hearing his litany echoed by the scream of the gigantic
white birds (24.14). It seems, then, that his presence signals what he believes to

18 Increase Mather lists numerous such instances in An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious
Providences (1684). In a parallel to Pym, some of these also involve drawing lots, for example the
following: “A New-England Vessel going from Boston to some other parts of America, was through
the continuance of contrary winds, kept long at Sea, so that they were in very great straits for want of
Provision, and seeing they could not hope for any relief from Earth or Sea, they apply themselves to
Heaven in humble and hearty Prayers, but no Calm ensuing, one of them made this sorrowful
motion, that they should cast Lots, which of them should die first, to satisfy the ravenous Hunger of
the rest” (l. Mather 15). Notably, there is never a suggestion that the act of cannibalism in these
cases is blameworthy.
be a transgression of an absolute order. Keeping with the general theme of non-closure, the text will not allow us to assign Nu-Nu’s demise to any specific cause. Lenz aptly remarks that “Pym ends—it is not concluded—with the potential of indeterminacy” (Poetics 43).

The “whiteout” is a disorienting optical polar phenomenon of which Poe could scarcely have been aware, but which is remarkably suited to describe the final events in Pym. It is a concept used to describe the vanishing sense of perspective and the difficulty perceiving proportions caused by the enormity and monotony of the Antarctic landscape. Almost every explorer of the Heroic Age has remarked on this. Stephen J. Pyne describes the phenomenon evocatively as the moment when the “vanishing point so fundamental to Western representational art itself vanishes” (136). This perspectival point enables the observer to define what is background and foreground, but when lost, the sense of orientation is lost as well: “Nowhere is this better exemplified than in that most dreaded and complete of Antarctic atmospherics, the whiteout—in metaphoric Russian, the white darkness. […] The whiteout is more insidious and more mentally disturbing than snow blindness because it makes consciousness difficult and convolutes rational thought” (Pyne 136). In Pym, there is of course a suggestive type of whiteout in the final scene:

And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But 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. (24.14)

As Pollin observes: “It is Poe at his ambiguous best” (358n). It is a feat in itself to be able to make a passage so suggestive, but at the same time so elusive as not to convey any meaning. The perfectly white figure certainly seems to suggest some divine meaning,19 but even that vague suggestion is further shrouded. Lenz puts it aptly: “It appears to be the unknown itself that towers above Pym” (“Poe’s Pym” 35).

Toni Morrison reads the ending in racial terms, as a “visualized but somehow closed and unknowable […] impenetrable whiteness that surfaces […] whenever an Africanist presence is engaged” (32-33). The textual response to the nightmarish visit to the blackness of Tsalal is a soothing meditative

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19 One critic who has developed this is Curtis Fukuchi, who writes that “in view of the theological significance at the conclusion of the narrative of the white figure [resembles] the Ancient of Days in the Book of Daniel and Christ in the Book of Revelations” (147). Dan. 7:9 reads: “the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool.” The description of Christ in Rev. 1.14: “His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow.”
reassurance of the superiority of whiteness, a closed white image (Morrison 33). Gardner also reads the image in racial terms, but sees it as a consummation of the doctrine of polygenism, providing proof that races have separate origins, reading it “as a fantasy of a point of reunion with an original parent—with the white ‘Adam,’ or the white god—a reunion neither Peters nor the Tsalalial could witness” (148). Alluring though they may be, such interpretations are more projections than readings. I think this highlights the interpretative dilemma of many of the events in *Pym*, as J. Gerald Kennedy puts it, “its ambiguous central events both compel and resist analysis” (167). This is specifically true of the ending, which seems loaded with significance but devoid of definite meaning.

Even if the term is anachronistic, I think the whiteout provides an appropriate metaphor of the final dissolution of *Pym*. The non-closure of the text deprives the reader of a proper vanishing point that would help rationalize the narrative by putting it into perspective. The whiteout similarly leaves the observer without points of reference. Richard Byrd describes losing his sense of orientation during an Antarctic flight in terms hauntingly familiar to *Pym’s*: “Only a milky, trembling nothingness” (123). The reader is similarly abandoned mid-flight with no points of reference. All we have left are conflicting narratives; none of which takes precedence to help organize the others. As Frank Kermode has argued, we make sense of texts by reading them with the end as the point that retrospectively arranges events into a narrative development. The text descends gradually into whiteness, which operates also on the most directly textual level possible, by the cessation of the black letters on the white page.20 What is so frustrating about the non-ending of the narrative is that it is interrupted just before the point of discovery, not only in its exploratory sense, but also as anagnostisis, the point where the narrative reveals its teleological structure. As the narrator of “MS” phrases it, where “the rays of my destiny are, […] gathering to a focus” (141); in other words, where the purpose of the events he participates in will be ordered into a coherent narrative.

The loss of points of reference works on several levels in the concluding chapter. The ambiguity of the meteorological phenomena makes it difficult to tell whether Pym and Peters are approaching a region of intense heat or of

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20 Jean Ricardou has argued interestingly, although somewhat obscurely, that the novel is an allegorical “jorney to the bottom of the page” and that “no text is more complete than *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, for the fiction it presents points to the end of every text, the ultimate establishment of blank paper defended by whiteness” (4). For Ricardou, the conclusion of *Pym* seems far from unclear; it represents literature that stages its own literariness.
equally intense cold.21 J. Lasley Dameron suggests that the events leading up to
the ending “can be interpreted on the natural, or literal, level as the culmination
of a series of unusual, but not supernatural, visual experiences actually reported
by those venturing into a polar region” (33).22 Pym, Peter, and Nu-Nu’s bodily
responses of lethargy, confusion, and sensation of warmth are as much
symptoms associated with hypothermia: “The Polar winter appeared to be
coming on—but coming without its terrors. I felt a numblness of body and
mind—a dreaminess of sensation—but this was all” (24.8). Nu-Nu recedes into
“drowsiness and stupor” and finally dies, and Peters is overcome with “apathy”
(24.7-14). A common conception at the time was that Africans were unable to
withstand cold climates, as can be illustrated by a passage from Cooper’s Nations
of the Americans: “All experience proves, that ages and generations must elapse
before the descendants of the African can acquire habits of endurance which
shall enable him effectually to resist frost, if, indeed, it can ever be done”
(114n). The fact that Nu-Nu is the most severely affected as they progress
south thus opens up for the possible naturalistic interpretation that he
succumbs to the climate, in contrast to the conventional metaphysical
explanation that he is forbidden entry into a region of white racial purity. Thus
all the outward signs suggest winter, but the physical sensations are of heat:
“The heat of the water was extreme, even unpleasant to the touch. […] A fine
white powder, resembling ashes—but certainly not such—fell over the canoe
and over a large surface of the water [...]” (24.9). The ashy substance, like
snow, “melted into the water as it fell” (24.13). Poe seems to be playing a
double game with the readers’ expectations regarding the Antarctic landscape.
On the one hand it is similar to the temperate or even tropical regions that we
have seen in every other text so far, with its origin in the conflicting
observations by previous explorers. On the other hand there is the possibility of
a realistic representation of ice and snow, which would, indeed, find its
confirmation just a few years hence. In 1838, the Antarctic paradigm wavered
between these two visions, and as Harry Levin writes, “Poe was much too
shrewd to go into particulars about the Pole, at a time when real explorers were
setting out for it” (117). From here, the novel could progress either way, should

21 Cordelia Candelaria has suggested a related reading, where she attributes the various
meteorological and sensory phenomena in the final chapter to cold and snow. She even suggests
that the Tsalalā taboo against whiteness is derived from previous experience of freezing death
(36).
22 Dameron proceeds to demonstrate several textual parallelisms between the final chapter of Pym
and passages from William Scoresby’s Journal of a Voyage to the Northern Whale-Fishery (1823).
One of the most intriguing instances is Scoresby’s description of the peculiar water with “several
veins or patches” found off the Greenland coast, which has a striking resemblance to the water at
Tsalal (Dameron 39).
Poe decide on a sequel in case the book was a success. Or, as it turned out, he could just suspend it over the abyss, and wait for the returning U.S. Exploring Expedition to provide an extratextual bookend.

The note of aporia, or whiteout, that the text ends on is reflected also in the deferral of narrative authority that is effected in the final “Note,” in which we are informed that Pym is no more:

It is feared that the few remaining chapters which were to have completed his narrative, and which were retained by him, while the above were in type, for the purpose of revision, have been irrecoverably lost through the accident by which he perished himself. This, however, may prove not to be the case, and the papers, if ultimately found, will be given to the public. (Note.1)

We may read Pym’s narrow escapes, which constitute a large part of the text, as conventions of a providential narrative. But the final note then subverts such a reading when we learn that Pym has died in an accident. However, the possibility of Pym resuming his narrative posthumously is kept open, not even allowing the reader the closure of knowing that there is no more text to be expected. The editor tells how he has turned to Mr. Poe “to fill the vacuum” created by the vanished manuscript, but how he has declined “for satisfactory reasons connected with the general inaccuracy of the details afforded him, and his disbelief in the entire truth of the latter portions of the narration” (Note.2). Mr. Poe thus disqualifies Pym’s narrative authority in an exact reversal of the “Preface,” where it is stated that it was this part of Pym’s narrative that had piqued his interest in the first place: “more particularly in regard to that portion of it which related to the Antarctic Ocean” (Preface.2). In a text that has touted Antarctic discovery as its prime object already from the start, Mr. Poe thus exits the text by declaring his disbelief in precisely this part of the narrative. It is no less confusing that we do not know whether Mr. Poe refers to the events in the final chapters, or events in the missing chapters. Poe certainly has constructed an elaborate hoax here. But it can be argued that he has inscribed his own interest in the Antarctic in the text, and that Mr. Poe’s withdrawal of support signifies Poe’s ultimate investment in the realist paradigm of Reynolds and the U.S. Exploring Expedition. Whalen observes that in the final chapter of the narrative, Poe shifts his narrative “to an oneric, mythical, or divine realm” and in so doing he also jumps ship from the realistic paradigm he has so far kept within, and “abandons every pragmatic value emphasized by Paulding,

23 “But hoax, with these sort of people, is, I believe, a general term for all matters above their comprehension” (Poe, “Hans Pfaall” 427).
Reynolds, Morrell, and a host of other writers” (187). But in the final note he retracts that symbolically—after all, he did refer to Pym afterwards as a “very silly book,” even if the sincerity of that statement can be questioned (Poe to Burton).

With Pym dead, Peters currently unavailable, and Mr. Poe disavowing the text, there is no active authoritative voice left in the narrative. But here the editor promptly steps in and assumes authority by claiming that both Pym and Mr. Poe have missed crucial aspects of the narrative, and proceeds to heap quasi-philological speculations on the reader. But these only add another shroud to the narrative, as Rosenzweig observes: “The anonymous editor with his authoritative tone and ostensibly objective scholarly erudition ultimately functions ironically in exactly the opposite manner from his purported aim of clarification” (140). The loss of perspective continues here as well, since the editor conflates Pym’s sketches of the figures in the rock, even though the first set were monumental rock formations several hundred yards large, and the second set found on a wall inside the large chasms (23.8-10). And, finally, the note is closed by the enigmatic final sentence “I have graven it within the hills, and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock” (Note.9). Because this sentence is set off typographically from the rest of the editor’s note, it is uncertain whether it is part of the note or if it represents another layer of narrative authority. It is, in fact, a doubling of the mysterious shrouded human figure, with its mock-divine flavor. The result is a suggestive analogy of the Supreme Author and the literary author, as Poe asserts his godlike authority over the literary universe. He has inscribed the dissolution of meaning in the text, and the pseudo-biblical final sentence might be, as Kennedy writes, “an esoteric allusion to the literary revenge he imagined himself to achieve in Pym” (291n). There is a sense of authority behind the words in the final sentence, but we are denied a firm basis for that authority since it is disconnected from a meaningful context. As Rowe describes it: “Forever holding out the promise of a buried signified, Pym offers a sequence of forged or imitation truth” (104).

In writing his Antarctic in such a non-committal manner, Poe evades the problem of having to describe in detail a region that was just about to be explored. However, by the same strategy he is also able to convey the sense of imminence of revelation symbolically, making this effect into the reader’s central experience. David Seed observes that Poe would return to a similar theme in “Eleonora” (1841), where he discussed such dreamy approaches to some indistinct revelation (81). In the beginning of “Eleonora,” Poe’s narrator prefaces his tale by describing how dreamers “obtain glimpses of eternity,
and thrill, in awaking, to find that they have been upon the verge of the great secret. [...] They penetrate, however rudderless or compassless, into the vast ocean of the ‘light ineffable’ [...]” (“Eleonora” 638). Readers of Pym are familiar with the experience of drifting without control while sensing they are about to be told a great secret, only to experience a disorienting whiteout.

Ten Years Later: A Note on Eureka

As a bridge into the following chapter on James Fenimore Cooper’s The Sea Lions it can be noted that Poe returned to the polar environment ten years after Pym. In Eureka (1848), he writes about “Divine adaptation,” which is his term for the idea that everything in the universe is exactly and purposefully structured:

To give an instance: — In polar climates the human frame, to maintain its animal heat, requires, for combustion in the capillary system, an abundant supply of highly azotized food, such as train-oil. But again: — in polar climates nearly the sole food afforded man is the oil of abundant seals and whales. Now, whether is oil at hand because imperatively demanded, or the only thing demanded because the only thing to be obtained? It is impossible to decide. There is an absolute reciprocity of adaptation. (Section 8)24

This time it is not specifically the Antarctic Poe is concerned with, but polar climates in general. The conflation is revealing because now, apparently, such a thing as polar climate exists as a common referent, and it is cold and barren, not tropical. There was no such consensus on the nature and climate of the poles when he wrote “MS” and Pym. The event that had redefined the view of polar climates in the U.S. was primarily the return of the U.S. Exploring Expedition. As we shall see in the following chapter, Poe’s turn to polar realism was repeated by Cooper. A further parallel between Cooper and Poe is that both used the polar environment to demonstrate the visible presence of divinity. In this section of Eureka, we see how Poe approaches some form of Christian mysticism. His pseudo-scientific principle of adaptation is operative everywhere, but it is in the extreme conditions of the polar environment that it becomes most discernable. In Poe’s teleological vision, there is an immanent purpose in the phenomenal world, adapting the individual to the environment and, possibly, also the other way around. He draws the parallel between literary authors and the Divine Author, and comes to the conclusion that “perfection of

24 As can be inferred this “adaptation” is related only in name to the evolutionary concept—it has more in common with William Paley’s divine watchmaker argument, or intelligent design.
plot, is really, or practically, unattainable—but only because it is a finite intelligence that constructs. The plots of God are perfect. The Universe is a plot of God” (Section 8). As will be seen in the following chapter, this could just as well have been written by Cooper, even though the two authors were otherwise of extremely different temperaments.
CHAPTER FIVE

“That Frozen World”: The Discovery of Antarctica and James Fenimore Cooper’s The Sea Lions

When James Fenimore Cooper revisits the Antarctic in the novel The Sea Lions: Or, The Last Sealed in 1849, fifteen years after The Monikins, the geography is radically different from what we have seen so far. Gone are the utopian encounters of Symzonia, the fantastic satirical communities of The Monikins, the otherworldly utopia of “The Atlantis,” and the lost tribes of The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, as well as the tropical climate featured in all of them. In the period between “The Atlantis” and The Sea Lions, the Antarctic sign had undergone a transformation. It was no longer an enigmatic blank on the map: the existence of an Antarctic continent had been verified, leaving no space for open waters or polar openings, and the climate had proven to be more frigid than any other previously known. In many ways, it was the Antartica of James Cook that was verified: “a Country doomed by Nature never once to feel the warmth of the Sun’s [sic] rays, but to lie for ever buried under everlasting snow and ice” (412). The visionary American Antarctic project, originating with John Cleves Symmes, had finally been refuted. In this sense, then, the Antarctic sign had solidified: the open, tropical waters of the previous representations had frozen over. For the first time in this study, we see the real Antarctic emerge, “that frozen world” as it is called in The Sea Lions (326), emerge, essentially as we know it today.

This chapter traces how the defining moment in the American discourse on Antarctica—the return of the U.S. Exploring Expedition—is reflected in Cooper’s The Sea Lions. The novel was written after the anti-climactic return of the expedition. The expected revelation of the Antarctic enigma did not happen; it seemed as if the Antarctic would not yield any revolutionary knowledge. Instead Cooper chooses to write an Antarctic narrative of spiritual regeneration, closely connected to the sublimity of the Antarctic landscape. The realistic setting in the Antarctic thus becomes the stage for a morality play with a conventional set of characters. But this is also a historical romance of sealing, where the Antarctic history is given back to the sealers after the more fantastical writings that had preceded it.

The Sea Lions is the story of the rivaling sealing captains Roswell Gardiner and Jason Daggett who voyage into the Antarctic in search of a secret sealing island, commanding two identical ships—both coincidentally named the Sea Lion. Gardiner has a chart of the island, which Daggett does not, so Daggett
intends to simply follow the other ship. Gardiner manages to shake Daggett off, and can proceed on his own to locate the seal island, but Daggett manages to find his way there some time later. Since the season is already far advanced when Daggett arrives, Gardiner decides to stay and help him fill his cargo before the season is over. They delay too long, however, and are unable to make their way out of the Antarctic before they are frozen in and have to prepare for wintering there. During the winter, Daggett and most of his crew die, and his Sea Lion is destroyed. Gardiner, on the other hand, goes through a spiritual regeneration, and when spring arrives, he returns home, a new man.

The first indication that Cooper attempts something altogether different with The Sea Lion is the fact that he discards the first-person narration featured in all the previous texts in this study in favor of an omniscient perspective. This is not one of those subjective narratives where the authenticity is playfully cast in doubt. Cooper’s investment in The Sea Lion is with the real. One particularly pregnant scene demonstrates the difference between the Antarctic of the previous fictions and that of The Sea Lion. It occurs when Gardiner first spots a “stationary cloud” that marks a “veiled spot” (198). This brings to mind the deferral of meaning that ends Pym, represented by the “white curtain” or “veil,” which opens up to reveal only yet another veil, that of the mysterious “shrouded human figure” (24.14). The revelation in The Sea Lion is of a decidedly more material nature: “Just then, the vapour, which had kept rolling and moving […] suddenly opened, and the bald head of a real mountain, a thousand feet high, came unexpectedly into the view!” (198). When the curtain is drawn, the real Antarctic (what can be more solid than a “real mountain”?!) appears, a “ragged and bleak” landscape of interminable ice (198). In the analysis of the concluding chapter of Pym, we also saw that its language of sensory impression is ambiguous—it could be interpreted as sensations of either extreme heat or cold—which I read as representing a liminal moment in Antarctic history. It both refers back to the tropical landscape of the previous fictions, and points forward to the landscape of ice that was to follow, with both these sets of expectations being played against each other. Pym describes how “The Polar winter appeared to be coming on—but coming without its terrors. I felt a numbness of body and mind—a dreaminess of sensation—but this was all,” how the “heat of the water was extreme,” and how “drowsiness and stupor” come over them (24.7-9). In The Sea Lion, the language is exactly the same but without the ambiguity. Here the polar winter causes “the sort of drowsy stupor which is known to precede death in those who die by freezing” (367-68). Later, Gardiner’s sensations are described during the coldest night of
the winter: “A numbness began to steal over the lower limbs; and this was the last unpleasant sensation remembered by Roswell, when he fell into another short and disturbed slumber” (391-92). In *The Sea Lions*, the Antarctic landscape and its effects are completely represented through the language of realism.

For the first time in fiction, *The Sea Lions* provides an approximation of the immense proportions of the ice-world inside the Antarctic Circle; its diameter “would traverse a distance materially exceeding that between New York and Lisbon. This would make those frozen regions cover a portion of this globe that is almost as large as the whole of the Atlantic Ocean, as far south as the equator” (307). The hole-in-the-pole has been capped by an icy continent. *The Sea Lions* can also boast the first fictional account of wintering in the Antarctic.¹ It is also significant that all other texts so far have progressed beyond the empirical limits of the day—to the South Pole, or even beyond. The open construction of the Antarctic at the time allowed for such imaginative exploits. *The Sea Lions*, on the other hand, is wholly enacted on the Antarctic periphery, among the sub-Antarctic islands where sealers sought new hunting grounds. At this point in history, the verified existence of an icy continent shut off access to the South Pole by ship, refuting visions like that of Jeremiah N. Reynolds’s, who wanted “to cast anchor on that point where all the meridians terminate” and leave the star-spangled banner there to “wave on the axis of the earth itself!” (*Address* 99). And since continental exploration would not become a desirable goal until almost fifty years later, Antarctica itself was left alone for the time being. Through this shift in focus, *The Sea Lions* breaks with the tradition of speculative fiction characterizing the previous texts and initiates a new line of Antarctic realism. The defining event for this new fictional development was of course the sense of finality brought to the Antarctic geography by Charles Wilkes and the U.S. Exploring Expedition in the 1840s. As Elena Glasberg observes: “after the Wilkes Expedition reported on the icy and relatively lifeless conditions in the Antarctic, Poe’s experimenting gave way to the more conservative shaping of Cooper” (91).

The expectations on the U.S. Exploring Expedition had run extremely high. We might recall Poe’s words the year before it departed: “We look forward to this finale—to the published record of the expedition—with an intensity of eager expectation, which we cannot think we have ever experienced before” (“South-Sea Expedition” 70). Measured against such anticipation, it was perhaps inevitable that its results would be something of an anti-climax in

¹ The first recorded wintering in the Antarctic was in 1821, when the captain and ten of the crew of the British sealer *Lord Melville* were involuntarily left behind on King George Island, part of the South Shetlands (Gurney 182).
the public view, especially as regards the question of Antarctica. Six and a half years later, Poe reviews Wilkes’s initial report of the expedition and it is clear that his eager expectation has been frustrated: “The general impression […] has very naturally been that little or nothing was accomplished” (Review of Brief Account 164). He concedes, however, that this impression is not entirely justified. After all, the expedition had accomplished much important scientific and geographical work; his disappointment pertained to that central issue: “In the mere point of approaching the south pole—that pole which, in the opinion of an Honorable Secretary, formed the sole object of the adventure—something more, indeed, might have been performed” (Review of Brief Account 164). Objectively, it would be hard to claim that the expedition had been a failure; indeed, as Nathaniel Philbrick writes about the accomplishments of Wilkes:

he had made discoveries that would redraw the map of the world. He and his officers had surveyed dozens of uncharted Pacific islands. They had completed America’s first survey of what would one day become the states of Oregon and Washington. His team of scientists had brought back forty tons of specimens and artifacts, including two thousand never-before-identified species. Most impressive of all, he had established the existence of a new continent. Battling icebergs and gale-force winds in his fragile wooden ships, he had charted a 1,500-mile section of Antarctic coast that still bears his name: Wilkes Land. (xv)

Even so, a sense of disappointment is discernible in most commentaries. Edward S. Ellis’s assessment from 1899 is representative in this regard, when he states that Wilkes “coasted the Antarctic Continent for seventeen hundred miles, and brought back many interesting products of those regions, but accomplished nothing of practical value” (qtd. in Lenz, Poetics xxix). It seems as if the results of the search for a southern continent simply was not proportional to the desires that had been projected onto the blank Antarctic surface: “The Antarctic, rather, suddenly appeared a cultural dead end, not a logical extension of Manifest Destiny but a literal wasteland fraught with controversy that called into question a heroic and honorable conception of self and nation” (Lenz, Poetics xxix).

Whatever the expectations had been, the U.S. Exploring Expedition redefined the Antarctic discourse and put into play a new set of representational standards for literary treatments of the region. I would like to illustrate this shift by a brief detour to another piece of Antarctic writing from the period immediately after the U.S Exploring Expedition. James Croxall Palmer,
assistant surgeon of the expedition, gave his Antarctic experience a poetic
treatment in a brief collection called *Thulia: A Tale of the Antarctic* (1843). When
the Exploring Expedition returned, Wilkes confiscated all the officers’ journals
with the intention of reserving the right to write the official narrative for
himself. Somehow *Thulia*, with its appended extract from an expedition journal,
slipped under the radar, possibly, as William E. Lenz speculates, because it
looks like a conventional volume of poetry (*Poetics* 57). This actually made
*Thulia* the first statement of any detail of the expedition that was available to
the public. The collection consists of four sections: the poems “Thulia” and “The
Bridal Rose,” the song “The Antarctic Mariner’s Song,” and an appendix titled
“Antarctic Adventures of the United States Schooner Flying-Fish in 1839.”
Most of the collection is in commemoration of the ship *Flying-Fish*, which
reached the furthest south of any of the ships on the expedition. Consequently,
the *Flying Fish* is renamed *Thulia* in the poem, with a reference to Thule.5

Although *Thulia* is non-fictional and therefore does not quite qualify as a
primary text in the scope of the present study, it can be used to provide an
illustrative example of the transition from romantic to realistic modes of
Antarctic representation. Throughout the collection Palmer struggles to convey
his Antarctic experience through poetic imagery. For instance, the Antarctic is
described as an untouched and peacefully innocent region: “Where battles
never had been fought, / Nor blood for glory ever shed; / And where the tame
leviathan / Knew not the enmity of man” (“Bridal” 10.3-8). But immediately
after the last line, Palmer adds a note to an appendix where the same scene is
recounted in more prosaic form:

Whales were numerous beyond the experience of the oldest sailor
on board; lashing the sea into foam with their gigantic flocks, and
often, in mad career, passing so close to the schooner, as to excite
serious apprehensions for her safety. A fin-back once kept them
company for several hours; and a monstrous right-whale, of
greater size than the vessel herself, lay so obstinately in her track,
that the men stood by with boat-hooks to bear him off. (68)

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2 In 1868, Palmer published a revised and expanded version under the title *Antarctic Mariner’s Song*,
which is essentially the same as in 1843, but with added personal tales of the crew members. This
later version is reprinted as an appendix to Lenz’ *Poetics*.
3 Because of this, there is a certain amount of impatience with Wilkes in the reviews of *Thulia*. The
Southern Literary Messenger, for instance, writes appreciatively of the passages of “the ice and
frozen seas of the South,” but also complains: “not an inkling of which has before been given to the
public” (qtd. in Lenz, *Poetics* 72).
4 “The Antarctic Mariner’s Song” was set to music written by James Dwight Dana, famous American
geologist and zoologist, who was enlisted in the science corps on the expedition.
5 “As the type of the extreme limit of travel and discovery [...] the highest or uttermost point or degree
attained or attainable” (*OED* “Thule”).

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It is as if Palmer is trying to negotiate the different generic demands of poetry and travelogue. The poetic license he allows himself superimposes a mythological layer onto the Antarctic, by which he gets caught up in a conventional Romantic mode, inherited largely from Coleridge. But it is as if this is not enough; the Antarctic can no longer be conveyed exclusively through symbolic language, and therefore Palmer evidently feels obliged to supplement this with a matter-of-fact record of the events as they really happened. This pattern of supplementing the symbolic expression of the poetry with scientific notes is repeated throughout the lyrical sections, until the closing “Appendix,” which is eight pages of straight expedition journal. “Structurally, two opposing forces appear at work,” Lenz observes, where “the notes function as commonsense translations or corrections of poetic expression” (Poetics 67).

Another example from the poem shows this clearly. In “Thulia,” Palmer describes a tumultuous natural scenery where “Huge castled clouds are towering high,” and the ocean billows below as in defiance of the heavens above (3.6). To this is added the explanatory footnote: “These peculiar clouds, in the neighbourhood of Cape Horn, are called cumuloni, by Capt. Fitzroy, R. N. They come up with a south-west gale” (41n). The note carries a complete authenticating apparatus with the scientific name and meteorological explanation of the phenomenon, and even an authoritative source: the Royal Navy Captain and premier meteorologist Robert FitzRoy. Palmer seems to be vacillating between his roles as poet and as member of what was then the largest scientific expedition in the history of the U.S. Thulia thus conflates the two Antarctic paradigms I have described in this study: the speculative one with its language of symbolism, and the new one where the Antarctic is known and properly conveyed through the language of realism.

To some degree, it seems as if Palmer recognizes the fact that he writes for an audience that had been conditioned with lofty expectations of what the Antarctic would contain, and where the prose truth would not suffice. As Lenz remarks, Thulia “reveals the preconceptions and questions nineteenth-century Americans had of the Antarctic: Was it real or imaginary? Was it a land of unimaginable wealth? Was it a terra incognita populated by supernatural horrors? Was it a gateway to a Symmesian inner world, a door to the Earthly Paradise?” (Poetics 62). We certainly see language that is familiar to us, primarily from Poe and Coleridge—the parallelism of the titles “The Antarctic Mariner’s Song” and “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is hardly coincidental—in the way that Palmer approaches the Antarctic: “Yonder, see! the icy portal / Opens for us to the Pole; / And, where never entered mortal, / Thither speed we to the goal”
(“Mariner” 2.1-4). Even though it is essentially an epic poem narrating the events of scientific exploration, the landscape is suffused with gothic ambience (Lenz, Poetics 64). For instance, there are icebergs towering “Like tombs in some vast burial ground […] Ghost-like the night-watch tramps his round” (“Mariner” 5.6-8). In fact, he professes to be unable to experience the Antarctic scenery unmediated, without recalling “visions of old romances” (App. 68) and falling back on conventional gothic tropes in his own representations. Gothicism does not prevail in Thulia, however; the icebergs may be frightening, “But all their terrors how they fade. / Before proud man’s sublimier will” (“Mariner” 5.39-40). As we shall see, this was a type of optimistic rationalism that Cooper did not share. There are other familiar echoes from past visions of the Antarctic as well. While in the Antarctic, Palmer exults: “All the field of fame is ours” (“Mariner” 4.2). In other words, the explorers have finally come to claim the American “field of fame” that Reynolds envisioned in his report in 1828 (“Report” 230). Reynolds might have been ousted from the expedition, but his ghost hovers over the whole project; it was in the same year as Thulia appeared that Poe renamed the Wilkes expedition “the Reynolds Expedition of Discovery” (Review of Brief Account 164).

**Historical Perspectives**

Cooper’s strategy in The Sea Lions for negotiating this representative shift from speculative to realistic Antarctic geography was to go straight to the source for authenticity: Wilkes’s Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition (1844). W. B. Gates has demonstrated the great extent to which Cooper relied on Wilkes for both general facts and individual incidents “to invest his story with an atmosphere of complete verisimilitude” (1075). For instance, the itinerary of the southern leg of the voyage in The Sea Lions closely follows Wilkes, including the account of the characteristics of Cape Horn (Gates 1070-71). Furthermore, there is the episode where Daggett’s Sea Lion is trapped between moving sheets of ice, “nipped” in Cooper’s term (221). Gates remarks that this may also derive from a similar episode in Wilkes’s Narrative (1073). Thomas Philbrick points out, however, that Cooper had written this scene once before, in The Monikins, where Poe used his “ice-screws” to escape a similar situation (215; Monikins 221-24). T. Philbrick has further added to the list of sources on polar exploration that Cooper drew on. He traces the origins of factual details or even incidents to Benjamin Morrell’s A Narrative of Four Voyages (1832), Edmund Fanning’s Voyages Round the World (1833), William Scoresby’s Account of
the Arctic Regions (1820), and William Parry’s Journal of a Voyage for the Discovery of a
North-West Passage (1821); the last two especially seems to have provided
Cooper with the material he needed to describe a verisimilar Antarctic
wintering (T. Philbrick 217-24). The aggregate impression of this broad
collection of authoritative factual sources of polar material is that it was
important to Cooper that his Antarctic representation was as credible as
possible.

*The Sea Lions* is set only twenty-nine years prior to the time of its
narration in 1848, but even so it should be considered a historical novel. It is
narrated across the momentous Antarctic paradigm shift I have just described,
which gives it a split historical perspective. The narrator occupies the post-
discovery position, knowing the approximate characteristics and geography of
the region, whereas the sealers make the voyage to an Antarctic that is still
essentially unknown. The time of action, 1819, actually coincides with the first
appearances of Symmes in the public arena with his holes-in-the-poles theory.
The employment interview with Watson, a prospective crewman, might contain
an oblique reference to Symmes. For all he knows, he says, the Sea Lion is likely
headed “for some unknown part of the world […] maybe for the South Pole,
for-it-know, or for some sich out-of-the-way hole” (80). Since the existence of
an Antarctic continent was not settled yet, sailing to the geographic south pole
is still in the realm of possibility to Watson; just as it is possible for Daggett, a
little further on, to speculate about icebergs drifting all the way even “to the
south pole for-ti’-now” (220). These are the sole possible references to this type
of discourse, however. In all other respects, Cooper writes a verisimilar
alternative Antarctic history.

*The Sea Lions* is conceived as a period piece, one of Cooper’s historical
romances, which typically recreate a recent period in the American past. For
instance, two of his early novels, The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground (1821) and
The Pilot: A Tale of the Sea (1823), both detail little known events of the
Revolutionary War. In his original preface to The Spy, Cooper describes how he
perceives his relation to history: “We do not absolutely aver, that the whole of
our tale is true; but we honestly believe that a good portion of it is; and we are
very, that every passion recorded in the volumes before the reader, has and
does exist” (xi-xii). As Hester Blum points out, in Cooper’s process “the feeling
of historicity is as important […] as any strict historical accounting” (82). In the
preface to The Pilot, Cooper further elaborates on his role as a historical writer
in restoring important but more or less forgotten parts of American history:

The Author wishes to express his regret, that the daring and
useful services of a great portion of our marine in the old war should be suffered to remain in the obscurity under which it is now buried [...] it is fair to presume that [the U.S.] owes no small part of its present character to the spirit that descended from the heroes of the revolution. [...] If his book has the least tendency to excite some attention to this interesting portion of our history, one of the objects of the writer will be accomplished. (3-4)

*The Sea Lions* can be regarded as a similar effort to highlight a marginalized part of American history. As we have seen, the Antarctic seal trade constituted a substantial part of the American economy during the first half of the 19th century, and it is to this important part of American history that Cooper turns his attention here, bestowing credit where it is due. The Antarctic is given back to the sealers, placing them at the center of action. His strategy of historicity rather than historical accuracy is the same here as elsewhere in his historical novels. Stephen J. Pyne notes that in the same manner as Cooper “converted the geographic data of the Long expedition into a moral geography for the Old Trapper in his novel *The Prairie*, so he relied on the published accounts of sealers, whalers, and scientific expeditions to sustain the geography of Antarctica in which he set *The Sea Lions*” (166). Just as important, in *The Sea Lions* Cooper sets out to write a more realistic Antarctic history than that of the previous texts analyzed here. His realistic depiction of the era when Antarctic sealing was at its height provides a corrective to the visionary imaginings of the other narratives. To be sure, many of the earlier Antarctic fictions had in fact cast sealers in central roles. In *Symzonia*, Seaborn recruits his crew under the pretense of a sealing voyage, and he actually lands a sealing party. However, as its subtitle *A Voyage of Discovery* signals, this was not the primary purpose. In *The Monikins*, an American sealing captain expertly navigates the Antarctic waters, but it is not a sealing voyage. In *Pym*, the *Juno Guy* is on a sealing and trading mission, but no hunting is done during the course of the novel. Indeed, her sudden transformation into an Antarctic exploring ship is perhaps as fantastic as anything else in the novel, since a sealer or whaler that went beyond its business forfeited its insurance in case of accident (Reynolds 35). Just as the real Antarctic emerges for the first time in fiction here in *The Sea Lions*, so is it the first time we meet sealers who actually practice their trade.

The novel is set in the middle of a period of frantic activity, often referred to as a “gold-rush,” on the Antarctic periphery (Headland, *South Georgia* 43). In the years immediately following the discovery of the South Shetlands in 1819, the American sealing industry was at its absolute height (T. Philbrick
In the 1820s, the Antarctic Ocean was navigated almost exclusively by sealers, many of them American, in search of new hunting grounds. In contrast to the aura of romance surrounding Antarctic exploration, sealing, the “skinning business,” was practiced by the proletarians of the sea, whose rough trade had the lowest status of all the fisheries (T. Philbrick 212).

The split historical perspective between the time of action and of narration is also evident in the various ways the novel relates to Cook’s *ne plus ultra*. The narrator writes, alerting us to the historical divide, that this was “at that time the great boundary of antarctic navigation” (194). In 1848, of course, Cook had been surpassed by many: Weddell, Morrell, Wilkes, to name only the most publicized. For the sealers of *The Sea Lions*, however, Cook still marked the limits of geographical knowledge. But it is an authority under challenge—in both in the novel as well as historically. When Gardiner first learns of his destination from the deacon, he still holds Cook to be the model: “That’s a high latitude, deacon, to carry a craft into. Cook, himself, fell short of *that*, somewhat!” The deacon’s response, however, is prompt and to the point: “Never mind Cook—he was a king’s navigator—my man was an American sealer” (84). We recognize this defiant attitude towards Cook from numerous other occasions where American national accomplishment was concerned. Refuting Cook’s negative assessment of the region was of course fundamental to the American project of Antarctic exploration and commercial expansion. Later, when Gardiner ponders his mission of getting into high latitudes, he has apparently forgotten his previous hesitation (one may suspect that so had Cooper) and swung around to the deacon’s position: “As a sealer, he had several times penetrated as far south as the *ne plus ultra* of Cook” (191). We are given the common underdog narrative of the American self-made man who routinely matches or even outdoes the organized efforts of the mighty empire. Indeed, Cooper even challenges the claim to primacy of many of the discoveries of peri-Antarctic islands made by European explorers:

Independent of the discoveries of the regular explorers, a great deal of information has been obtained from the sealers themselves within the present century, touching the antarctic seas. It is thought that many a headland, and various islands, that have contributed their shares in procuring the *accolades* for different European navigators, were known to the adventurers from Stonington and other by-ports of this country, long before science ever laid its eyes upon them, or monarchs their swords on...

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6 During the seasons 1820-21 and 1821-22, 44 and 91 vessels, respectively, visited the South Shetlands alone (Headland, Chronological 112).
7 See, for instance, Headland’s listings for these years.
the shoulders of their secondary discoverers. (193)

It is likely that there is actually more to this than empty boasting. Sealers had been extremely active in the Antarctic Ocean during the first decades of the 19th century and were continuously driven further south as seals became scarce. It is impossible to even approximate the extent of their operations, however; since they were usually very reticent about revealing information about sealing grounds, possession of such knowledge became increasingly important. In Watson’s words in the novel: “They tell of seals getting scarce; but I say, it’s all in knowin’ the business” (80). The sealers’ goal was commerce not science, even if they made incidental discoveries (Headland 28). Those voyages did not always make it into the official histories, but Cooper recreates them in fictional form.

In his Address Reynolds retells a related anecdote, surely included to appeal to patriotic sentiments, about how the accomplishments of American sealers astounded even European expeditions. In 1821, two ships, sent out by the Russian Emperor Alexander, under the command of Thaddeus von Bellinghausen, were befogged between the Antarctic Peninsula and the South Shetland Islands. When the fog lifted, Bellinghausen was astonished to see a small American sealer, under the command of Nathaniel Palmer, lying between his ships. Bellinghausen says he had just previously prided himself on having made new discoveries:

when lo! the fog lifts and shows an American vessel along side, whose master offers to pilot me into port, where several of his own nation lie at anchor! We must surrender the palm of enterprise to you Americans, and content ourselves with following in your train. […] I behold before me a pattern for the oldest nation in Europe; since I here find the American flag, a small fleet, and a pilot, instead of making new discoveries. (Reynolds, Address 33-34)

Bellinghausen even named his sighting “Palmer’s Land” in honor of the young sealer, as Reynolds tells us. The British, continues Reynolds indignantly, show no such respect: “a British vessel touched at a single spot in 1831, taking from it the American, and giving it an English name!” (Address 34). It is easy to see why Reynolds would choose to recount this anecdote; it really has it all: American sealers that trump an Imperial expedition and a humbled Russian admiral who holds them to be worthy models for even the oldest European
nation.8

The split historical perspective is also foregrounded by Cooper’s interspersed authorial comments throughout the novel. Sometimes this is done through remarks with a knowledge that the characters do not possess. It is not a matter of dramatic irony, however; the interruptions are exclusively historical elaborations with tangential facts that have no bearing on the action. But it would be erroneous to assume that they are purely parenthetical; rather they have the function of highlighting the different states of Antarctic knowledge of the time of writing and time of action. The following passage is a typical example of this device:

It is now known, also, by means of the toils and courage of various seamen, including those of the persevering and laborious Wilkes, the most industrious and the least rewarded of all the navigators who have ever worked for the human race in this dangerous and exhausting occupation, that a continent is there also; but, at the period of which we are writing, the existence of the Shetlands and Palmer’s Land was the extent of the later discoveries in that part of the ocean. (181)

Since the return of the U.S. Exploring Expedition, Wilkes had been severely criticized and was even court-martialed. Hence this section is written as a sort of public defense, drawing attention to the accomplishments of Wilkes and away from the controversial man himself. It is not merely a neutral vindication of a public figure, however, since Cooper and Wilkes were personal acquaintances.9 Thus, in the same manner as in The Monikins, Cooper uses the Antarctic representation to a certain degree as a means to engage with a contemporary public issue, although in the previous book it was expressly political, whereas here it is mostly a matter of tarnished reputation.10

8 Philip L. Mitterling notes, however, that the American version of the encounter differs significantly from Bellinghausen’s account, which makes no mention of anything beyond a conversation on sealing (50).
9 In fact, Cooper and Wilkes were staying together at a hotel in Philadelphia as Wilkes was in the process of preparing his Narrative for publication in 1844 (Stanton 309). Cooper wrote to his wife: “Charles Wilkes is in this house, superintending the publication of his work. It will be a very magnificent book, and I make no doubt will do him credit” (Letters 2:525-26). In a letter to his wife, following the trial, Cooper writes of his relief that Wilkes was acquitted, albeit reprimanded: “You have seen Wilkes’ sentence. It is just what I expected; relieving him from opprobrium of all sort, though the secretary’s reprimand manifests feeling” (Letters 2:483).
10 Moreover, as Gates has noted, this digression also shows that Cooper still follows Wilkes’ itinerary closely. Just at the point when Gardiner is about to leave Cape Horn and proceed into the Antarctic, Cooper interrupts the narrative to pay tribute to Wilkes, at the exact same location that Wilkes had interrupted his narrative to pay tribute to Captain James King (Gates 1071). King was one of Cook’s officers who performed important astronomical and geographical work during Cook’s last voyage and also prepared the journals for publication after Cook’s death.
The split historical perspective seems designed to properly convey the
trepidation that the sealers must have felt before voyaging into completely
unknown territory. In order to achieve this effect, Cooper contrasts the two
perspectives:

It was an enterprising and manly thing for a little vessel like the
Sea Lion to steer with an undeviating course into the mysterious
depths of the antarctic circle—mysterious far more in that day,
than at the present hour. [...] At the time of which we are
writing, much less was known of the antarctic regions than is
known to-day; and even now our knowledge is limited to a few
dreary outlines, in which barrenness and ice compete for the
mastery. Wilkes, and his competitors, have told us that a vast
frozen continent exists in that quarter of the globe; but even their
daring and perseverance have not been able to determine more
than the general fact. (190)

As he writes, Wilkes had not been able to ascertain much, but the things he did
find were momentous: the establishment of the existence of an Antarctic
continent and an exhaustive description of the frigid climate. This was enough
to temporarily lay to rest the imaginings of holes-in-the-poles, open waters at
the South Pole, or tropical islands with lost tribes.

Throughout the novel Cooper uses the device of suppressing the exact
location of Sealer's Land, which of course is a reference to the secrecy of the
sealing business. It is first announced as a conventional gesture of
verisimilitude, involving "an explicitly documentary posture that confused fact
with fiction—a method especially suited to events and places so remote or
secret as to be practically unverifiable [...]" (Fausett 162). With reference to the
sealers' right to secrecy, Cooper claims his novel to be the more true precisely
because he will not give it its realistic markers. Reynolds writes about the
competitive conditions of the sealing trade in his report on Pacific islands, etc.:
“In the history of the seal-trade, secrecy in what they know, has been deemed a
part, and a most important part, too, of their capital. There is nothing more
common at this time, than that islands are frequented for animal-fur, and their
positions known to no one on board but the captain [...]” (“Report” 228).
Morrell also refers to this when he promises that, despite all that he has
divulged in the narrative of his voyages, he has retained enough of potentially
lucrative information to ensure that any prospective partner in future projects
“would not only realize incautable profits by the first voyage, but might
monopolize the invaluable trade as long as they please; because I alone know
where these islands are situated” (466). T. Philbrick suggests that Cooper actually adopted the device of suppressing information from Morrell (217).

The scarcity of seals made information about sealing grounds valuable property. Indeed, as the deacon says to Gardiner: “What would you say to the note of a sealer who should lay down an island where the seals lie about on the beach like pigs in a pen, sunning themselves? Would you not call a chart so noted a treasure?” (72). This is probably as close to a description of a sealer’s version of the land of milk and honey as you can get, and the name, Sealer's Land, is aptly chosen to convey this. Secrecy was of course of the essence in being able to capitalize on that knowledge; people like Morrell and Fanning, who publicized their findings, were exceptions. Even Stimson, for all his intuitive Christianity, is unequivocal on this point:

Nobody is obliged to tell of his sealing station. I was aboard one of the very first craft that found out that the South Shetlands was a famous place for seals, and no one among us thought it necessary to tell it to all the world. Some men are weak enough to put such [sic] discoveries in the newspapers; but, for my part, I think it quite enough to put them in the log. (188)

In honor of such secrecy, Cooper claims to be unable to divulge the exact location of the Sealer's Land. For instance, when the deacon first sees the charts provided by Tom Daggott, Cooper honors the sealers’ code of secrecy:

The first of the charts opened, the deacon saw at a glance, was that of the antarctic circle. There, sure enough, was laid down in ink, three or four specks for islands, with lat. — °, —”, and long. — °, —”, written out at its side. We are under obligations not to give the figures that stand on the chart, for the discovery is deemed to be important, by those who possess the secret, even to the present hour. We are at liberty to tell the whole story, with this one exception […] (53)

It is hard to imagine that there would still be uncharted or unvisited islands in this part of the Antarctic at the time of writing, after almost thirty years of extensive exploitation. Cooper stretches the point of realism in a conspicuous and almost impish fashion, especially since he continues to give more and more specific hints. What at first seems as part of a simple documentary posture gradually takes the shape of a puzzle for the reader. First Cooper gives the position to within five degrees of longitude, not very far in those latitudes: “nearer than that we do not intend to carry the over-anxious reader, let his curiosity be as lively as it may” (258). Then, in spite of this proclamation, he narrows down the possible geographical location even further towards the end
of the novel by stating that it lies roughly ten degrees to the south of Cape Horn (329). Combined, we get the approximate position of 66° S, 65-75° W. Cooper evidently wants the reader to be able to get a fairly specific location. The position indicated is not very far off from Trinity Land, to the southwest of the South Shetlands and probably part of the Antarctic Peninsula or an island just off its coast. At the time of action in The Sea Lions, this was the southernmost confirmed sighting of land. It was discovered and named by Edward Bransfield on 30 Jan. 1820 (Gurney 160), which would actually coincide with the Sea Lions’ stay there. On Bransfield’s map it is a brief tracing of coastline starting at 60°S, 64°W, and projecting to the southwest, simply marked, “Trinity Land partly covered with snow” (facs. in Headland 114). However, it seems as if its exact location and discoverer was a matter of some uncertainty in the decades after. The entry “South Polar Islands” in the Philadelphia publication The Encyclopaedia of Geography (1837) attributes it to Bellinghausen and suggests that it “may probably be found to consist also of a cluster of islands” (173). W. H. B. Webster, writing about a voyage in 1829, simply states that they “were coasting along a tract of land […] to the southward of the South Shetland group, and called by the sealers Trinity Land” (135). It is impossible to tell for certain whether the location of Cooper’s Sealer’s Land is intentional, but as will be clear from the following, this strikes a central theme in the novel—accepting the truth of the Trinity.

An Antarctic Morality Tale: Spiritual Regeneration and Sublimity

Cooper’s strategy of careful realism is linked to the overarching spiritual theme of the novel, because in certain respects The Sea Lions is an American “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” Both are concerned with matters of faith and redemption in the Antarctic. Both also came after a defining moment of exploration that authoritatively established a unified view of the Antarctic in their respective spheres, i.e. Cook’s voyage in the case of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Wilkes’s in Cooper’s, and in both the representation of the Antarctic is realistic. It may perhaps seem odd to discuss “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” in terms of realism, but I am referring only to its treatment of Antarctic material. Just as Cooper drew directly on the journals of Wilkes and others, Coleridge may have drawn inspiration from Cook’s journals to form the bleak and desolate imagery of the Antarctic:11

11 John Livingstone Lowes remarks that there are several textual parallelisms between Cook’s journal and passages from “The Ancient Mariner” (45-47, 90, 478n).
Mist and Snow,
And it grew word’rous cauld:
And Ice mast-high came floating by
As green as Emerauld.

And thro’ the drifts the snowy cliffs
Did send a dismal sheen;
Ne shapes of men ne beast we ken—
The Ice was all between.

The Ice was here, the Ice was there,
The Ice was all around: It crack’d and growl’d and roar’d and
howl’d— (1:49-59)

The two texts also occupy a similar historical position, being preceded by fantastic and utopian texts written before the defining moments of exploration. The precursors of Cooper we have seen, and in a British context there is Robert Paltock’s The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins (1751). As an extract of the synoptic title has it, the novel relates Wilkins’s “Shipwreck near the South Pole; his wonderful Passage thro’ a subterraneous Cavern into a kind of new World” (xxv). The British development of the Antarctic theme here—from Paltock, through Cook, to Coleridge—describes a similar trajectory to that of the American fictions in this study: from speculative fiction via exploration to Antarctic realism.

In Walden (1854), Henry David Thoreau also indicates that something has happened to the Antarctic. In his somewhat cryptic manner, he sees the unsatisfactory results of the U.S. Exploring Expedition primarily as an exhortation to seek self-knowledge:

What was the meaning of that South-Sea Exploring Expedition, with all its parade and expense, but an indirect recognition of the fact, that there are continents and seas in the moral world, to which every man is an isthmus or an inlet, yet unexplored by him, but that it is easier to sail many thousand miles through cold and storm and cannibals, in a government ship, with five hundred men and boys to assist one, than it is to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one’s being alone. (Walden 310-12)

Such efforts are necessarily futile, he seems to think: “Yet do this even till you can do better, and you may perhaps find some ‘Symmes’ Hole’ by which to get at the inside at last” (312). The rhetoric of American Antarctic exploration, starting with Symmes, had been that the gaze of the enlightened explorer could penetrate even the most inaccessible areas and secrets of the world—remember
Palmer's sublime human will above, and see discussion of Morrell below. Thoreau reverses the process: exploration becomes introspection. The Symmesian hole-in-the-pole still gives access to interior worlds, but now in a psychological or spiritual sense. Thoreau exhorts the reader, with a borrowed phrase, to “be Expert in home-cosmography” (310).12

Thoreau's call for introspection rather than continuous external exploration indicates that there has been a shift in the development of the Antarctic discourse, which also affects how the Antarctic is conceptualized in fiction. Whereas all previous works were fantastical projection on the great unknown of the Antarctic, Cooper's *Sea Lions* instead uses the real Antarctic as a backdrop for a tale of spiritual awakening. The utopias or mysteries in tropical settings have been replaced by a struggle against the Antarctic elements. As in Coleridge, however, the realistic setting becomes the scene of a tale of morality and spirituality, a site where the extremity and remoteness of the landscape provides a condensed demonstration of questions of faith. Susan Fenimore Cooper recognizes this in an introduction to the novel: “While the outer movement of the plot is connected with the two schooners, there is a secret and a deeper spirit at work at the heart of the narrative” (Coleridge Gallery 390). Even though the novel is not explicitly allegorical, there is nevertheless a persistent symbolic dimension. It is concerned with a struggle between good and evil that is exteriorized in a classical manner in the doubling of ships and protagonists. Through this device, Cooper is able to convey his “great theme of regeneration,” from life through death to rebirth, enacted in this case in the course of an Antarctic seasonal cycle from summer to spring (T. Philbrick 244). T. Philbrick also identifies Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” as the prototype in this respect (229). Both tales have the same type of transgression at their center: in Coleridge the killing of the albatross, associated with Christ, and in *The Sea Lions*, Gardiner’s denial of the divinity of Christ.

Even the principal characters seem to have the quality of allegorical types. Gardiner, the hero, sets out for the Antarctic, which will become the stage for his struggle with faith. Daggett, the greedy captain of the second *Sea Lion*, functions as Gardiner’s dark shadow. Predictably, it is Gardiner who has regenerative potential, and his *Sea Lion* prevails in the end, while the other ship and captain are destroyed. The deep connection between Gardiner and Daggett is symbolically enacted in the whaling episode where their lines are crossed by a freakish coincidence (149-65). Allen F. Stein observes that it is “extraneous as a plot element,” but that it has the function of establishing the theme of doubling

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12 From William Habbington’s “To My Honoured Friend Sir Ed. P. Knight.”
(249). On the surface—literally and figuratively—the episode is an action-packed nautical adventure, but it is fraught with a deeper symbolism of entangled lines of fate. When Daggett says, “Providence has fastened us to this crittur’, as if on purpose,” the scene is infused with dramatic irony (163). As they move in for the kill, the scene foreshadows the plotline of the subsequent Antarctic drama. Both strike simultaneously at the whale—the “dreaded monarch” (160)—but it is Gardiner who comes out victorious. This should be read in relation to how it is Gardiner who is ultimately regenerated when he reconciles with the “dread Being,” while Daggett is destroyed because of his moral failure (iii). Robert W. Neeser remarks that Cooper allowed himself some poetic license in the whaling episode; actual skippers would never have gone in the boats, leaving the ships in the hands of subordinates. This may be correct, but having them stay on ship would hardly have been as suggestive. Given Cooper’s nautical background, we might even assume that he knew very well that he was deviating from strict realism here, but that he deliberately made this sacrifice for the sake of his spiritual allegory.

The ship beset by storm and calamity is a commonly used symbol for the testing of faith, and seems to have the same conventional function here. Significantly, it is Daggett’s Sea Lion that is destroyed in the Antarctic, whereas Gardiner makes it back, but not unchanged. The ship that finally returns from the Antarctic tribulations is a merged version of both Sea Lions, since the crews have to burn parts of their ships for fuel, and need to cannibalize the wreck in order to make Gardiner’s ship seaworthy (383-84). The merging of the ships mirrors the unification of faith that constitutes the framework of the novel. The “Twin Sea Lions” (145)13 and their captains exteriorize the internal spiritual process of the morality tale and provide a decidedly gothic inflection. The parallelism of the vessels and their captains is so thoroughly realized that T. Philbrick remarks that “the novel seems a partial fulfillment of Cooper’s earlier intention to write a tale ‘in which ships would be the only actors’” (255).

Whereas Daggett represents the dangers of giving in to worldly temptation, the ever-didactic Stephen Stimson represents the spiritual guide who will help Gardiner make the right choices in the end. In an otherwise favorable review of The Sea Lions, Herman Melville humorously describes the odd figure:

Then we have one Stimson, an old Kennebunk boatsteerer, and Professor of Theology, who, wintering on an ice-berg, discourses

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13 Daggett remarks on the similarity: “If they lay in a shipyard, side by side, I don’t think you could tell one from the other” (114).
most unctuously upon various dogmas. This honest old worthy may possibly be recognized for an old acquaintance by the readers of Cooper’s novels.—But who would have dreamt of his turning up at the South Pole? (“Cooper’s New Novel” 236)

What Melville intimates is that Stimson is really Natty Bumppo transposed into the Antarctic, which is not an unfair description. But Stimson is more than just the voice of piety; it is because of his expert advice on Antarctic navigation and polar survival that Gardiner and crew are able to survive. Gates has traced much of this advice to Wilkes’s Narrative (1107), which means that Stimson is an integral part of the realistic apparatus of the novel. However incongruent Stimson’s presence might seem at times, his dual roles as expert polar and religious navigator are central for the consummation of both the adventure and spiritual plots, as well as for illustrating their interdependence. Gardiner’s deficiency in “many attainments that mark the thorough sea-dog” mirrors his need for spiritual regeneration, and Stimson is necessary for the completion of both (98). The first time Stimson speaks of faith in the novel is just after the Sea Lions have miraculously avoided shipwreck: “‘God is with us!’ exclaimed the young master—‘blessed for ever be his holy name.’ ‘And that of his only and true Son,’ responded a voice from one at his elbow” (132). Uncannily, Stimson sneaks up from behind and addresses the exact issue that is at the center of Gardiner’s and Mary’s crisis of faith: Gardiner’s denial of the divinity of Christ. Stimson’s discourses on faith throughout the novel are so exactly gauged to bring Gardiner over to Mary’s views that he could be considered an extension of her character. After they have returned from the Antarctic and Gardiner has proven worthy of his wife to be, he does “not let Stimson pass out of his sight, as is customary with seamen when they quit a vessel,” but keeps him close as if to signal his continued dedication to the insights of his spiritual enlightenment (431).

The novel contains two more principal characters that are crucial for the plot development and as moral examples to counterpoint the Antarctic adventures: deacon Pratt, who owns Gardiner’s ship, and his niece Mary, who is also Gardiner’s beloved. Mary, as is signaled by her name, is the idealized spiritual as well as romantic object. Her ideal influence over Gardiner stretches all the way into the Antarctic. Gardiner will have to prove himself worthy of her love—somewhat in the manner of the relationship between Goldenelaw and Anna in The Monikins. Meanwhile, she is chastely awaiting his return in the Arcadia of home with its orchards and cherry blossoms. As Melville remarks: “Somewhat in the pleasant spirit of the Mahometan, this; who rewards all true
believers with a houri” (“Cooper’s New Novel” 236). Deacon Pratt, on the other hand, is such a manifestation of greed that his character becomes a caricature. He even dies clutching a bagful of gold, and the narrator tells us that “there is much reason to believe that the demons who had watched him, and encouraged him in his besetting sin, laughed at this consummation of their malignant arts!” (417). He serves as an example of religious hypocrisy, the counterpoint to Stimson’s and Mary’s uneducated and purely intuitive faith.

The primary focus of the novel is Gardiner’s spiritual journey, however, and, to a lesser extent, Daggett’s corresponding spiritual failure. S. F. Cooper sums up the merged narratives of adventure and regeneration in characteristically dramatic style: “The young man sails on his daring voyage; he reaches his mysterious bourne; and here, in those distant icy regions, comparatively alone with his Maker, amid shipwreck, and disaster, and suffering, his mind is enlightened by the fulness of truth” (391). But, in this Antarctic divine comedy, Gardiner and Daggett seem to be infused with more meaning than if they were merely individual characters. Indeed, historically, the Gardiners and Daggetts were two of the principal families of Long Island and Martha’s Vineyard respectively, so perhaps the two captains are as close to Everymans of the seas as it is possible to get.14

The persistent spiritual theme in The Sea Lions has occasioned many critics to agree with Steven Harthorn’s remark that the novel is somewhat prone to “preachiness,” citing a contemporary review that complained that it was “more of a sermon than a romance” (I). T. Philbrick has shown, however, that those two aspects of the novel, the sermon and the romance, are inseparable, and that The Sea Lions combines “the two great tendencies of [Cooper’s] literary and philosophical development, the progress from romance to realism and the shift from a conception of the universe as the arena in which individual man wins fulfillment to a conception of the universe as the material expression of God’s purpose […]” (209). But in The Sea Lions it is a mystical realism, where the real is the source of mystery, and where religion is immanent in the world (Lenz, Poetics 89). S. F. Cooper testified to her father’s deep interest in the literal fulfillment of prophecy, and The Sea Lions seems to explore the same territory (Household Edition xxj). Already in the novel’s subtitle, The Last Sealers, the real and the mystical are interlinked by the signaled connection to Christ’s parables of the lost sheep, lost silver piece, or the prodigal son in Luke

14 There is even a Gardiner’s Island in Gardiner’s Bay off the eastern tip of Long Island. Both island and bay are named after Lion, sometimes Lyon, Gardiner (1599-1663), who established the first English Settlement in New York in 1639. This episode is related in the novel; we are also told that Roswell Gardiner is a direct descendant of Lion (24).
15. The sealers are not only lost to the world when they are trapped in Antarctica, they are also spiritually lost and in need of being found. Or be found wanting, as the case may be, for Cooper’s narrative has a marked judgmental streak in it as well.

Although the spiritual dimension of the novel is fairly straightforward on its own, Cooper wants to ensure that the readers start out with this idea firmly planted in their minds. He sets the agenda in the preface: “In this book the design has been to portray [sic] man on a novel field of action, and to exhibit his dependence on the hand that does not suffer a sparrow to fall unheeded” (vi). Unlike Poe’s fantastic “region of novelty and wonder” (Pym 24.4), this refers to the new Antarctic geography, which is transformed into the scene of spiritual regeneration and where the extremity of nature provides a lesson in humility. We have to assume that this is a different form of humility from the one Cooper satirized in The Moniker. There Golden calf found the moniker clerical dogmas to be the same as those of Christendom, believing themselves to be “a miserable lost set of wretches” whose only means of salvation is “humility—humility—humility. Once thoroughly humbled to a degree that put them above the danger of backsliding, they obtained glimpses of security, and were gradually elevated to the hopes and condition of the just” (308-09). In the preface to The Sea Lions, Cooper explicitly links the concept of humility to the Antarctic environment. He transposes the characters into this defamiliarizing environment, no less strange for having been discovered, and then reduces their existence to the bare essentials, both physically and spiritually:

If any thing connected with the hardness of the human heart could surprise us, it surely would be the indifference with which men live on, engrossed by their worldly objects, amid the sublime natural phenomena that so eloquently and unceasingly speak to their imaginations, affections, and judgments. [...] This indifference, in a great measure, comes of familiarity; the things that we so constantly have before us becoming as a part of the air we breathe, and as little regarded. [...] It is the want of a due sense of humility, and a sad misconception of what we are, and for what we were created, that misleads us in the due estimate of our own insignificance, as compared with the majesty of God. (iii-iv)

What better location to demonstrate the diminutiveness of mankind than the immense Antarctic landscape? No place is so isolated or exposed to the elements, as is demonstrated to the sealers when Daggett’s ship is wrecked: “Then it was that the vast superiority of nature over the resources of man made
itself apparent. The people of the two vessels stood aghast with this sad picture of their own insignificance before their eyes” (317). It is not only a terrifying landscape, however, since the admission of one’s own insignificance is also an acknowledgment of the greatness of something else, in the Christian ethos of the novel. As Gardiner exclaims before the majestic features of the Antarctic: “if any place on earth can particularly incline one to worship God, surely it must be some such spot as this!” (238). This indicates Cooper’s main purpose in transposing his hero to the Antarctic: to show mankind in its real proportion, as placed by the Divine Being “as an atom, amid the myriads of the hosts of heaven and earth” (iii). The adventure story is just the vehicle for this superior motive. Stimson sums up the order of priorities of the two levels of narrative: “No scalin’, sir, can be half as important as this reading of the good book in the right spirit” (347).

In the preface, Cooper states clearly what the adversary in this game is: “This pride of reason is one of the most insinuating of our foibles, and is to be watched as a most potent enemy” (v). To take pride in human reason is to him a form of idolatry: “We hear a great deal of god-like minds, and of the far-reaching faculties we possess; and it may all be worthy of our eulogiums, until we compare ourselves in these, as in other particulars, with Him who produced them. Then, indeed, the utter insignificance of our means becomes too apparent to admit of a cavil” (iv). This is made explicit as Mary voices the same idea in admonishing Gardiner for his religious insolence: “You worship your reason, instead of the one true and living God. This is idolatry of the worst character, since the idol is never seen by the devotee, and he does not know of its existence” (101). Arguably, the most central religious idea of the novel is thus the necessity of abandoning reason in matters of faith. It hinges on two contradictory statements of creed: first Stimson’s intuitive version of belief: “A Deity I could understand would be no God for me” (359-60); and Gardiner’s negation of the same concept: “The idea of not having a Deity that he could not comprehend had long been one of [his] favourite rules of faith” (360). Gardiner does not accept the divinity of Christ since the miraculous cannot be encompassed by his previous knowledge or experience. Cooper adds the comment that “his exception was one of the most obvious of the suggestions of the pride of reason, and just so much in direct opposition to the great law of regeneration, which has its very gist in the converse of this feeling—Faith” (360).15

15 S. F. Cooper claims Stimson’s view to be her father’s own, whereas he held Gardiner’s “to be puerile to a degree that might be almost called absurd” (Household Edition xx).
Thus far I have tried to show how Cooper employs the realistic discourse on the Antarctic to reinterpret it as a site of revealed religion. The historical novel is used as an illustration of a spiritual narrative, which is executed with almost complete consistency. There are, however, certain points where the two types of discourse are at variance with each other; more specifically, where the discourse of realism complicates a unified moral reading.

The first example concerns the realistic embellishment of the character of Daggett, who in many ways occupies the position opposite from Gardiner in the stereotypical gallery of characters in the spiritual allegory. Whereas Gardiner has regenerative potential in the form of some intuitive notion of faith, Daggett clearly has not. During the course of the novel, Daggett is repeatedly censured for his “propensity to the ‘root of all evil’” (227). For example, his character is described in a representative passage: “The lust of gold was strong within him” and that his “whole existence is concentrated in the accumulation of property” (239). T. Philbrick even goes so far as to characterize Daggett as “clearly evil, a brutalized hypocrite whose only motive is greed” (250). This would perhaps have been a valid evaluation, had it not been for some events in relation to his death that give nuance to his character. His deathbed scene starts out conventionally enough, where the sinner sees the error of his ways:

As his last hour approached, his errors and mistakes became more distinctly apparent, as is usual with men, while his sins of omission seemed to crowd the vista of by-gone days. Then it was that the whole earth did not contain that which, in his dying eyes, would prove an equivalent for one hour passed in a sincere, devout, and humble service of the Deity! (388)

His repentance is not without qualifications, however, as he says to Gardiner: “I’m afraid that I’ve loved money most too well […] but I hope it was not so much for myself, as for others. A wife and children, Gar’ner, tie a man to ‘arth in a most unaccountable manner” (388-89). In contrast to the independent Gardiner, idealistic rejection of the material world is a luxury Daggett cannot afford. By endowing Daggett’s character with a human dimension beyond the stereotypical profiteer, Cooper comes dangerously close to subverting the spiritual allegory. If Daggett’s actions really were selflessly motivated, why is he punished? The novel does not dwell on such ambivalence, however. One paragraph later Daggett is buried in the snow and we are told how he is construed as a warning example: “When Roswell Gardiner saw this man, who had so long adhered to him, like a leech, in the pursuit of gold, laid a senseless corpse among the frozen flakes of the antarctic seas, he felt that a lively
admonition of the vanity of the world was administered to himself” (389). Daggett is the physical manifestation of Gardiner's moral shortcomings as in the traditional doppelganger-structure, where one has to be destroyed in order for the other to live. This is a continuation of the analogy between the twin Sea Lions and their respective captains. Just as Gardiner is completed through the negative example of Daggett, so Gardiner's ship has to be complemented with salvaged timber from Daggett's. According to Stein, this signifies “the fusion of Gardiner's baser nature with his better elements into a regenerate identity” (252). But, then again, if this is to hold true, we have to accept that the death of one is justifiable as part of the redemption of another, and as Cooper elaborates the realistic elements of the novel, the moral tendency becomes extremely precarious.

The moral tendency of the novel is further complicated by the fact that every single development of the plot originates from a central act of deceit: the deacon's appropriation of the information about Sealer's Land and the hidden treasure. He finagles this information from the dying Thomas Daggett and tampers with it to keep it from Jason Daggett, its rightful heir. Everything else follows from this: the Sea Lions are sent to the Antarctic, Daggett has to pursue Gardiner since he does not have the proper information, Gardiner eludes Daggett, Daggett arrives at Sealer's Land late in the season, they are forced to winter there, Daggett dies, Gardiner completes his spiritual regeneration, and finally Gardiner returns home as an affluent man and gets his bride. The sub-plot of the pirate treasure appears like an afterthought that has as its sole purpose to counterbalance this basic injustice. In fact, it can hardly even be described as a plot element, since it is only briefly mentioned in the novel. The expectations of swashbuckling raised by the phrase “pirate treasure” are frustrated; the actual treasure hunt is not even included. Significantly, however, we are told what is done with the treasure: Gardiner and Mary distributes the money “among the families of those who had lost their lives at Sealer’s Land,” i.e. Daggett and most of his crew (430).16 By this transaction they have earned the right to the riches they have made on the sealing voyage and the inheritance

16 Willard Hallam Bonner has argued that the inclusion of the treasure is a reference to the legendary Captain Kidd, who actually cached money and jewels on Gardiner’s Island, an episode Cooper treated in his History of the Navy. It is also referred to in relation to Widow White who, had she comprehended what Tom Daggett told Deacon Pratt, “Not only would an unknown sealing-island been laid before the East-enders, but twenty such islands, and keys without number, each of which contained more hidden treasure than ‘Garrner’s Island,’ Oyster Pond, the Plumb and Fisher’s, and all the coasts of the Sound put together, enriched as each and all of these places were thought to be, by the hidden deposits of Kidd” (Sea Lions 59). Even though this plotline is rather peripheral in The Sea Lions, Bonner observes that it “does present in American fiction […] perhaps the first instance of the conventional South Sea treasure island chart found among the effects of a mysterious dying sailor, thus anticipating Robert Louis Stevenson and a hundred others” (23).
from the deacon. Any acknowledgment of the irony in the fact that the prime cause of the comedic structure of the novel is a theft by a churchman is conspicuously absent. Pyne makes the valid point, however, that there are two different kinds of treasures in the novel: the pirate booty, which is morally tainted “illicit wealth,” and the treasure of Sealer’s Land, which is “natural wealth” and therefore morally just (166). Therefore, “the true treasures of nature, not those of piratical humans, become the basis for Gardiner’s prosperity and his revivified faith in a Christian God” (Pyne 167). Certainly, this perspective is present in the novel, but it still does not take into account the deacon’s fraudulent actions. Perhaps Cooper intimates that his death expiates this crime.

Furthermore, there seems to be a tacit acknowledgment in the novel of the necessity of a more pragmatic approach to morality, which goes against the grain of the spiritual narrative. This becomes explicit when Mary expresses her horror at the thought that the Sea Lion might be engaged in slave trade (260). A little later there is a related scene where she criticizes the idea of trade in general: “Ah! why cannot men be content with the blessings that Providence places within our immediate reach, that they must make distant voyages to accumulate others!” (285). The deacon responds: “You like your tea, I fancy, Mary Pratt—and the sugar in it, and your silks and ribbons that I’ve seen you wear; how are you to get such matters if there’s no going on v’y’ges? Tea and sugar, and silks and satins don’t grow along with the clams on ‘Yster Pond’” (285). Mary sensibly changes the subject. The model heroine here appears somewhat less than ideal. Daggett had confessed to greed, but with the object of supporting his dependents, while Mary’s small indulgences are luxury items.

**The Antarctic Sublime**

In spite of the transition to a realistic mode of representation, the Antarctic of The Sea Lions is not limited to realism. The Antarctic landscape becomes infused with mysticism as it figures as a living entity with sublime essence. In this respect it has many similarities with the animistic wilderness of Cooper’s frontier narratives. “Cooper’s myth of the wilderness was greatly influenced by such romantic conceptions as the myth of nature as pervaded by spirit and the aesthetic ideal of sublimity,” John G. Cawelti observes: “However, Cooper’s particular notion of the wilderness was also shaped by what he had come to believe about the American Indian and his relationship to the land” (154). But whereas Cooper’s American nature is primarily imbued with Native American
spiritualism, albeit mediated through an Anglo-American consciousness, the untouched Antarctic is exclusively Christian territory. In *The Sea Lions*, Cooper takes the empirical material of the Antarctic and remolds it into the source for revealed religion, where the sublimity of the realistic landscape communicates and confirms the presence of divinity. Paradoxically, the realistic mode of representation becomes a vehicle for conveying something that is usually beyond the scope of realism.

Cooper connects the agency of spiritual regeneration to ideas of the sublime, specifically in nature. As was seen above, this is addressed in the very first sentence of the novel where Cooper discusses human indifference to creation despite “the sublime natural phenomena that so eloquently and unceasingly speak to their imaginations, affections, and judgments” (iii). His object is to launch his main characters into the Antarctic to be broken down by the environment, have their insignificance in the scale of things demonstrated, and ultimately instilled “with a proper sense of the power of the dread Being” (iii). The application of the concept of the sublime throughout the novel seems to be in very general terms only; there are no overt references to the philosophical treatments of the idea. But, then, the general concept had certainly been part of common cultural parlance since the 18th century, especially in educated circles (Phillips x). From Cooper's usage, however, it is clear that it primarily designates something that cannot be grasped by reason. One of the main themes of the novel, the truth of the divinity of Christ, is explicitly linked to the sublime. In the preface, Cooper introduces it in the rather odd context of a discussion of the facial features of the Arctic explorer John Alexander Franklin and Benjamin Franklin. He makes the bizarre claim that all bearers of the name Franklin carry some inexplicable resemblance:

by one of those secret laws which just as much baffle our means of comprehension, as the greatest of all our mysteries, the incarnation of the Son of God—a resemblance that, of itself, would go to show that they are of the same race […] a likeness that lies as much beyond the grasp of that reason of which we are so proud, as the sublimest facts taught by induction, science, or revelation. (vii)

I take it that the “sublimest facts” refers to some idea of phenomena that are rationally inexplicable but whose effects can nevertheless be observed. This strange but incontrovertible likeness, Cooper seems to say, reveals hidden connections in nature that demonstrate the presence of a divine organization of the world, but whose principles are not a part of the world.
There are three principal agents that bring about Gardiner's conversion. The first two are the influence of Mary, especially through her directed Bible studies, and Stimson's pious discourse. But "the most important cause," T. Philbrick remarks, "is the steady and overwhelming influence of his Antarctic environment" (240), effected through the agency of the sublime. When Gardiner has his epiphany, it appropriately occurs on "positively the severest night" within the regenerative cycle of the Antarctic seasons (362). It comes at a point when the sublimity of the Antarctic experience converges with religious symbolism. Never before has Gardiner "been made so conscious of his own insignificance" as this night when he contemplates the constellation of stars known as the Southern Cross (358). In times when sailors navigated largely by observations of familiar star constellations, the Southern Cross was the primary guide in celestial navigation in southern latitudes. Palmer also incorporated a similar image into "Thulia": "While over-head, a holy sign, / The southern cross, is in the sky; / Assurance that an eye divine / Watches the exile from on high" (1.21-24). The suggestiveness of both marine and spiritual navigation affects Gardiner as well:

It now attracted Roswell's gaze; and coming as it did after so much reading, so many conversations with Stephen, and addressing itself to one whose heart was softened by the fearful circumstances that had so long environed the sealers, it is not surprising that it brought our young master to meditate seriously on his true condition in connection with the atonement that he was willing to admit had been made for him, in common with all of the earth, at the very moment he hesitated to believe that the sufferer was, in any other than a metaphorical sense, the Son of God. (358)

The Antarctic once again functions as the interface between the earthly and spiritual realms, as it did in Prospero's "The Atlantis." The distance here is immense, however: the stars twinkle "in their diminutive but sublime splendour" (264); as if to remind the reader of the unattainable knowledge of the "mystery that no human mind can scan" (v). The "fearful circumstances" that have beset the sealers and that have forced them to struggle for survival against the Antarctic winter, may be read in relation to Edmund Burke's stipulations on the nature of the sublime: "that the idea of bodily pain [...] is productive of the sublime. [...] that the sublime is an idea belonging to self-preservation. That it is therefore one of the most affecting we have. That its strongest emotion is an emotion of distress, and that no pleasure from a positive cause belongs to it" (79).
Trapped in the Antarctic and struggling for self-preservation, Gardiner is at his most vulnerable. He is consequently in the position where the effect of sublimity is optimal. This moment of revelation is the first step towards that humbling sense of insignificance that Cooper described in the preface and returns to here:

We suppose that a sense of humility is the first healthful symptom that shows itself in every man’s moral regeneration. A meek appreciation of his own station and character disposes him to receive revelation with respect, and to have faith in things that are not seen. Perhaps no one over whom the sword of fate was not actually suspended by a hair, was ever better placed to admit the lessons of humility than was Roswell Gardiner at that very moment. (359)

The central tenet of Gardiner’s personal philosophy that needs to be destroyed before he can complete his spiritual regeneration is his sense that “his reason must be satisfied” even in matters of faith (359). The Antarctic experience in its sublimity goes beyond the rational level and directly affects the visceral. The sublime supplies exactly that emotive response to something incommensurable that is the novel’s religious rationale. Adam Phillips remarks that “the Sublime makes reasoning impossible and is the antithesis of philosophical enquiry because it is always that which is in excess of any kind of limit or boundary” (xxi-xxii). Gardiner's attempt to approach the problem of faith from a rational direction fails, but the sublimity of the Antarctic landscape bypasses reason and puts existence in perspective. Related to the idea of self-preservation is the sense of losing control; the sublime is something that overpowers and imposes its own will. Cooper's allusion to the sword of Damocles symbolizes this sense of powerlessness in a striking manner (359). Gardiner is the most susceptible to Christian doctrines at the point where he is the most vulnerable and entrapped.

Cooper is clearly not interested in debating the sublime as an aesthetic category, unlike Burke whose concern, according to Phillips, was finding “a secular language for profound human experience” (xii). In this sense, it can be said that Cooper appropriates that secular language to illustrate concerns of faith. Phillips points to a pertinent issue regarding Burke’s aestheticism: if the sublime is such a powerful communicator of feeling, “What, it could be asked, in an age newly skeptical of certain religious and epistemological assumptions was Nature, at its most dramatic trying to persuade us of?” (xii). Cooper’s response, as mediated through The Sea Lions, is clear: to demonstrate a sense of the infinite magnitude of God. He likewise conceptualizes “the sublime natural
phenomena” as communicating “eloquently and unceasingly” to those who are open to receive it (iii).

The Antarctic sublimity, both in the natural scenery and struggle for survival, works to bring Gardiner to see that God works directly in this world:

Who, and what was the Dread Being—dread in his Majesty and Justice, but inexhaustible in Love and Mercy—who used these exceeding means as mere instruments of his pleasure? and what was he himself, that he should presume to set up his miserable pride of reason, in opposition to a revelation supported by miracles that must be admitted to come through men inspired by the Deity, or rejected altogether.

In this frame of mind Roswell was made to see that Christianity admitted of no half-way belief; it was all true, or it was wholly false. (361)

Gardiner, of course, confesses to its being all true. Hence, since he cannot deny the evidence of divine work in the sublimity of the Antarctic, he can no longer deny that Christ is the Son of God. In perfect synchronicity with his moment of conversion, as Stein observes, “Gardiner hears a dreadful shriek from the quarters of Daggett and his men. He rushes there and finds several dead from the cold and Daggett dying” (251). There is no explicit causal link between the two, but on the level of the spiritual narrative, Daggett has been found wanting, which leads to the shedding of the unregenerate double. Cooper constructs the Antarctic as a crucible to which, as Russell T. Newman observes, he “sends two men in two identical ships to the same island for the same purpose” (69). As if to acknowledge that the testing is over, the Antarctic landscape responds: on the morning after, spring arrives, creating a flood of the thawing ice and snow, signaling a spring-cleaning with marked biblical connotations. It also becomes a demonstration of human transience:

It was soon ascertained that the recent deluge had swept all the ice and every trace of the dead into the sea. The body of Daggett had disappeared, with the snow-bank in which it had been buried; and all the carcases of the seals had been washed away. In a word, the rocks were as naked and as clean as if man’s foot had never passed over them. (394)

This is not to be construed as a token of the indifference of nature, however; Cooper immediately announces that “the late storm had been one of unusual intensity, and most probably of a character to occur only at long intervals” (394). The Antarctic landscape is a living entity that mystically reacts to those who venture there. It forgives and releases them, for the time being, although it
is apparently hypersensitive to human pride. When Hazard, the chief mate, trivializes the dangers of the surrounding volcanoes—“These volcanoes are nothin’ but playthings, a’ter all”—these instantly respond by “casting into the air a large flight of cinders and stones” (400). It is as if nature issues a reminder that they are only sinners in the hands of an angry God whose prerogative it is to destroy his adversaries or elevate the faithful, somewhat in the manner of the God in the book of Samuel: “The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; out of heaven shall he thunder upon them: the LORD shall judge the ends of the earth; and he shall give strength unto his king, and exalt the horn of his anointed” (1 Sam. 2:10). The Sea Lion is let off with a warning, however, and she is providentially guided through this awesome display, which impresses Gardiner deeply. The crew, however, are not as impressed: “Such is the difference between men whose hearts and spirits have submitted to the law of faith, and those who live on in the recklessness of the passing events of life!” (401). Even though they have been exposed to the sublimity of the Antarctic landscape to the same degree as their captains, petty crewmen are obviously not included in Cooper’s narrative of soul-searching, judgment, and regeneration. For all Cooper’s protestations to the contrary, redemption seems to be a matter for the intellectuals in the end.

When Gardiner’s spiritual regeneration is completed, he discovers that the world is once again a novel region. He has rid himself of the “vacant indifference” to even the “sublimest exhibition of the Almighty power” that has so far characterized him:

Now, how differently did he look upon natural objects, and their origin! If it were only an insect, his mind presented its wonderful mechanism, its beauty, its uses. No star seemed less than what science has taught us that it is; and the power of the Dread Being who had created all, who governed all, and who was judge of all, became an inseparable subject of contemplation, as he looked upon the least of his works. (401)

In this regard, the novel is a prototype of the modern Antarctic narrative in which the battle against the elements becomes a point of departure for introspection, as well as for finding and overcoming one’s limits, by which the sublimity of the polar landscape “serves to enoble man, who gains stature by his association with his titanic environment and by his combat with his elemental antagonists” (T. Philbrick 241). Stephen Pyne, for instance, describes how Robert Falcon Scott created a “moral universe” in his writings, where the “story became one not simply of man against nature but of man against
himself. The odyssey of the Polar Party is the great moral drama of Antarctica, and except for science fiction, which has followed Poe's example, imaginative literature has never moved beyond the episode” (171). But Cooper’s novel creates exactly such an episode some sixty years before Scott, where the Antarctic odyssey becomes a great moral drama of soul-searching and self-knowledge.

The Sea Lions is a modern Antarctic narrative in a more specific sense as well: it provides a detailed account of the practical side of dealing with the polar climate of the Antarctic, which of course was wholly absent from the previous fictions. The account of the preparations for meeting the Antarctic winter—with the cold ablutions, the proper insulation of the cabin, the scarcity of fuel, and the necessity of hot meals (330-33)—are all familiar aspects of the modern Antarctic narrative as we have learned to recognize them from the Heroic Age. Even their decision to “make dresses of skins” (345) in adaptation to the environment is prescient of the different choices of clothing made by Scott and Roald Amundsen. As the story goes, the pragmatic Amundsen learned from the Inuit to use animal fur whereas the formal Scott used Royal Navy issue fabrics, one important reason why the former triumphed and the latter failed. In fact, Glasberg performs a naturalistic reading of The Sea Lions, where the outcome depends on the factor of adaptation: “Daggett leads his ship to complete ruination, due to his inability to adapt, as Gardiner has done, to the Antarctic environment” (107). Both captains and their men undergo the same procedures of “hardening” before the cold, however, so it would not explain the different outcome literally (330). But in the spiritual narrative, Gardiner adapts to the mystical Antarctic environment and survives, whereas Daggett keeps to his old ways and is destroyed.

We saw in The Moniks how Cooper associated the grandeur of the Antarctic landscape with the sublimity of the Alps—a conventional setting for demonstrating the sublime. But the reference to the Alps signifies more to Cooper than just a metaphorical transference of aesthetic characteristics. T. Philbrick alerts us to the fact that the Alps have always had a mystical dimension in Cooper’s writings as a “religious symbol” (228). For instance, in Sketches of Switzerland (1836), Cooper writes about the Alps that “It was impossible to look at them without religious awe; and, irreverent as it may seem, I could hardly persuade myself I was not gazing at some of the sublime mysteries that lie beyond the grave” (1:71), and he also describes them as “the sublime altar that God has here reared in his own honour” (1:220). In The Headsman (1833) he describes how the Alps demonstrate “an humbling sense of
the dependence of man upon the grand and ceaseless Providence of God” (208). This resonates with a similar theme in The Sea Lions, but here the image of the Alps is invoked only to be immediately deemed as inadequate for properly communicating the impression of the Antarctic: “The glorious Alps themselves, those wonders of the earth, could scarcely compete in scenery with the views that nature lavished, in that remote sea, on a seeming void” (197). The rhetorical strategy of transposing an image for its similarity only to immediately state its difference seems to be logically contradictory and counterproductive. But it functions as a rhetorical device that illustrates the incommunicable effect of the sublime, which we also encountered in The Monikins.

In addition to the metaphor of the Alps, Cooper also imports a metaphor from Wilkes’s Narrative in order to properly communicate the Antarctic experience. When the Sea Lions try to navigate their way through a sea of icebergs, Cooper writes:

A distinguished navigator of our own time has compared the appearance of these bergs, after their regularity of shape is lost, and they begin to assume the fantastic outlines that uniformly succeed, to that of a deserted town, built of the purest alabaster, with its edifices crumbling under the seasons, and its countless unpeopled streets, avenues and alleys. (265)

Wilkes’s metaphor of a ghostly city becomes a haunting theme, extended for the duration of the scene with slight variations. At one point, we are told that the “spectral white” icebergs resembled a “wild and magnificent ruined city of alabaster that was floating about in the antarctic sea! […] The passages between the bergs, or what might be termed the streets and lanes of this mysterious-looking, fantastical, yet sublime city of the ocean, were numerous, and of every variety” (269). Even though the fantastic has been exorcised from the realistic plot, it thus makes its return through metaphor. The affective rhetorical figures of Romanticism are also clearly discernable when we are told that “the scene resembled one that the imagination might present to the mind in its highest flights,” and that it was a display of “fantastic images” (273). Obviously, since the image of the alabaster city is derived from Wilkes such romantic metaphors of the Antarctic landscape were not limited to fiction. For instance, Palmer described the Antarctic scenery as “an amphitheatre of sublime architecture” (App. 70). In fact, if we look at the passage in Wilkes’s Narrative from which Cooper borrowed the metaphor, we find that his description is actually the most Romantic of them all. He starts out by stating that the scene “recalled the
recollection,” as if to signal some vague, distant past “of ruined abbeys, castles, and caves, while here and there a bold projecting bluff, crowned with pinnacles and turrets, resembled some Gothic keep,” only to finally use the trope of feigning linguistic defeat, “a verbal description of them can do little to convey the reality to the imagination of one who has not been among them” (Wilkes 2: 297-98). As was seen above, such admission of the shortcomings of language seems itself to be a rhetorical device in the discourse of sublimity. Indeed it has to be, as the whole concept of the sublime revolves around the idea of something incommensurable that cannot be encompassed by rhetoric or reason.

Cooper stages the problem of how to properly convey the sublimity of the Antarctic experience in an episode where Mary and the deacon are trying to comprehend the counterintuitive features of the Antarctic climate. The deacon simply cannot understand how it can be so different from home, as if the laws of nature were not universal:

It’s desperate cold ice, the sealers all tell me, that of the antarctic seas. Some on ’em think it’s colder down south than it is the other way, up towards Greenland and Iceland itself. It’s extr’or’mary, Mary that the weather should grow cold as a body journeys south; but so it is, by all accounts. I never could understand it, and it isn’t so in Ameriky, I’m sartain. [...] I believe, but I don’t understand. (279)

A book of geography tells them that the difference is caused by “the inclination of the earth’s axis to the plane of its orbit,” but they are completely unable to understand what this means; the explanation “was Hebrew” to them (280). The scene illustrates the problem of understanding phenomena beyond ordinary experience. To Mary and her uncle, accepting the facts of science entails just as big a leap of faith as Gardiner’s acceptance of the Godhead. Predictably, Cooper turns Mary’s ignorance into a moral observation on how she is still able to intuit spiritual truth: “To her intellect, nothing was clearer, no moral truth more vivid, no physical fact more certain, than the incarnation of the Son of God” (280). Cooper seems to advocate the necessity of making a leap of faith; spiritual certainty cannot be achieved through experiential knowledge. Faith and the sublime seem to operate in similar ways, through intuition and by bypassing the intellect.
A New Barrier

_The Sea Lions_ thus represents a shift in the way in which the Antarctic is represented—the result of the work of the U.S. Exploring Expedition, which had finally established the existence of Antarctica and refuted all visionary speculations that had preceded it. But, as we have seen, at the same moment as the real Antarctic appears, Cooper immediately projects a new vision on top of it, and its meaning is deferred once again to something that lies beyond. This gesture is made explicit in Cooper’s preface to the novel, where a modulation of a phrase we have encountered before returns: “Something that we cannot comprehend lies at the root of every distinct division of natural phenomena. Thus far shalt thou go and no farther, seems to be imprinted on every great fact of creation” (iv-v). We recognize the first clause of the second sentence as a paraphrase of the passage in the Book of Job where God says to the ocean: “Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed” (38:11). Significantly, the same biblical passage had been invoked in relation to the Antarctic also by Benjamin Morrell, but with a diametrically opposed meaning. For Morrell it denoted an imaginary boundary, a “superstitious notion that an attempt to reach the South Pole was a presumptuous intrusion on the awful confines of nature,—an unlawful and sacrilegious prying into the secrets of the great Creator” (29). To Morrell’s optimistic rationalism, however, there are no obstacles that cannot be overcome by sheer application of human will:

> I contend that genius, science, and energy combined can work miracles, and even remove mountains; for what is a miracle but the power of spirit over matter—the triumph of mind over physical impediments. The march of intellect is irresistible; and were the earth itself one globe of ice, the fire of genius, directed by the wand of science, could melt a passage to its centre. The day is not far distant when a visit to the South Pole will not be thought more of a miracle than to cause an egg to stand on its point. (30)

Morrell outlines a Promethean project in which the goal of the prying eye of science is to uncover everything, or, like Ahab, to break through the surface of the phenomena and get to the thing in itself. Reynolds had been equally assertive: “Who so presumptuous as to set limits to knowledge, which, by a wise law of Providence, can never cease? As long as there is mind to act upon matter, the realms of science must be enlarged […]” *(Address 70).*
In *The Sea Lions*, Cooper takes issue with such optimistic rationalism, by reintroducing an outer limit to human understanding, the point where the proud course of human reason shall be stayed: “There is a point attained in each and all of our acquisitions, where a mystery that no human mind can scan takes the place of demonstration and conjecture. This point may lie more remote with some intellects than with others; but it exists for all, arrests the inductions of all, conceals all” (v). Inductive reasoning, the preeminent machinery for producing empirical knowledge, breaks down at Cooper’s new *ne plus ultra*, the point beyond which no one has passed. Some may get farther than others, but all will inevitably fail. Transcendence is denied since it is impossible to infer the underlying reasons or originating causes of the world from the facts of that world. For Cooper, it is not ultimate knowledge of the Antarctic that lies beyond the barrier of possibility, but ultimate knowledge itself. T. Philbrick remarks that “the icy barriers of Antarctica become the analogues of the mysteries which ultimately confront all rational inquiry and mark its farthest limits” (232). This cognitive frustration or denied transcendence seems related to the unattainable knowledge in Poe’s “MS. Found in a Bottle” and perhaps also to the ending of *Pym*, but there the status of the boundary was ambivalent. It figured both as a geographical point of this world, and possibly as something else beyond. Cooper’s delimitation of human reason seems paradoxically, as Lenz remarks, to place him in the tradition of Romanticism, “in direct opposition to the robust rhetoric and stalwart determination of the narratives of Benjamin Morrell and Edmund Fanning” (*Poetics* 88). Or it might be even more closely related to Alexander Pope’s dictum: “Know, then, thyself, presume not God to scan; / The proper study of mankind is man” (10; II.1). As we have seen, Thoreau would echo the sentiment a few years later.

Of course, the main difference between Morrell and Cooper is that they are located at opposite ends of the Antarctic discovery. Cooper was in possession of the insight that the answer to “one of the most intensely exciting secrets,” as Poe phrased it, had not yielded any radically new knowledge. It had only served to push the boundary of knowledge further on. Hence the scientific optimism is gone and Cooper instead signifies the injunction borrowed from Job as an absolute boundary of human knowledge. He revamps it as a divine delimitation of human reason, and, as such, a cause for due caution and humility before the knowledge reserved for God. *The Sea Lions* may be an Antarctic novel, but it is the testing of the human spirit that is its principal focus, not the Antarctic in itself. For Cooper, materiality was apparently not enough; his Antarctic is infused with divine meaning beneath the surface. In
this sense, Cooper not only anticipates the spiritual overtones of the modern, heroic Antarctic narrative. In creating an Antarctic in which the divine will is immanent, and which threatens the destruction of the daring explorer, he also anticipates H. P. Lovecraft’s paranoid visions in “At the Mountains of Madness” (1936). Lovecraft’s Antarctic hides an ancient alien civilization of “Elder Things” that lie buried under the ice, hiding a brooding secret of origins and threatening destruction, and beyond that an even darker secret that lies beyond human comprehension. In the process of glossing over the Antarctic with his mystical narrative, Cooper thus makes it into a secret once again.
The overarching aim of this study has been to see how the Antarctic is represented in American fiction of the early 19th century, and how this relates to contemporary knowledge and speculations about the region. Additionally, since the region was virtually unknown until the end of the period, the object has been to investigate what content the empty space of the Antarctic was filled with, and to what end. The question of why the Antarctic was chosen as a site of projection can be answered by the observation that the setting was already in public focus, and would therefore in and of itself appeal to the curiosity of the audience. In *The Monikins* and “The Atlantis” this strategy is especially apparent since they are only cursorily concerned with contemporary knowledge of the Antarctic; here the region primarily provides an opportune vehicle for social projection. In the other fictions the interaction with non-fictional conceptualizations of the Antarctic is more complex, responding to ideas that circulated at the time of writing. *Symzonia* was written in response to John Cleves Symmes’s theory of a hollow earth whose interior was accessible through immense polar openings. Edgar Allan Poe also used the idea of a hollow earth in “MS. Found in a Bottle,” which ends at the South Pole in an enormous polar opening. The ending of *Pym* could possibly be read in these terms also, but in that instance it is merely a suggestion that only takes definite form in relation to “MS.” However, *Pym* should primarily be seen against the backdrop of the U.S. Exploring Expedition to the Antarctic. All texts except *Symzonia* appear in the context of this expedition or the public debates that led up to it. Both *Pym* and “The Atlantis”—published one month before and one month after the departure of the U.S Exploring Expedition respectively—refer explicitly to the expedition, connecting their narratives to the general excitement around it. When it returned in 1842, the expedition had charted much of the Antarctic region, and verified the existence of Antarctica. The Antarctic was no longer unknown, which changed the manner in which it was represented in fiction. When Cooper returned to the Antarctic in *The Sea Lions* in 1849, he used the findings of the expedition as the basis for a realistic representation. The Antarctic was no longer tropical and inhabited as in all the previous narratives except “MS,” but appeared essentially as we know it today. Beneath this layer of realism, however, Cooper also imagined the Antarctic as having a hidden purpose, stating that human knowledge can never attain ultimate knowledge—in effect, the Antarctic remains a buried signifier and can never really be explored. The theme Cooper introduces here, that no matter
how much science uncovers there is still something more beyond, would become a central part of Antarctic writing further on.

To be sure, the fiction studied in this thesis form too limited a body of texts to draw any definite conclusions about literary tendencies. But in Chapter Five I drew the parallel to a similar development in English literature with the examples of Robert Paltock’s *Peter Wilkins* (1751) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1798): the first being a hollow-earth utopia, and the second a realistic representation of the Antarctic in the wake of James Cook’s explorations. These follow the same trajectory from utopianism via exploration to realism as the texts of this study. David Fausett comes to a similar conclusion in his investigations of utopias of *terra australis incognita*—which in the context of Fausett’s study meant Australia— noting that the utopian form gave way to realistically oriented forms once Australia was known in its essentials (9). In other words, there is a demonstrable connection between exploration and literary fiction in the late 17th to early 19th centuries, which can probably be explained by the fact that this type of fiction is predicated on the idea of exploration in the first place, the setting being determined by the focus of exploration. However, while Fausett claims that the geospatial utopia ceased to exist because it ran out of unknown geographical territory with Cook’s Antarctic exploration in 1772-75 (1-2), this study has shown how the Antarctic became a productive utopian site once more for American writers in the early 19th century. In principle, however, Fausett’s claim is valid also for the period of this study: once a community regards a region as known it ceases to produce utopias. Or, rather, one should say that it places a moratorium on utopian writing, since this process seems to come in cycles.

Regarding Antarctic utopias of the early 19th century, we only have to adjust the time frame by some seventy years to the U.S. Exploring Expedition in 1838-42. In fact, after *The Sea Lions*, there was no Antarctic fiction at all until the 1880s, which, as Elizabeth Leane observes, “reflects the fact that relatively little Antarctic exploration took place during this period” (158). After Cook, there had been relatively little scientific interest in the Antarctic until it was revived by Americans who saw in the region an opportunity for national distinction, and after the U.S. Exploring Expedition, the Antarctic again faded from public, scientific, and literary focus.

To conclude my study, I will give a brief sketch of the main lines of the development of Antarctic fiction after 1850 in order to show how the Antarctic has retained much of the characteristic of mystique also into the present. Many of the themes encountered in the texts of this study return in different guises,
showing that they are part of a continuous tradition of Antarctic writing. The next time the Antarctic came into focus again was during the so-called Heroic Age of Antarctic exploration (1895-1922). The start of the Heroic Age in 1895 is marked by the call of the Sixth International Geographical Congress to scientific societies worldwide to explore the Antarctic before the turn of the century, stating that “the exploration of the Antarctic regions is the greatest piece of geographical exploration still to be undertaken” (qtd. in Pyne 85). After this followed an intense period of Antarctic exploration by expeditions under the command of legendary names such as Roald Amundsen, Robert Falcon Scott, and Ernest Shackleton. The end of the period is usually marked by Shackleton’s death in 1922. During the Heroic Age it was primarily continental exploration that was on the agenda since no one had as yet sighted the interior of Antarctica, or been to the South Pole. A new unknown area for speculative fiction was thus opened up.

The renewed interest in the Antarctic towards the end of the 19th century brought a surge of Antarctic literature. Here we find, for example, Jules Verne’s Le Sphinx des Glaces1 (1897) and Charles Romyn Dake’s A Strange Discovery (1899), which are of special interest in the present context since they also engage with an unsolved Antarctic mystery—the lack of closure in Pym. Dake’s novel picks up Pym’s narrative where it leaves off, taking Pym and Peters into a utopian world at the South Pole. Le Sphinx des Glaces is a strange blend of continuation and revision of Pym, in which Verne meticulously connects loose threads left by Poe. As Basil Ashmore phrases it in his introduction to the novel, Verne had “provided a solution” to Pym, and gathered “the tangled skeins of the original plot’s completion and rationalized the final section […]” (8). The naturalistic “solution” offered by Verne is that the white, giant human figure at the end of Pym’s narrative was only a drifting iceberg. In Verne’s revision, Dirk Peters alone makes it out of the Antarctic, and it is he who brings Pym’s notebook to Poe. In the conclusion to Verne’s novel, Pym’s corpse is found pinned to a giant lodestone at the South Pole. Closure at last.

Leane has noted that the new scientific focus on Antarctica at the beginning of the 20th century had the effect that utopian writing—which had been a significant feature of Antarctic literature—was gradually phased out as fiction became more and more influenced by exploration narratives: “the increasing human experience of the continent meant that a group of (comparatively) more realistic Antarctic narratives grew up alongside this utopian tradition” (165). Two late examples can be given of realistic Antarctic

1 Rendered in English translations as either An Antarctic Mystery or The Sphinx of the Ice-Fields.
fiction that engage with the Heroic Age in different manners. Ursula K. Le Guin’s short story “Sur” (1982) is an alternative-history fiction relating how a South American expedition consisting only of women who reach the South Pole one year before Amundsen and Scott, but decide not to leave any mark of their accomplishment. Beryl Bainbridge’s The Birthday Boys (1991) is a reworking of Scott’s Terra Nova expedition in fictional form, a so-called faction, narrated by the five men who would form the final party that made the ill-fated attempt to reach the pole.

The speculative impulse remains, however; even though the present state of knowledge about Antarctica would seem at a first glance to leave little room for the imagination, it continues to be as prolific a site of speculation as ever. Imagining that the Antarctic hides some sort of alien mystery has been a popular motif in science fiction during the 20th century. The perhaps most influential work in this respect is H. P. Lovecraft’s novella “At the Mountains of Madness” (1936). Although first published in 1936, it was written already in 1931, between Richard Byrd’s first two expeditions to the South Pole in 1928-30 and 1933-35. At this time, it was the unknown parts of the continent’s interior that were on the verge of being explored. In Byrd’s case, this was primarily to be done by airplane, which is also the transportation used in the story. The narrative tells of how a group of scientists discover an ancient alien city, once populated by god-like “Elder Things,” deep under an Antarctic mountain range. In a manner reminiscent of Prospero’s in “The Atlantis,” the narrative is introduced as a warning to future expeditions not to enter these unknown parts: “I am forced into speech because men of science have refused to follow my advice without knowing why. It is altogether against my will that I tell my reasons for opposing this contemplated invasion of the antarctic—with its vast fossil hunt and its wholesale boring and melting of the ancient ice caps” (Lovecraft 256). “At the Mountains of Madness” is another story inspired by Poe’s Pym. Beneath the Antarctic mountains are tunnels—evoking the mysterious chaiks of Tsali—inhabited by ancient alien monsters that repeat the cry of the birds in Pym: “Tekeli-li.” One of the characters suggests an explanation for the coincidence that Poe might have had some mysterious access to “unsuspected and forbidden sources” when writing Pym (Lovecraft 340). Possibly influenced by Lovecraft, John W. Campbell also writes about an alien secret buried in the Antarctic in the novella “Who Goes There?” (1938). In this story a group of scientists finds an alien spacecraft in the Antarctic ice, but they also awaken the alien itself, which can devour and assume the shape of any creature. Paranoia ensues among the small group in the claustrophobic
Antarctic research station since no one can be certain that the others are who they say they are. “Who Goes There?” has been filmed twice: as *The Thing from Another World* (1951) and *The Thing* (1982). More recently, the movies *X-Files: Fight the Future* (1998) and *AVP: Alien vs. Predator* (2004) have continued the use of this motif of buried alien secrets under the Antarctic in the tradition Lovecraft initiated.

There always seems to be some opening for the imagination, no matter how thick the ice sheet that covers the continent. After his two first Antarctic expeditions, Byrd led three more: in 1939-40, 1946-47, and 1955-56. During these expeditions, close to a million square miles of the Antarctic continent was surveyed from the air. One would think that such a massive geographic and scientific undertaking would make Byrd an unlikely candidate to excite speculation. In 1947, however, he allegedly made a puzzling statement in a broadcast shortly before he took off on another polar flight: “I’d like to see that land beyond the Pole. That area beyond the Pole is the center of the great unknown” (qtd. in Godwin 121). Most people will find no apparent mystery here—Byrd was on one side of the pole and wanted to fly over it to the uncharted territory on the other. But this innocuous comment inspired a whole new generation of hollow-earthers, claiming that Byrd had referred to a world on the other side of the polar opening (Godwin 118-23; Standish 276-77). The hollow-earth idea, which seemed archaic even in 1818 when Symmes proposed it, thus lived on into the 20th century. Even before Byrd's flight, hollow-earth literature had moved via Verne's *A Journey to the Center of the Earth* (1864) into the 20th century with Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *Pellucidar* series (1914-62), and was a common feature in pulp fiction from the 1940s and 50s (Standish 267-81). Worth mentioning in this context is the B-movie *The Mole People* (1956), which opens with a mini-lecture on the origins of the hollow-earth theory, including a brief exposition of Symmes’s ideas. The hollow earth has also become a playful theme in postmodern literature, such as Ian Wedde's *Symmes Hole* (1986), Rudy Rucker's *Hollow Earth* (1990), and Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon* (1997), all referring back to Symmes—Rucker’s novel even includes Poe and Jeremiah Reynolds as characters.

In a bizarre turn of events, Antarctica has also figured in speculations about Nazi survival, in which prominent Nazi leaders allegedly retreated to secret bases in the Antarctic at the end of WWII (Godwin 125-29). Presumably, the combination of the geographic remoteness and unfamiliarity of the Antarctic give credence to these speculations in much the same way they did to the holes-in-the-poles theory. These survival myths take some curious details in
the history of Antarctic exploration as their points of departure. Germany had
indeed sent an expedition to Antarctica immediately before the war, the Deutsche
Antarktische Expedition (1938-39), with the object of claiming Antarctic territory,
and allegedly establishing secret bases. In relation to this, conspiracy theorists
have found the timing of the U.S. Navy’s Antarctic expedition “Operation
Highjump” (1946-47) highly suggestive. It is the largest Antarctic expedition to
date, in which Byrd led a fleet of thirteen vessels, 4,700 men, and thirty-three
aircraft (Mills 488). In the eyes of the conspiracy theorists, “Operation
Highjump” was never about Antarctic exploration, but a military effort to
locate the German bases.2 Not surprisingly, this conspiratorial mythology has
spawned speculative fiction, such as W. A. Harbinson’s Genesic Projekt Sauer III
(1980), William Dietrich’s Ice Reich (1998), and Clive Cussler’s Atlantis Found
(1999). The Ice Reich is perhaps the most interesting of these. A speculative
fictionalization of the German Antarctic expedition in 1938-39, the novel
develops into a search for a biological super weapon in the form of highly
infectious spores that can be found in a cave on an Antarctic volcano island.

In our times, Antarctica has once again figured as a determinant of the
future. For example, the Antarctic ice constitutes the world’s largest freshwater
reserve with the capacity to supply many arid countries, provided the logistical,
environmental, and political problems involved in harvesting icebergs can be
solved (Pyne 355-56). Antarctica is also the last major unexplored region for
fossil fuels; exploitation is currently prohibited, but oil companies have already
applied for permits to prospect the region (Pyne 353-54). Furthermore, Elena
Glasberg points out the historical irony that the thinning ozone layer has once
again turned the world into debating “holes at the poles” (197). The vision of a
temperate Antarctic has transformed from a utopian, agrarian dream into a
dystopian, ecological nightmare where melting icecaps will cause a catastrophic
rise of the sea level. Since 1959, Antarctica has been under the protection of the
Antarctic Treaty System. In what seem almost utopian terms, the Treaty defines
Antarctica as a continent of science and peace, stating in the preamble that “it is
in the interest of all mankind that Antarctica shall continue forever to be used
exclusively for peaceful purposes and shall not become the scene or object of
international discord.” In Kim Stanley Robinson’s eco-thriller Antarctica (1997),
the protection of the Antarctic Treaty is about to dissolve as corporate interests
and non-Treaty nations move to exploit the natural resources of Antarctica.
Focusing on the events triggered by a series of sabotage acts by radical

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2 For a fascinating glimpse of this subcultural phenomenon, see, for instance, Joseph P. Farrell’s
pseudohistorical book Reich of the Black Sun (238-55).
environmentalists, the novel imagines how the future of Antarctica shall be handled in a realistic manner, but with a focus on ecological sustainability. *Antartica* is one of the latest examples of the Antarctic utopia, but with a modern sensibility: it is an environmental utopia, or ecotopia, centering on a small, international nomadic community that lives in symbiosis with the Antarctic environment under the leadership of a reluctant matriarch.

It is clear from these examples that the imaginative potential of Antarctica has not diminished by its being explored and declared the continent of science. The proliferation of fiction and fictional genres in conjunction with the fact that geographical exploration has given way to increasingly specialized science have made the correlation between these less obvious than in the 19th century. As Leane notes, Antarctica “became an acceptable setting for all kinds of genre fiction” after the Heroic Age (165). Some of the mystique of Antarctica might be retained because of its forbidding nature; discovery is not followed by colonization and settlement. For most, it is still *terra australis incognita*, and still exhibits much of its mythical quality. Indeed, sometimes science gives us indications that there really might be some secret buried under Antarctica: for instance, subglacial lakes several thousand meters beneath the icecap might contain living microbes in environments that have been sealed off for the last half a million years. Moreover, since the ice sheet has been continually frozen since the last ice age, core samples have revealed the climate record as far as 750,000 years back. Almost two full centuries after *Pym*, Antarctica is still “one of the most intensely exciting secrets” (17.12).
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This study examines a small body of early 19th-century American literature set in the Antarctic: Adam Seaborn’s (pseud.) Symzonia (1820), Edgar Allan Poe’s “MS. Found in a Bottle” (1833) and The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (1838), Peter Prospero’s (pseud.) “The Atlantis” (1838-39), and James Fenimore Cooper’s The Monikins (1835) and The Sea Lions (1849). These texts were written in a momentous phase in the history of Antarctic exploration when the region went from being almost completely unknown geographic territory to being known essentially as we know it today. In an American context, the Antarctic came to be of particular interest from the 1820s and on—it was even termed the American “field of fame.” After extensive public debates, it was decided that a national expedition to the Antarctic should be formed—what subsequently became the U.S. Exploring Expedition (1838-42), the largest American scientific or exploratory project that had ever been undertaken. When the expedition returned, it had charted large parts of the Antarctic Ocean, and established the existence of an Antarctic continent. The literary texts studied here are all imaginative responses to, and reflections of this historical development in which the Antarctic went from unknown to known. Prior to the discovery, speculative fiction explored the imaginative potential of the Antarctic, using it for social projection. Among other things, the Antarctic was envisioned as a tropical region, inhabited by utopian communities, lost savage tribes, or monkeys evolved from humans—it was even imagined to be a gigantic opening into the interior of the earth. Immediately after the U.S. Exploring Expedition had returned and reported its discovery, however, the conceptualization of the Antarctic was transformed in fiction as well. The Sea Lions, which is the only text of this study that comes after the discovery, represents the region in realistic terms.