

The Polar Regions
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The America that Poe inhabited in the early nineteenth was deeply engaged in geographic exploration. Three years before Poe's birth in 1809, Lewis and Clark returned from their expedition across the newly acquired Louisiana Territory. Over the next half century, while Poe was growing up, serving in the U.S. Army, editing magazines and penning his poetry and fiction, Americans surveyed the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, blazed the Oregon and Santa Fe trails, and launched expeditions to the South Pacific, the Antarctic, and the American West. Meanwhile, fellow writers such as Richard Henry Dana and Herman Melville described factual and fictional journeys to distant places. It should come as no surprise, then, that Poe exploited this ubiquitous theme of discovery in his literature. Tales such as "Manuscript Found in a Bottle," "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall," and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* are replete with journeys, discoveries, and various exotic locales. For Poe's fictional explorers, however, the real *ultima Thule* lay not in the South Seas or the South Pole, but in their own minds.

By the early nineteenth century, the expeditions of Captain Cook, Lewis and Clark, and others had expanded the boundaries of the known world — or, at least, the world known to American readers. Huge portions of the earth, however, remained to be explored, leaving real-life explorers with alluring goals — and imaginative sorts with a delicious field for speculation.¹ One American whose vivid fancy would stir many another imagination and eventually help to inspire a full-scale expedition was a retired U.S. Army captain named John Cleves Symmes, Jr. In 1818, Symmes, then in St. Louis, made a bold, thrilling proclamation:

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 twelve or sixteen degrees. I pledge my life in support of this truth, and am ready to explore the hollow, if the world will support and aid me in the undertaking.

Under his signature, Symmes added a few notes, including this one:

I ask one hundred brave companions, well equipped, to start from Siberia, in the fall season, with reindeer and sleighs, on the ice of the frozen sea; I engage we find a warm and rich land, stocked with thrifty vegetables and animals, if not men, on reaching one degree northward of latitude 82; we will return in the succeeding spring.²

If Symmes could not exactly reach "all the World" with his proclamation and invitation, he did attempt to reach a good part of it. As biographer James McBride explains, he "addressed a copy of this circular to every learned institution and to every considerable town and village, as well as to numerous distinguished individuals, throughout the United States, and sent copies to several of the learned societies of Europe."³ Two years later appeared a novel, *Symzonia; Voyage of Discovery*, attributed to one Captain Adam Seaborn, but perhaps written by Symmes or, if one modern scholar is correct, Nathaniel Ames, a sailor who wrote *A Mariner's Sketches* (1830) and

other books.⁴ The narrator recounts a supposed journey to the Antarctic hole and, through it, into an internal realm populated by alabaster white people who enjoy a life of prosperity and virtue.

The notion of a hollow earth was not original to Symmes. As early as 1665, Athanasius Kircher had argued in his *Mundus Subterraneus* that the earth contained a fiery core and channels connecting its interior and exterior. Englishman Edmond Halley of comet fame expressed a similar belief in a 1692 essay published in *Philosophical Transactions*. Symmes may have encountered the idea in Cotton Mather's *Christian Philosopher*, which contains a reference to Halley's theory. Scottish mathematician and physicist John Leslie also theorized about a hollow earth.⁵ In any case, it was Symmes who launched a sensation in the United States. Unlike Halley and Leslie, Symmes was no scientist, and his "New Theory," as it came to be called, did not gain unanimous support from the scientific community, although at least one mathematician saw the potential for promoting scientific inquiry, even if the motivation was warped. This mathematician, Thomas Johnston Matthews, published a critique of Symmes's theory, but pledged the profits from it to support an expedition. A number of other Americans, presumably less skeptical about Symmes's idea, got on board and pushed the government to act. Despite memorials calling for exploratory expeditions in 1822 and 1823, Congress did nothing.⁶ The belief in "Symmes' Hole," however, would not go away. In 1826, an anonymous author — perhaps James McBride, an acquaintance of Symmes — came out with *Symmes's Theory of Concentric Spheres*, which carried on its title page Hamlet's famous admonition: "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, /Than are dreamt of in your philosophy!" As the author explained in his preface, his purpose was "to attract the attention of the learned, who are in the habit of indulging in more abstruse researches into the operation and effect of natural causes; and should it be found to merit the attention of such, it is hoped their enquiries may be so directed as to accelerate the march of scientific improvement, enlarge the field of philosophic speculation, and open to the world new objects of ambition and enterprise." The book, both a description and a defense of Symmes's theory, touches on everything from winds, monsoons, and reports of northern animal migrations on earth to Saturn's rings and apparent circles around the poles of Mars, all phenomena possibly related to the existence of concentric spheres, here and elsewhere in the solar system. It also makes explicit reference to "the tremendous whirlpool on the coast of Norway, called the Maalstroom, which sucks in, and discharges the waters of the sea with great violence," presumably the same whirlpool that serves as a setting for Poe's story "The Descent into the Maelström."⁷

A more important apostle emerged in the form of an Ohio newspaperman named Jeremiah Reynolds. In 1825, Reynolds joined Symmes on a lecture tour and proved a gifted promoter, sometimes addressing audiences himself. Three years after they began touring together, the U.S. House of Representatives called for an expedition to explore "coasts, islands, harbors, shoals, and reefs," but the Senate derailed the plan. Reynolds, however, managed to mount a private expedition and set sail with the crews of three ships, including the *Penguin*, in 1829. After several sailors abandoned the expedition, Reynolds had to give up while in South America. Although he had not made any landmark discoveries in the Antarctic, the journal he kept on the expedition may have inspired the mysterious ending to *Pym*. Symmes died in 1829, but Reynolds, after spending two years in Chile, pushed again for a government-sponsored expedition. By now, he had long since split with Symmes and was emphasizing the need for scientific inquiry instead of the possibility of holes in the poles. Finally, in 1836, Congress came

through with support for an expedition. Three years passed. Various participants, including Reynolds and Secretary of the Navy Mahlon Dickerson, prepared and planned, quibbled and squabbled. When, on August 18, 1838, more than 300 men, including seven scientists and artists, left Norfolk, Virginia, Reynolds was not among them. Dickerson, who nursed at least one grudge against him, had taken steps to keep him out of the expedition. The commander was Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, chosen after others had refused or resigned. Over the next four years, Wilkes and his fellow explorers on the United States South Seas Exploring Expedition, or “Ex. Ex.,” traveled some eighty-seven thousand miles, rounding Cape Horn, cruising through Antarctic and South Pacific waters, visiting perhaps 280 islands and America’s Northwest coast, and ultimately circumnavigating the globe to arrive in New York in 1842. Along the way, the men collected more than sixty thousand specimens of plants, animal skins, shells, and more (many of which would go to the new Smithsonian Institution or the National Botanic Garden) and, significant, discovered Antarctic land where it had not been known to exist — but, alas, no unknown civilizations occupying interior spheres.⁸

As an editor, Poe was aware of geographical expeditions, including the plans for this expedition in particular. He not only reviewed books about the travels of James Clark Ross and J. L. Stephens, but also referred explicitly to the South Seas expedition numerous times, both before its launch and after its completion, in his journalism and his novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. In his reviews, Poe championed both the cause and Reynolds, its chief advocate, saying, “Our pride as a vigorous commercial empire, should stimulate us to become our own pioneers in that vast island-studded ocean, destined, it may be, to become, not only the chief theatre of our traffic, but the arena of our future naval conflicts.” He added that the United States had a “*duty*...to contribute a large share to that aggregate of useful knowledge, which is the common property of all.” In a review that appeared in the January 1837 issue of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, the same issue in which the first installment of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* appeared, he praised Reynolds as a man ideally suited for the position of corresponding secretary on the expedition:

How admirably well he is qualified for this task, no person can know better than ourselves. His energy, his love of polite literature, his many and various attainments, and above all, his ardent and honorable enthusiasm, point him out as the man of all men for the execution of this task. 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 may have had a personal acquaintance with Reynolds, as he seems to indicate in the first sentence here and later when he says, “Gentlemen have impugned his motives — have these gentlemen ever seen him or conversed with him half an hour?” Indeed, one report links the promoter and author to the curious circumstances surrounding Poe’s mysterious death in Baltimore in 1849. Before he succumbed on October 7, Poe was said to have cried out “Reynolds!” on more than one occasion. “Perhaps to his dim and tortured brain,” biographer Arthur Hobson Quinn says, “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’ into ‘darkness and the distance.’”⁹

While Poe’s acquaintance with Reynolds and the meaning — or even existence — of his final cries are matters of conjecture, there can be no doubt that Poe was familiar with Symmes’s New

Theory. Thanks to the lectures, books, and newspaper coverage that Americans encountered throughout the 1820s, the theory was in the air. Furthermore, scholars have argued for Poe's familiarity with *Symzonia*.¹⁰ Indeed Poe described related phenomena in his own fiction. Both "Manuscript Found in a Bottle" and "A Descent into the Maelström" feature plunges into oceanic holes. In the former, Poe's narrator, alluding to a theory that the earth contained a whole network of passages, says, "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 southern pole itself."¹¹ The latter story refers explicitly to Kircher's notion of "an abyss penetrating the globe, and issuing in some remote part."¹² The protagonist of "The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall," furthermore, sees signs of an opening at the North Pole from his balloon as it soars toward the moon. In *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Poe seems to exploit popular interest in the theory to craft a tantalizing scene as Pym and his companions float in their canoe toward the South Pole. In line with Symmes's theory, the travelers encounter warmer temperatures as they approach the pole, and the mysterious white "shrouded human figure" that appears in the novel's conclusion could be identified with the inhabitants of the "internal world" in *Symzonia*. J. O. Bailey has noted numerous parallels in the two novels — references to remnants of sea vessels and unusual animals, for example, as well as detailed descriptions of penguin colonies — and argued that *Symzonia* served as a primary source for Poe as he was writing *Pym*.¹³

What did Poe's familiarity with Reynolds, Symmes's Hole, the Antarctic expedition, and the general notion of a hollow earth mean for his literature? The question has drawn attention from numerous commentators, who have proposed various interpretations. Burton Pollin has suggested that Reynolds's *Address on the Subject of a Surveying and Exploring Expedition to the Pacific Ocean and South Seas* provided material for *Pym*. Similarly, Richard Kopley has argued that Poe drew on Reynolds's "Leaves from an Unpublished Journal," which recounts his adventures on the aborted private expedition, and has used the connection to explain *Pym*'s mystifying conclusion, arguing that the giant "shrouded human figure" Pym reports seeing in the Antarctic sea is actually the figure of a penguin on the prow of a ship about to rescue him.¹⁴ Other scholars have examined Poe's sea fiction in the context of the genre of travel narratives or the country's scientific, commercial, and political ambitions. Lisa Gitelman, for instance, characterizes *Pym* — with its "tedious and seemingly irrelevant non-original material," non-cohesive narrative, and "frustratingly anticlimactic end" — as a parody of exploration literature and argues that it "mocks the exuberance for exploration voyages and voyage accounts that gripped America in the 1830s, an enthusiasm inflamed by the desire to compete with British naval exploration and the global reaches of British empire." Matthew Teorey, noting that Poe published and republished "Manuscript Found in a Bottle" numerous times in the years leading up to the Antarctic expedition, as well as the years of and after the expedition, argues that this tale "can be read as a dramatization of his excitement about America's embarkation into imperialism — and at the same time his apparent concerns about the possible dangers of such an endeavor."¹⁵

Poe certainly was engaged with the goings-on of the external world, and his writings about the Antarctic expedition show an awareness of the country's scientific and commercial concerns. Still, it is difficult to imagine that the author of so much symbolic, psychological fiction was thinking only of literal seas and expeditions when he penned his sea fiction. In his reading of

Pym, Kenneth Silverman argues, “The climax of the work, a fantasy of being swallowed and engulfed, reveals Pym's self-destructiveness to be driven by a desire to merge with the dead.”¹⁶ For Poe, furthermore, place was often a metaphor, specifically a stand-in for some aspect of the psychological landscape. The edifices portrayed in “The Haunted Palace” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” are obvious metaphors for human heads or minds, and the school that is the setting for the first part of “William Wilson,” the catacombs of “The Cask of Amontillado,” and the realm described in “The Domain of Arnheim” all can be read in a similar fashion. In light of Poe's fascination with psychological space, his engagement with unknown lands holds special significance. As Darryl Jones has suggested, Poe's imaginary encounters with holes and poles is part of a larger fascination with *ultima Thule*, a Latin phrase referring to a supposed island, perhaps in the vicinity of Norway or Iceland, once considered the northernmost part of the known world. Some 300 years before the birth of Christ, the Greek explorer Pytheas supposedly visited Thule in his journey north of Britain. The phrase appears in “The Pit in the Pendulum,” in which Poe writes, “My cognizance of the pit had become known to the inquisitorial agents — *the pit*, whose horrors had been destined for so bold a recusant as myself — *the pit*, typical of hell, and regarded by rumor as the Ultima Thule of all their punishments.”¹⁷ a slightly amended version of the phrase appears in “Dream-Land,” where it carries more of its original geographical meaning:

By a route obscure and lonely,
Haunted by ill angels only,
Where an Eidolon, named NIGHT,
On a black throne reigns upright,
I have reached these lands but newly
From an ultimate dim Thule —
From a wild weird clime that lieth, sublime,
Out of SPACE — out of TIME.¹⁸

If the phrase refers to an extreme in “The Pit in the Pendulum,” here it points to something beyond the extreme, a separate realm entirely. Jones notes that, for French writer Gaston Broche, who may have drawn on *Pym* in writing his adaptation of the Pytheas story, the land of ultima Thule “acts as a limit-point of human speech and understanding beyond which is only silence and whiteness and consequently as a space with the potential to open up vistas of numinous terror.”¹⁹ On a literal level, the earth's actual ultima Thule — that is, the polar regions — existed, but were not yet discovered. As such, they were both alluring and threatening. The possibility of a treacherous hole leading to the bowels of the earth only added to the sense of mystery and danger.

The motif of ultima Thule was more than a tantalizing trope for evoking terror, however. It also fit squarely into Poe's conception of the mind as a place with its own remote, unknown regions. In the mid-1830s, around the same time he was writing of Reynolds and the push for a southern oceanic expedition, Poe was gushing over the promise of phrenology, the pseudoscience that postulated that the brain consisted of physical regions dedicated to various qualities, including “Amativeness,” “Cautiousness,” and “Language.” For one enamored of a model that presented the mind as a physical entity that could be mapped, the concept of ultima Thule was the perfect metaphor for the mind. Like the earth, the mind had its own remote,

mysterious region — one both alluring and threatening. For Poe, this region was the seat of imagination, what he once called “the poetical portion” of his mind.²⁰ In this respect, Poe was borrowing from phrenologists, who conceived of an artistic faculty in the brain. A great deal of evidence, however, suggests that Poe was also at least dimly aware of an actual psychological entity now widely recognized by modern neurological researchers. In the current model of the human mind, the right cerebral hemisphere is dominant for the processing of images and negative emotions, as well as some aspects of music, while generally lacking key linguistic functions. It also plays a key role in dreaming and may be the source of self-destructive urges. In countless works, from his gothic poems and tales to his detective fiction to his philosophical dialogues, Poe betrayed a fascination with all of these processes and impulses, as well as a compulsion to explore and cultivate the mental region responsible for them.

If ultima Thule, in its various manifestations in *Pym* and other works, indeed represents a psychological realm, perhaps even the right brain in particular, then the actions taken toward and in it assume special significance. To set off to explore ultima Thule, the region at or beyond the extremes of understanding, is to delve into a mysterious realm in the human mind, into the realm of what Freud would eventually call the “unconscious.” Indeed, some experts have likened the right cerebral hemisphere to the unconscious. Because of its remote, mysterious qualities, as well as its association with self-destructive urges, such a journey — even a mental one — was both alluring and dangerous. One might be enticed by the promise of “DISCOVERY” — the word painted on a sail in “Manuscript Found in a Bottle” — and drawn inexplicably toward the unknown, as Pym and his comrades are in the final pages of *Pym*. At the same time, just as Pym and characters in both “Manuscript Found in a Bottle” and “Descent into the Maelström” face the threat of a perilous plunge and possible destruction, one who dares the unknown realm of the mind risks succumbing to madness or self-destruction. Imagination and madness, of course, have long been associated in literature, as characterizations of art and artists by Shakespeare, Dickinson, and others make evident. For Poe, the metaphor of a plunge into the earth's interior dramatized the fall into madness as a physical event.

Even for a writer such as Poe, who frequently sought to explore the world of the mind, the external events of the world could be a rich resource to mine for literary material. In the case of the United States South Seas Exploring Expedition and Americans' fascination with Symmes's Hole, these events provided him with a metaphor he could exploit in his efforts to portray the nature and exploration of an alluring, yet threatening region of the mind. Both a geographical and a mental realm, ultima Thule amounted to an invitation to ambitious sorts to take the plunge.

NOTES

1. Darryl Jones, "Ultima Thule: *Arthur Gordon Pym*, the Polar Imaginary, and the Hollow Earth," *Edgar Allan Poe Review* II (2010), 51-69; Mark Canada, "Flight into Fancy: Poe's Discovery of the Right Brain," *Southern Literary Journal* 33 (2001), 62-79.
2. Quoted in James McBride, *Pioneer Biography: Sketches of the Lives of Some of the Early Settlers of Butler County, Ohio*, 2 vols. (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke, 1871), vol. ii, 243-4.
3. McBride, *Pioneer Biography*, vol. ii, 244
4. *Symzonia; Voyage of Discovery* (New York: J. Seymour, 1820); Hans-Joachim Lang and Benjamin Lease, "The Authorship of *Symzonia*: The Case for Nathaniel Ames," *New England Quarterly* 48 (1975), 241-52.
5. Tara E. Nummedal, "Kircher's Subterranean World and the Dignity of the Geocosm," *The Great Art of Knowing: The Baroque Encyclopedia of Athanasius Kircher*, ed. Daniel Stolzenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 37-47; David Standish, *Hollow Earth: The Long and Curious History of Imagining Strange Lands, Fantastical Creatures, Advanced Civilizations, and Marvelous Machines Below the Earth's Surface* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2006), 15, 22-4, 45-50.
6. William Stanton, *The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 9-13.
7. *Symmes's Theory of Concentric Spheres; Demonstrating That the Earth Is Hollow, Habitable Within, and Widely Open About the Poles* (Cincinnati: Morgan, Lodge and Fisher, 1826), vi, 106.
8. Stanton, *The Great United States Exploring Expedition*, 13-38, 359; Jeff Rubin, "United States Exploring Expedition," *Encyclopedia of the Antarctic*, ed. Beau Riffenburgh, 2 vols. (New York: Routledge, 2007), vol. i, 1028-30.
9. Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1180, and *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1231, 1240-1; Arthur Hobson Quinn, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1941), 640. See also Robert F. Almy, "J. N. Reynolds: A Brief Biography with Particular Reference to Poe and Symmes," *Colophon* 2 (1937), 227-45; Aubrey Strake, "Poe's Friend Reynolds," *American Literature* II (1939), 152-9. For a challenge to Moran's account of Poe calling "Reynolds!" on his deathbed, see William T. Bandy, "Dr. Moran and the Poe-Reynolds Myth," *Myths and Realities*, ed. Benjamin Franklin Fisher (Baltimore: Edgar Allan Poe Society, 1987), 26-36.

10. Jones, "Ultima Thule," 61; Almy, "J. N. Reynolds"; J. O. Bailey, "Sources for Poe's Arthur Gordon Pym, 'Hans Pfaal,' Other Pieces," *PMLA* 57 (1942), 513-35; *The Science Fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Harold Beaver (New York: Penguin, 1976), 334-6.
11. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1969-1978), vol. ii, 145.
12. *Ibid.*, vol. ii, 583.
13. Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, 985-6, 1132, 1179; J. O. Bailey, "Sources," 514-20.
14. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Imaginary Voyages*, ed. Burton R. Pollin (New York: Twayne, 1981), 18-19; Richard Kopley, "The Secret of Arthur Gordon Pym: The Text and the Source," *Studies in American Fiction* 8 (1980), 203-18.
15. Lisa Gitelman, "Arthur Gordon Pym and the Novel Narrative of Edgar Allan Poe," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 47 (1992), 350, 353, 358; Matthew Teorey, "Into the Imperial Whirlpool: Poe's 'MS. Found in a Bottle' and the United States South Seas Exploration Expedition," *Poe Studies* 38 (2005), 43.
16. Kenneth Silverman, *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 136.
17. Poe, *Collected Works*, vol. ii, 690.
18. *Ibid.*, vol. i, 343-4.
19. Jones, "Ultima Thule," 51; *Oxford English Dictionary*.
20. Poe to Philip Pendleton Cooke, August 9, 1846, *The Collected Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. John Ward Ostrom, Burton R. Pollin, and Jeffrey A. Savoye, 2 vols. (New York: Gordian, 2008), vol. i, 595.