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The Polar Sublime in Contemporary Poetry of Arctic and Antarctic Exploration

Andrew Buchanan Jackson

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
Sheffield Hallam University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

In this thesis I formulate the concept of a polar sublime, building on the work of Chauncy Loomis and Francis Spufford, and use this new framework for the appraisal of contemporary polar-themed poetry. I trace the continuing presence of the Miltonic and Romantic sublimes in these poems, and suggest that Lyotard's ideas on the sublime in relation to the avant-garde are of particular relevance to lyrical expressions of indeterminacy. Expanding on Lyotard's emphasis on temporality and the sublime, I suggest that a particularly modern planetary sublime is evidenced in some of these poems, one which acknowledges the vast scales of geological time or inter-stellar space and which arises from encounters, real or textual, with the polar regions.

The polar sublime is further developed by taking Kristeva's concept of the abject in order to identify a textual sublime in these poems, many of which highlight the extreme physical suffering of the explorers and the disgusting food they occasionally had to eat. This new reading of Kristeva is extended to formulate the concept of the 'polar body', a vulnerable entity which, like the explorer-body, is viewed as an increasingly abject form by contemporary poets.

I look at poems written in English and published after 1970 whose subject matter is Arctic and Antarctic exploration, ranging from Sir John Franklin's first attempts to discover the Northwest Passage in 1819 to Sir Earnest Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition of 1914–1917. In addition, I consider poems which recount poets' personal experiences of the Antarctic continent. Poets discussed include Bill Manhire, Chris Orsman, Elizabeth Bradfield, Sarah Lindsay, David Solway, James Pollock, Melinda Mueller, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch, Sheenagh Pugh, Katharine Coles, W.S. Graham, and Derek Mahon.

My own creative work, a collection of poems, includes a series devoted to the legend of Saint Brendan and his sea voyage in search of an earthly paradise. I follow the Middle Dutch version of Brendan (c. 1400), and the use of this grand, heroic narrative as a framework reflects contemporary poets' reworking of polar exploration histories. In these poems, the perilous Romantic quest narrative includes both sublime and abject figures and draws on my own experience of sailing round the Arctic islands of Svalbard during the summer of 2015.

Table of Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	iv
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	v
Introduction	1
1. The sublime and polar exploration narratives	6
The sublime in Longinus, Addison, Burke, Kant	8
Sublimity and the poles	14
Towards a polar sublime	20
2. Contemporary poetry and the polar sublime	26
Sublime traces	27
‘The teeming gulf’: a positive abyss	34
The planetary sublime of the poles	46
‘Is it happening?’: suspended time and tricks of light	59
3. The abject body and the textual sublime	71
Strange meat and hairy stew	74
The suffering and dismembered body	88
The journey of the polar dead	102
4. The polar body	111
Constructing the polar body	112
The clean and dirty poles	118
The devouring poles	125
5. Reflective commentary on the creative work	132
Creative work: a collection of poems	146
Appendix I Summaries of key polar exploration missions, 1819–1917	200
Bibliography	213

List of figures

1. The *Antigua* anchored at Hornbækpollen, Svalbard,
79° 36' 15" N, 12° 40' E 5
2. 'Landing the Treasures, or Results of the Polar Expedition!!!'
George Cruikshank, 1819 89
3. Lilliehöökreen, Svalbard, 79° 19' N, 11° 36' E 138

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life-changing experience which informed the entire series of Brendan poems. Our armed guards – Sarah Gerats, Therese Arulf, Aurora Degnes and Sally Hovelsø – kept us safe from polar bears and allowed the wilderness party to continue long into the bright, sunlit night.

The poem ‘Three Messerschmidt Heads’ was first published in *Poetry London*, Spring 2014. ‘Inexpressible Island’ and ‘The Find’ were first published in my collection *The Wilderness Party* (Bloodaxe Books, 2015).

Finally, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Alexander Hutchison for guiding the critical work home. This PhD is dedicated to his memory.

Introduction

This practice-based PhD takes as its subject contemporary poetry of polar exploration – in particular, historical polar exploration as undertaken at the turn of the twentieth century. Both academically and creatively, I am drawn to the fact that the contemporary poets under consideration are turning and returning to a ‘grand narrative’, to use Jean-François Lyotard’s term¹ – a strategy which seems to be particularly at odds with a postmodern literary era in which, again quoting Lyotard, ‘[t]he narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal’.² It is precisely these elements which define polar exploration narratives, however, and which are capturing the imagination of many contemporary poets.

At the same time, these re-imaginings are not undertaken in the same unquestioning, un-ironic spirit in which these narratives first emerged. The concepts of sublime conquest, moral fortitude and noble sacrifice were the classroom topics of a pre-War era: polar exploration’s unselfconsciously ‘Heroic Age’. This study seeks to show how in recent polar poetry there is an inevitable re-framing of these metanarratives; not only as a result of contemporary sensibilities, but also as a result of the lyric mode in which they are being expressed.

A significant part of the creative work included with this thesis has another historical narrative as its basis, that of Saint Brendan and his legendary voyage – another tale of peril and sublime wonder which was told, re-written and re-told in different forms and different languages between the eighth and fifteenth centuries. Brendan travels in search of an ideal, an earthly paradise, with a small crew of monks who share his ambition. The concept of the Romantic quest is thus relevant to the Brendan narratives and to Heroic Age polar exploration: a physical encounter with the

¹ Lyotard, Jean-François (2004). *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, p. 37

² *ibid.*, xxiv

mythical or the near-impossible is being sought, a journey which will utterly transform those involved. My own personal encounter with the sublime Arctic environment of Svalbard in June 2015, sailing in a relatively small three-mast barquentine ship, the *Antigua*, enabled me to write some of that experience into the Brendan poems.

The fact that St Brendan is believed to have travelled to the Arctic regions has been highlighted by Barry Lopez in *Arctic Dreams*³ and by several contemporary poets. In her poem ‘The Ice-Pilot Speaks’, Pauline Stainer describes how ‘*St Brendan’s monks / sail through the eye / of the iceberg*’.⁴ The New Zealand poet Bernadette Hall also makes the connection between Brendan and polar exploration: in her poem ‘The Irishman’, Brendan, like Antarctic veteran Tom Crean, is ‘a good / keen Kerry man’ and sails ‘through the arch [...] of an iceberg’⁵ in Arctic waters. In addition, Hall repeats Lopez’s description of Brendan’s iceberg-hole as being like ‘the eye of God’,⁶ as does Nick Drake in his own brief treatment of St Brendan.⁷ In all three poets, Brendan is referenced only in passing or in summary fashion, as is the Arctic environment’s presence in the narrative, and therefore these poems do not provide the basis for extended analysis. In the ‘eye of God’ image however, the link is made between the polar regions and the powerful impact of the awe-inspiring sublime.

The aesthetics and language of the sublime are familiar elements in descriptions of polar landscapes, and this provides an opportunity to formulate a contemporary polar sublime in relation to these poems of polar exploration. Again, there are historical texts to be considered, particularly of the Romantic era, and a particular mode of expression which at first hand may appear to be out of fashion in contemporary poetry – one which

³ Lopez, Barry (1986). *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*. London: Macmillan, p. 316

⁴ Stainer, Pauline (1994). *The Ice-Pilot Speaks*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, p. 13

⁵ Hall, Bernadette (2007). *The Ponies*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, p. 38

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 39, and Lopez (1986) p. 316. It should be noted however that Lopez gives no citation for his quoted phrase ‘like the eye of God’, and so the source of this simile – surely modern, and not from primary Brendan texts – is unknown. Its continuing popularity is a result of Lopez’s wide readership.

⁷ Drake, Nick (2012). *The Farewell Glacier*. Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, p. 13

has roots in the varieties of religious experience, whether orthodox or unorthodox, and in the Romantic impulse towards pantheism. While some of the poets under consideration in this thesis employ Christian symbolism, to consider poetic representations of polar space within a framework of religious or quasi-religious significance is too narrow an approach when one considers the broad range of textual and affective responses the sublime can engender.

Instead, I formulate the polar sublime using several points of focus. The relevance of the sublime as landscape category has been well established in relation to the polar regions, notably by Chauncy Loomis and Francis Spufford, and this also informs my definition of the polar sublime. In addition, I suggest that contemporary awareness of psychoanalytic models of thought allows for an enhanced interpretation of the figure of the crevasse, or abyss – a figure which has Miltonic and Romantic precedents, and which has increased significance for contemporary poets in light of Barbara Claire Freeman’s concept of the feminine sublime. I also develop the concept of the planetary sublime, which acknowledges Wordsworth’s vision of geological timelessness but which incorporates Lyotard’s emphasis on temporality as a key aspect of the Burkean sublime and the twentieth-century postmodern sublime.

This sense of the planetary has a relationship with eco-awareness. Even if climate change is not invoked directly, its presence can be indicated: Nick Drake uses an ice-core as a first-person narrator to express a form of eco-consciousness in his collection *The Farewell Glacier*;⁸ Bill Manhire and Katharine Coles describe ice-sampling and other scientific activities witnessed during their Antarctic residencies. Over the full range of polar-themed poetry, however, contemporary poets are focusing on historical exploration narratives more often than climate-related anxieties, and for this reason ecocriticism has not been used as the primary critical framework of this

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 45–46

thesis. Furthermore, what Greg Garrard describes as the explicit ‘moral and political agenda’⁹ of ecocriticism also applies to certain forms of explicit eco-poems, and the results – including several poems in the Nick Drake collection referred to above – are often dull sermons to the converted. Again, the textual and affective aspects of the sublime are more relevant to the drama of contemporary polar poems, so instead I draw on Kristeva’s concept of the abject to formulate the textual sublime within the broader polar sublime. This concept serves a dual purpose: it addresses the degradation of the human body during historical expeditions, so often the focus in the poems under consideration, and also the polar environment itself.

As these contemporary poets express the vulnerability of both human beings and the environment they traverse, they are critiquing the ‘heroic’ while implicitly acknowledging the status of the planet as an endangered entity. The economies of power within the aesthetic of the sublime have thus taken a radical shift: where formerly it was the explorer whose perilous self-preservation defined the sublime encounter, contemporary readers and writers are more likely to be concerned for the preservation of the ice-sheets. In outlining this shift, I employ Kristeva’s notion of the clean and proper body, a body whose boundaries are recognised and maintained, and whose surfaces are not despoiled, to draw together the aesthetics of sublime human suffering and the concept of the ‘polar body’.

These various sublimes – the natural, the planetary, the textual – I am proposing as key aspects of the contemporary polar sublime. It is not necessary for the poems under consideration to include all of these aspects in order to qualify as works of the polar sublime, although some do: it is the subject matter of polar exploration, in conjunction with one or more of these sublime aspects, which I propose may be classed as the polar sublime in its broadest sense.

⁹ Garrard, Greg (2012). *Ecocriticism: Second Edition*. London: Routledge, p. 3

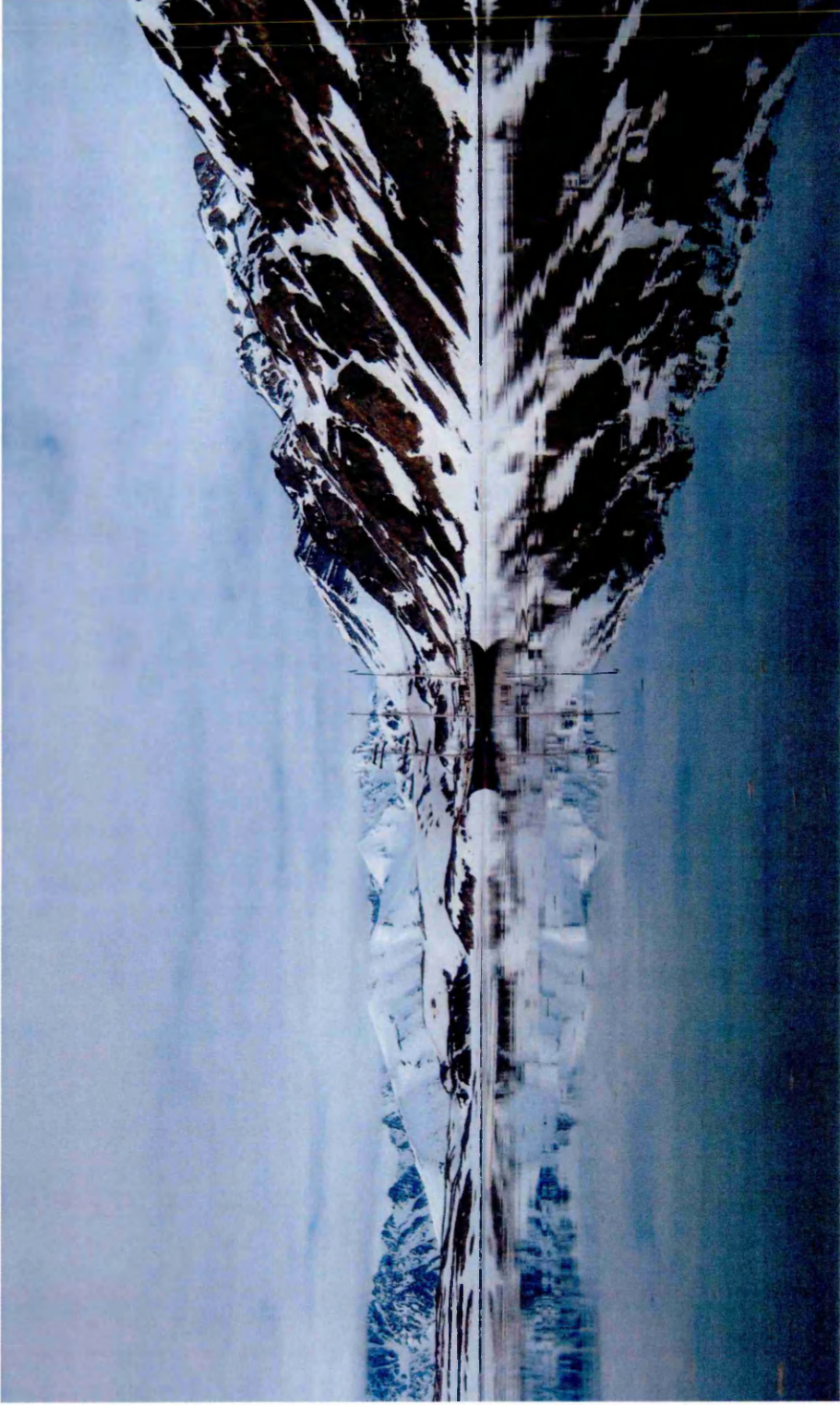


Figure 1

The *Anigua* anchored at Hornbækpollen, Svalbard, $79^{\circ} 36' 15''$ N, $12^{\circ} 40' E$

Photo by the author, 20 June 2015

Chapter 1 The sublime and polar exploration narratives

In the introduction to *Antarctica in Fiction*, Elizabeth Leane defines her study as narrative-focused and primarily concerned with ‘the kind of stories about Antarctica which imaginative texts tell’.¹ While this framework includes occasional discussion of what she describes as narrative poems by Bill Manhire, Derek Mahon and Douglas Stewart, she admits that ‘the large number of shorter lyric poems dealing with the continent deserve separate treatment’.² It is the intention of this thesis to provide that treatment, while widening the scope to include poems whose subject is the Arctic. Under consideration will be contemporary poetry published in English after 1970 which takes polar exploration – particularly during its ‘Heroic Age’ (1897–1922)³ – as its theme. Although occasional poems on the subject appeared before this date – for example Michael Hamburger’s ‘Arctic Explorer’ in 1961⁴ – 1970 is significant as being the publication year of W.S. Graham’s *Malcolm Mooney’s Land*, whose title poem draws on Graham’s close reading of Fridtjof Nansen’s accounts of Arctic exploration, most notably the *Fram* expedition of 1893–1896. Gwendolyn MacEwen’s verse play *Terror and Erebus*, although first broadcast on Canadian radio in the early 60s, did not appear in print until 1974.⁵ The majority of poems under consideration were published after 1995, reflecting the surge of interest in polar history within the mass-market publishing industry⁶ and the availability of creative residencies in the Antarctic which

¹ Leane, Elizabeth (2012). *Antarctica in Fiction: Imaginative Narratives of the Far South*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.17

² *ibid.*

³ Dates as suggested by Guly, H.R. (2014). Human Biology Investigations During the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration (1897–1922). *The Polar Record*, 50 (253), p. 183–191. There is no consensus as to the date range of the Heroic Age, however: Fergus Fleming refers to ‘the Age of Heroes, a period stretching from 1888 to 1914’, in Shackleton, Earnest (2002). *South: The Endurance Expedition*. London: Penguin, x

⁴ In: Hamburger, Michael (1999). *Collected Poems 1941–1994*. London: Anvil Press, p. 82–83, the poem first published in *Poetry* magazine, October 1961

⁵ MacEwen, Gwendolyn (1993). *Gwendolyn MacEwen: Volume One: The Early Years*. Margaret Atwood and Barry Callaghan, eds. Toronto: Exile Editions, p. 99

⁶ Roland Huntford’s 1983 revisionist study *Scott and Amundsen: The Race to the South Pole* (Macmillan) can be seen as the starting-point of this renewed interest. Fergus Fleming’s *Barrow’s Boys*, published in

has allowed poets from America, Australia and New Zealand to write from first-hand experience of that environment.

The theoretical framework for this study will be the aesthetics of the sublime and, insofar as it reflects a type of sublimity, the concept of the abject as defined by Julia Kristeva.⁷ The sublime may at first sight be an obvious choice for polar subjects: Chauncy Loomis's influential essay 'The Arctic Sublime',⁸ Francis Spufford's *I May Be Some Time*,⁹ and I.S. MacLaren's work on the impact of aesthetics on Franklin's voyages¹⁰ have all taken the sublime, and its domesticated counterbalance, the beautiful, as a central point of reference. None of these authors includes contemporary poetry in their scope however, and Leane is not convinced of the efficacy of the sublime as an overarching framework or governing idea in relation to polar literature: in particular, she maintains, 'focus on [the sublime] tends to draw one back to the well-examined nineteenth-century texts of Coleridge and Poe'.¹¹ This rather arbitrary and backward-looking focus on the Romantic and Gothic sublimines would appear to dismiss the possibility of a contemporary sublime; an aesthetic which, this thesis will argue, has particular relevance to poetry on polar themes.

In order to establish the continuing and significant presence of the sublime in contemporary polar poetry, this first chapter will provide an overview of the sublime as it has been conceptualized by Longinus, Addison, Burke and Kant, with particular emphasis on its relevance to polar environments, and also of the Arctic or 'polar'

1998 (Granta) was soon followed by his *Ninety Degrees North: The Quest for the North Pole* (Granta, 2001), with other popular titles appearing from Kelly Tyler-Lewis (2006), Glyn Williams (2009), and Meredith Hooper (2010) as listed in the bibliography.

⁷ Kristeva, Julia (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

⁸ Loomis, Chauncy C. (1977). The Arctic Sublime. In: Knoepfelmacher, U.C. and Tennyson, G.B., eds. *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press

⁹ Spufford, Francis (1996). *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination*. London: Faber and Faber.

¹⁰ MacLaren, I.S. (1984). Retaining Captivity of the Soul: Response to Nature in the First Franklin Expedition. *Essays in Canadian Writing*, (28), 57–92; and, MacLaren, I.S. (1985). The Aesthetic Map of the North, 1845–1859. *Arctic*, 38 (2), 89–103.

¹¹ Leane (2012), p. 12

sublime as suggested by Loomis and Spufford. This will set the context for chapter two, in which the reformulation of the ‘polar sublime’ will begin: one which takes account of twentieth-century theorists, and which is informed directly by contemporary polar poetry.

The sublime in Longinus, Addison, Burke, Kant

The first-century A.D. treatise *Peri Hypsous* [*On the Sublime*], by the author known as Longinus, marked the first appearance of this concept in literature. For Longinus, the sublime is a quality of language, in poetry or prose, which has the capacity to affect the reader (or listener, if the work is being delivered by an orator) in a specific way; that is, a language event which ‘throws an audience into transport [...] with strength irresistible [it] strikes home, and triumphs over every hearer’.¹² The vocabulary deployed here is one of force, of masculine power, ‘the compacted might of genius’,¹³ and the audience, we learn, is propelled into an ecstasy it is powerless to refuse. Longinus outlines how the true sublime can be recognized, therefore, by a study of effects: if the soul is transported, if thoughts are elevated, if passions are raised ‘to a violent and even enthusiastic degree’¹⁴ then we are in the presence of the real thing, and the impression will be long-lasting. To achieve these effects, the subject matter should concern force on a cosmic scale: uprisings and revolutions, terrible or heroic deeds, cliff-hanging episodes. Longinus gives extracts from Homer’s *Iliad* as examples: wars waged by the gods, ‘the whole world in commotion, and tottering on its basis! [...] heaven and hell, things mortal and immortal, all combating together, and sharing the danger of this important battle’.¹⁵ If the scene is not one of battle, then imposing scale alone is

¹² Longinus, quoted in: Dionysus Longinus on the sublime, tr. William Smith (1743). In: Ashfield, Andrew and de Bolla, Peter, eds. (1996). *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 22

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 23

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 24

sufficient to hit the sublime register: ‘lofty Mountains [...] enormous Monsters [...] heavy Whales [...] the parting Waves’.¹⁶

Drawing these threads of cause and effect together, Longinus suggests that there is something innate in human nature which responds to limitless grandeur; the human mind ‘passes the bounds of the material world, and launches forth at pleasure into endless space’.¹⁷ Paradoxically, this moment of transport is triggered by objects *in* the material world, and Longinus is consistent in suggesting that scale is the key quality, as when he refers admiringly to the grandeur of ‘the Nile [...] the Rhine, or still much more, the ocean’.¹⁸ The ocean trumps the grand rivers by virtue of its boundlessness, its capacity for violence and destruction, its deeps, its power to amaze. Another telling example from nature is the volcano, and Longinus describes ‘the boiling furnaces of Etna, which cast up stones, and sometimes whole rocks, from their labouring abyss, and pour out whole rivers of liquid and unmingled flame’.¹⁹ Here, we are told, the sense of danger and violence is still present, as is the abyssal depth we would find in the oceanic sublime, but with the addition of the feminine ‘labouring’ and a fiery birth, an out-pouring which may just as easily be reduced to an act of throwing-up; not diabolic creation, but a tide of waste material. This serves to highlight the supposition that, for Longinus, the sublime’s perceiving and participating subject will be male, and this masculine response to a powerfully feminised Nature will be an ambivalent mix of awe and terror. Although the concept of the ‘feminine sublime’ is considered in chapter two, the issue of gender in relation to landscape and homosocial epic narratives – including the poetry of polar exploration – deserves a much greater treatment than is within the scope of this thesis.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 25

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 28

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

In Longinus, then, the sublime may be categorized in three ways: as a type of literary content to be found in epic or tragic tales; as the audience's response to that content which, in its passionate involvement, amounts to a form of self-loss in a moment of heightened intensity; as awe-inspiring natural phenomena which may be represented in sublime literature or apprehended directly, unmediated by a masterful (and presumably male) author. It is a mode of feeling which can be provoked by a description of an active volcano or the sight of real one, both rhetorical and actual.

In a series of 1712 articles for the *Spectator*, thirty years before William Smith's influential translation of Longinus into English, Joseph Addison identified some of these key elements of the sublime in very similar terms. On the one hand, it was to be found in nature: a rocky precipice when viewed from a distance produces a delightful feeling of terror, delightful because the viewer is in no personal danger but can entertain feelings of vertiginous instability. Addison then makes an explicit comparison between this safe distance and the relationship between comfortable reader and disturbing texts. He says: 'when we read of torments, wounds, deaths, and the like dismal accidents, our pleasure does not flow so properly from the grief which such melancholic descriptions give us, as from the secret comparison which we make between our selves and the person who suffers'.²⁰ Addison emphasises the reader's sense of safety: he or she may freely enter the tragedies being described and freely disengage, and there is a curious pleasure to be had from reading about those who are suffering the direct impact of calamitous events. Concerns about bodily harm are inextricably linked with the intoxicating powers of the sublime, and for this reason the image of the precipice will become a recurring motif in sublime literature, one which represents, in the words of

²⁰ Joseph Addison in *The Spectator*, no. 418, Monday 30 June, 1712; quoted in: Ashfield and de Bolla (1996), p. 68

John Dennis, a 'delightful Horror' even at 'the very brink [...] of Destruction; one Stumble, and both Life and Carcass had been at once destroy'd'.²¹

This quotation originates in Dennis's late seventeenth-century account of a journey through the Alps. He anticipates Addison by identifying the sublime in mountainous nature, by describing the encounter in dramatic terms so that it serves as a textual sublime, and by accommodating the reader's hunger for narratives of death or dismal accidents. Dennis also anticipates the Alpine sublime of the Romantic poets, particularly Shelley's 'Mont Blanc' with its 'ice-gulfs'²² and snowy serenity. The textual sublime, then, need not rely on gods and monsters: it is to be found in travellers' tales, and their descriptions of magnificent yet hostile environments.

In Edmund Burke's treatise on the sublime and the beautiful of 1757, the curious pleasure to be gained from close encounters with mortal danger is again the point of focus. Like Addison, he proposes that this pleasure is dependent on the subject being situated at a safe distance from potentially crushing forms of nature or calamitous events, given the overriding instinct for self-preservation. The sublime is to be found in 'ideas of pain, and danger',²³ and, echoing both Longinus and Addison, for Burke the safest yet most impactful way of encountering the sublime is via the artistic or creative representation of human tragedy. He maintains that: 'poetry, painting, and the other affecting arts, transfuse their passions from one breast to another, and are often capable of grafting a delight on wretchedness, misery, and death itself'.²⁴ Significantly with Burke, the sublime becomes synonymous with terror, and implicated in this definition is an audience in search of thrilling disaster narratives. The natural world offers a suitable array of powerful threats: the ocean, vast mountains, confounding darkness, the

²¹ John Dennis, quoted in: Ashfield and de Bolla (1996), p. 59

²² Shelley, Percy Bysshe (1927). *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. London: Oxford University Press, p. 528

²³ Burke, Edmund (2008). *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Adam Phillips, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 36

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 41

ubiquitous precipice, and Burke shares Longinus' admiration for the volcanic in stating that Virgil's 'description of Vulcan's cavern in Etna',²⁵ with its 'terrific lightnings, and sound, and fear, and anger, with pursuing flames',²⁶ is among the most sublime passage in the *Aeneid*. In addition, his attempt to account for its impact leads to a vision of a monstrous physical being: the various images are 'formed into a gross body; it is hammered by the Cyclops, it is in part polished, and partly continues rough'.²⁷ Longinus makes the same analogy between constituent elements of discourse and the sublime effect of those elements being 'skilfully knit together [...] united into one body'.²⁸ Significantly, however, in Burke's century, the final major work on the sublime – Kant's *Critique of Judgment* of 1790 – would ignore the intensities of the text and concentrate exclusively on the phenomenal world.

Kant invokes natural forces as typical examples of the sublime. These include: 'overhanging [and] threatening rocks, thunderclouds [...] volcanoes in all their violence of destruction, hurricanes [...] the boundless ocean rising with rebellious force',²⁹ all of which may exert a powerful attraction when viewed from a certain distance and in a position of security. He argues, however, that the sublime is not a quality of physical objects in themselves but the sensibility of mind upon encountering those objects. In the attempt to comprehend such vast, limitless powers, the imagination encounters a limit, breaks down, and 'recoils upon itself',³⁰ a moment which nevertheless produces a curious feeling of 'emotional delight'.³¹ The sublime moment, *by virtue* of its attendant dangers and risks, and not in spite of them, is in Kant's view an essentially pleasurable one: the pull-and-push, the magnetic attraction and repulsion which this involves has,

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 155

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 156

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ Longinus, in: Ashfield and de Bolla (1996), p. 29

²⁹ Kant, Immanuel (2008). *Critique of Judgment*. Nicholas Walker, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 91

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 83

³¹ *ibid.*

for him, an irresistible quality. What might be called the domestic virtues – comfort, good health, material wealth – are made to seem insignificant by comparison, since they cannot prove to the mind ‘the sublimity of its own vocation even over nature’³² nor stir the soul to reflect upon its own fellowship with the infinite.

Thus, Kant indicates that pleasure is allied to self-esteem, and, in turn, that the sublime affords an opportunity to ‘esteem something highly even in opposition to our (sensuous) interest’.³³ Importantly, Kant’s primary focus is natural objects as they strike the eye, and the ‘horror and sacred awe’³⁴ they may provoke. He does not consider literary representations of these same objects, though he does suggest that poets and novelists are able to capitalise on popular demand for sublime thrills.³⁵ He admits, too, that the sublime is to be reached by regarding natural objects ‘as poets do’³⁶ and not as disinterested philosophers might, though even this may locate the sublime in sensitive, perceiving subjects rather than their poetical works.

These brief summaries indicate the fascination with sublime feeling, particularly in the eighteenth century, feeling which would be given full expression by the Romantic poets. Also indicated are the shifting perspectives on the sublime, and the repeated attempts to analyse and codify its cause. The high-flying rhetorical sublime in Longinus is superseded by the ‘mathematically sublime’³⁷ in Kant, in which the individual’s inability to comprehend the infinite scale of the phenomenal world leads to what

³² *ibid.*, p. 92

³³ *ibid.*, p. 98

³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 99

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 106

³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 100

³⁷ Lyotard emphasises that Kant’s ‘das Mathematisch-Erhabene’ and ‘das Dynamisch-Erhabene’ ‘do not signify that there are two kinds of sublime, the one mathematical and the other dynamical’, but that these terms should be read as the sublime considered either ‘mathematically’ or ‘dynamically’. See: Lyotard, Jean-François (1994). *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 90. The English translation of the *Critique* refers to ‘the *mathematically* and the *dynamically* sublime’ (Kant 2008, p. 78); however, commentators such as Philip Shaw use the terms ‘the mathematical sublime’ and ‘the dynamical sublime’ and describes them as ‘two types of the sublime’. See: Shaw, Philip (2006). *The Sublime*. Abingdon: Routledge, p. 80–81. I therefore use the term ‘mathematically sublime’ rather than ‘the mathematical sublime’ throughout.

Lyotard calls a 'catastrophe [for] the imagination'.³⁸ Burke's assertion that 'I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power'³⁹ would carry with it the possibility of being annihilated by the Deity, confirming the sublime's double threat to both body and soul, flesh and imagination, the material and the existential, as recognized by John Dennis at the Alpine precipice.

It is the natural world which provides the common thread in these various formulations of the sublime; specifically, those aspects of the natural world which are remarkable enough – or dangerous enough – to induce a radical feeling of awe, one which may also include a fear for one's psychological and physical safety. In addition, as Addison acknowledged, there is a textual sublime to be had from tales of hair-raising mishap and death, and it is these two aspects – the natural sublime of extreme environments and the textual sublime of extreme physical suffering – which are found conjoined in the narratives of polar exploration. This fact has been recognized in recent studies of Arctic- and Antarctic-themed literature, most notably by Chauncy Loomis and Francis Spufford, and these studies have turned to Burke's taxonomy of the sublime in order to establish their arguments. Those studies will now be considered, along with dissenting opinions on the relevance of the sublime in contemporary polar literature. Also, in order to establish the continuing relevance of Burke, his taxonomy will be revisited and analysed in relation to polar landscape and polar narratives.

Sublimity and the poles

In his influential essay 'The Arctic Sublime', Chauncy Loomis suggests that the high northern landscape is the very epitome of Burke's sublime aesthetic. In Loomis's view: 'had he written his analysis of the sensational causes of the Sublime a century later than he did, he might well have used the Arctic in his discussions of light and dark, sound

³⁸ Lyotard (1994), p. 103

³⁹ Burke (2008), p. 59

and silence, obscurity, solitude, vastness, and magnificence as sources of sublime astonishment and terror'.⁴⁰ In a more recent study by Cian Duffy,⁴¹ the broader term 'polar sublime' is used to include the Antarctic in this aesthetic and to acknowledge the work of Francis Spufford in *I May Be Some Time*. Duffy does not attempt to provide a definition of the term, however, and simply uses it to signify the natural sublime of polar landscapes as featured in literary texts. In addition, his study does not include literature beyond the Romantic period. It is necessary to revisit Loomis and Spufford before we can argue for a polar sublime which takes account of their studies and enlarges upon them. Some adjustments are required for a contemporary polar sublime to be defined in relation to contemporary polar poetry.

Loomis's argument concerning the Arctic sublime is borne out in the primary exploration literature of both poles. When Robert Falcon Scott first saw the Antarctic plateau on the *Discovery* expedition in 1903, he admitted 'a scene so wildly and awfully desolate [...] cannot fail to impress one with gloomy thoughts'.⁴² The plateau is a featureless expanse of snow-covered ice over 600 miles in diameter, encompassing the South Pole itself, scoured by near-incessant frigid winds, devoid of any organic life. Scott's account continues:

But, after all, it is not what we see that inspires awe, but the knowledge of what lies beyond our view. We see only a few miles of ruffled snow bounded by a vague wavy horizon, but we know that beyond that horizon are hundreds and even thousands of miles which can offer no change to the weary eye, while on the vast expanse that one's mind conceives one knows there is neither tree nor shrub, nor any living thing, nor even inanimate rock – nothing but this terrible limitless expanse of snow. It has been so for countless years, and it will be so for countless more. And we, little human insects, have started to crawl over this awful desert, and are now bent on crawling back again. Could anything be

⁴⁰ Loomis (1977), p. 102–103

⁴¹ Duffy, Cian (2013). *The Landscapes of the Sublime 1700–1830: Classic Ground*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 21 and Chapter 3. The term 'polar sublime' is also used by Matthew Francis (2004, p. 112) to refer to Spufford's work, although Spufford himself never uses the term.

⁴² Scott, Robert Falcon (1929). *The Voyage of the 'Discovery'*. London: John Murray, p. 605

more terrible than this silent, wind-swept immensity when one thinks such thoughts?⁴³

Here is terror and awe in abundance: the mind struggles to comprehend vast geographical and temporal scales, in relation to which human beings are infinitesimally small and therefore at the mercy of higher, indifferent, inhuman powers. In the wake of high-risk imperial endeavours to map the furthest reaches of the Earth at the turn of the nineteenth century the language of the sublime had found a natural home. The Heroic Age explorers were not so far distant from the Romantics in their aesthetic tropes: Loomis argues that what he terms the ‘Arctic sublime’ was a natural development of the Alpine sublime as expressed in Shelley’s ‘Mont Blanc’ and Byron’s ‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’, quoting Byron’s phrase ‘All that expands the spirit, yet appals’⁴⁴ to encapsulate these ambiguous powers of attraction-repulsion. The Alps inspired awe with their vast scale, their snowy peaks, and their threat to human beings of annihilation by avalanche, precipice, or crevasse.

Of significance here is the transposition of the natural sublime into the textual sublime. In an Arctic context, the British Navy’s attempt to discover the Northwest Passage in 1819 – the first of John Franklin’s ill-fated missions to the Canadian high north – led to the publication of first-hand exploration narratives, accounts that would stoke the reading public’s desire for tales of this weird, unmapped region and the often grisly fate of those who struggled to tame it. This astonishing and terrible sublime is situated in two possible encounters, then: the naval crew’s perception of and reaction to Arctic space, and the reader’s engagement with Arctic exploration narratives. In fact, for Loomis, the Arctic sublime exists *primarily* in ‘the Victorian imagination [of]

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 605–606

⁴⁴ Byron, George Gordon (1961). *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron*. London: Oxford University Press, p. 218

armchair travelers'⁴⁵ and is related as much to soul-stirring tales of triumph and defeat as it is to qualities of light or landscape. Arctic exploration was a contemporary 'saga or an epic drama'⁴⁶ which aroused public passions, tensions, horror, shock; the same affective qualities that Longinus prized in the *Iliad* and which conjured the sublime into being. Loomis emphasises that it was the 'popular image of the Arctic [which] had become so awesome',⁴⁷ an image which included the sublimely appalling fate of Franklin's men who succumbed to scurvy, starvation, and cannibalism.

Loomis encapsulates a polar sublime which is both natural and textual, a landscape category and an epic tale, and in this he follows in the Longinian and Burkean traditions. Francis Spufford expands on Loomis's perspective to include the Antarctic, and to situate the aesthetics of the sublime at the centre of early twentieth-century polar exploration narratives. He identifies the essential ambiguity of the sublime in the question of whether it 'opened you up or closed you down'⁴⁸ – that is, whether the soul or imagination dilated in the moment of ecstatic transport towards the infinite or whether it contracted in the presence of an overwhelming, annihilating power that left one feeling like an insignificant 'human insect', to repeat Scott's phrase. In considering Burke, Spufford suggests that inversions or disruptions of natural order contribute to the sublimity of the polar regions, citing such examples as the Antarctic midwinters in June and the never-setting or never-rising sun.

While Spufford acknowledges the unassailable existence of the natural sublime by stating that 'the glacier [...] is sublime in and of itself',⁴⁹ he follows Loomis in paying equal attention to the relationship between text and reader by citing the 'scientific romances'⁵⁰ of the Victorian era: apocalyptic visions of the end of the world,

⁴⁵ Loomis (1977), p. 96

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p. 100

⁴⁷ *ibid.*, p. 104

⁴⁸ Spufford (1996), p. 19

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 37

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 24

of civilizations upturned, of nature asserting its power. These narratives fostered a taste for what he calls the ‘sublime of defeat’,⁵¹ which leads him to suggest that Edwardian audiences were just as eager to read about Scott’s death in Antarctica as relish the elements of landscape⁵² – and the popular press were willing to oblige with as much gruesome detail as deemed fit. If explorers set off with the dream of conquering hostile environments and proving, in that phrase of Kant’s, the mind’s ‘sublimity of its own vocation even over nature’,⁵³ Spufford suggests that there was a readership at home who were rather hoping for the ‘dreamed-of conquest *by* raging elements’⁵⁴ and, crucially, its portrayal in literature: those tales of ‘torments, wounds, deaths, and the like dismal accidents’ identified by Addison as textually sublime.

Spufford also highlights the masculine-gendered nature of the sublime aesthetic, involving ‘men’s subjection to more powerful men or to great natural forces’⁵⁵ while leaving women to act as signifiers for the beautiful, the harmonious, the domestic; a fact which makes the sublime particularly relevant for the exclusively male endeavours of historical polar exploration. In suggesting that women authors turned to the Gothic in order to experience and convey this ‘tougher aesthetic’⁵⁶ of peril and threat, he again makes clear that the relationship between author, text, and reader is one in which the affective impact of the sublime is induced in a safe environment, and the writer, as much as the reader, has an opportunity to explore subjects of a horrifying or disturbing nature. As de Bolla says in respect to this key point: ‘the power of language [...] produces sublimity’:⁵⁷ the orator-author is possessed by the very sublime which enraptures the audience.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p. 26

⁵² *ibid.*, p. 26–27

⁵³ Kant (2008), p. 92

⁵⁴ Spufford (1996), p. 26

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p. 35

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ De Bolla, Peter (1989). *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics and the Subject*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 41

Loomis and Spufford are in broad agreement with regard to the natural and textual sublime and the importance of both to polar narratives. Elizabeth Leane is not as easily convinced, however: she accepts the ‘horizontal sublimity’⁵⁸ of Antarctic landscape, particularly the white desert of the Antarctic plateau, but differs in asserting that the sublime is first and foremost a ‘landscape category’,⁵⁹ a category in response to which ‘language [...] falls short’⁶⁰ in the face of ‘inexpressible extremes’.⁶¹ While this tongue-tied response has been attested to in many exploration accounts, it may also be invoked as a mere rhetorical device. For example, on his approach to the Antarctic plateau in October 1903, Scott writes: ‘To describe the wildly beautiful scene that is about us to-night is a task that is far beyond my pen’, but nevertheless goes on to write two lengthy paragraphs about these ‘fantastic and beautiful forms’.⁶² The inexpressible is therefore a very narrow definition of the sublime which, inevitably, leads Leane to reject its aesthetics as a possible focus for her study of Antarctic-themed literature. She does not consider the textual sublime as outlined by Loomis and Spufford, nor Burke’s wide-ranging taxonomy. In addition, she rejects the suitability of the sublime on the basis that its initial application was to northern or Alpine landscapes, and claims there is a risk in conflating the very different geographies of the Arctic and the Antarctic. While worthy of note, this is also a narrow categorisation which denies the sublime its aesthetic relevance to both poles.

Though it is possible to accept Leane’s assertion that the sublime cannot be sufficient as the *exclusive* aesthetic for polar landscapes and polar narratives, it is important to revisit Burke’s taxonomy at this point in order to expand on Loomis and Spufford and confirm the significance of the sublime to polar exploration. In addition, aspects of Burke’s taxonomy which are not given attention by Loomis and Spufford will

⁵⁸ Leane (2012), p. 12

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 11

⁶⁰ *ibid.*, p. 1

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² Scott (1929), p. 577

be considered, the better to formulate the concept of the polar sublime as a wide-ranging aesthetic. This consideration will also establish the link between Burke and twentieth-century theorists of the sublime such as Thomas Weiskel and Jean-François Lyotard, whose theories will be of key importance in following chapters. The Burkean element of privation, in particular, is of crucial importance to Lyotard's formulation of the sublime moment. Given the centrality of Kant in the work of Weiskel and Lyotard, continuing attention will be paid to the Kantian sublimines insofar as they relate to polar narratives, and this too will serve to address the absence of Kantian theory in the polar sublimines of Loomis and Spufford.

With Loomis and Spufford taking Romantic, Victorian and Edwardian texts as their primary focus, studies of the sublime in relation to modernist and postmodernist literature must also be considered if a contemporary polar sublime is to be defined. For example, Steven Vine does not discuss polar-themed material in *Reinventing the Sublime*,⁶³ but draws on Weiskel and Lyotard as much as Kant and Burke in order to support his arguments. Alan Richardson's *The Neural Sublime*,⁶⁴ though devoted to Romantic literature, introduces current cognitive theory which is of relevance to polar mirages. In order to begin outlining a truly contemporary polar sublime, therefore, these studies will serve as important points of reference.

Towards a polar sublime

The importance of Burke to the polar sublime may be consolidated by returning to his 1757 *Enquiry*. He proposes that 'darkness is more productive of sublime ideas than light',⁶⁵ which relates to his idea of obscurity in relation to the sublime.⁶⁶ So, a land in

⁶³ Vine, Steven (2013). *Reinventing the Sublime: Post-Romantic Literature and Theory*. Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press

⁶⁴ Richardson, Alan (2010). *The Neural Sublime: Cognitive Theories and Romantic Texts*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press

⁶⁵ Burke (2008), p. 73

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p. 55

which perpetual darkness reigns for months on end will have the capacity to engender sublime feeling through a heightening of rational and irrational fears. In addition, Burke's suggestion that 'a light by its very excess is converted into a species of darkness'⁶⁷ has obvious relevance to the long polar summers in which the sun does not set for months on end. In fact, as is well established now, this excess of light at the polar regions can plunge a snow-blind traveller into literal darkness.

Modern commentators on polar exploration have also noted how reliable vision is undermined in other ways within a predominantly white landscape. As MacLaren explains, this is because 'space [can] not readily be demarcated and approximated between the immediate foreground and distant background'.⁶⁸ Barry Lopez confirms that, due to the exceptional clarity of the atmosphere, exploration parties would push forwards in the belief that their visible goal lay only a few miles away, only to see it perpetually out of reach.⁶⁹ These tricks of the eye effectively rendered the explorers blind to their true position in space, while blizzards and white-outs could erase vision and cause extreme disorientation. On a grander scale, due to these tricks of polar air and light, nineteenth-century explorers would spy new distant islands or land masses, give them names, add them to the cartographic record, only to have them dismissed as optical illusions some years later. As Lopez notes with laconic precision:

The 'Barnard Mountains', reported by John Ross in 1818 [...] were found not to exist by Edward Inglefield in 1852. American explorer Charles Francis Hall's 'President's Land' proved an ephemera. The 'King Oscar Land' and 'Petermann Land' described by an Austrian army officer from Cape Fligeli, Franz Josef Land, in 1884 were never seen again.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 74

⁶⁸ MacLaren (1985), p. 100

⁶⁹ Lopez (1986), p. 240

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, p. 238

These illusions are sublime by virtue of their effect on the perceiving subject: they induce a ‘dislocation of the faculties among themselves’, to use Lyotard’s phrase,⁷¹ an indeterminacy with regard to the subject’s relation to what they regard as real or unreal. In his recent study, Alan Richardson argues that ‘the rhetoric of illusion so pervasive within popular science and neuroscience overlaps with the rhetoric of the sublime’,⁷² and coins the term ‘the neural sublime’ to describe this brain-centred approach to cognitive dissonance. In his view, it is the brain’s capacity for constructing realities *in excess* of the material world which produces a wow factor analogous to the transcendental sublime. In this conception the links to Burke are evident, particularly his emphasis on obscurity for sublime affect – whatever is ‘dark, uncertain, confused’⁷³ – and, as Richardson notes, his appreciation of the sun’s power to create sublime intensities or retinal ‘afterimages’,⁷⁴ which establishes the relevance of the 1757 *Enquiry* to the optical wonders of the polar regions.

Another element of Burke’s taxonomy of particular relevance to polar exploration and the polar sublime is privation. He stresses that ‘[a]ll *general* privations are great, because they are all terrible; *Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude* and *Silence*’.⁷⁵ This theme, of course, is emphasised in a wide variety of polar exploration texts. Explorers have borne witness to the vacuity of the polar plateau of Antarctica, the interminable darkness of the polar winters, the relative or absolute solitude of the Heroic Age explorers traversing ‘the Great Alone’.⁷⁶ The one privation Burke does not mention is that of hunger, and it is a curious omission. During the Irish famine of 1740–1741

⁷¹ Lyotard, Jean-François (1998). *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 98

⁷² Richardson (2010), p. 22

⁷³ Burke (2008), p. 55

⁷⁴ Richardson (2010), p. 33, referring to Burke (2008), p. 73–74

⁷⁵ Burke (2008), p. 65

⁷⁶ A phrase from Robert Service’s poem ‘The Shooting of Dan McGrew’ and appropriated by Herbert Ponting in *The Great White South or With Scott in the Antarctic*, London: Duckworth, 1922, p. 150, 189

(known as the ‘Arctic Famine’ due to extreme cold weather)⁷⁷ Burke was ten years-old and possibly ‘frozen in for the duration of the famine in [...] north Co. Cork’,⁷⁸ a region particularly devastated. It has therefore been suggested that he had ‘first-hand experience of famine’⁷⁹ at that time. His description of the typical diet among the Irish rural population shows that he was aware of the extreme poverty they suffered: ‘As for their food, it is notorious that they seldom taste Bread or Meat; their Diet, in Summer, is Potatoes and sour Milk; in Winter, when something is required comfortable, they are still worse, living on the same Root, made palatable only by a little Salt, and accompanied with Water’.⁸⁰

Perhaps the omission of hunger is not so curious. Crucial to the experience of the sublime for Burke was that relative ‘distance’ from the source of pain or danger. It may be the case that Burke’s very *closeness* to famine prevented him from nominating hunger as an admirably ‘grand’ privation if viewed ‘at certain distances, and with certain modifications’.⁸¹ It is precisely this privation, however, that would terrify and excite Victorian readers of polar exploration narratives, notably Sir John Franklin’s voyages in search of the Northwest Passage: the slow starvation of the entire crews, when encountered via the safe distance of newspaper reports, allowed for the type of textual sublime that Addison would have recognized.

On the evidence of this survey it is possible to argue that the sublime, whether textual or natural, is an appropriate framework upon which to base a further study of polar-related literature. The environment itself contains elements which, as Spufford says of glaciers, are inherently sublime, and the hallucinatory effects of air and light may throw the

⁷⁷ Gibbons, Luke (2003). *Edmund Burke and Ireland: Aesthetics, Politics and the Colonial Sublime*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 132

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 131

⁸⁰ Edmund Burke, quoted in: Gibbons (2003), p. 130

⁸¹ Burke (2008), p. 36–37

perceiving subject into a state of perceptual unreality. Expedition literature recounts the epic struggles and dismal failures that readers in search of the textual sublime will find especially soul-stirring, and this supports the emphasis placed by Loomis and Spufford on the transmission of sublime experience from awe-struck explorer to an enraptured reader who is both drawn to and appalled by the extent of suffering endured.

Some key shifts are required, however, if the polar sublime is to be codified for contemporary poetry. As already noted, the focus of Loomis and Spufford is almost exclusively on nineteenth-century literature, and the sublime is an aesthetic which is strongly associated with Romantic poetry. It is this association which prompts Leane to abandon its significance beyond Coleridge and Poe, and her fleeting references to contemporary Antarctic-themed poetry contain no references to the sublime: it is necessary to show, therefore, that there are aspects of the Romantic sublime which are just as relevant to contemporary polar poetry. As already noted, there is no study of the polar sublime in contemporary literature which takes into account the work of Weiskel on the Romantic sublime, or Lyotard on the Kantian sublimes, both of which have direct bearing on poetry which confronts the privations and isolations of polar adventures.

Several issues therefore remain to be addressed: in particular, a fuller concept of a 'polar sublime' will be established in relation to contemporary poetry in order to show how it might resemble the Burkean or Romantic sublimes at the centre of Loomis's and Spufford's arguments and, crucially, how it might differ. The level or type of difference will depend on a reading of twentieth-century theorists of the sublime, ignored by or unavailable to Loomis and Spufford, to ascertain whether the sublime has been re-codified in such a way as to be relevant to polar subjects. A reading of contemporary polar poetry will itself contribute to this differentiation and development. Further, the definition of the polar sublime will be examined in the light of recent studies, notably

by Steven Vine, who draws on the work of Julia Kristeva to bring the human body into the sublime equation. The result, it is anticipated, will be a comprehensively defined polar sublime, consisting of various potential aspects, which can be used as a meaningful framework for the interpretation of contemporary poems of the subject of polar exploration and landscape. It is to these poems that this study now turns.

Chapter 2 Contemporary poetry and the polar sublime

T.S. Eliot's allusions to the journeys of Scott and Shackleton in *The Waste Land* have received much critical attention. Leane notes that Shackleton's descriptions of Antarctica's 'cruel waste of ice'¹ provide an apt connection to the poem's symbolism, and suggests a similarity between Antarctic mirages and Eliot's towers 'upside down in air'.² In pointing to these links, however, Leane does not consider the wasteland – real or symbolic – in relation to the sublime. Steven Vine, on the other hand, does argue for a post-Romantic or modernist sublime in *The Waste Land*, quoting Weiskel's concept of radical indeterminacy, the excessive 'on and on' which fails to culminate in the Romantic sense of a 'transcendent self'.³ In doing so – and perhaps surprisingly – Vine does not make reference to the poem's polar allusions to support this argument. By reinforcing such connections and taking them to another stage, mainly through a broader focus on contemporary polar poetry, this chapter will aim to establish the 'polar sublime' as a contemporary aesthetic: one which bears traces of the Burkean / Romantic sublime and the modernist / postmodernist sublime as set out by twentieth-century theorists and commentators, in particular Thomas Weiskel and Jean-François Lyotard.

Some contemporary poets clearly have a self-conscious awareness of the sublime as a theorized term, and of its popular association with the polar regions. Derek Mahon's 'Antarctica' repeatedly invokes the sublime and the ridiculous. Katharine Coles, in her poem 'Looking South', reports that a friend of hers 'is All / About the Sublime Now'⁴ to convey those qualities particular to the Antarctic but also the increasing availability of that heightened moment to those who have the means and opportunity for foreign travel and outdoor activities such as rock climbing or

¹ Shackleton (2002), p. 80

² Leane (2012), p. 4–5

³ Vine (2013), p. 73–74

⁴ Coles, Katharine (2013). *The Earth Is Not Flat*. Pasadena, CA: Red Hen Press, p. 101

mountaineering. To begin, then, it will be useful to present a brief study of poems which include the term, in order to engage with the sublime as it is understood by those poets. In addition, what might here be called the ‘traditional’ or Burkean sublime will be traced in order to establish its continuing relevance to polar poetry and, by doing so, extend the critical approaches of Loomis and Spufford into contemporary literature.

Sublime traces

As we have seen, Kant’s 1790 *Critique of Judgement* defines the sublime as a feeling in response to particular aspects of the natural world. In addition, he suggests that certain human conditions, such as extreme isolation, could be a source of wonder mixed with horror. In his earlier 1764 study of the sublime and the beautiful, Kant formulated what is now a familiar binary: ‘Nothing is so much set against the beautiful as disgust, just as nothing sinks deeper beneath the sublime than the ridiculous’.⁵ Attraction is opposed by repulsion; the lofty is opposed by the low. The differences in affective response are clear: beauty is attractive, whereas disgust is a visceral, bodily rejection; the sublime is noble and soul-stirring, whereas the ridiculous is a source of comedy or embarrassment. It should be remembered, however, that the sublime contains the contradictory opposites of attraction and repulsion, and commentators such as Thomas Paine, writing five years after the publication of Kant’s *Critique*, took a more relativistic view: ‘The sublime and the ridiculous are often so nearly related, that it is difficult to class them separately. One step above the sublime, makes the ridiculous; and one step above the ridiculous, makes the sublime again’.⁶ From this, we can surmise that there is a particular *excess* of the sublime – already an excessive experience – which may tip it over into comedy, farce, or unenlightened hubris. Similarly, an excess of the ridiculous

⁵ Kant, Immanuel (2003). *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 83

⁶ Paine, Thomas (2014). *Selected Writings of Thomas Paine*. Ian Shapiro and Jane E. Calvert, eds. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, p. 435

with regard to human endeavour may quickly become a source of anxiety if actions are unbalanced and flirting with danger. In Derek Mahon's 1986 poem 'Antarctica', we are closer to the see-saw economy of Paine than we are to the absolute dualisms of Kant:

'I am just going outside and may be some time.'
The others nod, pretending not to know.
At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime.⁷

Here, the first line quotes Captain Oates: his final recorded words as he prepared to walk out of the tent to his death during Scott's 1910–1912 attempt on the South Pole. This act of self-sacrifice (along with the quotation) was immediately valorized by the British press upon news of Scott's death.⁸ The words are at once banal and dramatic, casual and horrifying, the final lines of a character as he exits the stage of action, unambiguously heroic. Returning to Mahon's refrain, it is possible to read the ridiculous and the sublime as two co-existing yet distinct elements, i.e. '[a]t the heart of the ridiculous [and] the sublime', offering the possibility of a Kantian, dualistic reading, and yet the poem will go on to confirm their intimate relationship: 'there will glow, / At the heart of the ridiculous, the sublime'. In other words, at the heart of the ridiculous *is* the sublime; the sublime is subsumed within the ridiculous, perceptible at its very core. Mahon's suggestion is that the high ideals of Scott and his crew, the 'self-sacrifice' of British colonial endeavour, are suffused with naivety, error, and waste. It is 'the earthly pantomime', not an epic narrative, that Oates takes leave of, and this reflects the postmodern impulse to see Heroic Age exploration as a source of comedy or farce – Monty Python's ridiculous 'Scott of the Sahara' sketch being one example.⁹ Nevertheless, Mahon signals the *genuine* sublime with an unexpected shift to the vertical scale: once Oates has left the enclosed boundary of the tent, 'frostbite is

⁷ Mahon, Derek (1985). *Antarctica*. Oldcastle: Gallery Press, p. 33

⁸ As described by Max Jones in: Scott (2008), xxx–xxxiii

⁹ Script available in Manhire, Bill, ed. (2004). *The Wide White Page: Writers Imagine Antarctica*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, p. 173–180

replaced by vertigo'. He has arrived at the figurative brink, and stares over a dizzying precipice. In this moment of sudden uplift an almost out-of-body experience is conveyed: the transcendental sublime in its negative, annihilating aspect.

Chris Orsman invokes the sublime in relation to landscape and aesthetics in his poem 'A Grotto in an Iceberg'. He recounts Herbert Ponting's photograph taken from within a large, teardrop-shaped cave on Scott's *Terra Nova* expedition:

The ice cave frames a distant view

of the *Terra Nova* anchored to the ice-foot
a mile away. The Picturesque gives way

momentarily to the Sublime
like the 'perforated rock'

in an eighteenth-century drawing.
Then it's all domestic again ¹⁰

Scott's diary entry of this event also proves that the vocabulary of the sublime was still current at that time: 'Ponting has been ravished yesterday by a view of the ship seen from a big cave in an iceberg, and wished to get pictures of it'.¹¹ As de Bolla notes, the tropes of 'ravishment and transport'¹² appear early in the discourse on sublime rhetoric, as evidenced by Thomas Stackhouse in his reflections on Longinus and representations of the natural world, where he says: 'an excellent picture even of the most common things, will always touch and ravish the soul'.¹³ In addition to the picturesque, Orsman also invokes another binary of the sublime: the domestic – that bounded, feminine-gendered, civilized space which provides a haven from the ungovernable highs and lows of the natural or masculine sublime, a theme he explores more fully in another poem,

¹⁰ Orsman, Chris (1999). *South*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 45

¹¹ Scott, Robert Falcon (2008). *Journals: Captain Scott's Last Expedition*. Max Jones, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 75

¹² Ashfield and de Bolla (1996), p. 7

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 50

'The Polar Captain's Wife'. While the captain is navigating between icebergs, his wife is 'stranded amidst the furniture' and wanders 'from room to room, touching / temperate surfaces'.¹⁴ The explorer is associated with the sublime, and therefore depth; his wife is associated with the beautiful, as expressed in surfaces, thus conforming to Burke's binary formulation of the two aesthetics.

A brief study of two poems will serve to show the presence of what might be called standard sublime figures in contemporary polar poetry. In James Pollock's 'Northwest Passage', the suggestion that one might be 'sailing the thundering ice-fields on the ocean, / feeling her power move you from below'¹⁵ recalls Burke's assertion that 'the ocean is an object of no small terror'¹⁶ and his belief that 'power' is a characteristic feature of the sublime.¹⁷ Spufford's suggestion that reversals or disruptions of the natural order are sublime¹⁸ is evidenced in Pollock's poem by an Arctic landscape in which 'all summer the sun's hypnotic eye / won't blink',¹⁹ and the religious awe associated with the sublime is present in the 'steeple of jagged ice'.²⁰ Infinitude, central in both Burke and Kant, appears as 'the infinite, empty plain of wind and snow',²¹ an image also of the modernist wasteland. Finally, the polar quest is identified as a metaphor:

see how foolish you have been:
forcing your way by will across a land

that can't be forced, but must be understood,
toward a passage just now breaking up within.²²

¹⁴ Orsman (2008), p. 12

¹⁵ Pollock, James (2012). *Sailing to Babylon*. San Jose, CA: Able Muse Press, p. 3

¹⁶ Burke (2008), p. 54

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 59–65

¹⁸ Spufford (1996), p. 21

¹⁹ Pollock (2012), p. 3

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*, p. 4

In this ‘foolishness’ we can sense the proximity of the ridiculous to the sublime, and Pollock foregrounds the masculine-heroic will to power in all its imperialist folly. With the word ‘forcing’, Pollock recalls Gwendolyn MacEwen’s verse play ‘Terror and Erebus’ in which Franklin’s men ‘drive and press on down / Into the giant virginal strait of / Victoria’²³ – an act of penetrative violence – and in which those men, by virtue of their hubris, ‘created the Passage / By willing it to be’.²⁴ Pollock is able to introduce a psychoanalytic frame of reference, suggesting that an understanding of or connection to the feminine may provide an opportunity for gnosis with regard to the male psyche.

There is a precedent for this inward focus, to be found in the Romantic sublime: Christopher Stokes, in his analysis of ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner’, suggests that Coleridge ‘shifts the terrors [of the sublime] from *outside* a perceiving subject, as they are in Burke [...] and relocates them *inside* the subject’.²⁵ The subject ‘terrifies itself [and] finds an abyss within. It becomes sublime’.²⁶ In emphasising internal sources of danger and salvation, Pollock’s poem as a whole contains the elements that link Burke, the Romantics, and modernists such as Lawrence. We remember how Gerald Critch in *Women In Love* ‘was like a man hung in chains over the edge of an abyss [...] He was suspended on the edge of the void, writhing’.²⁷ Making the existential point explicit, Gudrun says to him: ‘You seem to be clutching at the void – and at the same time you are void yourself’.²⁸ This poem of Pollock’s, therefore, is an example of how the subject of historical polar exploration may reveal traces of the sublime as a landscape category and, in addition, a sublime which acknowledges the psychoanalytic interiority of the modern and postmodern condition. The contemporary poet’s access to historical detail means that a lack of direct experience of these landscapes is no barrier to the creation of

²³ MacEwen (1993), p. 105

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 102

²⁵ Stokes, Christopher (2011). *Coleridge, Language and the Sublime: From Transcendence to Finitude*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 86

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Lawrence, D.H. (1998) *Women in Love*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 351

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 338

a textual sublime: any number of primary and secondary sources could have informed Pollock's account of the horrors endured by Franklin's crew.

By comparison, Bill Manhire is one of the poets under consideration who has visited Antarctica under the auspices of a creative residency program. In his poem 'Current' he describes an encounter with a genuine abyss, an encounter which inspires in him a feeling of 'cold elation', the archetypal sublime feeling of negative pleasure:

And we were all of us
watching Brian suspended
from the lip of the Taylor

blue above palisades of height,
ledge after ledge of light,
columns and spills and organ pipes²⁹

Both the vertical and the abyssal sublime are present in this passage. Milton's 'excessive bright' is present in 'ledge after ledge of light', a seemingly endless succession which in turn evokes the sublime infinities of Burke and Kant. As in Pollock's 'steeple of jagged ice', the sense of sacred awe is invoked by the Taylor glacier's 'organ pipes' – the same phrase used by geologist Cecil Madigan in his description of Antarctica's Horn Bluff during Douglas Mawson's 1911–1914 expedition:

Awed and amazed, we beheld the lone vastness of it all and were mute. Rising out of the flat wilderness over which we had travelled was a mammoth vertical barrier of rock rearing its head to the skies above. The whole face for five miles was one magnificent series of organ-pipes. The deep shade was heightened by the icy glare beyond it. Here was indeed a Cathedral of Nature, where the 'still, small voice' spoke amid an ineffable calm.³⁰

²⁹ Manhire (2001), p. 265–266

³⁰ Madigan, C.T., in: Mawson, Douglas (2013). *The Home of the Blizzard: A Heroic Tale of Antarctic Exploration and Survival*. New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, p. 357. For another example of the vertical sublime, see Orsman (2008), p. 33: 'here are walls of rock, jutting outcrops, / a vertical thrust that tilts the mind / off balance.'

Madigan expresses the Antarctic's transformation from wasteland to grail castle, from the negative to the positive sublime. Returning to Manhire's poem, the narrator and others are watching a scientist dangling over the edge of a glacier from a safe distance, thus conforming to Burke's requirement of distance if the sublime is to be experienced as a pleasure: if Manhire were dangling himself, the proximity of danger would more likely induce fear. Vast natural scale and human insignificance, also present in the Madigan passage quoted, is reinforced by the image of this dangling scientist 'hammer[ing] // the tiny yellow pegs in'³¹ to the glacier's face.

In the same poem, Manhire continues the sacred theme with reference to the small miracles of Antarctic landscape:

Yet even crossing the lake
we were walking on air,
walking on water.

Beyond the moat
lay low chapels of ice:

and each place, each palace,
did chime and tremble as we passed.³²

Immediately recognizable in these poems is the Romantic sublime of 'Gothic cathedrals [...] a chilly sensation of terror [...] [sudden] visionary lights',³³ to quote Coleridge. The sense of 'walking on air' invokes the transcendent, the sublime as out-of-body experience, while 'walking on water' introduces the association with religious awe. As might be expected, then, the Arctic and Antarctic regions are reliable sources of sublime experience, whether the poet is drawing on (inter)textual sources, as in Pollock, or from direct experience, as in Manhire. Moving on from that recognition, it is possible to make the argument for a different kind of sublime emerging from contemporary poems

³¹ Manhire (2001), p. 266

³² *ibid.*

³³ Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1973). *Biographia Literaria: Volume I*. J. Shawcross, ed. London: Oxford University Press, p. 199; quoted in Stokes (2011), p. 166

of the far north and south – the polar sublime – which diverges from and develops the more familiar figures of Burke, Kant, and the Romantics.

‘The teeming gulf’: a positive abyss

The figure of the precipice, already noted, provides occasion for sublime feeling by virtue of the boundless depth imagined beyond its brink. Its sublimity is not limited to the potential annihilation of the subject; there is a sacred value to the abyss, the etymology of which includes ‘primal chaos’, the *prima materia* that Milton’s Holy Spirit injects with life:

thou from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like sat’st brooding on the vast abyss
And mad’st it pregnant³⁴

This sacred element retains an ambiguous quality, however: the abyss is the ‘womb of Nature and perhaps her grave, / Of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire, / But all these in their pregnant causes mixed’.³⁵ It incorporates both life and death, plenitude and decomposition. In eighteenth-century literature on the sublime, the vast profundity of nature is rhapsodised to such an excess that the Third Earl of Shaftesbury could declare that he ‘dare no more behold the amazing depths, nor sound the abyss of *Deity*’.³⁶ The sublime infinitude encompassed by the Godhead included the possibility of a creative power at the depths of destruction.

From a mythopoetic or alchemical point of view, the deep was sublime by virtue of what it might bring forth as much as what it might swallow. If a sense of the sacred is omitted from the figure, it is the latter expectation which predominates – the abyss

³⁴ Milton, John (1979). *Poetical Works*. Douglas Bush, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 212

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 252

³⁶ Cooper, Anthony Ashley, Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1714). *From Characteristics*. In: Ashfield and de Bolla (1996), p. 73

becomes a 'gulf', with its etymological link to appetite and ingestion, as evidenced in Shelley's 'The Cyclops' ('your gaping gulf, and your gullet wide')³⁷ and in Tennyson's 'Ulysses' ('It may be that the gulfs will wash us down').³⁸ Alternatively, it is the negative sublime of subjective Romantic anxiety, Wordsworth's 'abysses of a joyless heart'³⁹ or Byron's theatrical gloom: 'You look down o'er the precipice, and drear / The gulf of rock yawns, – you can't gaze a minute / Without an awful wish to plunge within it'.⁴⁰

With the Alpine sublime, the figure of the abyss as negative threat found its ultimate representation in the crevasse. The OED entry for 'gulf' includes Samuel Johnson's admonition: 'O'er the ice as o'er pleasure you lightly should glide, / Both have gulphs which their flattering surfaces hide'.⁴¹ Polar exploration is a textual history of surfaces and hidden depths, and the crevasse is an ever-present danger for those traversing the White Road.

It is important to note the link between surfaces and depth at this point: attention paid to the former may express a deferred anxiety about the latter, which is an anxiety relating to the potential influx of the negative sublime. Theresa Kelley argues that a defining aspect of Wordsworth's aesthetics is revealed when 'sublime depths show themselves unwilling to remain "below", and beautiful surfaces work to suppress sublime intrusions'.⁴² When it comes to contemporary poetry of polar exploration, however, the figure of the abyss is reclaimed as a more positively-charged symbol, one which bears more resemblance to Milton's cauldron of potentiality than the existential void of the Romantic and early modernist traditions. This reformulation is the first key

³⁷ Shelley (1927), p. 703

³⁸ Tennyson, Alfred (1968). *Poems and Plays*. London: Oxford University Press, p. 90

³⁹ Wordsworth, William (1971). *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*. Thomas Hutchinson, ed. London: Oxford University Press, p. 170

⁴⁰ Byron (1961), p. 822

⁴¹ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 'gulf', 2.a; from Hester Lynch Thrale (1786). *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson*. Dublin: Messrs. Moncrieffe, etc.

⁴² Kelley, Theresa M. (1988) *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 9

element of the contemporary polar sublime, and at this point contemporary polar poetry will be examined for expressions of this positive abyss.

American poet Elizabeth Bradfield presents the autobiographical, imaginative background to her fascination with Arctic and Antarctic exploration in a way which defines the powerful ambiguity of the abyss:

Snow fell. The street was plowed and salted.
My dreams were white and treacherous.
I walked as if the pavement's grooves
were signs of where it could collapse.
I wanted it to.⁴³

The narrator encounters the polar regions via exploration narratives and admits to adding exclamation marks of 'astonishment / or disbelief' in the margins of these books, evidence that she is responding to the textual sublime. As John Dennis, explicating Longinus, says in a treatise of 1704, 'the sublime does not so properly persuade us, as it ravishes and transports us, and produces in us a certain admiration, mingled with astonishment and surprise'.⁴⁴ For Bradfield, the daily 'work-related hazards' take on a monotonous air of safety by comparison to this 'astonishment', and are described in mock-heroic terms: 'Tempestuous / blizzard of keys, avalanche of / email'.⁴⁵ The workaday routine, then, is figured as a reliable surface – as unending and undifferentiated as an Antarctic slog, perhaps, but devoid of its potential for the natural or the textual sublime.

This question of ravishment – and the shifting balance of power implied in the conceptualization of the sublime moment – has been addressed by Barbara Claire Freeman in *The Feminine Sublime*. She makes a crucial distinction between the

⁴³ Bradfield, Elizabeth (2010). *Approaching Ice: Poems*. New York: Persea Books, p. 26

⁴⁴ Quoted in: Ashfield and de Bolla (1996), p. 37

⁴⁵ Bradfield (2010), *ibid.*

Longinian sublime and what she terms the feminine sublime, which is of relevance here: in a comparison of poems by Homer and Sappho, both quoted by Longinus, she notes that they ‘may be alike in that both depict the speaker’s encounter with death, but they do not exhibit the same concern with self-preservation’.⁴⁶ In the Sappho poem, the narrator is ‘dying’ of love and expresses what might be called an annihilating ecstasy; the passage from Homer features a storm at sea and a ship in peril. The latter bears the traditional hallmarks of sublime threat to life and limb; the Sappho poem does not. This leads Freeman to propose that the Sappho poem foregrounds ‘the deployment of agency to intensify and underscore the wish for dispossession, and to recognize in the scene of self-dispersal a site of self-empowerment’.⁴⁷ The narrator in Sappho is not turning away from annihilation, but *desiring* it, celebrating it – and this same desire can be read in the narrator of Bradfield’s poem. There is no binary of victory or defeat invoked; in evidence instead, to use Samuel Holt Monk’s phrase quoted by Freeman, is a ‘more radical flux and dispersion’.⁴⁸ In *wanting* the surface to collapse, in desiring a fall into the depths, Bradfield’s narrator gives voice to the feminine sublime – the affective yes-no of sublime attraction-repulsion is transformed into an emphatic yes! yes! in relation to the abyss. In addition, if we recall the Miltonic figure of the pregnant abyss, the ‘womb of Nature’, it becomes possible to argue that Bradfield is reasserting the positive associations with that womb-like interiority and its power for regenerative good, and that male and female poets may differ in their representations of this figure.

The word ‘treacherous’ is significant in Bradfield’s poem in that it has a particular affinity with polar landscapes. In its figurative sense, the OED defines it as ‘deceptive, untrustworthy, unreliable; of ground, ice, etc., unstable, insecure’,⁴⁹ and illustrates this context with a quotation from the Alpine travel journals of John Tyndall,

⁴⁶ Freeman, Barbara Claire (1995). *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women’s Fiction*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, p. 19

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 26

⁴⁹ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, ‘treacherous’, 2

which observe: ‘over other [crevasses] a thin and treacherous roof of ice was thrown’.⁵⁰ Bradfield signals that ‘white and treacherous’ dreams, and therefore the unconscious, can impact with a sense of negative depth; a feeling in which the subject is falling, or losing control. What makes this an example of the proposed polar sublime (and Freeman’s feminine sublime) is the fact that this loss is actively desired. The figurative collapse is both a drop into the *rewarding* depths of the unconscious and an expression of desire for a life of increased affective intensity, or meaning.

Images in other Bradfield poems build on this theme of falling as a link to desired intensity. In the tale of an unspecified expedition,

five of us have fallen
to dangle alongside cliffs of ice, the thin crust
breaking into chasm easily, as if such sudden transformations
were to be expected and we’re the fools to be surprised.
Only a thin rope holds us to the surface.⁵¹

Explicit here is the idea of falling-through as breakthrough, as transformation, as opposed to life-threatening accident, and this also recalls Freeman’s feminine sublime: a moment not of defeat, but of radical change. In the ‘thin rope’ there is the same sense of insignificance in the presence of sublime scale as in Manhire’s ‘tiny yellow pegs’ referred to previously. Paired with the ‘thin crust’, it is also possible to read this ‘thinness’ as a liminal zone between the phenomenal world and the sacred otherworld which inspires both wonder and terror in suitably sublime fashion.⁵² In the untitled introductory poem to Bradfield’s *Approaching Ice*, the narrator entreats:

*Tell me a wild bird sings deep
in the crevasses, wingstrokes cracking air.*

⁵⁰ *ibid*; the quote is from John Tyndall (1860). *The Glaciers of the Alps*. London: John Murray

⁵¹ Bradfield (2010), p. 4

⁵² The concept of ‘thin places’ has become popular in literature of ‘Celtic’ spirituality and/or Christianity, for example Béres, Laura (2012). A Thin Place: Narratives of Space and Place, Celtic Spirituality and Meaning. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, (31) 4, p. 394–413

*Tell me there's a surface we can walk on
lidding miles of plumed and luminescent fish.*

*I'm ready to be amazed. I'm longing for it.*⁵³

The narrator's 'longing' for amazement again signals the feminine sublime as defined by Freeman. With regard to the polar sublime, as present in Bradfield's poem, crevasses are inhabited: the very unnaturalness of a bird singing in a crevasse makes it ordinarily sublime, but in this image there is an added association of *jouissance* which requires a new term within the taxonomy of the sublime – the 'positive abyss'. It is related to the feminine sublime in which there is no 'victimized body' under threat.⁵⁴ It is an internalized version of Milton's abyssal 'womb of nature', as already suggested, and is given expression in Whitman's sublime outcry: 'The Past – the dark unfathom'd retrospect! The teeming gulf – the sleepers and the shadows! The past – the infinite greatness of the past! For what is the present after all but a growth out of the past?'⁵⁵ In this view, the teeming gulf is one which contains the potential for imaginative life, and has the capability of bringing-forth or bringing to light. It is not the assimilating gullet of the negative sublime, nor is it empty. It is a chasm which contains a sign.

This concept of the positive abyss within the polar sublime can help to elucidate W.S. Graham's poem 'Malcolm Mooney's Land'. It is first worth noting the historical and personal context of the poem's pre-history, however.⁵⁶ Graham was living a few miles from Gulval in Penzance during the winter of 1962–1963, the winter that became known as Britain's 'Big Freeze'. From 26 December 1962 to early March 1963 the whole of Britain was immobilized by heavy snowfall and blizzards, with Devon and

⁵³ Bradfield (2010), p. [1]

⁵⁴ Freeman (1995), p. 20–22

⁵⁵ Whitman, Walt (1998). *Leaves of Grass*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 315

⁵⁶ Curiously, the weather conditions of 1962–1963 are not noted in the major studies of Graham to date, i.e. Lopez (1989), Francis (2004), or Pite and Jones, eds. (2004)

Cornwall being the worst affected. Dartmoor ‘was like Siberia’,⁵⁷ essential transport services failed, and by early February Cornwall was entirely cut off. The Thames froze over, and a ten-foot iceberg was sighted at Greenwich. The English Channel also began to freeze at Dover and Eastbourne, and there was ‘pack ice in most ports’ – including, no doubt, Penzance. In the midst of these dangerously Arctic conditions, then, sat Graham, and three years later, in a letter dated 19 January 1966, he wrote to Ruth Hilton, ‘I finished my Cold poem’,⁵⁸ i.e. ‘Malcolm Mooney’s Land’. In one of the poem’s most striking images, the narrator-explorer writes in a diary entry:

I heard the telephone ringing deep
Down in a blue crevasse.
I did not answer it and could
Hardly bear to pass.⁵⁹

Matthew Francis suggests that this is a record of a typically polar hallucination, as found in Eliot’s reference to Shackleton’s ‘extra man’,⁶⁰ and quotes Graham’s words from the *Poetry Society Bulletin* of 1970 in which he states ‘my poem is not a telephone call. The poet only speaks one way. He hears nothing back’.⁶¹ Francis also highlights Graham’s re-use of the image in ‘What Is the Language Using Us For’, in which the narrator complains of being ‘in a telephoneless blue / Green crevasse’.⁶² A crevasse without a telephone is the negative sublime; a crevasse containing a ringing telephone is a positive abyss, and therefore an example of the polar sublime – it is this positive charge which makes it so difficult for the narrator to pass it by. As an image, it may be compared to Bradfield’s bird-singing crevasse above: there is a promissory aspect, in

⁵⁷ Information and quotations are taken from the BBC television programme ‘The Big Freeze’, first broadcast in early 1963 and repeated as part of BBC2’s ‘Winterwatch’ programme which aired on 19 January 2013

⁵⁸ In: Snow, Michael and Snow, Margaret, eds. (1999). *The Nightfisherman: Selected Letters of W.S. Graham*. Manchester: Carcanet, p. 195

⁵⁹ Graham, W.S. (2004). *New Collected Poems*. Matthew Francis, ed. London: Faber and Faber, p. 154

⁶⁰ Francis, Matthew (2004). *Where the People Are: Language and Community in the Poetry of W.S. Graham*. Cambridge: Salt, p. 113–114

⁶¹ Francis (2004), p. 121

⁶² *ibid.*

which an object of the narrator's 'longing' is signalling its presence. There is also a close similarity between Graham's crevasse and the Bill Manhire poem already quoted, which refers to a sacred moment in the ice-fields when 'each place, each palace, / did chime and tremble as we passed'. In both instances the narrator is acknowledging the presence of the sublime and yet does not (or cannot) answer its call.

While the abyss of the polar sublime may be desired – or its contents desired – it nevertheless retains the capacity to disturb. Graham's ringing telephone carries an uncanny sense of alarm: who is calling? what do they want to say? if the poet were to answer, would he be abandoning his position of isolated safety on 'the other side of words'?⁶³ The unresolved nature of the call amounts to another moment of radical indeterminacy, acknowledgment and refusal, an amalgamation of wonder and apprehension in response the 'real unabstract'⁶⁴ voices of others.

In Sarah Lindsay's poem 'Mawson in a Crevasse', the explorer Douglas Mawson is dangling by a fourteen-foot length of sledge-harness, the sledge itself wedged across the lip of the crevasse and preventing his fall. At first, events are described in the familiar terms of the negative sublime. Of the earlier disappearance of team member Belgrave Ninnis, Lindsay writes: 'In the crevasse down which he disappeared, they saw / one broken dog on a ledge too deep to reach / and ultraviolet walls of ice. No bottom'.⁶⁵ The characters stand on the brink of the infinite, and witness at first hand its destructive force. Mawson's fate, however, is to fall into a crevasse himself and dangle in the indeterminate zone between life and death, 'turning / in a diminishing spiral, / like milk at the mouth of a drain'.⁶⁶

⁶³ Graham (2004), p. 157

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Lindsay, Sarah (2008). *Twigs & Knucklebones*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, p. 106

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

Lindsay then develops the image of the 'diminishing spiral' to introduce the figurative possibility that the abyss is not without content: Mawson sways 'like the planchette of a speechless Ouija board',⁶⁷ and the poem ends:

But ever after he carried a wedge of space inside
where a pendulum hung, and he was its little weight,
slightly scribbling on the void beneath;
ever after he waited without hurry
for the time when he would find out what it wrote.⁶⁸

Here, Lindsay reproduces the Romantic sublime with its internalisation of the abyssal drop, and, like Graham's 'telephoneless' crevasse, we find the void is 'speechless' – a word which conjures the astonishment of the sublime moment as well as its inexpressible content. As in Manhire's 'tiny yellow pegs', sublime scale is invoked in the description of Mawson as 'little', the void vast. What raises this poem above the negative sublime, however, is the figure of the abyss as Ouija board. Despite its Gothic resonances, and its *momentary* speechlessness, it is nevertheless presented as an object whose purpose is to reveal otherworldly voices, voices which confirm an afterlife of whatever description. And the final line of the poem, although unresolved, is not conditional: Mawson *would* find out what the spirits of the dead wrote – through him – on that space.

Although it is possible to read Lindsay's other-worldly communications in relation to polar hallucinations, similar to Graham's disembodied 'voices' in 'Malcolm Mooney's Land',⁶⁹ it can also be read as a representation of Mawson 'sound[ing] the abyss of Deity',⁷⁰ encountering the supernatural. Whatever power is scribbling words upon the void, it is not Mawson himself. He is the 'emblem of a mind [...] that broods / Over the dark abyss', to return to Wordsworth's image, and the abyss will be a source

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 108

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ Graham (2004), p. 154

⁷⁰ Cooper (1714), in: Ashfield and de Bolla (1996), p. 73

of revelation. So Lindsay gives us an example of the void as epiphany, and not as annihilating space.

Canadian poet David Solway also uses the séance as a narrative device to explore the gap between past expeditions and the present.⁷¹ Though the figure of the abyss does not feature explicitly, there is evidence of its presence. At the Ouija board, the poem's fictional research team '[summon] up the caulker's mate' from Franklin's final and fatal voyage in search of the Northwest Passage, the directional 'up' signalling the spirit's habitual residence is 'below' in relation to current space-time. This is confirmed towards the end of the poem, when the successfully-raised spirit finally disappears and '[sinks] into the dark the Ouija board / had briefly lit and lately steered us toward'. What makes this an example of the positive abyss is that Solway describes the spirit as having 'one more thing to say to fill the crack / between assumption and event – what records lack'. The gulf may not be literal and spatial, but it is certainly temporal, showing a gap which has been 'filled' with the voices of the dead, and thus an invocation of the teeming gulf within the polar sublime. Once more, an absence or void has been acknowledged, but as an opportunity for replenishment, for presence.⁷²

There is also evidence of a re-seeding of Wordsworth's Romantic sublime in these contemporary poems. As Weiskel notes of the 1805 *Prelude*, 'The Godhead and the unconscious depths are here significantly allied as the "under-presence" [...] which powers the mind into its exaltation'.⁷³ We are back in the presence of the 'abyss of Deity'.⁷⁴ In the polar sublime, as argued for here, the seemingly bottomless crevasse is in fact an under-presence, lidded by a thin surface crust; not void, but container or conduit of meaning. This thin crust, then, may be interpreted either as an image of ego-consciousness or of 'everyday', habitual, unadventurous life. W.S. Graham's sense of

⁷¹ Solway, David (2003). *Franklin's Passage*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, p. 65

⁷² For a full treatment on the relevance of the supernatural to polar expeditions, see McCorristine, Shane (2010). The Supernatural Arctic: An Exploration. *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, 9 (1), 47–70.

⁷³ Weiskel (1986), p. 194

⁷⁴ Cooper (1714). In: Ashfield and de Bolla (1996), p. 73

language as an ‘obstacle [...] [that] freezes round us all’⁷⁵ is reflected in this passage by

Rae Armantrout:

Metaphor forms
a crust
beneath which
the crevasse
of each experience.⁷⁶

While retaining a hint of treacherous unreliability, there is nevertheless no pejorative sense to ‘experience’ here: the under-presence is simply subjective reality, the phenomenology of human existence, whether it be good or ill. What is missing from Armantrout’s lines, in comparison to the poems quoted by Bradfield and Lindsay, is an explicit indication of how thin, or otherwise, that crust is: whether language is a freezing barrier or a thin skin. As a figure of the polar sublime, however, it serves to represent the underlying gulf as a wished-for, human space.

If the crevasse has presented poets with an opportunity to represent and reinterpret the bottomless void, other aspects of exploration have presented them with images of polar space which incline even further towards the sublimity of the infinite. Scott himself, in the end-papers of his June–October 1911 journal, transcribed the following lines by F.T.

Palgrave:

Who is man and what his place,
Anxious asks the heart perplex,
In the recklessness of space,
Worlds with worlds thus intermixt,
What has he, this atom creature,
In the infinitude of nature?⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Graham (2004), p. 155

⁷⁶ Armantrout, Rae (2010). *Versed*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, p. 5

⁷⁷ As quoted in: Scott (2008), p. 294

This is an apt expression of anxiety in the face of the negative sublime. In ‘this atom creature’ we can hear Scott’s previous description of himself as a ‘little human insect’ crawling over the Antarctic ‘desert’,⁷⁸ as well as Mahon’s ‘solitary enzyme’. If the planetary scale is intimidatingly vast, how much more so the wider cosmos. The ‘infinitude of nature’ is not merely spatial, however: it is also temporal. Kelley notes Wordsworth’s ‘association of the sublime with chaos and pre-history’,⁷⁹ and, in relation to his interest in the earth’s visible geology, mentions the then-popular belief in a great pre-historical deluge, whether Biblical or otherwise,⁸⁰ to account for the great mountain ranges and ravines.

In Wordsworth’s lifetime, however, scientific endeavour was also focused on vast temporal contexts. George Lyell published his *Principles of Geology* (1830–33) in which he argued against these diluvial or Flood theories and suggested that the Earth was far older than was then imagined. Lyell was also the first to suggest that erratics – rocks which bear no relation to their native surroundings, and which are a particular feature of polar environments – were transported over great distances by icebergs and glaciers; evidence for which, in later editions, he cited eye-witness accounts from Arctic and Antarctic expeditions.⁸¹ At the turn of the twentieth century, too, it is clear that geological surveys were of prime importance as part of the scientific aims of the Heroic Age expeditions through uncharted land – a fact which has not gone unnoticed by contemporary poets. It is necessary therefore at this stage to develop the concept of the polar sublime on two axes – spatial and temporal – to take account of the cosmic and the planetary themes to be found in contemporary polar poetry.

⁷⁸ See Chapter 1 above, p. 15

⁷⁹ Kelley (1998), p. 129

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, 106

⁸¹ Lyell, Charles (1854). *Principles of Geology*, 9th ed. New York: D. Appleton & Co, p. 219–232

The planetary sublime of the poles

In Kant's outline of the mathematically sublime, standards of measurement – no matter how large – may aid the imagination in grasping vast quantities or sizes if understood by relative degrees. As these measures extend *ad infinitum*, however, we enter into difficulties:

supposing [a mountain] is [...] a mile high, it can serve as unit for the number expressing earth's diameter, so as to make it intuitable; similarly, the earth's diameter for the known planetary system; this again for the system of the Milky Way; and the immeasurable host of such systems, which go by the name of nebulae, and most likely in turn themselves form such a system, holds out no prospect of a limit.⁸²

This particular example of imaginative expansion (it may be considered a form of sublime 'dilation'⁸³) presents more than a mathematical challenge: it introduces the concept of sublime scale in relation to the Earth as a whole. Its grand mountains and terrifying oceans are reduced to a mere speck when viewed against the backdrop of the infinite cosmos. In this moment of apprehension, it is not only relative size and distance which induces sublime feeling: the concept of time is equally powerful when placed on the cosmic scale. Edward Duffy has used the phrase 'planetary sublime'⁸⁴ to describe Panthea's 'visionary song of earth'⁸⁵ in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, with its '[t]en thousand orbs involving and involved [...] [u]pon a thousand sightless axles spinning'.⁸⁶ The vision is not of planets but of elemental and earthly particles, but Shelley's analogy is nevertheless with the music of the spheres and the 'orbits woven /

⁸² Kant (2008), p. 87. Simon Morley (2010, p. 12) also begins his introduction to the sublime in this mode: 'Today we are constantly learning of new realities too vertiginously complex, it seems, for us ever fully to encompass them in our mind. Astronomers now believe, for example, that the visible universe contains an estimated 100 billion galaxies and that each galaxy also consists of billions of stars'.

⁸³ For example Coleridge, 'BEING limitless, comprehending its own limits in its dilation', quoted in Stokes (2011) p. 147. See also Ashfield and de Bolla (1996) p. 175 for William Duff: '[The poet of Genius] labours to express in his compositions the ideas which dilate and swell his Imagination'.

⁸⁴ Duffy, Edward T. (2011). *The Constitution of Shelley's Poetry: The Argument of Language in Prometheus Unbound*. London: Anthem Press, p. 215

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ Shelley (1927), p. 256

Of the wide-wandering stars'.⁸⁷ Their vast number is matched by the seeming infinitude of their physical existence, both in terms of time past and time future.

If the 'planetary sublime' is to be developed as a concept, it should properly include representations of geological earth-time, as in this Voice ('from the Mountains'), also from *Prometheus Unbound*: 'Thrice three hundred thousand years / O'er the Earthquake's couch we stood'.⁸⁸ Implicit here is the notion that human beings are insignificant when measured against so large a timescale, one in which primal forces have had the opportunity to create, destroy and re-create the 'superficies of the earth',⁸⁹ to use Wordsworth's phrase. The planetary sublime, then, as here defined, will include aspects of the following: the planet Earth relativized as a component of the inter-planetary, and the planet Earth *as* planet, with its visible record of ancient, non-human history.

Crucially, contemporary poets have had the advantage (if it can be so called) of being able to visualize the planet as a whole and in a single glance. The truly iconic photograph taken in December 1972 on the Apollo 17 provided an image of the full-colour Earth situated in space: an image which revealed, in Greg Garrard's words, 'a fragile totality'.⁹⁰ (The photograph is also notable for its clear view of Antarctica and the South Polar Ice Cap.) Of relevance here is Lyotard's gloss on Kant's mathematically sublime, when he comments: '[the] aesthetic comprehension of the whole (at one time) of a very large or infinite series is what reason demands of the imagination and what provokes the sublime emotion'.⁹¹ Curiously, perhaps, Weiskel takes this same image as an example of the current era's *lack* of sublime feeling in the grand Romantic tradition, and he emphasises how: '[t]he infinite spaces are no longer astonishing; still less do they terrify [...] we see in those pictures taken aboard the Apollo spacecraft "this litle

⁸⁷ *ibid.*, p. 234

⁸⁸ *ibid.*, p. 206

⁸⁹ Quoted in Kelley (1988), p. 17

⁹⁰ Garrard (2012), p. 182

⁹¹ Lyotard (1994), p. 109

spot of earth, that with the sea embraced is,” and we know that the ethos of expansion is doomed’.⁹² It may be argued that the very ubiquity of the Earth image, and the small scale of its reproduction, has had a desensitising effect, and yet the photographs of the ‘immeasurable host’ of nebulae have surely not lost their ability to astonish, nor the reaches of outer space their ability to terrify when imaginatively or rationally contemplated.

Weiskel *does* admit that ‘[b]lack holes [...] are in the present state of knowledge an occasion for the sublime’,⁹³ due to the fact that they do not fall within the bounds of comprehension, but also, it may be inferred, because they cannot be adequately represented in a snapshot, Apollo-Earth fashion. As we now turn again to contemporary poetry of polar exploration, it is necessary to delineate the planetary sublime within these frames of reference, and to establish it as one type, or instance, of the polar sublime.

The extremity of the poles, both geographically and topographically, demands a response to the landscape which takes account of their positions relative to the rest of the globe and which acknowledges the astonishing otherness of those environments. Chris Orsman’s *South* gives a chronological account of Scott’s *Terra Nova* expedition, and an early poem describes the scene at Cape Evans, Antarctica, upon the crew’s arrival and unloading:

The panorama on our doorstep[.]
intimates the planetary;

the moon is our near neighbour,
we breathe her thin atmosphere

as the motor-sledges are fired
and fart amidst dogs and men.⁹⁴

⁹² Weiskel (1986), p. 6

⁹³ *ibid.*, p. 35

⁹⁴ Orsman (1999), p. 37

The grandeur of the scene is undercut by the mundane, practical or comical details which accompany the action. No sooner has the sublimity of their surroundings been admired than the troublesome motor-sledges ‘fart’ in a moment of deflationary bathos. The sublimity remains, however, and Orsman is representing it in a manner which is unmistakably polar. The vocabulary mirrors Scott’s description of his arrival at Cape Evans: his journal entry conveys the inexpressible aspect of the sublime, but also employs an aesthetic framing device to limit its scope: ‘No words of mine can convey the impressiveness of the wonderful panorama displayed to our eyes. Ponting is enraptured and uses expressions which in anyone else and alluding to any other subject might be deemed extravagant’.⁹⁵ Orsman does not use the familiar language of sublime rapture or transport,⁹⁶ however, but instead introduces the concept of the ‘planetary’ which does not appear in Scott’s original account. The unsettling proximity of the moon as a ‘near neighbour’ – inhuman, lifeless, remote – allows for a similar perception of Earth at the Antarctic. The landscape is inhospitable to human survival and contains no native human inhabitants. The inherent dangers of travelling to and from such a place, not least surviving there, were enough to define both nineteenth-century and Heroic Age explorers as ‘the Apollo astronauts of their day’.⁹⁷ In Orsman’s poem, it is the feeling of having been transported *off* the inhabited Earth which allows the explorers to breathe lunar air – a sense of transport which is at the heart of the sublime experience. Simultaneously, the explorers are afforded a perception of the Earth they stand on as an object in space, defined by, or seen in relation to, its neighbouring planets and not in terms of human settlement or impact.

⁹⁵ Scott (2008), p. 71.

⁹⁶ Orsman picks up on this theme later in the book, however, in the poem ‘Forelands’: ‘they long to enter / a new world of enraptured seeing’, p. 55

⁹⁷ The phrase is used by multiple authors and has become ubiquitous, but for an example, see: Wilson, John (2001). *John Franklin: Traveller on Undiscovered Seas*. Montreal: XYZ Publishing, p. 39. For a lyrical expression of this idea, see Solway (2003), p. 17: ‘We trace identical descent, / the astronaut, the diver / and the explorer in his tent, / by land or sky or river [...] whether peasant-born or gentry, / the sailor or the marcher, / whether burning on re-entry / or freezing at departure.’

Signs of the planetary sublime increase as Orsman recounts the final stages of Scott's journey across the Polar Plateau to the South Pole and back, as might be expected given the increasingly extreme nature of landscape. He describes the faces of those in the Southern Party, blackened by frostbite, and given an uncanny appearance after the removal of snow-goggles:

His goggles have ghosted a pale moonscape
around his eyes; aqueous humour

admits the passage of light, marks out
the planetary stillness at his centre.⁹⁸

The transformative powers of the poles are working to imprint the planetary sublime upon the men: they have become branded with lunar symbols and, analogous to the figure of the internal abyss, now *contain* a 'planetary stillness'. It is this invocation of cosmic scale which signals that, in this moment, the subject is himself sublime. The reduction of sight to an objectified function of 'aqueous humour' is also transformative: the men are reduced to barely-surviving organisms, a dehumanizing process which emphasizes their insignificance on the planetary scale. A similar transformation can be seen in Mahon's 'Antarctica', in which Oates is addressed as a 'solitary enzyme' within the greater system. Orsman revisits his planetary theme as Scott and his party arrive at the South Pole: 'Their bodies are weighted, / and tilt like the polar needle // aligned to the earth's centre'.⁹⁹ This consolidates Orsman's earlier vision of the moon as 'near neighbour': at these extremes, the men are transmuted into inorganic minerals, and are presented not in relation to each other but to powerful planetary forces beyond their control.

⁹⁸ Orsman (1999), p. 83

⁹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 87

While poets such as Manhire emphasize extreme Antarctic conditions in relation to the rest of the planet Earth ('Highest, driest, coldest, windiest / continent')¹⁰⁰ Orsman again opts for reflections on the inter-planetary in his description of Scott's return journey from the South Pole:

As cold as Mars (say) – temperatures
plummet and the explorers sense

that deep-space drift where the sun's
cut down to size¹⁰¹

By transposing the men onto the equivalent of a Martian landscape, Orsman is here representing a sublime moment of privation. As Earth becomes analogous to Mars, the Earth itself is reconstituted as an object in space – that infinite zone of absolute zero in which even the sun is overpowered. For the men to 'sense' or imagine this 'deep-space drift' is for them to experience Burke's archetypal terror and Kant's mathematically sublime, here defined more specifically as the planetary sublime. It is a vision that Orsman has had first-hand, in fact, during a creative residency in Antarctica, and he uses the same imagery to describe his visit to Lake Bonney in 1998:

we hike across Lake Bonney's
star-fractured lens,
taking ourselves further out
than we've ever gone before,
right to the planetary edge
and beyond, to what this lake
neatly simulates: an ice-bound
port to the solar system,
a mirror of the lakes of Mars.¹⁰²

Going 'far out' to the planet's edge is an apt description of the sublime sense of approaching a limit, beyond which is annihilation or revelation. Antarctica is the

¹⁰⁰ Manhire (2001), p. 253

¹⁰¹ Orsman (1999), p. 94

¹⁰² Orsman, Chris (2008). *The Lakes of Mars*. Auckland: Auckland University Press, p. 36

jumping-off point, the point of departure, as the imagination makes a leap into the dark infinities of outer space. In order to establish this concept as typical of the polar sublime, we can now consider poets other than Orsman and identify the (inter)planetary as a recurring theme.

In her poem 'On the Longing of Early Explorers', Elizabeth Bradfield begins by establishing the desire for *terra incognita* in its historical context: 'Before satellites eyed the earth's whole surface / through the peephole of orbit [...]'.¹⁰³ Bradfield invokes an ironic nostalgia for times in which Romantic quests were still discussed 'in quaint accents and obscure / sentence structures' and a naive belief in the paradisaical poles, 'unsullied' and 'unspoiled', was still possible. Although the planetary sublime does not make a significant impact here, the poet nevertheless chooses to make whole-Earth images a defining point in both polar exploration and planetary perception. In Bradfield's poem 'First Austral Contact', however, she expresses the full planetary sublime:

Antarctica's been mapped. There's no oasis
past its metal rind of settlements.

And now white-suited explorers, hoses connected
to fishbowl helmets, have declared
the moon's southern pole
could be scattered with ice, reservoirs
pooled in the explosive sighs
of landing comets.¹⁰⁴

The main theme of 'On the Longing of Early Explorers' is restated here: there is no fabled temperate zone beyond the ice-packs at either pole, as once imagined.¹⁰⁵ Just as Everest became the *de facto* imperial challenge after the conquest of the poles,¹⁰⁶ so the

¹⁰³ Bradfield (2010), p. 49

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 54

¹⁰⁵ The 'open polar sea' theory, firmly believed (against all evidence) by John Barrow, Second Secretary to the Admiralty 1807–1845. See for example Fleming (1998), p. 33–35, and Brandt (2011), p. 31–33

¹⁰⁶ John Noel to the Royal Geographical Society in March 1919: 'Attention during the last few years [...] has been focused more and more upon the Himalayas; and now that the poles have been reached it is

moon has become the next locus for astonishing journeys into the other-worldly. These ‘landing comets’ have been invoked elsewhere by Bradfield, in relation to the Antarctic itself rather than the moon: in her description of Douglas Mawson's search for the South Magnetic Pole she mentions how ‘local deviations – rocks flung down from the stars / that hold strange metals – rob the task of its simplicity’.¹⁰⁷ The link between polar earthscape and moonscape is thus strengthened, and the Antarctic identified as a debris field of interstellar matter.

The *specific* features of Arctic or Antarctic landscape are not the only opportunity for the planetary sublime to emerge: the clarity of the atmosphere and the long polar nights may lead to broader cosmological speculation. Bradfield imagines Richard Evelyn Bird ‘[s]truggling outside to muse / upon the universe’s clockwork’¹⁰⁸ during his solitary five-month winter sojourn in an Antarctic meteorological station in 1934. Likewise, on visiting Antarctica herself in 2010, the poet Katharine Coles is led from a consideration of the ‘manifold mirages’ of polar spaces to starlight’s twinkle ‘[c]reated by distortion, light traveling through / Vast improbabilities’.¹⁰⁹ Burke’s words on the quality of *magnificence* in relation to the sublime are relevant here, particularly in a passage where he mentions how: ‘[t]he starry heaven, though it occurs so very frequently to our view, never fails to excite an idea of grandeur’.¹¹⁰ While a clear, starry sky is not a feature unique to the poles, it nevertheless takes on a related significance when we take into account the more specific, moon-base experience of those in such isolated locations. The ‘[v]ast improbabilities’ referred to by Coles, in this instance referring to distances through space, represent a crisis for the imagination upon its encounter with Kant’s mathematically sublime. The incredible distances between stars

generally felt that the next and equally important task is the exploration and mapping of Mount Everest.’ In: Davis, Wade (2011). *Into the Silence: The Great War, Mallory and the Conquest of Everest*. London: Bodley Head, p. 87

¹⁰⁷ Bradfield (2010), p. 40

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*, p. 80

¹⁰⁹ Coles (2013), p. 44

¹¹⁰ Burke (2008), p. 71

reflect back to the subject the distances between polar base and civilization, and thus consolidate the sense of grand isolation.

This sublime anxiety relating to planetary distance recurs in the poem 'He Completes Me',¹¹¹ in which Coles imagines the annihilation of the body – or, at least, its digital representation – during a Skype session from Antarctica to the 'outside' world:

our faces travel
Space and through everything

Space contains: winds and quirks and flurries,
Dust and ice shattering.

Her partner's face appears '[i]n bits and pieces [...] eyes and nose broken, so star- // Crossed even the machine can't / Translate or put them back together'. By stating that 'faces travel' and arrive, rather than their representations, Coles expresses the fear of annihilation by the powerful sublime of interstellar space. The same technological glitches might well have occurred between any two locations, no matter how remote, given poor enough bandwidth; what defines this image as an example of the planetary and polar sublime is the implicit link between the hostile environment of outer space and Antarctica, their 'winds [...] and flurries', their shattering ice, and the impossibility of travelling through such environments without risk to life and limb.

We have seen how Kant's 'immeasurable host' of stars and planets takes on a particular and sublime significance in polar environments due to an imaginative kinship between those extreme landscapes and the inhospitable tracts of space. In Kant's formulation, distances which hold out 'no prospect of a limit' will inspire the sublime feeling. He does not give the same degree of attention to time as he does to space, however. Only in passing, and parenthetically, does he gloss the infinite as 'space and

¹¹¹ Coles (2013), p. 51

time past'.¹¹² Although Burke includes *infinity* in his taxonomy of the sublime, he uses as an example 'the eye not being able to perceive the bounds of certain things'¹¹³ and the continuation of an object's 'parts [...] to any indefinite number'.¹¹⁴ This is very close to Kant's mathematically sublime, with its focus on extensions in space rather than existence over time. It is the temporal scale, as an accompaniment to the spatial, which forms the second key element of the planetary sublime as proposed here, and which will now be examined in further detail.

As now envisioned by secular science, time past and time future have gained infinite extension, and for this reason have the capacity to produce feelings of sublimity. On the human scale, an imaginative encounter with Earth-history, encompassing what might be called pre-history or the pre-human, is liable to set the mind reeling. Imaginative projections into the future may be equally awe-inspiring. Wordsworth is again a significant precursor with regard to this sublime astonishment: Theresa Kelly notes the 'geological and lexical surface'¹¹⁵ of his description of the Ravine of Arve, which includes the 'immeasurable height / Of woods decaying, never to be decayed'¹¹⁶ – the forward motion of time seemingly infinite – as well as invocations of deep time past, the '[c]haracters of the great Apocalypse, / The types and symbols of Eternity'¹¹⁷ visible in the rocks, crags, and torrents. The mixture of sacred awe and terror, as we have seen, is typical of sublime feeling. 'Characters' of the landscape are being read as revelatory text. If Wordsworth's phrase 'first, and last, and midst, and without end'¹¹⁸ bears overt traces of the Deity, it nevertheless encapsulates what is here being defined as the planetary sublime in its secular, temporal aspect. Furthermore, it is this sense of

¹¹² Kant (2007), p. 85

¹¹³ Burke (2008), p. 67

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Kelley (1988), p. 106

¹¹⁶ Wordsworth, William (1971), p. 536

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *ibid.*

without-beginning and without-end which is a recurring theme in contemporary polar poetry and thus a significant aspect of the polar sublime.

As we turn to contemporary poets of polar exploration, we can see how the polar regions are notable for what might be called their radical temporality. Bill Manhire, in his poem 'Hoosh', juxtaposes Antarctic time with Christian time in such a way as to crown the former while diminishing the latter:

the glaciers calve and thunder,
melt-water of whatever was freezing here
a million years before Christ ¹¹⁹

Antarctica is *first*, to echo the Wordsworthian formula of 'first, and last, and midst, and without end', and thus has claims of priority or superiority. In Manhire's image, the birth of Christian civilization is rendered comparatively insignificant, with the implication that civilization as so defined is dwarfed by the powers of the natural world. In addition, using the birth of Christ as the historical measurement casts an aura of sacred sublimity upon the landscape itself. By virtue of being older than Christianity, Antarctica has more *depth* on the temporal scale, and therefore has a claim to being more profound. Chris Orsman makes the same connection: 'The water that was buried alive / when Christ's wound // was fresh in his side / flows free in the meltwater stream'. ¹²⁰ In addition, the melt-water from the million-year-old ice is flowing in the narrative present in these poems: the happening-now is thus co-existent with pre-history, the temporal scale collapsing in one astonishing moment of sublime perception. The narrators are witness to an event which is being conceptualized as a near-miracle.

A character named Emily in Manhire's 'Hoosh' poem, of unspecified relation to the narrator, is involved in scientific research which involves drilling into the ice for core samples, and this too provides an opportunity for meditations on time:

¹¹⁹ Manhire (2001), p. 253

¹²⁰ Orsman (2008), p. 40

Geology! the helicopter rises,
the scientists crowd round,
and Emily's drill goes down

through a thousand years of ice:
ghost of a dog, ghost of a pony,
Oates going deeper and deeper

below the surface ¹²¹

There is a trace of the astonishment associated with the sublime in the exclamatory opening, followed by opposing vertical movements in the rising helicopter and the descending ice-drill. As Weiskel notes, height and depth are both signifiers of the sublime, with 'depth [...] the unchallenged locus of god or value'¹²² insofar as it signifies profundity in the modern day. The body of Oates, in Manhire's poem, is becoming sublime by virtue of its increasing depth. It is figured as a profound object. To make a journey below the surface is to embody underworld-explorers such as Orpheus or the Hell-harrowing Christ. On a psychoanalytic level, 'deeper and deeper' can operate as an image of regression under hypnotherapy, a going back (in personal time) as well as a going down (into the unconscious). It is worth repeating at this point the quotation by Weiskel with regard to Wordsworth's *Prelude*: 'The Godhead and the unconscious depths are here significantly allied as the "under-presence" [...] which powers the mind into its exaltation'.¹²³ In Manhire's poem, Oates is established as an 'under-presence' of both sacred and secular sublimity. The fact that this underworld journey takes Oates through psycho-geological layers of various ghosts is a further element in establishing his Orphic significance.

Towards the end of the poem, Manhire addresses geological time more literally:

¹²¹ Manhire (1999), p. 259–260

¹²² Weiskel (1986), p. 24–25

¹²³ *ibid.*, p. 194

sediment and algae,
the movement and retreat
of seasons, time passing

in samples and traces
– *beech and conifer* –
stuff from the core¹²⁴

The italicized words indicate an entry in Scott's journals, in which a lecture by geologist Griffith Taylor includes a reference to 'wood fossil conifer'.¹²⁵ Recent ice-core samples confirm that the Antarctica of the Eocen period (53 million years ago) had a temperate climate before its continental drift south.¹²⁶ Manhire's italics also serve to register the significance of this fact, and the astonishment which accompanies the imagination's attempt to grasp such profound timescales. The 'core' is both ice-core and Earth-core, a signifier of extreme geological depth – deeper than Oates, who, as sublime as he may now be, is yet again reduced to relative insignificance by comparison to the 'first and last and without end' of the planetary sublime.

In a different poem, 'Some Frames', Manhire gestures towards an infinite time future, and one which is particular to polar regions, when he exclaims: 'Antarctica! / where a single / footprint lasts / a thousand years'.¹²⁷ This image of the thousand-year-old footprint is not simply an invocation of infinitely forward-moving time in balance with an infinitely receding past, however: it is an imaginative confrontation with radical stasis, a vision of time in unnatural suspension, defying the natural laws of entropy, and this vision requires an expanded consideration of time in relation to the polar sublime.

As already noted, neither Burke nor Kant give significant consideration to the sublime possibilities of time; it is only in recent years that modern theorists of the

¹²⁴ Manhire (2001), p. 260

¹²⁵ Scott (2008), p. 215

¹²⁶ See for example: Pross, Jörg; Contreras, Lilith; Bijl, Peter K. et al (2012). Persistent Near-Tropical Warmth on the Antarctic Continent During the Early Eocene Epoch. *Nature*, 488 (7409), p. 73–77. Available online at <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v488/n7409/full/nature11300.html>, last accessed 20 August 2015

¹²⁷ Manhire (2001), p. 263

sublime such as Jean-François Lyotard have addressed the importance of time in relation to the moment of sublime feeling. Given that this study focuses on contemporary poetry, it is also appropriate that twentieth-century formulations of the sublime are drawn in to support the concept of the polar sublime. It is to Lyotard that this study now turns in order to further conceptualize the contemporary sublime of Arctic- and Antarctic-themed poetry.

‘Is it happening?’: suspended time and tricks of light

In his study of the Romantic sublime, Thomas Weiskel summarizes the Kantian moment of the sublime as follows: ‘the surface is broken, the discourse breaks down, and the faculties are checked or suspended: a discontinuity opens between what can be grasped and what is felt to be meaningful’.¹²⁸ This moment in which, to quote Simon Morley, ‘thought comes to an end and we encounter that which is “other”’,¹²⁹ a moment Weiskel describes as ‘radically indeterminate’,¹³⁰ is developed by Jean-François Lyotard in relation to art of the twentieth-century avant-garde. Lyotard also provides some useful distinctions between the Burkean and the Kantian sublimities in order to formulate a particularly modern sense of temporal disruption – a moment in which the subject experiences what might be called a break in the surface of time, or, to repeat Weiskel’s term, a ‘discontinuity’ on the temporal scale. It is this discontinuity which provokes in the subject the question ‘Is it happening?’ – an indeterminate moment in which the contemporary sublime is manifest. Although Leane gives significant attention to the issue of time in Antarctic narratives,¹³¹ she does not establish a connection

¹²⁸ Weiskel (1986), p. 21. This also echoes Kelly on Wordsworth, as quoted above, p. 35: ‘sublime depths show themselves unwilling to remain “below”, and beautiful surfaces work to suppress sublime intrusions’.

¹²⁹ Morley (2010), p. 18

¹³⁰ Weiskel (1986), p. 24

¹³¹ Leane (2012), p. 153–179

between temporality and the sublime. It is Lyotard, then, who will provide the basis for a further development of the polar sublime in contemporary poetry.

In his move to distinguish the sublimes of Burke and Kant, Lyotard begins with a consideration of artist Barnett Newman. In analysing Newman's own thoughts on the sublime as well as Newman's paintings, Lyotard describes the sublime of the avant-garde as follows: 'it is what dismantles consciousness, what deposes consciousness, it is what consciousness cannot formulate [...] What we do not manage to formulate is that something happens, *dass etwas geschieht*. Or rather, and more simply, that it happens ... *dass es geschieht*'.¹³² This moment of suspense induces both anxiety and pleasure, the typical negative pleasure of the sublime moment, and Lyotard elaborates: '[i]t is at the very least a sign, the question mark itself, the way in which *it happens* is withheld and announced: *Is it happening?*'¹³³ This leads Lyotard to conclude that 'the question of time, of the *Is it happening?*, does not form part – at least not explicitly – of Kant's problematic'¹³⁴ whereas he considers this question of time to be *central* to Burke's concept of the sublime. From Burke's emphasis on privation, Lyotard can formulate the sublime moment of incomprehension as 'a privation in the face of *Is it happening?*'¹³⁵ It is this feeling of temporal suspension – a suspension in which the rational faculties become, in Lyotard's words, 'dislocated'¹³⁶ – which can be found in contemporary polar poetry, and which, as will now be shown, is a typical feature of the polar sublime.

In his poem 'A Lyrical Incident', Chris Orsman elaborates on a moment from Scott's *Terra Nova* expedition in which the ship is sailing in a narrow lane of water with icebergs on either side:

The sough and creak of ice gave way
to a breathing quiet; gazing astern

¹³² Lyotard (1998), p. 90

¹³³ *ibid.*, p. 92

¹³⁴ *ibid.*, p. 99

¹³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 93

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, p. 98

each man saw his face imprisoned
by a reflection in the ice;

beaded and yellow, our gazing eyes
registered neither terror nor surprise

at the moving shipboard scene.
Our live outstared faces

passed by and were forgotten.
Nor did we make any enquiry

of the walled oracle of the ice.¹³⁷

The poem's epigraph, from Herbert Ponting's original account of this event,¹³⁸ defines the scene as 'ominous-looking', and there is an implied sense of anxiety in response to an unspecified threat. The sublime is signalled by their entry into the 'silent corridor', so narrow and walled-in that they are spatially repositioned into an isolation zone, a zone in which they are suddenly deprived of habitual sounds. As Lyotard notes in relation to Longinian rhetoric, the sublime 'sometimes even takes the form of outright silence' and that silence 'constitutes the most indeterminate of figures'.¹³⁹ This is true of non-rhetorical figures; an influx of silence is appropriate for the growing sense of immanence. It is an eerie 'nothingness now',¹⁴⁰ to use Lyotard's term, and yet something *does* happen: the crew are presented with a real-time presentation of themselves, a projection onto the ice which acts as an uncanny counterpart to Ponting's own film record which Orsman refers to repeatedly in other poems.

This real-time moment, however, is figured in the poem as a suspension of time: their faces are 'imprisoned' in ice, with the implication that ice will preserve them near-eternally. The crew's vision is of their own death but also their weird immortality in this landscape. The fact that they register neither 'terror nor surprise' at this vision –

¹³⁷ Orsman (1999), p. 29

¹³⁸ Ponting (1922), p. 41

¹³⁹ Lyotard (1998), p. 94–95

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 92

responses to be expected during the sublime moment – makes it no less sublime, since this lack of response, this privation of affect, is startling enough to create a textual sublime for the reader. The crew are pictured in a state of suspension, literally and figuratively; any description of their outward astonishment would break the spell of indeterminacy, the sense of *Is it happening?*

Orsman makes the religious undercurrents explicit in the final stanzas, with the vision that '[w]aters of the Resurrection // will rise and undercut the base / and in our own time melt out // the glorious and glacial tombs / we had glimpsed as our destiny'.¹⁴¹ It is this shift into self-reflection and the reference to future time which breaks the suspense of the ice corridor. In addition, the end-time of the Last Judgement is imagined as imminent in Antarctic waters, as an undisputed here-now of natural occurrence, both miraculous and mundane. This poem serves to highlight the disruption and discontinuity of time as identified by Lyotard as a defining element of the contemporary sublime: the 'now' of the ice corridor contains intimations of immortality as well as a dislocation of the senses – a radical indeterminacy which might express itself as 'Are we *here now?*' The planetary sublime considered in the previous section is manifest in the seeming-timelessness of the Antarctic regions, a quality which contributes to a collapse of time past, present, and future: an embodiment of Wordsworth's 'first, and last, and midst, and without end'. This perception of polar environments as unnaturally unchanging, alluded to earlier in Manhire's vision of a thousand-year-old footprint in snow, is not wholly defined by features in the natural landscape however: the lack of entropy is most clearly seen in relation to human artefacts at the poles, a lack which is experienced as an uncanny disruption of time. Poets' descriptions of objects and artefacts will now be considered, to complete this consideration of suspended time.

¹⁴¹ Orsman (1999), p. 29–30

Whenever the contents of a Heroic Era hut are itemized, and their miraculously preserved status noted, a moment of polar sublimity is being expressed. In Bill Manhire's poem 'The Hut', the narrator begins by describing the moment in which the threshold is crossed: 'Four doormats domesticate you / as you enter: step by step / you leave the ice behind'.¹⁴² This crossing-over is significant in that it represents an exit from the traditional (masculine) sublime of the Antarctic environment and an entrance into the domestic realm of the bounded and the beautiful. The following stanzas describe the single moment in which time past is compounded with time present:

And inside, there's Edwardian order:
furniture and food,
a late-twentieth-century broom,

and now a poet sweeping the floor.¹⁴³

The narrator, Manhire himself, is simultaneously in and out of his own time. The addition of a modern broom ties him to the 'now' of the late 1990s; otherwise, he confirms that he is squarely in Edwardian space by itemizing the variety of goods on the shelves – 'Minced collops, rump steak, / cans & cans of cod roe; / stewed kidneys, Roast Veal, / Flaked Tapioca, anchovies, / pickled onions [etc]'. To re-state Lyotard's formula, the sublime is 'a privation in the face of *Is it happening?*' in relation to time. The privation here is that of change, natural decay, atrophy: a seeming absence of time itself.¹⁴⁴

Manhire continues to record the hut's contents in what may be interpreted as loving detail, though devoid of any outward affect ('bloaters and Preserved Parsnip / and Moirs Mutton Cutlets'¹⁴⁵), a tactic which – like Orsman's ice-imprisoned crew above – would seem to deny the sublimity of the moment. In the final stanza, however,

¹⁴² Manhire (2001), p. 272

¹⁴³ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ See also Bradfield (2010), p. 61, 'In Praise of Entropy': 'What terror in the cryogenics / of this place, the stasis'.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 273

Manhire switches suddenly to an omnipotent viewpoint and describes how ‘outside, a mile or so / beyond the hut, / Erebus starts to go up’.¹⁴⁶ It is with this image that Manhire acknowledges the sublime import of the poem as a whole: the far-off volcanic activity of Mount Erebus is the most traditional of sublime moments, but here it is made doubly sublime by virtue of going ‘up’ in smoke – it is a vision of transcendence and transport, the raising of a mountain on the vertical scale.

Elsewhere, Manhire emphasizes the affective content of the sublime moment experienced inside a perfectly-preserved polar hut, and thus harks back to the traditional tropes of astonishment and disbelief which characterized the eighteenth-century sublime. In ‘Visiting Mr Shackleton’, he reproduces entries from the visitors’ book inside Shackleton’s hut at Cape Royds:¹⁴⁷

Cool! Wow! Beautiful! Awesome!
Like going back in time.
Amazing! Historic! Finally
I am truly blessed.

[...]

Wow! Cool! Historic! Yo!
Awesome! Privileged. Unreal!¹⁴⁸

It is a deceptively simple poem which acknowledges the modern-day linguistic banality of sublime astonishment and yet which honours it by its careful choice of quotations. ‘Like going back in time’ appears twice, emphasizing the importance of temporality; ‘Finally / I am truly blessed’ introduces a sense of near-religious experience; ‘Privileged’ pays tribute to what has been seen as the privileged nature of sublime experience;¹⁴⁹ ‘Unreal!’ conveys the dislocation of the faculties in the moment when

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ As confirmed by Manhire, in Manhire (2004), p. 320

¹⁴⁸ Manhire (2001), p. 277

¹⁴⁹ For example, Jamie, Kathleen (2008). A Lone Enraptured Male. [review of Robert Macfarlane’s *The Wild Places*, Granta, 2007]. *London Review of Books*, 6 March 2008. Similarly, Stokes (2011, p. 115)

both logical and phenomenological certainties are overthrown, and contains an inevitable echo of Eliot's sublime intensities in *The Waste Land*.¹⁵⁰ Returning to the extract of Manhire's already quoted – 'Antarctica! / where a single / footprint lasts / a thousand years' – we can see the appropriate astonishment in the face of that which appears (from the point of view of temperate-zone natives) to be unnatural, illogical: following the human imprint in the snow, *nothing happens*. And by virtue of its figurative immortality, the mark-in-time is transcendent.

These considerations of sublime suspensions in time allow for a further interpretation of Mahon's 'Antarctica'. The gesture towards infinitude is made in the lines 'He is just going outside and may be some time // In fact, for ever'.¹⁵¹ This marks the beginning of a journey which transcends all notion of onward-going progress or destination. The narrative presents a privation for the reader, a lack of content with regard to the figure of Oates-outside. The what-next is absent. The very repetition of Oates's words in Mahon's villanelle – 'I am just going outside and may be some time' is quoted indirectly twice and directly twice, including the poem's first and penultimate lines – adds to the sense of uncanny stasis: their sense of finality is removed, with Oates continually re-situated in the deictic moment of his departure, in a potentially endless time-loop of 'just going', and thus embodying Lyotard's sublime sense of 'privation in the face of *Is it happening?*'

Sublime suspensions in time and reason are also represented by the recurring 'unreality' of polar mirages. Katharine Coles introduces text from Shackleton's *South* in her poem 'Mirage' to create a dialogue between herself and the explorer in relation to their common Antarctic reality:

summarizes the Romantic sublime as 'a sacramental scene for the lone individual', with the implication that this Romantic individual is male and in possession of highly-tuned poetic sensibilities.

¹⁵⁰ Vine (2013), p. 73–86

¹⁵¹ Mahon (1985), p. 33

So icebergs hang

Upside-down. I need to see
What he sees. *From the mast-head*
false alarms. Oh,

Unreality. I'm unalarmed. *In the sky,*
The land appears ¹⁵²

Optical illusions are also referred to by Bradfield ('where the earth's edge flatlines / mountains of drift in suspension')¹⁵³ and Manhire ('the sun setting twice, / icebergs that fly').¹⁵⁴ The polar mirage represents the sublime by virtue of its inversion of natural order and by its weightless, transcendental quality. More specifically, it is an example of the 'neural sublime', a concept proposed by Alan Richardson – a sublime which is corporeal insofar as it arises from the interplay between optic nerves and brain. He describes the 'dividend of pleasure'¹⁵⁵ to be had from perceptual illusions – the so-called 'wow factor' – a pleasure which is nevertheless 'accompanied by a disturbing sense of loss and disorientation for the conscious subject'.¹⁵⁶ In other words, the familiar negative pleasure of the sublime arises from a 'dislocation of the faculties among themselves',¹⁵⁷ to repeat Lyotard's phrase: a physiological disruption which overthrows reason, to the extent that the object of perception takes on the aura of a miracle.

On occasion, a mirage may approximate a religious vision, as portrayed in Orsman's poem 'Delirium'. Set during the final stages of Scott's fateful return journey from the South Pole, and after the self-sacrifice of Captain Oates:

¹⁵² Coles (2013), p. 66. Melinda Mueller also takes Shackleton's account as the basis for her descriptions: 'Mock / suns and the sun are tethered in halos. / Icebergs hang in midair. Refraction hoists / them there, turns them upside down, draws them up / as wavering spires'. Mueller, Melinda (2000). *What the Ice Gets: Shackleton's Antarctic Expedition 1914–1916: A Poem*. Seattle: Van West & Company, p. 12

¹⁵³ Bradfield (2010), p. 56

¹⁵⁴ Manhire (2001), p. 256

¹⁵⁵ Richardson (2010), p. 33

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p. 35

¹⁵⁷ Lyotard (1998), p. 98

The horizon, as far as they could guess,
was at a slight incline – rising ground

where the air had thickened, magnified.
Two strangers came towards them,

the man supporting the woman;
they were naked although the air

swaddled them and made indistinct
features of loins, face, and chest ¹⁵⁸

The sublime moment is heralded by a mixture of perceptual ambiguity and a form of unnatural atmospheric change. The air thickening and ‘magnified’ suggests the formation of a lens, a perceiving centre through which the action is to be revealed, and an increase of intensity which is typical of the sublime. Despite this, however, the vision remains disconcertingly unfocused, defined by a Burkean obscurity, with the two naked figures described as ‘coming through the waters / of the lower world’.¹⁵⁹ One may interpret these figures as Adam and Eve, with part of their power residing in the fact that they are *of* the sublime, by virtue of their numinous power, and not witness to it. After all, we learn: ‘storm cloud / deepening into Prussian blue, // the blur of snow drift already rising / in the south, did not threaten them’.¹⁶⁰ By introducing a sublime and sacred vision to the narrative, Orsman pays tribute to Shackleton’s (and Eliot’s) ‘sensed presence’ or extra man; these spiritual figures are of the mythopoetic past and yet manifest themselves in the here-now of a perceptually dislocated present.

The alternations between ‘rising ground’ and ‘lower world’ also invoke the vertical scale of the sublime, from lofty heights to abyssal depths, and Orsman reproduces this duality elsewhere (again in the context of Scott’s final days) but with a more explicit sense of the radical indeterminacy appropriate to the moment-in-

¹⁵⁸ Orsman (1999), p. 101

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*

suspension of disordered sense: '[a]re we rising or descending? // is the question on everyone's lips'¹⁶¹ in the poem 'Turning Back', and 'voices rise and fall / across the plateau'¹⁶² in 'Hardships of the Polar Party'. Orsman's own direct experience of Antarctic space is described in the same terms: the poem 'Ascents' begins, 'As if the light were springing from every source / under heaven, and we were suspended'.¹⁶³ The image contains a powerful sense of the numinous and of religious uplift, the ascent of the Antarctic travellers transformed into a figure of ascension. A vision of uncanny suspension is also present in Melinda Mueller's re-telling of Tom Crean's journey south with Scott:

Sledging up the Beardmore Glacier,
I once saw the team ahead
lifted by mirage, their doubles hung
in air above their heads

as if the Ice breathed out a mirror.¹⁶⁴

The dark significance of doubles in the Gothic sublime has been noted by Mishra;¹⁶⁵ here, they appear as ghostly but non-threatening apparitions, a source of wonder as opposed to bad omens. The moment of Crean's perception, too, is one of suspended belief, both reality and unreality.

Both physiological and spiritual disruptions are portrayed side by side in Bill Manhire's 'Hoosh', where the image of 'icebergs that fly' is immediately followed by 'the Virgin Mary standing beside / a dead man on an ice floe'.¹⁶⁶ This figure also follows in the tradition of Eliot's 'third man/woman',¹⁶⁷ linked to manifestations of

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 92–93

¹⁶² *ibid.*, p. 95

¹⁶³ Orsman (2008), p. 46

¹⁶⁴ Mueller (2000), p. 18

¹⁶⁵ Mishra, Vijay (1994). *The Gothic Sublime*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, p.75

¹⁶⁶ Manhire (2001), p. 256–257

¹⁶⁷ The connection between Eliot and Shackleton is explored in: Ramsey, Jarold (1970). *The Waste Land and Shackleton on South Georgia*. *English Language Notes*, 8 (1), 42–45; and Booth, Allyson (1999). Sir

divine providence which, by their other-worldliness, have the power to unseat the subject from his/her position of temporal and perceptual security. The *now* at the heart of *Is it happening?* is caught up in a single suspended moment of sublime yes-no, a tension that cannot resolve itself until temporal and perceptual normality is resumed.

Following this consideration of a number of poets writing on polar themes, it is clear that Burke's taxonomy of the sublime is still evidenced in contemporary poetry of polar exploration. Furthermore, it appears that Kant's sublime of mathematical increase – to date given less attention in relation to polar narratives – is equally valid as an interpretive tool in relation to what is here termed the planetary sublime in its geological and inter-stellar aspects, and this in turn can be regarded as a true manifestation of the polar sublime.

While contemporary polar poetry bears traces of the Romantic sublime, particularly in relation to Wordsworth's 'under-presence', writers' awareness of psychoanalytic paradigms allows for a positive relation to the figure of the abyss, resulting in a recognizably Miltonic sublime within the polar context. In addition, it has been shown that modern theorists of the sublime, unaddressed by Loomis, Spufford and Leane, are of key importance in the formulation of the polar sublime. Weiskel's interpretation of the Romantic sublime introduces the notion of radical indeterminacy, the moment when the mind/object relation breaks down;¹⁶⁸ Lyotard's studies of Kant and the avant-garde introduce the problematic of time to this indeterminacy. These concepts have been shown to be of key significance in contemporary polar poetry as it attempts to represent a landscape of arresting visions and disorientating mirages.

Earnest Shackleton, Easter Sunday and the Unquiet Dead in T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land*. *Yeats Eliot Review*, 16 (2), 28–33.

¹⁶⁸ Weiskel (1986), p. 23

There is further work to be done before the polar sublime is fully delineated, however. With regard to Romantic texts, Anne K. Mellor argues that the sublime moment ‘erases the body’¹⁶⁹ – it is the gross material element which must be sacrificed in order to make the leap towards the divine, a movement characterized, in the words of Coleridge, by ‘the dilating Soul, enrapt, transfused, / Into the mighty vision passing’.¹⁷⁰ This is a typically Romantic description of the privileged, experiential sublime in the midst of Nature. We may remember the words of Addison at this point, however, and acknowledge that the textual sublime, for the reader, involves narrative accounts of ‘torments, wounds, deaths, and the like dismal accidents’. Following on from this, in our continuing study of contemporary poets, it is the body which prompts our attention, as the locus of injury, suffering, and death in the punishing environments of the Arctic and Antarctic. For this reason, and with this key shift in focus, it is Julia Kristeva’s assertion that ‘[t]he abject is edged with the sublime’¹⁷¹ – and critical responses to that assertion – that will form the basis of the next chapter.

¹⁶⁹ Mellor, Anne K. (1993). *Romanticism and Gender*. New York: Routledge, p. 88

¹⁷⁰ Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1960). *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. London: Oxford University Press, p. 378

¹⁷¹ Kristeva (1982), p. 11

Chapter 3 The object body and the textual sublime

The particular and compelling nature of the sublime, its wow factor, has been shown in the preceding chapters to be a challenge for the mind, or the imagination, or the mental faculties however they are defined. For Kant especially, the sublime exists in that brief moment in which imagination and reason are in conflict, generating a euphoria which threatens to overwhelm the subject's internal balance. As we have also seen, however, the materiality of the body is a fundamental aspect of the sublime's economy. For example, in Burke's formulation, as summarized by Alan Richardson, the sublime is 'a corporeal experience [...] a stretching and subsequent relaxation of the nerves',¹ and his emphasis on safe distance and self-preservation puts the subject's physical wellbeing at the very centre of his aesthetic concerns. The lofty precipice can attract and repel by virtue of the imagination's sense of what can happen to the body should it pass over the brink. With regard to the rhetorical or textual sublime, and a writer's ability to transport the reader with epic tales of heroism and tragedy, it is worth re-emphasising at this point those metaphors used by Longinus and Burke as noted in chapter one: especially how, for Longinus, rhetorical effects must be 'skilfully knit together [...] united into one body'.² In the same context, for Burke, images may be 'formed into a gross body [...] part polished, and partly [...] rough'.³ In order for the concept of the polar sublime to be fully developed, therefore, the significance of the body in relation to the sublime will be addressed in what follows. In doing so, the textual sublime – as opposed to the landscape category of the natural sublime – will form the new focus in relation to the contemporary poems studied in this chapter. In this perspective, it is descriptions of materiality, of food and flesh, which will establish the textual sublime as a manifestation of the polar sublime.

¹ Richardson (2010), p. 26

² Longinus, in: Ashfield and de Bolla (1996), p. 29

³ Burke (2008), p. 156

This turn towards the body will incorporate and expand upon the work of Julia Kristeva. It is a particularly negative form of materiality that she depicts in her highly influential book *Powers of Horror*, with its emphasis on the idea of the abject and the associated affective response of disgust. The abject is the unclean and impure (however those concepts are culturally understood), and is represented by ‘defilement, sewage, and muck’,⁴ ‘body fluids [and] shit’.⁵ The ultimate abject object is the corpse, which is ‘cesspool, and death [...] the most sickening of wastes’.⁶ In more theoretical terms, Kristeva describes the abject as something ‘radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that [...] [a] “something” that I do not recognize as a thing’⁷ and which heralds a sudden sense of uncanny otherness.⁸ The abject has the power to draw the subject ‘toward the place where meaning collapses’⁹ and which operates ‘[o]n the edge of non-existence and hallucination’.¹⁰ It is something which ‘simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject’.¹¹ It is possible, nevertheless, to read traces of the sublime in all these descriptions of the abject. For example, the uncanny lies at the heart of the Gothic sublime, in which, as Vijay Mishra notes, ‘terror [is] an effect of an object linked to the whole question of selfhood’.¹² The collapse of meaning is present in the radical indeterminacy of the negative sublime as defined by Weiskel, ‘that moment when the relation between the signifier and the signified breaks down’.¹³ Hallucinations are part and parcel of the cognitive disruptions or perceptual intoxications during sublime encounters at the poles, as noted in the previous chapter. The sublime, too, both attracts and annihilates the subject with its inhuman force.

⁴ Kristeva (1982), p. 2

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 3

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 2

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 5

¹² Mishra (1994), p. 71

¹³ Weiskel (1986), ix

When Kristeva acknowledges the sublime directly, it is in wholly positive terms: starry skies, open seas or stained glass windows have the ability to ‘carry me away, and sweep me beyond the things that I see, hear, or think [...] [I] find myself removed to a secondary universe’.¹⁴ It is ‘a *something added* that expands us’¹⁵ – in essence the dilatory power of the Romantic sublime as expressed by Wordsworth and Coleridge. She does not consider the darker, negative side of the sublime, nor does she consider the textual sublime; her examples of starry skies and stained glass windows are rather commonplace and clichéd. She turns to the Freudian sense of ‘sublimation’, however, to describe the subject’s internal control over the horrors of the abject: what is disgusting or repulsive may be risen above, or psychologically transformed, and it is this connection which leads her to assert that ‘[t]he abject is edged with the sublime. It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being’.¹⁶ The repulsive mess of the material present may be transcended by an imagination which is ‘swept beyond’ the sensory world into a realm of higher meaning, the sublime operating as a power of transport.

Kristeva’s abject-sublime conjunction is briefly stated, then, in *Powers of Horror*. It has nevertheless provided a crucial point of reference for contemporary studies on the sublime, most notably by Steven Vine. In his consideration of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, he proposes that ‘Victor Frankenstein’s project – a project dedicated to raising abject or intractable matter into life, and to making inert bodiliness animate – is [...] a project *of* the sublime: a massive and overwhelming “sublimation” of the abject body’.¹⁷ Further, he suggests that Shelley ‘reverses Kant’s idealist sublime by returning its transcendences to the body, reinscribing its idealism in matter’.¹⁸

¹⁴ Kristeva (1982), p. 12

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 11

¹⁷ Vine (2013), p. 43

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 44

Kristeva's concept of the abject, then, whether broadly material or specifically body-centred, can be read in relation to the transcendent powers of the sublime.

Despite *Frankenstein's* polar narrative framework, and the various studies which establish the close links between the novel's composition and polar exploration,¹⁹ Vine does not include these polar themes to support his concept of the bodily sublime; likewise, as noted in the previous chapter, he does not consider the specificities of polar landscape in his consideration of the sublimities in Eliot's *Waste Land*. As a consequence, there is an opportunity to extend and re-focus Vine's 'bodily sublime'²⁰ in the context of contemporary polar poetry, thus enabling a further development of the polar sublime as here defined. In addition, there is a need to build upon Kristeva's concept of the abject in relation to the sublime: those narrative elements of 'torments, wounds, deaths, and the like dismal accidents' referred to by Addison are central to polar poetry and to the textual sublime it engenders, with explorers' bodies being the loci of said torments, wounds, and accidents. Those bodies have a real and symbolic relationship with food, given the importance of rations on polar expeditions, and it is the link between food and the abject which will now be examined in order to broaden the concept of the contemporary polar sublime.

Strange meat and hairy stew

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva suggests that 'food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection'.²¹ To ingest disgusting food or whatever is considered to be 'unclean' is a wholly negative experience, for Kristeva, resulting in an absolute physical rejection. In this, she maintains her binary definition of the 'clean'

¹⁹ In particular, Craciun, Adriana (2011). Writing the Disaster: Franklin and Frankenstein. *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 65 (4), 433–480; and, Richard, Jessica (2003). 'A Paradise of My Own Creation': Frankenstein and the Improbable Romance of Polar Exploration. *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 25 (4), 295–314.

²⁰ Vine (2013), p. 44

²¹ Kristeva (1982), p.2

and the ‘unclean’, which, like Kant’s binary of the beautiful and the disgusting alluded to in chapter two, allows for no spectrum of affective response. It is possible, however, to formulate just such an ambiguity, and in the language of the sublime: in Lyotard’s words, ‘the sublime feeling is an emotion [...] that alternates between an affective “no” and “yes” [...] [i]t involves a recoil, as if thinking came up against what precisely attracts it’.²² One only needs to think of the popular television programme *I’m a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!* in which a group of celebrities are marooned in the Australian jungle and challenged to eat live witchetty grubs, mealworms, crickets and other unpalatable creatures to realize that the disgusting is both compelling *and* repulsive from the safe distance of the viewers’ armchairs – the same distance Addison identifies between reader and text which enables a pleasurable response to accounts of human suffering, a response which defines the textual sublime.

Pleasure and disgust are therefore not mutually opposed: they are among the essential elements of the textual sublime, just as pleasure and horror make up the affective response to the natural sublime. For this reason, the abject is fundamentally bound up with the sublime in a manner which goes beyond Kristeva’s idea of sublimation and the symbolic. Furthermore, it is in contemporary polar poetry that the textual sublime of the abject finds its ultimate expression, and for this reason the abject is a powerful presence in the wider context of the polar sublime.

Exploration teams, like armies, march on their stomachs. The well-stocked larder is a signifier of early-expedition idealism and the transposition of comforting domestic life into the inhospitable polar otherworld. In his poem ‘Hoosh’, already discussed in the previous chapter, Bill Manhire lists the contents of Scott’s hut at Cape Evans from first-hand view, having visited Antarctica in person, all miraculously preserved by the cold:

²² Lyotard (1994), p. 68

Minced collops, rump steak,
cans & cans of cod roe;
stewed kidneys, Roast Veal,
Flaked Tapioca, anchovies,
pickled onions; not to mention

the A1 Mulligatawny Soup
(Specially Prepared for Invalids)
1150 jars of bottled fruit,
bloater paste and Preserved Parsnip
and Moirs Mutton Cutlets²³

There is an implication of excess and surfeit in the list, an inexhaustible supply which reflects the abundance of Empire and its faith in logistics. All is not perfect, however: the soup has been awarded the highest rank of ‘A1’ and yet, by including ‘Specially Prepared for Invalids’, Manhire is hinting at the physical downfalls to come in Scott’s mission. Despite those failures, Scott and his crew will nonetheless be considered exceptional victims, ‘A1 invalids’, the best of British manhood. As ‘bloater paste’ is spied on the shelf, there is also the introduction of the potentially disgusting, and thus the abject – a corpse may be ‘bloated’ as much as a corpulent gastronome; mass-market tinned paste hints at unknown industrial processes rather than domestic kitchen activities; a ‘paste’ is a substance of ambiguous form and content in relation to the original herring. In all likelihood it could be disgusting. This extract cannot be considered properly sublime, given that the abject is not emphasised in high degree; it is significant, however, in that it establishes the baseline from which the abject sublime will emerge – an aisle of plenty which, in its very excess, foreshadows the privations to come. It is an excess which is not entirely appetising in its random combinations (tapioca is paired with anchovies on a single line), with ‘invalids’ and ‘bloater paste’ introducing an uneasy ambiguity to the symbols of health and heroic success.

²³ Manhire (2001), p. 272–273

Another way in which food is subject to symbolic transformation at the poles is described by Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch. On the subject of the printing press in Scott's hut, she describes how:

[Wilson] binds the paper
in Venesta plywood from packing cases.

Reverse relief: as they can't obliterate
the stencilled titles of the original contents
each volume is by default called *The Julienne Soup*,
The Bottled Fruit and *The Irish Stew*.²⁴

There is a mismatch between label and content, a slippage between signifier and signified. Food has been replaced with inedible paper: a mash of wood pulp. There is an implication here of literature as nourishment, the mind-body distinction dissolved in the image of an edible book. Crews do not survive on metaphors, however, as David Solway makes clear:

Would that the box stuffed with hymnals
had been a crate of Normandy pippins.
Lord, cascade them with apples and pears
for a bill of provisions is an empty promise
and words do not sustain us in extremity.²⁵

Solway introduces the symbolic relationship between food and salvation, and in the same poem suggests that a 'kettle of iron soup laced with parsnips / would have deputized for the Eucharist'²⁶ on Franklin's mission through Arctic Canada – the body of Christ in a mess of pottage. As with Manhire's list, we are not in the presence of the textual or object sublime – there is nothing repelling in Wynne-Rhydderch or Solway's imagery – but, in order for that sublime to emerge, relatively positive representations of foodstuffs must include the seeds of that transformation.

²⁴ Wynne-Rhydderch, Samantha (2012). *Banjo*. London: Picador, p. 41

²⁵ Solway (2003), p. 25

²⁶ *ibid.*

Full shelves signify order and optimism. As exploration missions progress, however, food comes to signify the increasingly abject state of the crews. The affective response of disgust may be in reaction to the ambiguous, the rotten, the composite, or what Mary Douglas defines as ‘matter out of place’:²⁷ reindeer hair is all well and good on the back of a reindeer, but reindeer hair in a bowl of soup is disgusting. While Kristeva assigns a negative value to the abject, there is *one* positively-charged possibility: she highlights ‘the *jouissance* produced by uttering [the abject]’,²⁸ noting ‘the erotic, sexual, and desiring mainspring of abjection’.²⁹ It is this pleasure in the utterance or textual representation of the abject which brings us closer to Bakhtin’s concept of ‘gay matter’, which, he suggests, ‘degrades and relieves at the same time, transforming fear into laughter’.³⁰ Kristeva picks up on Bakhtin’s figure of the carnival and highlights its ‘semantic ambivalences, which pair the high and the low, the sublime and the abject’.³¹ Contemporary poets are working with precisely these ambivalences in their confrontations with the polar sublime. On the one hand, the reader’s affective yes-no in relation to disgusting matter should be aroused; on the other hand, such extreme unpleasantness may be played for laughs in order to provide cathartic release or to introduce the ungovernable, erotic materiality of the flesh. William Ian Miller makes the obvious point, unexamined by Kristeva, that ‘[t]he comic and the disgusting [...] share significant points of contact’³² – points of contact that will be in evidence in contemporary polar poems.

Returning to polar food, then, it is possible to see the increased degradation of wholesome food as an intensifying textual sublime which both attracts and repels the reader, a negative sublime which, as with any sublime, includes a disconcerting degree

²⁷ Douglas, Mary (1984). *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge, p. 36

²⁸ Kristeva (1982), p. 20

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Bakhtin, Mikhail (1984). *Rabelais and His World*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, p. 335

³¹ Kristeva (1982), p. 138

³² Miller, Ian William (1998). *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, ix

of pleasure. To take examples from the work of Bill Manhire, Elizabeth Bradfield and Melinda Mueller, food may be polluted ('our hairy stew',³³ tea leaves infested with 'hairs loosed from boot or bag'³⁴), ambiguous or unappetisingly novel ('the odd meat / we're carving, / clawed flippers and flightless / wings'³⁵), unnaturally composite ('pony mixed with penguin / mixed with whale'³⁶) or primitive-raw as opposed to civilized-cooked ('They chew raw seal meat / to wet their throats with blood'³⁷). If well-preserved and well-ordered food represents Kristeva's *corps propre*, the clean and proper body, disgusting food represents the abject body with all its excessive failures. It is not simply the *jouissance* of utterance at work here: contemporary poets are providing a safe encounter with the intensities of the abject sublime.

The scale of intensity has further levels, however. There are sources of food so closely connected with human companionship and interdependence that the act of eating them almost amounts to cannibalism. Sarah Lindsay describes the situation faced by Mawson and Mertz after their companion Belgrave Ninnis disappeared down a crevasse with a sledge full of provisions:

The two men left fed dogs to their dogs,
fed them boots and harness, finally
ate dog themselves. His mouth keeps recalling
the feel of stewed paws, which Mertz refused,
favoring liver.³⁸

In feeding dogs to other dogs, the explorers have created a cannibalistic environment. In feeding them boots and leather harnesses, Lindsay evokes the fate of Franklin and his men who, on their 1819–1822 mission across the Canadian Arctic, famously eat their spare shoes to ward off starvation. By eating dogs themselves, Mawson and Mertz have

³³ Manhire (2001), p. 259

³⁴ Bradfield (2010), p. 21

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 4

³⁶ Manhire (2001), p. 259

³⁷ Mueller (2000), p. 35

³⁸ Lindsay (2008), p. 106

broken a particularly strong taboo of civilized Western society and have thus become abject. Kristeva's description of the abject as one of 'those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*'³⁹ is relevant here. By describing the oral impact of this desperate meal, and making a deictic shift from past tense to present ('ate dog [...] His mouth keeps recalling'), Lindsay manages to shift the sensation from the historical Mawson into the reader. It is happening *now*, in the text. Its powers of horror come from the fact that it is an external part of the animal being consumed, the paws – the part in contact with the ground, and thus to all forms of polluting matter, given that huskies defecate and urinate on the run when pulling sledges – and not a suitably internal slice of something warm-blooded.

On occasion, however, the temptation to play the abject for laughs proves irresistible. Manhire manages to infuse this same dog-eating act with the *jouissance* of utterance proposed by Kristeva, when he describes: 'seal / rissoles and the stewed paws // of huskies, a wonderful / banquet on deck'.⁴⁰ The seal rissoles are a humorous concoction, particularly with the comic timing of the line-break; the stewed paws are an exotic item which may or may not be chosen from the banquet, and which are allowed to share an ironic space with 'wonderful'. In this sense, the abject sublime shares the economy of the Kantian sublime: it may be defined in absolute opposition to the ridiculous, or in close proximity to it. To repeat the words of Thomas Paine, '[o]ne step above the sublime, makes the ridiculous; and one step above the ridiculous, makes the sublime again'.⁴¹ It is this oscillation on the scale of textual intensity which, in the contemporary polar poem, points to Kristeva's *jouissance* or Bakhtin's gay matter in one moment and the genuine horrors of the abject sublime in the next.

³⁹ Kristeva (1982), p. 12

⁴⁰ Manhire (2001), p. 259

⁴¹ Paine (2014), p. 435

The taboo of cannibalism is one that Kristeva acknowledges in *Powers of Horror*. If the human corpse is the ultimate abject object, the site of total symbolic breakdown, its transformation into unclean food is doubly abhorrent. In the poems which mention stewed paws above, the authors have been careful not to identify the dogs by name. When the victims are named and individualized, however, the association with *human* cannibalism is implicit, and this is a further intensity of the abject sublime. Melinda Mueller describes the scene at Shackleton's camp on an Antarctic ice floe, the crew stranded after the sinking of the *Endurance*:

Wild puts the revolver to its head. Macklin
drags the body off. He carried the dog Grus
in his pocket as a pup, "with only
his nose peeping out and getting covered
with frost." Macklin skins out Grus's body.
Crean butchers his dog Nelson and visits
the tents. "I've brought a bit of Nelson for
you to try."⁴²

To cannibalism is added the suggestion of infanticide, with crew members eating dogs they have raised and nurtured. In extreme environments, Mueller is suggesting, a civilized Christian man may become Kronos, epitome of horror, devourer of his own children. Mueller still manages to keep the tone relatively light by including matter-of-fact conversation taken verbatim from crew members' journals; devoid of any outward show of outrage or abnormality, 'a bit of Nelson' becomes an appealing *hors d'œuvre* or *amuse-bouche*. This scrap of meat is nevertheless still identified with a named individual and thus with an undivided whole: bodily coherence has broken down in such a way as to emphasise the increasingly abject materiality of the crew. Their descent into animality is counteracted by an act of civilized food-sharing. Again, an element of humour, albeit black humour, is present, as the abject sublime flirts with the ridiculous.

⁴² Mueller (2000), p. 29

Bill Manhire's poem 'Dogs', concerning the sled dogs on Amundsen's South Pole expedition of 1910–1912, commemorates every animal by name: 'we shot the first one, Bone [...] we had to shoot Lucy [...] Sara fell dead on the way [...] Rex was turned into cutlets [...] Per broke down utterly [...] we slaughtered Svartflekken [...] Lasse, my own favourite [...] Like Lurven, he made fifteen portions'.⁴³ The cannibalistic aspect is again emphasised ('dog can be fed on dog [...] One dog found its grave in another's stomach'⁴⁴) as is the necessity of explorers eating their dogs. This is the economy of survival. In this instance, Manhire presents the shocking significance of these actions before undercutting the intensity of the mood with bathos. At the poem's end, Amundsen attempts to dismiss any morbid thoughts with renewed physical action. As the long list of dead-dog names peters out in a series of ellipses, he admits:

Yes, of course, it is true, sometimes

I feel quite alone. It is hard almost to speak ...
My best friends bark in my stomach ...

But then I think:

*Come now, harness the team!*⁴⁵

At the moment when Amundsen loses the power of speech, his digested dogs are vocalizing from within; in swallowing their flesh, he has become the resting place for their living souls. His body is haunted. As such, his turn towards outward progress is a sublimation of this cannibalistic act. The depths are denied, and he focuses on what he can see, on blank exteriors: 'the great unknown [...] white, always white, // with always a splendid surface'.⁴⁶ Kristeva's argument on defilement and internalization within the Christian mythos is relevant here, particularly in her reference to these apocryphal

⁴³ Manhire, Bill (2003). *Lifted*. Manchester: Carcanet, p. 36–38

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 36–37

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 39

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

words of Jesus: ‘you have cleansed that *outer skin* [...] whereas *inside* [you] *are filled with scorpions* and all kind of wickedness’.⁴⁷ The Antarctic landscape comes to reflect Amundsen’s whiter-than-white surface, but in eating his dogs he is filled with material sin. His call to forward-moving, goal-centred team action is an attempt to banish the awareness of this fundamental duality and to integrate masculine body and masculine will once more: to be forgetful, forceful, purposeful.

The other animals to play a significant role in polar expeditions were ponies, particularly in Scott’s Antarctic expedition of 1910–1912. A significant number of poets have made a point of naming some or all of Scott’s ponies in roll-call or school register fashion⁴⁸ before moving on to describe their butchery. This strategy confirms the animals as fellow-victims in the heroic narrative as well as inevitable food, and links their material fate to that of the men. Chris Orsman’s poem ‘Chums’⁴⁹ is nothing more than a list of names, in fact: the ten ponies chosen to haul sledges of equipment towards the South Pole. Their meat was cached at what was to be christened Shambles Camp. Beyond these names they are not characterized, but in the poem which follows, ‘Akeldama’, Orsman begins by stating: ‘The personality of each pony / vanishes under the knife’.⁵⁰ The significance of the ‘Chums’ poem lies in its title: the word is commonly associated with soldiers who had enlisted together to fight in the First World War, and Orsman is establishing kinship between the ponies as a group but also between the ponies and the men. They are engaged on the same mission, suffering the same hardships, battling against the Antarctic elements towards an uncertain victory. The names serve to memorialize and yet the list is impersonal: this specific pony or that does not matter, they are merely expedition fodder. Scott and his party will eat their

⁴⁷ Kristeva (1982), p. 116

⁴⁸ Orsman (1999), p. 79; Bradfield (2010), p. 5; Manhire (2001), p. 281

⁴⁹ Orsman (1999), p. 79

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 80

porters, their ‘chums’, which in this context allows for a cannibalistic interpretation that includes the exploitative nature of Empire.

During the two expeditions led by Sir John Franklin in search of the Northwest Passage through Arctic Canada, there were no dogs or ponies to be sacrificed. As a result, Franklin’s account of his 1819–1822 mission includes the following: ‘previous to setting out, the whole party ate the remains of their old shoes, and whatever scraps of leather they had, to strengthen their stomachs for the fatigue of the day’s journey [...] Not being able to find any *tripe de roche*, they drank an infusion of the Labrador tea-plant [...] and ate a few morsels of burnt leather for supper’.⁵¹ David Solway represents this increasingly desperate search for nourishment as follows:

You can’t eat saxifrage and harebells.
Rock tripe, laver and shoreside kelp
are locked in pack ice.
Dog lichen and moss steeped in melted brash
make an inedible gruel
though an excellent glue for caulking.
Old rope feazed into oakum doesn’t chew.⁵²

Tripe is commonly perceived as disgusting in its natural form. In this instance the reference is to *tripe de roche*, a form of barely-digestible lichen (*Umbilicaria mammulata*) which formed a major part of Franklin’s scavenger diet. Like Manhire, Solway manages to convey a sense of comic brio by the sheer excess of unappetizing options, culminating with the possibility of inorganic matter appearing on the menu.

It was the reports of the human cannibalism, on this expedition and on Franklin’s last expedition of 1845, which formed the basis of the textual sublime for the Victorian reading public – reports which were famously denounced by Charles Dickens

⁵¹ Simmonds, Peter Lund (2012). *Sir John Franklin and the Arctic Regions: A Narrative Showing the Progress of the British Enterprise for the Discovery of the North-West Passage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 40

⁵² Solway (2003), p. 9

and the British press.⁵³ The ultimate taboo had been broken, which in turn only whetted the appetite for those tales of ‘torments, wounds, deaths, and the like dismal accidents’ which had the power to compel and repulse in equal measure. It is also the taboo which informs the textual sublime of contemporary poets, the point on the scale of intensity which appears to escape ridicule or humour. Gwendolyn MacEwen does not refer to cannibalism directly, but it is possible to read a foreshadowing of grim events as the voice of Captain Crozier describes the final months of a crew trekking overland in search of food and safety:

We scattered our instruments behind us,
 and left them where they fell
Like pieces of our bodies, like limbs
We no longer had need for⁵⁴

The scattering of instruments represents the failure of Victorian science and imperial ambition in the extreme environment of the Canadian Arctic, a gradual stripping-down to the uncivilized and animalistic. MacEwen also manages to imply a process of transformation akin to evolution, but an evolution which runs counter to the assumptions of imperial progress: for ‘limbs’ to have no practical value, to be extraneous to requirements, the body must be undergoing a radical reconfiguration in relation to its environment. It is evolution figured as entropy, as a journey into the abject.

By comparison, David Solway is unflinchingly explicit in describing the fate of Franklin’s crew on their disastrous 1845–1847 mission:

It’s the skulls that bring it home,
give scale, give scope to it:

⁵³ It is worth noting that Dickens described the Inuit, the source of those reports of cannibalism, in wholly abject terms: ‘a gross handful of uncivilized people, with a domesticity of blood and blubber’. (As quoted in Loomis, 1977, p. 108.) To be civilized is to be ‘clean’; to be savage is to be unclean, both outwardly and inwardly.

⁵⁴ MacEwen (1993), p. 115

[...]

some split like crockery,
the shards scraped clean with rasps and hunting knives;
others with the jaws wedged off –
the best way to get at the brains⁵⁵

This passage can be read in relation to MacEwen's emphasis on the abandonment of scientific instruments: Crozier is a 'scientist' who, elsewhere in MacEwen's poem, declares 'Now we come to the end of science'⁵⁶ and accepts that his Enlightenment principles are insufficient in the Arctic wilderness. As Solway makes clear, what will sustain the men is not brain-power but brain-meat; not a transfer of knowledge but a sharing of flesh. The skulls 'bring [...] home' significance not only to the author but also to the reader: a level of intimacy with the abject is required in order for the full horror to be imagined. For the members of Franklin's crew, the transformation from civilized men into so-called primitive savages is complete. They are embodiments of the abject: broken down, defiled, unclean, and yet, for the reader, agents of the textual sublime.

The sublime's association with the sacred is also relevant to the abject descent into cannibalism. Kristeva describes the Eucharist narrative as 'a way of taming cannibalism [...] [by] interiorizing and spiritualizing the abject'.⁵⁷ The body of Christ is manifested, ingested, sublimated. In his poem 'Northwest Passage', previously discussed in chapter two, James Pollock draws out these themes by casting the Canadian Arctic in a sublime light: Franklin and his men are moving

in that long winter night among the steeples
of jagged ice, and the infinite, empty plain of wind and snow,
when the sea refuses to be re-born in spring⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Solway (2003), p. 38

⁵⁶ MacEwen (1993), p. 115

⁵⁷ Kristeva (1982), p. 118

⁵⁸ Pollock (2012), p. 3–4

The ‘natural’ yearly cycle of death and rebirth has been stalled by the ice, and the men are ‘far from their wives and children, far from God’.⁵⁹ Their distance from the feminine, from the domestic, from the nurturing and the beautiful, represents their immersion in the masculine sublime, and the result is physical and mental breakdown. The effects of scurvy are evident in their ‘blue gums’, and they are ‘half-mad, snow blind’.⁶⁰ Finally, they ‘kill the ones who’ve drawn the fatal lots, / and take [their] ghastly communion in the snow’.⁶¹ From this radical failure, and this transgression, Pollock has fashioned a morality tale – the poem is addressed to ‘you’, the reader, and describes what might happen during the attempt to find ‘your Northwest Passage’ using Franklin’s men as examples. To use Leane’s phrase, we are in the realms of polar psychotopography,⁶² and the fabled passage which provides an escape route from this nightmare of stasis and (self-)devouring is ‘breaking up within’⁶³ – a break-up which is natural within the context of Arctic time and place, and which reveals itself only when the illusion of willed, masculine progress has been abandoned.

By representing a vision of cannibalism as a ‘ghastly communion’, Pollock is sublimating the abject: significance is re-inscribed onto matter in the poem’s text, the crew are invoked as living and dead, the drama endlessly reanimated. At the same time, he, like Solway, is offering the reader an opportunity to enjoy these ghastly events, to participate imaginatively in the horror at a safe distance and thus to partake of the textual sublime. By focussing on food, Pollock and other contemporary poets have identified a key anxiety of the polar sublime: the anxiety which is connected to orality, of swallowing and being swallowed. This leads us to a more direct consideration of the body and its suffering at the hands of the polar sublime.

⁵⁹ *ibid.*, p. 4

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² Leane (2012), p. 55

⁶³ Pollock (2012), p. 4

The suffering and dismembered body

At the centre of the polar exploration narratives is the body of the explorer. This body has been recognized as having a symbolic function within the polar journeys of Empire; for example, Jen Hill argues that the nineteenth-century explorer's body carried the expectations and imaginative investments of the British public during times of imperial expansion, describing it as 'a prosthetic national body that stands in for the citizen/reader at home'.⁶⁴ As a result, any damage to or abjection of the explorer's body would negatively impact on imperial idealism, and the polar regions guaranteed this very danger. As Hill remarks, 'a standard trope of Arctic narratives is the disappearing body – the fewer the pages to the end, the less of the frostbitten body remains'.⁶⁵ In the popular imagination, the chief characteristic of extreme cold was that it had the power to *penetrate* the seemingly impervious and indomitable body – as the male explorers were penetrating 'virgin territory'⁶⁶ – and, by degrees, *disassemble* it. The explorer body is therefore clean and proper (to use Kristeva's phrase) at the beginning of the narrative, and its boundaries secure. During the course of the expedition, however, it becomes increasingly abject. A satirical cartoon by George Cruikshank of 1819 depicts the return of a polar expedition, described by Spufford as 'a naval party who have all, without exception, had their noses frostbitten off. The officer leading [John Ross] wears a paper nose, for dignity'.⁶⁷ With body parts liable to end up separated from the whole, those parts became the focus of a particular anxiety and horror, especially fingers, noses, toes and feet. The body was subject both to piecemeal losses and final erasure, not dissimilar to the glacial landscape the explorers were crossing with its continual

⁶⁴ Hill, Jen (2008). *White Horizon: The Arctic in the Nineteenth-Century British Imagination*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, p. 43

⁶⁵ Hill (2008), p. 39

⁶⁶ MacEwen (1993), p. 105 uses the phrase 'the virginal straight of / Victoria'.

⁶⁷ Spufford (1996), p. 55. There are different interpretations of the image, however. M.J. Ross notes: 'John Ross had reported that the Inuit pulled their noses as a gesture of greeting, and the effect of this form of salutation is shown on the faces of the crew'. Ross (1994), xvii. Likewise, Glyn Williams suggests the crew are missing their noses as a result of 'exchanging too many salutations with Eskimos'. Williams (2009), p. 181



Figure 2

'Landing the Treasures, or Results of the Polar Expedition!!!' George Cruikshank, 1819

© Trustees of the British Museum

calving and melting.

The Cruikshank cartoon is significant in another sense. In Bakhtin's view, Renaissance drama heralded the shift away from the grotesque body of the community towards what he calls 'divided, atomized, individualized [...] "private" bodies'⁶⁸ and, as a result, the folk culture of humour and excess was being superseded by 'the bourgeois conception of the completed atomized being'.⁶⁹ In this notion of the 'completed' being we have a precursor of Kristeva's clean and proper self with its boundaries intact, safe from pollution and non-polluting in itself. In polar narratives, however, and as Cruikshank demonstrates in his cartoon, there is a continuation of Bakhtin's folk-body in the form of the expedition crew: a body of men which can be represented as one. Each individual crew member is a figurative limb, working towards the higher purpose of the expedition aim; a limb which may be lost without necessarily jeopardising the onward advance of the crew-body as a whole. In Cruikshank's cartoon, the multiple loss of noses indicates the loss of individuality: it is the crew-body which has sustained a single injury. This is a representation of excess which speaks of the grotesque body in its Rabelaisian form, and, as a result, the ridiculous gains ascendancy over the abject sublime.

There are several points to consider, then, from this perspective in the ongoing formulation of the polar sublime in contemporary poetry. Jen Hill's concept of the explorer's body as a 'prosthetic national body that stands in for the citizen/reader at home'⁷⁰ emphasises the relationship between text and reader: narrative accounts of the explorers' bodies, particularly in their suffering moments, form the basis of the reader's empathy and identification. This reader-response to descriptions of physical injury and death reminds us, once again, of Addison's definition of the textual sublime and the

⁶⁸ Bakhtin (1984), p. 23

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, p. 24

⁷⁰ Hill (2008), p. 43

pleasure that such descriptions may afford. The body, in its various states of abjection, both compelling and repelling, is central to the textual sublime. In addition, there is always the possibility that the sublime, by virtue of its very excess, may tip over into the ridiculous. Where the abject body is concerned, this ridiculousness takes the form of Rabelaisian black humour.

Turning now to contemporary poems, we can see how these body-related issues come to the fore. Chris Orsman describes the commemorative photographs taken at Cape Evans before the start of Scott's final journey South: 'Five men: / they'll carry their faces // to the Pole'.⁷¹ The suffering to come is prefigured by this physical splitting-off, a form of disassociation which transforms the explorers' faces into a type of baggage, items which may in theory be cast off or left behind, no longer integral. Later in the narrative sequence, in the poem titled 'The Pole', Orsman presents a vision of Scott and his party arriving at the South Pole, quoted here in full:

He wore his whole body
like a prosthetic

reaching out
to this abstraction

wondering where
exactly the lines

collided.
It was not

as he once dreamed it
piercing his heart.⁷²

The sense of physical disconnection is such that Scott's entire body has become baggage, a burden to be carried in the service of a heroic ideal. The Pole is immaterial and ambiguous in this moment, and thus the body approaching it is incapable of

⁷¹ Orsman (1999), p. 69

⁷² *ibid.*, p. 86

confirming its existence by sensory means. There is also the suggestion that Scott's body has undergone such a degree of suffering in the freezing conditions that he is literally numb, no longer the instinctual owner of his own flesh, which is now of another substance: an insensate plastic or silicone. The fact that Scott was referred to as 'The Owner' during the expedition⁷³ is also noted by Orsman ('here's the Owner with a football'⁷⁴) and this adds a particular resonance to the sense of loss, and the loss of sense. Orsman has anticipated Hill, then, with a poetic representation of the explorer as 'prosthetic body', but with a different emphasis: the explorer's body is a prosthetic in itself, for Orsman, not a symbolic extension of the armchair reader.

The same sense of disconnection is described in Yeats's 'Sailing to Byzantium', where the body is 'a dying animal' to which the soul is 'fastened',⁷⁵ and an old man is nothing more than a 'tattered coat upon a stick'.⁷⁶ The association with flesh and clothes is particularly strong in poems of polar exploration and is related to the sense of body as other, as garment, as something put on and liable to peel off; a sense which also relates to concepts of ownership and identity. For Elizabeth Bradfield, the grip of the polar regions 'pulls apart your layers, / the glues that make you whole',⁷⁷ an image reinforced by the enjambment in 'Gore-Tex, Thinsulate, skin / under engineered layers'.⁷⁸ By sitting alongside Gore-Tex and Thinsulate, skin becomes an additional layer to be stripped off, the organic and the inorganic becoming equivalent or composite.

In the poem 'In Preparation', Bradfield explores the same idea in a more fanciful vein:

⁷³ Cherry-Garrard (2005), p. 312, 324

⁷⁴ Orsman (1999), p. 41

⁷⁵ Yeats, W.B. (1961) *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. London: Macmillan, p. 218

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, p. 217

⁷⁷ Bradfield (2010), p. 10

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, p. 11

Explorer, what will you wear? Has someone taken
hair pulled from her brush each morning
since your birth, put it away in a box,
top carved with your name by your father
on the day he thought of your name?
Has she spun the long, fine stuff into thread
then knitted it into socks to warm you?⁷⁹

The potential explorer is identified as male, his mother the source of the dead hair woven into socks: a fantastical image which conjures the archetypal female spinners and weavers of mythology or fairy tales. The dead hair is abject by virtue of being a form of matter out of place, detritus which is mingling with dust and other pollutants, a bodily waste product which may cause revulsion if found in the sink or shower. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva asks the question, 'Why does *corporeal waste*, menstrual blood and excrement, or everything that is assimilated to them, from nail-pairings to decay, represent [...] the objective frailty of the symbolic order?'⁸⁰ Dead hair is on a level with nail-pairings. In addition, the waste in Bradfield's poem is *maternal*, which conforms to Kristeva's idea of the abject being grounded in a pre-linguistic, maternal entity,⁸¹ the traces of which Bradfield imagines may be found on the male explorer's adult feet. What Bradfield represents here is not simply the abject, however: the dead hair is transformed in the process of spinning and knitting, becoming once again a source of maternal warmth and comfort. Matter is re-inscribed with meaning, and thus the abject is sublimated.

Another poem which portrays the explorer in close proximity to the maternal body is 'Scott's First Voyage' by Ian Abbot, which begins: 'I crouch among the snowfields of my mother's body. / Under the white drifts of her breasts I suck new air /

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, p. 45

⁸⁰ Kristeva (1982), p. 70

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 13

which holds the callousness of blizzards'.⁸² Only the child-narrator's body is symbolized as warm-blooded: 'My body / is a red tent / already stained / with the signatures of a hard passage.' It bears the traces, in other words, of the internal aspect of the mother, a 'stain' which signifies the abject of the maternal body and which counterbalances her representation as an all-white sublime landscape. A deeper analysis of the Bradfield and Abbot poems using Lacanian psychoanalytic theory would be fruitful, but requires the introduction of a new critical framework which lies beyond the scope of this thesis. These two examples serve to highlight this possibility, and Kristeva's relevance here.

Returning to the abject flesh and expedition clothing, Melinda Mueller also makes an explicit connection. In her description of Shackleton, Worsley and Crean arriving at the whaling station in South Georgia after their sea journey from Elephant Island in the *James Caird*, she states: 'They looked / like ghosts or worse, men in rotting grave-clothes / with blackened skin. Was that cloth or flesh / that hung from them in tatters?'⁸³ The rhetorical question reinforces the ambiguity of the perceived objects: they are walking corpses, monstrous embodiments of the abject, showing signs of material decay. Although Mueller does not mention it, one can easily imagine the smell: the men had been wearing the same clothes for nearly a year.⁸⁴ Recalling their much-needed wash and change of clothes, Shackleton himself defined it as a transition from 'savages' to 'civilized men'⁸⁵ – a restoration of the 'clean and proper self', to repeat Kristeva's phrase, and an awakening from the nightmare of the unclean, the abject. By imagining the whalers' response to the dirty men and posing it as a question, Mueller allows the reader to partake in that moment of horror, and, by creating this

⁸² Abbot, Ian (1988). *Avoiding the gods*. Blackford: Chapman, p. 16

⁸³ Mueller (2000), p. 63

⁸⁴ Shackleton (2002), p. 200

⁸⁵ *ibid*, p.203

textual sublime, leaves the question hanging long after the characters have cleaned themselves up.

As striking as these images are, we have not yet encountered the full intensity of the textual sublime. Bradfield's vision of hair socks is comfortingly transformative; Mueller's walking dead are rather theatrical in their Gothic rags. When contemporary poets turn to the subject of Australian explorer Douglas Mawson, however, the abject materiality of the flesh becomes an almost overwhelming source of horror.

During the Australasian Antarctic Expedition of 1912–1913, Mawson was exploring and mapping a stretch of the continent with two companions: Belgrave Ninnis and Xavier Mertz. On the 14th of December 1912, without warning and barely without a sound, Ninnis disappeared down a crevasse along with six huskies and the sledge that contained the team's three-man tent, all the dog food, and nearly all the food for the men. Mawson and Mertz remained, with the safety of base camp 300 miles away. During the course of their return journey, they began to slaughter and eat the remaining huskies. The American poet Sarah Lindsay continues the story as follows, in the poem discussed earlier in this chapter, 'Mawson in a Crevasse':

His mouth keeps recalling
the feel of stewed paws, which Mertz refused,
favoring liver. Shortly thereafter, their hair and nails
and skin began falling off. Mertz raged and cried,
bit off one finger, spat it out, finally fell silent.

[...]

[Mawson] hasn't got far
since he had to bind the soles of his feet back on.
It's good not to feel them squish with each step.
He's lost the cuff of one ear.⁸⁶

Here we have the layers becoming un-glued, the sense of bodily coherence and unity being undone. This is made particularly graphic in Mertz's action of biting off his

⁸⁶ Lindsay (2008), p. 106–107

own fingertip in a moment of delirium. He believed it was frostbitten, and thus ‘dead’, without feeling, though Lindsay omits this detail from the narrative, and thus allows for the possibility that Mertz was dismembering his living flesh: an act approaching self-cannibalism. Mawson has ‘lost the cuff of one ear’, emphasising again the symbolic relationship between flesh and clothes. Most significant of all is the effect on Mawson’s feet, the soles of which have become detached due to suspected vitamin A poisoning after eating vitamin A-rich husky liver.⁸⁷

Lindsay focuses on the act of binding and thus the hope of restoration, however desperate: the loose parts of the body are not jettisoned, but reincorporated back into the whole. In a dramatic deictic shift, the third person narrator *inhabits* Mawson’s body in the present tense in order to share his suffering (‘It’s good’) while using the abject ‘squish’ to signify the fluidity to which Mawson’s body is now subject. In doing so, the possibility arises that the narrator *is* Mawson, in that moment, making his confession to the embodied present. What is more, the shift to the present tense at the moment of feeling ‘good’ also places the reader in Mawson’s body – the affective response, for both narrator and reader, is framed in the here-now. The compelling-repulsive quality of the textual sublime is the result of this physical empathy, the reader being forced to walk, figuratively and abjectly, in Mawson’s shoes.

As already noted, however, the abject sublime is always in danger of tipping over into black comedy, and this tension is also present in Lindsay’s poem. The excessive understatement of ‘It’s good not to feel them squish with each step’ allows for a shocked response of laughter. In the uncanny casualness of ‘it’s good’ we can hear Captain Oates beginning his final sentence with ‘I’m just going outside’. With ‘squish’, there is an opportunity to partake in the *jouissance* of utterance afforded by the abject.

⁸⁷ This assessment has been questioned, however, by Denise Carrington-Smith, *Medical Journal of Australia*, 183 (11), 2005, p. 638–641: available online at <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2005/183/11/mawson-and-mertz-re-evaluation-their-ill-fated-mapping-journey-during-1911-1914>, last accessed 20 August 2015

This tension is even more evident in Bill Manhire's poem 'Hoosh', in which, like Lindsay, he plays with tenses in order to establish an affective *now* for the reader:

you hear the tin dogs yelping

*

while Mawson ties
the soles of his feet
back on

*

and we
hop on the Snowmaster ⁸⁸

Manhire is one of the few poets to have visited Antarctica: in addressing the reader as 'you', he is using the third person to relate first-person experience. The entire poem is written in the present tense, his own Antarctic narrative interspersed with historical narratives, and the effect is one of temporal indeterminacy. Manhire as narrator is coexistent with Mawson, the latter represented in the act of binding the soles of his feet, no less 'alive' than the late twentieth-century narrator and his companions as they jump on a snowmobile. The importance of temporality to the sublime was considered in chapter two, but here the significance is rather different: by placing the injured and abject Mawson in the present, Manhire, like Lindsay, presents the reader with an image of living flesh, and it is this vivid physicality which secures the reader's imaginative participation in the body of a long-dead historical figure. Again, Mawson's abject flesh has been re-inscribed with meaning, and has come to symbolize heroic fortitude. In addition, the tension alluded to – the abject sublime's propensity to slide into the ridiculous – is present in Manhire's clipped phrasing: there is no abject *content*, as there is in Lindsay's poem, simply a bland description of what is being presented as a casual

⁸⁸ Manhire (2001), p. 255

act, without affect or outward signs of the suffering taking place. It is this disconnection which allows for a humorous tone to edge the sublime in Manhire's work.

While both Manhire and Lindsay acknowledge the potential for levity, Kona Macphee takes an altogether serious approach in her poem 'Meat' – a title which in itself confirms the absolute materiality of the subject:

Mawson, the single finisher,
now staggers to the line of huts
(*My God! Which one are you?*),
his own soles cobbled to his feet
like flapping cuts of meat.⁸⁹

The locus has shifted to Mawson's eventual arrival at base camp. The crew there cannot tell whether it is Mawson, Mertz or Ninnis who is approaching, and Macphee records their cry of awed terror at the sight of this ravaged body from which identity has been erased or occluded, the signified adrift of its signifier. Mawson has undergone the same transformation from clean and proper into the utterly abject as did Shackleton, who, on his arrival at Elephant Island, heavily bearded and unwashed in tattered clothes, had the following exchange with the whaling manager:

'Don't you know me?' I said.
'I know your voice,' he replied doubtfully. 'You're the mate of the *Daisy*.'
'My name is Shackleton,' I said.
Immediately, he put out his hand and said, 'Come in. Come in.'⁹⁰

Of relevance here is Kristeva's definition of the abject as that which 'disturbs identity, system, order'.⁹¹ It is only upon positive identification that the whaling manager is prepared to touch Shackleton and invite him into civilized space. Returning to Macphee's poem, the link between flesh and clothing is again established with 'cobbled', and Mawson's feet have been reduced to 'cuts of meat'. Given that Macphee

⁸⁹ Macphee, Kona (2013). *What Long Miles*. Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, p. 29

⁹⁰ Shackleton (2002), p. 201

⁹¹ Kristeva (1982), p. 4

also highlights the eating of husky liver by Mawson and Mertz, and bearing in mind the reference to ‘stewed paws’ in both Lindsay and Manhire, we can see that this descent into the abject involves the reduction of the human to the animal: husky feet are equivalent to Mawson’s feet in that their flesh is a source of nourishment somewhere along the food chain.

Mawson’s plight, as represented by these poets, is that his body is literally falling apart. Elizabeth Bradfield writes about an earlier Mawson mission, the 1909 attempt to discover the South Magnetic Pole, and in doing so invokes the figure of the crew-body as the various men succumb to the punishments of Antarctic space: ‘Mawson will say *It took / the lot of us to make a whole man*’.⁹² This theme of loss and totality in relation to the male body is picked up elsewhere in Bradfield, notably in the poem ‘Wives of the Polar Explorers’. By employing Robert Falcon Scott’s wife Kathleen as a narrator, she expresses both the grim humour and the underlying dangers of a polar adventure: ‘*Good-bye, dear heart – if / you lose a finger, string it for me as a charm / to beckon you home*’.⁹³ The breezy tone trivializes the loss, making it sound akin to an act of forgetfulness. As with the case of Mawson’s feet, however, the matter is serious: Scott’s body is losing its wholeness, disintegrating, approaching a state of disability. The ‘charm’ of the detached finger works on the basis that the part and the whole are magically and inextricably linked: the part *desires* reunification with the whole, suggests Bradfield, just as the remainder of Scott desires reunification with its missing part. It is the *finger*, in other words, which is the beloved object and not Kathleen herself – she merely wields its power. There is no escaping the Freudian interpretation of such a severance: the higher power of the Antarctic sublime has emasculated Scott, with Kathleen the new guardian of his lopped ‘member’. Here again

⁹² Bradfield (2010), p. 40

⁹³ *ibid.*, p. 78

is an example of the abject being transformed into a bodily sublime, dead flesh becoming infused with magical significance.

The Canadian poet Anne Michaels also uses Kathleen Scott as a narrator in her poem 'Ice House'. Kathleen Scott had studied sculpture with Rodin, and, after her husband's death in Antarctica, she went on to work in hospitals during the First World War, taking casts of men's faces for surgical reconstruction. Michaels draws out the significance of this:

Men returned from war
without faces, with noses lost
discretely as antique statues,
accurately as if eaten
by frostbite.
In clay I shaped their
flesh

[...]

the surgeons copied
nose, ears, jaw
with molten wax and metal plates
and horsehair stitches⁹⁴

For comparison, it is worth remembering Cruikshank's cartoon at this point. Regiments returning from war can be seen as representing a crew-body, similar to a polar exploration party: a group of individuals who have experienced the same extreme environment and suffered the same terrible impact. In Michaels' poem, however, there is no opportunity for satire or Rabelaisian humour. Similarly, the potential dark comedy in Manhire's reference to Mawson's feet would not seem appropriate within the context of World War casualties. What Michaels does is to sublimate the abject body by allowing for its creative reassembly, in this case by a female creator working with clay – a material which carries with it associations of the Biblical creation of Adam. The anxiety relating to orality is again present: frostbite can 'eat' off noses. The horsehair

⁹⁴ Michaels, Anne (1999). *Skin Divers*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, p. 38–39

stitches are an additional abject element by virtue of being animal matter out of place, interlaced with human skin.

Although the implications cannot be fully explored here, it is worth pointing out that these representations of explorers' wounded bodies are of relevance to broader themes of disability. Bill Hughes is of the opinion that "the wounded" and their bodies have once again found their place in disability discourse',⁹⁵ and suggests: 'impairment is the fate of each and every one of us and, therefore, it is important to recognise that able bodied status is essentially temporary'.⁹⁶ Hughes also cites Kristeva's 'clean and proper body' as equivalent to the 'unimpaired being' before arguing that the 'normal or non-disabled body/self is not empirical but normative, an ideal of being'.⁹⁷ In this context it is worth remembering again the Manhire poem previously quoted, with its reference to 'the A1 Mulligatawny Soup / (Specially Prepared for Invalids)'.⁹⁸

In choosing polar exploration as their subject, contemporary poets are thus engaged in the discourse of disability: the arena of polar action is one which contains 'ideal' or heroic beings as well as broken or impaired beings, and, as has been shown, their interest is primarily with the latter. It is, after all, the wounded or abject flesh which stands to be transformed by the textual sublime; an act of restoration which is more symbolic, more significant, than a straightforward return to the clean, healed, ideal self.

We have seen that poems of polar exploration have at their centre the explorer's body, a body which begins in a clean and civilized state but which undergoes a metamorphosis into something monstrous, more savage, and closer to abject matter. Represented in a grotesque and comical form, as in the Cruikshank cartoon or in Bradfield's image of Kathleen Scott wearing her husband's finger on a chain, the abject

⁹⁵ Hughes, Bill (2009). Wounded/Monstrous/Abject: A Critique of the Disabled Body in the Sociological Imaginary. *Disability & Society*, 24 (4), p. 401

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

⁹⁷ *ibid.* p. 403

⁹⁸ Manhire (2001), p. 273

may become a source of black comedy. While poets have taken a measure of grim delight in describing these impairments and losses, they have also chosen to repair and patch-up the invalid: Mawson is forever binding the soles of his feet back on in order to continue his narrative journey. In certain instances, however, the explorer does not survive, and contemporary poets have been drawn to the polar dead as much as the wounded. This dead flesh provides another opportunity for poets to write the sublime into being.

The journey of the polar dead

Dead explorers present a particular challenge for contemporary poets of the polar sublime. As already discussed, representations of the abject and wounded can offer a textual sublime for the reader who wishes to participate in heroic disasters from a safe distance. The reader's affective response of disgust arises in response to a text which is both compelling and repulsive. In addition, the raising of abject flesh into symbolic significance is to create what Steven Vine refers to, as mentioned in chapter two, as the 'bodily sublime'.⁹⁹ The unique property of the polar dead is that, unlike corpses in temperate climates, they do not decay. This is highly significant, given Kristeva's definition of the corpse as the abject object *par excellence*:

The corpse [...] is cesspool, and death [...] without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death [...] Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver.¹⁰⁰

Kristeva emphasises those elements which are most likely to provoke disgust: the cesspool, leaking fluids which transgress the clean and proper boundaries, a breaking-

⁹⁹ Vine (2013), p. 44

¹⁰⁰ Kristeva (1982), p. 3

down of matter into something unclean, something threatening and polluting. 'It is death infecting life',¹⁰¹ she declares, and the figure of the corpse 'beckons to us and ends up engulfing us',¹⁰² implying a fear of being swallowed that recurs throughout her formulation of the abject. William Ian Miller, however, makes the point that '[w]hat disgusts, startlingly, is the capacity for life [...] The having lived and the living unite to make up the organic world of generative rot [...] The gooey mud, the scummy pond are life soup, fecundity itself: slimy, slippery, wriggling, teeming animal life generating spontaneously from putrefying vegetation'.¹⁰³ Although the affective response remains negative, Miller rejects Kristeva's binaries of clean and unclean in favour of a holistic view of matter, 'the having lived and the living'¹⁰⁴ engaged in the one continuous cycle of birth, death, and regeneration.

Rot and decay are signifiers of life, then, as much as death. To decay is to follow the natural arrow of time towards entropy. As previously noted in chapter two, the polar regions are notable for their apparent *lack* of time, their ability to hold matter in unnatural stasis. If a corpse cannot decay, and, as a result, cannot arouse the affective response of disgust associated with decay, what is its symbolic function within the framework of the abject or the textual sublime? Kristeva's vision of cesspools and fluidity is a narrowly temperate one, and one that contemporary poets are correcting in their poems of polar exploration.

Elizabeth Bradfield, in her poem 'In Praise of Entropy', presents the reader with the essential problem of polar corpses. Quoting from a secondary text, she begins:

*Outside Scott's hut at Cape Evans
a mummified husky dog lies, teeth bared,
the leather collar still around its neck.*

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p. 4

¹⁰² *ibid.*

¹⁰³ Miller (1998), p. 40–41

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*, p. 40

[...]

What terror in the cryogenics
of this place, the stasis.¹⁰⁵

The scene is terrifying – and thus sublime – by virtue of the continuing presence of a dog which died in the early years of the twentieth century. Moreover, a living self is conjured in its snarling features, one responding to a perceived threat, when in fact the lips have no doubt drawn back over time. The leather collar speaks of domestication, and thus of human affection, the object of which is uncannily present and yet horribly absent, both dog and ex-dog, a thing which survives and yet which is dead. Bill Manhire sees the same object with his own eyes during his trip to Antarctica, and describes:

the wind and light above the hut
where – a corpse by a kennel –
a husky's still on his chain,

and all around, the litter of heroic vision:
anchor, abandoned sledge;
boxes & broken glass & rusty nails¹⁰⁶

The emphasis on the ambiguity of the object is even more pronounced. Manhire only specifies the fact that the dog is a corpse parenthetically; if that sub-clause is removed, what he is presenting in the main clause is a husky in all its natural huskiness. The dog is not just collared, as in Bradfield's poem, but chained, which compounds the sense of time standing still, its brutal stasis. In a mockery of the living flesh and its fertility, the dog is surrounded not by a litter of pups but a litter of man-made objects from the

¹⁰⁵ Bradfield (2010), p. 61. The text in italics is taken from *A for Antarctica: Facts and Stories from the Frozen South* by Meredith Hooper (Macmillan, 1991), as noted in Bradfield (2010), p. 99. For a first-hand account of a mummified animal, described in terms of the planetary sublime, see Orsman (2008): 'the mummified seal, / lying not far from the shore, / found her spacesuit lacking / as she crawled here from the coast / a hundred years ago', p. 35

¹⁰⁶ Manhire (2001), p. 281. The same scene is witnessed by Orsman: 'And here, chained to its kennel, / a dog skeleton points its snout / towards the skirts of Mt Erebus.' Orsman (2008), p. 48. A 'skeleton' carries a very different significance to a mummified animal, however, suggesting the remains of natural decay, and thus the sublime impact is lost.

various Heroic Age expeditions, now devoid of purpose and similarly trapped in Antarctic suspension.

What begins to emerge here is a textual sublime which is defined by Lyotard's 'privation in the face of *Is it happening?*' as discussed in chapter two – an anxiety relating to the lack of entropy – and also by Kristeva's horror in the face of the abject corpse. This polar sublime, however, presents a radical alternative to Kristeva's abjection. Without decay, and therefore without the affective response of disgust, the perfectly frozen corpse of the polar regions begins to look *clean*, not least because of the association of snow and ice with purity and cleanliness. Matter is not breaking down, or at least not in a way which is discernible to the human eye; the body's boundaries are not collapsing, but are miraculously maintained – in fact, they are uncannily strengthened in the process of being frozen solid. The polar dead have transcended the abject to become objects of sublime wonder and terror.

Turning now to the dead bodies of polar explorers, we can see the full implications of this incorruptible sublimation. In dealing with the death of Captain Scott and his companions, Chris Orsman begins by tracing the traditional downward curve of entropy: 'What broke down – gristle, fibre, / the scar tissue of old wounds – // was dispensable'.¹⁰⁷ As the men succumb to starvation and scurvy, the body is figuratively left behind as a new essentialism takes over, either of the will or the soul. Interestingly, this is the final poem in Orsman's *South* and so he falls shy of describing the dead in their final state. Samantha Wynne-Rhydderch takes the narrative forward to its conclusion, with Apsley Cherry-Garrard as the narrator in her poem 'Geology':

¹⁰⁷ Orsman (1999), p. 104

We dug out
the quartz that had been Scott, Wilson

and Bowers, their lithologies in rock sequence
and the sledge weighed down by thirty-five pounds
of granite they'd stopped to collect from a moraine

on the way back. Erratics: rocks that differ
from those native to where they're found.¹⁰⁸

Far from being abject, the bodies are now a component of the planetary sublime as defined in chapter two: features of geological strata which transcend the human. The explorers are themselves erratics, matter out of place, but so transformed that they do not arouse disgust. As quartz, their bodies have become semi-precious, their flesh achieving a strange increase in value which is again indicative of their sublimation.

The polar dead may become rock-like in another sense: in the poem 'My Year Out', Wynne-Rhydderch again uses Cherry-Garrard as the narrator to describe how 'we heard a crack // like a shot: Scott's arm breaking / as Atch freed his diary'.¹⁰⁹ This is a faithful representation of the scene as recalled by rescue party member Tryggve Gran: 'I heard a noise [...] like a pistol shot [...] I was told this was Scott's arm breaking as they raised it to take away the journals strapped under his arm. Scott had died dreadfully [...] his face contorted with frostbite'.¹¹⁰ It is not the bone which is breaking with a loud crack but the frozen entirety of the arm. In a sense he has become a memorial to his former self, a solid statue.

Reference was made in chapter two to Bill Manhire's vision of Oates's body 'going deeper and deeper // below the surface [...] still perfectly himself',¹¹¹ and this perfection is a sign that he has not fallen beyond the limit, as Kristeva would put it, and bears no trace of the abject. Being 'perfectly himself' places him in the category of the

¹⁰⁸ Wynne-Rhydderch (2012), p. 54. The same association is made by Pauline Stainer (1994, p. 43) in her poem 'Thaw': 'The bodies of Victorian climbers / are recovered / as the glaciers retreat // erratics / in the malachite green, / backlit by the sun.'

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*, p. 51

¹¹⁰ Quoted in King, Peter, ed. (1999). *Scott's Last Journey*. London: Duckworth, p. 7

¹¹¹ Manhire (2001), p. 260

corps propre, the clean and proper self. This journey below the Antarctic surface has an imagined end, however, as Cherry-Garrard describes: 'I hope that by the time Scott comes home – for he is coming home: the Barrier is moving, and not a trace of our funeral cairn was found by Shackleton's men in 1916 – the hardships that wasted his life will be only a horror of the past'.¹¹² The bodies are in transit as the Antarctic ice steadily shifts over time, and Elizabeth Bradfield picks up on this movement in a poem with Cherry-Garrard as the narrator:

his body, still wrapped in its reindeer bag, still swaddled
in his tent's frayed silk, flag still tattering, his body
may have reached the Ross Sea
through the slow torrent

of the ice shelf. All the days he plodded,
the land was sliding back beneath him, treadmill
to the sea where he at last is given

a sailor's burial,
maybe today, sunk and drifting.¹¹³

The unnatural and 'terrifying' cryogenics of the polar environment are not, in the end, a finality to which Scott is condemned, and therefore the bodily sublime of the polar dead is also undergoing a transformation. Scott may 'emerge' into the here and now of natural decay, the spell broken, the flesh once more becoming flesh. Bradfield elaborates on this in another poem, the subject of which is Belgian explorer Adrien de Gerlache and the sea-burial of a crew member in the Antarctic sea, 1898:

his body
would not have gone to bone
quickly, the chill allowing his flesh
to [be] crawled by sea spiders
and limpets for years.

So was he erased?

[...]

¹¹² Cherry-Garrard (2005), p. 537

¹¹³ Bradfield (2010), p. 60

The sea
holds them all now. And in the water all have tongues.¹¹⁴

It is the ocean which represents a return to the natural, an environment in which the corpse can relax into abjection. The ocean is the site not only of decay but of a resurgent fertility, and therefore the erotic: to repeat Kristeva, quoted earlier in this chapter, *jouissance* of utterance reflects ‘the erotic, sexual, and desiring mainspring of abjection’.¹¹⁵ In the figure of the devouring ocean, the theme of orality again has primacy, the flesh once again food, not frozen quartz or inorganic matter.

Katherine Stansfield also picks up on this idea in her poem ‘Spook of the Antarctic’, the title itself suggesting the unsettling nature of the polar dead:

Captain Scott
hasn’t died. He sees my sins
and weeps inside the ice. One day
he’ll make it to the sea again and then¹¹⁶

This is the poem’s final stanza, and thus it ends by avoiding any anxieties of orality and the abject. Instead, Stansfield emphasises the sublimity of the frozen Scott, the incorruptible being who has taken on a Christ-like significance in the timeless Antarctic landscape. Like the immaculately preserved husky outside his hut, he has somehow survived death by avoiding decay. In imagining the dead Scott, then, contemporary poets are confronting – and representing – two possible sublime figures: that of the perfected, inorganic, immortal body, or that of the abject, decomposing, erotic body.

One of the boldest attempts to instil the dead polar flesh with an erotic charge is the poem ‘Envyng Owen Beattie’ by Sheenagh Pugh. The subject is John Torrington, a crew member on Franklin’s fatal expedition of 1845 in search of the Northwest Passage. Torrington died in January 1846 and, along with two other crew members, was buried

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 34

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Stansfield, Katherine (2014). *Playing House*. Bridgend: Seren, p. 60

in the frozen ground of Beechey Island, Arctic Canada. His body was exhumed in 1984 by the Canadian anthropologist Owen Beattie, and Pugh reimagines the scene after Torrington was released from the permafrost by slow degrees of un-thawing, with Beattie gently picking up the body for autopsy:

the head lolled
and rested on his shoulder,
and he felt the rush
that reckless trust sends
through parents and lovers. To have him
like that; the frail, diseased
little time-traveller;
to feel the lashes prickle
your cheek; to be that close
to the parted lips:
you would know all the fairy-tales
spoke true: how could you not try
to wake him with a kiss?¹¹⁷

It is only a body in its unfrozen, abject state which has power to instil a 'rush' of erotic feeling – or at least an imagined rush of erotic feeling, since Pugh is ascribing the response to Beattie. To 'have' someone is the language of sexual union, the prickle of eyelashes on cheek a supremely intimate moment.

Another sign of the abject is the denotation of Torrington as 'diseased'. Pugh is no doubt referring to the theory that Franklin's crew died partly as a result of Mercury poisoning from the imperfect soldering on food cans, and yet the word invokes the possibility of contagion and pollution, anxieties at the very centre of Kristeva's abject. A *frozen* body is sterile, however, and incapable of either catching or spreading disease. It is only in thawing that Torrington's body becomes a source of dis-ease, and it is this transition which marks the move towards the horrors of the textual sublime. Like Scott

¹¹⁷ Pugh, Sheenagh (1999). *Stonelight*. Bridgend: Seren, p. 21–22

in Stansfield's poem above, Torrington is apparently not 'really' dead but under a spell. Given the intensity of the abject moment, orality again resurfaces as the chief anxiety, a dead man's lips seemingly open for a kiss.

Throughout this chapter, Kristeva's notion of the abject has been applied to reveal the textual intensities of the contemporary polar sublime. Both food and flesh are present in a 'clean' state before deteriorating into abject matter over the course of the exploration narrative, a transformation which may be represented as grimly comic or purely disgusting. This abject matter may in turn achieve a disconcerting sublimity by existing 'out of time' in frozen stasis, and, contrary to Kristeva's formulation of the corpse as a site of 'transitional swarming',¹¹⁸ the polar dead, whether human or animal, may embody a clean, impermeable perfection. These tropes of clean and unclean, as already suggested, are particularly relevant in polar environments traditionally envisaged as pure, unsullied, untouched, and in the next chapter the polar landscape itself will form the focus of attention – not for its capacity to represent the traditional sublime, but due to its representation in contemporary poetry as a body in itself.

¹¹⁸ Kristeva (1982), p. 109

Chapter 4 The polar body

The explorer-body is famously ill-equipped to traverse the polar wastes: its journey is one way, towards abject degeneration. In the economy of the sublime, it might be expected that the polar regions be represented as the inhuman powers responsible for this annihilation, but contemporary poets may take a more relative view of the relationship between land and adventurer – one which acknowledges the land as a body, and one liable to injury and desecration. This chapter will consider how these authors are dealing with the inorganic matter of Arctic and Antarctic space, and how they bring them to life.

As we have seen in chapter one, explorers such as Scott were impressed by the sight of Antarctica's 'terrible limitless expanse of snow' which bore no signs of life, the 'awful desert' which was to become an apt symbol of the wasteland. It was a landscape which represented an absolute for the imagination, and thus inspired sublime feelings of fascination and horror. As Elizabeth Leane points out, however, the polar regions have also been envisioned as living beings, as bodies, and she quotes Morton Moyes's account of his increasingly troubled imaginings while stranded alone in a hut during Douglas Mawson's 1911–1914 Antarctica expedition, where he says: 'I could at times think of all Antarctica as [...] a slow-brained sentient being bent on making a man part of itself [...] deceptively solid and lifeless but actually full of movement and change, with a slow amoebic vitality [...] some it conquered, grafting them indivisibly to its body'.¹ For this reason, from the perspective of something insidious and absorbing, Leane argues that Kristeva's idea of the abject is of particular relevance to Antarctic narratives insofar as the landscape threatens to disturb 'the subject's sense of unity'² by incorporating or ingesting the explorer-body into itself. She suggests that the body's

¹ As quoted in: Leane (2012), p. 54

² *ibid.*, p. 58

boundaries – and thus sense of self – are commonly represented as being insecure in this environment, with the division between subject and object broken down. Leane also notes that the abject has links with the maternal body in Kristeva’s formulation, and that the polar regions are often feminine-gendered in creative descriptions. This too strengthens the importance of the abject as a framework for studying polar narratives.

With its focus on thematic elements in polar narratives, however, Leane’s study is lacking a detailed consideration of the abject as it relates to representations of polar landscape itself, and, as a result, she does not consider how this abject polar body may relate to the sublime. Having formulated the polar sublime in detail in preceding chapters, and having shown the significance of the abject to its range of intensities, both textual and body-centred, this chapter will extend these concepts to include the physicality of the polar regions as portrayed in contemporary poetry. In doing so, the polar sublime will encompass both explorer and environment.

Constructing the polar body

It has been argued by Cian Duffy that the oppressive emptiness of the polar regions, as described by eighteenth-century travellers in their expedition accounts, provoked Romantic authors to ‘reclaim that emptiness for the imagination’.³ In Coleridge’s celebrated passage from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the narrator establishes that the Antarctic regions are devoid of living beings:

And through the drifts the snowy clifts
Did send a dismal sheen:
Nor shapes of men nor beasts we ken –
The ice was all between.⁴

³ Duffy (2013), p.105

⁴ Coleridge (1960), p. 189

As though to compensate for this privation, the stanza immediately following assigns both human and animalistic qualities to the icebergs, which ‘cracked and growled, and roared and howled’.⁵ Duffy also notes the habitual need of polar explorers to inscribe meaning onto this alien landscape, and quotes John Ross’s account of his crew’s first sight of an iceberg during the 1818 mission in search of the Northwest Passage: ‘at one time it looked like a white lion and horse rampant’,⁶ which they interpret as the lion and unicorn of the King’s coat of arms and thus a positive omen. This leads Duffy to suggest that ‘[p]olitical meaning is thus inscribed upon an inhuman wilderness’.⁷ As we saw in chapter three, this act of inscribing meaning onto ‘lifeless’ matter – of ‘making inert bodiliness animate’,⁸ to repeat Steven Vine’s phrase – is a project *of* the sublime, and it is this project that contemporary poets are engaged in as they attempt to embody the polar landscape.

This process begins, as it did for the Ancient Mariner, at sea. For Antarctic exploration in particular, the journey south over the Antarctic Ocean presents a particularly dangerous stage of the expedition. As noted in chapter three, the ocean may be represented as a cauldron of organic life with its natural cycle of growth and decay, which places it in symbolic opposition to the frozen wastes. Due to the extremity of Antarctic waters, however, an alternative view is possible, as indicated in Chris Orsman’s poem ‘*The Terra Nova in a Gale*’ which uses Herbert Ponting’s film account of Scott’s *Terra Nova* expedition as its point of reference: ‘A stilled shot in the Roaring Forties / conveys “the wilderness of the deep”’.⁹ Orsman then counters this image of desolate waste by using his own words to describe ‘the marbled fat / of the sea’, a dark expanse broken up with white lines of foam and breaking waves. It is a particularly striking transformation in that it carries a trace of the abject: the sea resembles a cut of

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ As quoted in: Duffy (2013), p. 132

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 133

⁸ Vine (2013), p. 43

⁹ Orsman (1999), p. 16–17

meat, as did Mawson's feet in the Kona Macphee poem considered in chapter three, and therefore is both embodied and corpse-like. This tension between the living and the dead is further explored by Orsman in 'The Ice Navigator', in which he describes how 'sails germinate / or die in polar waters',¹⁰ an alternating movement of expansion and contraction which also bears resemblance to the affective economy of the sublime, a feeling which, to recall Spufford, may open you up or close you down, dilate the soul or annihilate it. In the same poem, Orsman makes reference to 'the blue arteries of the Pack', and in doing so charges the polar waters with human vitality.

Once the *Terra Nova* party is on land, Orsman recounts the same image-making games among Scott's crew as those described by John Ross, quoted above. The men 'interpret the visible / surface of things' and 'read' in the glacial scenery 'lovers' profiles, the stoop // of a brother's shoulders, / Victoria's rump and coroneted bun'.¹¹ Orsman himself is employed in the same act of humanizing the inhuman landscape: the crew invasively 'prod into the sinuses of Antarctica',¹² one of the men is pictured 'with his ear to the continent / listening to the creak of its heart'.¹³ It is noticeable that in Orsman's account of his own visit to Antarctica the frequency and intensity of these symbolic embodiments increase – having seen the continent with his own eyes, there is a personal investment in this process of inscribing bodily significance onto the inorganic. Thus, his poem 'Primer of Ice and Stone' begins, '[w]hat language can we find / for the true desert?'¹⁴ before going on to describe stones bearing 'a spine / of snow'¹⁵ and the katabatic winds which can strip 'the igneous rock / into sinus or abdomen or shell'.¹⁶ In the poem 'Steps', he describes 'the white knuckle of the Taylor

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 21

¹¹ *ibid.*, 53–54

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 58

¹⁴ Orsman (2008), p. 27

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 28

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 29

Glacier’,¹⁷ evoking the combination of thrill, fear and force which is fundamental to the sublime, while also inscribing human form onto the natural landscape. His fellow Antarctic-visiting poet Bill Manhire chooses the more animalistic ‘glacier snout’ to describe the Taylor in his poem ‘Blood Falls’¹⁸ – the title being the name given to the reddish outpouring of iron oxide-tainted water at the glacier’s tip. Despite his use of the word ‘rusty’ to describe the outflow, emphasising the inorganic nature of the compound, ‘snout’ in combination with the title allows Manhire to conjure the image of a stupendously large animal with a nose-bleed. The effect of this association may not be to acknowledge the sublime scale of the glacier, however, but to diminish it: a ‘snout’ could be a harmless-sounding feature, a point of benign sensitivity. This then may be an example of the *taming* of the sublime, rather than the sublimation of matter – not for the purposes of imperial ‘ownership’, as in John Ross’s imaginary ice-animals, but as a means of establishing a relationship to the boundless environment via the inscription of small, recognizable, warm-blooded details.

Orsman’s fanciful vision of Queen Victoria’s ‘rump and coroneted bun’ in an iceberg (even with its element of reductive humour in presentation) is an apt prompt and reference point for the theme of gender and polar environments. The female-gendered personification of Arctic and Antarctic landscapes has been extensively commented on, with Duffy providing a succinct summary: accounts of polar exploration often represent ‘the attempt to conquer the landscapes of the sublime [...] remediated in the language of sexual conquest’.¹⁹ In *Survival*, Margaret Atwood chooses an extract from Gwendolyn MacEwen’s *Terror and Erebus* to illustrate the metaphorical presence of Nature-as-woman in Canadian literature, in this case the ‘giant virginal Strait of Victoria’,²⁰ as MacEwen describes it, scene of Franklin’s final attempt to find the Northwest Passage:

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 34

¹⁸ Manhire (2001), p. 262–263

¹⁹ Duffy (2013), p. 122

²⁰ MacEwen (1993), p. 105

But perhaps she might not yield,
She might not let you enter,
 but might grip
And hold you crushed forever in her stubborn
 loins,
 her horrible house,
Her white asylum in an ugly marriage.²¹

Later in the poem, the fruits of this annihilating union are represented in disastrous form: as they abandon the *Terror* and the *Erebus* to the ice, the crew's overland journey on foot begins as 'a kind of horrible birth, / a forced expulsion / From those two wombs'.²² The use of the word 'horrible' in both extracts links them together thematically, and serves to establish the compelling horrors of the textual sublime.

In arguing for the link between calving icebergs, the maternal body and the abject, Leane points to Shackleton's poem 'To the Great Barrier'²³ with its vision of a superlative and mysterious matriarch, but quotes only selected phrases from the following passage:

Mother of mighty icebergs, these Kings of the Southern Seas,
Mystery, yet unfathomed, though we've paid in full our fees,
Eyes strained by ceaseless watching, when the low grey fog doth screen
Your walls from our aching vision, and the great grim giants you wean
Away from your broad white bosom, where for aeons untold is laid
Each yearly tribute of fallen snows²⁴

Most noticeable here, when read in full, is not the abject but the traditional tropes of the sublime: the admiration of power and overwhelming scale, the Burkean obscurity of the fog which casts a veil over proceedings and establishes the uncanny air of mystery, the planetary sublime of the untold aeons of Antarctic history. With regard to the maternal polar body, it is significant that the men 'ache' to see the moment of birth and yet the

²¹ *ibid.* The quotation is worded slightly differently in *Survival* – 'And hold you crushed forever in her stubborn loins, / Join you finally to her horrible house, / Her white asylum in an ugly marriage' – though the source of the text used by Atwood is not clear. MacEwen's verse play was unpublished at the time of *Survival's* first publication in 1972. See Atwood (2004), p. 240

²² *ibid.*, p. 109

²³ Leane (2012), p. 59

²⁴ In: Mayer, Jim (2014). *Shackleton: A Life in Poetry*. Oxford: Signal Books, p. 36

vision is occluded, thus enabling the sublime idealization of the Mother to remain intact without any *genuine* object or bodily representation to challenge it. The Barrier is ultimately ‘league upon league of whiteness’ for Shackleton, which, despite the possibility of its hiding something other, suggests an impossible purity.

While Chris Orsman makes use of these feminine-polar tropes – his description of a map of Antarctica’s Dry Valleys includes the figurative ‘stretch-mark / of glaciers’²⁵ – his direct experience of the environment enables him to envision the polar body in non-feminine terms. He notices a ‘hogback of stone / cut like the plated spine / of stegosaurus’.²⁶ The proper geological term ‘hogback’ is here still readable as an animal projection, while the comparison to a Stegosaurus introduces an extreme temporality to invoke the planetary sublime. He sees ‘a lake in the granite hills’ as ‘the iris of God in its wide bed / of infinite gazing’,²⁷ and in doing so conveys a sense of sacred awe in the face of limitless divine power that would be familiar to eighteenth-century commentators on the aesthetics of the sublime. The continent is sentient, suggests Orsman, and yet the infinitude of its gaze is fixed and pitiless.

Katharine Coles, another poet writing from direct experience of Antarctic landscape, uses a variety of human and non-human images to convey the unlikely and unfamiliar sounds of a glacier:

Whale song, bird song, human,

Tea-kettle, trolley, typewriter. The glacier
Moans like any sotted lover,

Misplays pipes in its own parade;
It rumbles its stomach and chafes

Its legs together and clatters high
Heels across the pavement²⁸

²⁵ Orsman (2008), p. 41

²⁶ *ibid.*, p. 28

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 27

²⁸ Coles (2013), p. 68

This approach gives a much more accessible face to nature which, like Manhire's 'snout', has the effect of de-sublimating the landscape: although whale song may be said to be sublime, kettles and trolleys are not. The glacier is a conglomeration of harmless, small-scale objects. The feminine makes an appearance in the sound of high heels, though this is given no more prominence than the other elements. There is, perhaps, a hint of the polar body as an abject power with the ability to incorporate other life forms into itself, as proposed by Leane, in the glacier's rumbling stomach, though again this is not over-played in the poem's wider context.

Another method of de-sublimating the embodied landscape is to accentuate the abject. As noted above, representations of polar regions as being endlessly white ensures that they are subject to idealization. An undifferentiated expanse allows for imaginative leaps towards infinitude, and there is a sense in which contemporary poets are working against such absolutes by introducing the abject into the pristine landscapes of polar exploration. As was argued in chapter three, the abject may in itself be an occasion for the sublime insofar as it relates to the reader's enjoyment of physical suffering in literature; it may also, however, be the antidote to an overly Romantic vision of the poles, one used by contemporary poets to critique their own polar sublime of ice-chapels and small miracles.

The clean and dirty poles

Polar exploration is at once the cleanest and most isolated way of having a bad time which has been devised. It is the only form of adventure in which you put on your clothes at Michaelmas [29 September] and keep them on until Christmas, and, save for a layer of the natural grease of the body, find them as clean as though they were new.²⁹

Thus begins Apsley Cherry-Garrard's account of his journey to the South Pole on Scott's *Terra Nova* expedition, with the familiar elements of the polar sublime to the

²⁹ Cherry-Garrard (2005), xxi

fore: the sense of a landscape unnaturally or miraculously ‘clean’, and an awareness of the human body as quite different, with its ‘natural grease’ and abject effusions. As Bill Manhire summarizes, ‘[i]deas of purity, cleanliness and perfection come up repeatedly in writing about the Antarctic [...] nothing decomposes, not even the bodies of heroes’.³⁰ If we read this idealized representation in relation to Kristeva’s *corps propre*, or, as it is translated in *Powers of Horror*, ‘one’s own clean and proper body’,³¹ it is possible to view the polar environment as the very antithesis of the abject – a form of embodied landscape which has not ‘fallen’ into decay. As Leane points out, however, there is in literature an imaginative link between the poles and the abject: if the Earth is imagined as a body, and, according to maritime superstition, the extreme North and South are defined by their dangerous abysses and devouring whirlpools, then ‘the poles are mouth and anus, orifices that mark the border between the body’s inside and outside’.³² It is this tension between the clean and the abject which informs contemporary poets’ response to the landscape of polar exploration as they seek a modern alternative to the annihilating purities of the Romantic sublime. The result is the abjection of the clean and proper polar body, a process which humanizes those ‘inhuman’ landscapes and thus reduces their potential for sublime disturbance.

At the ‘clean’ end of the scale, Gwendolyn MacEwen describes what she sees as the absolute distinction between Arctic landscape and explorer-body in the context of Franklin’s mission in search of the Northwest Passage. After the loss of the ships, the men are expelled into ‘pure worlds of ice’, and, unfortunately for them, ‘[i]ce doesn’t eat, doesn’t get scurvy, / Doesn’t die’.³³ While the men become increasingly monstrous by virtue of their descent into cannibalism, the polar body is a clean, perfected monster that inspires awe and terror. The men are simply dead meat. In this formulation,

³⁰ Manhire (2004), p. 21

³¹ The rationale for the translation is given by Leon S. Roudiez in Kristeva (1982), viii

³² Leane (2012), p. 58

³³ MacEwen (1993), p. 113, 108

explorers are a pollutant within the polar environment, an abject infection of the natural sublime. The landscape is pure, the human body impure. Chris Orsman emphasizes this difference by describing the impact of walking into Scott's hut at Cape Evans:

the fugitive reek
of blubber, ponies, harness oil,
oats, disinfectant, socks
hung to dry, drift of old meals,
pungent cigar smoke,
the body odour of a book
shut tight for eight decades³⁴

The olfactory overload of human settlement lies in stark contrast to the scentless snow and ice. In the poem 'What the Camera Missed', Orsman proposes a 'scent [...] too fine for our nostrils'³⁵ may exist in the glacial fields of Antarctica: while evidence of the human body is gross, the polar body is fine, rarefied.

Another explorer-pollutant is alluded to by Orsman in the poem titled, appropriately, 'Purity', where he states: 'Officially / there was no self-abuse // on the expedition'.³⁶ It is a subject taken up in more fanciful terms by Elizabeth Bradfield in her poem 'Against Solitude'. Two male explorers are attempting to gain sexual satisfaction from each other by re-writing each other's body in feminine terms: 'Your hair has grown long / in our march, soft as my wife's. Keep your beard turned / towards the tent's silk, your fusty breath'.³⁷ The impure element here, though not mentioned, is semen – 'that most polluting of male substances'³⁸ according to William Ian Miller, and therefore, on the abject scale, the most disgusting. Miller also notes that 'semen has the extraordinary power conferred on it by patriarchy to feminize whatever it comes into contact with. [...] Whatever receives it is made woman'.³⁹ In light of this, if the polar

³⁴ Orsman (2008), p. 48

³⁵ *ibid.*, p. 40

³⁶ Orsman (1999), p. 63

³⁷ Bradfield (2010), p. 39

³⁸ Miller (1997), p. 103

³⁹ *ibid.*

regions are not explicitly represented as feminine-gendered, the very presence of all-male exploration teams brings with it the possibility of this feminizing pollutant. Poems of polar exploration are, in this sense, poems in which the polar environments have undergone a degree of abjection *whether or not* they are pictured as ‘clean’ and pure. These are narratives of taintedness, and the polar body is the locus of these imperfections. As with any abject body, its boundaries have been breached; it is no longer, to repeat Kristeva’s phrase, its ‘own clean and proper’ space, but has been infected by the all-too-human.

Elizabeth Bradfield considers the broader aspects of human impact as she describes a crew attempting to free their ice-bound ship:

they try and make a path across the ice
of its opposite: ash, soot, shit, dark feathers
pulled from birds skinned for meat,
to draw heat
anything

[...]

Each day: more soot
& shit & tea leaves hauled.⁴⁰

The polar environment’s ‘opposite’ is generated by virtue of human presence, thus establishing the binaries of purity and impurity – the former belonging to the white space, the latter belonging to the ship and its crew. The ship’s freedom – and thus the expedition’s heroic aim – depends on the waste of warm-blooded beings, whether shit or bird skins. Ideas of purity and impurity are also considered by Orsman, who follows a poem on the subject of Scott unloading his ship (‘we strive for great purity’⁴¹) with one about the novelty of the new encampment at Cape Evans: ‘The dogs’ prim faeces on the snow / were a source of much amusement [...] *bold italic* / in the script of paws

⁴⁰ Bradfield (2010), p. 57

⁴¹ Orsman (1999), p. 38

and pony hooves'.⁴² With 'prim' comes the suggestion of 'prim and proper', and thus the abject faeces bears symbolic traces of the 'clean and proper' in its new association with the snow. Orsman develops this theme in another poem, 'A Portrait in the Interior', in which he refers to 'prim-mouthed adventurers'⁴³ of old who (he imagines) would avert their eyes from the polar explorer and 'the faeces he shakes frozen from his trousers'.⁴⁴ The transformative aspect of the polar regions here works on the abject, removing both scent and texture; faeces lose their close association with the body, their warm origin, and instead becomes something akin to small change. In the act of shedding frozen lumps of themselves, the explorers become figurative icebergs.

Contemporary poets have gone beyond the human, however, by emphasizing those aspects of the polar regions which are themselves figuratively unclean even without the greasy pollutants of explorers. Orsman imagines 'the stink of guano, the litter of penguin feathers [...] the sink and mirror of Antarctica'.⁴⁵ The place not only mirrors back the abject nature of the explorer-body, but is itself a 'sink', a place of organic waste. In the interplay between penguins and predatory skuas, Bill Manhire represents the polar body as a Rabelaisian grotesque, a site of copulation, dismemberment, and birth:

Meantime another skua settles like a helicopter
among the penguins.
No, really, it says, I must insist.

It wants that patch of regurgitation
which the fledgling missed.
Actually, no,

it wants the fledgling.⁴⁶

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 39

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 82

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p. 82

⁴⁶ Manhire (2001), p. 276

Manhire's physical presence at the scene enables him to delay the grim revelation with genuine doubt or misunderstanding, the denouement all the more dramatic as a result. Disgusting (though natural) food makes an appearance in the adult penguin's regurgitated meal of semi-digested fish, while the chick itself is destined to become the skua's next meal. Manhire's casual tone, devoid of affect, mirrors the everyday banality of the scene. By contrast, Orsman takes a metaphorical and affective approach when describing a scene from his own Antarctic visit:

pillow lava from Cape Royds:
emblem
of black and white, rounded
like the buboes of plague
in the land's groin
or armpit⁴⁷

Faced with an environment which is absolutely sterile, Orsman compensates by introducing infection to the polar body; it is not magisterial and soul-stirring after all, but a powerless victim worthy of pity and disgust. To assign the word 'groin' or 'armpit' is to delineate, and thus to limit, the immeasurable landscape – to reduce its capacity to overwhelm. Elsewhere, Orsman suggests that 'at times / the cold is like leprosy, / contagious to the touch'.⁴⁸ It has the ability to break down the body's boundaries, and is thus an agent of the abject. In addition, he describes 'a scurf of ice on the strand' at Cape Evans,⁴⁹ the polar body shedding its skin. It is an image which transforms 'clean' ice into abject detritus, into dandruff.

As these examples show, contemporary poets are not content with representations of purity at the poles, but instead are more than willing to foreground the abject. This does not necessarily result in the textual sublime as discussed in chapter

⁴⁷ Orsman (2008), p. 29

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, p. 44

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, p. 47

three: in focusing on the natural environment and the animals within it, there is less opportunity for the reader's empathetic response. A wounded Mawson or a dead Scott may arouse fascinated horror as the reader identifies with the explorer-body; by comparison, a dead penguin is par for the course and doesn't demand any headlines. Instead, this abjection of the environment serves two purposes: to critique Heroic Age assumptions regarding 'purity of motive and behaviour',⁵⁰ as Manhire describes them, and to correct the more Romantic strains of the natural polar sublime in which the landscape is 'virginal' or heavily idealized. This correction, as we have seen, may result in the diminution of the landscape to an imperfect or infected human form, one that is far from clean. It may be argued that contemporary poets' awareness of ecological disasters such as oil spills has fed into their representations of explorers as pollutants within an environment that was hitherto immune to human impact, especially in the case of Antarctica, being a boundary-defined continent with no history of human habitation. The continent's *corps propre*, its secure and bounded self, may be seen to be compromised in representations of polar exploration there.

There is still an opportunity for the polar body to inspire the textual sublime, however, bearing in mind its capacity to devour explorers as noted by Leane – with danger to human life comes the reader's affective yes and no, the fascination with annihilation from a safe and comfortable distance. As discussed in chapter three, anxieties surrounding food and orality are at the heart of the textual sublime of the abject, and, as we can examine now, contemporary poets have paid particular attention to the devouring qualities of the polar landscapes embodied in their texts.

⁵⁰ Manhire (2004), p. 21

The devouring poles

In chapter three, the idea of the crew-body was proposed: a Rabelaisian composite of flesh and blood which, over the course of a polar mission, is nibbled away at by freezing temperatures and treacherous landscapes. It is worth returning to Bakhtin's concept of this grotesque body at this point in order to theorize the polar body as a monstrous, devouring entity with a hungry eye on those who traverse its surface. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin proposes:

[t]he distinctive character of [the grotesque] body is its open and unfinished nature, its interaction with the world. These traits are most fully and concretely revealed in the act of eating; the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart.⁵¹

This 'open and unfinished nature' is particularly apt for the ever-changing environments of the polar regions, dramatically melting and freezing, falling apart and re-forming, in continual states of flux.

Given that the polar body may include a surrounding ocean, the first hint of threat arrives before landfall is made. The possibility of being eaten alive is present in the oceanic sublime encountered on the journey, as Katharine Coles recognizes on her passage to Antarctica, addressing the seas thus: 'you are height // And depth and open mouth, and I am barely a morsel'.⁵² The traditional sublime qualities of height and depth are invoked, and the fear of annihilation registered, as the travellers are reduced to insignificant matter. As they reach the pack ice and begin navigating through it, Coles declares: 'the ship // Is tearing itself // Apart, isn't it, beam by steel beam; the ship is gnawing its own liver / And the sea is eating // Its heart out'.⁵³ Here, the crew's only means of safety, the ship, is felt to be engaged in a desperate act of self-devouring – an act which brings with it associations of extreme privation or starvation – while

⁵¹ Bakhtin (1984), p. 281

⁵² Coles (2013), p. 29

⁵³ *ibid.*

simultaneously being devoured itself. In addition, Coles imagines the sea *encouraging* her to observe this destruction ('Lean over / The rail, little one, lean a little farther'⁵⁴), a classic example of the sublime's fascinating horror when experienced from a position of relative safety. Similarly, Gwendolyn MacEwen describes the ice of the Canadian Arctic '[g]nashing its jaws'⁵⁵ on the unfortunate Franklin and his crew, and, thus trapped, 'they rot'.⁵⁶ Immobilization represents the beginning of deterioration at the extremes, and it is this close association between sublime dangers and the abject which signals the contemporary polar sublime.

Once on land, the danger only increases. Chris Orsman manages to convey the development of the polar body by describing the features on a map of Antarctica, in particular, 'the *terra rossa* / teething of mountain peaks'.⁵⁷ In this image, *terra rossa* or red earth is used to signify the polar body's gums erupting with stony teeth, and it is an image which manages to suggest the 'open and unfinished nature' of the grotesque body referred to above: Antarctica has been made young, a geological infant, and yet the reality is an entity of immense size – a conceptual dissonance which is appropriate in light of the polar body's kinship with Rabelaisian giants.

When it comes to Arctic exploration, a similar range of threats present themselves. Elizabeth Bradfield describes the fateful events of 1741 in which Vitus Bering and his crew were stranded on a previously undiscovered island off the eastern coast of Russia:

For weeks Bering's crew feasted
on the delicious bulk of sea cows (now extinct).

[...]

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁵⁵ MacEwen (1993), p. 104

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ Orsman (2008), p. 41. He likes the image so much that he repeats it in another poem in this same collection: 'the reddish teething of mountains', p. 28

Foxes bit the men's toes
at night. The land ate them as they ate the land,
calling it need, worrying about it later.⁵⁸

Here, an explicit point is made regarding the crew's exploitation of natural resources.

As all-consuming as the men are, however, the Arctic island responds in kind, and again the ambiguity between the devourer and the devoured is emphasized. In the struggle for survival, the crew are both the consumers and the consumed. Similarly, David Solway portrays the plight of Franklin's crew on their final mission as a struggle between the men and the land:

We eat what is in the tins.
Something eats into our bones,
eats, eats,
as rats gnaw at the corpses in the hold.
(Soon we will eat the rats.)
Ice surrounds and devours the ship.
Ice eats rock, wood, earth.
Ice eats men.
(Soon we will eat the ice.)⁵⁹

Solway is making reference to the theory, previously mentioned in relation to Sheenagh Pugh's poem on the exhumation of John Torrington, that the crew were suffering from lead poisoning due to the imperfect soldering on the Victorian tins of food. The men are being devoured from within, though they do not know it, in addition to being engaged in a mutual eating competition with the ice. This aspect of internality is significant: in chapter two, Christopher Stokes's analysis of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' was introduced, and in particular his idea that Coleridge 'shifts the terrors [of the sublime] from *outside* a perceiving subject, as they are in Burke [...] and relocates them *inside* the subject'.⁶⁰ The subject contains a horror which is read as a form of retribution for sin or hubris or error (the shooting of the albatross by the Mariner, or the imperial 'forcing'

⁵⁸ Bradfield (2010), p. 23

⁵⁹ Solway (2003), p. 26

⁶⁰ Stokes (2011), p. 86

of a passage through virgin territory) and it is this horror which in Solway's poem is being figured as a process of being devoured from within – a process which can also be conceptualized as self-devouring, as guilt.

Solway goes further by embodying the Arctic Canadian cold endured by Franklin's men as 'a creature rising from below the threshold / of human consciousness / or descending from above the spirit level',⁶¹ an image which recalls the verticality of the sublime in its height and depth, a depth which, in addition, is associated with the unconscious. His extended description of this 'creature' as 'palpable, relentless, bulletproof, famished'⁶² calls to mind that other monstrous yet sublime creature, Victor Frankenstein's creation, a being with 'superhuman speed [who] bounded over the crevices in the ice'⁶³ to seek its revenge. The monster is also a predator, with the ability to tear a man 'limb from limb, as the lion rends the antelope',⁶⁴ making the novel's polar framework, and Shelley's re-casting of Franklin's early exploration narratives, all the more apt.

The ice-crevice or crevasse, as observed in chapter two, may hold a positive significance within the framework of the contemporary polar sublime. As also observed, however, this does not preclude the more traditional, negative figure of the devouring gulf. In her poem 'In the Polar Regions', Elizabeth Bradfield begins by describing glaciers 'capping the hills / like false teeth'⁶⁵ before the imagined Heroic Age narrator goes on to imagine his 'weakened gums'⁶⁶ – a tell-tale sign of scurvy – and wobbling teeth. When five members of the party suddenly break through the surface ice into a crevasse, they find themselves connected to the surface by 'a thin rope':

⁶¹ Solway (2003), p. 29

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ Shelley (2008), p. 76

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 110

⁶⁵ Bradfield (2010), p. 4

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

Hanging,
there's nothing to do but stare at the blue contours of freeze
and tongue our loosening teeth, test the stringy roots
that hold them, waiting for a tug from the ones left above.⁶⁷

In this moment, the polar body reveals itself as a vast mouth: the crevasse is a decaying gum, and the explorers themselves the teeth within it, waiting to be extracted. The men are an aspect of the polar body, then, in its widest sense: a body which encompasses both natural landscape and invasive, human elements which are nevertheless becoming 'one' with the environment as it breaks down their clean and proper selves. Katharine Coles, in 'Here Be Monsters', declares: 'Fissure // Could swallow a body whole / Then close on itself, sucking / its tongue',⁶⁸ and makes the analogy between treacherous polar space and the 'voracious' imaginary creatures to be found at the edges of medieval maps, lying in wait for the unsuspecting voyager. There is a direct correlation between the increasing privation of hunger which is suffered by explorers and the increasingly ravenous environment they have trespassed upon. As noted in chapter two, the etymological link between 'gulf' and 'gullet' presents an opportunity to embody the crevasse-riddled polar regions as devouring entities, with heroic explorers a mere morsel on the menu.

In this analysis, then, it is possible to see both the composition and the animation of the polar body as interpreted by these authors. Bearing in mind the study of the polar dead in chapter three, which highlighted the corpses' slow journey from cryogenic suspension to natural decay in the ocean, we can recognize the outlines of a devouring, digesting, and excreting giant which bears some relation to the Rabelaisian grotesque but which is devoid of *jouissance* or comedy: the vulnerability of the human body is pitched in stark contrast to the sublime power of the environment. As we have also seen, however, the tendency to describe the environment in human or animal terms is a

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Coles (2013), p. 34

strategy whereby the imagination can establish a limit on the sublime scale and awful indifference of Arctic and Antarctic space. In delineating the environment as ‘groin’, ‘armpit’, ‘snout’, ‘tongue’, a grotesque form of animism takes the place of an unsatisfactory speechlessness or dumb horror. At the same time, a polar body represented as abject or infected is a true reflection of a contemporary sensibility, one which is cognisant of environmental change and decay, and which acknowledges the dark, destructive consequences to human endeavours around the globe. If we think again of Jen Hill’s statement, quoted in chapter three, that the explorer-body can be seen as ‘a prosthetic national body that stands in for the citizen/reader at home’,⁶⁹ and bear in mind the close relationship between the explorer-body and the polar body, the former subsumed or incorporated within the latter, it is possible to see this polar body likewise as a figurative prosthetic for the modern reader – one that retains traces of idealism and transcendence in its sublime aspect, but one which is also ‘us’ in its embodiment of the abject. Chris Orsman’s description of ‘icebergs corrupted / by their internal heat’⁷⁰ manages to capture the immaculate decay of the polar regions; places which are losing their sublime infinitudes to an increasing sense of temporality, and, thus, of their vulnerability.

It was the fate of many a crew member to be incorporated into a polar body they imagined was merely a surface to be traversed or mapped, and their various adventures and accidents have provided contemporary poets with a rare opportunity to engage with epic narratives of a real, non-mythical, flesh-and-blood sort. As this thesis has shown, these poets’ choice of polar subject matter reconnects them to what may be considered the traditional poetic sublimines of Milton and the Romantics, while their postmodern inheritance produces a contemporary sublime that is inter-cut with the ridiculous, in the

⁶⁹ Hill (2008), p. 43

⁷⁰ Orsman (1999), p. 46

form of the mock-heroic, and with the disgusting in its repulsive or comical aspect. In the poems under consideration, the explorers' bodies – and by extension, the food they consume – receive significant attention: it is this downfall into the realms of the abject which generates a textual sublime for the fascinated yet horrified reader. This sublime has been formulated here by modifying and expanding upon Kristeva's original conception of the abject-sublime nexus, and by employing the concept of the abject to identify the textual pleasures of epic, yet very human, disasters. The fragility and fallibility of the male hero is everywhere in evidence in these poems.

This fragility also extends to the polar landscape itself. As shown, the poets under discussion are bringing a planetary, global awareness to their work – one which figures the polar landscapes as bodies. The Coleridgean sublimity of the Antarctic relied upon its power to destroy human life, a power that sits at the heart of Burke's taxonomy of the sublime: this economy of power has been reversed, with human agency capable of destroying those environments. As demonstrated, contemporary poets remain fascinated by the apparent timelessness of the polar regions, but are equally drawn to their impurities, their injuries, and their decay. The question of time is one which, for these poets, is often suffused with anxiety. These lyrical reinterpretations of time past do not provide answers. Traversing the Great Alone, only questions of indeterminacy remain, questions relating to the spirit and the flesh, excess and deprivation, to be repeated *ad infinitum*: *Is it happening now? Are we rising or falling?*

Chapter 5 Reflective commentary on the creative work

The critical part of this thesis attests to the number of contemporary poems with polar exploration as their subject. The grand narratives of the Victorian and early twentieth-century explorers have provided poets with ample resources with which to partake in the intertextual exchange of detail and drama. The challenge for me as a writer, in approaching the creative part of this PhD, was how to find my own space within this busy field. For example, Melinda Mueller's compelling book-length account of Shackleton's *Endurance* mission covers all aspects of that dramatic narrative and is informed by impeccable research into primary sources; another poem on the subject of Mawson's disintegrating feet would look, in light of poems by Sarah Lindsay, Bill Manhire and Kona Macphee, rather unoriginal. Via direct contact with these three poets, I was able to establish that none of them were aware of each other's Mawson poems at the time they wrote their own – they happened upon the same subject by accident or synchronicity.¹ I did not have this luxury of unknowing. Likewise, I did not want to write dutiful, programmatic, polar-themed poems which contained none of that essential quality of the sublime: *drama*. My solution was to re-tell an epic exploration narrative that was only tangentially concerned with the polar regions, but which nevertheless conformed to the Romantic quest model that Spufford suggests is at the heart of polar exploration texts.² In this way I was able to incorporate elements of the otherworldly sublime and the miserably abject which are part and parcel of a perilous sea voyage in search of some fabled, idealized end.

The decision to make the voyage of Saint Brendan the main element of my creative writing project has its roots in the past: during my undergraduate studies at the University of Edinburgh in the early 1980s I purchased an album by the Irish composer

¹ Email correspondence with Sarah Lindsay, Bill Manhire and Kona Macphee, 2013

² Spufford (1996), p. 79–93

Shaun Davey, an orchestral suite on the theme of Brendan's legendary sea journey as reconstructed by explorer Tim Severin in 1976–77. This album, *The Brendan Voyage* (Tara, 1980), features Liam O'Flynn on uilleann pipes, with the pipes representing Brendan's boat, and the musical episodes follow Severin's voyage to the high northern latitudes: the Faroes, Iceland, Labrador, and Newfoundland. While researching the subject of polar exploration for this PhD, the figure of Brendan reappeared in Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams*. As Lopez writes of the tale's first incarnation, the eighth-century *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*:

Reading loosely, it is possible to imagine that Brendan reached the Faroes and Iceland, and perhaps saw the towering volcanic peak of Beerenburg on the eastern end of Jan Mayen Island. At one point the monks saw an iceberg that took three days of hard rowing to reach. Transfixed by its beauty, Brendan suggested they row through a hole in it, which in the evening light seemed 'like the eye of God'.³

The image of an 'iceberg' is a modern interpretation – the primary Brendan texts refer only to an encounter with a 'crystal pillar' in the ocean.⁴ As mentioned in the Introduction, however, contemporary poets such as Pauline Stainer and Bernadette Hall also place Brendan within sight of an iceberg and imagine him sailing in Arctic waters. Due to my research into the sublime, I recognized that Lopez's paragraph contains the familiar elements of that aesthetic: the 'towering volcanic peak', which in the *Navigatio* is transformed into a gateway to Hell; the feeling of transport inspired by huge icebergs, one of the recurring features of the polar sublime from Coleridge to the present day; the embodiment of the divine in Nature which fills the observer with sacred awe. Brendan's voyage, with its mixture of perils and wonders, with its small crew of monks on the high seas in search of an ultimate goal – the Isle of the Blessed, or an earthly Paradise –

³ Lopez (1986), p. 316

⁴ For the episode in the *Navigatio*, see: Barron, W.R.J. and Burgess, Glyn S., eds. (2005). *The Voyage of Brendan: Representative Versions of the Legend in English Translation*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, p. 53–54

is a narrative with many parallels to the idealistic ambitions of Amundsen, Scott, Shackleton et al, and their adventures through *terra incognita*. Both Scott and Shackleton were of a generation that could still invoke Providence during the course of their dangerous journeys, so an element of Christian faith also links these explorers, ancient and modern.

The existence of multiple versions of the Brendan voyage, in different languages and different forms, opened up the possibility of creating a contemporary version of my own. For translations of primary texts, I referred to *The Voyage of Brendan: Representative Versions of the Legend in English Translation*, edited by W.R.J. Barron and Glyn S. Burgess,⁵ and the version I chose as the basis for my own was the Middle Dutch poem *De reis van Sint Brandaan*, originally composed in rhyming couplets circa 1400, and translated into prose by Willem P. Gerritsen and Peter K. King. As medieval authors had created their own Brendan episodes, reflecting their own time and culture while retaining the original spirit of the Latin ur-text, so I could re-play the narrative with my own additions without losing the sense of direct connectivity to Brendan voyages past. This approach, of honouring a source narrative while creating an original and lyrical expression of that narrative, is present in the poems of polar exploration that I consider in the theoretical part of this PhD, and this forms a connection between the critical and the creative work. Contemporary poets have re-made the narratives of Scott and Shackleton, selecting which elements of the action to frame as lyrical episodes, omitting others, and interpreting the action in a way that suits their creative temperaments and styles.

With regard to form, the rhyming couplets of the Middle Dutch and Anglo-Norman versions suggested a strict approach would be appropriate, but this courtly style was lacking, to my mind, the necessary energy and variety of an exploration narrative

⁵ *ibid.*

full of miraculous happenings. It was the publication of *The Finest Music: Early Irish Lyrics* in 2014⁶ which provided a better solution to the question of form. In this anthology are included poems of travel to the Otherworld from the Irish *immram* tradition, a tradition to which the Brendan legend belongs. For example, in Ciaran Carson's translation 'Loeg's Description of Mag Mell' – a earthly paradise imagined to the west of Ireland – he describes:

at the east door three trees stand
with foliage of purple glass
from which perpetual birds sing out
to all the royal youths that pass

at the gateway to the fortress
is a most praiseworthy tree
illuminated by the sun
in branches of gold filigree⁷

The rhyme scheme ABCB is used extensively in the anthology, suggesting an appropriate match for Brendan-related lyrics, and this unpunctuated form of Carson's introduces the additional challenge of keeping phrases relatively short while maintaining a feeling of forward momentum in a dramatic narrative setting. Other translators use fewer stresses per line, for example twos and threes in Kathleen Jamie's 'Manchan's Wish': 'The beautiful greenwood / cloistering every side, / where many-voiced songbirds / might flit and hide'.⁸ The three-stress lines of W.S. Graham, for example in 'Seven Letters',⁹ were also in my mind as I considered form, not least because I have never used three-stress lines before in my work and there was an opportunity here to do so. All these considerations resulted in the first successful Brendan voyage poem to be written for this collection, 'The Great Fish', in two- and three-stress lines: 'They ride on calm seas / rowing out west / Brendan's heart thumps /

⁶ Riordan, Maurice, ed. (2014). *The Finest Music: Early Irish Lyrics*. London: Faber and Faber

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 82

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 22

⁹ Graham (2004), p. 121–140

an apple harvest'. Three-stress lines are used throughout (with occasional exceptions) in 'The Coagulated Sea': 'The *Cog* spins northwards / bucked by rough seas / her sails fully strained / like hounds on short leash'.

Having settled on a form suitable to an early Irish adventure, the issue remained concerning the need for variety if the sequence was to continue through twenty or more episodes. These unpunctuated, short-lined lyrics were written in the present tense to give a more immediate sense of dramatic action, and in the third person. For contrast, I decided to alternate between this form and longer-lined poems in the first person past tense, to represent a crew member's eye-witness account of the voyage – an acknowledgment of the importance of journal-writing in polar exploration narratives. The rhyming couplet form of the Middle Dutch and Anglo-Norman Brendan felt more appropriate in these poems' loose pentameter lines.

Given the importance of ship's names in exploration narratives and naval history – the *Terror*, the *Erebus*, the *Discovery*, the *Terra Nova*, the *Endurance* and the *Fram* are all central characters in their respective missions – the lack of a name for Brendan's famous wooden-framed, leather-bound curragh was something I wanted to address. A solution was found in the fourteenth-century Venetian version of the legend, as included in Barron and Burgess, which includes the following description of the building of the boat: 'They made it very strong and all of wood, according to the way in which they built boats in that country; and [Brendan] called it a cog'.¹⁰ The notes clarify as follows: 'Venetian *coca*, followed by the Tuscan text (*cocca*) [...] The *coca* or *cocha* ('cog') was a type of merchant ship which was widely used by the Venetians from the thirteenth century onwards'.¹¹ The similarity between Venetian *cocha* and Irish *curragh* was striking, and Brendan's boat was thus christened the *Cog* for my own version of the legend.

¹⁰ Barron and Burgess (2005), p. 168

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 350

Having stressed the significance of orality in relation to the abject in chapter three of the critical thesis, and emphasized the concept of the ‘devouring poles’ in chapter four, I wanted to emphasize this aspect of the early Brendan texts in my own poems. Like any exploration crew, the monks suffer the privation of hunger: rations are limited and opportunities to re-stock are scarce. Their repeated encounters with hermits and ascetics reinforce the idea that food is both limited and precious, and provided, if at all, by miraculous means. In addition, the monks themselves are in danger of being devoured, as in this quotation from the Dutch version: ‘An enormous sea monster came swimming towards them with its jaws, fathoms wide, open as if it was going to swallow their ship’.¹² For example, in my poem ‘The Coagulated Sea’, set in the ice-bound seas of the high north, the crew observe: ‘To and fro swaying / a multitude of masts / their hulls long crushed / by glittering mouthparts’. The fate of Shackleton’s *Endurance* is reflected in these lines. In addition, I have invoked hunger in its metaphorical or existential aspect in the poem ‘The Mermaid’: ‘The crew were both famished and well-fed / as they listened to her gurgling on the sea bed’.

Having travelled on a three-mast barquentine – the *Antigua* – around Svalbard with twenty-eight international artists in the summer of 2015, I was able to bring that experience to bear on the poem ‘The Coagulated Sea’. During a dinghy trip towards the glacier face of Lilliehöökbrean on the 19th of June 2015, the noise of the slowly melting ice fragments in the water made a particularly strong impression, and this is recalled in the following stanzas:

The *Cog* stops rocking
and lies quite still
the sound of snapping twigs
the work of some devil

¹² *ibid.*, p. 128



Figure 3

Lilliehöökbrean, Svalbard, 79° 19' N, 11° 36' E

Photo by the author, 19 June 2015

Clicks or a 'tick-tock'
the small voice of ice
coagulating waters
moving at snail's pace

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, polar travel narratives are notable for their intertextuality, with writers responding to other writers rather than to the environment directly: for example, Chris Orsman's *South* was first published in 1996, prior to Orsman's visit to Antarctica in 1998, with the poems relying on historical text and film for their content. Similarly, the Antarctic-themed poems in Wynne-Rhydderch's *Banjo* are based on Cherry-Garrard's text and research at the Scott Polar Institute in Cambridge. Having reached 80° north, I wanted to record as faithfully as possible what it felt like to be present in that moment at the glacier face – a moment which was utterly and genuinely sublime.

In 'The Cliff-top Monastery', I wanted to give a lyrical expression to the sublime in its temporal aspect, as formulated by Lyotard and as discussed in thesis chapter two, i.e. a moment of disruption or suspension on the temporal scale, and this too was informed by my trip to Svalbard and the Lilliehöökreen experience. Thus, in the aftermath of Brendan's experience of the ice-bound north: 'No one spoke. In each brother's heart, / time ticked, and stopped, and fell apart'. It was notable, during my own trip, that our collective response to the glacier face was not excitable or vocal, but one of complete silence. If we spoke at all, we *whispered*, an instinct which is difficult to rationalize. It may have been a reflection of the overwhelming impact of the sublime. The environment denied us appropriate language, or mode of communication. It was an experience which *wasn't* communicated, among ourselves, either during or after the event – it was a communal yet private moment in which we were all suspended, temporarily. It was quite extraordinary, and very moving.

I attempt to convey a similar feeling at the beginning of the poem 'The World Below': 'They come to a thin place / the wind absent / the water no substance / the hour no present'. My source text, the Middle Dutch version of Brendan, states: 'After a short time they came to a place where the water seemed to be of such a thin substance that they could clearly hear sounds coming up from the depths'.¹³ This sentence resonates with my critical discussion on the Wordsworthian sublime in chapter two: there is a disruption of the surface by an under-presence. In addition, there is an intertextual connection with Chris Orsman's sublime vision in his poem 'A Lyrical Incident', in which the *Terra Nova* enters a 'silent corridor' of 'breathing quiet',¹⁴ also highlighted in chapter two. Lastly, I allude to 'thin places', those liminal zones in which the otherworldly may become manifest, another element of chapter two's formulation of the polar sublime. My intention in 'The World Below' is to establish the *Cog* and crew in a state of suspension, one which allows for the influx of sublime wonders and inversions. My concept of the 'positive abyss' is also relevant here: the underworld in this episode is busy, teeming with life, civilized, and yet still retains those elements of uncertainty and threat which are typical of the unconscious, figuratively represented: the *Cog*'s anchor is held fast, the implication being that something 'below' is exerting a less than benevolent force.

The vast size of the living whale-island in 'The Great Fish' is representative of the wonders and terrors of the Burkean sublime, but again I was able to draw on direct experience: during the June 2015 sailing trip to Svalbard we witnessed fin whales and blue whales in the calm waters of Kongsfjorden, the blue whales surfacing so close to our ship that the captain hoped to be able to identify them as known or named individuals from our photographs. The image of the ocean as 'a pot / on furious boil' is one that I used initially in the series 'A Bestiary of Bones', in the 'L is for Leviathan'

¹³ Barron and Burgess (2005), p. 129

¹⁴ Orsman (1999), p. 29

poem: 'The ocean's pot begins to boil'. The devouring aspect of the gargantuan Rabelaisian body is alluded to here: danger to the crew of the *Cog* is expressed in cooking terms. The monks may be at risk of becoming a meal if the sea creature turns out to be malevolent.

There were many opportunities to introduce the abject into my Brendan poems: the crew vomiting in 'The Coagulated Sea', the corpse-like stink of brother Seamus in 'Devils' Mountain', the hot and cold suffering of the flesh in 'Judas'. I also had in mind Kristeva's definition of the abject as the 'in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'¹⁵ when it came to describing the fallen angels in 'The Walserands', with their 'long necks, like cranes, but their heads boar-heads; / wolves' teeth, human torsos, galloping dogs' legs'. Overall, my aim was to create a narrative which contained those recognizable elements of the sublime and the abject which are to be found in the contemporary poets discussed in the critical thesis, and to pay homage to polar exploration narratives with their high dangers and otherworldly marvels.

Cian Duffy's remarks in chapter three of *The Landscapes of the Sublime 1700–1850*, where he notes 'the curious mixture of the esoteric and the empirical which marks so much of eighteenth-century speculation about the Arctic sublime',¹⁶ are relevant not only to the Brendan poems but also to the poems I wrote to accompany an exhibition of drawings by the Sheffield-based artist Paul Evans.¹⁷ Paul's drawings depict an A–Z 'bestiary of bones' featuring the skeletons of mythical creatures such as the cyclops, the faun, the mermaid, the ouroboros, etc., and are thus empirical-fictional composites. As such, Kristeva's definition of the abject as 'ambiguous' and 'composite' is again represented in some of these poems. The Bunyip is a '[f]eathered croc with emu snout';

¹⁵ Kristeva (1982), p. 4

¹⁶ Duffy (2013), p. 126

¹⁷ The drawings in question are available to view on Paul Evan's blog *Osteography: art and bioarcheology*, at <https://osteography.wordpress.com>, last accessed 18 August 2015

the North American Piasa has a panther's body, a human face, and antlers; the German forest creature the Wolpertinger is defined by its very excess of mixed body parts, being variously described as a '[b]oar's-head weasel, duck-foot mouse, / dove-winged rabbit, sabre-tooth vole'.

These poems are also informed by my reading of Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*. On the one hand, empirical-sounding data is given in a clipped summary form, a form which avoids the narrative breadth and wider context of traditional myth or legend, resembling dictionary entries or traveller's journal notes. The poems are thus 'skeletal', in a sense: fragments of core meaning which may be fleshed-out in the reader's imagination, interpreted differently depending on how they are reconstructed – not singular entities but mixed messages.

When it came to writing on the subject of historical polar exploration, the story of Scott's Northern Party, as they became known, provided a good basis for expressing the abject: the six men, Campbell, Levick, Priestley, Abbot, Browning and Dickason, were forced to live in an ice cave for six months, and their deteriorating condition is described at length in Meredith Hooper's book *The Longest Winter: Scott's Other Heroes*.¹⁸ The research process began by re-reading chapters fifteen to eighteen (p. 225–279) which detailed the six-month stay in the ice cave, and gathering pertinent details which would convey the abject nature of the experience. The opening line of the resulting poem, 'Inexpressible Island', states that the cave 'stank', establishing the presence of the abject and the associated affective response of disgust. Textually, this stink is both a repellent and an attractor, as the textual abject often is: it is a hook to encourage the reader to continue with the narrative and to learn the cause of this dereliction. William Ian Miller suggests that 'stink', above all other words dedicated to

¹⁸ Hooper (2010).

the disgusting sensations, has a unique power, making its public usage ‘somewhat improper’.¹⁹ The reference to the men’s desire for ‘soup without reindeer hair in it’ is an invocation of Mary Douglas’s idea, mentioned in the critical work, that ‘dirt [is] matter out of place’²⁰ – reindeer hair is ‘clean and proper’, to use Kristeva’s phrase, when it is on a reindeer; in a bowl of soup it becomes a disgusting pollutant. This reference also owes a debt to Bill Manhire’s poem ‘Hoosh’, as studied in the critical work, with its ‘hairy stew’.

Due to the source material of Hooper’s text I was able to include the word ‘smitch’, as used by crew member Browning to describe the smoky, sooty air, and which Hooper suggests is ‘a Dorset word’.²¹ Further research confirmed the word’s presence in Scots, meaning a stain, smudge, or blemish, with quotations in the *Dictionary of the Scots Language* emphasizing its binary relationship to ‘clean’ or ‘fair’, e.g. ‘It’s quite clean, there’s no even a smitch on’t’.²² This made the word particularly apt in this context. The abject nature of the suffering human body is represented in the poem by ‘piss [...] [p]iles, / anal bleeding’, details again taken from Hooper’s text. The one moment which relates to the sublime is the hallucination in which penguins are mistaken for men, a perceptual transformation whose bathetic deflation turns the sublime into the ridiculous, and the heroism of rescue into the grimly comic.

The poem ‘The Amber Snail’ relies on the empirical for its narrative structure: the life-cycle of the parasite defines the sequential order of events, and the poem needed to be accurate in its details in order to faithfully represent a natural reality. The human response to such a life-cycle is one of disgust, however, and my intention was to represent the disgusting aspects to an exaggerated degree in order to achieve the attractive-repulsive effect of the textual sublime. Thus, the parasite’s eggs are expelled

¹⁹ Miller (1997), p. 78

²⁰ Douglas (1995), p. 36

²¹ Hooper (2010), p. 235

²² See: <http://www.dsl.ac.uk/entry/snd/smitch>, last accessed 18 August 2015

in bird faeces, faeces which the snail in turn will ingest. The transformation of the larval worm into an entity that ‘simmers, pops [and] spills’ a teeming multitude of worming offspring provided an opportunity to suggest a cooking process, and thus to invoke the most archaic form of abjection, according to Kristeva: food loathing. In addition, I had in mind William Ian Miller’s comments on the significance of the multitudinous in *The Anatomy of Disgust*, where he suggests that the ‘gooey mud, the scummy pond are life soup, fecundity itself: slimy, slippery, wriggling, teeming animal life generating spontaneously’.²³ It is this rank ‘excessiveness’ or surfeit which, according to Miller, provokes disgust. After a surfeit of the disgusting, the poem ends on a transcendental note with the invocation of Paradise, the abject sublimated onto a ‘higher’ level of perfected Nature – the same ideas explored in Robert Frost’s poem ‘Design’, to which this poem is indebted. Frost’s vision of a spider and a moth as ingredients of a ‘witch’s broth’²⁴ perfectly captures Miller’s idea of disgusting life-soup and Kristeva’s abject composites, while his narrator is ‘appalled’ by what appears to be the malevolent design of a Demiurge instead of the Deity.

In ‘The Find’ I focus on a suitably Arctic story concerning the discovery of a baby mammoth carcass in the Siberian permafrost in 2007. Drawing upon an article and accompanying photographs in *National Geographic* magazine, May 2009, the poem centres on the autopsy of the miraculously preserved body and as such relates to the study of the polar dead in chapter three. The mammoth has been transformed into a frozen rock-like object, thus raising it to the level of a sublime object worthy of awe. At the same time, its gradual thaw signifies a descent towards the abject with its queer smells and decomposing flesh. I have attempted to convey the same mix of empiricism and mystery referred to above in relation to the A–Z bestiary of bones poems: the

²³ Miller (1997), p. 41

²⁴ Frost, Robert (2001). *The Poetry of Robert Frost*. Edward Connery Lathem, ed. London: Vintage, p. 302

'knock knock' upon the frozen body in the first stanza is there to suggest a follow-up response of 'who's there?' This question – a question regarding material content *and* scientific or cultural significance – is then evoked in the multiple variations of the creature's name: the Latin *Mammuthus*, the Siberian *mamont*, a creature that 'wanders the frozen blackness of the underworld, herded by infernal gods'²⁵ according to the Nenets reindeer herders, and the Anglicized *Mammoth*. To end the poem, in keeping with the intertextuality of polar exploration histories and the significance of explorers' journals, I emphasize the body-as-text aspect of the corpse, a body from which a narrative may be reconstructed.

Overall, I feel I have produced an engaging piece of work in the Brendan voyage poems, one which encompasses the varieties of the textual sublime as would have been recognized by Longinus, Addison, or Burke. My hope is that they will add to the stock of Brendan scholarship while also providing a readable and entertaining version of the legend for those who are unfamiliar with it. In creating a series of poems with a dramatic narrative thread – an approach inspired by contemporary poets' re-telling of those perilous journeys of Franklin, Scott and Shackleton – I have achieved something new in my own work which I would otherwise not have attempted.

²⁵ *National Geographic*, 215 (5) May 2009, p. 36

Contents

I The Brendan Voyage

Brendan	149
The Burning of the Book	150
The Boat	151
The Crew	152
The Great Fish	153
The Paradise of Birds	155
The Mermaid	157
The Coagulated Sea	158
The Cliff-top Monastery	160
The Recluse	161
The Hellmouth	162
The Stolen Bridle	164
Devils' Mountain	165
The Vision of Heaven	167
The Turf Rider	168
Judas	170
The Burning Birds	171
Multum Bona Terra	172
The Walserands	174
The Sea Leaf	175
The Sea Serpent	177
The World Below	178
The New Book	180
Home	181

II A Bestiary of Bones

183

III Survivors

Inexpressible Island	192
Three Messerschmidt Heads	193
The Amber Snail	196
The Find	198

Brendan

Son of Munster, holy abbot, mother hen
to three thousand monks, good Christian men.
Abstemious, jug-eared, pious, he cries
easily and loves Brimstone butterflies.

The Burning of the Book

Books were Brendan's love, and one especially: the book of world-wonders.

He read of villages in flames, dragon-strafted, the very pots and pans treaced by heat; the Cynocephali, dog-headed folks who slobber and pluck the banjolele; Inexpressible Isle, where natives cannot speak but cough up moths; the inner Antarctic tribe, with their ice-hickle cities on wheels, their Heart's-Grief-Court; the great whale Jasconius, whose back bristles with oak forests.

And Brendan grew sick of such miraculous excess, the overwhelming surfeit, these mind-whelps a mockery of abstinence, of true monk's life with its bell ropes and belly chimes. The abbot wailed, and burned his greasy book.

The Boat

The abbot's dream was short. An angel spoke:
'Brendan, the wondrous contents of that book,
the one you burned, were true. Hear my curse:
you'll sail abroad, and prove these works on earth.'

On waking, flesh and spirit were engaged.
'Brothers, build me a curragh! Make haste!
Fifty hides were bathed in oak-bark liquor,
twelve long months, currying the leather,

and waterproofed with hot wool grease.
Carpenters raised a body, piece by piece:
gunwhales of oak, the rest of bone-white ash,
thwarts and ribs and oars, the single mast.

The frame was lashed with leather string,
the ox-hide sewn, tacked on, a durable skin.
Brendan cried, 'No miracle of God
outshines this boat! I name her now: the *Cog*.'

The Crew

Brother Robert	Helmsman, star-sensible, hawkeyed, singer of tuneless hums and anthems; the clickety-clack of his clay pipe on tombstone teeth; sleep-grumbler.
Brother Tom	Carpenter, Scot, strawberry blonde with curls tight as wood shavings; doom sayer; sullen adze master; custodian of the Infallible Bubble.
Brother Michael	Cook, from Cork; a burly bigfoot, purveyor of toothsome kickshaws, porkish pies, apocalyptic broths; bean counter, flute player.
Brother Seamus	Young lad, gardener, Limerick born; a skinnymalinky in hessian apron; airy sort, compulsive whistler; true muck's ambassador.
Brother Noah	Scribe, quill seeker, inveterate vellum tattooist; on this voyage a wave stenographer, dogfish diarist; oldfeller, now at fifty winters.

The Great Fish

They ride on calm seas
 rowing out west
Brendan's heart thumps
 an apple harvest

Brother Michael on flute
 unfurls two jigs
The Humours of Trim
 St Patrick's Pigs

The low-humped island
 Brendan spies first
three miles long
 furred with a forest

The *Cog* lies at anchor
 men trip ashore
their hunger a wolfhound
 scenting boar

Branches are hung
 with cooking kettles
hollow fruit
 the wind rattles

Brother Colm swings an axe
 and bleeds a trunk
the ground rears up
 a wounded hulk

The ground falls away
 as though in faint
monks in high terror
 stagger aslant

They spill to the *Cog*
 lift anchor and sail
the ocean a pot
 on furious boil

The island veers off
 north-northeast
Brendan full knows
 this living beast

A tree-topped fish
 gargantuan size
the flesh and bulk
 of Paradise

The Paradise of Birds

In short time
 an island appears
grassy and flower-capped
 youthful in years

The *Cog* brushes land
 and along a stream-bed
she is drawn by ropes
 the source ahead

Over the spring
 an extraordinary tree
its crown lost in cloud
 its shadow uncanny

And haunting that tree
 a thousand white birds
the branches obscured
 a plumage of pearls

One bird flies down
 to the *Cog*'s prow
a sweet hand-bell
 her wings' sound

If you are God's messenger
 Brendan weeps
then who are these birds
 enthroned at peace

The bird replies
 We are those angels
who tumbled with Satan
 from God's cradle

*We travel airwaves
without form
bird-bodies given us
only to praise Him*

*Brendan you will suffer
upwards and downwards
the sea brings judgement
mark these words*

At the hour of vespers
every birds sings
their throats in a thrill
and beating wings

The crew replies
with holy chants
both man and bird
by song entranced

Both man and bird
perfected there
by flesh or feather
faith or air

The Mermaid

Of note: at noon we spied a sea creature,
advancing on the *Cog* as if to capsize her;
the crew, in fear, transformed into gulls,
their irksome cries most harsh and pitiful.

Half woman it was, half fish, the body hirsute,
circling our boat repeatedly and mute.
With sunlight flashing off waves, our vision
failed to make fast; all was confusion.

Brendan shouted, 'Brothers, do not tremble;
you, stop gnawing that wooden spoon handle.
The *Cog* sails by fair winds and Providence.
Calm now, brothers, and quit this nonsense.'

At these words, the mermaid – as she was –
dove down deep, leaving nought but froth.
The crew were both famished and well-fed
as they listened to her gurgling on the sea bed.

The Coagulated Sea

The *Cog* spins northwards
 bucked by rough seas
her sails fully strained
 like hounds on short leash

Six unlucky brothers
 cough up their breakfast
their garments bibs
 indecorously splashed

The storm's holy force
 the waves' war zone
the crew turn ashen
 flesh weak on the bone

As winds fall a notch
 their spirits grow level
until a wraith of mist
 swallows their vessel

Brother to each brother
 looks insubstantial
a crew made of gauze
 a composite fog-animal

The *Cog* stops rocking
 and lies quite still
the sound of snapping twigs
 the work of some devil

Clicks or a 'tick-tock'
 the small voice of ice
coagulating waters
 moving at snail's pace

Brothers gaze in wonder
 ice plates or pancakes
or lightning-hewn ice boulders
 each with its own face

Mottled as mirror-glass
 or bubble-transparent
slabs of azure blue
 a jewelled firmament

The *Cog* now encased
 it is Brendan who sees
a thin host ahead
 like spears or trees

To and fro swaying
 a multitude of masts
their hulls long crushed
 by glittering mouthparts

Dig, brothers, dig!
 with oars and kitchen knives
the crew hack and hammer
 their second skin of ice

They lever the boat loose
 like a tooth from a gum
Eastwards! turn east!
 cries trembling Brendan

The Cliff-top Monastery

A fair wind rose; we drove eastward,
our minds crystallised by that ice world.
No one spoke. In each brother's heart,
time ticked, and stopped, and fell apart.

By morning we saw the cliff, iron ore red,
the monastery perched on top, gold-gilded.
Anchored, we hiked up: seven monks
welcomed us warmly, cooing like turtle doves.

Their food, they said, arrived by raven:
three loaves and one fish their daily ration,
the bird so bountiful they never hungered.
Awed, we danced a belly dance for God.

That night we observed their one ritual:
seven stones in a fruit picker's pail,
bird-skin robes. At dawn, we made haste
with tears of joy dismantling each face.

The Recluse

A westerly wind; the *Cog* sailed further east,
the crew barnyard-pungent but at peace.

A solitary white rock we saw, and on its top
a solitary man, hairy as a bear. We drew up.

Brendan shouted, 'Brother, what life is this?'

The man's reply: 'I perch. A steady business,
these hundred years my love, and my vocation.'

We chewed these words over and sailed on.

The Hellmouth

The brothers battle on
 through punishing headwinds
Providence a loose thread
 their minds bobbins

Exhausted they fall foul
 of powerful currents
the *Cog* but a plaything
 the ocean torments

Brendan looks in horror
 the coastline visible
volcanic fire and black smoke
 and human fuel

Poor souls in that fire
 writhe and gurn
hurled high and skyward
 by detonation

A sinuous molten rain
 one official in charge
Brendan cries out
 Who have they harmed?

The official calls back
 These false magistrates
corrupt leaders and extortioners
 on sizzling plates

These parasites made profit
 from poor citizens
a war of acceptable losses
 and win-wins

A vile stench envelops
the *Cog* and her crew
packed theatres of fire
fade from view

Pitch darkness descends
the brothers see below
a sea bed burning
with purest gold

The Stolen Bridle

Darkness fled; the brothers blinked, dumbstruck:
a temperate island, a jewelled castle of such work,
the roof iridescent as peacock feathers. Nearby,
four streams: of balsam, syrup, oil, and honey.

The crew began exploring, hushed but giddy.
Young brother Seamus, it was, whose glad eye
fell, enraptured, on the mouthwatering bridle,
its cheekpieces, throatlash, bit without parallel.

He stole this bridle, close-tucked in his habit.
He screamed, a second later, like a baby rabbit
clutched and raised heavenwards by a hawk.
Devils took him. He knew fire, swallowed smoke.

Brendan prayed: 'Forgive our brother Seamus,
Lord; order those rank fiends to reunite us.'
A sooty falling star, the *Cog* a leather cup:
Seamus rattled, stood, grinned, and threw up.

Devils' Mountain

The *Cog* makes progress
 benevolent waters
fulmar and gull
 seal and walrus

It is Brendan who hears
 a tremulous note
both airy and liquid
 indwelling and bold

A siren's song
 puts all men to sleep
the *Cog* drifts aimless
 her dreams deep

The brothers come round
 a burning mountain
a wide-mouthed man
 hollering at them

A scorched figure
 waving direction
his words' target
 the *Cog*'s helmsman

Ah devil cries Brendan
 you sad shyster
away and arse-kiss
 your bright Master

The devil calls back
 That bridle thief
that Seamus-crisp
 I know his reek

Deliver him Brendan
I'll fine-tune
his dissonant flesh
with fork and spoon

Under the boat's thwarts
a sweaty Seamus
hidden but stinking
as though a carcass

Never! shouts Brendan
as the *Cog* turns
the mountain spews forth
a swarm of demons

With flame-tipped arrows
and huge firebrands
they shower the *Cog*
as Satan commands

Pull brothers pull!
with scooping oars
the monks quit
those lively shores

The Vision of Heaven

The *Cog* ran confidently on, with full sail,
a brisk westerly ushering her from peril.
The brothers busied themselves with sewing kits,
darning their injured socks, patching habits.

Midsummer's night fell, and Brendan by God
was granted vision: the sky above the *Cog*
undulated like water and was inhabited,
swift angels lifting innumerable souls to bed.

There, the skin of angels flashed like fish scales;
the double-paradise described in bookish tales
grew visible, and Brendan wept, as human forms
conjoined with fur and claws and barley-horns.

At dawn, he roused the slumbering crew: 'Arise,
dear brothers, take breakfast, check supplies.
Give chanty-praise for heavens high and low.
I do believe. Look bright! We're heading home.'

The Turf Rider

The *Cog* beetles onwards
her crew high-wired
the green fields of Ireland
sorely desired

The sea is not void
Brendan spies first
an old man sailing
on a piece of turf

This clod of earth
his sole transport
weeds and fibrous dirt
his weak platform

You there! cries Brendan
what phenomenal sin
puts you at sea on a sod
so bannock-thin?

The codger replies
Barnstorming floods
engulfed my low country
its carnival show-gods

Upheaval and uproot
our fabric torn
I cling to what's left
and thank Heaven

Brendan I prayed for Seamus
as did those seven
whose bread is winged in
by faultless raven

A freshening breeze
the old man drifts
his turf his beloved
in penance or bliss

His parting words
the wind smothers
his fist brandishing
black feathers

Judas

A storm erupted, brutal and profound,
black skies with branch-lightning crowned.
Brendan's faith was lashed on Providence,
his heart secure, immune to weather's dance.

The *Cog* was driven east, her crew helpless.
At last, the burning rock; in some distress,
its naked resident grilled on one side,
his flipside blue and mortified by ice.

'Judas,' cried Brendan, 'by God's wounds
your motley suffering is old news.
I'll pray for one day's respite: human flesh
needs holiday from pain, His tenderness.'

Judas howled: 'This rock is my reward.
On Sundays I am variously adored
by fire and ice; tomorrow, I go home,
Hell's hooks, Hell's dark, Hell's grindstone.'

The Burning Birds

Far off, a column of smoke, the blue-black
plumes of punishment. We changed tack:
a coast, with air-tormented birds, enflamed
like windborne embers, made and unmade.

The mountain spumed fire. Two rivers flowed:
one scorching hot, one bone-snapping cold.
Bark split, and hung in strips, the trees nude.
We saw the red-breast pick away at Judas.

Multum Bona Terra

The *Cog* veers south
frayed but afloat
her crew in pieces
weary and sea-soaked

A loud cry of *Land!*
and soon ashore
they kneel and keel over
in fields of corn

Fatigue and suffering
withdraw in waves
the brothers ebullient
as bouncing babes

Wild game and fruit
this verdant country
no cultivating hand
but endless bounty

They see a mountain
of mind-buckling size
on its flanks a castle
tripping their eyes

Their progress blocked
a seething of snakes
a murderous cockatrice
guarding those gates

Brendan commands them
Hush! Let us pass!
the brothers on tippy-toe
enter and gasp

The walls made of crystal
 bronze creatures inlaid
as true as though living
 in sinew and vein

Elephant unicorn
 weasel panther
fish fowl and frog
 a tumultuous canter

Magnificent banners
 a horn's *cri de cœur*
all feast no famine
 hounds and wild boar

The castle courtyard
 sapphire and gold
brother Seamus it is
 whose blood runs cold

*Brendan these figures
 twitch by magic
who knows what master
 makes them tick*

This brother's caution
 Brendan heeds
they run away swift
 as hunted beasts

The Walserands

We left that brilliant castle, those rich cornfields,
and cast off. Suddenly, from shore, unholy squeals
and creatures pursuing us with bows and arrows,
their bodies a hotchpotch of odd bedfellows:

long necks, like cranes, but their heads boar-heads;
wolves' teeth, human torsos, galloping dogs' legs.
'You there!' cried Brendan. 'You hairy mixer-maxters!
Do you know God? Confess! You cannot catch us.'

'Brendan,' one grunted, 'we knew Him, face to face:
as radiant angels we inhabited that high place.
When Lucifer dreamed and schemed we lay low,
said nothing; our punishment this freak show.

'This gifted country is ours, an earthly paradise.
Our castle you know. Join us.' Their piggy eyes
flashed, and in their native language they growled
something about food, something about gold.

The Sea Leaf

With calloused hands
the monks row hard
their hearts mouse-hearts
their minds glamoured

It is Brendan who cries
and points north-east
a cricket-sized man
afloat on a leaf

In his left hand a cup
in his right hand a quill
the ocean his ink-pot
his work cell

The quill is dipped
then drip by drop
he fills to the brim
his thimble-cup

Each full cup
he tips and empties
Brendan he whispers
I measure the seas

I measure the seas
the crew sit pop-eyed
their faculties flipped
and lightly fried

I measure the seas
tara-loo tara-lay
by quill and by cup
I'll finish by doomsday

Says Brendan *O speck!*
you soft nugget!
this aim is a nonsense
away and forget it

The tiny reply
This world's wonders
are infinitely more
than you and your brothers

The Sea Serpent

Hungry for home; eleven days on course.
Day twelve, the sea gave birth: massive jaws,
a monster half-snake half-fish, armoured scales,
its eye gone bad, its mind a bed of nails.

It encircled the *Cog* and swallowed its tail:
trapped in this ring, waves chopped and grew tall,
pushing us cloud-wise or pitching us low.
If play or malice, Christ, we did not know.

The World Below

Again by God's grace
the *Cog* sails free
brother Michael rolls out
The Sneezing Banshee

They come to a thin place
the wind absent
the water no substance
the hour no present

A shimmer of air-tones
heat haze of bells
a groundswell of echoes
from deep-wishing wells

Up-rising a medley
the source unseen
plainsong and birdcall
hawkers of ice cream

Fancy-pant yodellers
a flurry of blows
the driving of cattle
the chatter of banjos

Brendan is clear
Let's plumb this depth
a sounding line sinks
and comes to rest

The brothers drop anchor
and soon sense
the force of entrapment
their sickening permanence

The anchor is stuck
 whatever's below
by angle or magic
 is not letting go

The helmsman wails
 By cutting this rope
we forfeit our lives
 abandon all hope

It is Brendan who cries
 Cut away cut away!
they fly towards Ireland
 a week and a day

The New Book

'Brother Noah,' said Brendan, 'answer me true:
are all the trials and tribulations of this crew
upheld in ink? Dear scribe, is our trip log full,
the record of wonder, weather, injury, miracle?'

In truth, I replied: 'Father abbot, this good book,
a blank volume before we left home, look –
it harbours that island-beast, the great whale;
the mermaid, articulating her broad fish-tail;

Hell's forge where souls fall and sky-rocket;
the bridle our burnt Seamus tried to pocket;
the double heaven; the dual-tormented Judas;
the boar's head angels who pursued us;

the dwarf who measured oceans with a cup;
the serpent ...' Brendan sighed, 'That's enough.
This book's our mission's end, our final cog:
a vessel bound with string, and skin of ox.'

Home

High ranks of cloud
 a coastline appears
its cliffs dear faces
 the crew in tears

A vision of Ireland
 white surf and gull
cries Brendan *The oars!*
 Pull brothers pull!

The *Cog* rubs her belly
 on pebble and sand
men crawl ashore
 they cannot stand

Their legs laughable
 so bird-scrawny
no muscle no spring
 nine years at sea

The brothers half-know
 their own monastery
there on a hilltop
 anchored safely

Monks from that hilltop
 tumble to greet them
their features a muddle
 of now and then

Brendan leads
 in solemn procession
the book borne aloft
 fat on a cushion

The altar of stone
 its cloth snow-white
the book is laid down
 its wonders complete

The book is laid down
 in Brendan's heart
the ticking of ice
 the melting apart

An angel has words
 in Brendan's ear
Time to set sail
 have no fear

II

A Bestiary of Bones

Poems commissioned by artist Paul Evans to accompany
twenty-six drawings of mythological and chimerical creatures,
exhibited in the Graves Gallery, Sheffield,
10 July–16 August 2014

A is for Al-mi'raj

Al-mi'raj the unicorn rabbit,
jousting at bees or cattle's heels.
Its Narwhal tusk is barley twist.
The battle squeak, the bloody fields.

B is for Bunyip

Seen a bunyip? Say it loud,
share its blip, display your wounds.
Feathered croc with emu snout.
Bones float up like speech balloons.

C is for Cyclops

The Guild of Cyclopes picnic do,
monocular fun, brewers' tent.
Picturesque their rolling view.
The infidels grow sage and mint.

D is for Dobhar-chú

Doberman pilchard, Pit bream,
Alsatian angler, Rottwhiting.
Sauce with parsley, double cream.
You and them. Ding ding.

E is for Encantado

This Romeo by river sings,
carnation pink his dolphin cock.
Plays on want, always wins.
A drain to captivate your luck.

F is for Faun

A faun-infected olive tree,
its fruiting spoiled forever after.
Faunish breath offendeth sheep.
Owns a broolly. Breeds November.

G is for Gorgon

She's evil eye and cobra oil,
turning flesh to Millstone Grit.
Your sinews add a gloss on coal.
O fountain-head, O spouting lip.

H is for Hippopodes

Hippopodes, that hazy tribe
with hairy shanks and bullet speed.
In China's badlands they survive.
The clippy-clop of tiny feet.

I is for Inkanyamba

The summer jaws of waterfalls,
thunder's fundamental bloom.
Sudden downpours, bucketfuls.
The honeyload in serpent's tooth.

J is for Jujak

The Emperor eats vermilion paste,
immortal shade immortal days.
Vermillion has a toxic base.
The Emperor thins. Moon phase.

K is for Karkinos

Hercules goes paddling forth
all monument all muscle tone.
He labours with heroic froth.
A nippy crab will claim his toe.

L is for Leviathan

An island flicks a high-rise tail,
plunges deep, is gone for good.
The ocean's pot begins to boil.
Solid brass now rotting wood.

M is for Mermaid

Those finny choirs of Cromarty
who comb the ocean, braiding song.
The roaring trade in novelty.
A whaling boat, a dinner gong.

N is for Nurarihyon

The uninvited helps himself,
your tea tobacco trifle nuts.
He's winkle pin. You're the shell.
He disappears like piss in flush.

O is for Ouroboros

Circle-wise consuming tail,
serpent of eternal spin.
Birth or death, a single dial.
A logo for the mess you're in.

P is for Piasa

Water panther, manticore,
the claws that fray a cotton cuff.
Iconic antlers, branch and thorn.
A human face. Near enough.

Q is for Quinotaur

Merovingian kings at cards,
ace of coins, ten of staves.
A future underscored by stars.
Bullish dolphins goring waves.

R is for Ratatoskr

Squirrel takes a message down
from eagle-top to worming root.
Squirrel snot obscures a noun.
Eagle shines an earthworm's boot.

S is for Selkie

Bay of Skail, moonlit beach,
cast-off layers, litter, wrack.
Still-warm coats, bootlace weed.
Lovers' bruck, tide slack.

T is for Titan

Kronos rules above below
off-balance, inner ear mucked up.
Gymnastics and a royal show.
The bars, the narrow beam of love.

U is for Unicorn

A Scottish beast in market towns,
the overseer of beef and grain.
Cupar Cross, the pennies, pounds.
The River Eden's holy name.

V is for Vanara

Monkey jaw the forest bell,
a godly nuisance hooting hoo.
Militia monkeys proud as hell.
Uniforms in Krishna blue.

W is for Wolpertinger

Boar's-head weasel, duck-foot mouse,
dove-winged rabbit, sabre-tooth vole.
Edible weddings, gingerbread house.
The creature a stew, swallowed whole.

X is for Xing Tian

Head's a cropper, severed clean,
a football chewed by city fox.
Nipples turn to eyes, and gleam.
A bellybutton speaks: 'Knock knock.'

Y is for Yale

In size, a goodly hippo sort,
with swivel horns like aerials.
A single skull, a double thought.
Heraldic true-impossibles.

Z is for Ziz

Almighty Ziz, the griffin bird,
heels on earth, beak on high.
Flesh of ages, roasted, served.
Butterfingers wave goodbye.

Inexpressible Island

Antarctica, March–September 1912

Their home, the ice cave, stank.
Six men slept in reindeer bags,
three facing three, by naval rank.

Not shadows but rendered fat:
six grease-phantoms who shat
continually, their blubber diet

ruinous on morale and gut;
their dreams pudding, sledge biscuit,
soup without reindeer hair in it.

The air sooty, a black smitch:
all wept with stove blindness.
A gallon tin for officers' piss,

a gallon tin for others'. Piles,
anal bleeding. Frozen seals
chipped with rock hammers, chisels,

the hard rain of meat splinters
melting in beards and Jaeger mittens.
Cock and balls frostbitten;

a log-book, for discipline;
the rescue party of ten men,
on closer view, ten penguins.

Polar night, six months. For every ill
a Sunday hymn, a smoking ritual.
Later, they would name the isle.

Three Messerschmidt Heads

Franz Xaver Messerschmidt, 1736–1783

The Incapable Bassoonist

No blousy orchestra, mon frère,
no instruments of torture –
to absolute silence I commit

my second house, this dark pit.
Fools tune up, rehearse wailsong:
sawmills have better seasons.

I clip toenails and hear gunshot.
Berliners redden like beetroot,
all puff and brute persuasion.

The wind lifts, rain comes on.
My old maestro, Carlos Kleiber,
moves wheatfields in the Hereafter.

Perfection can ruin us, mon frère.
Demons occupy the air.

The Difficult Secret

Lips, what? Keep schtum,
stay buttoned. Beaked spirits
govern this mum state
with knife and cockle-spoon,

crave rosebud or bee-stung
lips, those kiss-limpets.
Airborne occult potentates
bug me, spy: a southern

pout or pucker, eyes 'molten'
or 'melting' – leaks. Be shut.
Lips indrawn I unfruit.
Should I perish, dear cousin,

follow this breadcrumb:
in forty-nine apple crates
my several heads, one secret.
Cousin, lips herald bedlam.

The Artist as He Imagined Himself Laughing

Whose laughter is broken? Which dummkopf?
Whose bellows are half-price in Hell?
Whose joy begins like a whiffing breeze
and mounts, by jaw-shivering degrees,
to burst with as much angelic decibel
as distant wind-muffled sheep's cough?

Those gulp-throat gollums, that crow
choking on whortleberries . . . There's me,
alive in a Slovak lambswool hat
with bowling pin teeth, lips curled back.
Whose chuckle is tin-cast for eternity.
Whose countenance frozen, whose eye-stones.

The Amber Snail

A Mistle Thrush. Inside her gut
the adult flatworm parasite,
flake exquisite,

its breeding switch
flipped by warm blood. Bird shit
ferries eggs out. Splat. Splish.

The amber snail
steers beneath his calcium sail
at speeds near-transcendental,

dines al fresco on riverside greens;
intakes, by queer chance, a mere
spit of bird grease,

a smittering. The larval worm
lodges in our snail's intestine,
dreamtime, showtime:

it simmers, pops, and out spills
a multitude of ropey selves
who riddle Amber, their will

singular, hardcore:
to occupy those tender horns,
those touchy eye-stalks,

boom – they self-raise, balloon,
form stripes, pulse, pulse, horns
tumescent beacons.

Amber lives, a second life
with worming need, weird motive:
enflamed compulsive,

he climbs the higher stems at noon,
exposed, each unretractable horn
a flash cartoon,

a target. Wingbeat, windrush:
the morning's Mistle Thrush
dives and pecks off horns for lunch.

Damsel bug and fen spider
hunt through dusk; fireflies
mix their chemicals; distant cries;

bells, the bells of Paradise.

The Find

1

A table top. A body object,
pocked surface hard as rock,
entirely frozen. Knock knock.

Lashes, in perfect rows,
fringe the dry watering holes;
ears are extinct volcanoes,
halloo, halloo; by one elbow

a cow-licke of orange haire.
What beast is couched here.
Mammuthus. Honey monster.

2

The herd moves. A scoured sky,
a month-old calf in river slurry
kicks unswimming, makes cry,
inhales but sand; insucks clay.

Dies then, pipsqueak; water's
lactobactilli pickle her fibres;
a truelove knot in permafrost,
a woolly morsel. Full stop.

Skip 40,000 years. Blink them.
Reindeer herders click tongues.

3

Core sample: drill this football,
this bag of tricks. The sour smell
is lactic acid, the defrosting. Small
wonder – her bones weep crystals:

vivianite, a mineral phosphate,
bomb-tick liquor, brilliant blue.
Sweat beads in bio-suits.

Stomach contents: mother's dung,
microbe rich and best medicine.
This *mamont*, this omen.

4

Satellite object, out of body:
a premolar, rough nugget,
its two-horned fool's cap of roots.

Book of *Mammoth*, tooth diary:
'Born in spring' reads dentine,
its oxygen isotopes undying

soothsayers. And here, intact,
unerupted, her milk tusks,
their seedling story of 'prosperous
even days; ending abrupt.'

APPENDIX I

Summaries of key polar exploration missions, 1819–1917

John Franklin

The Coppermine River trek, 1819–1822

In 1819 the northern coastline of Canada was largely unknown and unmapped, something which had to be rectified if the Northwest Passage – the fabled sea route north of the Americas which linked the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans – was ever to be identified and attempted. Under the instruction of John Barrow, Second Secretary to the Admiralty, John Franklin was tasked with travelling overland from Hudson Bay to Great Slave Lake, a westward journey of 1,700 miles, and then to follow the Coppermine River north until he reached the open sea and the coastline he was to map. Franklin's party included Dr John Richardson (a 'solemn, diligent Scot who had been a surgeon with the Royal Marines'¹), the midshipmen George Back ('a conceited bounder'²) and Robert Hood ('shy, romantic'³), and ordinary seaman John Hepburn.

Franklin arrived at Fort Providence, Great Slave Lake, in July 1820. From this point in the journey his party would be aided by sixteen Canadian porters, or voyageurs – small boats and canoes were to be carried to enable them to cross rivers and to map the desired coastline. In addition, under an agreement with the Hudson's Bay Company, native Indian and Eskimo guides were to provide assistance and replenish food stores, circumstances allowing. From Fort Providence the party travelled 150 miles north-east and, in September 1820, built a winter camp near the Coppermine River, including a five-room log cabin for the four officers and a smaller one for the voyageurs. They named this camp Fort Enterprise.

After overwintering at Fort Enterprise they began their journey up the Coppermine, reaching the sea by July 1821. The conditions were too rough for their small boats, and the voyageurs were terrified of open water; on 22 August Franklin

¹ Fleming (1998), p. 127

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

decided to abandon the mapping mission and head south again to take stock at Fort Enterprise. The expedition quickly unravelled – they were in unfamiliar terrain and above the Arctic Circle; there was no game to hunt, and their rations had run out. They were reduced to eating the only greenery they could find – lichen – and whatever scraps of old animal carcass they happened upon. Eventually, they roasted or boiled their spare leather shoes and devoured those. Forty miles from Fort Enterprise, it was decided that George Back should make his own way ahead and bring back supplies for the near-starved party; Franklin would follow him with five voyageurs to aid the relay. Staying behind were the half-lame Richardson and the near-incapable Hood, with Hepburn acting as nursemaid.

Things soon fell apart in Richardson's group: the voyageur Michel Teroahauté provided the invalids with meat, claiming to have shot a partridge and a hare; this was followed a few days later by what he claimed were cuts from a dead wolf. On 20 October Robert Hood was found dead with a gunshot wound to the back of the head; Richardson and Hepburn would quickly surmise that Michel had pulled the trigger during an argument, and three days later Richardson would shoot and kill Michel in turn. They would later realize that the meat Michel had miraculously provided was in all likelihood the flesh of three fellow-voyageurs he had shot in desperation or hunger-struck delirium, thus making the Englishmen unwitting cannibals.

When Richardson and Hepburn finally reached Fort Enterprise on 29 October, they found Franklin and his remaining three voyageurs in a state close to death: there had been no replenished supplies at the camp as expected, and the men had been too weak to hunt or fish. Two voyageurs died. On 7 November, as a result of Back's contact mission, three native Indians appeared with emergency rations and the party was saved. By July 1822 Franklin and his men were in the safety of York Factory, Hudson Bay, and sailed back to England on the *Prince of Wales* in September. As Fergus Fleming

summarizes: 'Franklin had travelled 5,500 miles across land and water, had lost eleven of his twenty-strong party, and had returned with the news that he had mapped a miniscule portion of a coastline that everyone already knew existed'.⁴ Nevertheless, his fame was secured: he was the man who had eaten his boots.

John Franklin

The Northwest Passage: Erebus and Terror, 1845–1847

In another expedition initiated by Admiralty man John Barrow, Franklin (now Sir John, after being knighted in 1829) sailed out to search for the still-elusive Northwest Passage. Leaving London on 19 May 1845, Franklin was in command of the *Erebus*; in command of the *Terror* was Francis Crozier. On 26 July 1845 Franklin's ships were spotted by two whalers off Lancaster Sound, north of Baffin Island – this was the last sight of them before they disappeared into Canadian Arctic, never to return.

From the spring of 1848 a series of rescue missions were launched: it was thought that Franklin and his men could have survived on ships' stores, had they been trapped in the ice, even after three years. A prize of £20,000 was offered to anyone who rescued Franklin, £10,000 to anyone who discovered the whereabouts of his ships. Franklin's wife, Lady Jane Franklin, worked tirelessly to raise funds for further missions and maintain public awareness of her husband's plight; these missions would in turn become ice-bound and imperilled in the same treacherous waters. In August 1850 three graves were discovered on Beechey Island, locked in the permafrost; the grave plaques revealed them to be John Torrington of the *Terror* (aged 20), William Braine of the *Erebus* (32), and John Hartnell, also of the *Erebus* (25). All had died in the early months of 1846, during the expedition's first winter.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 153

In 1854, John Rae, an Orkney man who worked for the Hudson's Bay Company, managed to glean some information from a group of Inuit – in the winter season of 1849 they had come across a group of forty emaciated men under the command of a tall officer (possibly Crozier), dragging a boat southwards. A few months later the same Inuit discovered the remains of this party: a total of thirty-five corpses, some of which 'had been hacked with sharp knives and the cooking pots contained human remains'.⁵ Rae's report was met with outrage and disbelief, not least because the testimony came from those considered to be 'savages' by the British public. To refute Rae, Charles Dickens wrote in *Household Words*, 'We believe every savage to be in his heart covetous, treacherous, and cruel'.⁶

Finally, in the mission headed by Francis Leopold McClintock in 1859 – fourteen years after Franklin's disappearance – a document signed by Crozier was found in a metal canister on King William Island, and this revealed the fate of the *Erebus* and *Terror*. The ships had become trapped in the ice in September 1846, just north of King William Island, and abandoned by their crews in April 1848. Franklin himself had died on 11 June 1847, the cause unstated. The remaining men, under the command of Crozier, were to attempt an overland journey south in search of safety. All were to perish, and McClintock soon found some physical evidence: a boat containing two human skeletons and an array of equipment, including a battered sledge.

In the summer of 1984, the Canadian anthropologist Owen Beattie was given permission to excavate the graves of Torrington, Braine and Hartnell, which had been rediscovered on Beechey Island in 1976. Beattie's defrosting of the bodies and the photographs of their miraculously preserved flesh would inspire Margaret Atwood's short story 'The Age of Lead' (1991) and Sheenagh Pugh's poem 'Envyng Owen

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 411

⁶ Quoted in: Brandt, Anthony (2011). *The Man Who Ate His Boots: Sir John Franklin and the Tragic History of the Northwest Passage*. London: Jonathan Cape, p. 370

Beattie' (1998). Beattie proposed that the crew had contracted lead poisoning from the soldering on the poorly-made Victorian cans of tinned food.

On 9 September 2014, the Canadian government announced that it had at last discovered one of Franklin's doomed ships on the ocean floor – the ship under Franklin's command, the *Erebus*.

Robert Falcon Scott

The Terra Nova Expedition, 1910–1912

Scott was the obvious candidate for a concerted attempt on the South Pole, having led the Discovery Expedition of 1901–1904 in which he, Earnest Shackleton and Edward Wilson had trekked to within 530 miles of it. What was to be known as the Terra Nova Expedition of 1910–1912 included the same Edward Wilson (doctor and chief scientist), the young and short-sighted Apsley Cherry-Garrard (assistant zoologist), the diminutive but tough Henry 'Birdie' Bowers (storeman), and, in charge of ponies, Lawrence 'Titus' Oates of the 6th Iniskilling Dragoons. The expedition also included a dedicated photographer and film-maker, Herbert Ponting.

The *Terra Nova* departed from Port Chalmers, New Zealand, on 29 November 1910. Among its cargo were the varieties of transport it was hoped would carry them to the pole: thirty-three Siberian sledging dogs, fifteen ponies, and three motor-tractors. After a near-disastrous journey south through the roaring forties, they arrived in Antarctica at the end of December and built the expedition hut at the location christened 'Cape Evans', Ross Island, in January 1911. During five dark weeks of that Antarctic winter season, from 27 June to the 1 August, Wilson, Cherry-Garrard and Bowers would walk from Cape Evans to Cape Crozier and back; their aim, to retrieve some penguin eggs from the rookery at Cape Crozier in order to study its embryology. The

terrors of this trek would later be recounted by Cherry-Garrard in *The Worst Journey in the World*.

A group of six men, known to the expedition as the Eastern Party, was tasked with a separate mission to explore and map the area to the east of the Ross Ice Shelf known as King Edward VII Land: these six were Victor Campbell (in command), George Murray Levick (surgeon), Raymond Priestley (geologist), George Abbot, Frank Browning, and Harry Dickason. On 3 February 1911, while searching in vain for a safe place to anchor the *Terra Nova* and build winter quarters, they spotted a ship – Amundsen's *Fram* – and thus discovered there was competition in the race for the pole. They abandoned their eastern journey and sailed north instead, to Cape Adare, to take up residence in an abandoned hut and conduct scientific research. In January 1912 the party landed at Evans Coves to the south, and expected to be picked up by the *Terra Nova* in early February; as it turned out, pack ice made the cove inaccessible, and the six men were forced to dig an ice cave in which to see out the winter, living off whatever penguins and seals they could catch. After almost seven months living in the ice cave, they decided to attempt the walk south on 1 October 1912, finally reaching Cape Evans on 7 November. They would learn for the first time what had happened to Scott.

Scott's attempt to reach the pole began on 1 November 1911. The motor-tractors proved useless, and by 9 December the last of the exhausted ponies had been shot. On 3 January 1912, Scott chose the four men who would accompany him on the final dash for the pole: Edward Wilson, 'Titus' Oates, 'Birdie' Bowers, and petty officer Edgar Evans. They would be man-hauling their sledge of equipment and provisions, and, with the exception of Bowers, travelling on ski. Evans had cut his hand while re-fitting the sledge the previous month, an injury which would worsen as they continued. On 18 January, about a mile from the pole, they discovered a tent; inside, a note by Amundsen

confirming that the Norwegian party had reached the pole a month earlier on 16 December. Scott's party took a photograph of themselves at the pole and began the long journey home.

By 7 February, Scott noted that Evans was 'going steadily downhill'⁷ having suffered a possible concussion during a fall, and with frostbite to his nose and fingers. By 16 February he had 'nearly broken down in brain',⁸ and he died the following day. Continually beset by blizzards and low temperatures, Oates developed severe frostbite on his feet which slowed the pace of the whole party. They refused to leave him behind, but on 16 March he stumbled out of the tent and into a blizzard with the words, 'I am just going outside and may be some time'.⁹ Scott understood that Oates was sacrificing himself for the good of the group, and he was never seen again. From 20 March, the severe weather pinned the surviving three men in their tent, with no remaining fuel or rations. Scott's last diary entry, on 30 March 1912, ended with the words 'For God's sake look after our people'.¹⁰ The frozen bodies of Scott, Wilson and Bowers would not be discovered until 12 November, the scene witnessed and recorded by Cherry-Garrard. Scott's diaries were thus saved, and published in November 1913.

Douglas Mawson

The Australasian Antarctic Expedition, 1911–1914

Yorkshire-born Douglas Mawson was raised in Australia. A striking figure at six feet three inches tall with piercing blue eyes, he had Antarctic experience with Shackleton's Nimrod expedition of 1907–1909 and was in the party of three who trekked to what they

⁷ Scott (2006), p. 391

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 396

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 410

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 412

believed was the Magnetic South Pole on 16 January 1909. In 1910 he turned down a place on Scott's Terra Nova Expedition, deciding instead to mount an expedition of his own: the Australasian Antarctic Expedition of 1911–1913, its aim to make a geographical and scientific survey of areas known as King George V Land and Adélie Land . The ship *Aurora* left Hobart in December 1911, and the main expedition hut, housing eighteen men, was built at newly-christened Cape Denison in January 1912.

An eight-man team, led by the Antarctic stalwart Frank Wild, would split off to establish a Western Base fifteen hundred miles from Cape Denison and embark on its own series of exploratory forays into unknown areas. They were told to be ready for collection by the *Aurora* on 30 January the following year. After wintering at the main base, Mawson set off on 12 November 1912 to survey King George IV Land with two sledging companions: Xavier Mertz, a thirty year-old Swiss lawyer and skiing expert, and Englishman Belgrave Ninnis, a twenty-five year-old lieutenant in the Royal Fusiliers who had been an unsuccessful applicant for Scott's Terra Nova expedition. They took three sledges packed with equipment and provisions, pulled by seventeen Greenland huskies.

The team encountered a series of perilous crevasses and bad weather which hindered their progress; continual struggles with the huskies also added to their delays. On 12 December, Ninnis disappeared down a crevasse along with his sledge and his six dogs; the sledge contained the team's three-man tent, their spade, their pick, all of the dog food, and most of the remaining food for the men. All Mawson could see when looking down into the abyss were two huskies, one dead, one barely alive. Over three hundred miles from the safety of Cape Denison, and due to be picked up by the *Aurora* on 15 January, Mawson and Mertz had no choice but to turn round and head back. They had rations for ten days, with a five-week trek ahead of them.

Mertz's condition quickly deteriorated. He was a vegetarian, and they were forced to shoot and eat their huskies. Both men were in poor physical shape: dizziness, stomach cramps, loss of hair, loss of nails and skin. In a moment of delirium, Mertz bit off the tip of one finger to prove that he didn't have frostbite; he would fall into a coma and die on 8 January 1913. Mawson packed what remained onto his own sledge and continued the trek alone with one hundred miles left to go. On 11 January, Mawson was shocked to see that 'the thickened skin of the soles [of my feet] had separated in each case as a complete layer, and abundant watery fluid had escaped into the socks. The new skin underneath was very much abraded and raw'.¹¹ He bound the soles to his feet with bandages and carried on.

On 17 January Mawson plunged into a crevasse, still roped to his sledge, which was jammed across the lip and thus preventing his fall. He dangled freely in space on fourteen feet of rope, turning slowly round. With great effort he managed to climb up the length of the rope to the 'lid' of the crevasse, only to feel the snow give way and send him back to his dangling position. Lines from Robert Service's poem 'The Quitter' came to his mind ('Just have one more try – it's dead easy to die, / It's the keeping-on-living that's hard') and he mustered his strength for one final climb up the rope. The surface held him, and he was free to continue his trek. On 8 February he arrived at the Cape Denison hut to be greeted by six team members, safe, but just in time to see the *Aurora* sailing away to pick up Frank Wild's party to the west. With coal supplies low and weather hazardous, the ship had no option but to return to Australia with Wild's crew, refuel, and return to Antarctica at a later date.

Mawson and his companions were finally picked up by the *Aurora* ten months later, in December 1913, after enduring a second Antarctic winter in the hut. After further exploratory sorties, the ship reached Port Adelaide, Australia, on 26 February

¹¹ Mawson, in: Roberts, David (2013). *Alone on the Ice: The Greatest Survival Story in the History of Exploration*. New York: W.W. Norton, p. 227

1914. The series of physical ailments suffered by Mawson and Mertz were later thought to be linked with their forced diet of huskie liver, which is rich in vitamin A: they had both suffered from vitamin A poisoning. This theory has recently been questioned, however.¹²

Earnest Shackleton

Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, 1914–1917

After serving with Scott on the Discovery Expedition of 1901–1904, Shackleton led his own crew to the Antarctic on the Nimrod Expedition of 1907–1909 during which he would trek to within a hundred miles of the South Pole in a party that included the redoubtable Frank Wild. His aim on the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1914–1916 – otherwise known as the Endurance Expedition, after its ship – was for a six-man team to cross the entire continent on foot, from sea to sea, via the South Pole; a journey of 1,800 miles. It was impossible to carry enough supplies for such a long trek, and so a second ship, the *Aurora*, under the command of Æneas Macintosh, would carry a supply team to Scott's now-abandoned hut at Cape Evans; this team were tasked with laying a series of food depots from the Ross Sea to the Beardmore glacier to serve Shackleton's team on the second half of their trans-Antarctic journey. This second team, comprising of ten men, would be known as the Ross Sea Party.

The *Endurance* left Plymouth on 8 August 1914, and by December they had reached the Antarctic waters of the Weddell Sea. Struggling to navigate through the pack ice they were unable to reach their desired landing point, Vahsel Bay, and the ship was gradually frozen-in. By 24 February 1915 Shackleton accepted that there was no

¹² Carrington-Smith, Denise (2005). Mawson and Mertz: A Re-evaluation of Their Ill-Fated Mapping Journey During the 1911–1914 Australasian Antarctic Expedition. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 183 (11), 638–641

escape, and no option but to drift with the movement of the ice through the Antarctic winter months. The pressure of the grinding ice floes was too much for the ship to take, however, and on 27 October Shackleton gave the orders to abandon the splintering vessel; the crew of twenty-seven men would camp on the sea ice, march towards open water, and hope to sail to eventual safety in their three salvaged lifeboats: the *Dudley Docker*, the *Stancomb Wills*, and the *James Caird*.

By April 1916 supplies were running low, and the last surviving sled dogs were shot for meat. On 8 April the ice floe broke up, forcing them to take to the water in the three lifeboats; they set a course for the uninhabited Elephant Island, and landed there on 15 April. Two upturned boats provided shelter, and there were enough seals by the shore to provide a limited diet of blubber-rich food. They would need to seek rescue, however, and Shackleton decided to attempt the 800-mile sea journey to the whaling station on South Georgia. The *James Caird* was the chosen boat; his crew would comprise Tom Crean (recently a member of Scott's last expedition), navigator Frank Worsley (a New Zealander), Scottish carpenter Harry McNish, and seamen John Vincent and Timothy McCarthy. Staying behind on Elephant Island, and entirely reliant on Shackleton's success, a group of twenty-two men under the command of Frank Wild.

The *James Caird* landed at South Georgia after a hair-raising two-week journey across the Antarctic Ocean; unfortunately, the manned whaling station lay to the north of the island, and, their boat now being in such poor condition, Shackleton was forced to trek overland in order to reach it. With him he took Tom Crean and Frank Worsley. They had no map. The island was mountainous, snow-covered, glacier-veined. Against all odds, the three men reached the station, with Shackleton later recalling, 'during that long and racking march of thirty-six hours over the unnamed mountains and glaciers it seemed to me often that we were four, not three',¹³ an impression shared by Crean and

¹³ Shackleton (2002), p. 204

Worsley. It was this mysterious 'extra person' episode that T.S. Eliot was to re-figure in *The Waste Land*.

Shackleton's next task was to enlist the aid of a ship to return to Elephant Island to rescue the twenty-two men there. After several failed attempts, he reached the island on 30 August 1916 in a Chilean government-owned steam tug named the *Yelcho*. All men were alive, though in poor physical condition after four months living under an upturned boat on a shingle beach in freezing conditions. One man – Perce Blackborow, a stowaway on the *Endurance* – had his left foot amputated due to frostbite and gangrene. Meanwhile, at the other side of Antarctica, the Ross Sea Party knew nothing of these events and had continued with their supply-laying mission throughout 1915 and 1916. In May 1915 the *Aurora* had broken loose of its moorings in Cape Evans during a gale, leaving ten men stranded in the hut; the ship could only drift with the pack ice and return to New Zealand to re-fuel, taking vital equipment and provisions with it. In their mind, Shackleton would be advancing across Antarctica and in need of their depots. They carried on, hauling their sledges into the interior and back, slowly succumbing to starvation, scurvy, and mental exhaustion. Three men would die on the mission: party leader Æneas Macintosh, the chaplain Arnold Spencer-Smith, and general assistant Victor Hayward. The *Aurora* would finally reach the seven survivors at Cape Evans on 10 January 1917 – with Earnest Shackleton on board to greet them. Only then did they realize their labours, and the deaths of their companions, had been in vain.

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