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## Winter Lights: Disaster, Interpretation, and Jules Verne's Polar Novels

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### Abstract

"Winter Lights: Disaster, Interpretation, and Jules Verne's Polar Novels" examines the relationship between historical events and their interpretation as fiction. The article does not seek to identify sources but rather to examine how Verne reflects well-known events through the prism of artistic creation. In *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* and *The Sphinx of the Icefields*, the transformation of polar explorations and disasters is illustrated by, among other things, mythological images and the optical figures of the parhelion and the paraselene.

### Résumé

"Winter Lights; Disaster, Interpretation, and Jules Verne Polar Novels," explore les liens entre histoire, interprétation et fiction. Il ne s'agit pas ici d'identifier des sources mais d'examiner la façon dont l'écriture vernienne reflète et transforme les récits d'explorations et de désastres à travers des images comparables aux multiples réfractations évoquées dans *Les Voyages et aventures du capitaine Hatteras* et *Le Sphinx des glaces* par des emprunts mythologiques et l'évocation des parhélies ou des parasélènes.

### The Fate of Sir John Franklin

During his 1841 expedition to the Antarctic, James Clark Ross named two volcanic mountains after the ships he commanded, the HMS *Terror* and the HMS *Erebus*. The names of the ships may have seemed particularly appropriate for the volcanoes, one extinct, but the other actively spewing red fire and fumes on the desolate landscape. The awe-inspiring names of Ross' vessels were not unusual: the first *Terror* had been launched in 1696 and captured and destroyed by the French in 1704. The *Erebus* was the second war vessel to bear the name of the son of Chaos, or Khaos, the foremost of the primordial Greek deities. In Hesiod's *Theogonia*, Erebus represents darkness and is later changed into the river that runs through the kingdom of the dead.

Transformed from warships into expedition vessels, the *Terror* and the *Erebus* had a glorious and dramatic career. During Ross's Antarctic voyage, the *Erebus* collided with the

*Terror* in the course of a particularly difficult navigation among icebergs. But the ships came back to a triumphant homecoming in 1843. Ross, who could claim unparalleled knowledge of both Polar Regions—he had discovered the North Magnetic Pole on a previous expedition with his uncle Sir John Ross—was knighted and received the French Legion of Honor. But the voyages of the *Terror* and the *Erebus* were not over: the ships were fitted with steam engines and propellers, their keels reinforced with thick metal plates, and they sailed again on 19 May 1845 on an expedition in search of the Northwest Passage under the command of Sir John Franklin. They carried enough provisions for a three-year expedition and 138 crew members, five of whom were later sent back to England. The *Terror* and the *Erebus* were last spotted by whalers on 26 July 1845 at the entrance of Lancaster Sound in the Bay of Baffin, never to be seen again: Sir John Franklin's fate, that of his lost crew, and the two famed ships that had carried them so far north launched what must surely be the greatest number of rescue operations ever recorded in naval history. The British Admiralty offered a 20,000 pound reward for finding the vanished men; American expeditions, financed by a rich sea merchant named Cornelius Grinnell, sailed in 1850, and again in 1853. At one point, Elisha Kent Kane, a medical officer on board the American ship *Advance* recorded a gathering of eight vessels in the Bay of Baffin, all in pursuit of the same quest, all navigating, like the *Advance*, "surrounded by the imminent hazards of sudden consolidation of the open sea. . . [a]ll minor perils, nips, bumps, and sunken bergs. . . discarded." [1]



Figure 1 - "The *Terror* and the *Erebus* in the Antarctic," by John Wilson Carmichael, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK.

The first remains of the expeditions were found in 1850: three graves, traces of fire and sledge tracks on the ice. More upsetting news reached England in 1854, when John Rae reported hearing from Inuit hunters that the ships had been trapped in ice, and that men had died from cold and starvation, some resorting to cannibalism. "At a later date in the same Season," he wrote in his report, "but previous to the disruption of the ice, the corpses of some thirty persons and some Graves were discovered on the Continent, and five dead bodies on an Island near it. . . from the mutilated state of many of the bodies and the contents of the kettles, it is evident to us that our wretched Countrymen had been driven to the last dread alternative—cannibalism—as a means of prolonging existence." [2]

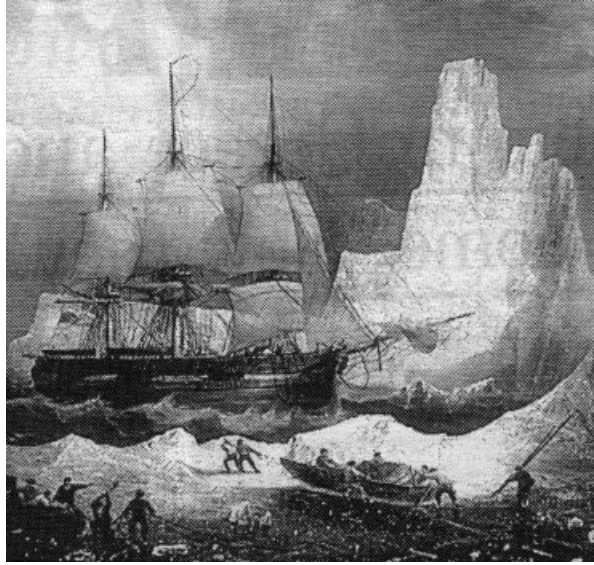


Figure 2 - "The HMS Terror in ice," National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK.

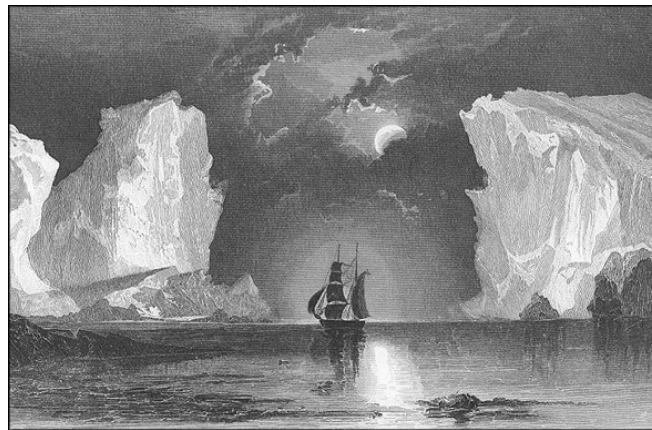


Figure 3 - "The Advance near Kosoak," from Elisha Kent Kane, *Arctic Explorations, The Second Grinnell Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin* (Philadelphia: Childs and Peterson, 1856), engraving by Van Ingen and Snyder after a sketch by Kane. Photo Frank Ward.

The report of cannibalism so outraged British society that Rae was discredited. In "The Lost Arctic Voyagers," published in December 1854 by *Household Words*, Charles Dickens wrote a passionate refutation of Rae's methods and conclusions:

There is one passage in [Dr. Rae's] melancholy report, some examinations into the probabilities and improbabilities of which, we hope will tend to the consolation of those who take the nearest and dearest interest in the fate of that unfortunate expedition, by leading to the conclusion that there is no reason whatever to believe, that any of its members prolonged their existence by the dreadful expedient of eating the bodies of their dead companions. Quite apart from the very loose and unreliable nature of the Esquimaux representations (on which it would be necessary to receive with great caution, even the commonest and most natural occurrence), we believe we shall show, that it is in the highest degree improbable that such men as the officers and crews of the two lost ships would or could, in any extremity of hunger, alleviate the pains of starvation by this horrible means. [3]



Figure 4 - Graves on Beechey Island, from Elisha Kent Kane, *The US Grinnell Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin* (New York: Harper, 1854), engraving by Hamilton after a sketch by Kane. Photo Frank Ward.



Figure 5 - Graves on Beechey Island. Photograph by, and courtesy of John Delaney.

Undaunted by Rae's report, Franklin's widow appealed to the public, raised funds, and won renewed support from the Admiralty. No less than twenty-five additional expeditions were sent in search of the missing Franklin. In 1859, Leopold M'Clintock, commanding officer of the *Fox*, reported the most concrete evidence of the explorer's fate: a "sad and touching relic" with a "double story:" a document found on a cairn on the coast of King William Island. This "relic" and the account given by M'Clintock of its finding deserve special attention:

The record paper was one of the printed forms usually supplied to discovery ships for the purpose of being enclosed in bottles and thrown overboard at sea, in order to ascertain the set



of the currents, blanks being left for the date and position. . . Upon it was written apparently by Lieutenant Gore, as follows: '28 of May 1847. H.M. ships 'Erebus' and 'Terror' wintered in the ice in lat. 70° 05'N.; 98° 23'W. Having wintered in 1846-7 at Beechey Island, in lat. 74° 43' 28"N.; long. 91° 39' 15"W., after having ascended Wellington Channel to lat. 77°, and returned to the west side of Cornwalls Island. Sir John Franklin commanding the expedition. All well. Party consisting of 2 officers and 6 men left the ships on Monday 24<sup>th</sup> May 1847. Gm. GORE, Lieut. Chas. F. DES VOEUS, Mate.'" [4]

Here, M'Clintock inserts a long development to celebrate Franklin's accomplishments up to that date: "Seldom has such an amount of success been accorded to an Arctic navigator in a single season" (220). "But, alas!" M'Clintock adds a little later,

round the margin of the paper upon which the Lieutenant Gore in 1847 wrote those words of hope and promise, another hand had subsequently written the following words: —'April 25, 1848.—H. M. ships 'Terror' and 'Erebus' were deserted on the 22d April, 5 leagues N. N. W. of this, having been beset since 12 September 1846. The officers and crews, consisting of 105 souls, under the command of Captain F. R. M. Crozier, landed here in lat. 69° 37' 42" N., long. 98° 41' W. Sir John Franklin died on the 11 June 1847; and the total loss by deaths in the expedition has been to this date 9 officers and 15 men. (Signed) F.R.M. Crozier, Captain and Senior Officer, James Fitzjames, Captain H.M.S. Erebus. (221)

A reproduction of the message, with the news of Franklin's death scribbled along the margins, shows the dramatic passage of time on the restricted space of the sheet. To some extent the small piece of paper records the passing of arctic time and the severity of the winter months perhaps more dramatically and more effectively than any calendar or journal. M'Clintock's text, by separating his account of the two messages that had been inscribed a year apart, explicitly tries to convey to the reader the drama and enigma of the year that had been marked but not told: Franklin's career, a last eulogy before the news of his death and that of one of the original signatories of the document:

There is some additional marginal information relative to the transfer of the document to its present position. . . from a spot four miles to the northward, near Point Victory, where it had been originally deposited by the *late* Commander Gore. This little word *late* shows us that he, too, within the twelve-month, had passed away. In the short space of twelve months how mournful had become the history of Franklin's expedition; how changed from the cheerful 'all well!' of Graham Gore! . . ."A sad tale was never told in fewer words." (222)

M'Clintock's report did not put an end to the search for Franklin's party, however. But in spite of the numerous expeditions launched in the hope of recovering additional remains of the lost explorers and the two glorious ships, remarkably few artifacts have been found, most of them gathered at the London Maritime Museum under the name of "Franklin's relics."

The story of the discovery of the Northwest Passage itself may not be as rich and dramatic as the story of the search for Franklin. Or rather, the two stories became so intertwined that by the end of the nineteenth century the expression going to "search for Franklin" commonly meant going to search for the Northwest Passage, with perhaps an important modification: Franklin was hopelessly lost, but there was hope the mythical passage would be found and sailed. At any rate, the Franklin expedition, the *Terror* and the *Erebus*, could not be forgotten, and together raised a series of recurring questions that would later inform Jules Verne's novels about the nature of exploration and search, the role of interpretation, and the dread of cannibalism.

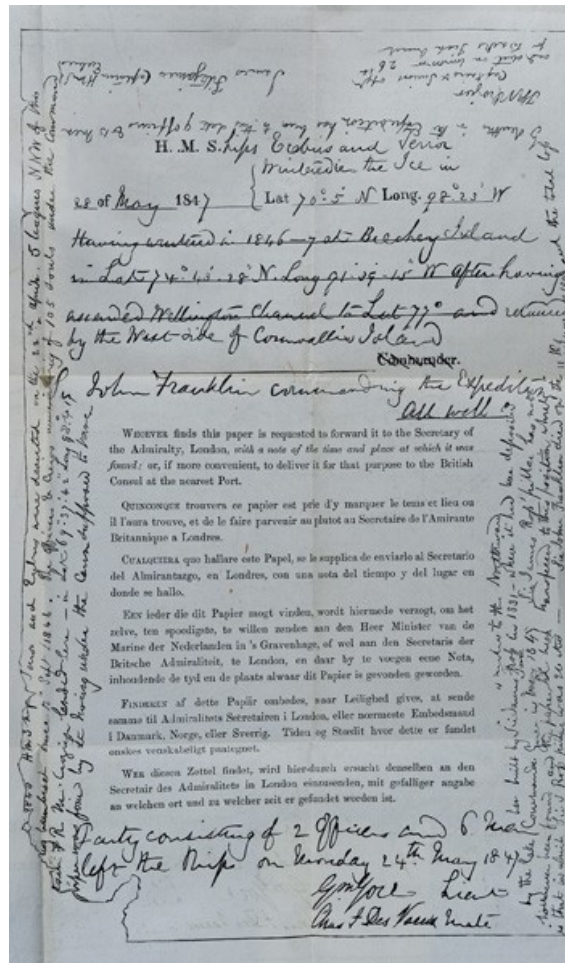


Figure 6 - Document, from Captain M'Clintock, The Fate of Sir John Franklin (Philadelphia: Lloyd, 1860), photo Frank Ward.

Rae had faithfully reported the Esquimaux's account of the disastrous end of Franklin's party, interpreting the details of the scene described to him as evidence of cannibalism. Dickens' indignant response constitutes the most serious argument about the necessity and perils of interpretation. He faults the unreliable nature of the Esquimaux representations, the imperfect understanding of Rae's interpreter, and the specificities of individual languages which make it difficult to find perfect equivalence among them. Yet, reluctantly drawn to the scene, Dickens himself attempts to give Rae's account another interpretation: "Had there been no bears thereabout; to mutilate those bodies; no wolves, no foxes? Most probably the scurvy . . . would of itself cause dreadful disfigurement—woeful mutilation—but, more than that, it would not only annihilate the desire to eat (especially to eat the flesh of any kind), but would annihilate the power." Finally Dickens suggests that the Esquimaux themselves probably killed Franklin's men. "There are pious persons who, in their practice, with strange inconsistency, claim for every child born to civilization all innate depravity, and for every savage born to the woods and wilds an innate virtue. We believe every savage to be in his heart covetous, treacherous, and cruel." [5] Beyond the obvious ideological premises of Dickens' solution, his theory offered a double advantage. It absolved Franklin's men of the most repulsive crime, the universal taboo of cannibalism and imagined them dying valiantly in combat: sick and weakened to be sure, yet morally undefeated.

But the matter could not easily be put to rest, and, the better to prove the innocence of Franklin's party, the second part of "The Lost Arctic Voyagers" reviews the most famous cases of cannibalism, giving the story of the *Medusa* pride of place. Dickens picks up where the *Edinburgh Review* had left off: Unlike the *Terror* and the *Erebus*, the *Medusa* had been placed under the orders of an undeserving captain, "no discipline worthy of the name had been observed aboard the *Medusa* from the minute of her weighing anchor," the crew consisted of "the scum of all countries," "[a]nd is it with the scourged and branded sweepings of the galleys of France, in their debased condition of eight-and-thirty years ago, that we shall compare the flower of the trained adventurous spirit of the English Navy, raised by Parry, Franklin, Richardson, and Back?"

The last paragraph of Dickens's textual analysis also reveals the ultimate purpose of the interpretation of disastrous events as "*Mémoires d'outre-tombe*" and is worth quoting at some length:

In weighing the probabilities and the improbabilities of the 'last resource,' the foremost question is—not the nature of the extremity; but, the nature of men . . . Utilitarianism will protest 'they are dead; why care about this?' Our reply shall be, 'Because they ARE dead, therefore we care about this . . . Because they lie scattered on those wastes of snow, and are as defenseless against the remembrance of coming generations, as against the elements into which they are resolving, and the winter winds that alone can waft them home, now, impalpable air; therefore cherish them gently, even in the breast of children. Therefore, teach no one to shudder without reason, at the history of their end. Therefore, confide with their own firmness, in their fortitude, their lofty sense of duty, their courage, and their religion.'" [6]

For all practical purposes, Dickens had given the scattered and mutilated bodies their proper burials, a textual headstone engraved with their glorious stories. The text also throws light on the specific relationship between disaster and interpretation, on the repeated desire for the disaster to be interpreted, to be given the meaning it eludes. To paraphrase Jean-Luc Nancy, interpretation begins after disaster. [7] Not just because the disaster strikes a terror that must be repudiated, a dread that must be overcome by analysis and reasoning; and not just because *Erebus*, the son of Chaos presides over the enigma of death as return to chaos. Interpretation may be a form of exorcism, to be sure, but independently of the assuaging function it may assume, it also draws from the disaster its resources and its paradoxical methodology. In this sense, one can apply to the interpretation born from disaster some of the ideas Walter Benjamin applies to translation: "[A]ny translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information—hence, something inessential. This is the hallmark of bad translation. But do we not generally regard as the essential substance of a literary work what it contains in addition to information—as even a poor translator will admit—the unfathomable, the mysterious, the 'poetic' something that a translator can reproduce only if he is also a poet?" [8]

For Dickens, Rae acted as a bad translator, not only because his interpreter could not perfectly understand the language of the Inuit, but because the man limited his interpretation to the transmission of information, when what was needed was a deeper comprehension of the mystery of Franklin's disappearance. What Dickens also makes visible is the desire to endow disaster with its own unfathomable depth the better to decipher it poetically, though without the slightest illusion that the deciphering provided would be the solution to the disaster's chaotic enigma. There can never be a last word on the understanding of disaster, only the construction of multiple layers of interpretation that together provide an insight into the collective imagination. "By virtue of its translatability the original is closely connected with translation," notes Benjamin, "in fact, this connection is

all the closer since it is no longer of importance to the original.” (71) The rhetorical putting to rest of the corpses discovered by the Inuits, of the rumors spread by John Rae, failed however to put the dead to rest; it only signaled that the multiple accounts generated by additional searches and the findings of additional “relics” would yield in equal parts incidental information and the fascinating fragments of an unsolved mystery.

### Fictions of interpretation

The passionate interest generated by the loss of the ships *Terror* and *Erebus* and the vanishing of their captains and crews are no doubt responsible for the writing and success of Jules Verne's polar novels, more particularly the 1866 *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* (*Voyages et aventures du capitaine Hatteras*) and the 1897 *Sphinx of the Icefields* (*Le Sphinx des glaces*). The novels are in great part inspired by the published accounts of the various searches for Franklin, and further demonstrate the relationship between disaster, exploration, and the mythical fascination of polar conquest in the second half of the nineteenth century. [9]

*The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* was published in two parts, entitled *The English at the North Pole*, and *The Desert of Ice*. [10] The first novel takes place in 1860 and starts with the announced departure of the *Forward* to a mysterious destination, which is later disclosed as the North Pole. Chapter 17 is entirely dedicated to the story of Sir John Franklin, describing King William Island, where some remains of the Franklin expedition were found, as “the scene for the worst tragedy of modern times! A few miles west the *Terror* and the *Erebus* had been lost for ever!” [11] As the small group of explorers proceeds slowly towards what Kane had called “the Polar limit of all northerness,” [12] they experience all the rigors of the arctic winter, and the novel borrows extensively from Kane and McCormick's narratives, which had been recently translated into French. [13] From the discussion of tropical driftwood carried by counter currents to the coast of Greenland, to fights with polar bears, fox hunting, the phenomenon of red snow, and the description of theatrical activities during the long arctic night, Verne clearly seems intent on integrating the most precise details of recent explorations in his fiction.

After multiple adventures that may seem improbable only to those readers who have not read narratives of polar expeditions, Hatteras and his friends approach the polar region, on board a small boat (the *Forward* had been previously destroyed in an explosion):

At that moment the storm unleashed its power and there came a torrent without name of the aerial waves; the boat lifted out of the water, and began to speed at vertiginous speed; its foresail was torn away, and fluttered off into the darkness like a great white bird; a circular hole, a new Maelstrom, formed in the swirl of the waves. The navigators, enlaced in this whirlpool, moved so fast that the lines of the water seemed motionless, in spite of their incalculable speed. . . . Then they were overcome by dizziness. Within them was the ineffable feeling of the abyss! [14]

They are ejected from the whirling abyss, to discover, in an episode familiar to all readers of Verne, that a volcano occupies the precise geographical location of the pole.

The mountain, in full eruption, was vomiting a mass of burning boulders and labs of glowing rocks ; it seemed to be repeatedly trembling, like a giant's breathing ; the ejected matter rose to a great height in the air amidst jets of intense flames, and lava flows wound down its flanks in impetuous torrents ; here inflamed serpents twisted their way past the smoking rocks ; there burning waterfalls fell through a purple mist ; further on a river of fire, formed of a thousand igneous streams, threw itself into the sea as a boiling outfall.” [15]





Figure 7 - The *Forward* with sun halo. From *Hatteras*, drawing by Riou. Photo Frank Ward.

Hatteras and his friends may have reached an undiscovered territory but the description of the Pole owes much to the lost *Inventio Fortunata*, possibly written in the fourteenth century, which described the North Pole and the Magnetic Pole as one location and showed a black rock occupying the site, surrounded by a giant whirlpool. The *rupes nigra* or black rock, located at the extreme north of the earth, and its surrounding whirlpool were regularly evoked in sixteenth-century texts. In a 1577 letter, John Mercator cited Jacobus Cnoyen to whom we owe a summary of the lost *Inventio*, describing the Arctic region as follows:

In the midst of the four countries is a Whirl-pool into which there empty four indrawing Seas which divide the North. And the water rushes round and descends into the Earth just as if one were pouring it through a filter funnel. It is four degrees wide on every side of the Pole, that is to say eight degrees altogether. Except that right under the Pole there lies a bare Rock in the midst of the Sea. Its circumference is almost 33 French miles, and it is all magnetic stone." [16]

It is worth noting that Verne's volcano is disclosed when "the fog was split like a curtain torn apart by the wind" to offer the first glimpse of "an immense plume of flames". [17] One recognizes in these pages, as with the evocation of a whirlpool, the influence of Edgar Allan Poe, who would play such an important role in Verne's other polar novel, *The Sphinx of the Icefields*.

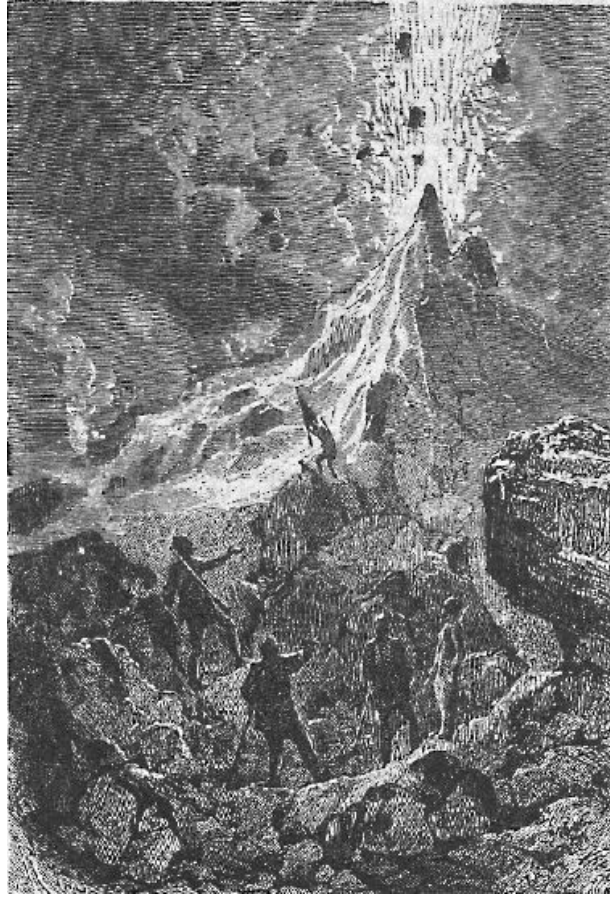


Figure 8 - The Volcano at the North Pole, from *Hatteras*, drawing by Riou. Photo Franck Ward.

As we know, Verne had initially planned to have Hatteras throw himself into the crater and die at the Pole, “The volcano is the only grave worthy of him” he wrote his publisher Pierre-Jules Hetzel. [18] But upon Hetzel’s insistence, Verne modified the conclusion: Hatteras returns to England, but he has become mad. “His madness was of a gentle sort, but he did not speak, he no longer understood, for power of speech had apparently departed at the same time as his reason.” [19] During his long daily walks, he always follows the same path and comes back walking backward. “The doctor attentively observed such a strange mania, and soon understood the reason for such a singular obstinacy; he guessed why the walk followed a fixed direction, under the influence, as it were, of a magnetic force. Captain Hatteras marched constantly north.” [20]

### Traces and refractions

In the course of their progress towards the North, Hatteras and his crew discover traces of past expeditions: “It was clear that Hatteras was inadvertently following the signs of a major disaster; he was advancing along the only practicable route, collecting the remains from some horrible shipwreck” (172). Initially the novel strikingly resembles a fictitious search for Franklin: beyond the numerous mentions of the catastrophe and the long account given in chapter 17, multiple allusions weave a tight net of cross-references between Hatteras’s adventures and those of his predecessors. Hatteras’s ship, the *Forward*, bears a name similar to Kane’s rescue ship, the *Advance*. At one point, the explorers kill a fox that had been captured by James Ross twelve years before: “While wintering, James Ross had the idea of trapping a large number of white foxes; he put

copper collars on their necks, with engravings of where his ships were, the *Enterprise* and the *Investigator*, plus the food stores. These animals often cover huge distances in search of food, and James Ross hoped that one might fall into the hands of men from Franklin's expedition. This explains everything, and our guns uselessly killed that poor animal, which might have saved the life of two crews" (142-143). The real-life message reaches only fictitious travelers, a dead end of sort.

During their return from the Pole, the explorers come across the dead bodies of the group of mutinous sailors who had burned the ice-bound *Forward*, and abandoned the expedition. The scene described by Verne is eerily reminiscent of the testimony reported by Rae and so violently attacked by Dickens:

Not long previously, this valley had been the scene of a last battle against time, against despair, against hunger; and from certain horrible remains, it could be understood that the wretches had fed on human bodies, perhaps living bodies, and amongst them, the doctor recognized Shandon, Pen, and the whole miserable crew of the *Forward*. . . the crew had clearly experienced a thousand tortures and a thousand despairs to come to this terrifying catastrophe; but the secret of their misery is buried with them under the snows of the Pole for ever. [21]

But while the novel follows previous textual traces, borrowing and integrating the multiple relics of previous narratives, its own specific fiction lies in the fact that the extraordinary conquest it describes will leave no trace behind, except for the novel itself. Although the group reads with passionate interest the signs left by previous explorers, Hatteras himself violently objects to the idea of leaving any message or traces behind. "The doctor had had the idea of building a cairn and depositing a note indicating the passage of the *Forward* and the expedition's purpose. But Hatteras formally opposed this notion: he did not wish to leave any traces a rival could use" (87). The explosion of the *Forward*, an "immense disaster," will also make it as hard for future expedition to find as the *Terror* and the *Erebus* themselves. Following Hatteras' intentions, before leaving the volcanic polar Island, Clawbonny "built a cairn at the precise point where the captain had first landed on the island. . . On the face of one of the stones Bell engraved this simple inscription with a chisel: JOHN HATTERAS, 1861" (340). For all practical purposes, this could be a tombstone, written at the time Verne had planned to conclude the novel with Hatteras' death in the volcano; [22 if Hatteras's body returns to England in the final version, his reason has died on the *rupes nigra* of the Pole. But the cairn, Verne is careful to note, may well not survive the volcanic eruption. Indeed, the question of traces remains at the heart of the relationship between the disappearance of Franklin and the searches that followed the disaster on the one hand, and between interpretation and fiction on the other.

## Parhelia

The specific nature of the Verne/Hetzel project for the *Extraordinary Voyages* required a large measure of scientific information and precision. But the nature of the various discoveries described in *Hatteras* raises a different set of questions. The status of an exploration and that of a search expedition are strikingly different. One consists in opening the way, the other in retracing a path, and it is at the very least intriguing that, when it came to write his novel, Verne should be more preoccupied with the searches for a missing explorer, than with the explorations themselves. If exploring can be compared to writing on a blank space, delineating new coastlines, giving names to unexplored islands, mapping out a continent, why should the act of writing in *Hatteras* be so absorbed by the

entirely different model of retracing a path, looking for clues, a model whose explicit goal is not to create but to duplicate, and whose success would lie in the uncovering of the already discovered?



Figure 9 - Engraved stone, from *Hatteras*,. Photo Frank Ward.

One of the answers might lie metaphorically in a specific form of optical sign frequently observed in polar areas and carefully noted in the records Kane and M'Clintock wrote during their search for Franklin. The *parhelia*, also called sun-dogs or “mock-suns,” appear as sun halos, or as multiple suns formed by ice crystals. Although they can be observed anywhere, they are far more striking in the low temperatures of the Polar Regions. [23] In his 5 October diary, Kane wrote at length of the phenomenon: “The air was filled with bright particles of frozen moisture, which glittered in the sunshine—a shimmering of transparent dust. At the same time we had a second exhibition of parhelia, not so vivid in prismatic tints as that of 5 September, but more complete. The sun was expanded in a bright glare of intensely—white light, and was surrounded by two distinct concentric circles, delicately tinted on their inner margins with the red spectrum.” [24] The night-time equivalents of the parhelia, the paraselenae, are also illustrated in M'Clintock's text. At one point in his narrative, he describes a burial in the ice pack under the Arctic night in these terms:

The body was then placed on a sledge, and drawn by messmates of the deceased to a short distance from the ship, where a hole through the ice had been cut: it was then “committed to the deep,” and the Service completed. What a scene it was! I shall never forget it. . .the deathlike stillness, the intense cold, and threatening aspect of a murky, overcast sky; and all this heightened by one of those strange phenomena which are but seldom seen even here, a complete halo encircling the moon, through which passed a horizontal band of pale light that encompassed the heavens; above the moon appeared the segments of two other halos or



paraselene to the number of six. The misty atmosphere lent a very ghastly hue to the singular display, which lasted for rather more than three hours. [25]



Figure 10 - Parhelion in Antarctica, August 2008. Photo Todor, courtesy of the Australia Antarctic Division.

The parhelia and paraselene optical phenomena are not the only refractive effect of the Polar Regions. On 13 September, the captain of the *Advance* spotted a ship. “On looking without the glass, I distinctly saw the naked spars of a couple of vessels. . .the masts, yards, gaffs, every thing but the bowsprits, were made out distinctly,” writes Kane in his report, “We changed our course. . .The fog, however, closed around them. Still we stood on. Presently, a flaw of wind drove off the vapor; and upon eagerly gazing at the spot, now less than three miles off, no vessels were to be seen. . . Refractive distortion plays strange freaks in these Arctic solitudes; but this could hardly be one of its illusions. . . As plainly as I see these letters did I see those brigs.” [26] The relationship between the refractive phenomena and the acts of reading and writing is thus explicitly stated. The ghost ships of the “Arctic solitudes” and Kane’s narrative both obey the principle of refraction, as light deviating through the prism of the ice crystal to produce a second image of far greater proportions. It is significant, too, that an illustration of a parhelion is inserted in *Hatteras* at the moment when “the *Forward* was at the very spot where the American vessels, the *Rescue* and the *Advance* . . . experienced such terrible dangers.” Verne adds: “Dr. Kane was on that expedition; at the end of September 1850, surrounded by ice floes, the ships were irresistibly forced back into Lancaster Sound. . . It was Shandon who narrated this disaster.” [27] Numerous examples of parhelia and paraselene enrich Verne’s text, and refraction plays a dramatic role on several occasions, changing animals into beasts of gigantic proportions.



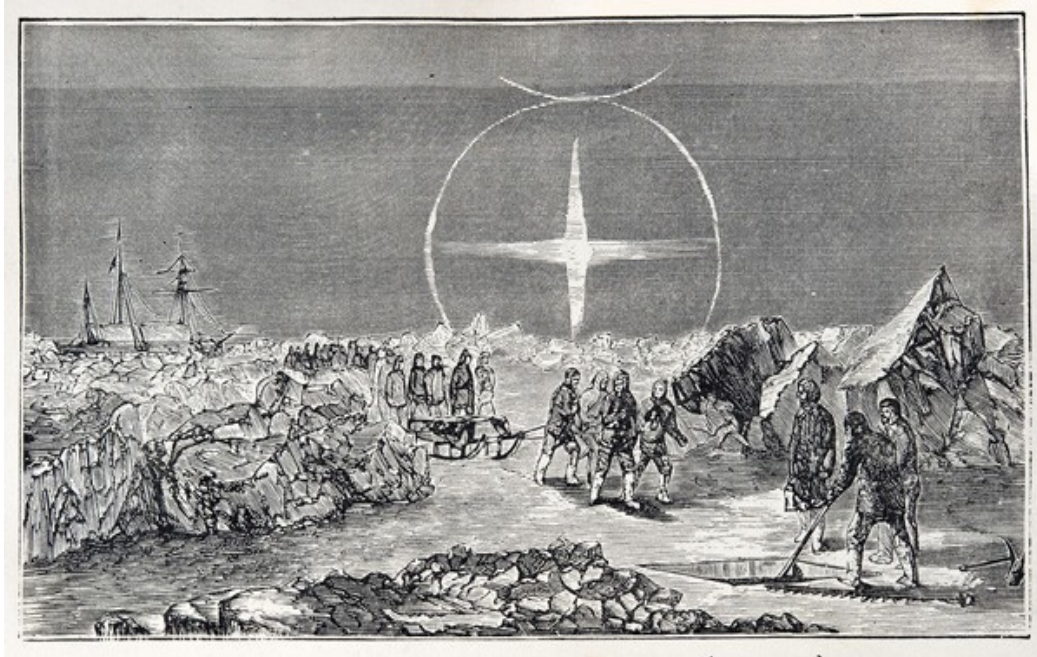


Figure 11 - "A Funeral in Ice," drawn by Captain May, from Captain M. Clintock, *The Fate of Sir John Franklin*. Photo Frank Ward.

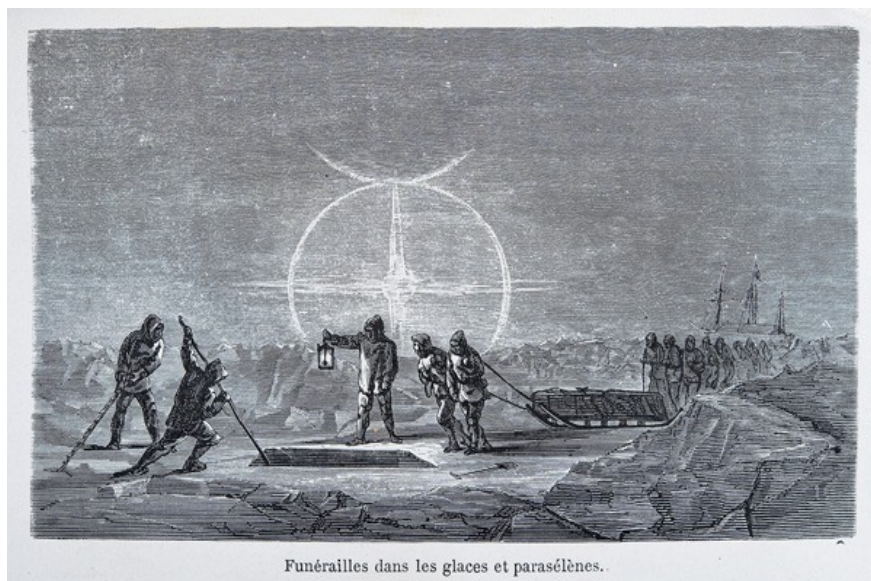


Figure 12 - "Funérailles dans les glaces et parasélènes," from Ferdinand de Lanoye, *La Mer Polaire, Voyage de L'Erèbe et de la Terreur* (Paris : Hachette, 1972). Photo Frank Ward.

Yet, the most striking parhelion may well be represented in Verne's writing career in the form of an Antarctic novel, his sequel to Edgar Allan Poe's 1838 *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. "The North Pole demands the South Pole, this is both a question of rhetoric and geometry," noted Henri Robillat, "the Vernian corpus would have been incomplete if *The Sphinx of the Icefields* had not been placed symmetrically to the great polar novel of the beginning of Verne's career." [28]

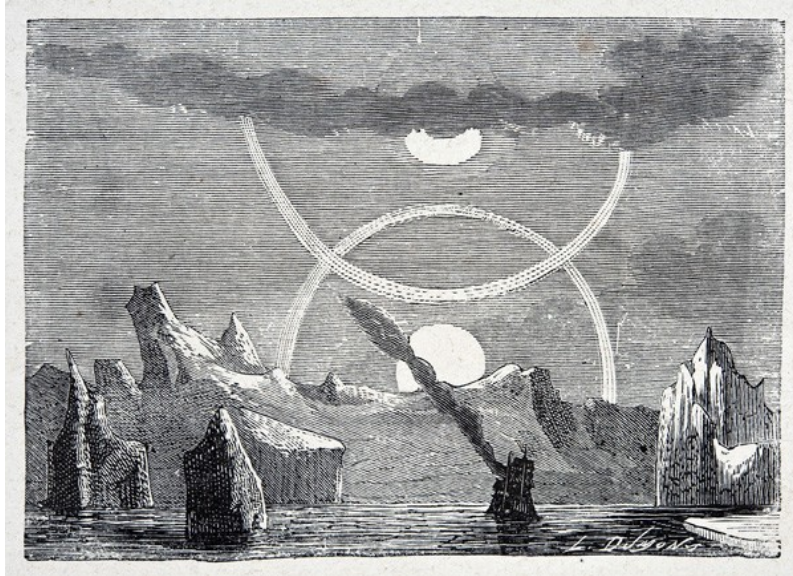


Figure 13 - Parhelia, from *Hatteras*. Photo Franck Ward.

## Mirage

The *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, published in 1838 by Edgar Allan Poe was translated in French twenty years later by Charles Baudelaire. For many Americans, the French enthusiasm for Poe remained an enigma, perhaps even a sign of poor taste. “Baudelaire is compromised by his having made himself the apostle of our own Edgar Poe,” wrote Henry James in 1878, “With all due respect for the very original genius of the author of the *Tales of Mystery*, it seems to us that to take him with more than a certain degree of seriousness is to lack seriousness one’s self. An enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection.” [29] If James had come across the long article Verne had published two years before the publication of *Hatteras*, in order to introduce the American author to the readers of the *Musée des Familles*, James would no doubt have described Verne as one of those decidedly primitive minds.

The last part of Verne’s 1864 article is dedicated to *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, recapping the strange adventures that befell the young man from Nantucket. [30] Verne carefully describes the three distinct but related episodes that compose the *Narrative*: Pym and his friend Augustus Barnard’s ill-fated adventure onboard the *Ariel* and their first shipwreck; eight months later, their second and more tragic adventure onboard the *Grampus* where mutiny, massacre and cannibalism decimate the crew; and Pym’s last journey when he is rescued, along with a sailor called Dirk Peters, by a schooner from Liverpool, the *Jane Guy*. Impelled by Pym’s evil genius to press on and explore the mysteries of the Antarctic, Captain Guy and his crew discover a new island called Tsalal where everything is entirely black: the people, the birds and the water itself which, although it has the appearance of *limpidity* when falling, writes Poe, presented “to the eye, as it flowed, every possible shade of purple...” [31]



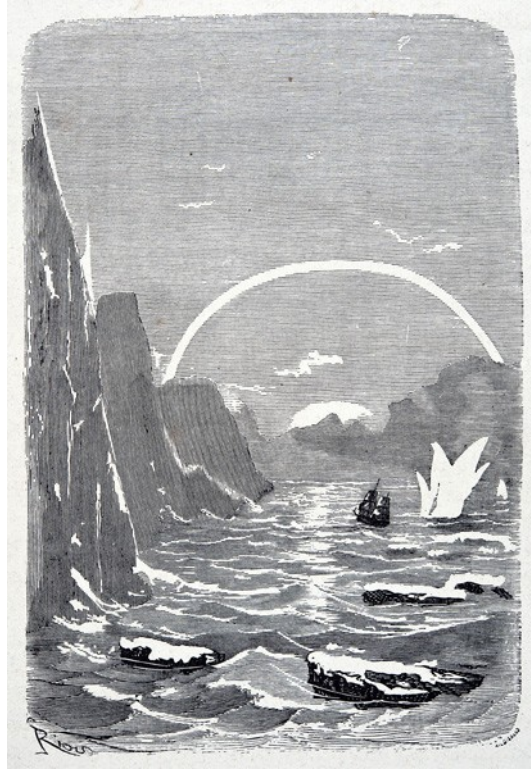


Figure 14 - Parhelion, from *Hatteras*. Photo Frank Ward.

The novel concludes with the destruction of the ship by the natives and the miraculous escape of Pym and Dirk Peters, carried by strong currents towards the South Pole onboard a fragile boat. Verne quoted extensively from the last mysterious entries of Poe's novel which describe "a limitless cataract, rolling silently into the sea from some immense and far-distant rampart into the heaven," and its dramatic conclusion:

*March 22.* The darkness had materially increased, relieved only by the glare of the water thrown back from the white curtain before us. . . And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow. [32]

These last pages have generated abundant critical interpretations that cover a wide range of possibilities, including the realistic explanation put forward by Richard Kopley, who notes that the cataract described by Poe could well be an aurora australis and the shrouded form that arises across the path of Pym and Peter that of the very ship which, one presumes, rescued Pym and Dirk Peters after their adventure. In his edition of Poe's *Narrative*, Kopley also notes that the shrouded figure has been interpreted as death (Moldenhauer, Peden) and as a Lazarus figure conquering death (Eakin); as goodness (Stroupe) and as perversity (Cox); as knowledge (O'Donnell, Helen Lee) and as the limits of knowledge (Lévy); as imagination (Liebler, Wells), the narrative itself (Kennedy, *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing*), and the white at the bottom of the unfinished page (Ricardou); as a Titan (Ljungquist), as a divinity (Bonaparte, Fiedler, Bezanson), and as Pym's unrecognized white shadow (Irwin, Robinson, *American Apocalypse*)." [33]

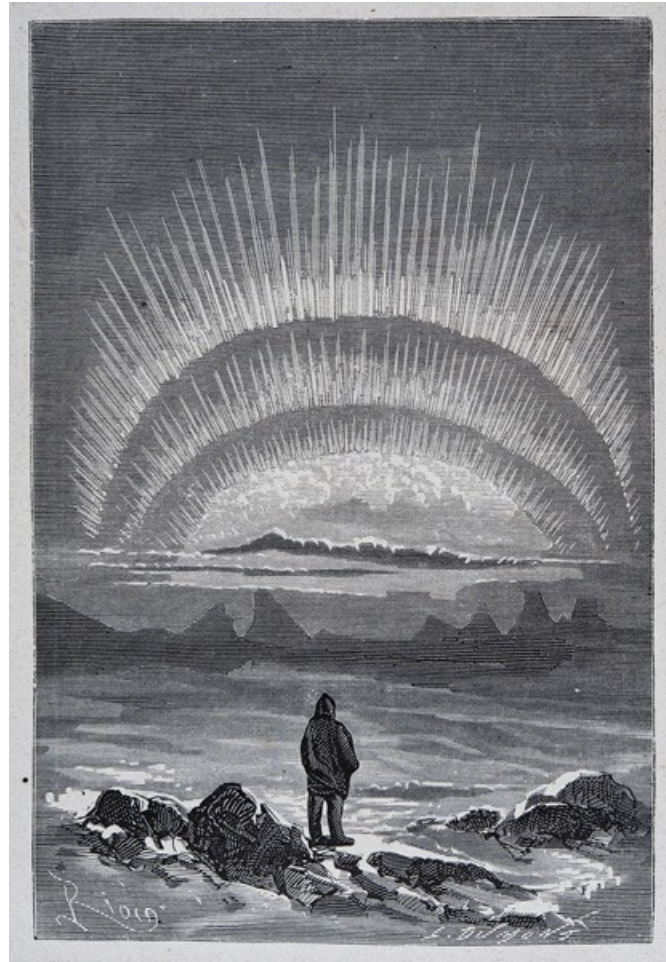


Figure 15 - Lunar halos, from *Hatteras*. Photo Frank Ward.

Marie Bonaparte, a student of Freud, was in fact more precise and saw in the veiled human figure an image of the mother's body, a representation of Poe's death drive, the impossible desire to return to the mother's womb.

Writing in 1864, Verne commented upon the ending with these words: "And the narrative is thus interrupted. Who will ever resume it?" [34] This is the task Verne would undertake, years later, in his *Sphinx of the Icefields* (*Le Sphinx des glaces*), thus giving himself, to quote Tim Unwin, a "second opportunity to discuss Poe's story." [35] The novel takes place in 1839, 11 years after the events recounted in the *Narrative*. The narrator embarks on the *Halbrane*, whose melancholy captain has been searching the southern seas for Pym's lost companions, and more particularly for his brother, the captain of the *Jane Guy*. Onboard the *Halbrane* is also Dirk Peters, hoping to find Pym whose disappearance Poe had mentioned in a note added to the *Narrative*, speaking of "the late sudden and distressing death of Mr. Pym" that accounted for the interrupted journal. Verne imagines instead that Pym, separated from his companions, had remained in the Polar Regions, while Peters had returned to the United States where he had published the narrative. Like many other Verne novels, and like the search for Franklin, *The Sphinx of the Icefields* thus leads the reader through unexplored territories in search of missing persons. In this case, there are no fabulous machines or superhero, no wars, no

conquests, not even the charting out of new territories, but a relentless descent into Poe's nightmarish landscape, and what first appears to have been the ultimate unveiling of the shrouded figure that dominated the *Narrative's* last paragraph. At the conclusion of *The Sphinx of the Icefields* the survivors of yet another shipwreck—that of the *Halbrane* seized by an overturning iceberg—relive Pym's last adventure. Their boat is taken at terrifying speed towards the prodigious mass that gives the book its title:



Figure 16 - *Halbrane* with sun halo, from *The Sphinx of the Icefields*, drawing by Roux. Photo Frank Ward.

With its strange shape, this mountain resembled an enormous sphinx . . . in the seated pose of the winged monster Greek mythology placed on the road to Thebes. . . The monster grew larger as we came near, without losing any of its mythological forms. It stood isolated on this immense plain, producing an effect I could not describe. There are impressions which can be reproduced by neither pen nor speech. And—but it could only be an illusion of our senses—it seemed as if we were attracted to it by the strength of its magnetic attraction" (478, 484). The mountain is indeed a gigantic magnet that explains the tragic conclusion of Pym's adventures: "After having gone beyond the South Pole, Pym, like us, had fallen into the monster's zone of attraction!...and there...seized by the magnetic fluid before having had the time to rid himself of the gun he was wearing on his shoulder, he had been projected against the mountain. (486)



It could certainly be argued that, in keeping with Verne's interest in scientific discoveries and his view of Poe as both a fantastic writer and a rational thinker, the magnetic mountain of the South Pole offers a "natural," if not exactly persuasive, explanation of the mystery of Poe's novel, or rather, an example of what Timothy Unwin has described as the fictionalization of science when he notes: "For Verne, if fiction feeds on science, then science also feeds on fiction, for fiction is what motivates science." [36] Interestingly, 1839, the date of the beginning of Verne's novel, is also the year when Sir James Ross Clark, who had discovered the North Magnetic Pole, had led the expedition to the Antarctic on the *Terror* and the *Erebus*. Clark never reached the South Pole and, as we have seen, his two ships were later lost in the expedition led by Sir John Franklin. It is thus possible to read the *Sphinx* as the hypothetical conclusion of several tragic polar adventures: the fictional voyage of Pym, the real life explorations of the *Terror* and the *Erebus*, and the mysterious end of Sir John Franklin and his crew.

The poles are the place of the "vertiginous attraction of the abyss" Verne had described in *Hatteras* (339), and it is easy to see how the black rock (*rupes nigra*) of the North Pole becomes the white mountain of the Antarctic, which was always imagined to be the exact opposite of the North. Verne had explicitly rejected the myth of a magnetic mountain in *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras* as hypotheses fed by credulity; neither Ross nor Hatteras and his crew, Verne writes, had found a mountain "capable of attracting vessels, tearing off their iron, anchor by anchor, nail by nail." [37] But the image still held a fascination though, surprisingly enough, Verne dismissed the possibility that the Sphinx stood at the magnetic pole or even close to it: "Did the proximity of the magnetic pole cause such effects?..." he asks when describing its fatal attraction, "[t]his was the first idea that crossed our minds. But upon reflection, this explanation had to be rejected....Moreover, at the place where the magnetic meridians meet, no phenomena other than the vertical position of the magnetic needle in two similar points of the globe can be observed. This phenomenon, already verified by local observations in the Arctic regions [and here, Verne is alluding to Clark Ross], should be identical in the Antarctic. Thus, there was a magnet of prodigious strength in the zone of attraction into which we had penetrated. One of those surprising effects that had been previously relegated to the rank of fables had taken place under our eyes. Who has ever been willing to admit that ships might be irresistibly attracted by a magnetic force, loosing their metal bindings on all sides, their hull opened up, the sea swallowing them into its depths?...yet, it was so." (480) Verne notes that winds bringing a "formidable accumulation" of electric fluid to the polar regions also cause the "luminous magnificence" of both *aurora borealis* and *australis*.

It is even believed—though the fact has not been observed—that at the very moment when a violent positive electric discharge takes place in the Arctic regions, the Antarctic regions are subjected to negative discharges. Indeed, these continuous currents that make the compass wildly fluctuate, must possess an extraordinary influence, and ...for this current to circulate around this sphinx, what was necessary?...nothing but a metallic vein..." (482)

The sphinx nonetheless occupies the pole of attraction, though its precise location remains unverifiable: "I think that this mountain must have been located in the magnetic axis.....but as for determining if it was precisely at the magnetic pole, our compass could not have done so...all I have to say is that its needle, wildly fluctuating and unstable, no longer indicated any orientation." (484) We know of Verne's obsession with maps and the geographical precision of his texts, but here—and in spite of the map inserted in the text showing the location of the sphinx—the travelers have lost their compass, and when Dirk Peters suddenly points to the remains of Pym's body, they know they have entered another dimension: "—There!...yes...there! I could not describe the impression these

three words made upon us: three cries, as Edgar Poe would have said, emanating from the depth of the ultra world.” (484) At this precise moment, it could be argued, Verne claims his text as fiction: a very specific form of fiction, to be sure, borrowing Poe’s voice the better to put a final end to Poe’s creation. Peters does not survive this grim discovery: “He tried to get up closer...to kiss the ossified remains of his poor Pym...his knees gave up. . .a sob compressed his throat...a spasm tore his heart...he fell...dead...” (486)



Figure 17 - The sphinx, from *The Sphinx of the Icefields*. Photo Frank Ward.

As Michel Serres and others have noted, Verne’s novels invest ancient mythology with the figure of science as modern myth. [38] In *Jouvenances sur Jules Verne*, Serres read *Michel Strogoff* as the tale of a modern Oedipus, wandering across Siberia, blind but lucid at last, engaged in a form of initiation. [39] *The Sphinx of the Icefields* is more explicit still, and no less complex, in its recasting of the Greek legend. The novel was first published two years after H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine*, where a sphinx also presides over the futuristic landscape inhabited by the Eloi and the Morlocks. Propelled into futurity, the time traveler first sees the gigantic form of the sphinx through a curtain of hail strangely reminiscent of the vapors and the cataract that opened up to reveal the shrouded figure towering over the last page of the *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*: “A colossal figure, carved apparently in some white stone, loomed indistinctly beyond the rhododendrons through the hazy downpour. But all else was invisible. My sensations would be hard to

describe. As the columns of hail grew thinner, I saw the white figure more distinctly. It was very large, for a silver birch-tree touched its shoulder. It was of white marble, in shape something like a sphinx." [40] Like a modern Oedipus, the Time Traveller limps through his adventure, like Pym he comes back to tell his story, only to leave again: "The Time Traveller vanished three years ago. And, as everyone knows, he has never returned." [41]

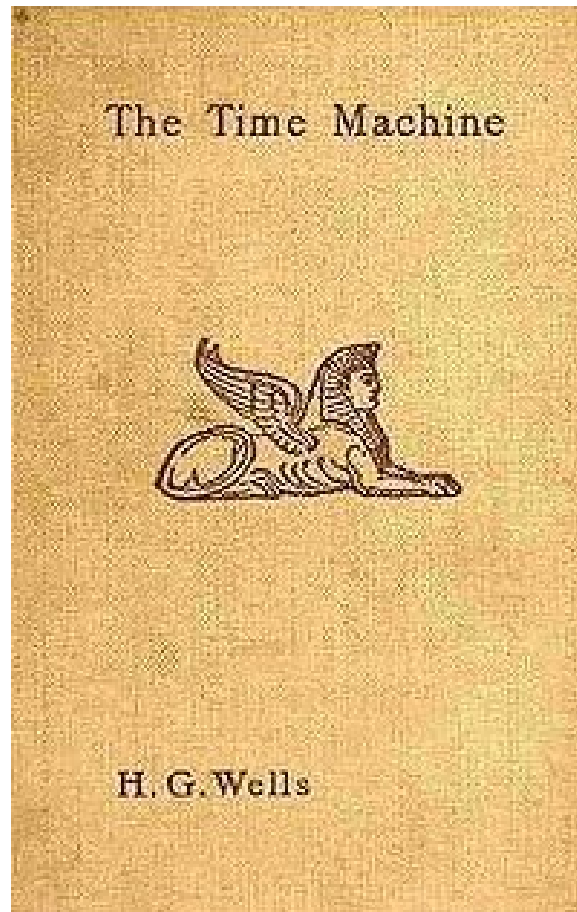


Figure 18 - H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine*. Cover of the first American Edition

In ancient Arabic, the word for sphinx meant the "father of Terror," and in another of Poe's stories, the vision of a sphinx blinds the beholder. One of the *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, entitled "The Sphinx," describes how, during the cholera epidemics that devastated New York—like the plague that had devastated the ancient city of Thebes—a young man, plunged into abnormal gloom by the growing number of casualties, describes the sudden appearance of a frightening and gigantic animal, so terrible that he "instinctively buries [his] face in his hands" covering his eyes as to protect himself from the apparition. [42] The monster is nothing but an insect "of the genus *Sphinx*, of the family *Crepuscularia*, of the order *Lepidoptera*, of the class *Insecta*—of insects." But for all its innocuous and fragile existence—the insect has just been caught in a spider's web—the description taken from a book of Natural History legitimates the fear experienced by the narrator: "The Death's-headed Sphinx has occasioned much terror among the vulgar, at times, by the melancholy kind of cry it utters, and the insignia of death it wears upon its corselet." [43]

As Claude Levi-Strauss has pointed out, the various retellings of the story of Oedipus (Freud's included) incorporate similar elements: whether the truth-seekers' infirmities result from an encounter with the sphinx or from a related episode, all the figures of Oedipus suffer from a physical defect (they are lame or blind); the man-devouring monster strikes terror; and of course knowledge or self-knowledge alone can vanquish the monster and lead to her destruction. It is rather remarkable that, eager as he claimed he was to provide a rational explanation for a fantastic tale, Verne opted to revive a myth in such detail. The ice monster devours ships, causing them to lose their bindings, their hulls to burst open and be "swallowed up" by the sea. At the foot of the gigantic mountain lie the wrecks of previous boats, like so many bones testifying to a gruesome feast; Arthur Gordon Pym's whitened remains are themselves transformed into a monstrous form: "a body, or rather a skin-covered skeleton, that the cold of these regions had preserved intact. He had a bent head, a white beard that fell to his belt, hands and feet armed with nails as long as claws." [44] The figures of insight and blindness associated with the Oedipus tale already played an important role in Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. The cataract described in the last entries, like a curtain descending over the eye, finally opens to reveal a vision itself covered by another veil: the gigantic draped figure that dominates the last entry of Pym's journal. Perhaps we should resist the temptation to lift the veil, to give meaning to the hidden shape that looms so large over the last entry, and focus instead on its narrative purpose: whatever is there cannot be identified by human eyes, and the end of the tale will not, should not, be told. Though lifting the prohibition in part, Verne insists on the metaphoric curtain that veils both the mythological truth and the uncertainty of exploration: "Dense fog everywhere," notes the narrator, "not the mist that is dissolved by the first rays of the sun, and disappears with the winds...No! a yellowish fog, rather, with a musty smell, as if this Antarctic January had been the 'brumaire,' the foggy month of the northern hemisphere. From the yellowish sky oozed vesicular mists that covered the top of our ice mountain." [45] In the midst of this thickened fog and as "new vapors accumulated" the narrator describes "one of those strange hallucinations that Arthur Pym's mind must have experienced":

I thought I was finally seeing what he had seen!...This solid fog was the curtain of mist that hung over the horizon, over his madman's eyes!... I looked for this 'limitless cataract rolling silently into the sea from some immense and far-distant rampart into the heaven.' I looked for the yawning rents behind which was a chaos of flitting and indistinct images agitated by the powerful blasts of wind!...I looked for the white giant, the giant of the Pole!...Finally, reason prevailed."

"This visionary turmoil, this wild distraction disappeared little by little," adds Jeorling, but "not once did the curtain open in front of us, and if the iceberg, which had moved forty miles during the last day, had gone beyond the extremity of the earth's axis, we were never to know!..." [46] (404)

At this point, Verne inserted a long note:

Twenty eight years later, what Mr. Jeorling had been unable to glimpse, another had seen, another had set foot on this part of the globe, on March 21<sup>st</sup>, 1868. . . And, at the very moment when the northern horizon cuts the solar disk in two equal parts, he took possession of this continent in his own name, unfurling a flag embroidered with a golden N. In the open sea floated a submarine called the *Nautilus*, and her captain was captain Nemo. (404)

With these lines, it could be argued, Verne tears the veil open for his readers, showing what was doubly invisible to the narrator of the *Sphinx of the Icefields*, what "Mr. Jeorling had been unable to see:" the chaotic volcanic landscape of the pole, littered with basaltic fragments, scoria, ashes, lava, and blackish rocks, and the scene that would take place

only at the equinox of 1868. The curtain thus opens briefly, but on another text, another fiction, and another time, to be closed again forever. Nemo appears only as a fleeting vision soon to be eclipsed by the continuing narrative. This curious note however introduces a more complicated twist to the narrative of the Antarctic: *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* (*Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*) had been published 27 years earlier, and Verne's fame owed much to the daring adventure he had described as Nemo's submarine odyssey. By referring to a text previously written, though taking place later than the novel he was in the process of completing, Verne also points out to a series of unresolved contradictions: no abyss threatened Nemo, no giant encountered and fatally attracted the iron submarine. The landscape was desolate, with a limited vegetation of lichens, but in the air "life was overabundant" with thousands of birds of various species; on land the "baroque cries" of penguins echoed the "formidable roaring" of walruses. [47] Nemo lists all the travelers who ventured near the Pole without ever reaching it, including Ross Clark's expedition onboard the *Terror* and the *Erebus*, but nowhere does the name of Poe's previous tale of the Pole appear. The fiction of Nemo summoned in the footnote belies the fiction of Pym to which Verne gives credence throughout *The Sphinx of the Icefields*, as the parhelia and refraction belie the evidence of the senses.

It may just be a question of geographical displacement of course: in *The Sphinx of the Icefields*, Verne stresses on several occasions that the travelers have gone beyond the Pole, unable to see it or even to measure their location accurately, since the sun remained invisible behind the persistent fog. [48] But if the Pole is the point of invisibility, the presence of the magnetic mountain seems nonetheless to elucidate a mystery. When Jeorling recognizes the magnetic attraction of the mountain, he writes: "I understood, and in an instant it threw a terrible light on the last catastrophe of which Hearne and his accomplices had been the victims." [49] This terrible light emanating from the "monster" is the revelation that the members of the crew who had stolen the lifeboat of the *Halbrane* had all died at the foot of the mountain.

### Cannibalism

Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* itself dwelt at some length on the cannibalism associated with the Greek legend of the man-eating sphinx. Pym at first hesitates to describe the scene where the three starving survivors of the *Grampus* agree to draw lots and then to kill and eat the designated victim: "It is with extreme reluctance that I dwell upon the appalling scene which ensued." "I must not dwell upon the fearful repast which immediately ensued," he repeats later, "such things may be imagined, but words have no power to impress the mind with the exquisite horror of their reality." Yet Pym goes on: "Let it suffice to say that, having in some measure appeased the raging thirst which consumed us by the blood of the victim, and having by common consent taken off the hands, feet, and head, throwing them, together with the entrails, into the sea, we devoured the rest of the body piecemeal." [50] Though more brutal than common accounts, these pages also echo other nightmarish descriptions from wreck survivors, notably those of the *Medusa*. Verne himself had given the story of the *Medusa* and its episode of cannibalism center stage in *Le Chancellor*, writing to Hetzel that it represented his own *Gordon Pym*. [51]

Dirk Peters first appears as Hunt, and only reveals his true identity half-way through the book. "How did Captain Len Guy and I, who had so often read Edgar Poe's book, fail to guess that the man who had boarded the ship in the Falklands and the half-Indian Peters were one? . . . Well, both Captain Guy and his passenger Jeorling had a veil over their eyes!... I admit it; we were two blind men." (275) Blindness is contagious, but for Jeorling the discovery of Peters' identity brings back "the terrible scenes in which he had



participated, events, Arthur Pym tells us, 'so completely beyond the register of human experience, and going beyond the credulity of men.'" (276)

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud describes the three instinctual desires that have been uniformly prohibited by civilization: "[These] instinctual desires," he writes, "are those of incest, of cannibalism, and of murder." But "the attitude of culture to these oldest instinctual wishes is [not] the same in each case," he adds, "cannibalism alone seems to be proscribed by every one." [52] In *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, Pierre Vidal-Naquet placed the sphinx in the category of the *subhuman*: "[O]ne is either above in the company of Zeus...or in the monstrous world of whatever is subhuman, in the company of the Sphinx." [53] "On the shield of Parthenopaeus the Sphinx, which is both female and subhuman (it eats raw flesh), pins down a citizen of Thebes." [54] Eating raw flesh, and particularly raw human flesh, reduces the human to the monstrous category of the subhuman monster. Pym and Peters, who briefly tasted the forbidden flesh, are united by symbolic destiny at the foot of the man-devouring monster. They join the fictitious sailors of Hatteras' *Forward*, the real-life men of the Franklin expedition, and the survivors of the *Medusa* in disclosing that other outcome of disastrous events: the return of the human species to the subhuman category of monstrosity.

There is no space to expand here on the links between the murder of the father described by Freud in *Totem and Taboo*, the cannibalistic scene that followed, and the generalized prohibition of incest and cannibalism that founded social rules and religion. But we should note that *The Sphinx of the Icefields*, in re-staging the *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, the better to erase some of its episodes [55] or to develop some of its themes, also performs a form of literary cannibalism, in the sense of a ritual tribute to the dead father. The boldness that consists in providing a sequel to Poe's work, in daring to lift—if only in part—the veil that hides the human figure, thus replays in various ways the murder of the father and the Oedipus tale. From this perspective, we should not be surprised that, at the end of a voyage whose goal is to retrace that of Pym we should encounter the figure of a sphinx.

A slight displacement however prevents us in the end from reading Verne's novel as the sequel that claims to elucidate the last pages of the *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Although the reader is (mis)led in identifying the sphinx with the shrouded human figure that arises in the last entry of Pym's journal, Verne himself carefully abstains from doing so, a rather remarkable omission in a novel so preoccupied with providing a conclusion and an explanation to an unfinished narrative. The sphinx thus does not lift the drapery that covered the gigantic shape, but it is particularly interesting to observe, as Jean-Pierre Picot did, that the mythical position of the sphinx on the map provided by Verne is in the vicinity of the Erebus volcano. In Greco-latin mythology, Picot notes, the Erebus opens the way to the underworld, and the sphinx's "double thanatological functions" are to mount guard [over a threshold] and to propose enigmas: "The enigma is that of human destiny, and the threshold is that of the other world." [56]

I would like to conclude with a painting by Magritte that, I believe, offers an appropriate illustration of Verne's novel. It is entitled *La Reproduction interdite* and shows the image of a young man whose face is doubly withheld from the beholder: his back is turned to us, and the mirror, contrary to all physical laws of refraction, duplicates our own perspective rather than showing the face of the man standing in front of it. Next to the man, on a simple shelf, lies Poe's novel in Baudelaire's French translation: *Les Aventures d'Arthur Gordon Pym*. The book and his title are reflected normally in the mirror, making the withheld face more enigmatic still. This painting can certainly be read as Magritte's own

meditation on the *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and perhaps as a comment on the undisclosed identity of the figure that haunts the last pages of the novel. But this painting seems more appropriate still as an illustration of the *Sphinx des glaces*, if one considers that in French the same word (*glace*) designates both ice and a mirror. In the conclusion of his novel, Verne wrote: "Arthur Pym, the hero so magnificently celebrated by Edgar Poe, showed us the way...May others follow, may others wrest away the last secrets of the mysterious Antarctic!" It could be argued that Jules Verne rewrote the myth of the sphinx, but with a variation, reversing the traditional riddle to ask: "What is man?" or "who is this man, Arthur Gordon Pym, Edgar Allan Poe?" and the book and the mirrored ice, both reply: "an enigma, an illusion."

The painting, too, is a parhelion.



Figure 19 - René Magritte, *La Reproduction interdite*, by permission of the estate of René Magritte. Reproduction, including downloading of Magritte works is prohibited by copyright laws and international conventions without the express permission of Artists Rights Society (ARS) of New York.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to thank George Slusser, who kindly invited me to participate in the 2009 Eaton Conference on Jules Verne, and William Butcher, whose comments and suggestions have been invaluable.

## NOTES

1. Elisha Kent Kane, *The U.S. Grinnell Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin, A Personal Narrative* (New York: Harper, 1864), p. 184.
2. Quoted in Russel A. Potter, "Sir John Franklin: His Life and Afterlife," *Elisha Kent Kane Historical Society*, p. 2. The complete disappearance of Franklin's 2 ships and crew remains unexplained, although recent studies have argued that the tinned food supplies were probably responsible for the disaster. See Owen Beattie and John Geiger, *Frozen in Time: Unlocking the Secrets of the Franklin Expedition* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987), and Scott Cookman, *Ice Blink: The Tragic Fate of Sir John Franklin's Lost Polar Expedition* (New York: John Wiley, 2000). To this day, remarkably few remnants of the expedition have been found. A 2008 expedition backed by the Canadian Government failed to locate the ships.
3. Charles Dickens, "The Lost Arctic Voyagers", *Households Words*, vol. X, no 245 (2 December 1854): 362.
4. Captain M'Clintock, *The Fate of Sir John Franklin Discovered in the Artic Ocean*, (Philadelphia, J.T. Lloyd, 1860), p. 219.
5. Dickens, *Op. cit.* . p. 365.
6. Dickens, *Op. cit.* 9 December 1854, pp. 392-393.
7. Jean-Luc Nancy, *After Tragedy*, unpublished keynote address, *Catastrophe and Caesura: Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe Today*, New York University, April 10-12<sup>th</sup> 2008.
8. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," *Illuminations*, ed. with a preface by Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955), p. 70.
9. William Butcher mentions 3 books as the main sources for Verne's *Hatteras*: Ferdinand de Lanoye et Amateur Etienne Hervé's *Voyages dans les glaces du Pôle arctique (Sir John Ross, Edward Parry, John Franklin, Beechy, Black, Mac Clure et autres navigateurs célèbres)* (1854); Lucien Dubois, *Le Pôle et l'équateur* (1863), and Lanoye's *La Mer polaire* (1854). This last title is a partial translation of Elisha Kent Kane's reports on the Grinnell expeditions. Captain M'Clintock's *The Fate of Sir John Franklin* was translated into French in 1860 under the title, *La Destinée de Sir John Franklin dévoilée* (Paris: A. Bertrand, 1860). Franklin was well-known in France and the book he had written about his previous arctic expeditions had been translated by M. Dufauconpret under the title *Histoire de deux voyages entrepris par ordre du gouvernement anglais* (Paris: Gide, 1824). Verne's interest in the Franklin expedition is illustrated as well by the number of times it is cited in his novels: Terry Harpold has noted more than 400 mentions of the disaster.
10. The novel was first serialized in Pierre-Jules Hetzel's *Le Magasin illustré d'éducation et de récréation*. On the attraction of the Poles in Verne's novels, see, in addition to the works cited by Butcher, Marcel Lecomte, "Le Thème du grand Nord," in *L'Arc* 29, 1966, pp. 66-68; and *Dossiers du Collège de Pataphysique* 16, "Centenaire de la découverte du Pôle Nord par le Capitaine Hatteras" (July, 1961).
11. Jules Verne, *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras*, trans. with an Introduction and Notes by William Butcher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 97. William Butcher's superb edition of *Hatteras* includes an extensive bibliography and Verne's initial ending of the novel. It should also be noted that the history of sea wrecks had been a well-established genre since the middle of the eighteenth-century. A particularly illuminating compilation is the *Histoire des naufrages* a 3-volume text initially written by Desperthes, augmented by J.-B.-B. Eyries. The complete edition was published in 1832 by Louis Tenré, in Paris.
12. Kane, *op. cit.* p. 149.

13. In his biography of Jules Verne, William Butcher notes: "Verne borrows throughout from Hervé and Lanoye, indeed copying about eight pages word for word, mistakes included, making this the lengthiest plagiarism identified in his works." *Jules Verne, The Definitive Biography, with an introduction by Arthur C. Clarke* (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 2006), p. 156. Verne also owned a copy of Joseph-René Bellot's *Journal d'un voyage aux mers polaires exécuté à la recherche de Sir John Franklin*, published in 1854. The French's enthusiasm for polar expeditions and their passionate interest in the fate of Sir John Franklin is demonstrated in the multiple articles and communications published in various journals and the bulletins of learned societies. The president of the French Society of Geography, Victor-Adolphe Malte-Brun published an update on all the searches in his *Coup d'oeil d'ensemble sur les différentes expéditions arctiques entreprises à la recherche de Sir John Franklin, et sur les découvertes auxquelles elles ont donné lieu* (Paris : A. Bertrand, 1955). I believe an additional text may well have inspired Verne's description of the ice fields: Léonie d'Aunet, *Voyage d'une femme au Spitzberg* (Paris: Hachette, 1854). Léonie d'Aunet was the only woman onboard an early scientific expedition to the Arctic. Nowadays, she is also remembered as one of Victor Hugo's mistresses.
14. *Hatteras*, p. 319-320, translation modified.
15. Id. p. 321. Jean-Luc Steinmetz comments on the mystique of the Poles and the possible influence of Verne's novel on Rimbaud in "Pacotilles pour un 'Barbare', *Les Illuminations*, un autre lecteur?" *Les Lettres Romanes*, 1994, pp. 65-74.
16. Cited in Taylor, E.G.R. "A letter Dated 1577 from Mercator to John Dee," *Imago Mundi* 13(1956): 56-68.
17. *Hatteras*, p. 318.
18. Letter dated 25 April 1864. Published in *Correspondance inédite de Jules Verne et de Pierre-Jules Hetzel*, ed. by Olivier Dumas, Piero Gondolo della Riva, and Volker Dehs (Geneve : Slatkine, 1999), vol. I, p. 27.
19. *Hatteras*, p. 348.
20. Id. p. 349.
21. *Hatteras*, pp. 345-346. Translation modified.
22. See Olivier Dumas, "La Mort d'Hatteras (avec la fin du manuscrit de Jules Verne)," *Bulletin de la Société Jules Verne*, 73 (January 1985), pp. 22-24 and "Le véritable Hatteras," *Bulletin de la Société Jules Verne*, 168 (Dec. 2008): 33-41.
23. For an explanation of the phenomenon, see David K. Lynch and William Livingston, *Color and Light in Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 171-175.
24. Kane, op. cit. p.222.
25. M'Clintock, op. cit. pp. 82-83.
26. Kane, p. 187.
27. *Hatteras*, pp. 116-117. See the series of articles written by Edmond-P. Gehu, "La Géographie polaire dans l'oeuvre de Jules Verne" in *Bulletin de la Société Jules Verne*, 9, 10, and 11-12-13.
28. Henri Robillat, "D'un Pôle à l'autre", in *Cahiers du Collège de Pataphysique*, 19 (1961): 31-35.
29. Henry James, *French Poets and Novelists* (New York and London: Macmillan, 1878), p. 76.
30. Jules Verne, "Edgar Poe et ses oeuvres", *Musée des Familles*, April 1864, pp. 193-208. See Arthur B. Evans, "Literary Intertext in Jules Verne's *Voyages Extraordinaires*," *Science-Fiction Studies*, XXIII:2 # 69 (July 1996): 171-187. Terry Harpold discusses another example of Poe's influence on Verne in "Verne, Baudelaire et Poe, *La Jangada et Le Scarabée d'or*", *Revue Jules Verne*, 19-20 (2005): 162-168. See also Jean-Yves Tadié, *Regarde de tous tes yeux, regarde! Jules Verne* (Paris : Gallimard, 2005), pp. 25-41.
31. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, edited with an introduction and notes by Richard Kopley (London and New York: Penguin, 1999), p. 168.

32. *Id.* pp. 216-217. Verne quotes the last entries from Baudelaire's translation in their entirety, reproducing the much-discussed error of the last sentence, where Baudelaire translated the "hue of the skin of the figure" as "la couleur de la peau de l'homme."
33. Richard Kopley, *op. cit.* p. 242.
34. Although *The Sphinx of the Icefields* is the only Verne novel to be explicitly presented as a sequel to *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Verne acknowledged the influence of Poe's novel on another of his works when he wrote of *Le Chancellor* "It's my *Gordon Pym*, but truer, and, I believe, more interesting," *Correspondance inédite de Jules Verne et de Pierre-Jules Hetzel (1863-1886)*, ed. by Olivier Dumas, Piero Gondolo della Riva and Volker Dehs (Geneva: Slatkine, 1991) vol. 1, p. 253. As Jean-Pierre Picot has noted, *Hatteras*, written just 2 years after Verne's article on Edgar Allan Poe, offers a tacit homage to the American writer, see "Verne, Poe, Schéhérazade, le ménage à trois?" in *Europe* 909-910 (Jan-Feb 2005): 80-92. By a curious coincidence, a Lieutenant onboard one of the expeditions in search of Sir John Franklin under the command of Sir Edward Belcher, was a certain Pim from Bedford, Connecticut. He is mentioned in several accounts, with a striking description of his quasi-phantasmatic apparition when he reached the ice-bound *Investigator*, commanded by Captain M'Clure, bringing them news of help. Poe's influence on Verne has been well-documented and recognized as early as 1866 by Théophile Gautier in "Les Voyages imaginaires de M. Jules Verne," re-published in *Jules Verne*, ed. by Pierre-Andre Touttain, *Cahiers de l'Herne* 24 (14 October 1874): 85-87.
35. Timothy Unwin, *Jules Verne: Journeys in Writing* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), p. 209. In his work, Unwin provides a detailed examination of Verne's rewriting of Poe's text, and concludes that "if all writing is rewriting, then the example of *Le Sphinx des glaces* demonstrates that the rewritten text is capable of profound originality." (212).
36. Timothy Unwin, "The Fiction of Science, or the Science of Fiction," in *Jules Verne: Narratives of Modernity* ed. by Edmund J. Smyth (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), p. 57. See also *Jules Verne: Journeys in Writing* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005).
37. *Hatteras*, p. 97.
38. Timothy Unwin also discusses at length "the interplay between the objective and the poetic, the scientific and the fictional" and argues persuasively that Verne's fiction often relies on another text as point of departure.
39. Michel Serres, *Jouvences sur Jules Verne* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974).
40. H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (New York: Berkley Highland, 1963), pp. 33-34.
41. *Id.* p. 139.
42. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Sphinx" in *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* with an introduction by Pádraic Colum (London: Dent, 1975), p. 68.
43. *Id.* p. 68.
44. *Sphinx*, p. 486. This scene is reminiscent of the discovery of bones in the *Voyage to the Center of the Earth* (*Voyage au centre de la terre*).
45. *Id.* p. 402.
46. *Ibid.* pp. 403-404.
47. *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*, ed. by Jacques Noiray (Paris : Folio, 2005), pp. 523, 528.
48. See the map inserted in the text. On the question of maps, see Terry Harpold, "Verne's Cartographies", *Science-Fiction Studies*, vol. 32 (2005), pp. 18-42.
49. *Sphinx*, p. 481.
50. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, p. 117.
51. In a letter to Pierre-Jules Hetzel, he wrote that the "raft of the *Medusa* had not produced anything as terrifying" as his novel. (15 Sept 1871). For a recent study of the *Chancellor*, see



Yves Gilli, Florent Montclair, Sylvie Petit, *Le Naufrage dans l'oeuvre de Jules Verne* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998), pp. 113-137.

52. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. by W. D. Robson-Scott (New York: H. Liveright, 1928), pp. 17-18. See also "Destins du Cannibalisme," *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, 6 (1972).
53. Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. By Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1990), p. 288.
54. Id. p. 292.
55. Lionel Dupuy, *Jules Verne, L'Homme et la Terre : La Mystérieuse géographie des Voyages extraordinaires* (Dôle : La Clef d'Argent, 2006). Dupuy discusses at length both Poe's influence and that of travel narratives such as Dumont d'Urville's important *Voyage au Pôle Sud et dans l'Océanie sur les corvettes L'Astrolabe et la Zélée par ordre du Roi pendant les années 1837-1838-1839-1840*. Dumont d'Urville left just a few years after a cholera epidemic killed his young daughter. He had never given credence to Weddel and Morrell's reports that there was a sea free of ice in the Antarctic, but faithfully tried to fulfill part of the mission defined by the government to penetrate as far South as possible. He came back to France to a hero's welcome but died tragically, along with his wife and son, in a railway accident in 1842. On the space of writing in Verne, see Daniel Compère, "Jules Verne et la modernité," *Europe* 595-596 (Nov-Dec 1978):27-36, and Marie-Hélène Huet, "Itinéraire du texte" in *Jules Verne, Colloque de Cerisy* (Paris : Union Générale d'Éditions, 1979), pp. 9-26.
56. Jean-Pierre Picot, op. cit. p. 90.

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