

# THE POETICS OF THE ANTARCTIC

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*A Study in Nineteenth-Century  
American Cultural Perceptions*

William E. Lenz



GARLAND STUDIES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE  
(VOL. 5)

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For my mother,  
Elizabeth Burroughs Lenz



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*Continent, city, country, society;  
the choice is never wide and never free.  
And here, or there . . . No. Should we have stayed at home,  
wherever that may be?*

—Elizabeth Bishop, "Questions of Travel"





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## Series Editor's Preface

What role did Antarctic exploration play on the American cultural stage during the nineteenth century? How do the multitudes of volumes detailing voyaging—from Hakluyt, Drake, Ellis, and others of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, on through Cook, Reynolds, Morrell, Scoresby, Wilkes, plus many additional writers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—come to bear upon literary figures such as Cowper, Coleridge, Scott, Byron, Mary Shelley, who in turn influenced the fiction of Cooper, Poe and Melville, or a vast quantity of work turned out by American versifiers? In a more restricted focus, what may we learn about the image of Antarctic exploration from a reading of James Croxall Palmer's book-length poem, *Thulia: A Tale of the Antarctic*, published in 1843, then revised and expanded into *Antarctic Mariner's Song* in 1868? Answers to these questions and illumination of many more aspects of the Antarctic's importance for Americans in the last century appear in the following pages.

The commercial, scientific, visionary, and adventurous implications of Antarctic voyaging, which often overlap, are clearly established by Lenz, who relates them to the developing American nationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, fact and fiction commenced to blur, in a time when fiction often was viewed as a suspect literary form, in American works such as Benjamin Morrell's well-known *Narrative* (1832), the less familiar *Narrative* by his wife, Abby Jane (1833), and Edmund Fanning's *Voyage Round the World* (1833). Lenz gives us sophisticated gender study in comparing the Morrells' books and finding Abby Jane's less "goal-driven." Turning to sea fiction—that type so popular during the early

nineteenth century—Lenz notes that Americans envisioned the sea as a jealous deity, and that, in consequence, the protagonist who confronted it was often cast as a new Prometheus in his determination to know and share the secrets of the ocean. We are also made aware of the preeminence of poetry among readers through much of the nineteenth century, and, more pointedly, that women were as likely to encounter and admire explorative voyaging as a literary theme. We are reminded, too, that American painting frequently centered in similar thematics. No narrow art emanated from Antarctic origins.

Chapter 3 is devoted to *Thulia*, Palmer's verse narrative mentioned above. Palmer was a surgeon with literary inclinations, and his book indicates the widespread popularity of narrative poetry among literate Americans. Lenz observes how Palmer's verse forms "control and contain the Antarctic" in contrast to Poe's "disjointed narrative style" in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, which "licenses as it stimulates extreme perceptions." Palmer's landscape is static; Poe's lives. *Thulia*, brought out in an attractive format for the Christmas trade, elicited some favorable attention, indicating the American interest in Antarctic exploration, an interest that could tolerate less than sterling verse if it encased stimulating themes. When Palmer revised his book-length poem—the focus in Chapter 5—his main interest seemed to be the achievement of polish. He also managed to create a nightmare world analogous to that in Poe's *Pym*, as may be seen especially in the added sections. Palmer's revisions may also exemplify his reaffirmation of positive qualities underlying American civilization, even though his experience in the Civil War had considerably sobered his outlook regarding that tumultuous event. In the *Antarctic Mariner's Song*, the Antarctic looms more as a symbol of the "eternal mysteries of nature, the absolute abstractions" than it had in the earlier version of the poem. We encounter far less conventional Gothicism and Byronism in the later rendition.

Turning to chapter 4, we shift to sea fiction proper. Lenz offers compact but provocative critiques of Cooper's *The Monikins* (1835), where the author's subsuming the Antarctic as region to political issues produced undeniable dullness, and *The Sea Lions* (1849), in which realism was mated with philosophy in

depicting the Antarctic as an area where the individual "confronts his own fears [and] the unresolvable ambiguity of reality, emblemized by the polar writer." So this later Cooper novel stands as a companion to *Pym* and to *Moby Dick*, in which the renowned chapter on "The Whiteness of the Whale" may stem from the famous Wilkes exploration narrative. Here Melville probes the limits of human perception.

Lenz goes on to note that most American sea fiction during the 1850s and 1860s did not feature Antarctica, just as exploration narratives displayed a turning to other territories for subject matter. Many of the latter delineated Arctic regions—which continued to be popular far into the 1890s. The changing, fluid perceptions of the Antarctic, however, permit Gothicism in the fiction of Cooper, Poe, and Melville to portray the Antarctic as showing the "underside of the American dream," in opposition to the positive feelings conveyed by reportage of the Wilkes expedition or those informing Palmer's work. In both works the Antarctic is presented as a field for conquest, and *Thulia* centers on a safe journey through troubled waters. Only later does he include loneliness and other frightening elements in far southern polar life. Lenz provides a brief contrast between nineteenth- and twentieth-century views of the Antarctic.

Matters of narrative technique, of realism coming to bear upon romance (and often enhancing it), of the single accomplishments attained by several nineteenth-century luminaries, such as Byron, Cooper, Poe, and Melville, who carried away artistic inspiration from their delvings into exploration accounts: All these and much more are given greater accessibility by means of Lenz's book. In itself it constitutes a work of exploration, and it should find readers whose reading of these pages will lead to further work in topics addressed here. *The Poetics of the Antarctic* invites and suggests as much as it defines, a positive trait in a scholarly book. The bibliographical information combines with persuasive presentations of keen analyses to demonstrate Lenz's authority in and relish for his chosen subject. We might well recall Emerson's writing in his essay "The Poet," that "bare lists of words" may constitute the stuff and substance of poetry. Lenz's listing of works detailing

exploration merge with the graceful, readable expression of his argument to produce a poetry of its own.

Benjamin F. Fisher  
University of Mississippi

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## Acknowledgments

Many years ago my mother, to whom I have dedicated this book, presented me with a well-preserved first edition of Charles Wilkes's five-volume *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*. I do not know whether, having learned of my new research interest in the expedition, she scoured second-hand bookshops in New York to secure it, or whether, as one family story goes, she had been entrusted with the volumes because one of our ancestors had sailed with Wilkes to Antarctica. Both versions ring true to my ear, and as Melville's Father Mapple says, there is "a two-stranded lesson" in that. The first volume of this set is inscribed "To My Dear Friend Gideon W. Young—With the Warmest Regards of Michael Kennephy (?) 1862–1887, 11 October." It would be pleasant to think that my own interest in the expedition, the Antarctic, and in the exotic had a genetic basis and was not just the result of my own eccentricities. But I have not followed this ancestral footstep beyond speculation.

I had hoped to write these paragraphs in Antarctica, perhaps sitting in an icebreaker-class ship's tiny cabin after a day of exploration on the earth's southernmost continent. Instead of retracing the route of the U.S. Exploring Expedition in 1839, however, I will approximate the travels of John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood, who in the same year, 1839, set out to explore the fabled Mayan cities hidden in the jungles of Central America. I will journey with a group of Chatham College students to Belize and Guatemala, accompanied by my good friend and colleague in psychology, Joe Wister, who traveled with me (twice) to the Galapagos Islands. He has been a constant support and provided a responsive sounding board for many of my most outrageous ideas. I also wish to thank Linda



Rosenzweig, my colleague in history, for her careful reading of the introduction; Tom Hershberger, who, as dean of the faculty, consistently encouraged my research in countless ways; and Chatham College, for several summer grants and a sabbatical in 1988 to initiate this project in earnest.

Lisa Kulick and Victoria Nelson, my incredibly competent student assistants, managed time and again to save me from committing the most horrendous mistakes. Librarians at dozens of institutions deserve liberal thanks for their hours of assistance in retrieving inscriptions, locating lost periodicals, and redirecting my searches.

I owe a long-term debt of gratitude to Ben Fisher, who most recently served as a series editor for Garland Publishing and who years ago wrote me the memorable words, "Away with paranoia!" There are few senior scholars who are as supportive and humane. And to Phyllis Korper, senior editor at Garland, who took all my extravagant requests calmly in stride, I offer my thanks.

I wish to thank the editors of the following journals for permission to reprint in revised form material from their pages: an early version of chapter 1 appeared in *American Studies* (reprinted from *American Studies*, Volume 32, Number 2, © 1991 Mid-America American Studies Association; used by permission); of chapter 2 in the *CEA Critic* Volume 53, Number 3 (Spring/Summer 1991: 30–38); and of chapter 3 in *ATQ* (Originally published in *ATQ*, Volume 4, Number 4, December 1990. Reprinted by permission of the University of Rhode Island). Special thanks are due to the Nantucket Historical Association for permission to quote from a typescript of a letter from William Hussey Macy to his cousin Susan Burdick, written on board the ship *Alpha*, October 8, 1848 (Nantucket Historical Association Research Center, Collection 96, folder 42); and to the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts, for allowing me to reproduce an illustration from Edmund Fanning's *Voyages Round the World* (1833) in their collection.

My family has for many years lived with my obsession and has coped extremely well; although I have not yet convinced them to voyage with me to Antarctica, I cajoled them into journeying with me to the Galapagos Islands and to Belize,

where they proved themselves the best traveling companions in the world. To Belle and Will, and to my understanding if bewildered wife, who surely never anticipated any of these peregrinations, I owe a continuously accruing debt.

Pittsburgh, PA



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## Introduction

A belief in the power and significance of exploration characterized nineteenth-century American culture. Americans viewed themselves as the heirs of Christopher Columbus, the New World's original Adamic namer. In the early 1800s, they demonstrated their birthright by pioneering, exploring, and expanding their vision of America in accordance with the patriotic mandate of Manifest Destiny. To be Americans meant to be participants in an ongoing process of discovery that continually resulted in personal, communal, and national rewards: exploration reenacted the heroic past of the Founding Fathers, initiating implicitly a regenerating pattern of renewal. For many nineteenth-century Americans, exploration was a cultural activity that connected historical with mythical conceptions of nation and self. Melville's Ishmael insists that all Americans share the desire to voyage out:

Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries. . . . But these are all landsmen; of week days pent up in lath and plaster—tied to counters, nailed to benches, clinched to desks. How then is this? Are the green fields gone?

As if to insure our understanding that what he describes is a characteristic national trait, Ishmael repeats and expands:

But look! here come more crowds, pacing straight for the water. . . . And there they stand—miles of them—leagues. Inlanders all, they come from lanes and alleys, streets and avenues—north, east, south, and west. Yet here they all unite. Tell me, does the magnetic virtue in the needles of the compasses of all those ships attract them thither?<sup>1</sup>

Exploration was a defining habit of self-conception, a ritual of rejuvenation, a sign of American cultural health. Americans had faith in the myth of eternal newness, possessed a visionary optimism toward the future, identified imaginatively with cultural heroes, and believed in their ability through language to create and re-create the self. For to explore *out there* is also to explore *within*, to probe the meaning of the self and community within an alien Nature. Although by the nineteenth century many Americans were no longer literally repeating the pattern of original exploration, the habit of exploration and the desire for its rewards still ran strong in their veins, reinforced by westward expansion, new waves of immigration, and growing fleets of commercial vessels. In *Two Years Before the Mast*, Richard Henry Dana, Jr., recounts the compulsion he himself shared with his countrymen:

There is a witchery in the sea, its songs and stories, and in the mere sight of a ship, and the sailor's dress, especially to a young mind, which has done more to man navies, and fill merchantmen, than all the pressgangs of Europe. I have known a young man with such a passion for the sea that the very creaking of a block stirred up his imagination so that he could hardly keep his feet on dry ground.<sup>2</sup>

Even if they neither went west to explore new lands nor east to sail the seas, though they stayed stock still in their comfortable parlors, Americans could still participate in the drama of exploration through the act of reading explorers' narratives, seamen's accounts, travel literature, and sea fiction. Charles Erskine in *Twenty Years Before the Mast* explains his own "enthusiasm" in no uncertain terms: "My heart thrilled at the name of Columbus, whose heroic soul was made to feel the meanness of kings, and whose dauntless courage called into creation a New World." His readers, Erskine implies, want to participate in similar creative acts, yet cannot literally put to sea: "You cannot, like Mahomet, go to the mountain, and so the mountain must be made to come to you. We cannot all be sailors and travelers, and visit foreign lands; and so I intend that some of these strange places—the sunny islands of the Pacific and the frozen regions of the Antarctic—shall visit you."<sup>3</sup> The tangible

products of exploration became less important than the persistent motivating desire.

To accept these postulates helps explain the popularity of explorers' narratives in the early Republic. Whether we think of John Barrow's *History of Voyages into the Arctic Regions* (1818), Timothy Flint's *Condensed Geography and History of the Western States, or the Mississippi Valley* (1828), Benjamin Morrell's *Narrative of Four Voyages* (1832), Henry H. Schoolcraft's *Narrative of an Expedition Through the Upper Mississippi to Itasca Lake* (1834) and *History of the Expedition Under the Command of Captains Lewis and Clarke* (1842), or B.M. Norman's *Rambles in Yucatan* (1843), we see a pattern of widespread interest in exploration as fundamental to nineteenth-century American culture.

There arises here the natural tendency to wish to distinguish between exotic explorers' narratives and more mundane travel accounts, both of which flourished in the early nineteenth century. Surely Flint's *Condensed Geography and History of the Western States* or Schoolcraft's *Narrative of an Expedition Through the Upper Mississippi* are substantially different from Barrow's *History of Voyages into the Arctic Regions* or Norman's *Rambles in Yucatan*. Nineteenth-century readers were, perhaps, much more likely to repeat the journeys of Flint or Schoolcraft than those of Barrow or Norman, so they might have bought the former books for utilitarian purposes (guidance, advice, maps) and the latter merely for imaginative purposes (fantasy, escape, curiosity). However, such a distinction will prove less useful than a recognition that all these works, in both sets, share underlying similarities:

1. As popular works at the same period, both sets ministered to the need of American readers to explore the new and the unknown; if Americans could not explore physically, they could travel imaginatively through reading.
2. Both sets are reading experiences; the reader explores new worlds imaginatively.
3. As opposed to fictions, which may have raised suspicions in the post-puritan nineteenth-century, exploration accounts legitimize extreme perceptions and



emotional responses, as they locate the reader in the morally safe world of useful instruction.

4. As accounts written after the fact, they all assume the survival and return of their authors; a pleasurable anxiety may be communicated to the reader at threatening incidents that occur, but it is one that is contained in a certainty that all will end well. These narratives offer the comic shape of fiction.
5. Both encourage a mild criticism of the self and society; as they dramatize contact with other environments and other cultures, they lead the reader to speculate about differences, yet do so only in a comforting, self-confirming fashion. Although the reader may adopt temporarily a point of view outside his own culture, he is not often encouraged to think like the "natives" described or to view their society as superior to his own.
6. Both sets are ultimately personally and nationally self-justifying: the accounts do not cause the reader to question individual or national motives or goals; their values are inherently self-promoting and culturally conservative. None of these works, for example, questions the right of Americans to explore and exploit newly discovered territories.
7. Both reinforce and celebrate a host of national values: they implicitly and explicitly celebrate the benefits of commerce, science, and glory (which suggests an American market for the glorification of commerce, science, and glory found in these works). Both sets acknowledge a faith in Providence and a concomitant rejection of superstition (not always present in fiction). Nature is to be subjected to man's needs. Both give voice to a faith in country and its missionary place, insist on faith in the individual man and his abilities, and demonstrate an interest in mechanics rather than in metaphysics.

Many of these exploration narratives suggest an even deeper cultural function. Filled with lavish descriptions of the exotic, they provide readers with pleasurable voyeuristic images