

Glaciers and Polar Landscapes in 19th Century Opera and Literature as a Metaphor for the “End” of Human Civilization

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A fascination with the “wild”, untamed nature is a phenomenon that appeared in 18th century art and literature, where depiction of “wild” nature is invariably presented together with the depiction of “primitive” native peoples (or with the depiction of Westerners removed from civilization) living happily and innocently away and unburdened from the “civilized” world. As for the depiction of “wild”, untamed nature in the 19th century, it constitutes an already different phenomenon than in the 18th century. My article concentrates specifically in the depiction of alpine and polar landscapes in 19th century opera and literature and to the first seeds of political and environmental considerations that these depictions contain. An interesting phenomenon (about which opera specialists might already be aware) constitutes the fact that in 19th century opera the depiction of glaciers and alpine landscapes is invariably combined with the politicized dramaturgy of the liberation of a nation, with the surrounding hazardous alpine landscape operating as a contributing factor for the achieved liberation of the oppressed alpine peoples. This phenomenon remains a little bit hazy in its very first appearance on the opera stage, during the French Revolution, in Luigi Cherubini’s opera *Elisa, ou Le glacier du Mont St. Bernard* (1794). However, it reaches a level of great dramatical complexity in Rossini’s *Guillaume Tell* (1829), where one of the protagonists (Tell’s son Gemmy) climbs the treacherous alpine glacier in order to initiate the resurrection of the Swiss against their Austrian oppressors, and where the opera transcendently ends celebrating the alpine landscape as a means of liberation, not simply from political oppression, but, very clearly, also from the faults of human civilization. I also discuss Berlioz’ similar use of the alpine landscape in the aria “Nature immense” in his *La Damnation de Faust* (1846), and compare the operatic dramatization of the alpine landscape to Edgar Allan Poe’s depiction of the polar landscape as a transcendental end/*telos* to human existence in his novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), as well as in the novel’s sequel by Jules Vernes, *Le Sphinx des glaces* (1897).

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (first written in 1818, but extensively revised in 1831) also ends with Victor Frankenstein's death in the Arctic landscape, where he has traveled to seek out and destroy his scientific/experimental creation which turned malevolent and murderous after having been abandoned by its creator. Frankenstein's creature laments his creator's death to Walton, a ship's captain who narrates the story line at this point in the novel, then the Creature disappears into the desolate, infinite reaches of the white polar landscape, never to be heard of again. The transcendental quality that the polar landscape carries in itself as a *telos* of both civilisation and geography has the exact same significance in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* expresses the ambivalence beginning to be felt in the rapidly changing, increasingly industrialized and urbanized 19th century Europe. The author's scepticism towards the industrial revolution is clear, raising some ethical dilemmas: Does scientific and industrial development imply a rationalized suspension of all subjectivity and moral judgement against science, or does science's presumed "neutrality" hide in itself a latent amorality? Is the pursuit of scientific knowledge until "the bitter end" a noble cause to pursue, and is the solitary, romanticized scientist in quest of limitless knowledge a hero or a villain, committing disregard and hybris against the natural order of things which he or she is trying to "conquer"? What are the consequences of tampering with the natural environment as expressed in 19th century literature and opera?

Cherubini's opera in 2 Acts *Elisa, ou Le glacier du Mont St. Bernard* (composed and performed for the first time in Paris in 1794, during the French Revolution), exemplifies what musicologists call a "rescue opera", which, as a politicized French sub-genre, is essentially defined by using the metaphor of the liberation of an incarcerated protagonist, in a subtle but clear celebration of the ideas of the French Revolution and the fall of the Bastille. (Beethoven's *Fidelio*, which completely emulates the "rescue operas" of Cherubini, of whom Beethoven was a great admirer, is a famous example of another "rescue opera", still present in today's repertoire.) In Cherubini's *Elisa, ou Le glacier du Mont St. Bernard*, which opens with a chorus of the mountain rescuers doing their rounds on the glacier looking for victims lost in the snow, the main dramatic interest resides solely in reuniting the two lost lovers/protagonists who are desperately trying to find each other in the perilous alpine landscape. The tenor protagonist is a self-proclaimed "romantic" who repeatedly drops himself into the snow-covered precipitous ravine in a lover's desperation. His second suicide

attempt during a storm on the glacier in Act II of the opera results in a rescue: an avalanche rolls upon him and pulls him into a crevasse, but his friends descend into the crevasse, dig him out of the snow, and reunite him with his beloved who has just arrived during the storm and has witnessed her lover's suicide attempt in the glacier's precipice.

Rossini's *Guillaume Tell* (1829), an alpine opera that came 35 years later, clearly owes some of its elements to Cherubini's *Elisa, ou Le glacier du Mont St. Bernard*. The politicized dramaturgy of *Guillaume Tell* (which was subtly instrumentalized against the conservative French Bourbon regime before the revolution of 1830) essentially makes *Guillaume Tell* a "federalist opera" (as I've taken the liberty to call it in another publication¹), celebrating the proclamation of Swiss Federalism after Switzerland's liberation from Austrian domination. Written by the librettist Étienne Jouy, who had witnessed the French Revolution and was marginally active during its first period as a Girondist (that is, essentially, as a moderate Federalist), the libretto of *Guillaume Tell* initially contained 5 different long revolutionary oath scenes which were reduced into just two long oaths by Rossini in the final version of the opera. Rossini uses the majestic landscape and the hazards of the alpine environment as a metaphor, not just to depict the fierce, untamed nature of the alpine inhabitants in their quest for political liberation, but also clearly showing the contrast between the pure, untamed alpine nature and the inevitable failings of human civilization. After the allegory of a storm in *Guillaume Tell*'s famous Overture and in the conclusion to Act IV of the opera, with the storm receding peacefully after the Austrian tyrant is killed by Tell's crossbow, the hazardous side of the alpine landscape was supposed to be depicted in another extended libretto scene. This however was cut during discussions between the director of the Opéra, the staging committee, and the different Parisian ministeries, due to the practical difficulties of staging the scene in question. In the aforementioned scene Gemmy, the athletic teenage son of Tell's (who is cast as a soprano), climbs the alpine glacier to reach Tell's hut and set it on fire, declaring the insurrection against the Austrians as a visual warning sign of fire on the glacier. Gemmy's ice-climbing libretto scene was planned in full detail, with him using crampons and 2 ice axes, perilously hanging/jumping over crevasses while his friends and mother, watching from below, shout him directions and warnings on his climbing route, such as to avoid certain passages with hidden crevasses and to follow the footsteps of the *chamois*, a wild goat of the

¹ Birbili, Maria, *Die Politisierung der Oper im 19. Jahrhundert*, Perspektiven der Opernforschung 21 (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2014).

alpine fauna. The opera's ending transcendently celebrates the alpine landscape at least as much as the liberation of the alpine Swiss peoples, as the clouds recede after the (allegoric) storm, in a melancholic, ambiguous "happy ending" in which the protagonists recite in admiration of their alpine majestic surroundings over a repeated orchestral figure which intentionally and repeatedly announces but deceptively avoids the confident affirmation of the tonic chord until the last 2 measures of the opera, repeatedly slipping into the shaky 4th and 6th degree, very ambiguously, in a deceptive cadence. Eugène Delacroix, the renowned pre-romantic painter of themes from the French Revolution, commented on Rossini's melancholic depiction of the magnificence of the alpine landscape in *Guillaume Tell*. (And this precise word, "magnificence", is repeatedly used by every soloist in the ensemble which ends *Guillaume Tell*.) Here it should be pointed out that Rossini as a child traumatically experienced the arrest of his father, who was a Napoleon sympathizer in the 1790s, in his hometown Pesaro in Italy. Rossini's ambivalent harmonic treatment of the ending of *Guillaume Tell* can be understood as a hint of his being aware of the utopic nature of any notion of political resurrection and liberation in a deeply faulted human civilization which can only pale in comparison with the sheer purity of the untamed, alpine nature.

Berlioz's use of the alpine landscape in his *Damnation de Faust* (1846) occurs in a parallel fashion to Cherubini's *Elisa, ou Le glacier du Mont St. Bernard*, even if the former work (Cherubini's) exemplifies pre-romanticism of the late 18th century, while the latter (Berlioz) represents full-blown romanticism of the mid 19th century. I am specifically referring to Berlioz's aria/invocation for his Faust "Nature immense, impénétrable et fière" ["Immense nature, impenetrable and fierce"], and to Clorindo's invocation in c minor "Ô rochers! Glaces éternelles! Témoins de mes cris et mes pleurs" ["O boulders, eternal ice, who witness my crying in sorrow"] in Cherubini's *Elisa, ou Le glacier du Mont St. Bernard*; an arioso which Berlioz knew well and did not forget when he composed his own invocation to the glaciers. Musically both invocations contain similar orchestral effects, as in the contrast between deep string arpeggios in a minor tonality and high, illuminating tones by the flutes depicting the alpine peaks over abysmal crevasses while the orchestra dominates with independent motifs dominating over the sheer syllabic melos in the invocation of the tenor's voice. In both works (Cherubini's *Le glacier du Mont St. Bernard* and Berlioz' *La Damnation de Faust*) the romantic tenor protagonist transcendently seeks the solitude and the desolation of the alpine glacier, mesmerized by its white abyss into which he repeatedly feels

attracted to fall, in desperation and instability typical for 19th century romanticism. In Cherubini's opera the protagonist's romantic desperation is still presented as mainly related to his disappointment as a lover. Yet, in Berlioz' *La Damnation de Faust* the disillusionment is complete having attained truly Baudelairian (*spleen*) dimensions and a complete disgust for the human existence: Faust abandons Marguerite, whom he truly loves, preferring to go to seek the uncompromising forces of the alpine nature which he considers alone as pure enough to contemplate, unsoiled by human and societal connection. The alpine landscape contains a redemptive capacity in both a theological and a social sense for Berlioz' Faust. (Who, needless to say, has less to do with the Faust by Goethe, and more to do with the late French romanticism Baudelaire's, whom Berlioz completely admired.) Faust's exclamation "Forêts! Rochers! Torrents! Je vous adore!" ["Forests! Boulders! Torrents! I adore you!"], more significantly intended than the Cherubini invocation, is to be understood as a quasi-religious, existentialist, anti-societal statement not only by his hero (Faust), but also by Berlioz himself, who viewed himself as the consummate romantic, lone hero, and who grew up at the feet of the Alps in La Côte Saint'André, near Grenoble. However, Berlioz's musical treatment of this invocation to the alpine landscape, with an evident disassociation between the orchestra, which represents the alpine landscape, and Faust's monologue, which represents the romantic anti-hero, proves that Faust is, once again, amiss as he is amiss continuously through the entire opera: a human being cannot truly integrate themselves into the "impenetrable" alpine landscape without consequences. Exactly as Poe's hero, Arthur Pym, experiences (as will be discussed next), human presence, conquering or transcendental, will not be accepted into the "pure" existence of the alpine/polar landscape. As Faust admits: "Et ici je *crois* vivre enfin": "And it appears to me that I'm alive here"). In the next scene reality is re-established as Mefistopheles appears, persuading Faust to return to humanity and to his beloved, Marguerite. However, Mephistopheles' promises are, as expected, mendacious: Mefistopheles is leading Faust to his damnation which in Berlioz' opera occurs in a concrete and more physical than metaphysical fashion. What we shouldn't fail to notice in this dramatization of the alpine landscape by Berlioz is that the alpine summits appear as a last and possibly the sole impression of bliss and purity on earth, before Faust's descent into Hell.

It's impossible not to notice the affinity between Faust's fall from the alpine landscape into the abyss of hell as shown by Berlioz and Edgar Allan Poe's handling of Arthur Gordon Pym and his transcendental obsession with reaching the South Pole. It should be reminded

that Berlioz became acquainted with Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* of Nantucket ten years after having composed his *Damnation de Faust* and twenty years after the novel's first publication in Baltimore's *The Southern Literary Messenger* in 1838. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* first reached France in Baudelaire's² translation of 1857.³ The affinity of concept between Berlioz's *Faust* and Poe's *Arthur Pym* lays precisely in their treatment of the alpine/antarctic landscape as an unreachable ideal/archetype which invariably ends up transforming the human conquerer into vanished insignificance. The dualism of concepts and the ambivalence between choosing the rationality of science and technology over the romanticized transcendentalism in the fascination with the "infinite" polar landscape bears already seeds of primal environmental thought pertaining to the "colonization" of nature.

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym reads as a supposed authentic sailing diary, documenting the real events of an expedition in the Antarctic Sea which took place in 1826. Arthur Pym is supposed to have been the real author of this sailing diary, while Edgar Poe is supposed to have been only the editor of the manuscript. In the early part of the expedition (which starts around the middle of the novel) Edgar Poe goes as far as to "transcribe" the jotted-down meteorological conditions, the fauna of the Antarctic sea, and the supposed

² It is unclear if *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* was known even to Baudelaire in the 1840s. Baudelaire's first contact with Edgar Allan Poe occurred apparently with the publication of *Révélation magnétique* in *La liberté de penser* from 15 July 1848. Baudelaire's friend Roger Asselineau's claim that Poe was revealed to Baudelaire through the translations by Isabelle Meunier in 1847 in *La démocratie pacifique* cannot be considered as a solid testimony, since Asselineau was very rarely in contact with Baudelaire between 1846 and 1851. On the other side, William Brandy's research has established that Baudelaire had read about a dozen stories by Edgar Allan Poe until 1852, although he was not acquainted with Poe's poetry or with his essays. Baudelaire's great admiration for Poe, inspiring him to produce five volumes of translations over a fifteen-year period, occurred at a later stage. For a thorough discussion see: Asselineau Roger, *Baudelairiana* (Messein: Léon Vanier, 1906); Bandy, William, *Baudelaire judged by his Contemporaries, 1845–1867* (New York: Publications of the Institute of French Studies, 1933). Baudelaire's translation *Aventures d'Arthur Gordon Pym* was published in 1857 (serialized from February 25 to April 18) in *Le Moniteur Universel*, in the exact same year as *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*) were published.

³ There is no concrete proof whatsoever that Berlioz might have noticed the publication of Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* in the French translation by Baudelaire, while Berlioz in 1857 was majorly preoccupied by his frail health and by his work on *Les Troyens*, an opera not related in the least to French romanticism.

longitudes/latitudes and sailing maneuvers reached by the schooner *Jane* every day. However, this realistic attention to detail is not kept up anymore once the schooner *Jane* reaches unknown Antarctic territory. The purely phantastic, romanticized narrative begins as Pym reveals himself not as an experienced sailor/explorer who is willing to make sense of the Cosmos, but as an obsessed voyager who is completely lost in his fascination for the polar landscape. At the end the landscape devours him alive, in a purely transcendentalist notion, typical for 19th century romanticism.

Arthur Pym's narrative occurs in constant transitions, from Pym's abandoning his secure adolescent existence in Nantucket, to his first misfortuned sea adventure on the little sailboat *Ariel*, then his imprisonment and almost entombment with no food or water and with a dog turned rabid, when he hides as a stowaway in the cave of the brig *Grampus*. This is followed by an insurrection on the *Grampus* then by the shipwrecking of the *Grampus* during which survivalist acts of cannibalism occur. As next the survivors are rescued by the schooner *Jane* and sail on an expedition to the Antarctic Sea, passing the arctic circle, the icefield, reaching the bizarre island Tsalal, sailing further on the lookout for a *terra Antarctica*, and finally disappearing into the white Antarctic abyss which appears to swallow them alive.

The semi-comedic gothic element⁴ in *Pym* is often similar to Berlioz' *La damnation de Faust*, where Marguerite not only inadvertently poisons her aunt when she tries to drug her so that she and Faust can rendez-vous, but a friend of Faust's predicts this accident when belting out his grotesque "Chanson du rat" ["The song of the poisoned rat"]. The putrified shipwreck full of rotten corpses which approaches the (also shipwrecked) brig *Grampus* is no romanticized material (as in Géricault's famous painting *Le Radeau de la Meduse* [*The Raft of the Medusa*]), but an histrionic, macabre caricature with an obsessive insistence of describing decomposing body parts, and with survivalist cannibalism occurring among the

⁴ The gothic element of German provenance dominating in Mephistopheles' and Faust's ride to Hell by Berlioz (featuring skeletons, screaming monsters, night owls, a rain of blood and the Pandemonium of the Damned in a pseudo-satanic language created by Swedish philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg) are very close to the universe of Poe's *Pym*. Different hypotheses have been expressed on the origins of the Berlioz ride to Hell scene, which doesn't occur directly in Goethe's *Faust*. There is an obvious German tradition at work here, particularly in relation with the well-known ballad *Lenore* by G. A. Bürger, an early monument of German romanticism, which also ends with a riding into the abyss, where Death guides the impure maiden Lenore to Hell. This ballad was translated by Gérard de Nerval in the same volume as his translation of Goethe's *Faust*, which Berlioz owned.

shipwrecked men immediately after the encounter with that ghost-ship full of decomposing bodies:

The body [...], resting as it did upon the rope, had been easily swayed to and fro by the exertions of the carnivorous bird, and it was this motion which had at first impressed us with the belief of its being alive. As the gull relieved it of its weight, it swung round and fell partially over, so that the face was fully discovered. Never, surely, was any object so terribly full of awe! The eyes were gone, and the whole flesh around the mouth, leaving the teeth utterly naked. This, then, was the smile which had cheered us on to hope!⁵

More extensively than a fascination with decomposing flesh, *The Narrative of Arthur Pym* contains a much stronger enthrallment with the fear of being buried alive, which happens to the protagonist at least six times during the narrative (twice underwater, twice in the cave of the sinking *Grampus*, later whilst being buried alive in a disintegrating labyrinth of multiple caves, in a slide produced by the treacherous indigents of the island Tsalal, and, finally, at the end of the narrative, with Pym getting swallowed alive by the white Antarctic abyss, as the narrative ends abruptly, with several lines of dots followed by blank pages.

French philologist Jean Ricardou⁶ considers the open ending of *The Narrative of Arthur Pym*, in a very material consideration of the written text, as “the fundamental density of unused white paper reflecting the whiteness of the Antarctic abyss which swallows Pym”. Another interpretation, by Maurice Lévy, considers the open ending of *The Pym Narrative* in its relation to *nothing*, in a conflict between the written word and the abyss. “Fantastic defines the moment when the written word is defeated by the abyss”.⁷ *The Narrative of Arthur Pym* is primarily enchanted with the idea of humanity getting further “beyond”, into the polar landscape, which signifies a *telos* of both civilisation and geography (in the most typical 19th century romantic thought of wishing to transcend reality). For a hero as Arthur Pym, who is “repeatedly on the brink of either death or discovery but never attains either”,⁸ his aspirations are to get beyond everything before reaching the abyss. In the open end of his narrative he reaches gigantic white drapes which do not contain anything behind them but emptiness. The Antarctic will not be discovered or domesticated but will remain an illusory notion, the

⁵ Poe, Edgar Allan, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1989), chapter 10, 102.

⁶ Ricardou, Jean, “Le caractère singulier de cette eau”, *Critique XXIV* (Paris: Flammarion 1967), 723.

⁷ Lévy, Maurice, “Pym, conte phantastique?”, *Études Anglaises* 27 (1974), 38–44.

⁸ Lévy, Maurice, “Le caractère singulier de cette eau”, *Critique XXIV* (Paris: Flammarion 1967), 44.

Antarctic Pole being a convergent point where the narrative ends and where, in the words of Richard Kopley, “the hero and the written word both plunge and are lost into the abyss.”⁹

Jules Verne wrote a sequel to *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* with the title *Le Sphinx des glaces* [*The Sphinx of the Icefields*], yet he wrote the sequel in 1897, sixty full years after the first publication of the original novel by Edgar Poe. On first impression the Verne sequel appears not to be acquainted with the romanticism of the middle 19th century, yet it's impossible to deny a certain romanticism in Verne too (to which I'll refer in more detail below). Moreover, it's impossible to ignore how much Verne's novel is indentured to Poe's. Apart from the fact that Verne's *The Sphinx of the Icefields* presents itself as the continuation of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, and that it pushes its sequel intentions to the point of pure literary cannibalism (vs. actual cannibalism, as was featured in Poe's novel!), when Verne goes as far as to summarize the entire Poe novel in his chapter V. Verne's *The Sphinx of the Icefields* reintroduces (initially incognito) the fascinating figure of the Native American Dirk Peters, Pym's devoted companion who followed him into the abyss at the end of the narrative. On the other hand, Verne's contemporary reality of acquired industrial exploitation of nature is hardly the same as Poe's. In the late 19th century our planet already appeared domesticated, explored in all its latitudes by railway, as Jules Verne so lively and accurately depicts in his novels, with hardly any gray margins of unknown territory left to explore. Verne's protagonist, the geologist Jeorling, finds out that *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is an authentic document and not just a novel by Edgar Poe as he had thought. Jeorling joins the Antarctic expedition of the schooner *Halbarn* to save the shipwrecked crew of the schooner *Jane* (the same schooner which went for an Antarctic expedition in Poe's novel). The scientifically-minded Jeorling methodically and relentlessly compares Pym's narrative against the realities and the events that he himself encounters on their way to the Antarctic, initially appearing like a patient Telemachus vis-a-vis Pym's Odysseus. He's disappointed to find nothing but desolation and infertile, frozen ground where Poe/Pym described bizarre phenomena and extraordinary, luscious vegetation. The process of Jeorling's disillusionment appears almost like the author's sad longing for the liberated romantic imagination, long since abandoned and forgotten in the late 19th century.

⁹ Kopley, Richard, *Introduction to The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, by Edgar Allan Poe (New York: Penguin Classics, 1989), 16.

But then something else occurs: after reaching the infamous island Tsalal, desolate and irreconnaissable after a big earthquake, Dirk Peters reveals his true identity as well as the fact that his beloved companion, Arthur Pym, has been lost forever in the Antarctic – instead of coming back to the United States as the novel by Poe insinuated. Thus the expedition decides to move further on, sailing on their schooner *Halbran*. From now on Jules Verne suddenly quits cannibalising the Poe novel and he seems to wish to go on an Antarctic journey even further than Poe. At this point in the Verne novel, the positivist geologist Jeorling has developed an obsessive fascination with Arthur Pym, one that rivals Pym's obsession with the Antarctic landscape. In a hallucinatory dream, Jeorling imagines reaching the Antarctic Pole and finding Arthur Pym present there behind the abysmal white drapes of steam described by Poe/Pym in his narrative, while in Jeorling's dream Pym has taken the form of a Sphinx, whom Jeorling interrogates on the mysteries of the Antarctic.

Ah! Que n'étais-je le maître de cette goélette! Si j'avais pu l'acheter, fût-ce au prix de toute ma fortune, si ces hommes eussent été mes esclaves, que j'aurais conduits sous le fouet, jamais l'*Halbran* n'aurait abandonné cette campagne, dût-elle l'entraîner jusqu'à ce point axial de l'Antarctide, au-dessus duquel La Croix du Sud jette ses feux étincelants!

Mon cerveau bouleversé foisonnait de mille pensées, de mille regrets, de mille désirs! Je voulais me lever, et il semblait qu'une pesante et irrésistible main me clouait sur mon cadre. Et l'envie me venait de quitter à l'instant cette cabine où je me débattais contre les cauchemars du demi-sommeil...de lancer à la mer une des embarcations de l'*Halbran*...de m'y jeter avec Dirk Peters, qui n'hésiterait pas à me suivre, lui!...Puis, de nous abandonner au courant qui se propageait vers le sud...

Et je le faisais...oui! je le faisais...en rêve! Nous sommes au lendemain...le capitaine Len Guy, après un dernier regard à l'horizon, a donné ordre de virer de bord...un des canots est à la traîne...Je préviens le métis...Nous nous glissons sans être aperçus...Nous coupons la bosse...Tandis que la goélette va de l'avant, nous restons en arrière, et le courant nous emporte...

Nous allons ainsi sur une mer toujours libre...Enfin notre canot s'arrête...Une terre est là...Je crois apercevoir une sorte de sphinx, qui domine la calotte australe...le sphinx des glaces...Je vais à lui...Je l'interroge...Il me livre les secrets de ces mystérieuses régions...Et alors, autour du mythologique monstre apparaissent les phénomènes dont Arthur Pym affirmait la réalité...Le rideau des vapeurs vacillantes, zébré de raies lumineuses, se déchire...Et ce n'est pas la figure de grandeur surhumaine qui se dresse devant mes regards éblouis...c'est Arthur Pym...farouche

gardien du pôle sud, déployant au vent des hautes latitudes le pavillon des États Unis d'Amérique...¹⁰

[Ah! Why couldn't I've been the master of that schooner! If I could have bought it, even trading my entire fortune, if its crew were my own, whom I would have commanded like slaves, never would the *Halbran* have abandoned its campaign, even if it had to sail until the Antarctic axis, over which the South Cross throws its shining lights!

My unruly brain was fermenting with a thousand thoughts, a thousand regrets, a thousand desires! I wanted to get up, but it felt as if a heavy, irresistible hand was pushing me down on my cabin bed. I was wishing to leave that cabin, where I was struggling against the nightmares of an unruly, sleepless state... To throw one of *Halbran's* boats into the sea... To jump in along Dirk Peters, who would not hesitate to follow me, him!... Then, to leave ourselves at the mercy of the current, which was moving south...

And I was doing it... yes! I was doing it, in my dream! It was tomorrow... Captain Len Guy, after a last look at the horizon, gives the order to turn around... one of the boats is in the water, behind the schooner... I give notice to the Indian... We sleep inside the boat without being noticed... We cut off the rope... While the schooner sails away, we stay behind, and the current takes us...

We're moving in the open sea... Finally our boat stops... There's land... I think I see a sort of sphinx, dominating the coast of this austral land... the sphinx of the icefields... I walk to it... I interrogate it... It gives me the secrets of these mysterious regions... And suddenly, around this monster of mythology, the phenomena described by Arthur Pym occur... The steam drapes, vacillating, coloured by luminous rays, tears... And it's not the described giant figure appearing in front of my stunned eyes... it's Arthur Pym... proud guardian of the South Pole, opening to the wind of the high latitudes the flag of the United States of America.]

And at the end of his journey Jeorling truly meets the Sphinx of the icefields, which is a massive rock formation vaguely reminiscent of a Sphinx, and containing a great amount of iron minerals, which have turned the rock formation into a giant magnet. Stuck hanging on this magnetized Sphinx/rock, Jeorling discovers Arthur Pym, or rather his mummified remains, as Pym was dragged on the magnetized rock by the metal parts of his shotgun. This macabre ending of Verne's novel appears not unworthy of Poe himself. Furthermore, this strange vision of the Antarctic Pole, where Verne substitutes Poe's infinite, impenetrable white abyss with a more positivist than romantic, yet no less transcendentalist notion of the Earth as a gigantic magnetic sphere, the axes of which are controlled by tremendous physical forces, constitutes in its turn a romanticization of physics or, more accurately, a

¹⁰ Verne, Jules, *Le Sphinx des glaces* (Paris: Éditions Hachette 1970), deuxième partie, chapitre VI, 347.

romanticization of magnetism, as Verne “inverts metaphysics into transphysics”.¹¹ *The Narrative of Arthur Pym* and *The Sphinx of the Icefields*, twin novels from two different periods of the 19th century, represent two Janus-like, indissociable facets of a 19th century approach to science and the environment.

A last hint testifying to the unmistakable affinity (or nostalgia?) of Jules Verne’s with French romanticism lies in the open homage which Verne offers to Baudelaire (and to Poe¹²) where he describes the departure of a lone albatross leaving the Kerguelen islands for the far South Pole at the end of the first chapter of Verne’s novel. It’s a solemn, mysterious departure of a bird for parts unknown on a path which the schooner *Halbran* will soon follow in search of Arthur Pym and of the depths of the Antarctic polar landscape.

Cet albatros, immobile sur une haute roche, à l’extrémité de la baie de Christmas-Harbour, regardait la mer dont le ressac brisait avec violence sur les écueils.

Soudain, l’oiseau s’éleva d’une large envergure, les pattes repliées, la tête longuement allongée comme une guibre de navire, jetant son cri aigu, et, quelques instants après, réduit à un point noir au milieu des hautes zones, il disparaissait derrière le rideau brumeux du sud.¹³

[The albatross, immobile on a high rock at the extremity of the bay of Christmas-Harbour, was watching the sea, which was beating up the rocks of the coast.

Suddenly, the bird lifted itself with open wings, his head facing the wind like a schooner, giving a high-pitched shout, and a few instants later it was reduced to a black point, disappearing into the high horizon, in the foggy curtains of the Antarctic South.]

¹¹ Gallet, Pascal-Emmanuel, Postface in “*Sphinx de glaces*” by Jules Verne (Paris: Hachette 1970), 500.

¹² Richard Kopley (see footnote nr. 9) has discussed the symbolism of the albatross and the penguin in Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, and he believes that this symbolism might have inspired *L’Albatros* by Baudelaire. The schooner which saved Arthur Pym from his first shipwrecking in the beginning of Poe’s novel is called *The Pengouin*, while giant albatrosses shouting “tekeli-li” are omnipresent in the novel until the end, as they continue to fly in the white drapes over the polar abyss which swallows Pym alive at the end of his journey.

¹³ Verne, *Sphinx*, première partie, chapitre I, 14.