

## Copyright Information

This article is copyright © 1998 The James Hogg Society and Contributors, and is the result of the independent labour of the scholar or scholars credited with authorship. The material contained in this document may be freely distributed, as long as the origin of information used has been properly credited in the appropriate manner (e.g. through bibliographic citation, etc.).

## Referring to this Article

Penny Fielding. “‘No Pole nor Pillar’: Imagining the Arctic with James Hogg”, *Studies in Hogg and his World* 9 (1998), 45–63. Online: Internet (date accessed): The James Hogg Society [<http://www.english.stir.ac.uk/centres/hoggsociety.htm>].

# ‘No Pole nor Pillar’: Imagining the Arctic with James Hogg

Penny Fielding

## I

In the 1730s Alexander Pope pondered the location of ‘the North’ in order to make a general point about relativity:

Ask where’s the North? at York, ’tis on the Tweed;  
In Scotland, at the Orcades; and there,  
At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where,  
No creature owns it in the first degree [...]<sup>1</sup>

A hundred years later, at a time of arctic fervour, the great question ‘where’s the North?’ had acquired a certain amount of urgency, making Pope’s relaxed speculation no longer readily available. A philosophical relativity was giving way to the new scientific precision of polar exploration, and the sense of an ‘Extreme’, once relativised out of existence by Pope’s geography, was now becoming an object of desire. Throughout the nineteenth century each unsuccessful attempt to reach the extreme North, the pole, could proudly boast of having established a new ‘furthest North’ accompanied by a new set of bearings. To adjust Pope’s phrase slightly: it had become very important for one creature to own the first degree.

However, despite European, and later American, fascination with reaching the North, the tropes which might be used to describe it were less certain than the degrees of latitude which might fix it. The question ‘Where’s the North?’ now sat uneasily with a second question, ‘What’s the North?’ Late twentieth-century social and critical theorists have argued that the attempt of any culture to establish its own modernity has always privileged history over geography. Most prominently, Foucault asserts that the nineteenth-century obsession with history set up a binary that can only begin to be loosened in our postmodern epistemologies:

The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis and cycle, themes of the ever-accumulating past with its great preponderance of dead men and the menacing glaciation of the world. The nineteenth century found its essential mythological resources in the second principle of thermodynamics. The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed.<sup>2</sup>

Foucault argues elsewhere that in history-privileging cultures such as prevailed in the nineteenth century, space is rendered ‘the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile’<sup>3</sup> and arctic explorers felt themselves to be confronting a space that was peculiarly liable to resist discourse. Efforts were made to counter this state of affairs and reports of arctic exploration try valiantly to situate themselves within history. Such accounts are typically given the sense of chronological sequence by being entitled ‘narratives’ and specifying the sequence of years of their duration. But the trouble with this approach was that there did not seem to be much time *at* the arctic: no visible effects of chronology, no lost civilisations, no history and no myth. The ‘menacing glaciation of the world’ that Foucault detects as a comfortable ending for nineteenth-century teleologies was already there, seemingly outside temporal process altogether. Instead of time, the North consisted in a great deal of unvariegated space, reducible only by its expression in geographical bearings. This, then, was a space that challenged nineteenth-century time-bound certainties, and the problematic localities of the extreme North were not easily adapted to existing discourses.

In his responses to the proliferation of reports on arctic exploration that appeared in *Blackwood’s* and other magazines, we can see how Hogg, a notable disrupter of history, throws himself with equal vigour into the problematisation of space. I am aware, of course, that there is no such thing as ‘space’ itself as an object of study. Space is brought into being by different forces—colonial space, domestic space, or the urban spaces of which Foucault writes. Certainly, a study of Hogg’s relation to the North might well consider his own position in arguments about the identity of ‘North Britain’, and in fact ideas about ‘going home’ to Scotland feature prominently in Hogg’s own arctic narrative. But the kind of space I will go on to consider will be the space of subjectivity in a more general sense: that is, how the geographical space conjured up by the nineteenth-century arctic can be translated into the spaces of the body and understood through the terms of psychoanalysis. Read through these approaches, arctic narratives reveal anxiety not only about a particular locality but also about the establishing of the subject’s position in space itself as it seeks to make basic distinctions between ‘I’ and ‘not I’.

## II

We are now familiar with the ways in which Hogg’s texts insinuate themselves mischievously into hegemonic discursive practices, and his arctic narratives are no exception. There is striking allusion to contemporary arctic adventuring in the poem ‘The p and the q, or The Adventures of Jock M’Pherson’.<sup>4</sup> Jock is curious precursor of Virginia Woolf’s Mr Ramsay, who charts his intellectual achievement along an imaginary alphabet, and his academic development is arrested in a more literal sense when he fails to learn any letters beyond O. After this educational impasse Jock is sent to sea and has several exciting adventures including, we are told, circumnavigating the whole globe. The reader is given a mad visualisation of a world wheeled around by giants ‘like a kirm on a standish’, and rotating on polar axles lubricated with bear’s grease. The narrator cautions:

Let Barrow, and Parry, and Franklin, commence  
From this as example, and learn to speak sense.<sup>5</sup>

Barrow, Parry, and Franklin, the polar heroes popular in the first half of the century are invited, in a grand inversion of sense and nonsense, to learn a new way of speaking; that is, a new subject position which radically confronts received notions of global space, and a topic which afforded Hogg plenty of material.

'Jock M'Pherson' was not Hogg's only warning about the misconceptions of contemporary arctic travellers. A longer assault on any preconceived ideas about the pole is the story of 'The Surpassing Adventures of Allan Gordon'. Although it has been edited in an *Altrive Chapbook* by Gillian Hughes, this tale is not particularly well-known or easily available, so a description of the story may be helpful. Allan Gordon, the son of an Aberdeenshire farm servant, is apprenticed to a tailor (thus following the same career path as Jock M'Pherson) but runs away to sea after a violent altercation with his master and ends up on a north-bound whaling vessel. The drunken captain claims to have reached the North Pole where the ship becomes surrounded and then crushed by pack ice. Allan is the sole survivor and goes on to survive an attack by polar bears, killing one and adopting its cub whom he names 'Nancy'. Allan and Nancy live happily together on the ice before setting out for Greenland where they fall in with a Norwegian colony now 'gone native' and Allan has some amorous adventures. After another ferocious bear attack on the colony, Allan is rescued by Nancy and, alone once more, finds a ship to take him back to Scotland.

Like 'The p and the q', 'Allan Gordon' offers a gleefully Gothic picture of the North, satirising the efforts of more sober reporters to account for their presence in the arctic. But before turning to Hogg's disruptive practices, we can first see what it was that he set out to disrupt.<sup>6</sup> In the early nineteenth century, Britons were in the Arctic for one of two reasons, both of them commercial. They were either there, like William Scoresby (a source for Hogg's tale) as whalers, or they had been financed by the British government to look for the North West Passage: a way round the North of Canada into the Pacific which, it was hoped, could be established as a trade route. Yet the nature of being there, as a state which could be represented, was much less certain. Early nineteenth-century accounts—indeed polar narratives in general—tend to site their own narratives in a very indeterminate field which challenged the grounds of perception itself. At stake in the description of this perplexing and threatening arctic space is a discourse of power which manifests itself in different ways. This is sometimes expressed as an assertion of European Imperial power, an obvious theme of arctic travel which I will address later, and often in the discourse of the sublime, the confrontation between a threatening material world and the creative imagination. 'Allan Gordon' addresses both these issues, laying bare the power-relations on which both are predicated. More political than Allan's narrative sometimes admits, the story sees power at the heart of the reconstruction of the individual in the crisis of alien arctic space. Freed from his slave-like existence with his master the tailor, Allan uses the discourse of the sublime to imagine political empowerment on his solitary iceberg: 'I [...] could not but deem it eminently sublime for me to be living in a chrysaline palace on this elemental mountain'.<sup>7</sup> And underpinning these specific workings-out or disruptions of social power is the main subject of this paper: the encounter between arctic space and European topography.

Contemporary accounts describe arctic travel as the colonisation of the unknown by a newly scientific mode of exploration. William Scoresby was complimented somewhat patronisingly in *Blackwood's*: 'True philosophy indeed regards with a loving eye the

faithful labours of her least inspiring followers; but he who would pursue her spirit beyond those sublime barriers which the timidity of less gifted minds have assigned to her domain, assuredly deserves to be rewarded with her most radiant of smiles'.<sup>8</sup> (As both a whaler and a student of natural history at Edinburgh University, there is the suggestion that Scoresby is to be taken as both the faithful labourer and the philosophical traveller beyond sublime barriers.) Needless to say, the equation of knowledge and power is an extremely precarious one in the arctic. Everything that can be *said* about the pole is qualified by the impossibility of *imagining* it. The physical properties of ice fields are such that they cannot be delimited by human perception, and no objects can emerge from them. The spatial configuration of the pole—or rather the difficulties of configuring it—challenge the very basis of subject-formation. One returned explorer from the John Ross expedition of 1818 describes: 'a vast, extended plane, of alabaster whiteness, and to which the eye can assign no limits'.<sup>9</sup> William Scoresby positions the Arctic outwith any European means of measurement. A learned system of relative distances here breaks down: 'Any strangers to the Arctic countries, however well acquainted with other regions, and however capable of judging the distances of land generally, must be completely at a loss in their estimations when they approach within sight of Spitzbergen'.<sup>10</sup>

The pole is thus a region both of the imagination and of the failure of an imagination confronted by an impossible topography. J. Hillis Miller, here following Jacques Derrida, points out how mapping is a fundamental epistemological exercise in the making of social organisation, and that the stability of such organisation rests upon a concomitant stability in the relationship between the figurative (maps) and the spatial (places):

Topography, the graphing of a place, presupposes arithmetic and geometry, and by implication the rest of the seven liberal arts, too [...] Topography is a logocentric practice through and through. It depends, for example, on the law of non-contradiction. A place is either there in a given place or not there, and no thing, a building for example, can be in more than one place at once.<sup>11</sup>

The nineteenth-century arctic is not like this. Sometimes it is difficult to say whether things are there or not there, as in the case of the mountains John Ross either imagined or claimed to have seen blocking Lancaster Sound. (Ross's notorious decision to turn back cost him the command of any other arctic expedition for ten years.) Even when things are more materially present, it is hard to say *where* they are present in a landscape in which the ice is constantly breaking up and shifting position. Ice makes mapping difficult, interfering with practices based on the rational manipulation of space and time: the coastline cannot be traced in a linear or chronological way, it is not easy to distinguish an inlet from a strait open in both directions. The arctic interferes with the figurative stability of topography. Contemporary maps of the known arctic are strange, ghostly affairs with stray lines unconnected at either end, aporia of the visual.

The spatial discourse available to talk about these geographical questions was equally uncertain. In the writing about the arctic of this period it is possible to detect a tension between two opposing geographical trajectories: to go into something, or to go beyond something. Thus, on the one hand, there was much talk of 'penetrating the icy fastnesses of the north'. It was sometimes thought that the proximity of the sun must melt the ice at the pole, and many people believed in an open polar sea into which it might be possible to sail. This was later taken to a rather startling extreme by the American John Cleves

Symmes who believed that there might be an entrance point at the pole into a hollow earth.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, the pole was thought of as lying *beyond* known territory, just as it lay beyond the imagination, an idea picked up in the title of 'The *Surpassing* Adventures of Allan Gordon'. One writer, commenting on an opposition to polar exploration, remarks: 'some go as far as to say, that the attempt was nothing less than impious, to pass the frozen boundary which God has been pleased to set to man's reason'<sup>13</sup> and I have already noted William Scoresby's philosophical flight 'beyond those sublime barriers'.

This pole, lying beyond known space, is more difficult to describe than the interior version because it had no ready model in colonial adventure, and it introduces spatial tensions into the description of the arctic. A *Blackwood's* reviewer is forced to turn to the vocabulary of African travel (widely known through Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior of Africa* of 1799) to offer a contrast with the idea of the pole: 'And most earnestly do we wish that Mr Barrow [...] may yet be as successful in the interior of Africa, as he has thus at length been on the exterior of North America'.<sup>14</sup> (John Barrow, Second Secretary to the Admiralty, was a notable fixer of arctic expeditions.) These concepts cannot be part of any transcendent logic but succumb to that of supplementarity in Derrida's sense of the term. The 'exterior' of North America is also the 'interior' of the icy fastnesses. 'North' itself is a provisional position when 'North America' becomes South relative to the North Pole. To be at the pole further disrupts the logic of polarity; at the extreme North there is no North or South. And in the physical mapping of the coast, the boundary that would mark 'North America' from what lies beyond is broken and incomplete.

Arctic explorers did not, of course, think they were merely milling about in unmappable space. On the contrary, and particularly as the century wore on, the idea of the North Pole as a discrete and absolute locality took shape out of the earlier tendency to use the term as synonymous with 'Arctic Regions'. As it became suspected that even if the North West Passage were established, it would lie too far North to be a practical commercial route, attention began to transfer to the Pole as position. This pole is ideal, abstract, and aspirational. It is a unique point in space, and its temporal position similarly attracts ideas of singularity: the pole can only be 'discovered' once. Another way of looking at this would be to say that the pole is phallic in the Lacanian sense, understood as the regulator of desire and location of authority. Much has been written of the gender implications of the penetration of the white, male explorer into the interior of 'darkest Africa', and in the arctic, the gender question invites ideas about the construction of masculine sexual identity and the role of narcissism. Arctic exploration often takes refuge in an optimistically phallic narcissism which can find its way into the scientific vocabulary of the time. One *Blackwood's* article comments with evident excitement that Ross and Buchan 'have measured the length of the pendulum in regions where the pendulum had never vibrated before'.<sup>15</sup> Fictional polar narratives interact with this triumphant attempt to overcome the problems of arctic epistemology: in *Frankenstein*, a text which bears an interesting relationship to 'Allan Gordon', Captain Walton is in search of 'the wondrous power that attracts the needle'.<sup>16</sup> He soon meets up with the well-mannered and beautiful Victor in whom all the sailors immediately take an interest. Similarly, the fragility of the assumption of phallic masculinity, and what lies beyond it,

is one of the main concerns of 'The Surpassing Adventures of Allan Gordon' and this is the question I will next address.

### III

In 'Allan Gordon' the captain's assumption of the pole lays claim to a geographical vanishing point, the convergence of all directions and a position which appears to transcend the limitations of space: 'Am I not resting on the pole of the world and can run from hence into any of its divisions I chuse' (p. 4). This assumed spatial authority also expresses itself in a gendered way. Captain Hughes is a drunken, post-Enlightenment version of *Frankenstein's* Captain Walton. Walton's polar conquest will result in an 'inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation'<sup>17</sup> and Captain Hughes seeks 'A discovery which will hand down my name to all generations' (p. 4). For these men the North Pole is not only unique but also an origin: singular, potent and naming, its phallic power is clearly asserted. Yet the problem with occupying the vanishing point upon which all trajectories converge is that things tend to vanish into it, not least the creature in *Frankenstein* who floats off towards the icy horizon 'lost in darkness and distance'.<sup>18</sup> As readers of almost any of Hogg's works, but particularly *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, will immediately be aware, any seizing of power based on singularity is a risky project. Captain Hughes's imaginary identification with the phallus is proved the illusion that Lacan later told us it was bound to be. His assumption of the absolute oneness and singularity of the pole is, literally, ruptured by his gruesome fate and reduced to a *corps morcelé*. He is multiply fragmented, being first 'crushed to pieces' (p. 5) by the ice and his corpse later observed by Allan as it is eaten by bears who are 'rugging and riving at the body of my late captain which I knew to be his from the shreds and patches of his clothes' (p. 9).

Allan's own anti-heroic status, contrasted with the over-confident Captain Hughes, parodies the strategies available in arctic narratives for this kind of empowerment in the face of the unimaginable arctic regions. In straightforward terms, Allan's topographical sense is dim at best; adrift on the iceberg which is his 'resistless vessel' (p. 23) he has only a vague suspicion that he is going round in circles. Lacking any confrontational intentions, and uninterested in technical data, Allan is the antithesis of the masculine polar hero. His early job as a tailor marks him out with the popular belief that this was not a manly occupation, and he himself comments: 'whether or not it was from having been bred a tailor I cannot tell but I certainly had something rather cowardly and timorous in my nature' (p. 12). Later in the story, the captain's desire to 'hand my name down to all generations' is inverted into comic excess by Allan's discovery that all the unmarried Greenland women claim him as father of their children, his supposed mistress having played multiple bed-tricks on him, and that he is now 'a butt of ridicule to the whole tribe' (p. 46). But Allan Gordon's exploration of sexual identity in arctic space is more complex than this straightforward parody. The erosion of the grounds for subjectivity makes prophetic the mate's words: 'if we lose our ship we lose ourselves' (p. 4). Hogg is interested in what happens when distinctions fail and differences are not observed and one such difference is that of language itself and the play between the literal and the figurative. Allan is saved from ruin by the old joke that there is no actual pole at the North Pole: 'there was no pole or pillar of any kind to be seen; neither was there any axletree or groove which there behoved to have been had we been at the pole of

the world' (p. 3). This is an interesting statement in two respects: first, to return briefly to Foucault's history of spatial epistemes, we can recognise in Allan's conception (which he shares with 'The p and the q's Jock M'Pherson) of a pre-modern cosmology, in which things have their designated places. Foucault calls this 'the space of emplacement' which was to be disrupted by Galileo's opening up a space of extension in which 'a thing's place was no longer anything but a point in its movement'.<sup>19</sup> This may remind us that 'Allan Gordon' is not just a joke about masculinity, but also one about modernity, or at least about a Frankenstein-like overconfidence in the capabilities of an enlightened scientificism.

The second point about Allan's global conceptions is that they resist any metaphorical implications: the literal-minded Allan calls a pole a pole and if you can't see one, it's not there. In fact, Allan is throughout his narrative very resistant to metaphor: he misses the possible pun on tailor's needles and compass needles, and when he accidentally stumbles on a trope he goes out of his way to admit its uselessness. On observing that a footprint is 'as apparent as the sun at noonday' he feels obliged to point out prosaically that this is an 'inapt simily' on the grounds that 'there was no sun and no noonday there' (p. 28). The joke here is not just on Allan but also on a more general problem experienced by polar explorers: the question of how the seemingly limitless pole could support a signification which depends on borders and differences, and on the plurality and metaphoricity of representation. The epistemological crisis engendered by the arctic was sometimes deferred by polar explorers in an attempt to transfer problems of perception and meaning to other races. 'Allan Gordon' addresses indirectly the way in which the Inuit were appropriated to underscore the Europeans' spatial dilemmas. To live in such regions, it was assumed, would be to suffer in an extreme form the epistemological confusion experienced by the writers of arctic narratives. In this region of sameness, the colonial aspiration to characterise indigenous peoples as other is infused by a sense that the extreme North produces extreme versions of the same. In one memorable encounter, the failure of symbolism experienced by the Ross expedition is transferred onto the Inuit. On meeting some 'Esquimaux', Ross runs up a flag 'on which was painted a hand holding a green branch of a tree'. This friendly gesture is, not surprisingly, ignored by the Inuit. The officer on Ross's ship who is describing the incident comments without any apparent sense of irony that these were 'a colour [...] and an object not very common in this part of the world'.<sup>20</sup> Yet it does not seem to be so much the *specific* cultural signification of the olive branch that the Inuit are deemed to have failed to understand as the process of signification itself. Amid the 'vast, extended plane, of alabaster whiteness [...] to which the eye can assign no limit' objects cannot be clearly distinguished. Parry complained of 'the want of objects to afford relief to the eye'.<sup>21</sup> The Europeans believe the Inuit to have infantile perceptions, unable to recognise objects or even their own reflection: 'they seemed like men who distrusted the sense of sight, and could not satisfy themselves of the reality of objects, until they had grasped them; to view themselves in a looking-glass, but more especially in a concave mirror, made them almost frantic with joy and wonder, and drew such bursts of laughter, and exclamations of surprise, as were never heard before'.<sup>22</sup>

Against these tenuous subjectivities, 'Allan Gordon' plunges its readers into a comically grotesque vision of the failure of power, of the self, of sexuality and of language. The story takes place in a world of violence in which distinctions are often

violently disturbed. Allan comments that for long periods of the year there is no day or no night, and both he and Nancy fall into spells of a kind of suspended animation. The familiar binaries of sleeping/ waking, alive/dead, male/female, human/animal, eater/eaten seem no longer in force. The polar bears, which lurk around every corner of this story, are habitually mistaken for 'naked human creatures' (p. 9) and Allan's relationship with Nancy is both parental, replacing her lost mother, and coyly eroticised: 'Yes she lay in my bosom and though certainly a most uncourtly mate she being the only one I had I loved her most sincerely I might almost say intensely' (p. 16). Gothic incidents emphasise this pattern of blurred polarities. In one nightmare moment Allan kills Nancy's mother leaving her stuck half in and half out of the ship's window and then hears strange munching noises (later revealed to be Nancy) from without: 'I was more frightened than ever and began to think that nature was all reversed in that horrible clime for how a creature could be dead and frozen in its hinder parts and munching and eating with its foreparts was to me quite inconceivable' (p. 13). In the Greenland section of the story this incident, already monstrous, has an even more grim inversion. Allan hears stories from the locals about the predilections of the bears:

Then horrid descriptions followed drawing pictures of what the bears had done what they would do. They represented them as liking to eat best the children alive and that in order to enjoy a meal with perfect zest they always held the children down with one paw and began at the feet and eat upward and that the poor things would be crying and trying to creep away even when the monsters had proceeded leisurely with their meal nearly as far as the heart. (p. 48)

This world of reversals of nature and failures of distinctions is regressive, rather than originary in the way Captains Hughes and Walton had expected of the Pole. Masculine heroics are replaced by something more dangerous to subjectivity. On spying a herd of polar bears, Allan recounts 'I never got such a fright since I was born of my mother' (p. 28) and we may be reminded of Julia Kristeva's contention that being born of one's mother is indeed a very frightening experience, an archaic loss of which we never quite accept the completion. That is to say, our most primary distinction of self and other is never a total one and this sensation of an incomplete separation Kristeva writes of as the condition of being 'abject'. The abject lurks within the symbolic order, threatening the collapse of borders upon which signification and all subsequent social relations depend: 'Without *one* division, *one* separation, *one* subject/object having been constituted (not yet, or no longer yet). Why? Perhaps because of maternal anguish, unable to be satiated within the encompassing symbolic'. In her preliminary definitions, Kristeva cites two examples of the abject, one cultural and the other belonging to the subject's personal archaeology. The first is what she describes as 'those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*', and the second is 'our earliest attempts to release the hold of that *maternal* entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language'.<sup>23</sup> I have already noted how the story dismisses the triumphant assertion of language and now we can see how 'Allan Gordon' plunges its anti-hero into an archaic world where the animal and the maternal are terms not clearly distinguished either from their opposites (human and infantile) or from each other. This is a world of primitive and partial subjectivities and regressive behaviours. Seen from an infant's perspectives the limitless arctic becomes a gigantic maternal body: Nancy searches her dead mother's skin for her teats, Allan uses an iceberg as his water supply: 'I sucked and sucked till I could

hold no more' (p. 6). Later Allan plunders the Captain's liquor store by sucking it up through the ship's bellows.

This feminisation of the arctic does not, of course, mean that 'Allan Gordon' can be easily read as a feminist text, even if its turning away from the phallus as origin of identity and towards the mother/child dyad seems relevant to the work of post-Freudian feminist thinking. If anything, this text seems to embody a grotesquely comic version of what Barbara Creed calls the 'Monstrous-Feminine', a condition which she sees as central to many horror texts. Creed, who draws on Kristeva's essay on abjection, argues that 'when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions'.<sup>24</sup> Both female sexuality and reproduction frighten Allan. After she has fought another bear, Nancy acquires 'something like a gleam of madness' (p. 32) in her eye which makes Allan very worried about going to bed with her as usual, and when he at last gives in she nearly suffocates him. Allan's own 'wives' cause him equal disquiet as he bemoans his many children and their 'ill-favoured disgusting mothers' (p. 48).

The comic horror of 'Allan Gordon' includes not only gender but also the idea of the inside and outside of the body (we have already seen this in geographical terms) and focuses particularly on eating. Significantly, Allan's reading in the Bible, to which he frequently draws attention, is quite selective. He is fond of the 'historical parts' but 'as for the tedious ceremonial law I accounted that perfect nonsense' (p. 34). The 'tedious law' refers presumably to the Judaic laws, including dietary restrictions, of Leviticus which, as Mary Douglas has pointed out, function as 'an act of recognition', allowing distinctions to be made between physical classifications in the animal world and to keep separate clean (whatever can be categorised) and unclean (whatever crosses categories).<sup>25</sup> But these laws do not hold sway in the arctic where Allan continually fears attack by cannibals who 'might flay and eat Nancy and I even without the ceremony of letting out the life blood' (p. 27). In the social world of Leviticus the spilling of blood is so transgressive of bodily integrity that it must be carefully managed by either scientific or religious ceremony. We might compare the valorisation of the medically precise blood-transfusions overseen by Van Helsing in *Dracula* with the vampires' indiscriminate and monstrous blood-letting in that novel. 'Allan Gordon' similarly evokes the terror of the body stripped of its social containment. Such unregulated incursions on the body's frame trouble the subject's dependence on the body as a primary means of recognising self: the delimitation of the individual from the space that surrounds it. Yet arctic narrative was habitually haunted by another threat to bodily integrity just as monstrous as vampirism: the dangers of cannibalism.

#### IV

Hogg's interest in the meanings of cannibalism are most striking in *The Three Perils of Man*, and Ian Duncan has written of Hogg's uses of it as a trope for the swallowing and incorporation of national history in *The Three Perils of Man*. Duncan shows how cannibalism tests the limits of narration, and especially narration's ability to absorb or incorporate its cultural past.<sup>26</sup> Hogg returns to cannibalism as a figure in 'Allan Gordon' and engages it in this tale's deconstruction of the certainties of nineteenth-century arctic terminology, and the laying bare of the crisis of empiricism that lies beneath.

Cannibalism, because of its taboo functions, occupies cultural positions that are not always clearly articulated, that is, not firmly fixed in social and linguistic exchange. Maggie Kilgour has described it as an archetypal state which undoes, at the most fundamental level, the difference between subject and object. As incorporation, it is a way of taking in and assimilating all others, and destroying social structures, which necessarily depend on difference. Like vampirism, in which the vampires' ingesting of the other's blood converts difference to sameness, cannibalism undoes the bodily spaces that make subjectivity possible. Cannibalism, then, gives rise to different drives towards and away from a state of sameness. Kilgour writes: 'the idea of return is both idealized as a return to communion with an originary source and a primal identification, and demonized as regression through the loss of human and individual identity'.<sup>27</sup> Psychoanalysis and anthropology have discerned different ways in which these trajectories can be manifested in personal and cultural experience. On the one hand cannibalism is the most restrictive of taboos, that which must be most stringently avoided, and where it does 'take place' it must be ascribed to the other. Cannibalism is usually expressed in anthropological terms as something practised by others: an act so opposed to human laws that to situate oneself in opposition to it is to confirm one's own humanity at a basic level. On the other hand, this taboo can be seen as a cultural practice designed to repress the lure of that regression that leads to spatial sameness and dyadic unity. What is repressed is cannibalism's offer to resolve difference, to return to a bodily homogeneity and consequent stability.

Thus the cultural position of cannibalism, and the rituals for its avoidance have a mutual dependency and are drawn to each other. We can see this in a moment from another of 'Allan Gordon's' intertexts, *Robinson Crusoe*, in which the rejection of cannibalism is not quite a complete one as expressed in the signifying body. Crusoe, in his horrified reaction to the remains of the cannibal feast across which he stumbles, provides an interestingly dual response. Peter Hulme sums up how Crusoe 'recovers himself' after this shocking experience: '[...] that paradigmatic manifestation of cannibalism finally allows Crusoe to clearly distinguish himself from others. He finally knows who he is; although only after the vomiting symbolically voids him, producing that impossibly 'pure' body, alimentarily chaste'.<sup>28</sup> But Crusoe's disgust need not only mean this, or rather this cultural meaning may be predicated on another psychological one. Kristeva argues that the dispelling of waste or undesired matter from the body, a repetition of the archaic abject of birth, is both an assertion of the subject and an assault on the subject's bodily integrity, crossing that border which is the body's frame. Vomiting, as a form of abjection, exposes what should be inside, and reminds the subject of its material condition and the ultimate state of non-signification: death. Disgust is both cannibalism's opposite (as recognised by Crusoe) and its mirror image, the excorporation, as opposed to the incorporation, of taboo matter.

'Allan Gordon' looks quite closely at the strange reciprocal relationship between cannibalism and the rejection of it. Despite, or because of, its surface horror of cannibalism, it is a motif that 'Allan Gordon' constantly returns to, neither describing it literally nor fully rejecting it. The story exposes in true Gothic fashion, albeit comically, the lure of whatever in fiction can escape cultural repression. Cannibalism, the greatest of taboos, takes on a normalcy of possibility. The newly-shipwrecked and hungry Allan is tempted to eat the bodies of the crew members, but is unable to find any. Later he

wonders if the first people he meets will be ‘savage cannibals or civilized Christians’, as if they might so easily be either.<sup>29</sup> There are ways in which the story adds cannibalism to its already extensive list of failures of difference. In this context we can see the story’s obsession with the breast and sucking in Kleinian terms; the infant attempts to counter its loss of the mother’s body in an aggressive, devouring relation, incorporating what it fears to lose. In ‘Allan Gordon’ this also works the other way round. Hogg picks up on incidents of cannibalism from contemporary accounts and among William Scoresby’s details about polar bears is the following remark: ‘Bears, though they have been known to eat one another, are remarkably affectionate to their young’.<sup>30</sup> That is to say, so far from the maternal and the cannibal being mutually exclusive, they are found together at the arctic. The anthropomorphic bears in ‘Allan Gordon’ carry traces of both these activities. They gobble up the ship’s crew, but Allan is moved by the sight of Nancy’s dead mother, realising ‘I had taken a mother from her starving offspring’ (p. 13).

The cannibalistic drive also takes place at a narrative level. In one sense, the story is itself very incorporative, taking in the other fictional narratives I have mentioned, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Frankenstein*, ‘The Ancient Mariner’, as well as contemporary reports, and assimilating them into the sameness of Allan’s naive, episodic narration.<sup>31</sup> Flat, uninflected, and largely unpunctuated, Allan’s narration is antithetical to those teleologies practised by arctic explorers. Following straightforwardly from one episode to the next, the narrative seems to have no end in sight. Even though Allan is narrating the story to a Scottish schoolmaster after the events have happened, his mind struggles with the concept of a position from which narrative can take place, that textual death which, in Walter Benjamin’s words ‘is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell’.<sup>32</sup> Allan’s arctic experience blinds him to such possibilities, as he tries to articulate in a jumble of temporal positions: ‘My present life was one of such romance that if I could have been certified that at any future period I should escape to give a relation of it I would have chosen to remain for the present’ (p. 34). The sentence begins and ends with the word ‘present’ as if chronological time is squeezed out of it.

Yet the story has a plot and does come to an end with Allan’s return to Scotland. Like a number of Hogg’s stories, ‘Allan Gordon’ is in part about narration, about the strange ways in which stories can be said to ‘happen’, and how time and sequence can be present in language.<sup>33</sup> Casting his hero into an arctic world that seems without temporal process, Hogg looks at an extreme case of how temporal epistemologies can make sense of a world which has no shaping forces of chronology. In this sense, it is cannibalism that allows Hogg to reintroduce time into the arctic, and with it the formal spacing of narrative. Overarching the story are two narrative trajectories linked by their concern with eating. When Allan is tempted to eat the bodies of his shipmates, he escapes this fate, as he believes, because he is spared by a divine will that has reserved him for something better: ‘I went once more among the wreck looking for something to eat but in fact with the hopes only of finding some one of my dead companions on whom I had made up my mind to prey most liberally but I found none so that the Almighty preserved me from cannibalism’ (p. 6).<sup>34</sup> This movement is counterbalanced by the Greenlanders who, in the grip of Thanatos, entertain ‘a prophecy and a firm belief’ that their entire community is destined to be consumed by the bears (p. 41), an event which Allan narrowly escapes during the final bear attack. The interaction between these two trajectories could quite easily be seen to prefigure *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in

which Freud describes how desire is deferred along 'ever more complicated *détours* before reaching its aim of death'.<sup>35</sup> But Hogg, typically interested in the self-conscious potential of stories, seems rather to anticipate post-Freudian interest in the way the contradictory yet symbiotic relationship between desire and death facilitates stories, deferring an anticipated end along the circuitous routes of narrative.<sup>36</sup> Cannibalism, for all its shocking possibilities, is what gives rise to narrative in 'Allan Gordon', a story which would otherwise have trouble in adapting itself to any narrative structure. The threat/avoidance of cannibalism in the story allows a chronological structure to appear as Allan defers his desire to eat the crew and escapes his fear of being eaten by the bears. A pattern of postponement and return is introduced; it is only after the final massacre of the Greenlanders that Allan can return home, and these events follow very swiftly upon each other.

And in another sense, Hogg's repetition of the cannibalism motif allows him to make Allan's otherwise flat and literal narration metalinguistic. Hogg plays with the recurrent possibilities that cannibalism will take place, or indeed is taking place, given the anthropomorphic nature of the bears. But it is never literally described, being rather a recurrent and wandering signifier than an event 'realised' in language. Looked at in this way, 'Allan Gordon' makes play not only with its own narration of cannibalism, but with cannibalism's strange place in arctic accounts in general. In the arctic narratives of the nineteenth century cannibalism lurks round every corner but is never present, as it were, in the flesh. Cannibalism is the fugitive other, always a potential in language but never substantiated. In one of its narrative forms, cannibalism introduces a split between narration and its objects: it either happens but cannot be spoken of, or is spoken of but cannot be found to happen. Arctic anthropologists became familiar with the idea that cannibalism is always alleged to be practised by 'other' tribes: John Ross encountered Inuit who claimed that the far North was inhabited by a race of giant cannibals. But if cannibalism is on the one hand a product of narration, on the other it cannot be narrated because, as the ultimate taboo, it is unspeakable. These two positions come together in one memorable piece of arctic reportage.

On John Franklin's arctic foray in the early 1820s, the returning expedition split into two, one party being led by the Scottish surgeon, John Richardson. Richardson himself narrates this part of the story in Franklin's *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea*. The men, suffering from severe exhaustion and starvation, have meat brought to them by their native Canadian guide, Michel. Michel says that the meat, which is badly damaged, is from a wolf killed by the horn of a deer. Richardson comments: 'We implicitly believed this story then, but, afterwards became convinced from circumstances, the detail of which may be spared, that it must have been a portion of the body of Belanger of Perrault'.<sup>37</sup> Later on, Richardson suspects that Michel has become violently deranged and shoots him through the head as a precaution. As evidence of Michel's dangerous insanity, Richardson notes that he has been claiming that white people ate his uncle and two other of his relatives. Richardson's imperialist thinking sets up the bizarre logic of cannibalism. In sparing us the unspeakable 'detail' which would prove his own cannibalism, Richardson refuses to realise his action in narration, while still asking the reader to believe it took place. And in refusing to believe that Michel's relations have been eaten, he consigns cannibalism to a world that exists *only* in narration. It cannot be a *narrated event* precisely because it resists the congruence of event and narration.

Reading ‘Allan Gordon’ alongside this account, we can see how Hogg’s story plays with the narratability of cannibalism, coming often to the verge of its literal enactment and then turning away, or rerouting into alternative signifiers in the case of the anthropomorphic bears. In its recognition of the gulf between language and its objects, ‘Allan Gordon’ embraces cannibalism not as an event but as the grounds for storytelling. It is what allows postponement, time, and thus difference into the arctic space, and affords Hogg ways of imagining the unimaginable and narrating the unnarrateable. Hogg’s arctic is not a place, such as might be claimed by polar explorers, but both a psychological and a narrative process. Like the cannibal joke, beloved of anthropologists, ‘Allan Gordon’ acculturises some of our deepest fears by making them narratable. On his passive journey through the forbidding arctic space, Allan marks himself out as a different kind of polar hero than the more overtly intrepid voyagers of the nineteenth century. And in ‘The Surpassing Adventures of Allan Gordon’ Hogg imagines an arctic that is more strange, yet also more deeply positioned in the processes that make up human subjectivity, than Barrow, and Parry, and Franklin had ever conceived.

## N O T E S

- 1 Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, Epistle II, ll. 222–25.
- 2 Michel Foucault, ‘Of other spaces’, translated by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16 no.1 (1986), 22–27 (p. 22). For the contemporary turn to space see Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Social Critical Theory* (London, 1989); Neil Smith and Cindi Katz, ‘Grounding Metaphor: Towards a Spatialized Politics’, in *Place and the Politics of Identity*, edited by Michael Keith and Steve Pile (London, 1993), pp. 67–83; *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Nancy Duncan (London, 1996); Kathleen M. Kirby, *Indifferent Boundaries: Spatial Concepts of Human Subjectivity* (New York and London, 1996).
- 3 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (Brighton, 1980), p. 70.
- 4 ‘Two versions of “The p and the q; or, The Adventures of Jock M’Pherson”’, edited and introduced by Robin MacLachlan, *Studies in Hogg and his World*, 7 (1996), 87–101.
- 5 ‘Two versions of “The p and the q”’, p. 97.
- 6 The best account of the cultural meanings of arctic exploration is Francis Spufford, *I May be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination* (London, 1996). A more straightforward narrative of the expeditions relevant to Hogg’s story can be found in Pierre Berton, *Arctic Grail: the Quest for the North-West Passage 1818–1909* (London, 1989). For Scottish involvement in the arctic see Ian Bunyan, *Polar Scots: Scottish Explorers in the Arctic* (Edinburgh, 1986), and Jenni Calder, ‘Perilous Enterprises: Scottish Explorers in the Arctic’, in *The Enterprising Scot: Scottish Adventure and Achievement*, edited by Jenni Calder (Edinburgh, 1986), 96–106.
- 7 ‘The Surpassing Adventures of Allan Gordon’, edited by Gillian Hughes, *Altrive Chapbooks*, 2 no.1 (1987), p. 19. Further references appear in the text.
- 8 ‘Account of Captain Scoresby’s Observations on the Greenland or Polar Ice’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 2 (January 1818), 363–69 (p. 363).
- 9 ‘Letter from an Officer concerning the Polar Expedition’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 4 (November 1818), 193–98 (p. 196).
- 10 William Scoresby, *An Account of the Arctic Regions with a History and Description of the Northern Whale-Fishery*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1820), I, 110.
- 11 J. Hillis Miller, *Topographies* (Stanford, 1995), p. 303.
- 12 For Symmes see Spufford, *I May be Some Time*, pp. 64–79.
- 13 ‘Letter from an Officer concerning the Polar Expedition’, p. 193.
- 14 ‘Captain Parry’s Voyage’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 9 (June 1821), 289–99 (p. 295).

- 15 'Analysis of Mr Barrow's Chronological History of Voyages into the Arctic Regions', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 4 (November 1818), 187–93 (p. 193).
- 16 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, edited by M. K. Joseph (Oxford, 1969), p. 16.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Shelley, *Frankenstein*, p. 223.
- 19 Foucault, 'Of other spaces', p. 23.
- 20 'North-West Passage: Expedition under Captain Ross and Lieutenant Parry, in the Isabella and Alexander', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 4 (December 1818), 338–44 (p. 339).
- 21 'Captain Parry's Voyage', p. 293.
- 22 'North-West Passage', p. 339.
- 23 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York, 1982), pp.12 and 13.
- 24 Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (London, 1993), p. 7.
- 25 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966), p. 57.
- 26 Ian Duncan, 'Scott, Hogg, Orality and the Limits of Culture', *Studies in Hogg and his World*, 8 (1997), 56–74.
- 27 Maggie Kilgour, *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation* (Princeton, 1990), p. 11.
- 28 Peter Hulme, *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean* (London, 1986), p. 198.
- 29 Christianity, with its central metaphor of incorporation through communion is a belief deeply imbued with the tropes of cannibalism, as Kilgour points out.
- 30 Scoresby, *An Account of the Arctic Regions*, I, 520.
- 31 For Hogg's sources see Gillian Hughes, 'Reading and Inspiration: Some Sources of "The Surpassing Adventures of Allan Gordon"', *Scottish Literary Journal*, 16 no. 1 (1989), 21–34. In addition to its relationships with *Frankenstein* and *Robinson Crusoe*, 'Allan Gordon' has clear echoes of 'The Ancient Mariner': like the mariner Allan kills an animal in what he tells us is 'wholly a spontaneous act' (p. 13), and, in a direct verbal echo, finds himself 'alone on a wide wide sea' (p. 15).
- 32 "'The Storyteller": Reflections on the Work of Nicolai Leskov', in *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt (London, 1973), p. 94.
- 33 I have discussed this point at greater length in *Writing and Orality: Nationality, Culture, and Nineteenth-century Scottish Fiction* (Oxford, 1996).
- 34 Allan's frequent and naive references to a superego-like 'Almighty' at work at the arctic also function to parody nineteenth-century explorers' attempts to introduce a reassuring natural theology into the bewildering polar space.
- 35 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Penguin Freud Library 11 (Harmondsworth, 1984), p. 311.
- 36 The classic analysis of this is Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford, 1984). See also Linda Ruth Williams, *Critical Desire: Psychoanalysis and the Literary Subject* (London, 1995), especially Chapter 5.
- 37 John Franklin, *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea, in the Years 1819, 20, 21, 22* (London, 1823), p. 451. The problem of figuring cannibalism in arctic narrative recurred in narratives of the last and fatal Franklin expedition of 1845. The Orcadian explorer John Rae's search for the lost expedition resulted in his reporting evidence of cannibalism, testimony which was vehemently resisted by the public.