



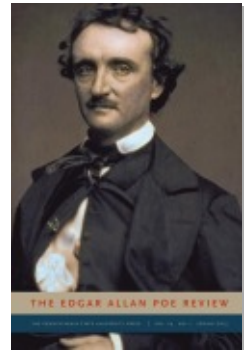
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The Sphinx of the Ice Realm by Jules Verne (review)

Johan Fredrik Wijkmark

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Jules Verne. *The Sphinx of the Ice Realm*. Translated and edited by Frederick Paul Walter. Excelsior edition. Albany: SUNY Press, 2012. 435 pp. \$24.95.

Johan Fredrik Wijkmark, Karlstad University

Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) is one of the most legendary enigmas of literary history. Arguably, what is so intriguing about it is that it has the superficial appearance of a puzzle that can be solved, sending readers along ever more abstruse and obscure interpretive paths—while aggregate experience tells us otherwise. The literary qualities of the work as a whole can be debated, with its long, rambling and seemingly pointless filler passages and its internal logical and narrative inconsistencies. I think, however, together with other Poe scholars, that for all its inherent flaws the ending is an eminently crafted machinery to present the appearance of truth, a literary puzzle devised to puzzle, not to be solved. In this sense it is a purely open-ended text that creates a field of gravity of its own, pulling readers into it. As John Carlos Rowe describes it, Poe's novel is "a machine for the production of surplus signifiers": "Forever holding out the promise of a buried signified, *Pym* offers a sequence of forged or imitation truth."¹ Indeed, it is a textual machine bearing more than a passing resemblance to the kind von Jung devises in Poe's "Mystification" (1837)—actually written *while* he was working on *Pym*—of which we are told "the language was ingeniously framed so as to present to the ear all the outward signs of intelligibility, and even of profundity, while in fact not a shadow of meaning existed."² A game, yes—but a sophisticated one.

A testament to the effectiveness of Poe's textual machine is that it has compelled other creative writers to complete it or enter into dialogue with it. Charles Romyn Dake did so in *A Strange Discovery* (1899), which picks up *Pym*'s narrative where it leaves off, taking *Pym* and Peters into a utopian world beyond the charted waters at the South Pole. And even though he does not attempt to conclude Poe's original, H. P. Lovecraft latches on to *Pym* as mythology in his novella "At the Mountains of Madness" (1936). More recent examples are Rudy Rucker's postmodern romp *Hollow Earth* (1990), in which Poe figures as a prominent character, and Mat Johnson's *Pym* (2011) in which we, at present time, find *Pym* still living and mysteriously preserved in the capacity as a half-zombified bartender for a race of large, white (except for a grayish one whose personal hygiene leaves something to be desired) humanoid figures at the South Pole.

Another example, of course, and in many ways the most interesting, is the text up for review here: Jules Verne's *Le Sphinx des Glaces* (1897), or as it is rendered in the current translation by Frederick Paul Walter, *The Sphinx of the Ice Realm*. Verne is of course immortalized for his contributions to the formation of the genre of science fiction, and here we can clearly see that he is using a prototype of a common modern feature of science fiction—that of the megatext, in which several writers write stories set in the same universe, obeying the same social and natural conditions, based on the same original.

The story goes as follows. We pick up the narrative in 1839, at the Kerguelen Islands, where we find our narrator, Mr. Jeorling, a wealthy American amateur biologist who has studied the flora and fauna of the islands. He is about to depart from the islands and is waiting for a particular ship to arrive, the English *Halbrane*, captained by a certain Len Guy. Those of you with Poe's narrative present in mind will immediately see the connection to Captain Guy of the schooner *Jane Guy*. As will come out shortly, Len Guy is indeed the brother of Poe's captain, on a mission to search for his lost brother. As is subsequently revealed, he acts on the firm conviction that Poe's *Pym* is not fiction after all, but a factual account of the Antarctic incursion of the *Jane Guy*. And so the game is afoot.

After this, the interlinking of the novel with Poe's original becomes ever more intricate. (And since Verne cannot take for granted any previous knowledge of Poe's *Pym*, large portions of the text—indeed, the whole of Chapter 5—recapitulate the original.) We are informed that the mysterious message in a bottle left at the Kerguelen Islands by Captain Guy in Poe's narrative, never to be mentioned again in that text, is picked up by his brother prior to the start of Verne's narrative. As the *Halbrane* progresses farther into the Antarctic, carefully following the itinerary of its predecessor as plotted in Poe's novel, the first tangible evidence that *Pym* is a true account literally drifts into the story in the form of a frozen corpse on a slab of ice. It turns out that this is one Patterson, a crewmember of the *Jane Guy*, and he very conveniently carries in his pocket a journal that confirms that some of the crew feared dead in the aftermath of the events at Tsalal Island in *Pym* have survived, among them the captain. Strengthened in his conviction, Len Guy sets course even farther south.

It is soon revealed, however, that Len Guy is not the only one aboard the *Halbrane* with a connection to the crew of the *Jane Guy*. Hunt, a mysterious sailor of almost superhuman strength and agility, turns out to be none other than Dirk Peters, Arthur Gordon Pym's consort, working his way back to the Antarctic where he was separated from Pym eleven years prior, convinced that Pym is still alive somewhere. In Verne's revision, Peters alone made it out of the

Antarctic the first time, and he was the one to bring Pym's notebook to Poe for publication.

But it does not end there; in one gruesome episode of *Pym*, Pym, Augustus Barnard, Peters, and a crewmember named Parker languish aboard the wrecked hull of the *Grampus*. Having nothing to eat, they resort to cannibalism, drawing straws on who will make the ultimate sacrifice. Parker draws the shortest straw, Peters immediately kills him, and a grisly feast begins. Well, it turns out here that Parker's name was actually altered in Pym's account to protect the family. His name was Holt, and of course it is revealed that his brother is on the *Halbrane*. When the ship is subsequently shipwrecked in the Antarctic, this turns into a significant plot twist as part of the crew stages a mutiny and Holt sides with the mutineers, having been informed of Peters's role in his brother's death, and they take off with the only remaining boat.

Shipwrecked and trapped, the remaining crew languishes on an Antarctic island when Peters recovers a drifting canoe, containing the first Captain Guy and three crewmembers alive. Now equipped with a rudimentary vessel, all thirteen survivors make their way even farther south, past the pole and northward on the other side. Here they run into a gigantic lodestone—the titular Sphinx—so incredibly powerful that it rips everything magnetic out of their hands, even from a large distance. Pinned to the lodestone they find Pym himself, crushed by the force when the magnetic force pulled his gun, fastened around his torso with a strap, toward it. The Sphinx has spoken and the mystery is revealed.

The story of *The Sphinx* hinges, humorously, on this central premise that Poe's tale is not fiction after all—an extension of Poe's jocular ruse of verisimilitude along those same lines in the original. The narrator spills a fair amount of ink protesting Captain Len Guy's mad conviction that Pym is a historical figure and that his tale is one of fact not fiction. Of course, this rational remonstrator has to be won over in order for there to be a narrative worth reading. Verne's solution to this is rather literal-minded—having a member of the *Jane Guy*'s original crew turn up as a deep-frozen corpse floating on an iceberg. The odds for this chance encounter make finding the proverbial needle in the haystack seem rather commonplace in comparison. To be sure, this is one of Verne's deadpan jokes—to devise the most unlikely event possible and use this as a token of verisimilitude.

The Sphinx is a strange blend of continuation and revision of *Pym*, in which Verne meticulously connects loose threads left by Poe—or attempts to, anyway. As Basil Ashmore phrases it in his introduction to a previous translation of the novel, Verne “provided a solution” to Pym, and gathered

“the tangled skeins of the original plot’s completion and rationalized the final section.”³

I would not go as far as saying that Verne has rationalized Poe’s tale completely, however. For instance, we do not get a solution to the white giant at the end of *Pym*; instead, Verne provides us with a black giant, the lodestone Sphinx. Moreover, as Verne attempts to tie up loose ends left by Poe, the result sometimes only serves to compound the mystification. For instance, when Poe tells the episode on Tsalal island, this is the locale where most mystery aggregates: we do not know the origin of the Tsalalians or their fear of whiteness, we are presented with water of singular characteristics, we find oddly shaped caves with suggestive carved-out figures. When Verne approaches that same region, however, he simply glosses over it (perhaps finding too many loose ends) by having Tsalal erased in a devastating earthquake before the narrative gets there, leaving no survivors—a bit of a letdown for *Pym* readers who would have liked to see where Verne would have taken the story.

At Tsalal, they do, however, find the collar of Pym’s dog, Tiger. The reader will recall from *Pym* that the dog exits the story under rather mysterious forms and without comment in Chapter 8, seemingly afflicted with the so-called Chuck Cunningham Syndrome—that is, Poe simply had no further narrative use for him, or just plain forgot about him. Verne obviously thinks Poe’s treatment of Tiger was negligent, given the heroic role the loyal dog serves on a couple of occasions, so here the dog is restored to center stage in the narrative. The survivors of the *Jane Guy* tell us how the dog plays an integral part in what happens at the island.

Of course, a rather strange consequence arises from this revival of Tiger—it means that the dog must have been alive and aboard the wrecked hull of the *Grampus*. But when faced with starvation the crew opt to spare a sizable Newfoundland dog and instead slay and eat one of their own. We can probably surmise that Verne took a little Homeric nap here. Even though Verne’s text is steeped in his usual understated humor, it is unlikely (although possible, of course) that this is an instance of that—it seems too twisted.

Verne’s *Sphinx* is a curious text, for many reasons, since, as stated, it literally follows the itinerary set by Poe. This has some odd effects, however. We have to remember that the state of knowledge about the Antarctic when Poe published *Pym* in 1838 differed significantly from that when Verne’s *Sphinx* appeared in French in 1897. In the 1830s, very little was known about the Antarctic region—indeed, the existence of the Antarctic continent was just a hypothesis—and Poe was able to capitalize on this lack of knowledge and project his work of speculative fiction onto that blank surface. Sixty years later, however, things

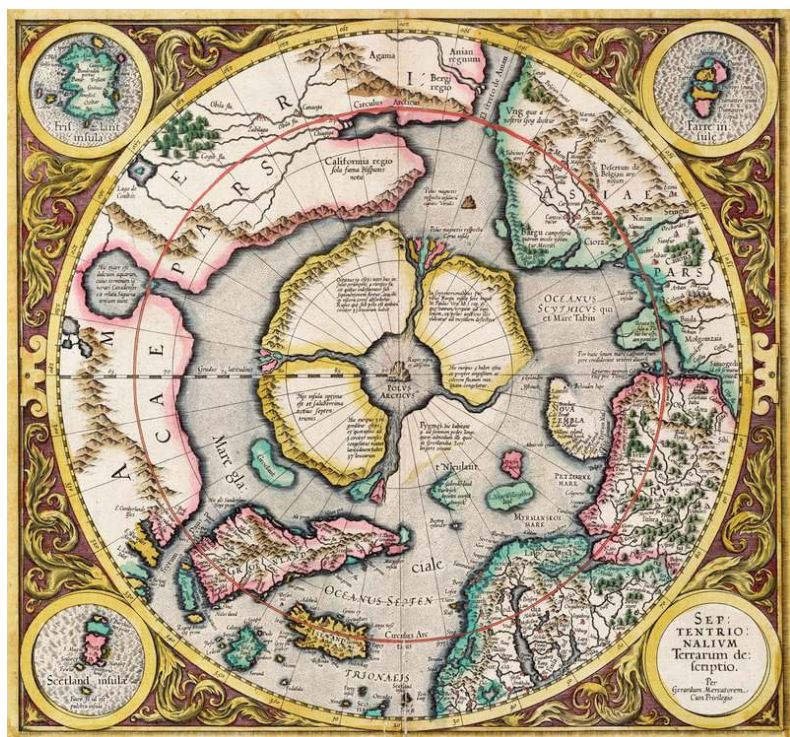


FIG. 1 Gerard Mercator's *Septentrionalium terrarum discriptio* (1613).

were radically different. The existence of the continent had been verified and large portions of its coastline had been mapped. Explorers had even landed on the continent, showing that the regions where Pym found tropical climate and inhabited lands contained only infinite expanses of various permutations of ice, and the closest thing to an indigenous population some funny-looking flightless birds. Moreover, the open waters of Poe's novel had been proved to be well onto the Antarctic mainland. So how does a scientific-minded author like Verne tackle this problem? The solution is simple—although its elegance is debatable: anachronistically, he devises a channel straight through the center of the continent, perhaps harking back to Gerard Mercator's sixteenth-century maps of the Arctic (fig. 1).

In devising these channels, Verne attempts to create a loophole through which imaginative writing can flow once again. Like at the very center of Mercator's map, there is actually a gigantic lodestone here. We can safely assume that Verne knew that much of the action of the novel was impossible, simply for the reason that the existence of an Antarctic continent was established and the open polar seas his heroes traverse simply were not there. Indeed, he most

certainly publishes the novel when he does because the Antarctic has become the object of great scientific interest again. Just two years prior, in 1895, the Sixth International Geographical Congress called on fellow scientific societies to explore the Antarctic, declaring that “the exploration of the Antarctic regions is the greatest piece of geographical exploration still to be undertaken.”⁴ This marks the beginning of the mythical Heroic Age, which culminates in the legendary race to the pole between Robert Falcon Scott and Roald Amundsen in 1911. Most certainly, Verne saw the potential in this public interest in this vast unknown. Indeed, as Verne states in a letter in 1896 (erroneously given as 1996 by Walter), quoted in the introduction, “It will come at the right time, since people are talking about voyages and discoveries at the South Pole” (xiv). But, as stated, it was not as unknown as Verne pretends. In many respects, it is an epistemic throwback to a state of knowledge that was outdated at the time of writing. The addition of the classical lodestone motif, however, shows that Verne was quite deliberate in the way he flouts the discourse of hard science. The lodestone polar motif has been used at least since the tales of Sindbad, with more recent examples being Robert Paltock’s *The Life and Adventures of Peter Wilkins, a Cornish Man* (1751) and Adam Seaborn’s (pseud.) *Symzonia: A Voyage of Discovery* (1820), both Swiftian satires. Verne thus playfully eschews science and instead invokes the tradition of wondrous voyages. In a “factual” footnote, he even has one of his own creations appear as part of historical record, Captain Nemo’s visit to the South Pole in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), thus playfully undercutting the veracity of the novel (214n).

As Walter points out in his introduction to *The Sphinx*, previous translations of Verne’s text have been incomplete. This is of course problematic, and the present initiative of providing a full version in English is a welcome one, indeed. But I think the abridged versions also point to a central problem with Verne’s text—it is not exactly high-grade literature, certainly one of Verne’s weaker efforts. It is necessarily derivative, of course, but in a way that makes Verne’s writing slightly infelicitous and the reading slightly dull. In my mind, the merits of Verne’s prose always lay more in the ideas than the treatment. But here Verne has put himself to the all but impossible task of linearizing Poe’s nonlinear text, like someone who tries to plug holes in a leaking ship where a new one always appears when the last one is plugged. The effect is tedious and does not serve to enhance the original or enrich the new version by intertextual linking. From this perspective, then, I think we can excuse previous editors for their shortcomings in this respect, since they probably did this to be able to present a more readable text. However, I also think that for the same reasons this novel will not typically



FIG. 2 Original illustration of the Sphinx by George Roux (1897).

appeal to regular readers of Verne, but even so it is of great interest to literary scholars. And for research purposes, an unabridged version is of course crucial. So here this Excelsior edition bridges a definite gap. I cannot judge the relative merits of the extant translations, but from the copious translator's notes here it seems to me to be a version that stays true to the original, which is important for interpretive precision, obviously. The notes in themselves are generally very informative. Several point out shortcomings in previous translations, which is perhaps not strictly necessary, and others point out textual inconsistencies of interest for close readers. But many notes contain interesting points regarding content, which are very helpful for any student of the text.

This edition also reproduces the beautiful illustrations to the French original, which is of great value in itself (fig. 2). Moreover, we get a brief foreword and afterword by Walter, both containing interesting material to put the text in context and making relevant textual points. In addition to all this, we also get Poe's *Pym* in its entirety (a slightly tweaked version of the original Harpers edition from 1838), and an excerpt of a portion pertaining to *Pym* from a lengthy essay by Verne, "Edgar Allan Poe and His Writings" (1864). The excerpt is of special interest since here, in 1864, thirty-three years before *Sphinx* is published, Verne discusses the non-ending of *Pym*: "And that's how

the narrative breaks off. Who will ever take it up again? Somebody more daring than I am, somebody bolder at pushing on into the realm of things impossible” (384). If Verne felt intimidated then, he has evidently regained his composure in 1896 when he writes to his publisher about the novel he is contemplating: “I’m very excited about this novel; we shall see whether it gets the public excited too . . . in my opinion it’s another *Pym*, but more true to life and I think more interesting” (xiv). The public’s excitement never quite rose to match Verne’s, however. And while the novel is certainly less fantastic than *Pym*, and therefore perhaps more “true to life,” it never becomes more interesting. But that does not mean it lacks interest—far from it. As I have hoped to indicate, *The Sphinx* holds eminent interest to anybody interested in studying Verne, Poe’s influence, or perhaps intertextuality in general.

Notes

1. John Carlos Rowe, “Writing and Truth in Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*,” *Glyph: Johns Hopkins Textual Studies* 2 (1977): 117, 104.
2. Edgar Allan Poe, “Mystification,” in *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe: Tales and Sketches, 1831–1842*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 291–305.
3. Basil Ashmore, “Introduction,” in *The Mystery of Arthur Gordon Pym* (London: Panther, 1964), 8.
4. Quoted in Stephen Pyne, *The Ice: A Journey to Antarctica* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 85.