

## Project Description

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**Title of Project:** *Reconsidering Space in Polar Exploration: Ships and Ice Realms in Romantic Fiction*

### 1. State of Research and My Contribution to the Field

The corpus of primary literature analysed in this PhD project consists of *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1818/1831); *Tales of a Voyager to the Arctic Ocean* (1826) and *Tales of a Voyager to the Arctic Ocean. Second Series* by Robert Pearse Gillies (1829); and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym. Of Nantucket* by Edgar Allan Poe (1838). All the texts under analysis were written in the first half of the nineteenth century and depict polar exploration. There is a discernable chronology in the primary works' description of polar exploration in reference to contemporary exploratory voyages. First, Shelley's novel picks up the Northwest Passage exploration at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Second, Gillies' books deal with British Arctic exploration in the 1820s. And finally, Poe's work can be regarded as an answer to the popularity of American South Pole exploration in the 1830s. In the project, this body of texts is investigated together for the first time. Moreover, Gillies' books have not been covered by any research to date.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has been extensively investigated in literary studies. The polar exploration in the novel has been most notably addressed by Griffin (1974), Spufford (1996), Beck (2000), and Craciun (2011). Griffin investigates the symbolic use of fire and ice in the novel as two opposing natural forces, and contemplates their representation in the Romantic tradition. Spufford focuses on the aspects of emptiness, fantasy, and ambiguity in the employment of the polar region as a setting in the novel. Beck examines the parallels between Walton's fantastic vision of the polar region and Milton's prelapsarian fantasy in *Paradise Lost*. Craciun, in turn, considers the broader contexts of authorship and publishing practices of the time in the depiction of polar exploration in the novel. Although the ice regions' sublime and imaginative properties have been highlighted, they have not been assessed within the concept of absolute space and its potential to dominate and endanger humans due to the physical properties of a natural site. Moreover, the role of ship space in *Frankenstein* has not been addressed in literary studies and has not been investigated as a synthesis of social space and heterotopia. Both the concepts are central to the understanding of the ship space in the novel as a complex and distinct place fashioned in contrast to an ice region.

Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* has been interpreted in a number of ways by literary critics. The sublime, unreal and imaginary properties of polar waters have been accentuated in literary scholarship by Ljungquist (1978), Rosenzweig (1982), Spufford (1996) and Jones (2010). However, they have not been investigated within a spatial reading of absolute space which, in my argument, will enable me to concentrate not on the elusive meaning behind the 'white chasm' of the South Pole, but its function as an overpowering natural space in the narrative. The ship space in *Pym* has been investigated by Campbell (1970) and Moldenhauer (1971) as a narrative setting for the grotesque, the motifs of violence and deceit, perverse pleasure and the imagination. The most notable exception here is Carringer (1974) who emphasizes the function of the ship in the delimitation of space in the novel. He argues that this circumscription of space embodies a typical tool of Poe's fiction in general, and in his sea voyages serves as "a pretext that allows him [Poe] to reverse all conventional associations that hold the sea to be a place of infinite expanse" (509). Nevertheless, the functionality of the ship in *Pym* as a socio-heterotopic space has not been analysed in literary studies.

In this PhD project, I propose to focus on the interrelationship between the spaces of polar ice and ships depicted in the analysed novels. I regard these two distinct spaces as complex places which interact in an intricate fashion in the primary texts. The two spaces are complex because they are concurrently imagined and physical spaces. In the analysis of polar ice and ships in the novels, I bring together eighteenth-century aesthetic theory and contemporary spatial studies. By doing this, I essentially intend to look at the characters' sublime experience ensued from the interaction between the two elements through the lens of spatial studies. Such theoretical angle will enable me to consider new spatial perspectives and implications of this interaction in the primary narratives and in Romantic travel fiction in general. Furthermore, my body of primary texts consists of well-known, canonical, literary works and relatively neglected works of fiction. Consequently, the analysis of the latter will put a new spin on the literary criticism of the former.

## 2. Data and Methods

### Data

Since the completion of my Master studies, I have undertaken an extensive archival research into Romantic travel writing published between the years 1800-1840s. In the course of this preliminary research, I have read more than a hundred texts, both fictional and non-fictional, which address geographic discovery and exploration of the period. I have examined numerous polar exploration accounts written in the first half of the nineteenth century by such British explorers as William Parry, John Ross, William Scoresby, Robert McClure, and others. Subsequently, I have chosen the four novels for my corpus in which the interaction between the spaces of ice and ships is most compelling. In these four novels the two investigated elements are depicted as opposing spaces. The oppositions between the two occur on the pragmatic (the voyage) and the narrative levels. However, they are not entirely binary since the semantic oppositions are repeatedly subverted in the analysed texts. On the one hand, this intermittent subversion of oppositions suggests that the two spaces are not fixed categories and are subject to transformation. On the other hand, I argue that this subversion imbues the two analysed elements with a creative potential in the narratives.

*Frankenstein* is a classic canonical text of English literature of the first half of the nineteenth century. The novel is most likely set in the 1790s and among other things deals with the British search for the North Pole and the Northwest Passage. The novel incorporates a complex narrative structure in which the diegesis essentially incorporates a story within a story. Robert Walton's frame narrative, which depicts the polar exploration, brackets Victor Frankenstein's story, the main part of the novel. Victor's story, in turn, includes the Creature's narrative. Walton's epistolary frame narrative contributes to the novel's textual cohesion as it begins and concludes the entire story. Walton's ship is blocked by ice in the polar zone which prevents the narrator from proceeding further in his voyage; and precisely for this reason, provides a narrative setting for the novel. In other words, in this complex narrative structure, the ship, isolated by ice, generates the series of subordinated narratives. *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is Poe's only novel. According to Gitelman (1992), "Poe depended [...] upon literature of and about exploration: *Pym* mimics this literature, and the exploration account genre constitutes its true subject" (350). Poe's novel indeed imitates this exploration genre most explicitly through its narrative structure. The diegesis incorporates a linear story that is narrated by a first-person autodiegetic narrator, Arthur Gordon Pym. The linear structure is interpolated by paratexts (footnotes and image figures) and various exploratory accounts of ship cargo, sea slugs, penguins, and ditto. These interpolated elements typically can be found in non-fictional exploratory travelogues.

Each of the two novel series by Robert Pearse Gillies consists of three volumes. The novels are told by a first-person autodiegetic narrator who remains nameless. The narrator embarks on a voyage to the Arctic Ocean on board the ship Leviathan along the Shetland Islands, Norway and Greenland. The characters on board the ship establish a routine in which each individual needs to share a story with the others when his turn comes. Consequently, the frame voyage (primary level) narrative is interpolated by tales (second level narratives). Like in *Frankenstein*, the frame narrative contributes to the textual cohesion of the novel series as it enables the author to link various tales into one whole. As a result of such narrative structure, the ship creates narrative time and space for the whole novel series. Therefore, the vessel is not only an important setting for the novels, but a driving force behind the construction of the plot's narrative. It encompasses a place that is put in contrast to polar ice. There are numerous depictions of icebergs, floes, and ice regions in the diegesis of the two novels. Ice is explicitly described at length by the narrator as majestic and awe-inspiring. At the same time, ice invokes fear and a sense of danger in the ship's crew.

Narratologically, there are three main grounds for making comparison of the polar exploration depicted in the primary literature. First, all the three authors of the texts under analysis employ the technique of narrative embedding in the construction of their works. The narrative embedding is most prominent in Shelley's and Gillies' novels. Both texts embody frame and interpolated narratives. In both the novels the framing technique is complete as the frame narrative begins and ends the diegesis. Second, there is a discernible narrative imitation of non-fictional exploratory travelogues in the analysed novels. It particularly pertains to *Pym* and *Tales* as this imitation occurs in the form of exploration topoi and journal-like entries in both the texts. Finally, all the novels under analysis contain metafictional elements, i.e. the narrators' references to their writing process. For example, in *Frankenstein* Walton's frame narrative is epistolary in form, and several times he comments on the feelings he experiences while writing his letters to his sister Margaret. Hence the narratological analysis of the polar exploration will allow me to formally identify differences and similarities in the novels' depiction of it, and further analyse the narrative representations of polar ice and ship spaces.

This PhD project investigates the manner in which the spaces of polar ice and ships interact with each other and their creative and subversive potential in the production of meaning. Henry Lefebvre's concept of space and its continuous social production are the theoretical basis of the project. The key concepts on which my analysis builds are social space, absolute space, the sublime, and heterotopia.

### *Absolute Space*

In Lefebvre's understanding, absolute (natural) space is a pre-historic and pre-social space which is never complete and ceases to exist as soon as it becomes regarded in isolation (Lefebvre 16). It is a space which existed when nature prevailed over human beings who later organised settlements and started to populate its space (Boer 87). In my interpretation of the concept, absolute (natural) space is neither a pure point of departure towards a social space nor a void frame for social practice. It is rather a site of nature permeated with social symbolisms that can prevail over humans in two capacities: 1) it dominates people because it bears potential danger towards them; 2) it can govern people's lives when it incorporates a daily source of sustenance for them. Therefore, I will structure my analysis of ice in the novels around this interpretation of the concept.

### *Social Space*

Lefebvre argues that “[s]ocial space is a (social) product” (26). Every society appropriates space in its own way; and space as a social product thus shapes humans’ lives in the sense that it presupposes them to follow certain rules of behaviour. In this context, space is not a mere frame for the human body, but it is rather a material creation of a social reality. Furthermore, the production of space, for Lefebvre, embodies “a purely visual field” where all human senses (smell, touch, taste, sight and sound) are utilised in the process (Gregory 220). Social space thus incorporates a concrete, material product to be employed by people. In the framework of my analysis of the novels, the ship space, following Lefebvre’s abovementioned understanding of space, encompasses a social space – the concrete, material space – that the narrators inhabit, experience, and make use of.

### *Heterotopia*

In his essay “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias” (1984), Michel Foucault regards the ship as “the heterotopia par excellence” since “the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea” (9). In the same essay, six principles are outlined which are characteristic of heterotopias. Taking Foucault’s assertion regarding heterotopias and their principles as a starting point in my analysis of the novels, I will, however, move away from viewing the books’ ship spaces as heterotopias par excellence and places “without a place” in order to fully ascertain their socially productive potential in the narrative. Instead, I will analyse the ship spaces as distinct social places which are heterotopic in nature.

### *The Sublime*

The concept of the sublime has inspired a vast literary scholarship, and subsequently numerous works have been written on the use and the experience of the sublime in Romanticism. My investigation of polar ice in the novels will be based on the concepts of the sublime as established by Edmund Burke (1757) and Immanuel Kant (1790). The concept is essential for addressing the characters’ feelings of fear and delight when they observe polar ice in the novels. There is an aspect in Burke’s concept that particularly pertains to the way the characters perceive the two investigated spaces. It is the argument that a safe distance is important for the aesthetic visual experience between a sublime object and a spectator. Polar ice invokes a sublime experience in the narrators from a distance. Concurrently, the ship space is perceived by the characters as a safe place. When the distance between the two diminishes or completely disappears, polar ice is regarded as a dominating space of nature; and the ship, in turn, becomes a dominated or endangered space. Regarding Kant’s concept, I incorporate the philosopher’s cognitive assessment of the sublime, i.e. a person experiences the sublime when they are mentally incapable of comprehending the grandeur of what they see. The cognitive assessment will be important for examining the characters’ individual perception of polar ice in the novels.

Thus, in the analysed novels polar ice combines the features of Henri Lefebvre’s concept of absolute space and the concept of the sublime; while ship spaces embody the characteristics of Lefebvre’s concept of social space and Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia. Absolute space is important for the analysis of polar ice as a natural site that dominates the characters; concurrently, the sublime performs the key role in the discussion of the mixed feelings of awe and dread, and the importance of distance in the perception of the two spaces. The concepts of social space and heterotopia are essential in the investigation of the ship space as a distinct place for the characters. Notwithstanding, I wish to depart from the established theoretical framework in the following three instances. First, I will move away from Foucault’s understanding of ships as heterotopias par

excellence and “places without a place”. Second, I will re-interpret Lefebvre’s concept of absolute space as a pre-historic and pre-social natural space into a space of nature that has an agency in its own right, and therefore interferes with human projects of domination. Finally, I will combine Burke’s and Kant’s concepts of the sublime in my analysis since the depictions of polar ice in the novels embody the features of both concepts.

### Methods

My main methodological approach is the close semantic analysis of the ships and ice depicted in the primary literature. Building upon the concepts of absolute space, social space, the sublime, and heterotopia, I will outline the functional use of the depicted ships as a synthesis of social space and heterotopia; and the role of the described ice as a synthesis of absolute space and the sublime. Furthermore, I will also employ a semantic approach in order to analyse the social relations in which the characters engage themselves and then further scrutinise the manner by which these relations affect the social production of the investigated spaces. In addition to the semantic analysis, I will employ a narratological approach in order to formally identify differences and similarities in the depiction of polar exploration and the two examined spaces in particular. The final step will be to investigate and compare the manner in which the examined locations interact, and their ultimate creative and subversive potential in the novels. I will apply the abovementioned steps to a single novel at a time, comparing the impact of the characters’ social relations (and various ideas, actions and beliefs that leaven these relations) on the imagined and the actual spaces of the ships and ice. After examining the characters’ social relations and their production of the locations in the individual novels, I will compare the conceptions of these spaces, their function and the nature of their interaction in the novels of my corpus. Subsequently, I will situate the results and conclusions of the project within a historical discourse on polar exploration in the Romantic period. Ultimately, I hope to reach a conclusion in which new social and spatial perspectives on the polar exploration in Romantic fiction may be re-conceptualised.

**Keywords:** *Romanticism, space, aesthetics, heterotopia, sublime, exploration, ice, ships.*