

# “Steering Against the Tyde of Satan’s Malice”: *The Strange and Dangerous Voyage of Captaine Thomas James*

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Named by I.S. MacLaren as a possible source for *Paradise Lost* (MacLaren 326), and by J.F. Nicholls, Ivor James, and others as the main source for Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” *The Strange and Dangerous Voyage of Captaine Thomas James* (1633) is a text that deserves to be recuperated for critical attention. The *Voyage* has a venerable publishing history: according to Miller Christy, Thomas James’s biographer and editor in the Hakluyt Society’s 1894 edition of *The Strange and Dangerous Voyage*, by 1807 the text had been printed in three separate editions and, by 1870, had been reprinted in abridged form in dozens of other works, including a retelling in one of Maria Hack’s widely-read “Harry and Lucy” books for children (i. clxxxi-clxxxvi). Christy attributes the success of the *Voyage* primarily to its novelty, although he acknowledges its literary merit: “it had considerable general interest as a narrative of adventure by sea in a then-almost-unknown portion of the world” (i.clxxxi). This is a reasonable assumption to make regarding the text’s reception in the 1600s, but one might make the further assumption that more recent works should logically have supplanted James’s by the 1870s. The fact is that *The Strange and Dangerous Voyage* is a gripping narrative, a psychodrama which conflates the North and evil as James’s adversary for his soul. In this essay, I wish to explore both the text and the context of *The Strange and Dangerous Voyage of Captaine Thomas James*: I believe that it occupies a pivotal place in our culture’s construction of the Arctic.

The image of the Arctic as wasteland, implacable and desolate, is ubiquitous in Western culture. At first glance, it would seem that the binary system that underlies our thought and its expression in language produces a dichotomous trope about landscape. We employ the metaphor of the earth as a site of reproduction and the metonym of the earth as female, as they have been found in Western literature from classical antiquity to the present, and name a landscape either “fruitful” or barren.” However, the Arctic is not “barren”; the land supports its inhabitants. It appears that another trope that was specific to the northern hemisphere, which operated in ancient and medieval literature, has assisted in our construction of the Arctic. In both Chris-

tian and non-Christian traditions, the North was associated with physical and moral darkness (Dustoor 244). The patristic literature of medieval Europe, in providing exegeses on certain biblical passages that situated the devil's throne in the North, introduced an important figure into English literature that, displaced, continues to complicate our notions of northernness.

Isaiah (14: 12-14) named the North as the site of Lucifer's throne:

- 12 How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!
- 13 For thou has said in thine heart, I will ascend unto heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of congregation, in the sides of the north
- 14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High.

This passage was understood by early Christian commentators such as Jerome, Augustine, Gregory, and Paterius to refer to the story of the rebellion of Lucifer and his followers and their fall from Heaven (Salmon 119). From their commentaries, and through the sermons, hymns, and religious poetry of the early English church, the North become so clearly associated with the home of the devil that it needed no explanation when the trope was employed in the secular literature of the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries, as it was in the work of Chaucer, Langland, Greene, Marlowe, and Shakespeare, among others. Its meaning was transparent: the Latin phrase from the Vulgate Bible could be inserted without comment, as in John Skelton's "Collyn Clout" (c.1521). Skelton's protagonist attacks the clergy and accuses bishops of "sytte(ing) in trones,/Lyke *princeps aquilonis*" (344-5) and thus delivers a pun; it is generally accepted by scholars that the cleric under attack in "Collyn Clout" is Wolsey, whose archbishopric, York, was situated in the North (Skelton 469 n.345).

Later Renaissance poets could not employ this trope with such assurance. The discoveries made by those involved in the exploration of the northern hemisphere "called all in doubt," to quote John Donne: poets responded to a time of enormous epistemological uncertainty by readjusting the mythos of the North just as map makers adjusted its shape. Unfortunately, the newly available information did little to dispel the idea of the North as a locus of evil; in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) Satan and his rebel angels fall from Heaven into Pandemonium, located in "a frozen continent,"

. . .dark and wild, beat with perpetual storms  
Of whirlwind and dire hail, which on firm land  
Thaws not, but gathers heap, and ruin seems  
Of ancient pile; all else deep snow and ice,  
A gulf profound as that Serbonian bog

Betwixt Damiata and Mount Casius old,  
Where armies whole have sunk: the parching air  
Burns froze, and cold performs the' effect of fire.  
(PLII: 588-95)

One of the new sources of information available to poets about the northern regions of the globe was *The Strange and Dangerous Voyage of Captaine Thomas James*. Ostensibly an account of James's travels in the Subarctic, the Voyage is in reality a fascinating record of the psychological suffering of a terrified man. To regard the text as "humourous," as did Sir Barrow, who called the Voyage "a book of 'lamentation and weeping, and great mourning' . . . one continued strain of difficulties and dangers and complainings" (qtd in Christy clxx), is to disregard this subtext. It is crucial to the interpretation of the Voyage to recognize James's fear. It is also crucial to my argument: it is this terror of "the hell within" displaced onto the physical place of the Arctic that stimulates subsequent writers and strengthens and refigures a powerful cultural trope.

Thomas James set out to find a Northwest Passage into the South Sea in his ship, the *Henrietta Maria*, on May 3, 1631, under the patronage of Charles I of England and the "Worshipfull Merchant Adventurers of the City of Bristoll." Upon his return, in October 1632, James was commanded to an audience with Charles for the purpose of presenting the King with his discoveries. Charles appears to have been fascinated by James's account of his adventure, which James read to him from his journals. James wrote to a patron, Humphrey Hooke:

the conference, by way of questions  
and answeres, continued about twoe  
houres time...his Matie...commaunded  
mee a second time to attend hem and  
giue him a further relation...and make  
an abstract of my Journall, and p'fect  
my observations, and bring it to him;  
wch I am about, and brieflie intend to  
effecte, an know his further order.

(qtd in Christy i. clxxviii)

Charles's "further order" was publication.

*The Voyage* was ready for the press within five months of James's return (Christy i clxxvi); the text is a compilation of narrative, poetry, excerpts from James's journals and ship's log, his map, and appendices of various documents, treatises, and lists. The narrative itself veers eerily between past and present tenses, constructed as it is from material composed on the actual

voyage and from material composed in retrospective reflection. The effect is unsettling: the reader is at once present in the narrative and absent from it, at once in the middle of the horror and safe outside it in England. This strategy (and it may not have been a conscious one) serves to underline James's inscription of the North as a place of evil: not only the voyage, but the North itself is "strange and dangerous."

The text opens with a title page, followed by a dedicatory epistle to King Charles, which foreground the psychological horror of the journey that James develops further in the narrative. The title page promises, *inter alia*, a "relation" of "THE MISERIES INDURED, BOTH\Going, Wintering, Returning" from this "STRANGE AND DANGEROUS VOYAGE." The letter to Charles is equally provocative: James writes that

many a Storme, and Rocke, and Mist,  
and Winde, and Tyde, and Sea, and  
Mount of Ice, haue I, in this  
Discouery, encountered withall; many  
a despaire and death had almost  
overwhelmed mee. (ii 453)

In the prefatory chapter to the main narrative (ii. 455-59), James carefully and deliberately outlines his preparations for the voyage and the rationale behind each of the many decisions he must make in the course of those preparations. These are chilling passages. We have already been prepared for the idea that this was a perilous voyage: now we are being asked to consider the idea that it should not have been. Captain James has done all a captain can do toward safeguarding his ship and crew, and, indeed, concludes his preparations "expecting a faire winde to begin the voyage" (ii. 459); but from the moment James and his crew embark, we realize that James is battling a supernatural force of some sort. James's "faire winde," fails to appear: they set sail with "little winde" on the third of May, and then meet with such severe gales that they cannot leave the coast of England until the seventeenth. This wind is given malevolent character: it is figured as having "opposed it selfe. . . strongly against us" (ii. 461). The winds remain "variable and vnconstant" throughout the crossing; the weather is "thicke" and "foule" at Greenland. It is at this point in the narrative that James makes his first acquaintance with the pack ice that becomes, for him, a visible symbol of evil, the material representation of the forces he must battle in order to carry out his mission of discovery and return to England. It is an epic struggle.

Early in the morning of the fifth of June, James and his crew find themselves "incompassed about with Ice." Though they "strooke many fearfull blowes against it," the ice continues its assault against the men: "we were

beset with many extraordinary great pieces of Ice that came upon us, as it were, with wilfull violence, and doubtlesse had crushed vs to pieces if we had not let fall some Sayle, which the Ship presently felt." The ice does crush the ship's shallop<sup>1</sup> and it continues to enclose the *Henrietta Maria*,

in great pieces, as high as our Poope, and some of the sharpe blue corners of them did reach quite under us. . . [they] did heave and set and so beat vs that it was wonderfull how the Ship could indure one blow of it; but it was God'e only preseruacion of us, to whom be all honour and glory. In this extremitie, I made the men to let fall, and make what Sayle they could, and the Ship forced herself thorow it, though so tossed and beaten as I thinke neuer Ship was. When we were cleere, we sayed the pumps and found her stanch, vpon which we went instantly to prayer, and to praise God for his mercifull deliuey of vs. (ii. 462)

God is called upon and thanked for His "mercifull deliveries" time and again, for the ice continually "pester[s]" (ii. 462), "bruises" (ii463), "torments and beat[s]" (ii 464) the ship; it makes "a hollow and hideous noyse" (ii. 464) and "strange whirlings" in the sea (ii. 465). It carries away or destroys the ship's tools and equipment (ii. 467) and endangers the men (ii. 466, 470). Yet James and his crew "continue in torment" (ii. 473) through Hudson Strait until they reach Mill Island on the fifth of July. It is then that James decides not to "prosecute the descouery to the North-westward":

Wee were, moreouer, driuen back againe with contrary windes, still closed and pestered with ice, and with all the perils and dangers incident to such aduentures, so that we thought, a thousand times, that the Ship had bin beaten to pieces. (ii. 474)

The summer is spent in exploring Hudson Bay; on August sixth, at latitude 58° 28', the *Henrietta Maria* is finally "very free of Ice. . . .we went to prayer, and to giue God thanks for our deliuey out of the Ice" (ii. 480). However, James's voyage is never far from catastrophe: even in the navigable "thicke puddleish water" the *Henrietta Maria* experiences "fearfull accidents." Rocks, shoals, and breaches threaten to ground the ship; heavy wind causes

wave action in shallow waters that makes the ship unmanageable. In one such “chopping short Sea” a horrifying incident occurs: in attempting to pull in the ship’s cable, a number of the men are thrown from the capstan. Nine of the men are involved in the accident, of whom eight only just escape permanent injury or death, but the ship’s gunner,

(an honest and diligent man) had his  
legge taken off betwixt the Cable and  
the Capstang, which wrung off his foote,  
and tare all the flesh off his legge,  
and crushed the bone to pieces, and  
sorely withall bruised all his whole  
body.

(ii. 486)

The crew is immobilized, losing control of their “memory” and “strengths”: they eventually recover themselves, extract the gunner and carry him to the surgeon. Unfortunately, as they do so, the ship drives onto the shoals again (ii. 487). The wind, personified, has become another enemy against whom James must battle:

[he] changed not his condition, but  
continued in his old anger and fury  
. . . [he] showed his vttermost malice;  
and in that tearing violence that nor  
I, nor any that were then with me, euer  
saw the Sea in such a breach.

(ii. 491)

As winter approaches, conditions worsen: the men begin to fall ill (ii. 490), tempers begin to flare (ii. 496), and, having decided to overwinter in Hudson Bay, James begins the arduous search for a safe harbour for the *Henrietta Maria*. However, there can be no “safe harbour” for James and his men in the unfriendly North: due to the “debaring ice,” “foule grounds,” and “vncertaine depths” of Hudson Bay, James is forced to moor near the shore of an island, which he later names Charlton Island, and to take the drastic measure of sinking the *Henrietta Maria*. The ship, seized by James’s enemy and molded into a fantastic frozen spectre of a vessel, “did looke like a piece of Ice in the fashion of a Ship, or a Ship resembling a piece of Ice.” Despite “tormenting cogitations,” James could not “see any hope of sauing the Ship. . . it was most impossible [for the Ship] to endure these extremities long” (513). The men, who were living on the island in two log houses, had been rising daily from their sickbeds to battle their enemy; they

beate the Ice off the Cables. . . [and]

digge the Ice out of the hawses; in  
which worke, the water would freeze  
on their clothes and hands, and would  
so benumme them that they could hardly  
get into the Ship, whithout being heau'd  
in with a rope.

(ii. 513)

They were weakening rapidly. Two men had already died: John Barton, the gunner's mate, was crossing one of the island's ponds and, "when he was in the very midst, the Ice brake and closed vpon him, and we neuer saw him more" (ii. 511); and the gunner, who had lost his leg in the capstan incident, "did languish vnrecouerably," and died with frozen plaster "at his wound, and his bottle of Sacke at his head" (ii. 514). The others suffer from exposure, poor diet, and overwork; it is necessary that wood be chopped, water be hauled, and provisions be retrieved from the icy holds of the *Henrietta Maria*. James writes:

We had three sorts of sicke men; those  
that could not moue, nor turne themselues  
in thier Beds, who must be tended like  
an Infant; others that were, as it were,  
creepled with scuruy Aches; and others,  
lastly that were something better. Most  
of all had sore mouthes.

(ii. 545)

These desperately ill men undergo a daily medical treatment in order to perform their quotidian tasks: a macabre ritual, it involves the extraction of teeth and the cutting away of gum tissue so that they can eat, and a bathing of "griued parts" (thighs, knees, and legs) so that they can stand. "By night," writes James, "they would be as bad againe, and then they must bee bathed, anoynted, and their mouthes againe drest, before they went to Bed" (ii. 545).

By the spring, the North begins to claim its victims. The mate's master, John Warden, dies on May 6: he is given "the most Christian-like" burial possible under the circumstances (ii.547). The ship's carpenter, William Cole, dies on May 18: he is burried by the mate's master by "as many as could goe, for 3 more of our principall men lay then expecting a good houre" (ii.545). James writes that Cole's death brought the crew to "the most miserable estate that we were in all the voyage": Cole had been building a pinnace in which the men had hoped to sail home should the *Henrietta Maria* be unsalvageable in the spring. That evening the ship's master, no doubt spurred to an investigation of the ship by Cole's untimely death, makes a grisly discovery when prowling around the *Henrietta Maria*: the ship's gunner, committed

to the sea upon his death in mid-November, had frozen fast to the vessel under the gun-room ports. The next day, James writes,

I sent men to dig him out, He was fast in the Ice, his head downewards and his heele upward (for he had but one legge) and the plaster was yet at his wound. In the afternoon, they had digd him cleere out; after all which time, he was as free from noysomenesse as when we first committed him to the Sea. This alteration has the Ice and water and time onely wrought on him: that his flesh would slip up and down upon his bones like a gloue on a man's hand (ii. 549).

The dead, at least, are supposed to be in Heaven: the living consider them fortunate to have escaped the "hell" of Charlton Island. The "vnnaturelnesse" of the northern spring "tormented" James's men: "hot gloomes that we cannot indure in the Sunne" and bitter coldness in the night (ii. 551), and "an infinit abundance of bloud-thirsty Muskitoes" eclipsed the "torments" of the winter (ii. 556).

A providential discovery of a small patch of vetches (ii.552), which the crew promptly added to their diet, proved the turning point for the James expedition:

For now our feeble sicke men, that could not for their liues stirre these two or three months, can indure the ayre and walke about the house; our other sicke men gather strength also, and it is wonderfull to see how soone they were recouered.

(ii.555)

The men gain the strength necessary to assist in raising the *Henrietta Maria*, which had somehow remained seaworthy; on the seventeenth of June, 1632, despite "the Ice . . . all thicke about us," James and his crew floated their ship, "went all to prayers, and gaue God thanks that had given us our ship againe" (ii.556).

On the twenty-fifth of June, James orders one of his men to set a fire "on the eminentest place of the Iland," hoping to contact "any Saluages on the maine or the Ilands about us" (ii.559). The forest "tooke fire;" the flames ran "most strangely" and burned "most furiously," necessitating immediate flight from the area, and a general decampment from the island: the crew slept on



board the *Henrietta Maria* and worked furiously for several days to rescue their belongings from Charlton Island. They sailed away on the second of July. Although James attempted to continue the search for the North-West Passage that summer, the wretched conditions in which he and the crew once again found themselves sailing were the deciding factors in abandoning the search and returning to England:

for we were hourelly, for the space of  
sixe weekes, as it were in the lawes  
of death; yea, neuer any (that I have  
heard of) haue beene so long, in such  
long nights, vpon a foule shoald shore,  
tormented with Ice, as we haue now beene.  
(ii. 580)

"Pestered" by ice, dogged by "foule thicke weather" (ii. 582), and followed by yet another "malicious", "perplexing" storm (583), and "hindered and crost with much contrary tempestuuous windes and weather" (ii,592), the *Henrietta Maria* managed to "labour and rowle" her way home, arriving at Bristol on the twenty-second of October, 1632:

The ship was torne....beaten...  
broken....[and] bruised....many  
defects there were besides, so that  
it was miraculous how this vessell  
could bring vs home againe. Being  
all here arriued, we went all to  
Church, and gaue God thanks for  
his preseruation of us amidst so  
many dangers.  
(ii. 592)

Thomas James concludes his narrative with a vicious attack on the "fables" written on the search for the North-West Passage by "Portingals and Spaniards, who neuer speak of any difficulties. . . as if they had beene brought home in a dreame or engine" (ii. 588). This is a sudden surge of splenetic prose from a narrator who has ostentatiously bowed his neck under the suffering sent by God elsewhere in the text. The argument that follows, that there probably is no North-West Passage to the South Sea (ii. 589), sounds hollow and self-excusatory although it is carefully constructed; James acknowledges that "what I haue here hastily written will neuer discourage any noble spirit that is minded to bring this so long tryed Action to absolute effect" (ii. 592). In fact, forty years were to pass before anyone was so "minded." One wonders what influence *The Strange and Dangerous Voyage* had on

this sudden decline in a hitherto popular activity.

When Thomas James left Bristol for Hudson Bay in May 1631, he was three days ahead of Captain Luke Foxe and his ship, the *Charles*; Foxe sailed under the patronage of Charles I and of the Adventurers for the North-West Passage, London. Foxe's account of his summer in Hudson Bay, *North-West Fox* (in Christy), published in 1635, provides a fascinating gloss on *The Strange and Dangerous Voyage*; Foxe's tone is phlegmatic and practical and, although he meets with the same nasty weather conditions that so terrify James, he chooses to engage in a scientific observation of "this prodigious thing we call Ice" (ii.288) rather than in a metaphysical battle with it. Foxe is lyrical about the landscape; he notices "showers of small snow and hard frost, so as all our tackling and shippe-bowes where the water came were all ice-sickles" (ii. 382-3), "this morning Aurora blusht, as though shee had ushered her Master from some unchast lodging, and the ayre so silent as though all those handmaidens had promised secrecy" (ii.395), and that "the land lying hid in snow, doth cause a white reflexe in the Ayre all night, as though it were dawning or twi-light, before and after sun-set (ii. 388). As Miller Christy notes, Foxe carefully records the sighting of "ne fewer than twenty-three species of plants, shrubs, and trees; twenty-one of mammals; twenty of birds; and several of fish" (i. cxxx). Luke Foxe's sub-Arctic is teeming with life and endlessly fascinating: Thomas James finds the land "utterly barren of all goodnesse" (ii. 477).

Thomas James's engagement with the North is metaphysical. Challenged beyond his capabilities, perhaps incompetent to begin with (Christy i. clxxi, clxxv), James's terror at the hell within himself displaces onto a North which becomes incomprehensible, evil, and fraught with forces that threaten to overwhelm him. At mid-term, James asks his reader to consider "these few ragged and teared Rimes," a dialogue between the soul and the body. The poet's body exhorts his soul to leave off its grief at the place of evil in which his body finds itself:

... We haue with confidence relied vpon  
A rustie wyre, tocht with a little Stone,  
Incompast round with paper, and, alasse,  
To house it harmlesse, nothing but a glasse;  
And thought to shun a thousand dangers by  
The blind direction of this senseless flye.  
When the fierce winds shatter'd blacke  
    nights asunder,  
When pitchie clouds, spitting forth fire and  
    thunder,  
Hath shooke the earth, and made the Ocean

roare,  
And runne to hide it in the broken shoare:  
Now thou must steere by faith, a better guide;  
"Twill bring thee safe to heauen, against the  
tyde  
Of Satan's malice. . . .

(ii. 505)

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#### Note

1. *Editor's note:* A shallop is a light, open boat for use in shallow water.

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