15. LISA BLOOM

Science and Writing: Two National Narratives of Failure

In this essay, the failed British expedition to the South Pole in 1911 provides a case study of how representations of masculinity, technology, science, and empire are co-articulated. I compare Captain Robert Falcon Scott's narrative with the writings of American arctic explorers such as Captain Robert Peary and Vilhjalmur Stefansson to examine how different national fantasies of masculinity and science contributed to the formation of distinct imperial ideologies. In each national tradition, polar exploration defines masculinity and science as a superhuman attribute that actual men can never achieve. Thus, I will examine the difference between the ways these traditions deal with the possibility of actuality of scientific failure in terms of distinct narratives of writing.

The British were the losers in the race to the South Pole. Roald Amundsen of Norway reached the Pole in 1911, one month ahead of the hapless Captain Robert Falcon Scott. Not only did the British team fail to reach the Pole first, but Scott and his four men died of hunger and cold on their way back. After completing nearly seven-eighths of the distance they encountered a blizzard, and unable to reach their food depot just eleven miles away, died in their tent from a combination of frostbite, sickness, and starvation. This was no ordinary failure, to be covered up as a national embarrassment. Rather, the tragedy of the British expedition was seized on and celebrated by the British as a national historical event. The Peary controversy was different; the uncertainty attributed to Peary's success at

the North Pole was not just a straightforward case of failure, and for reasons I will make clear, not recuperable in the way failure could be in terms of a British heroism of sacrifice.

Eight months after the Scott expedition had disappeared, a search party found the tent with the bodies of Scott and his men inside. They recovered the men's diaries, letters, and other belongings. Included among these possessions was a geological collection that included 30 pounds of rock specimens that Scott had hoped would contribute to science. Surgeon Atkinson, who buried Scott and his men, was moved by the presence of the stones: "They had stuck to these up to the very end, even when disaster stared them in the face and they knew that the specimens were so much weight added to what they had to pull."[1]

Yet the pursuit of science was only one of several goals for the British expedition; for Peary's exploit, science was integrated into the expedition as a means as well as a singular goal. Peary attributed his superior abilities to management of what he referred to as a "traveling machine" that deployed the latest technological advances in scientific instrumentation and modes of transport. By contrast, Scott's masculine performance depended simply upon the integrity and honor of being a British gentleman. In Scott's view, British minds and bodies alone were enough to display the superior capabilities of the male hero.[2]

This is why Scott is able to portray the failure of his expedition as a heroic example of British character: "Our wreck is certainly due to this sudden advent of bad weather. . . . I do not think human beings ever came through such a month as we have come through. . . . I do not regret this journey, which has shown that Englishmen can endure hardships, help one another, and meet death with as great a fortitude as ever in the past."[3] Scott's rearticulation of his expedition's fortitude was readily accepted by the search party, who in memory of Scott and his men chose to inscribe the following line from Tennyson's *Ulysses* on the cross marking their burial site: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."[4]

At Scott's request, his diary was given to his wife, Kathleen Scott, who, with a family friend, Leonard Huxley, prepared and arranged his notes for public consumption. With funding from the British government, Scott's diary and letters were rapidly published in 1913 in London, New York, and Boston under the title *Scott's Last Expedition: The Personal Journal of Captain R. F. Scott, R.N., C.V.O., on His Last Journey to the South Pole.*[5]

In the years following Scott's death a myth of the gentleman hero was

erected on the foundation of the letters Scott wrote to explain the causes of his expedition's misfortunes. He wrote of himself as a man who sacrificed his own life to look after the welfare of his men. His letters demonstrated his leadership qualities and his ability to face death alone nobly. Thus a typical editorial in the London *Times* praised the failure of the Scott expedition: "Let us put out of our minds all the gossip which . . . has been circulated about a race. . . . The real value of the Antarctic expedition was spiritual, and therefore in the truest sense national. It is proof that in an age of depressing materialism men can still be found to face known hardship, heavy risk and even death, in pursuit of an idea. . . . That is the temper of men who build empires, and while it lives among us we shall be capable of maintaining an Empire that our fathers built."[6] Scott was able to reveal "the temper of men who build empires," thus saving Britain from the disgrace of losing to the Norwegians, by displaying the noble behavior of the "real" English gentleman. Even though Scott was not an aristocrat or a great explorer, his orderly and respectable death demonstrated the qualities of an Englishman that was born to rule.

In England, Scott's point of view was the only version of the story that was made public at the time. Although Scott makes references to the other four men who died with him in the field, their letters and diaries remained private. They were representatives of the navy, silent supporters of their commander, observers.

For many years the original diaries and letters of Scott and his men were not available to the public. Recently, some of these documents have been released. Roland Huntford, a Scandinavian historian, studied these original manuscripts and revealed in his 1979 book *Scott and Amundsen* the concerted effort made at the time of Scott's death by the British Admiralty to conceal unsettling facts about the Scott expedition. By comparing Scott's original diary with the published version Huntford found that "Scott's diaries were purged of all passages detracting from a perfect image; particularly those revealing bitterness over Amundsen, criticism of his companions, and, above all, signs of incompetence."[7]

Huntford's research revealed that Scott's diaries and letters were altered in order to turn the official version of events into something worthy of public reverence. The suggestion that Scott and his men died from scurvy is suppressed because it would have reflected on the whole conduct of the expedition. Roland Huntford provides an example of a significant excision made by a committee chaired by Kathleen Scott:

> It began with Kathleen Scott who, at her husband's request, was dealing with the papers. 'He was the last to go,' she wrote to Admiral Egerton, sending Scott's farewell letter to him—which happened to indicate otherwise. It was one of the letters found loose in the tent. On the back was a note in Bowers' hand, suggesting that Bowers may have been the last survivor, or at least casting doubts on Scott's claim. . . . In any case it was inconvenient evidence. It was suppressed and, instead, there was issued an official reconstruction of the closing scene in the text, contrived at the request of Kathleen Scott by the playwright Sir J. M. Barrie.[8]

In Barrie's reconstruction of Scott's death, the social relations of the expedition are concealed and Scott outlasts his social inferiors: "Wilson and Bowers died first and Captain Scott . . . thereafter . . . unbared his shirt and . . . with his head flung back awaited death. We know this because it was thus that the three were found. . . . Some of the wording may not be quite right, but the brevity is."[9] Barrie's staged drama perpetuates an ideal of British male heroism in which the captain, unafraid, thrusts his manly chest out in the face of adversity and awaits death alone.

American Myths of Modernity and Masculinity

In Scott's case, failure is recuperable through writing, whereas it is not in terms of a U.S. evolutionist discourse of science. This cultural difference is apparent in U.S. arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson's reaction to Scott's death in 1913:

> It has been so many years since arctic and antarctic exploration took any comparable toll of lives that we had come to feel fairly secure. After all, Peary and men like him have made exploration a science and with modern equipment and provision against the cold . . . there is not the danger that there used to be. . . .
>
> But perhaps our confidence in the steadily improved equipment of exploring parties had grown till we have been lulled into a false sense of security. This disaster to the Scott party is crushing in the way that the wreck of the *Titanic* was crushing. We had grown to believe that traveling on the seas in a huge liner was stripped of its traditional perils.[10]

The myth that scientific progress had turned ocean travel and polar exploration into risk-free activities was of a fairly recent origin. The loss of the Scott expedition was a reminder that all dangers had evidently not entirely disappeared with the recent alliance between exploration and science. Instead, Stefansson points out that the belief in the infallibility

of polar exploration and ocean travel was a sign of the new dangers that such mythologies of science engendered. The irony, as we shall see, is that Scott downplayed any alliance between scientific techniques and his expedition.

For Stefansson, the effect of the new sense of security might have proved damaging, yet he agrees that its existence was warranted. The relatively few lives lost in arctic and antarctic exploration in recent years showed that a significant advance had indeed been made. So much is this the case that when Stefansson is told that the failure of the Scott expedition was simply the result of a blizzard, which was considered a rather commonplace occurrence of nature, not only does he disbelieve it, but he invents a greater calamity as the cause: "Such a tragedy could be explained only on the supposition that some great and incalculable calamity overtook the party, a calamity of the proportions of an earthquake. . . . An earthquake might have broken loose a huge fragment of the ice barrier . . . so that they floated out to sea, but this is hard to believe."[11] It is not surprising that Stefansson fabricates a more extreme incident in order to conform better to an ideology of modernization and progress. Evidently, a blizzard just did not count as an obstacle to Stefansson—it was too ordinary: "No blizzard alone ever killed Captain Scott and his men. He was too experienced an explorer for that. Out on the Western prairie such a thing might be. A rancher might get caught unawares in a snowstorm, to be frozen and buried in the drifts. But in the Arctic regions? No. And certainly not when the leader was such a man as Scott, who had the finest of equipment and who knew how to guard against cold and snow. That was his business and he knew his business."[12] Stefansson's disbelief can be attributed to a certain historical certainty of that period. Stefansson, a polar explorer himself, does not need to know Scott personally in order to assert confidence about Scott's expertise. For Stefansson, science and exploration are so intimately intertwined that it would be inconceivable that Scott, as a practitioner of science, would not know something as basic to the profession as how to guard against cold and snow. But did he?

For U.S. explorers such as Stefansson, who linked polar exploration to the ideology of modernization and progress, expertise was a necessity if science was to offer as a social reality the safer world that its apologists promised.[13] The "Peary system" that Peary described in his book *The North Pole* ensured that his material experience measured up to the ideologically produced expectations of science: "The source of our success was a carefully planned system, mathematically demonstrated. Everything

that could be controlled was controlled, and the indeterminate factors of storms, open leads, and accidents to men, dogs, and sledges, were taken into consideration in the percentage of probabilities and provided for as far as possible."[14]

The pseudoscientific Peary system provided the image under which Peary's expedition was perceived to be infallible. The symbolics of this system embodied a discourse that allowed no margin for error in the practice of science. There was no room for failure, which would be synonymous with ruin, nor was there any question that the Pole might be unwinnable. Thus, Peary's actual failure during his seven earlier attempts to reach the North Pole could only be recouped once he was able finally to say he had succeeded, and that he was the only one to have accomplished the deed. In order to be assured of his own victory, Peary had to make sure that his rival's claim was discredited.

It is in this sense that U.S. science seemed to have its own set of ethics. It did not matter that the importance given to determining the true discoverer of the North Pole was out of proportion to any practical value attached to its attainment. By the early twentieth century, almost all parts of the world were known and more or less adequately or approximately mapped. Exploration no longer consisted of discovery but was rather a symbolic politics, a form of athletic endeavor or sport that exalted the male body and its exterior scientific apparatus.

There was an interest in showing that a male American body as a scientific device could dominate the most severe and inhospitable physical environment of the globe. If attaining the North Pole was part sporting competition for the Americans, athletic ability was not the only thing that was being tested. For the president of the American Geographical Society, Gilbert Grosvenor, all of the international participants were not equally equipped for the task. To Grosvenor, it was not just male physical strength that was being tested in this contest, but rather, the combination of physical strength and scientific ability. For Grosvenor, the United States had an advantage over the rest of the nations because it was the most scientific. In Grosvenor's narrative it is fitting that Peary, who represents the essence of U.S. identity, is depicted as a scientific manager: "No better proof of the minute care with which every campaign was prearranged can be given than the fact that, though Peary has taken hundreds of men north with him on his various expeditions, he has brought them all back, and in good health. . . . What a contrast [Peary's] record is to the long list of [British] fatalities from disease, frost, shipwreck, and starvation."[15] Peary is the

preeminent polar explorer because he is the "most persistent and scientific."[16] "The minute care with which he prearranged every campaign"[17] enables him to overcome the flaws of early polar expeditions. For Grosvenor, the U.S. claim on the North Pole seems to make disease, famine, and other forms of human misery relics of a less scientific past. In winning the race to the North Pole, Grosvenor suggests that the Americans were able to show that the British expedition's reliance on character and determination was not enough.

It is significant that Peary, the scientific manager, represents himself as the epitome of manliness. As a figure for U.S. nationalism, the body of the U.S. polar explorer was defined by the enterprise of science, in which expertise and skill rather than the inner qualities of fortitude and dignity under stress were emphasized. National moral superiority was expressed in terms of a discourse constructed by an evolutionist technology of science.

One Form of Male Sacrifice

The mythification of the Scott expedition by the British Admiralty fit within an already established tradition of British imperial heroics connected to the polar regions. Prior to the Scott expedition, male sacrifice in the polar regions served as a means to perpetuate a superior image of Britishness and British nature not motivated by self-interest.

The connection between polar exploration and a certain brand of British imperial humanism can be dated from the time of the disappearance of the earlier Franklin expedition sent out by the British navy in 1845 to discover the Northwest Passage. In order to find the lost Franklin expedition, the British navy participated in a humanitarian search perhaps unparalleled in maritime history.[18] Over a period of fourteen years, 40 British expeditions were sent out to look for the survivors. What most characterized these heroic rescue expeditions was a romantic notion of self-sacrifice. These men and ships were sent out to the arctic not for material gain, but rather to save their fellow countrymen from death or to bring back their bodies. Such a display of chivalric values combined with noble sacrifice helped turn British polar explorers into romantic national figures. The trope of tragic self-sacrifice connoted the spirit of the nation. The virtues of British fortitude were celebrated as part of a mid-nineteenth-century romantic literary discursive tradition, as evidenced by Alfred Lord Tennyson's celebrated poem "Ulysses," cited by Huntford:

> One equal temper of heroic hearts,
> Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
> To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.[19]

Tennyson's poem, originally dedicated to polar explorer Sir John Franklin, prevailed as a tradition and, fittingly, reappeared in 1912 to memorialize the graves of Captain Scott and his men.

After the Napoleonic Wars, there was not much demand on the Royal Navy as a fighting force, and polar exploration became a surrogate for active service. Many who sought to escape from the monotony of peacetime enlisted. Thus arose a distinctively British type: the naval officer who took to polar exploration as part of his ordinary career.

Sir Clements Markham, writing in 1893 on the relevance of polar exploration during his tenure as president of the Royal Geographical Society, recognized it as "a nursery for our seamen, as a school for our future Nelsons [Nelson, early in his career, had been a midshipman of an arctic expedition] and as affording the best opportunities for distinction to young naval officers in times of peace."[20]

Under Markham's direction, antarctic exploration became highly esteemed within the navy. Markham himself derived his passion for polar exploration from his early experience as a cadet in the arctic on the second Franklin search expedition in 1850–51. He knew half a dozen languages and was a prolific writer on the history of exploration. The figure of Markham as an explorer, gentleman, and writer provides a marked contrast to Peary's image as the red-blooded, tough, competitive U.S. scientific manager: "[Markham] seemed the embodiment of the romance of Geography; his bosom swelled, and his shirt front billowed out like the topsail of a frigate, and as his voice rose in praise of 'our glorious associates,' he often roused a rapturous response."[21] The description of Markham by a Royal Geographical Society official brings a potentially contradictory "softening" dimension to the image of the polar explorer. It is significant that in the case of Markham, power is ascribed in terms of sartorial and rhetorical flourish rather than physical strength or scientific expertise. To the old arctic admiral who had not seen the ice for twenty years, the era of the 1840s and 1850s was not a blemish from a less scientific British past. Rather, he recovers the tragedies of that period as "great endeavors" and "heroic achievements." For Markham, the 1840s and 1850s were the most memorable period in polar exploration because of the countless heroic sacrifices made.

Self-sacrifice as such was valorized by the Anglican Church, according to Huntford, who cites Francis Paget, dean of Christ Church: "Surely war, like every other form of suffering and misery, has its redeeming element in the beauty and splendor of character men, by God's grace show in it. . . . Men rise themselves and raise others by sacrifice of self, and in war the greatness of self-sacrifice is set before us."[22] This philosophy has its exact parallel in polar exploration, as evidenced by the following passage from Captain McClure's narrative of his 1850–54 search for Franklin: "How nobly those gallant seamen toiled . . . sent to travel upon snow and ice, each with 200 pounds to drag. . . . No man flinched from his work; some of the gallant fellows really died at the drag rope . . . but not a murmur arose . . . as the weak fell out. . . . There were always more than enough of volunteers to take their place."[23]

During the mid-nineteenth century the ideal of personal gallantry was seemingly an end in itself. Writing in 1893, it was this old romantic image of the polar explorer that Markham intended on keeping alive. "The Polar Regions . . . difficult of access . . . [are] of surpassing interest and importance. Here we meet with examples of heroism and devotion which must entrance mankind for all times. . . . There are dangers to be encountered and difficulties to be overcome which call forth the best qualities of our race."[24] For Markham, polar exploration was seen as a testing ground to keep alive displays of moral courage and bravery, as well as a place to express the superiority of the British race. In such writing, the British had very high standards of ethics when it came to themselves. They of course often applied other standards to the non-Western peoples they subjugated in their scramble for new territories and wealth. Indeed, the aesthetic side of polar exploration made for convincing imperial theater; those polar explorers who risked their lives to find the Franklin expedition became the British heroes and embodied the idea of adventure but were not tarnished by the horrors of empire. These heroes of the British military had a less compromised image than their counterparts in the colonies, who represented quite a different personification of the British empire. Once Adm. Sir Leopold McClintock finally discovered the remains of the Franklin expedition, an era of polar exploration had ended. So much did that period have a hold on the British imagination, however, that it was revived again in the late nineteenth century.

At the turn of the century, the tradition of polar exploration remained intact, yet now members of the middle class were able to participate in this formerly upper-class tradition (Scott himself was a member of the middle

lass). A whole ideological system of entitlement to rights had been rected on the assumption that certain military virtues such as courage, ravery, and manliness were innate qualities of British subjects in the oyal Navy. It now mattered less whether these men were no longer part f the upper class, for their affiliation with the Royal Navy bestowed on hem the requisite authority and prestige.

In keeping with the attitudes of the Royal British Navy during this eriod is a reconstruction of the past, or the literary attempt to transport he heroic past fictionally into the present, of which Markham's writings re one example. Only to polar explorers outside of England did such an mphasis on aesthetic literary ideals seem retrograde, especially when they were put into practice. Official British exploration had lapsed since Capt. Sir George Nares, R.N., led a naval expedition that attempted to reach the North Pole between 1875 and 1876. The expedition was a failure; the methods were outmoded, and many of the crew died of scurvy. Sir Clements Markham had repeatedly disparaged progress abroad, preferring to rely on an outmoded British method. This attitude was most evident in 1899 in his advocacy of a system of man-hauling over the use of dogs as draft animals:

> In recent times much reliance has been placed upon dogs for Arctic traveling. Yet nothing has been done with them to be compared with what men have achieved without dogs. Indeed, only one journey of considerable length has ever been performed, in the Arctic regions, with dogs—that by Mr. Peary across the inland ice of Greenland. But he would have perished without the resources of the country, and all his dogs, but one, died, owing to overwork, or were killed to feed the others. It is a very cruel system.[25]

Scott had a similar moral view on dogs. This is not surprising, as Scott, like Markham, was a navy man rather than a polar explorer by profession. Scott's limited experience in the field apparently was not considered a hindrance to his ability to accomplish his goal, as experience or expertise was not necessarily highly valued in the British navy anyway. The navy, in the approving words of Adm. Sir Herbert Richmond, was "breeding amateur Naval officers."[26] As historian Roland Huntford put it: "The study of strategy and tactics was considered almost bad form, chiefly because Nelson was erroneously believed to have triumphed at Trafalgar without a plan of battle. Most officers believed that the old hereditary idea of gallantry and dash would see them through."[27] This faith in gentlemanly improvisation seems to point to the existence of an ideological

system in which there was the belief that certain heroic virtues were innate to the British. According to this belief, it would be considered redundant to learn something that was already hereditary. From such a perspective the incorporation of new techniques readily adopted by the Americans or the Norwegians would be difficult.

Scott was not completely lacking in polar experience before his 1911 South Pole expedition. In 1905 Scott was appointed by Markham to lead the *Discovery* expedition to Antarctica. Yet his experience on this expedition did not drastically change his opinion on dogs that he had received from Markham. In his narrative *The Voyage of the Discovery*, Scott dismisses the use of skis for antarctic exploration with the opinion, "that in the Antarctic Regions there is nothing to equal the honest and customary use of one's own legs."[28] And about the dogs, he writes: "In my mind no journey ever made with dogs can approach the height of that fine conception which is realized when a party of men go forth to face hardships, dangers, and difficulties with their own unaided efforts, and by days and weeks of hard physical labor succeed in solving some problem of the great unknown. Surely in this case the conquest is more nobly and splendidly won."[29]

Scott is concerned above all with constructing an image of noble struggle. The polar explorer is not a scientific hero who rationally learns from his hardships and learns to search for advanced means to make them easier. He is someone who prefers adventure to anything else. Adversity and setback almost become morally desirable. He shuns the use of dogs because they would make the obstacle seem less formidable. Why? For Scott, the basis for all this is the Englishman's ever-present willingness to prove his superiority. He is totally self-sufficient, even in the harsh climate of Antarctica. Dogs would interfere with this heroic image.

Cold Comforts

Scott's idea of masculinity put more emphasis on willpower and moral strength than did Peary's polar narratives, which depended on his control of the tools of science. Scott's particular sense of masculinity is encoded in the letters he wrote before his death in March 1912. These documents became the founding text that accounted for the rise of the Scott myth.[30]

"If this letter reaches you Bill and I will have gone out together. We are very near it now and I should like you to know how splendid he was at the end—everlastingly cheerful and ready to sacrifice himself for others, never a word of blame to me for leading him into this mess. He is not suffering, luckily, at least only minor discomforts."[31] Scott wrote the preceding passage in a tent in Antarctica in March 1912. "This mess" that is so calmly written about, the "it" that is referred to as being "very near" is how Scott introduces the reader to the event of his and his lieutenant Bill's (Dr. Edward Wilson) imminent deaths. This letter, however, is about Bill's death, not his own. Lying in a tent on their return from the South Pole, Scott writes a letter to Bill's wife to inform her that she is now a widow. He is reassuring. He tells her that her husband is "everlastingly cheerful." Even at the moment when he is confronted with his own death, Bill remains "splendid," "ready to sacrifice himself for others" with "never a word of blame" to Scott, who was apparently responsible. Who would blame him now, anyway, as he is dying too? But not yet, he is still writing, consoling the grief of others. Even with death upon him, Scott always thinks of others first.

In the next paragraph of Scott's letter, Bill is now dead: "His eyes have a comfortable blue look of hope and his mind is peaceful. . . . I can do no more to comfort you than to tell you that he died as he lived, a brave, true man—the best of comrades and staunchest of friends."[32] Scott renders the last moments of Wilson's death with an aestheticizing comment: "His eyes have a comfortable blue look of hope." No other mention is made of the corpse, which, marked by scurvy and frostbite, must have been rather unsightly. Yet the image of the "comfortable blue look of hope" expresses that Wilson faced death bravely, honorably. If there was any remorse or unpleasantness, Scott does not pass it on to Wilson's wife. This is what an honorable gentleman wants her to believe.

With Wilson dead or near death, Scott now writes to Mrs. Bower, the mother of Lieutenant Henry Robertson Bower, the other officer dying with him now in the tent: "I write when we are very near the end of our journey, and I am finishing it in company with two gallant, noble gentlemen. One of these is your son. He had come to be one of my closest and soundest friends, and I appreciate his wonderful upright nature, his ability and energy. As the troubles have thickened his dauntless spirit ever shone brighter and he has remained cheerful, hopeful, and indomitable to the end."[33] This letter, like the earlier one, seems chiefly motivated by an impulse to reveal nothing concrete about the reality of Lieutenant Bower's death. Scott is describing not the event of Bower's death but an aesthetic representation. The narrative culminates with an image of Bowers not as a flesh-and-blood man, but as a "dauntless spirit."

Scott concludes his letter by connecting the idealized image of Bowers "dauntless spirit" to another mythical site of unity and harmony—the respectable English bourgeois family. Bower's last memories of happiness, his ability to remain "splendidly hopeful to the end" are due to his "happy home." In the final sentences of Scott's letter the dying Bowers and his family exist in a mutually authorizing relationship: "To the end he has talked of you and his sisters. One sees what a happy home he must have had and perhaps it is well to look back on nothing but happiness. He remains unselfish, self-reliant and splendidly hopeful to the end, believing in God's mercy to you."[34] By establishing a tie between Bower's noble death in Antarctica and the familial home in England, Scott connects the two remote places, Antarctica and England. Yet what is striking is how he erases the harsh conditions of Antarctica by portraying Bower's death in such a psychically undisturbing way that it appears as if he died a natural death in England.

Scott writes both these letters in the first person, yet within his narrative he seems to exist as the detached third person. Although Scott is at the scene of the event, he appears to be far away. His attention to formal literary conventions in his letters suggests that Scott is not freezing and starving to death in a tent in Antarctica but rather sitting at his desk somewhere in a comfortable London flat.

Scott avoids altogether any passing references to frozen bodies or to death in Antarctica. He refers to the harshness of the situation in only the most perfunctory way: "Excuse writing—it is −40 and has been nigh for a month." Instead, Scott populates the scene with images and voices from England through the writing of numerous letters to the families of his men, to his own family and friends, and to his superior officers in the Admiralty. Also, by employing a style that is distancing and artificially associative, he manages to avoid any direct reference to the horror of the situation at hand. Moreover, his use of clipped naval expressions like "we are pegging out in a comfortless spot," "we have shipped up," "a close shave," and "shot our bolt" expresses that his impending death and the death of his men have left his dignity and bearing intact in the community of a courageous male crew.

Through Scott's letters, Antarctica is a theater in which a performance by British naval officers can be seen from the privileged standpoint of England.[35] Thus, Antarctica is textualized; it becomes a discursive space in which intrepid British naval officers can prove that they can still die as gentlemen. Never deviating from their routine, they faced death as they

lid life—unruffled, certain of themselves, and dignified. There are no last-minute attempts to save themselves. All in all, the fiction of Scott's narrative construction has a predictably tidy end, with everything properly explained by Scott, down to an account of his men's final dying words.

Nothing could better imply the superiority of the men of the British race than Scott's staunch adherence to principle, his national consciousness, and his sense of responsibility to the nation as a whole. The absence of cowardliness showed that he and his men died nobly, without shame. Even under the most horrible of circumstances they were able to appear unassailable in themselves (heroic, brave), capable of dying honorably, even from the most ignoble of deaths. If Scott and his men were unable to perform a deed worthy of heroes, at least they were able to die in heroic fashion.[36]

All Body, No Technique

There are two men of the polar party—Evans and Oates—whose mothers and wives Scott does not bother writing letters to. These men were already dead. Evans died one month earlier; Oates died soon afterwards. The disagreements between Scott, Oates, and Evans, reported in Roland Huntford's book *Scott and Amundsen*, make it clear that these men were critical of Scott's leadership abilities.[37] According to Huntford, Evans was especially demoralized by the expedition's failure to get to the South Pole first. It was intolerable to him that Amundsen's Norwegian team beat them. Evans was depending on the financial security and promotion victory would have brought. For him, attaining the Pole without the reward of priority meant failure and ruin. According to Huntford, who had privileged access to Oates's diary, Oates was more of a manager. He felt betrayed by Scott's incompetent leadership. The most blatant example, according to Huntford, was Scott's unexpected decision to take five men with him to the Pole rather than four. This change of mind threw the whole intricate organization of his expedition dangerously out of joint. Everything was arranged for four-man units: tents, gear, cookers, fuel, and the depots of food along the route. Although Oates, according to Huntford, saw the foolishness of Scott's capricious decision, he remained silent and wrote self-disparagingly in his diary about his own inability to intervene.

In his letters to his friends and family, Scott maintains an understanding, benevolent attitude towards Evans and Oates. He represents Evans,

who apparently became insane from scurvy before he died,[38] as one of the "sick" that he and his men stuck with until the end. He honors Oates, who committed suicide, for noble self-sacrifice. This not only makes Oates's suicide less dishonorable but makes it fit better into the image of fraternity that Scott constructs in his letters.

Scott imagines the navy to be a community, regardless of the actual inequality that may have prevailed. When Scott writes to Vice Adm. Sir Francis Charles Bridgeman, "We could have come through had we neglected the sick," he displays his willingness to sacrifice his own life, even for men of a lower rank, to perpetuate an image of fraternity based on duty and on hierarchical comradeship.[39]

Scott became an established British tradition during World War I, according to Huntford, who cites the following 1916 entry from a British newspaper: "After a notable bout of disaster, he [Scott] had given his countrymen an example of endurance. . . . We have so many heroes among us now, so many Scotts . . . holding sacrifice above gain [and] we begin to understand what a splendor arises from the bloody fields . . . of Flanders . . . and Gallipoli."[40] The Scott tradition lingered on. Writing in 1959, British historian L. P. Kirwan recounts the familiar story line: "Such are the bare facts of Scott's approach to the Pole. The rest of the story, the exhausting march across the plateau, manhauling all the way; the sight of Amundsen's black flag tied to a sledge-bearer at the Pole; the tell-tale marks of sledge tracks, skis, dogs' paws; the death of Evans, Oates' self-sacrifice, the utter dejection and tragic end of the homeward journey are part of our heritage."[41] Churches and schools became the public sites for passing down the Scott tradition to future generations.

What is striking is the construction of masculinity immortalized through the Scott letters. Through the act of writing, a nationalist myth was established, in which writing itself becomes a means to mythologize an ideology of masculinity in which, paradoxically, the male body is ignored. Or rather, the male body's performance becomes the means by which a moral theater is constructed, in which the body ultimately disappears. The gendered, physical body is replaced by moral character, which provides the foundation on which masculinity becomes heroicized. The exterior world also loses its concreteness in Scott's account. An expedition to the South Pole expresses an exploration into British character. It does not serve as a means to isolate and exalt a virile and potent male body, as Peary's account suggests. The worst possible ending for Scott would be not death, but a failure in moral resolve. Thus, in the narrative of national

haracter, Scott and his men literally sacrifice their bodies and exemplify lfless courage in order to legitimize their claim to rule.

Gender and Narrative Form

Writing played different roles in the construction of the Scott myth and in e U.S. stories of polar exploration. I have pointed out how in Britain, e Scott story is enmeshed in writing from beginning to end. Its tran-ending aspect is expressed by Scott's encounter with death and mirac-ous resurrection through his diary and letters. Writing offers a form of esence in absence, a means of salvation by which disorder, meaningless-ess, and death are overcome.

In the case of Scott's story, importance is given to the rhetoric of riting well, rather than truly or accurately. The recruitment of a British aywright by Scott's wife to rewrite his diaries hints at a whole literary adition at work here from the very beginning. In Scott's letters the thority created is anchored to a large extent in subjective experience as ediated and authorized by a literary style. By writing that "we could ve come through had we neglected the sick," Scott claims that he posed himself and his men to additional dangers and personal sacrifices d connects his actions to a higher national mission as defined by the etaphor of tragic self-sacrifice, which belongs to romantic literary dis-rsive conventions.[42]

In contrast to the British, the Americans are trying to produce a arrative that is part of a scientific tradition. There is a large emphasis on teriority. Performance and achievement matter most. The scientific deal calls for professional detachment and scientific proofs. The rhetoric f science does not allow for subjectivity except in the form of "genius," r for a sacrifice for a collective identity.

The two narratives have more in common, however, than one might xpect from such different genres. In both, authority resides in the effacement of the speaking and experiencing subject. The different genres hosen suited the particular imperial ideologies each writer was promoting. Scott's story was coded within the static and timeless genre of tragedy,[43] expressing England's desire to maintain its dominion of the past into he present. The Americans, by contrast, glorified a progressive scientific deology that looked more to the future but also wanted immortality. Nonetheless, whereas Scott's subjectivity is understood and constituted in erms of literary ideals, Peary's is defined by scientific objectives. Whereas

tragedy is acceptable within the parameters of the literary, there is no place for it within Peary's or Stefansson's scientific discourse. It would be considered merely a catastrophic error of judgment.

Peary and Stefansson anchored the authority of their discourse under the banner of science and progress. They also apportioned different qualities—those of nature-to-be-conquered—to the scene of the poles. Scott instead adopted literary conventions of the sublime to explain his own tragic situation to a British public. In Scott's letters, the landscape of Antarctica is vast, wild, tumultuous, and awful (suggestive of infinity). The blizzard that Scott encounters and blames for the tragedy represents a vast, chaotic, and frightful aspect of nature and is associated with pain and terror. England, which Scott represents, in contrast represents all that is good, ordered, and agreeable.

The point of departure for Peary and Stefansson is totally different, for their narrative is organized around the conquest of nature. Not only do they find positive values for those aspects of the landscape that Scott sees as vast, terrifying, and misproportioned, but they even feel at home there. This homeliness, however, is expressed in terms of extreme scientific alienation from the environment. In Stefansson's discourse Antarctica no longer represents the unknown, as science has already conquered it and made it familiar. "Mankind" now dominates over nature. There are no longer any parts on the globe that can pose a threat. Within such an ideology of modernity and progress, there is no place for a tragic hero such as Scott. Neither can Antarctica provide the accompanying stage by which "man" can obtain glory by recognizing his own limits, for at this stage in the U.S. discourse of progress, science and technology have abolished these limits.

British and American Media Traditions

A British television series, entitled *The Last Place on Earth*, was based on Huntford's *Scott and Amundsen*.[44] The seven-and-a-half-hour epic was one of British television's most ambitious and costly drama series. The series presented Scott as an arrogant and amateurish leader who brought death on himself and his team by inadequate planning and by incompetence before and during the expedition. Such a portrait was inevitably controversial and was condemned by Dr. John Hemming, director of the Royal Geographical Society: "I am very, very disappointed. The acting is superb and the whole presentation is excellent but the length to which it

oes to find elements of anti-British bias and anti-Scott bias is just lu-icrous. The way in which it is hysterically anti-patriotic is ridiculous."[45]

Roland Huntford, formerly the Scandinavian correspondent of the *Observer*, spent five years researching *Scott and Amundsen*. On its publica-ion in 1979, the book created considerable controversy. The film rights ere purchased by British Central Television's series executive producer, obert Buckler, who approached Trevor Griffith to write the screenplay. riffith was distinguished as a political playwright and by his commitment o the more popularly accessible forms of television and the cinema. For riffith, much of the story's contemporary relevance was that it carried ndamental lessons for Britain in the 1980s: "We are living with a gov-rnment that constantly exhorts us to return to the great Imperial tradi-ons of this nation, and to embrace not just the rhetoric but the practices f the Victorians and the Edwardians. So the series looks at the character-tics of the age, at the class differences and at the age of nationalism."[46]

Griffith's reworking of the Scott story illuminates what is at stake in living with a government that constantly exhorts us to return to the reat Imperial traditions." For Griffith, *The Last Place on Earth* provided an llegory for the Thatcher government and its nostalgic relation with the lass-based values, hierarchical structures, and "news management" of the ictorian age: "At a time when news management has reached such ppalling levels as in the reporting of the Falklands, the Korean Airlines isaster, and the invasion of Grenada, it seems important to look at how a yth of glorious and heroic failure was constructed in that way."[47]

The Thatcher government regained popularity after the Falklands/Malvinas War, a result of the rise of nationalist sentiments. The enthusi-sm for the Scott story similarly relied on a reworking of patriotic senti-ents. As I demonstrated earlier, the Scott myth has enjoyed special ower, for it can function well in a later period of real decline of empire World War I to the present), or in an era imbued with a sense of immi-ent decline, as was the case at the time of Scott's death. Scott's military iscipline and loyalty stood out as a timeless example of a universal British radition that would put an end to anxieties about national weakness. Andy Metcalf and Martin Humphries point out how this process was exemplified in the conduct and aftermath of the Falklands War:

A war fought at considerable cost, with significant casualties, for a few bleak, carcely populated islands with a lot of sheep, was enough to reverse the Conser-vative Party's slump in popularity and win them the 1983 general election. This

was no mean feat—and it was largely due to the symbolic meanings attached to going to war. Churchillian phrases dripped from the mouths of the "War Cabinet," as a sordid xenophobic enterprise was transformed into a paean to manhood, a celebration of the phallus draped in the Union Jack. Resurgent nationalism and a refurbished manhood were fused into one as the ships left port, the jets screamed overhead, and wives and sweethearts cried and waved good-bye. Everyone was in their place. We'd seen the movie a hundred times: Now it was time for the real thing.[48]

The aftermath both of Scott's tragedy and of the Falklands War had remarkable power. In Britain, where the Labour party and the Left still have some control of the public media, however, there is a greater possibility of popular critique of national policies, as evidenced by *The Last Place on Earth*. In contrast, the debate around Peary in the media has remained privatized—within the control of the National Geographic Society and its magazine—and thus the critiques of Peary have not touched on wider political issues but instead have remained narrowly focused on establishing or disputing the accuracy of Peary's claim to the North Pole.

Despite the confinement of the North Pole controversy to a narrowly technicist realm of ideas, why is it that this debate still prevails today? Why can't it be resolved by concluding that the Pole was simply unwinnable? These questions can only be explained in terms of understanding that the North Pole was also perceived as a mythologized image of empire at the early part of the twentieth century. In this respect, the controversy around the conquest of the North Pole can be seen as an allegory for more recent symbols of U.S. imperial mythography, such as the Vietnam War and more recently the Persian Gulf War. Hannah Arendt describes how the U.S. government masked a host of contradictions in order that the historical event match the fantasy in Vietnam:

> The Vietnam War was exclusively guided by the needs of a superpower to create for itself an image which would convince the world that it was, indeed, the mightiest power on earth. Image making as global policy was something new in the huge arsenal of human follies recorded in history. . . . [Image making] was permitted to proliferate throughout the ranks of all government services, military and civilian—the phony body counts of the search and destroy missions, the doctored after-damage reports of the air force, the constant progress reports to Washington.[49]

Like the North Pole, Vietnam was a male testing ground. In both, shame was attached to losing and thus forgoing the opportunity to demonstrate one's manhood. The denial of failure establishes a continuity between these two national events. J. Hoberman describes how the traumatic experience of the loss of the Vietnam War was rewritten by Hollywood cinema:

> Vietnam offered no great battles and no clearly defined enemy. Its casualties included our long-standing sense of national innocence and masculine identity, not to mention the broad national consensus that had defined American foreign policy. This has made the war particularly difficult to represent: inherently polarizing and depressing, with a built-in unhappy ending, it both broke the conventions of civilized warfare and the basic rules of Hollywood entertainment. It was the last picture show.
>
> The impossible longing for a satisfactory conclusion tempts each Vietnam film to sell itself as definitive. It is precisely that bummer of a finale . . . that has left us with a compulsion to remake, if not history, then at least the movie.[50]

The rewriting of Vietnam by Hollywood makes U.S. soldiers appear as victims of superiors, bureaucrats, and communists. Soldiers crack up, are cowardly, and fuck up (kill civilians). Yet Vietnam heroism exists both in spite of and against U.S. government policy.

Setting Things Aright: Technology, the Gulf War, and Peary

The denial of failure was enacted not only in Hollywood stage sets but also in the Persian Gulf region. After the so-called allied victory, the legacy of the Vietnam War was cited as a disease that had been overcome.[51] On March 3, 1991, George Bush declared, "We have kicked the Vietnam Syndrome."[52] Bush had promised that the Persian Gulf War would be different—a neater package and easier to understand, with clear closure and an unambiguous resolution. Just as Peary's complex story has been rewritten by the *National Geographic* with a happy ending reinstating Peary as an uncontroversial U.S. hero, so too has the Persian Gulf "victory" restored good feeling about a previously denigrated United States in decline. And in both cases, the discursive logic of this favorable outcome turns on technology as unchallengeable or seemingly undefeatable. This essay is my attempt to explain the interconnections between the multiple narratives of national identity, scientific progress, modernity, and masculinity across the national cultures of the United States and the United Kingdom. Once one of these discourses is invoked, the others are imme-

diately brought into play. In this sense the Falklands and Malvinas, Vietnam, and Persian Gulf narratives parallel those of both Scott and Peary.

During the Gulf War, advanced weaponry was brought in to restore the old national narratives of success; in a similar way, new high-tech photographic processes presumably solved the problem of Peary's inaccuracy at the North Pole. The seamless performance of technology was more important for the American, who unlike the British never showed in the media a precision weapon that missed.[53] For the Americans, winning the Gulf War was inextricably tied to the myth of technological prowess embodied in high-tech electronic weaponry (Stealth fighters, spy satellites, Patriot missiles, and Tomahawk cruise missiles that were dependent on "perfect" maps drawn of Iraqi territory and terrain).

Moreover, the war was programmed in terms of its media presentation, and in various ways failure was written out of the narrative from the beginning. The televisual apparatus in general, and TV news in particular, joined forces with the military to narrate the event in a way that would sanitize and prettify the war in order to associate it with a pre-Vietnam vision of U.S. innocence and righteous virtue. Following this logic it is not surprising that the Gulf War was scripted as a replay of World War II with its reassuring overtones of justice, democracy, and victory, rather than of Vietnam, with which it had more in common. In these presentations, the performance of so-called smart technology was thought to be so infallible that in the earliest hours of the bombing, CNN's Pentagon reporter, Wolf Blitzer claimed that the 150,000-man Republican Guard had been crippled or destroyed by air strikes alone.

Such exaggerated claims for the efficacy of technological weaponry kept alive the belief, which was an inextricable part of the Peary narrative, that technology was unbeatable and that the structure of operations was somehow bloodless and unerring. In contrast to Vietnam, which could not be figured as a clean war, the Persian Gulf War was represented as strangely antiseptic and disembodied, as media coverage focused on the performance of U.S. smart bombs and surgically precise air attacks.[54] Reportage focused on identifying viewers with the pilots doing the bombing rather than with those civilians being bombed (the elision of images of Iraqi deaths or casualties). Brown bodies in general were shown as having little presence to Americans except as mere numbers. The Persian Gulf War was far more successful in rendering abstract and erasing enemy brown bodies than was the Vietnam War, where their suffering

nd death were made all too palpable on home television. It was not until eeks afterward that a Western audience heard that 70 percent of the 8,500 tons of bombs dropped on Iraq missed their targets and hit thouands of civilians instead.[55]

The righteous modern violence on behalf of the Western internaional community was contrasted to the primitive, barbaric violence of addam Hussein's forces.[56] Where Saddam Hussein and the Iraqis were epresented as irrational beings with an uncontrollable sexual drive (Iraq as shown as having "raped" Kuwait, which required massive but "surgial" retaliation), Bush and the Western soldiers were identified as repreentative of heroic Western masculinity, now cured of previous "impoence" suffered in Vietnam.

The reactive Rambo style of Western masculinity tended to dominate he media's account of the war. One thinks of Colin Powell's "cut it off nd kill it" or Schwarzkopf's promise to "kick butt" or the reports of ilots watching porn videos before ejaculating their bombs over Iraq.[57] Yet despite the overblown masculinist rhetoric, this imagery did not seem nything more than a feeble attempt to remasculinize or regender social elations in an age in which heroism had less to do with the body and more to do with delegating work and manipulating electronic data. Take, for example, the *San Francisco Chronicle* poster that appeared during the Gulf War with the caption "A lot can happen between 9 & 5," featuring a before-and-after shot of Sylvester Stallone as Rambo, bare-chested and armed to the teeth, and of a fully clad, rotund General Schwarzkopf as the top allied manager. Only two years after the war, it was significant that the war as experience and symbol was no longer being evoked, despite the fact that the media engineered a broad consensus in favor of the war. The "victory" in the Persian Gulf had largely unraveled, and the war was seen as having a much more ambiguous or murky ending. Saddam was still in power, and the claims of military technological know-how were seen as vastly overrated by the Pentagon itself.[58] Rather than exulting over their country's military victory in the Persian Gulf, Americans worried about corrupt politicians, the recession, and increasing budget cuts of domestic programs. The implementation of an older narrative that was supposed to supplant the Vietnam syndrome (the narrative of failure) seems not to work well in a radically changed and uncertain post–Cold War context. There was a strong feeling that things would never be the same again, and one wonders how viable the ideological narrative of scientific progress

that has framed the discourses of the *National Geographic* and the story of the Persian Gulf War will be in the future. What new narratives of Americanism and masculinism will replace them? Will new stories be produced that do not rely solely on technology as the transcending foundation of a gender- and race-based Americanism?

16. HANS ULRICH GUMBRECHT

Perception Versus Experience: Moving Pictures and Their Resistance to Interpretation

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We have become accustomed to conceiving the relationship between image and reflection (the relationship between images and concepts as the medium of reflection) with a tinge of dialectical melodrama—a melodrama, to be sure, that consistently leads to a "happy ending." In general, we assume a tension between image and reflection. The image speaks to the senses, and for that reason images are assigned to the referential horizon of philosophical aesthetics. Reflection, by contrast, takes place in concepts, in the elements, that is, that constitute language and discourse. Aesthetic experience is not conceptually mediated experience and thus silences discourse. But we can accept such silence only with difficulty.[1] For this reason more than any other, the conviction seems to have prevailed that aesthetic experience, as sensual experience, can be captured by language after all—as long as its incommensurability with conceptuality has not been explicitly recognized at the outset. The discourse through which this is supposed to occur is called "interpretation."

In this essay I wish to problematize such attempts to rescue the possibility of discourse by means of interpretation, primarily on the basis of historical arguments. I will not take this historicizing so far as to claim that because of altered conditions of experience, this salvation is today no longer possible. I begin instead with the assumption of a principal heteronomy between sensuality and conceptually mediated reflection and will then—more modestly—attempt to show that what can be sustained less and less today is merely the illusion that this fundamental incompatibility