SOUTH
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In January 1915, as *Endurance*, the ship carrying Sir Ernest Shackleton's second Antarctic expedition, made its way through pack-ice in the Weddell Sea, the vessel became caught between ice-floes. Pack-ice, Shackleton wrote in his journal, "might be described as a gigantic and interminable jigsaw-puzzle devised by nature. The parts of the puzzle in loose pack have floated slightly apart and become disarranged; at numerous places they have pressed together again; as the pack gets closer the congested areas grow larger and the parts are jammed together till finally it becomes 'close pack', when the whole of the jigsaw-puzzle becomes jammed to such an extent that with care and labour it can be traversed in every direction on foot".[1]

Navigation through the pack was intimately dependent on these movements. The purpose-built ship, steam-powered as well as masted, and equipped with a reinforced prow for ramming the ice, followed channels or 'leads' that opened up as the floes moved apart. The ship had been proceeding in this way since December, generally making harder going than had been anticipated. As the voyage continued, the whole pack was in ceaseless motion: large icebergs drifted through it with the current, while the prevailing wind blew it in the opposite direction. This shifting white surface, broken up into "innumerable narrow lanes", extended to the horizon around the ship in all directions, and moved with the swell. After becoming stuck, the *Endurance* drifted with this mass which was neither land nor sea, an in-between world made still more unreal by frequent mirages of the kind Antarctic voyagers commonly experience .

Explorers who, like Shackleton, took part in the heroic age of Antarctic exploration between 1893 and 1918, found themselves profoundly moved by the strange and terrifying beauty of the Antarctic regions. Several of them published accounts of their experiences, and these often carry echoes of ancient mythic or epic voyage-narratives. Shackleton, describing the ice-floes cracking and crashing and fissuring, writes: "Standing on the stirring ice one can imagine it is disturbed by the breathing and tossing of a mighty giant below."[2] The explorer and the strange land are powerful archetypes, and while the great expeditions of this period were largely scientific in purpose, it is clear that the explorers were not urged on only by the desire for knowledge. The region itself had been a mythic land, the hypothetical southern continent – *Terra Australis* – shown on Ptolemy's map as joining Africa to Asia. The notion of an inhabited yet secluded southern land was finally put paid to by the Cook and Kerguelen voyages of the late eighteenth century, but the mythic dimension remained. The place into which the explorers ventured was itself in a sense imaginary; they visited a region of their minds. Their writings, which include poetry, reflect this, and so do the photographs and paintings that members of the expeditions produced.

The second Scott expedition, which set out in 1910, and the Mawson expedition which followed a year later, took with them the professional photographers Herbert Ponting and Frank Hurley. The latter went on to join Shackleton's ill-fated voyage, and during the long Antarctic night he photographed the stricken ship by flashlight. Covered in ice from prow to

mast-top and cresting a frozen wave, *Endurance* appears as – to use Hurley's words – "a spectre ship". Were it not for the cast shadows of chains on the bow, the image would read as a photographic negative. The extreme cold holds the boat fast as if draining it of life, and freezes its sails to the spars.

The ghost ship legend, common to many cultures, found notable retellings during the nineteenth century, from Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (which the explorers quoted and imitated in their writings) to Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer*. That this should have been the case might partly be explained through reference to an analogous example, Melville's *Moby Dick*. Melville's book, which incorporates a highly technical account of the contemporary whaling industry as well as recounting Ahab's quest, shows how the relationship between man and nature had entered a new phase. The great nineteenth-century images of ghost ships and shipwrecks reflect industrialised society's uneasy relationship to the physical world, which its power of action reduced to an ever-retreating horizon.[3] When Shackleton published his account of the *Endurance* expedition, he gave the book a one-word title, *South*, which itself evokes an absolute, abstract or metaphysical goal.

It might seem paradoxical to claim that the explorers were voyaging in their imagination, given that their experiences were real and painful enough. *Endurance* was eventually crushed by the ice, and its marooned crew rescued only after some months, following an epic 750-mile voyage in a small boat by Shackleton and five others. Nobody died on that expedition, but others were less fortunate. Real, too, were the explorers' tasks. All members of Antarctic parties were skilled and practical in some way, and many had scientific projects to undertake. Hurley and Ponting, both commercial photographers who subsequently published their own illustrated books on their respective voyages, readily fitted into this generally clear-sighted scheme.[4]

Clear sight, however, was exactly what, in the hyper-lucid Antarctic environment, summoned the imaginary. There were the mirages, for example, that Shackleton wrote of: "From the mast-head the mirage is continually giving us false alarms. Everything wears an aspect of unreality. Icebergs hang upside down in the sky; the land appears as layers of silvery or golden cloud. Cloud-banks look like land, icebergs masquerade as islands...Worst of all is the deceptive appearance of open water, caused by the refraction of distant water, or by the sun shining at an angle on a field of smooth snow or the face of the ice-cliffs below the horizon".[5] This world was unreal because it was pure appearance. Not only the mirages made it so, but its very beauty and the fact that the thing of beauty was literally untouchable. In their protective gear, the explorers were at times almost as isolated from their environment as divers and astronauts are from theirs. The world they see so clearly is inimical to them, and in a sense they will never reach it.

Endurance and its party fell victim to that environment, and Hurley's central subject thenceforth became the disaster itself. In the selection of plates he managed to save, the narrative of wreck and rescue unfolds within a white landscape that indifferently performs its ceaseless mutations. In settings such as these, both Hurley and Ponting produced the best photographs of their careers, by virtue of the very intensity of their involvement with a subject needing to be approached with infinite precision. The results are at once clinical and hallucinatory. In one of Hurley's images, the ship appears in the distance above a foreground filled by 'ice flowers', carnation-like forms that had grown rapidly on the surface of newly-

uncovered water. Like the planet in Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*, this terrain is mimetic, forming and reforming as if in response to memories, or to remembered myths.

[1] Quoted in Sir Ernest Shackleton, *South – The Story of Shackleton's Last Expedition 1914-1917*, London 1919, p.11.
[2] Shackleton, *op. cit.*,p.55.
[3] See D.H.Lawrence's observations on Melville in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, New York, 1923.
[4] Herbert Ponting, *The Great White South*, London 1924; Frank Hurley, *Argonauts of the South*, New York 1925.
[5] Shackleton, *op. cit.*, p.33-4.

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