

Historical Introduction

“[I]ncidents very *icy*” Cooper wrote to his London publisher on July 18, 1848, announcing “one more tale . . . Scene, principally, Antarctic Ocean.”¹ Readers who have not ventured far outside the Leather-Stocking Tales may be surprised with this “*icy* . . . Scene,” as the adventures of the younger Natty Bumppo seem always to occur, in D. H. Lawrence’s words from 1923, in a world of “perfect paste in a perfect setting. . . . Of course it never rains: it is never cold and muddy and dreary: no one has wet feet or toothache: no one ever feels filthy, when they can’t wash for a week.”² Virtually all critics assessing Cooper’s whole career comment on his vision growing darker and more realistic in his later years. Thus, toothache excepted, all these woes will afflict the sealers of *The Sea Lions*.

Not that Cooper had never before written of episodes very icy; Natty Bumppo, if not in his youth, in the winter of his age had to face snow and ice. In *The Pioneers* (1823), chapters XX–XXII, Cooper recorded the slow and irregular melting of the winter’s frozen covering culminating in the ice melting from Otsego Lake, a harbinger of the spring that will bring the pigeons that the inhabitants of Templeton slaughter so thoughtlessly. In *The Prairie* (1827), chapter XXIV, the still more aged but always resourceful Natty must surrender to the Sioux when he realizes the fugitives he was leading cannot escape being tracked in newly fallen snow. Perhaps most memorably, in the exciting chapters XV–XVII of *Satanstoe* (1845), the two pairs of young lovers, innocently sleighing on the Hudson, must escape the surging ice floes as the frozen river melted. And in his nonfiction, Cooper recorded his fascination with the sights and the movements of ice in the Alps chapters of his travel book *Gleanings from Europe: Switzerland* (1836).³

Also, at the very beginning of his career as a writer, Cooper contributed two reviews of polar adventures to his friend Charles K.

Gardiner's *Literary and Scientific Repository, and Critical Review*. In July 1821 the *Repository* printed an anonymous review of William Scoresby's *An Account of the Arctic Regions, with a History and Description of the Northern Whale-Fishery* (1820). An anonymous review of William Parry's *Journal of a Voyage for the Discovery of a North-West Passage* (1821) appeared in the January 1822 issue.⁴ Franklin cites as clear appropriations for Cooper's Antarctic tale two incidents in these Arctic narratives: "Parry's long account of his successful overwintering in the ice off Melville Island in 1819–1820 . . . and Scoresby's briefer, secondhand account of the wreckage visited on the Dutch Greenland whaling fleet by ice some forty years earlier."⁵

By 1849 Cooper was also well read in contemporary narratives of polar explorations. In his preface to *The Sea Lions*, Cooper recorded as explorers worthy of our admiration "[s]uch names as those of Parry, Sabine, Ross, Franklin, Wilkes, Hudson, Ringgold, &c., &c.," (5) so we may well look to this list for more possible sources. Franklin⁶ discusses the sealing captain Edmund Fanning's *Voyages Round the World* (1833) for details Cooper used on Antarctica. And Philbrick cites another source from the 1830s, Benjamin Morrell's 1832 *A Narrative of Four Voyages, to the South Sea, North and South Pacific Ocean, Ethiopic and Southern Atlantic Ocean, Indian and Antarctic Ocean*.⁷

But in many ways, Cooper's most important source was Charles Wilkes's multi-volume account of the United States Exploring Expedition that he led in 1838–1842, published in 1844–1845 as the *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition*.⁸ Following Waterloo, the world's oceans were opened to exploration and to charting of lucrative hunting grounds for the sources of sea-mammal skins and oil. Belatedly, the United States asserted its national power and prestige by organizing a charting and scientific expedition in the decade that saw the most momentous of all such expeditions, that of Charles Darwin as recorded in his *Voyage of the Beagle* (1831–1836).

Cooper's investment in the success of the Wilkes's expedition is recorded in his letters concerning the outfitting of and occasional news about the venture.⁹ According to Franklin, "Cooper knew Wilkes (and especially his family) quite well and had taken considerable interest in the officer's career from its beginning." (The fact that Wilkes was a prickly customer, often blustering to assert his importance, did not deter the rather similar Cooper from admiring his achievement.) When Cooper encountered Wilkes in Philadelphia in August 1844, he assisted the explorer in producing a cheap edition of his narrative

by introducing him to his efficient copy editor and stereotyper, John Fagan, as well as to his erstwhile Philadelphia publishers, Lea and Blanchard.¹⁰ Franklin notes that Wilkes was referred to seven times in the novel, and was the source of Cooper's startling images of iceberg formations as immense city blocks, especially in chapter XIX.¹¹

Recently, a single untitled and undated leaf in Cooper's hand has come to light that bespeaks his attitudes towards the Wilkes expedition. While editing the Cooper Edition text of *The Monikins* (1835)—Cooper's earlier fictional venture into the high southern polar seas—Keat Murray discovered the authorially-revised manuscript leaf presented below as a clear text for convenience. (In appendix 1 of this edition, we record Murray's diplomatic transcription as revised by Schachterle). The passage begins with Cooper recording his pride that the United States, less than half a century after 1789, had mounted so ambitious an expedition. But Cooper went on to lament the caviling about funding and staffing Wilkes's five ships, especially as promulgated in a partisan press he himself was suffering from in the period 1838–1842. Finally, Cooper celebrated Wilkes's penetrating well within the Antarctic circle (66.5 degrees south) to “seventy degrees of longitude,” and discovering a huge tract of land—still named Wilkes Land—which helped to prove that Antarctica is a separate continent. Thus, the narrative elements of this fragment mirror the remarks Cooper made about the United States Exploring Expedition in the letters cited above (note 9) as well as in later documents cited below.

It is creditable to the curiosity, that an undertaking of this character, should have been accomplished within little more than half a century of its admitted independence. That there was much of uncertainty vacillations, mismanagement, and delay in the preparations, was the consequence of a want of a direction in the department, to which the duty of ordering and superintending officially belonged. Unsuitable vessels were fitted out for the expedition, in the first place, and the quarrels of those who were attached, or wished to be attached, produced one of those interferences of the public press, which are so common among us, and which so often injure, while they so rarely lead to good. These difficulties were not overcome until the public mind began to weary of the subject; or, what was worse, to treat it with levity and indifference; until the feeling of the country, at the moment the vessels actually sailed, was a species of sullen satisfaction that it had escaped the disgrace of not being able actually to get such an expedition to sea, rather than a justifiable

expectation that any ulterior benefits, or reputations were to attend its progress. A silence as sullen as the satisfaction just mentioned, succeeded the departure, and years passed in which the distant adventurers were seldom named, in public or private. The hearts of those to whom they were near and dear, doubtless felt for their hardships, and danger and longed for their return, but we cannot remember another instance connected with that great national favorite, the navy, in which the public mind has manifested an indifference so disproportionate to the magnitude of the reputation and positive interests that were involved in the result. Unhappily, the first reports from the ships were not favorable, and many appeared disposed to dismiss the whole matter from their minds, regarding the attempt as an anticipated failure. The fittings of some of the vessels proved to be defective, and the squadron had gone into Rio, where it was reputed to have made extensive repairs, at a most heavy expense. From that moment, no one appeared to think good could come of this ill-fated enterprise, and it was in a measure forgotten. The occasional arrival of a disaffected officer, who had been sent home, and who brought his own story of the reason of his return did not add to the reputation of the adventurers, for, in this country, there are always persons ready to fill their columns by deciding, on such occasions, without a hearing.

From the state of apathy that was produced by these combined means, the public mind was suddenly aroused to a new interest in the movements of the expedition, by a rumour that great geographical problems of the Antarctic circle was [*sic*] solved by the discovery of a new Continent, which had been coasted by the vessels of the expedition for near seventy degrees of longitude, or nearly one fifth of the circle of the earth! It is true, that later accounts brought with them some doubts as to the priority of this discovery, it having been also claimed for a French Expedition that was searching in the same quarter of the ocean at the same time; but, giving, to these pretenders, all that was claimed which has turned out to be more than they are entitled to receive, it alters but little the merits of the case. Our own explorers were actively at work, were in the foremost rank of the bold and hearty, were doing their whole duty, and it matters little in the eyes of the reflecting and intelligent, whether they, as [*sic*] the French, saw this unknown continent a few hours the soonest. The unexpected intelligence of the success of the Explorers revived a portion of the dormant interest of the public in the fate of the expedition, and it began to be understood that an amount of useful labor had been achieved, that was creditable equally to the country, and to those

it had employed. A later day, when the vessels had returned, this intelligence was understood to be corroborated.

The fragment here is roughly written, perhaps a first draft of a text Cooper never developed further. Though Wilkes is never named, Cooper's pride and pleasure in their achievement are clear in his summary that "[o]ur own explorers were actively at work, were in the foremost rank of the bold and hearty, were doing their whole duty." And in the novel, chapter XIII, Cooper made a very similar tribute to Wilkes, including his expedition leading to the recognition that Antarctica was a separate continent:

It is now known, also, by means of the toils and courage of various seamen, including those of the persevering and laborious Wilkes, the most industrious and the least rewarded of all the navigators who have ever worked for the human race in this dangerous and exhausting occupation, that a continent is there also; but, at the period of which we are writing, the existence of the Shetlands and Palmer's Land was the extent of the later discoveries in that part of the ocean. (162)¹²



One more element in three decades of cumulative experiences lies behind *The Sea Lions*—Cooper's own experience with maritime mammal hunting far south of the Equator. Susan Fenimore Cooper records in *The Cooper Gallery* that

[i]n his early married life, Mr. Cooper had paid repeated visits, during the summer months, to a relative of Mrs. Cooper, living on one of the islands off the eastern shore of Long Island. This gentleman led a sort of semi-aquatic life, which had great attractions for a young man still a seaman at heart. His estate covered an island of some size, inhabited by his own family and dependents only, and bearing the pleasing name of Shelter Island; and all communications with the main land were carried on by boats of different kinds.¹³

The semi-aquatic gentleman was Charles T. Dering, connected to the family of John Peter Delancey, whose daughter Cooper had married in 1811. Franklin speculates that Cooper and Dering may

have discussed buying a whaling ship in fall 1818; what is certain is that Cooper, acting for both, purchased the 260-ton *Union* (Roswell Gardiner's *Sea Lion* is 140 tons) in spring 1819. His letters of the period show that, like Deacon Pratt and Roswell Gardiner, he put his characteristic energy into repairing and outfitting the ship and selecting an able crew; the ship sailed in August 1819.¹⁴ But unlike the aging and already-wealthy tight-fisted Deacon Pratt, Cooper in 1818 was head of a growing family with a diminishing income. When the well-filled *Union* returned in July 1820 with decent profits, Cooper was consumed with work on another scheme he had adopted to generate income: proofreading his second novel, *The Spy*. Dering went on speculating in whaling; for his part, Cooper speculated for the rest of his life on authorship.

Cooper's casual visits to Shelter Island and his more intense ones when arranging for the sailing of the *Union* thoroughly familiarized him with the names and geography of the prime whaling and sealing ports in New England in 1819–1820, the years in which the novel takes place. Chapter II of *The Sea Lions* acquaints the reader with the locale around the home base of Oyster Pond and nearby Sag Harbour, Shelter Island, and Holmes' Hole ("Hum'ses Hull.") Roswell Gardiner "was known to be a descendant of Lyon Gardiner, that engineer who had been sent to the settlement of the lords Saye and Seal, and Brook, since called Saybrook, near two centuries before" and presumably distantly related to the Gardiners who still owned the island bearing their name (22). The sailors Gardiner recruits are both locals and from more distant maritime communities like Stonington ("Stunin'tun") in Connecticut; the rival *Sea Lion* hails from the Yankee bastion of Martha's Vineyard.



A final line of inquiry needs to be examined concerning how Cooper called upon the cumulative experience of three decades in writing his penultimate novel. In his July 1848 letter to Bentley, he referred to the novel, initially named *Lost Sealers*, "as a counterpoise, or *pendant* might be a better word, to the *Crater*."¹⁵ Here *pendant* seems to be used in sense 12b from the *OED*: "a complement, counterpart." Several characteristics of *The Crater* make sense here. Both novels take place on islands dominated by a distant volcano; in very different ways both novels describe attempts of humans to settle into new environments;

and both novels show the social conflict between people who follow good and bad leadership. The warm and ultimately fertile soil of *The Crater* provides a counterpart to the sterility of Sealers' Island, just as the genial atmosphere at Oyster Pond in the spring counterpoises the icy sterility in the same season at the antipodes.

However, a more apt complementary *pendant* would be the Antarctic fantasy satire on American and English politics and society Cooper published in 1835, *The Monikins*. (Perhaps its abysmal failure on both sides of the Atlantic prevented Cooper's naming his least well-received novel to date in soliciting a London contract for the new book.) Both Franklin and Philbrick suggest Cooper was influenced by the popular lectures of John Cleves Symmes beginning in 1818 that resurrected the ancient fantasy that the Earth was hollow with entrances at the poles.¹⁶ Franklin argues that an anonymous novel of 1820, *Symzonia*, by "Captain Adam Seaborn," further popularized Symmes's ideas, creating a tradition into which the detailed description of the Antarctic voyage of *The Monikins* neatly fits. In his satire of sentient monkeys arguing over the ideal political economy, Cooper pokes fun at Symmes in the person of the bluff, hardy New England captain, Noah Poke.¹⁷ And for his Antarctic travel lore in the 1835 novel, Cooper drew upon the same sources as he used in *The Sea Lions*, save for the Wilkes narrative from the next decade.¹⁸



The preface to *The Sea Lions* suggests yet another relevant *pendant*. The first seven of the nine paragraphs deal with religious issues and doctrine—the reference to Antarctic explorers quoted before does not occur until the last paragraph. And the title page epigraph from Thomas Campbell's *Pleasures of Hope*, invoking the "Daughter of Faith" to "Melt, and dispel, ye spectre doubts," clearly applies to hero Roswell Gardiner's conversion to the orthodox Trinitarian Christian faith Mary Pratt and Stephen Stimson advocate. At the deepest personal level for Cooper, *The Sea Lions* is a *pendant* to the 1842 *The Wing-and-Wing*: both novels convey exciting adventures at sea in a spectacular setting but focus the inevitable love story to enforce the doctrine of Trinitarian Christianity.¹⁹ The earlier novel is set in 1799, when Napoleon was menacing British naval dominance in the Mediterranean. The devout Italian Roman Catholic Ghita Caraccioli rejects her lover, the dashing French privateer Raoul Yvard, because

Yvard adopts the atheism of the early French Revolution. This difference in religious views results in *The Wing-And-Wing* being the only novel by Cooper where in the last pages, lovers are *not* united, Yvard dying after the British attack his crew.

Both the 1842 and 1851 *Wing-and-Wing* prefaces make Cooper's religious themes unmistakable. "Our chief concern, on the present occasion, is on the subject of the contrast we have attempted to draw between profound belief and light-hearted infidelity."²⁰ The preface Cooper supplied for the slightly revised 1851 Putnam text is even more forcefully doctrinaire, with the first two long paragraphs stressing Cooper's belief that a proper spiritual life requires that logic and reason yield to humility and faith. These paragraphs conclude: "From arrogantly claiming a right to worship a deity we comprehend, we soon come to feel that the impenetrable veil that is cast around the God-head, is an indispensable condition of our faith, reverence, and submission. A being that can be comprehended, is not a being to be worshipped."²¹ Raoul Yvard claims he can worship only that which his reason comprehends, an argument that Ghita rejects because a "being that can be comprehended, is not a being to be worshipped."

In *The Sea Lions*, Mary Pratt, born of Yankee Puritan stock, shares with Roman Catholic Italian Ghita Caraccioli the deep-seated faith that a "being that can be comprehended, is not a being to be worshipped." Similarly, her lover Roswell Gardiner, like Yvard, insists on a religion that meets his standards of rational logic. Before Roswell embarks on his voyage of external and internal exploration in chapter VIII, Mary sharply criticizes him: "You worship your reason, instead of the one true and living God. This is idolatry of the worst character, since the idol is never seen by the devotee, and he does not know of its existence" (91). Roswell's heresy is a pride of reason that refuses to accept Jesus as the Son of God, "a species of infidelity," Cooper interposes, "that is getting to be so widely spread in America as no longer to work in secret, but which lifts its head boldly among us, claiming openly to belong to one of the numerous sects of the land" (23–24). This bold sect is, of course, New England Unitarianism, to Cooper the latest perversion of the Puritan mindset.

Gardiner, unlike Yvard, is converted (and gets his girl). Yvard comes close to conversion, fatally wounded and surrounded by the dead, with Ghita he stares into the sublime starry heavens—but he dies before making any commitment.²² Similarly, the sublimity—beauty combined with present mortal danger—of the Antarctic heavens

moves Gardiner after the death of his rival *Sea Lion* captain Daggett and most of his crew to recognize the limits of his reason. “How little had he [Daggett] been able to foresee all that had happened, and how mistaken had been his own [Gardiner’s] calculations and hopes! What, then, was the intellect of which he had been so proud.” (350).

On his spiritual voyage, Gardiner’s conversion to heartfelt faith from intellectual self-reliance is promoted by his reading of the passages in the Bible Mary had marked for him that argue for Christ’s divinity. Even more crucial for him—if not the reader—are the solicitations of the old Kennebunk sailor, Stephen Stimson—tellingly named as the “provident boat-steerer” (353).²³ Like Ghita, Stimson’s faith is felt in the heart, not in the intellect. In making his Trinitarian spokesperson a Yankee from Kennebunk, Maine, Cooper is exercising his usual exemption from despising anything Yankee in admiring their seafaring skills. But a deeper personal meaning attaches to the name of the “provident boat-steerer.” As Franklin notes, Cooper in his England travel book recalled knowing while on his *Stirling* voyage a “gigantic fellow from Kennebunk of the name of Stephen Stimpson.” Like Ithuel Bolt in *The Wing-and-Wing*, Stimpson had been impressed into the British navy but, unlike Bolt, had been discharged. Stimpson escorted the adolescent Cooper around London.²⁴ Cooper does not recollect any theological discussions then, which seems unlikely given the venue, but in recalling the name of the old shipmate, Cooper must have been probing some decades-old sense of guidance.²⁵

Some evidence exists that Cooper was going through some form of personal reconsideration of Christ’s divinity in the same year he wrote *The Sea Lions*. His journal entries are extant for 1848 for January 1 to April 14, and May 13–14.²⁶ Entries are brief: typically, a few sentences recording the weather, agricultural events in the spring, political tidbits, personal visits, and wins and losses in the evening chess matches with wife Susan. Cooper also recorded their nightly reading of the Bible, generally a chapter at a time starting on January 1 with St. John (presumably the Gospel) and proceeding book by book through to the end of the New Testament, tackling Revelations from March 6–10. “Finished revelations, a most extraordinary book,” Cooper noted on March 10. The next day he recorded starting the Old Testament: “Genesis 5 chapters. A strange account.”²⁷

One of his longest entries concerning his response to their nightly readings occurred on Sunday, March 5: “The three epistles

of St. John, and that of St. Jude. The celebrated passage touching the divinity of Christ, is so embedded in similar doctrine that it strikes me the whole chapter must go if those two verses go. But is not the entire new testament full of this doctrine? The pride of man makes him cavil at that which he can not comprehend, while every thing he sees has a mystery in it! Church to-day in the forenoon." The brief letter of Jude occurs just before Revelations, at the end of the New Testament, preceded by three letters attributed to John. What the crucial "two verses" are that Cooper refers to is not clear. Only the first of the three John epistles is more than a page long in the King James version the Coopers doubtless used. At least five pairs of verses there are candidates as "[t]he celebrated passage touching the divinity of Christ": 1:23–24; 3:23–24; 4:9–10, 4:14–15, and 5:1–2. But as Cooper says, the "entire new testament [is] full of this doctrine [of the divinity of Christ]."

In any case, the verses in question aroused in Cooper an unusual testimony to their importance, perhaps one that deepened his own personal investment in the creed and practices of the Episcopal Church. Franklin and others have documented Cooper's active role in the Cooperstown church since his return there in 1836, but such records show involvement in governance issues, not personal commitments. The language of the two novels focusing on faith discussed here suggests that commitment was now becoming more intimate and personal—though not necessarily confined to any local institution.²⁸



Whatever deeper intimate and personal issues motivated Cooper's religious backstory in *The Sea Lions*, as always, needing income was the primary driving force to write and publish the new novel. In his last decade, national financial upheavals resulted in publishers issuing much cheaper softcover books; increasing competition from other writers did not diminish his sales numbers but did lower his per title income significantly.²⁹ His strategy for his penultimate novel followed the tactic he began to experiment with in the 1842 *The Wing-and-Wing*,³⁰ continued with in the two volumes of *Afloat and Ashore* (1844), and made his normal procedure with *Satanstoe* (1845). He wrote out the novel in the clearest handwriting he could muster to eliminate the delay in having a fair copy prepared by someone else, his inevitable practice through his career to the *Home* novels (1838).

He sent batches of chapters to his now-trusted Philadelphia copy editor and stereotyper, John Fagan, traveling to that city as needed to review and correct proofs before having Fagan cast stereotype plates for the perfected text. He paid for the plates himself and sent them to the New York publisher Stringer and Townsend under a contract to print and distribute a fixed number of copies, returning stipulated royalties to the author. Owning the plates secured Cooper the right to contract with any publisher to issue the text under circumstances the author fully controlled. And he sent parcels of the perfected sheets to Bentley in London, to enable his London publisher to issue the new novel a few days before Stringer and Townsend, initial publication being a requirement for securing British copyright.

We have rather little information on the specific dates on which the sequence of all these events occurred. The extant correspondence published in Beard's *L&J* specifies some but not all of the relevant dates. As indicated before, when sending Bentley the final sheets of *The Oak Openings* on July 18, 1848, Cooper announced "one more tale I shall finish this season." His financial request was simple: "This book I offer on the same terms as the last." Bentley demurred slightly, asking to defer a decision until *The Oak Openings* appeared, but by October 2 he agreed to the prior terms, £350, though he cautioned Cooper to eschew "the introduction of political discussion," which he stated, correctly, lost Cooper some readers as his reviewers often proclaimed.³¹

On November 15, 1848, Cooper sent Bentley a characteristic letter concluding with some private tidbits of "political discussion" on the current president (Polk) and on Louis Napoleon. But he began with business: "By the steamer of his day, I send you vol. 1st"—that is, enough text for Bentley to set the first of the three volumes still required for the 19th century British "triple-decker."³² Not until February 16 does the extant correspondence disclose more about work on the novel, with Cooper telling Fagan from Cooperstown that "[t]he rest of copy is on the way, complete." But delays in posting from Philadelphia had prevented him from receiving and presumably correcting "chapters 6, 7, and part of 8," of the second American volume (or third British). Since Cooper was soon departing for New York, he asked Fagan to send to him in New York the remaining materials—"the last Eng— vol. Preface, Title &c, in duplicate, that I may send it to England. . . ."³³

Writing on March 3 and again March 5, 1849, from the Globe hotel in New York to Fagan, Cooper requested the Philadelphia shop

to send him remaining proofs of the text.³⁴ Then on the March 7 he wrote Fagan that “I have sent the whole of Vol. IIIId, Eng. Ed. Sea Lions, to England, by means of correcting the proof sheets. But we must send a perfected duplicate by the next packet.”³⁵ The reminder to transmit a duplicate was Cooper’s long-standing practice of sending two sets of a new novel to London, to avoid delay lest one set was misrouted or lost. Fagan appeared to assure Cooper in his response on the March 10 that “I sent proof-sheets yesterday to make out your 2d set for the next steamer,”³⁶ though as Franklin notes, some problems in communication prevented Fagan from supplying Bentley with a complete set of printed perfected sheets.³⁷

Franklin’s analyses of Cooper’s business papers not available to Beard indicate that he made arrangements with Stringer and Townsend in November 1848. For \$900, Cooper gave his New York publishers the right to publish “as many as five thousand copies no earlier than the tenth of March” 1849, with another three thousand before March 10, 1851, if demand existed. After that, the plates returned to Cooper’s financial control.³⁸ Franklin estimates Fagan’s charges would have been around \$400,³⁹ leaving Cooper a very modest profit in America of at most \$500.⁴⁰ On March 29, 1849, the Bentley London edition was published in the usual handsome three volumes with ample margins and a generous twenty-seven lines per page. Two weeks later, on April 10, the more crabbed and compact New York edition (forty-one lines to a page) of Stringer and Townsend appeared in far more modest garb, two volumes in paper wrappers, with “PRICE 25 CENTS” prominently displayed on each volume.⁴¹

By late April, Cooper was hearing good things about the sales of his latest novel. In a chatty set of miscellaneous observations sent home on April 28, 1849, to “My Dearest wife,” Cooper reported that “[James] Stringer has so closely sold the first edition of Sea Lions (5000 copies) that he did not like to give me four copies, begging me to wait for the next edition (1000) next week. I am told the book sells very well, and this without the aid of a puff.”⁴² The next day a similarly conversational letter to Susan concluded with “Sea-Lions doing very well.”⁴³

But the reports from London were not nearly so good. The New York edition may have gone to 6,000 copies, but on June 15 Bentley informed Cooper that “the sale of the last two books [*The Oak Openings* and *The Sea Lions*] will not enable me to meet your views [for another £350 for his next novel]. I only printed 750 Copies of

each book, and by the first of the two lost a little, but by the last, *The Sea Lions*, I am likely to lose a considerable sum. I only printed 750 Copies as I said, and have sold only 400!"⁴⁴ In negotiating over that next novel, which became *Ways of the Hour*, Bentley reluctantly declined meeting Cooper's price, and on July 24 provided the dismal numbers printed and sold of the last two titles:

Seven Hundred & Fifty Copies were printed of 'Beehunter' [*Oak Openings*] of which number 557 were sold at the usual price. £85 in advertising.

And a similar number of *Sea Lions* were printed, of which 400 have been sold published in Ap—Spent in adv[ertisin]g £86. The sale has now completely ceased.⁴⁵



By 1849, Cooper's expectations for reviews he considered fair had long faded. A few reviewers dutifully hailed what was to be his penultimate novel, but his long presence in print and the rough treatment he experienced after his return home in 1836, especially from the Whig press, led him to anticipate a paucity of "intelligent" reviews. Thus, in the second paragraph of the final chapter, Cooper compares the failure of Deacon Pratt's minister in giving a sound funeral sermon to "reviewing . . . [which] might be made a very useful art, in the hands of upright, independent, intelligent, and learned men. But nothing in this world is as it should be" (377).

American reviews of Cooper's late fiction often are colored by one of two views of the author: a curmudgeon who too often took out his frustrations with critics by ruining his stories with outbursts of social and political views, or a patriot whose work continued to uphold the sacred values of the Republic.

In "Letters from New-York," the critic of the *Southern Literary Messenger* devoted the three long paragraphs on *The Sea Lions* to expatiating on the first view. "Ever since Mr. Cooper's return to his own country from a somewhat 'lengthy' expatriation, he has looked upon himself as a victim to 'the ingratitude of Republics.'" Though the critic began by stating that "I cannot say that I have read it; I endeavored honestly to do so, and failed," after rehearsing Cooper's outrages in *Home as Found* and the libel suits, the reviewer concluded of the

novel he has not read, "I hesitate not to pronounce 'The Sea-Lions' a very stupid novel, tedious, dismal; loose in its style, ill-constructed, poorly begun, feebly continued, and lamely ended."

Interestingly, as with several other publications, Melville's *Mardi* shares a page with *Sea Lions*; perhaps to show his impartiality, the reviewer declared that "Mr. Melville's 'Mardi' is likewise a failure," a sharp decline from *Typee*. The "lengthy" review commented on several other recent publications, and concluded with a warm notice of the Putnam edition of Cooper's works, quoting with favor the author's new introductory reflections on *The Spy*, "which are given in so much milder a mood than Mr. Cooper's usual comments."⁴⁶

As with his alleged political intrusions, Cooper's religious views provided another topic for reviewers to center their censure or praise. The June 1849 review in *Holden's Dollar Magazine* presented caveats about Cooper's alleged conservative stances in both politics and religion, and is worth quoting at length as a representative sample of this school of criticism:

The *Sea Lions* is more of a sermon than a romance. The preface is an old fashioned essay, like those of the last century on the unconsciousness of Divine favors, which would be creditable to a school boy, but, as the introduction to a romance, it is as much out of place as an imitation of one of Doctor Watt's hymns would be for an epilogue to a melo-drama. Mr. Cooper is a high tory in politics and a high churchman in religion, and he means that whoever reads his romances shall know it. We think that he would please his readers better and promote his own interests by serving up his theology and his fictions under separate covers. . . . With Mr. Cooper's decided *penchant* for preaching it is really surprising that he does not give up novel writing and go into the pulpit. He has long renounced his countrymen as hopelessly given over to radicalism in politics, and since he cannot hope to do them any good politically, there is nothing left to him but to preach to them on the more momentous subject of the future condition of their souls.

The reviewer continued by reminding readers of Cooper's lawsuits, in which he allegedly failed in attempting to change political views, so that Cooper "has now undertaken to draw them all within the enclosures of the church of which he is himself a member, and which is, of course, the only true church. The particular theological

motive of the *Sea Lions* appears to be to controvert the doctrines of Unitarianism.”

Having savaged the theology of *The Sea Lions*—but correctly identifying its theological target—the reviewer went on to quote the last paragraph of the introduction with its catalog of explorers, and then to sketch the opening chapter with its unfriendly descriptions of New Englanders. To round out the essay, the reviewer quoted eight exciting paragraphs from the beginning of chapter XI, the rival “*Sea Lions*” pursuing whales off the coast of Brazil.⁴⁷

In sharp contrast, the “Literary Notices and Criticisms” section of *Brownson’s Quarterly Review* not only warmly saluted Cooper’s patriotism but singled out the theology of *The Sea Lions* for special praise. Orestes T. Brownson had begun his intellectual career as a Transcendentalist and Unitarian, but in 1844 converted to the Roman Catholic Church. The Transcendentalist review he had early founded he now resurrected in 1844 as *Brownson’s Quarterly Review*, advocating for both Catholic religious and conservative political views. Not surprisingly then, the twelve-page review in his quarterly cordially agreed with the theology of a novel by a Protestant who often shared the doctrines Brownson now embraced.

Brownson’s began by affirming Cooper as a true patriot. “He has ventured to think and write as a freeborn American, to intimate that the American national character is not exactly perfect nor regarded as exactly perfect by European nations, and that there is room for improvement; he has even gone so far as to point out some of our faults, to tell us that good-breeding is not necessarily incompatible with patriotism, that there is no necessary connection between ill-manners and democracy, and that a man may be a gentleman without ceasing to be a republican.” The next two paragraphs support this position in detail, and then the review shifted to matters theological. *Brownson’s* made the good point that, in his early fiction, Cooper often embraced a religion of Nature at the expense of Revealed Religion; but

we think it [“Mr. Cooper’s latest publication”] the very best of his novels. It is equal in power and interest to his most popular works, and superior to them in its deep religious feeling and high moral tendency. . . . Its great design is to illustrate the doctrine of Divine Providence, to show the worthlessness and danger of talent, energy, and perseverance in the pursuit of wealth for its own sake, and to urge the importance, in all the relations of life, of accepting and

conforming to the great truths of the Gospel, even though they are mysteries, and tend to humble the pride of reason.

Two pages from chapter I, of Cooper's describing Deacon Pratt's hypocrisy, follow, succeeded by a defense of the New England character—Presbyterians excepted—as too harshly rendered in the opening chapter. The review concluded with four pages from chapter VII of Mary Pratt's appeals to Gardiner to adopt her Trinitarian views; Mary Pratt, for this sermon, is saluted as "a pure-minded and excellent girl, the very best female character in her walk in life Mr. Cooper has ever drawn. She has pure, deep, strong affection, and high, uncompromising religious principle."⁴⁸

The Providence, Rhode Island, *Manufacturers' and Farmers' Journal* disagreed summarily with Brownson. "No Unitarian will take offence at the extraordinarily jejune and foolish arguments of old Stimson." But ten days earlier, the *Journal* had admiringly reported that "We have been told, on the highest literary authority, that Mr. Cooper receives a higher sum for his copyrights than any other living novelist."⁴⁹

The Literary American provided a two-paragraph review, the first of which advanced Cooper-as-patriot, "one of the few that have been gratefully appreciated by their countrymen; and one whose works have in an especial manner procured respect abroad for American Literature." The reviewer appeared to have at least skimmed the novel, for he praised the "vivid scenes and high-wrought adventures. . . . Full of 'hair-breadth 'scapes,' and wrought up to the highest pitch of interest by the able pencil of a master, the work under consideration is not surpassed by any sea novel in our language."⁵⁰

The *Southern Quarterly Review* produced an even shorter opinion, a mere six sentences. But their review made the salient point that in *The Sea Lions* Cooper was more interested in delineating space rather than characters.

His [more recent] narratives derive their interest rather from delineations of natural phenomena, than from human nature or society. In a previous work [doubtless *The Crater*, 1847] he required our attention chiefly to the development of new abodes for man by volcanic ebullitions, and the story before us is given mostly to the empire of ice in the antarctic regions. To those who seek for a very fair description of these little known regions—of their vast territories of cold—their extensive fields of frost,—their storms of snow,—their mountains of ice, and the novel terrors of such an

agent, in such a world of void and desolation, these volumes should be satisfactory.⁵¹

Several American journals printed reviews of the Putnam “Author’s Revised Edition,” 1849–1851. Even though *The Sea Lions* was not reissued in that series, the *American Whig Review* singled it out as a prime example of the author’s strengths. The *Review* devoted two full pages to extensive quotations entitled “Cape Horn,” “Entering the Antarctic,” and “Seamanship among the Ice,” and concluded that “[h]is *forte* is his power of fancy, exercised on remote scenes and objects; there it moves freely, unimpeded by the actual; but it is too exuberant to meddle with every day life. . . . He is at home, not in the parlor, or in the street, but on the ocean, or in the wilderness.”⁵²

The polemical stances of the American reviewers were largely absent in the British reviews, but they had their own axes to grind. A long review in the *Spectator* begins with moderation. “In this fiction Mr. Cooper exhibits his distinctive merits of enforcing a broad principle of life and morals, exhibiting some peculiar line of nautical adventure, and portraying with great naturalness of delineation a particular class of American society. As far as matter and plan are in question, the *Sea Lions* is a remarkable example of freshness and fertility. Local scenery—a curious class of American life—the nautical objects, adventures, and field of enterprise—are almost as fresh as if Cooper had never written.” But the characters are of “the bumble grade,” and “there are no scenes of remarkable interest.”

An even-handed summary of the plot followed, with twists to emphasize Cooper’s delineation of “a curious class of American life,” small but sharp business practitioners on an isolated strip of maritime Long Island. Half the review exemplifies this characterization by quoting from chapter XX Deacon Pratt’s justification for using purloined information to send the hero Roswell Gardiner in search both of fur seals on a hitherto-unknown sealing grounds in the Antarctic and of buried pirate treasure in the Florida Keys. The review concludes with a complaint that “[t]here is a slight trait in *The Sea Lions* of the American maxim ‘our country right or wrong,’ which amounts to sheer impudence. Throughout the novel the only Antarctic voyager Cooper mentions by name (except Cook incidentally) is that ‘distinguished navigator’ Wilkes, and no opportunity is lost of thrusting him forward.” The unpublished text presented above discloses how zealously Cooper sought to establish Wilkes’s crucial

role in “discovering” Antarctica; the *Spectator* review concluded by chiding him for “something exceedingly like shuffling in connexion with Belany’s discoveries.”⁵³

Similarly, the *Gentleman’s Magazine* in a single paragraph praises the “skill of the author” in depicting the nautical competition between the two sealing ships, but devotes half the review to asserting the superiority of British authors of maritime fiction. “In describing the wonders also of the mighty deep, and the manners of those who steer their course over its trackless waters, he [Cooper] is almost equal to Captain Marryatt, which is according him no slight meed of praise. Both possess their several excellencies, but, whilst the transatlantic novelist is very successful in delineating the character of the seaman of the commercial navy, our countryman in addition is surpassingly skilful in painting the manners and habits of the genuine professional sailor with all his particular features and distinctive marks.”⁵⁴

The Athenæum also began its full-page review with a glancing blow at Cooper relative to his English peers. “Mr. Fenimore Cooper had some of the qualities which might have made him the Defoe—as he has occasionally been called the Scott—of America. But defective taste, absence of artistic purpose, and the want of mercy on his public have been too strong for his genius. No novel by the author of ‘The Red Rover’ can be utterly disregarded; but few among his recent essays can hope to stand upon the same shelf as their progenitors produced at a period ere his faults were so fully fixed.” After dismissing the first of the three Bentley volumes as “tedious and *meandering*,” the review recognized Cooper’s main interest is in the spiritual relationship of Mary Pratt and Gardiner. But the reviewer chose to round out the discussion of *The Sea Lions*, in the custom of the time, with more than two columns reprinted from chapter XXVI, Roswell’s belated relief of Daggett’s frozen crew. A final short paragraph drew the reader’s attention to a similar long excerpted review “from Mr. Melville’s ‘Mardi’ cited by us a few weeks ago.” The reviewer concluded that “[t]he reader will hardly require to be told in what manner the tremendous sufferings narrated [in the long excerpt quoted] wrought a cure upon the money hungerer, Daggett,—as also upon the doubtful lover of Mary Pratt. The end of the book is a piece of poetical justice upon ‘the most approved principles.’”⁵⁵

The Literary Gazette provided the most balanced British review of *The Sea Lions*—one that even Cooper, had he read it, might have considered “upright, independent, [and] intelligent.” The *Gazette*

found much to welcome in “the three distinct features in this tale,” with which the review begins: “1. The main design to portray man in a moral field of action in order to show his immediate dependance upon a superior power. 2. The minute description of every sort of situation in which vessels can be placed at sea, and the manœuvres by which they avoid dangers if not overcome by them. And 3. The usual construction of affairs in love, worldly concerns, and exhibition of character, which form what is called the Plot of a Novel.”

Mary Pratt, “a genuine Christian, full of simplicity, faith, and charity,” the initial “unbeliever or Deist,” Captain Gardiner, and the “pious seaman” Stimson, who eventually helps convert Gardiner, all are sympathetically named. The *Gazette* granted that “[t]o general readers their nautical exploits [of the two “Sea Lions”] may not be so intelligible as to naval readers”—a caveat shared doubtless by modern readers. The wintering over in the Antarctic is commended, and extended quotations from various parts of the novel attest to the success of the elements constituting “the Plot of a Novel.”⁵⁶

The best-known reviewer of *The Sea Lions* was by the up-and-coming maritime novelist Herman Melville, whose *Mardi*, as we have seen, was occasionally noticed side by side with *The Sea Lions*. The twenty-nine-year-old Melville reviewed the latest novel by the fifty-nine-year-old Cooper in the *Literary World*. His review is brief, descriptive, and overall positive—though how closely he read we may wonder when he declared that Deacon Pratt was Mary’s “respected father.” He noted “the grandeur of the many scenes here depicted” in the Antarctic and correctly espied Cooper’s sources in Wilkes and Scoresby. While concluding with a salute to “our national novelist,” Melville joined in deriding “one Stimpson [*sic*], an old Kennebunk boatsteerer, and Professor of Theology, who, wintering on an iceberg, discourses most unctuously upon various dogmas.” (Actually, the real “Professor of Theology” in the novel is Mary; see her lecture on the Trinity before Roswell departs in chapter VII which *Brownson’s Quarterly Review* singled out for special praise. She is far more than the “moist, rosy hand” of “a houri” as Melville flippantly described her.)⁵⁷

In summing up his definitive study of Cooper’s sea fiction from *The Pilot* (1824) to *The Sea Lions* a quarter century later, Thomas Philbrick concludes that “[i]t is difficult to exaggerate the significance of *The Sea Lions* in the evolution of nautical fiction.” In his first contributions to a genre he helped to found, *The Pilot* (1824), *The Red*

Rover (1827), and *The Water-Witch* (1830), Cooper narrated exciting adventures in intensely romantic nautical settings. The two volumes of *Afloat and Ashore* (1844), and even more *Jack Tier* (1848), moved sharply to more realistic settings and characterizations. *The Sea Lions*, in Philbrick's perspective, transcends these particulars to make the human encounter with the sea expressive of universal truths.

The Sea Lions represents the first complete liberation of the sea novel from the notion that its principal function is the depiction of a special realm of experience. Although Cooper's narrative, unlike those of such pure allegories as Melville's *Mardi* (1849) or his own *The Monikins*, remains firmly embedded in a matrix of concrete plausibility, the reader's attention is never focused on the uniqueness of the sailor, the ship, and the ocean; rather, the seaman becomes the representative of all men, and his environment becomes an analogue of the condition of all human existence.⁵⁸

Two years later, influenced by Cooper's work, this movement in nautical fiction from the realistic trials of a frail sailing ship in tossing seas to oceanic philosophical crises finds its fullest embodiment in *Moby-Dick*.

NOTES

1. *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, ed. James Franklin Beard (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968), 5, 374. Future references to this edition will be cited in the text as *L&J*.

2. D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (London: Penguin, 1977), 66.

3. For these and the following examples of sources for *The Sea Lions* Cooper read or wrote himself, the editors are indebted to Wayne Franklin's exhaustive study of the interplay of the author's writing and reading. See his *James Fenimore Cooper: The Later Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 450–62, cited hereafter in the text as *JFC:TLY*. Readers wishing a full account of Cooper's sources should consult Franklin and the earlier but still immensely valuable study by Thomas Philbrick, *James Fenimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 209–59, cited hereafter in the text as *DASF*. Franklin cites as earlier literary scholarship on Cooper's Antarctic sources W. B. Gates, "Cooper's *The Sea Lions* and Wilkes' *Narrative*," *PMLA* 65:6 (December 1950): 1069–75, and Warren Walker, "Introduction," *The Sea Lions* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), xxiii–xxv. Explanatory Notes will reference these sources as appropriate.