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# Don't Believe Everything You Read: Hoaxes and Satire in the Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym

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DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU READ: HOAXES AND SATIRE IN *THE*  
*NARRATIVE OF ARTHUR GORDON PYM*

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Bachelor of Arts in English

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# HOAXES AND SATIRE IN *THE NARRATIVE OF ARTHUR GORDON PYM*

ERIK E. HARDER

## ABSTRACT

*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* stands out among Edgar Allan Poe's body of work as his only novel. It also stands out in the fact that it has received comparatively little attention from scholars, owing at least in part to the idea that it is a literary failure on Poe's part. Analysis reveals quite the contrary, however, as the novel is not a disjointed narrative masquerading as travel literature, but rather it is a satire of the genre of travel literature. Poe was driven to write the novel at the behest of his publisher, who also encouraged Poe to plagiarize "authentic" travel literature for his own narrative in order to create a more saleable product. Poe borrowed heavily from Benjamin Morrell's *A Narrative of Four Voyages* and fashioned his own novel as a satire of Morrell's reportedly true account. I argue that Poe's novel contains elements of hoax, satire, and parody and was written to satirize a genre of literature that Poe originally had no interest in pursuing.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, an Antarctic seafaring narrative presented as a true story, occupies a very specific place in Edgar Allan Poe's catalogue. This is due less to its being his first and only novel and more to how it is has been treated by scholars. *Pym* exists as a footnote to the more widely read Poe works. It is not a stretch to say that most laypeople have never heard of the novel or even knew that Poe wrote anything other than short fiction. When compared to Poe's other works, *Pym* remains quite neglected among scholars as well. J. Gerald Kennedy pointed this out in 1976 when he wrote that *Pym* underwent a "century of neglect" and that it was not until the 1950s that scholars started taking the novel seriously ("Infernal Twoness" 41). Even with more than twenty years of scholarship, Kennedy asserts that up until his own study the idea that *Pym* was a "literary deception" was "dismissed as incidental" (42). This attitude toward *Pym* persists, however, as few scholars since Kennedy have gone back to the literary deception inherent in *Pym* – and this is not due to Kennedy having done all there was to do. Kennedy also happens to lay out the themes that scholars will continue to go back to as time goes on: "the aesthetic and metaphysical implications of the novel," "the

narrator as an artist-hero or spiritual wanderer,” and “mythic patterns” (41-2). Perhaps the most popular of these is the focus on the narrator, which has recently taken the form of questions of authorship and the relationship of the reader to the text through the narrator<sup>1</sup>.

Modern *Pym* scholars seem to be doing just what Kennedy pointed out back in the 1970s. The only difference seems to be that while Kennedy thought that the hoaxing element was being “dismissed as incidental,” modern scholars are taking it for granted, as though this element of the novel has already been examined to its fullest extent. To say that that the hoaxing element of *Pym* is taken for granted may seem misleading since there is, undeniably, a hoaxing element in the novel. Many scholars rely on or reference the hoaxing element in their analyses, but very few delve into it more deeply than to simply say that Pym perpetrated the novel as something true. There is a lot more than a simple hoax at work in *Pym*; this element of the novel plays an integral role in how the novel was both written and received as well as how the larger satire is formed. It is my argument that *Pym* is a satire of travel literature and its authors. Poe constructed *Pym* as a sort of magnifying glass with which to burn away the façade of truth that travelogue authors had enjoyed. Pym the “hero” is a caricature of the travelogue authors themselves and his tale is a satire of those authors’ books. By satirizing travelogues and their authors, Poe could pull back the curtain, so to speak, on travelogues and their authenticity (or lack thereof) and show discerning readers that the man behind that curtain was not the author alone, but a hodgepodge of author, publisher, and even the reading public. For the common, or less-discerning, reader *Pym* was going to be Poe’s greatest hoax. The hoax,

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<sup>1</sup> See Jang, Pahl, and Pritchett.

however, does not seem to have been taken seriously, nor did it sell particularly well (Kennedy, "Introduction"). Though the hoax ultimately failed, the satire is strong, cleverly constructed, and remains one of Poe's greatest achievements.

It may be useful to define a few terms that will appear repeatedly throughout this paper. There are several definitions of "satire," but the one of interest here is: "the use of irony, sarcasm, ridicule, or the like, in exposing, denouncing, or deriding vice, folly, etc." (Satire, dictionary.com). Throughout the novel, Poe satirizes travelogues in general and Benjamin Morrell's *Narrative of Four Voyages* in particular. This satire has less to do with vice and more to do with folly. The second word of special importance is "hoax," which is defined as "something intended to deceive or defraud" (Hoax, dictionary.com). Finally, "parody" is defined as "a humorous or satirical imitation of a serious piece of literature or writing" (Parody, dictionary.com). Parody is a useful term here because, as I will show, *Pym* has such a close relation to *Narrative of Four Voyages* that it may be considered, at least in some respects, a parody of that work.

Another aspect of these terms worth considering (beyond definition) is the fact that all may fail or succeed in various degrees. Just as a novel may succeed or fail in financial terms as well as literary or scholarly terms, so too may satire and hoax succeed or fail in different ways. For instance, *Pym* failed as a hoax insofar that no one was duped by it (or at least, no one recorded being duped). On the other hand, *Pym* succeeded as a satire insofar that it fits the definition above and was also very subtle. As a point of comparison, one of the most celebrated satires of literary history was Johnathon Swift's "A Modest Proposal." One of the key aspects of the essay and, coincidentally, one of the reasons that it is widely considered to be a literary success is that the satire is so subtle



that readers sometimes have a difficult time realizing that Swift is talking about cannibalizing babies. Though the satirical “payoff” of *Pym*, so to speak, is not quite as shocking as that of “A Modest Proposal,” Poe’s subtlety is on par with Swift’s and has a definite impact on the success of the satire in *Pym*.

As it turns out, several forces were coalescing at once to influence Poe’s first and only novel, the unique combination of which would provide just the impetus for the hoax and satire at the heart of *Pym*. Contrary to the popular imagining of how an author comes to produce a work – that sort of romantic notion of the artist struck by sudden inspiration – *Pym* was created almost entirely out of necessity rather than desire. This is particularly interesting for Poe since he is, as Terence Whalen points out, “variously depicted as an opium-crazed visionary or as the more conventional romantic outcast” and more recently “as an aesthete-craftsman” (4). The truth, however, is that Poe never intended to write a novel when he started *Pym*; he had actually gone to his publisher with a collection of short fiction – *Tales of the Folio Club* – which was rejected with the advisement that readers preferred a “single and connected story [that] occupies a whole volume or a number of volumes” (Whalen 162). So, to suggest that Poe was somehow above economic concerns is simply false. Not only was Poe subject to the economics of the publishing industry, he was being virtually crushed by them. During a period of about two years when Poe was writing *Pym*, he was unemployed and his family was “literally suffering for want of food” (qtd. in Whalen 163). These difficult times would turn out to be just the sort of motivation Poe needed in order to finish his novel. Not only was he motivated by immediate concerns such as being unable to provide for his family, but, as I will argue, he was motivated by what seems from every angle to be events completely the

fault of Harpers. Poe already had a volume of short fiction ready to publish, but it was Harpers that refused it and, in no uncertain terms, demanded a novel. He would give them a novel, but not exactly the one they expected.

This sort of meddling on the part of Harpers was not out of character for them. Whalen also describes how they provided material for travel literature author John L. Stephens who had recently returned from abroad, but said he had not taken enough notes on which to base a book. For Harper, travel literature sold better than anything else (Whalen 163) and they were not about to let something as arbitrary as facts prevent them from turning a profit. When Stephens explained that he had “taken no useful notes,” Harper replied, “That is no matter. . . . We have got plenty of books about those countries. You just pick out as many as you want, and I will send them home for you; you can dish something up” (qtd in Whalen 163). Harpers was in the business of making money and in juxtaposition to Harpers’ success, Poe was living in poverty. It is not unreasonable to suggest that Poe may have noticed this inequality.

Besides these economic pressures, there were also social pressures on Poe’s novel. The fact that Poe chose to write an Antarctic adventure novel was exactly in keeping with what the audience at large was clamoring for. Johan Wijkmark details the American push to Antarctica, writing that, though James Cook, a Brit, circumnavigated Antarctic in 1775, America was not ready to accept Britain’s word that there was no Southern continent. Wijkmark argues that it was the rebellious American attitude toward England that drove them to eventually set sail in order to answer the Antarctic question. “During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Antarctic became an American intellectual colony of sorts” and “a productive site for Americans to project desires for national

distinction” (Wijkmark 85). In April of 1836, Jeremiah Reynolds addressed the House of Representatives to argue for an Antarctic expedition in the hopes of discovering a southern continent. In May of that year, the House passed a bill approving the U.S. Exploring Expedition (1838-42). Wijkmark points out that Poe was very much tapped into this vein of social interest as can be seen in two articles he wrote on Jeremiah Reynolds. The first made an appeal to “patriotic sentiments” to argue for proper funding of Reynolds’ impending Antarctic voyage (93). The second article appeared in the same issue of the *Southern Literary Messenger* as the first installment of *Pym* and takes the form of a “laudatory review of Reynolds’ *Address*” and “continues along similar patriotic lines as in the previous article” (Wijkmark 94). The timing of the first installment of *Pym* and Poe’s praise of Reynolds is certainly not a coincidence.

Poe’s use of what Wijkmark views as appeals to the patriotism of his readers is in keeping with the national attitude toward England. Taken on its face, this could be merely Poe agreeing with the larger sentiment of his country. However, it could also be an attempt to drum up interest in his novel. As pointed out earlier, shortly after these articles appear in the *Messenger*, Poe loses his job there and faces poverty. If Poe was aware of the growing national excitement for an Antarctic adventure as well as Harpers intense focus on the business of travel literature, he certainly could have been using the patriotism behind the U.S. Exploring Expedition to his advantage. Part of this sentiment was that Cook had already (correctly, as history would prove) concluded that there was no open lane, by sea, to the center of Antarctica. Wijkmark writes that “for Reynolds’ vision of the American field of fame, it was vital to refute the [explicitly British] idea that the Antarctic was occluded by a landmass” (95). Continuing, Wijkmark argues that

Poe's "open polar waters" is in keeping with Reynolds' own ideas in order to provide "fictional support for Reynolds against the British." To this point, he also points out that "while the Antarctic journey is undertaken on a British ship, it is Pym's boldness and perseverance that convinces Captain Guy to press on" (95-6). This is further evidence of the importance of the fervor surrounding the Antarctic expedition and its influence on *Pym*.

These economic and social pressures not only produced the circumstances under which Poe would write *Pym*, but influenced the novel directly, as reflected in its pages. The way Poe expresses these pressures is in the hoaxing element and satire of the novel. By presenting the novel as a hoax, he creates a cover for his larger purpose, which is to satirize the genre of travel literature. Travel literature is the major cause of Poe's economic and social misfortunes: destitute, practically begging for a job (Whalen 163), unable to support his family and "spurned by his foster-father" (Ibid. 5). It is my argument that Poe uses *Pym* as a way to satirize travel literature in an attempt to make fools out of those who supported that genre and its authors over Poe and his own works. In *Pym*, Poe appears to submit to the advice that he should "lower himself a little to the ordinary comprehension of the generality of readers," (Whalen 162) but in actuality throws this advice and all it entails into the faces of those who would suggest it to him. Though *Pym* is not the commercial success Poe must have hoped it would be, thereby preventing him from the true victory he was seeking, it does live on as a literary success at least.

## CHAPTER II

### BLENDING HOAX AND SATIRE

Throughout the introduction I referred to “the hoaxing element” of *Pym*. This, of course, refers to the fact that the novel was written as the first person account of true events, but was actually the creation of Poe’s imagination (and some plagiarized travel literature). As it turns out, neither the novel nor the hoax was very successful (Kennedy, “Preface” 195). There could be several explanations for the failure of his hoax, but two seem the most probable: Poe simply failed at creating a believable hoax, or the hoax was not his true intention. The answer lies somewhere between these. The preface of the novel is the set-up for the hoax and contains a great deal worth examining. The hoax, however, is a diversion from the heart of *Pym*: the satire. By blending hoax and satire, Poe was attempting to jab at both the public (to whose “ordinary comprehension” he had been directed to pander) and the genre of travel literature (whose popularity and economic success undermined the salability of Poe’s fiction).

Hoax and satire were not new to Poe when he wrote *Pym*. Harpers had rejected *Tales of the Folio Club* in 1836, which is when they advised Poe to write a novel. *Tales of the Folio Club* was going to be “a collection of pieces, each imitating a popular

fictional sub-genre and recounted by a narrator belonging to the mythical ‘Folio Club,’ said to be ‘a mere Junto of *Dunderheadism*’” (Kennedy, *Pym and Tales* 291-2), but the collection was turned down in favor of a novel. Two tales that were intended for inclusion in this collection<sup>2</sup> are of particular interest here: “MS. Found in a Bottle” and “Mystification.” These two tales each have something in common with *Pym* and provide valuable insight into how Poe handled some of the themes and subject-matter he would go on to include in his novel.

“MS. Found in a Bottle” (1833) may have the most obvious connection to *Pym* given that both are written as the first person accounts of men who explore the Antarctic. Five years before *Pym* was published, Poe was already working on parodying sea travel: “Poe presumably intended to assign ‘MS Found in a Bottle’ to ‘Mr. Solomon Seadrift who had every appearance of a fish.’ The comic framework raises the question of whether the tale should be regarded as a parody of the sea story” (Kennedy, *Pym and Tales* 292). With “MS,” Poe was also sharpening his ability to use real-world scientific theory to lend credence to his fiction: “[Poe] had consciously evoked John Cleves Symmes’s early nineteenth-century theory of holes at the North and South Poles drawing ocean water into the centre of the earth” (Ibid. xvi). When examined in the context of *Pym*, “MS” becomes almost a blueprint for the novel, evidencing the core concepts Poe would go on to use in *Pym*. It is no wonder that Poe would return to themes first explored in “MS” considering the great reception and success of the tale, which won him a fifty dollar prize and publication in the *Baltimore Saturday Visitor* when he submitted it, along with several other stories, for a contest held by the periodical.

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<sup>2</sup> The exact stories that were to be included is conjectural. See Hammond and “Tales of the Folio Club” webpage from eapoe.org

In May 1837, Poe worked out a deal with Harpers to publish *Pym*, but the 1837 bank panic delayed publication for a year. A month after Harpers agreed to publish *Pym*, the short story “Mystification” was published, which tells the tale of Ritzner Von Jung and the manipulation of his rival, Hermann. The two men quarrel over the proper etiquette of dueling, both professing to be experts in the field, and Jung bests his rival by providing him with the only treatise on the subject Hermann had never read. The supposed treatise is nearly indecipherable, being written in Latin and with the language “ingeniously framed so as to present to the ear all the outward signs of intelligibility, and even profundity, while in fact not a shadow of meaning existed” (Poe 210). Hermann receives the treatise, reads it, and assigns it “unusual merit,” as it is revealed that “Hermann would have died a thousand deaths rather than acknowledge his inability to understand anything and everything in the universe that had ever been written about the *duello*” (211). Poe wrote a tale about a book being used to confound readers at the same time he was writing *Pym*. The link between the two is that they are both narratives about the untrustworthiness of the written word. *Pym*, or rather the outcome of reading *Pym*, is exactly what “Mystification” is about: a book being used to confound its readers by presenting them with a seemingly clear message with the real meaning hidden beneath layers of satire, parody, and absurdity.

Several years after the publication of *Pym*, Poe would go on to enjoy the most successful hoax of his writing career in “The Balloon Hoax,” which actually made it to publication and circulation as real news in *The Sun* (a New York-based newspaper) before the paper realized its mistake. “The Balloon Hoax” is a fictional account of the very real Monck Mason taking a hot air balloon across the Atlantic in three days. By

sprinkling in some real details, such as using the real-life aeronaut Monck Mason as his protagonist, and some “clever extrapolation of scientific principles” (Kennedy “Notes”), Poe was able to fool an entire newspaper and its audience for a few days before everyone caught on. One reason for the success of “The Balloon Hoax” and the failure of the hoax in *Pym* may be exactly those real-life details that Poe utilized. By telling a fictitious story about a real person, the reader did not have to suspend disbelief quite as much, nor did Poe have to try and create a believable protagonist (as he did in *Pym*). Once the story was published, Poe was then able to rely on the authority of the newspaper to validate his story simply by its inclusion. “MS” and “Mystification” are examples of Poe honing his skills at satire, parody, and hoaxing which would culminate in *Pym*. Whatever the shortcomings of his hoaxing in *Pym* may have been, he eventually learned from them and produced “The Balloon Hoax,” verifying as true the popular sentiment that “practice makes perfect.” His excellent use of satire and parody, however, are on perfect display in *Pym*.

Poe sets the stage for his satire in the hoax, which begins in the opening paragraph of the preface. Writing as Pym, he says he originally had no intention of writing down his experiences because he “kept no journal” and says, “I feared I should not be able to write, from mere memory, a statement so minute and connected as to have the *appearance* of that truth it would really possess, barring only the natural and unavoidable exaggeration to which all of us are prone when detailing events which have had powerful influence in exciting the imaginative faculties” (Poe 2). This sounds eerily familiar to the exchange between Stephens and Harpers mentioned earlier, when Stephens tried to explain he had “taken no useful notes” with which to write a travelogue of his most



recent excursion. Harpers replied that Stephens could use any number of travelogues written by other authors on the same locales. When Poe says he could not write from memory well enough to even give his narrative the *appearance* of truth “it would really possess,” he is saying that because it is not true in the first place – just as Stephens’ book would never be true. To give his novel “the appearance of truth it would really possess” would be to write a work of fiction marketed as a work of fiction, rather than a work of fiction marketed as autobiographical. Of course, it is difficult to determine exactly what readers may have expected from travelogues in terms of truth. Speculation is less than fruitful, but, as far this paper is concerned, “truth” allows for creative interpretation of events, but those events should still have actually happened. This seems to be a fair expectation. Though it is doubtful that Poe would have known of aforementioned exchange between Stephens and Harpers, the passage from *Pym* suggests that he at least suspected such things happened or even experienced it himself. After all, Harpers has been documented as encouraging plagiarism among their own authors and several direct sources for *Pym* were published by Harpers; it is entirely plausible that Poe would have had a similar conversation with the publisher. To include it in the preface becomes a jab at the entire genre and those who work in it and support it, showing them how ridiculous their claims of truth are by creating a caricature of their works.

Poe continues, saying that even if he could write it as the truth, it would still have “the natural and unavoidable exaggeration to which all of us are prone when detailing events which have had powerful influence in exciting the imaginative faculties” (Poe 2). This statement is very interesting because it is saying that even reportedly honest and truthful accounts of actual events are not completely honest because of “natural and

unavoidable exaggeration.” Poe is jabbing at the travelogue writers here, pointing out the fact that, even when they are not blatantly lying, their works will always have at least a little bit of fiction in them. In *Pym*, Poe is turning that formula upside down: putting a little truth in his fiction while betting that the audience will not be able to tell the difference. His bet was not ill-placed, as it is clear that the public had been eagerly devouring travel literature for some time, apparently oblivious to the practices of publishers like Harpers. Poe was preying on – and criticizing – the naivety of readers who put blind faith in non-fiction without any proof of its veracity. This focus on the differences, or lack thereof, between fiction and truth continues when he uses the phrase “imaginative faculties,” which connotes make-believe or fantasy rather than truthful, honest, or reality. When someone wants to express a great deal of surprise, they might say, “I could not believe my eyes,” and to counter disbelief, “Seeing is believing.” Of all the faculties to invoke in relation to recounting events, Poe chooses the “imaginative faculties” rather than the faculties of perceiving reality. Poe is subtly suggesting that fantasy and reality cannot always be determined by someone’s word, be he Edgar Allan Poe or John L. Stephens.

Another important aspect of the Preface to consider is that another writer (other than the fictional witness of the recounted events), a mysterious “Mr. Poe,” helped write the book. Again, this seems to be Poe in dialogue with the writers of travel literature. By adding this to the Preface, it is as though he is saying that in order for this to be a “real” travelogue (whatever that might mean) it must have a ghostwriter. When Poe writes, “however roughly, as regards mere authorship, my book should be got up, its very uncouthness . . . would give it all the better chance of being received as truth” (3), he is

really calling out the ghostwriters – the hired hands of Harpers – as rough and uncouth writers. It turns out that Benjamin Morrell’s *Four Voyages*, “one of the most popular exploration narratives in antebellum America” was ghostwritten (Whalen 164). *Four Voyages* was one of the works Poe borrowed from – quite heavily too, as will be discussed later – for *Pym*, so it stands to reason that he would have at least suspected the truth behind who authored the work even if he did not know it explicitly.

As for the readers receiving this tale, as truth or anything else, Poe is again being subtly sardonic. When Poe writes that he should trust “the shrewdness and common sense of the public,” he is certainly being tongue-in-cheek. Going back to Paulding’s advice to “lower himself . . .” and Harpers’ admission that readers preferred a “single and connected story” (Whalen 162) quoted earlier, Poe addresses these nuggets of wisdom in two ways in the above passage from the Preface. First, he addresses these statements by saying that the roughness of his work makes it more attractive to his readers, thereby lowering the ghostwriters and travelogue writers since that is what readers really love (especially when one considers Harper’s statement about travelogues selling the best) as well as the readers themselves for what Poe must have considered their poor taste. If making his novel rough and uncouth will lend to its credibility as a travelogue, and the generality of readers love travelogues (as evidenced by how well they sell) then the real travelogue writers (i.e. the ghostwriters and hack explorer-authors) have really got the market cornered on dumbed down, made up works of alleged truth. Second, he really plays with Harpers’ advice that readers prefer works “especially fiction” in a “single and connected story” of book-length. What does Poe write but a (purportedly) nonfictional and (seemingly) disorganized, incoherent mess of a story – occupying a single volume. If

Poe had thumbed his nose any more blatantly at Harpers they would not have published his book.

Moving on from the preface, Poe introduces one of the most peculiar aspects of the novel: Pym's pet dog, Tiger. The reason Tiger is peculiar (other than being a dog named "Tiger"), is that he disappears from the book suddenly and without explanation. While this may seem to be a simple, if glaring, omission on Poe's part, there is another reason for not only the dog's disappearance, but the dog's inclusion in the novel in the first place. The first time Tiger is introduced, Pym is in a state of delirium in the hold of the *Grampus* and mistakes Tiger for something else entirely: "The paws of some huge and real monster were pressing heavily upon my bosom—his hot breath was in my ear—and his white and ghastly fangs were gleaming upon me through the gloom" (Poe 21). After a horrifying moment of accepting what he thought was his impending death, Pym comes to his senses: "I was bewildered, utterly lost in amazement—but I could not forget the peculiar whine of my Newfoundland dog Tiger, and the odd manner of his caresses I well knew. It was he" (22). This scene is a microcosm of the larger hoax of the novel. Repeatedly, Poe presents a scene in which an object appears to be something other than what it really is. This is a smaller kind of hoax, or trick, that Poe is using on two levels: on the first, it is a trick being played on the character that is misperceiving the object; on the second, it is a trick being played on the reader who must divine the truth in the scene. Tiger plays exactly this part in the novel. He is repeatedly used as a tool with which Poe confounds both the characters and the reader. Of course, the irony of the above scene is that after Pym mistakes Tiger for a monster, he says that he knows the dog well and emphatically states "It was he." This emphatic statement of truth is yet another trick as

the reader must wonder if the dog really a dog at all and if its owner truly knows the answer.

The scene continues and, in a brilliant moment of foreshadowing, Pym says “[f]or the presence of Tiger I tried in vain to account” (22). As mentioned earlier, Tiger eventually disappears from the text entirely and, at that point, the reader is left doing the exact kind of vain accounting Pym performs here. Following this, Pym recounts how he first met Tiger. Yet again, Poe subtly foreshadows the near future of the text as Pym narrates, “I had rescued him, when a puppy, from the clutches of a malignant little villain in Nantucket who was leading him, with a rope around his neck, to the water” (22-3). Just before Tiger disappears, Pym and his companions are adrift on a shipwreck in the middle of the ocean, bringing Tiger’s watery misfortunes full-circle.

Shortly following this scene, the crew of the *Grampus* mutinies and Pym finds himself in very dire straits, being both trapped in the hold and, should he escape, at the mercy of the mutineers. Eventually, Augustus saves Pym and they are able to concoct a plan to defeat the mutineers, only to have the ship wrecked in a storm. Pym is then set adrift on the shipwreck with a small party consisting of Augustus, Dirk Peters, Richard Parker, and Tiger. It is while they are adrift at sea that Tiger makes his final appearance. The last mention of the dog comes during a scene in which Pym is (yet again) delirious and says:

When I recovered from this state, the sun was, as near as I could guess, an hour high. I had the greatest difficulty in bringing to recollection the various circumstances connected with my situation, and for some time

remained firmly convinced that I was still in the hold of the brig, near the box, and that the body of Parker was that of Tiger (74).

This narration is already difficult to trust due to the mental state of the narrator, but it becomes doubly confounding as Pym mistakes Parker for Tiger and Tiger is never mentioned afterwards.

It is no mistake that Parker and Tiger are confused here. Later on, as the crew is slowly starving, Parker convinces everyone to draw straws to see who will be cannibalized to save the others. As luck would have it, Parker draws the short straw and is shortly thereafter killed by Peters and cannibalized by the survivors. Given Pym's the fact that Tiger disappears after Pym mistakes the dog and Parker, it may be the case that Pym is hallucinating in some respect. Whether this is due to the hunger and thirst he is experiencing or the mental anguish he goes through in reconciling the murder and cannibalizing of another man, it may actually be Tiger that is killed and eaten. Pym's anguish is evidenced during Parker's death: "Such things may be imagined, but words have no power to impress the mind with the exquisite horror of their reality" (94). The fact that Pym appeals to imagination only furthers the idea that something else is going on entirely. The crew goes on to remove the victim's hands, feet, and head and throws these overboard, which would help in removing any aspect of humanity from the deceased. Of course, it would still be plain to see that it was not a man, but the body of a dog that remained, but given Pym's mental anguish and overall deteriorated state, it is not impossible that, as is common in many of Poe's other works, the narrator is experiencing something other than reality. This would have been a rather masterful hoax on Poe's part as well, with the hoax being that the reader and the narrator are both tricked into

believing that a man was just cannibalized and, furthermore, for what amounts to no reason at all. Just a few lines after Parker is devoured, Pym says:

On the twenty-second, as we were sitting close huddled together, gloomily revolving over our lamentable condition, there flashed through my mind all at once an idea which inspired me with a bright gleam of hope. I remembered that, when the foremast had been cut away, Peters, being in the windward chains, passed one of the axes into my hand, requesting me to put it, if possible, in a place of security, and that a few minutes before the last heavy sea struck the brig and filled her I had taken this axe into the forecastle and laid it in one of the larboard berths. I now thought it possible that, by getting at this axe, we might cut through the deck over the storeroom, and thus readily supply ourselves with provisions (95).

The crew is able to retrieve enough provisions to stave off starvation for at least a little while longer. Similarly to Tiger, Parker and his sacrifice are never mentioned again. Poe's construction of Tiger, including the dog's disappearance, and, later, of Parker's death are so closely knit as to not be mere coincidence. Rather, Poe was creating a smaller hoax inside of a larger one. He draws the reader in and sets them up for the real purpose of the novel, which is to subvert any expectations due to the supposed genre of the novel or past experience with travelogues, and instead delivers a cutting satire full of double-meaning and subtle winks.

## CHAPTER III

### THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN MORRELL

Even the structure of the narrative itself is a satire. It is widely accepted that Poe used Benjamin Morrell's *Narrative of Four Voyages* as a source for his text<sup>3</sup>. It just so happens that Pym goes on four adventures of his own: the drunken sailing expedition that ends with a shipwreck, an attempt at stowing away aboard the *Grampus* that ends with being lost at sea, a journey aboard the *Jane Guy* that ends on the island of Tsalal, and his attempts to survive said island that end in a mysterious whiteness at sea. One of the great ways in which Poe subverts the structure of the traditional travelogue is that it is unclear whether or not the traveler ever really gets home to recount his journey. Also, with each "voyage" ending in shipwreck, it seems that Poe is poking fun at the absurdity of Morrell's own travelogue by showing how improbable it is for someone to not only survive to recount all the troubles that Pym and Morrell encounter, but to encounter all of these troubles in the first place. The probability of a single person experiencing the troubles that Morrell recounts and then living to tell the tale is dubious at best and it seems Poe had his own doubts about the veracity of Morrell's tale. That Poe structures

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<sup>3</sup> See Gitelman, Kennedy *Pym and Tales*, Whalen, and Wijkmark.



his narrative into four shipwreck episodes is further evidence that he is making a direct jab at Morrell.

Morrell's *Four Narratives* served as more than a template and source of information for Poe. Lisa Gitelman argues that Poe uses *Pym* (the novel) to parody exploration literature in general (353) and Pym (the character) to parody Benjamin Morrell specifically (358-9). Poe's familiarity with Morrell's *Four Voyages* is well-known, with Whalen pointing out that Poe's major sources for *Pym*, including *Four Voyages*, Jeremiah Reynolds' *Address to the House of Representatives*, John L. Stephens' *Incidents of Travel*, and several other works were all published by Harper (163). In addition, as pointed out earlier, Harpers was in the business of providing not only direction on what kind of works their authors should write, but material for those authors to plagiarize. Harpers' intentions as far as encouraging plagiarism or providing material for inspiration is unclear, though one may safely speculate that Harpers must have been aware of the possibility of such material being plagiarized. Whether or not Harpers directly provided Poe with *Four Voyages*, sections of Poe's novel bear such a strong resemblance to Morrell's that he must have had a copy of it or been intimately aware of it in some capacity, even going so far as to cite passages from *Four Voyages* in the text of *Pym* (Poe 123).

Poe, with his very strong (and public) opinion of what constitutes a worthy narrative, would probably not have been overly pleased with *Four Voyages*<sup>4</sup>. The book's layout foils any chance at suspense: Morrell summarizes each chapter in the index with blurbs such as, "A desperate Battle—Victory doubtful—The Savages defeated." Poe's

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<sup>4</sup> See Poe, Edgar Allan. "Philosophy of Composition."

own writing shows how much he valued suspense and misdirection, so Morrell's layout must have been quite the aesthetic affront to him. Continuing in the same vein, the "just the facts" structure of *Four Voyages* ends up creating more of a catalog or diary than a narrative, providing yet another facet for Poe to criticize. The length of Morrell's book would have also been a problem for Poe, as Poe is on record supporting the short form over the long (Poe, "Philosophy"). Furthermore, knowing that this author and his ilk were successful where he was nearly on the street would have provided just the right sort of motivation to parody and satirize the genre.

A closer examination of Morrell's *Four Voyages* will help in understanding just how Poe was satirizing the genre through Morrell's book. It will be helpful to keep in mind that Morrell's four voyages follow a general pattern: departure, discovery of new lands, natural disaster, and returning home. The lone exception is the third voyage, which has neither natural disaster nor violent encounter with natives. Poe follows this pattern, more or less, throughout *Pym* and uses it to further his satire. The four voyages end up being more like probes into the wilderness than a single, long expedition, as Morrell ends each voyage by returning to harbor in New York, NY. Each voyage goes farther out than the last, with the final voyage going all the way to Australia. Poe picks out parts of various voyages in Morrell and inserts them into his own novel as need arises. Due to this, the order of the four adventures in *Pym* does not completely coincide with the order of Morrell's four voyages, but Poe does stick to Morrell's order at least in general.

The first voyage in *Pym* has the eponymous hero and his staunch companion, Augustus, making a drunken excursion to sea in the middle of a storm. Poe structures the

four episodes in *Pym* more as shipwrecks than voyages: where Morrell returns home at the conclusion of each voyage, Pym is involved in shipwreck after shipwreck and only furthers his adventure rather than returning home to start a new one. The only exception to this is the first shipwreck in *Pym* where the two boys survive and are returned home by a friendly vessel. Of course, this only spurs them on to seek more adventure in the second voyage, so it does loosely follow the pattern I have laid out, as the first shipwreck furthers the adventure despite them returning home. This first adventure and subsequent shipwreck most closely resembles Morrell's first voyage. In the first of Morrell's four voyages, he encounters a natural disaster very similar to the storm that Pym and Augustus encounter, but in two parts. The first part is when Morrell's ship strikes a rock and needs repairs. This occurs when Morrell is navigating into a lagoon in order to find harbor during an oncoming storm. He is actively watching for rocks, having noticed them on approach (102). Despite his knowledge that there were rocks in the area and his active vigilance, the ship strikes one "in the middle of the passage" and requires repairs. Though this occurs before the storm hits and Pym's first shipwreck occurs during a storm, there are some similarities in the two scenes. In Morrell's case, he strikes a rock he was looking out for, where Pym ends up at sea with a friend whom he was drinking with and, not surprisingly, is completely drunk. Morrell's scene has the appearance of safety due to his vigilance, but his vigilance fails him. Similarly, Pym's vigilance fails after thinking he has studied Augustus closely enough to conclude that he is fit for sailing, when in actuality he is not. Though different means – a rock and a storm – the outcomes are the same: both men fail in their ability to discern an obvious danger and pay for it. To further increase the similarity between Pym's first voyage and Morrell's, the

crew of Morrell's ship later get drunk at a port and end up sticking Morrell with a very large bill (116). It turns out that the crew was tricked by the proprietor of a "grog-shop" into thinking that Morrell had given the man a signed note declaring that the men should drink as they pleased (116); Morrell, like Pym, is endangered by drunken comrades.

The two voyages even end in a similar fashion. Though Morrell makes it back to harbor with his ship intact, while Pym's is destroyed, Morrell yet faces his own dire situation. Upon return, Morrell discovers that his wife and children are dead due to an unspecified cause. He describes his loss as most grievous: "I was alone in the world! Like a tree on the desert, stripped of its branches!" He goes on to say he blacked out and his family found him in the state of "a lifeless corpse" from which it takes him nearly twelve hours to recover. During this time, he is catatonic, hallucinates, and, after finally recovering, describes his eyes as "dry and hot" and his throat parched (137-8). This scene acts as a sort of emotional shipwreck and stranding. Morrell continuously evokes his manliness throughout the book, even saying of this news that "for the first time, I could have wept—but the idea of its being unmanly prevented me" (138). Since he refuses to properly grieve, he suffers the aforementioned scene of various states of distress before recovering. The news destroys his manly defenses, but his own professed "unnatural struggle against overpowering feelings" isolates him from the world around him, including the family who only wishes to help. This emotional shipwreck and stranding are reflected by Poe when Pym and Augustus are literally shipwrecked and stranded, only to be saved by a third party. Poe satirizes Morrell's emotional scene, however, when he describes the "rough-looking personages" of the Penguin's crew being moved to tears when Pym is revived (8). This contrasts with Morrell's explanation that

“the hardy sons of New England” learn early on that crying is a sign of weakness, particularly for “those who are destined to buffet the billows of Neptune” (138). It even takes Pym three-and-a-half hours to be revived after his rescue (12), which echoes Morrell’s slow revivification. Though he pokes at Morrell’s exaggerated manliness, the internal struggle recounted by Morrell may have been one of the few scenes that Poe would have found interesting, using internal struggle and madness as prevalent themes throughout his own writing.

Morrell’s second voyage and Pym’s second adventure also match up quite well. The natural disaster of the second voyage is a volcano eruption (192-3) that creates a similar scenario for Morrell to what Pym goes through in the hold of the *Grampus*. Morrell describes how the volcano’s eruption turns them into prisoners on the water: “Our situation was every hour becoming more critical and alarming. Not a breath of air was stirring to fill a sail, had we attempted to escape; so that we were compelled to remain idle and unwilling spectators” (193). Pym is similarly compelled to remain an idle and unwilling spectator when he stows away in the hold of the *Grampus*. Pym, in the midst of a slow and torturous death by starvation and thirst, is reduced to spectating and reporting as Augustus becomes the protagonist for a short time. The woes of Pym’s predicament are quite similar to Morrell’s. Pym says “For another twenty-four hours it was barely possible that I might exist without water” and “it had been with the greatest difficulty that I could breathe at all” (31). Morrell similarly describes how “our respiration now became difficult” (194) as the air became super-heated. Morrell also states that there “evinced no indications of even a temporary suspension” (193-4) of their plight. This is echoed by Pym, not in words, but rather in his delirious state of semi-

consciousness bordering on lunacy that gives the effect of drawing out his imprisonment by preventing him from keeping track of time. This is enhanced by his prison itself, which is blanketed in utter darkness, conjuring images of solitary confinement in prisons or being buried alive.

It is this state that forces a reversal of roles between Pym and Augustus. Pym is the narrator of the novel and spends almost its entirety narrating events in which he was an active participant. In the hold, however, he is retelling a story second-hand due to his inability to act. Now, the story is about Augustus and Pym is nearly inconsequential. When the mutiny begins, Pym describes it as a “scene of the most horrible butchery” (37). The word “scene” implies that Pym is watching something unfold and can do nothing to influence the events, but in actuality he is not even watching. Pym apparently sleeps through the mutiny in its entirety (36). Augustus then becomes the focus of the remainder of chapter four as well as chapters five and six. For instance, Pym narrates Augustus’ escape from his handcuffs and how he finds Pym near death in the hold. Then, to further emphasize the reversal of roles, Pym says “The leading particulars of this narration were all that Augustus communicated to me while we remained near the box” (49). Poe could have chosen several other words than “narration,” but narrating is precisely what Pym is doing. This also suggests that Pym may not even be getting the narration entirely correct as he reveals that it is, for the most part, second-hand (from the mouth of the true agent, Augustus) and incomplete: “It was not until afterward that he entered fully into all the details” (49). It is not until chapter seven that Pym once again exercises his own agency and concocts the plan to use the mutineers’ superstitions against them (61).

If not completely undermined as any sort of reliable narrator, Pym's credibility certainly does not improve when he reveals that he is recounting events he slept through. Later, he says that the events of his narrative are so "entirely out of the range of human experience" that he proceeds in "utter hopelessness of obtaining credence" for his tale (39). When considering this statement in light of Pym as an unreliable narrator, Poe seems to be winking at the audience since, on its face, the statement is true: it really is entirely out of the range of human experience to recount events one never witnessed. Pym's complaint that he may not be given the credence he thinks he deserves is also tongue-in-cheek on Poe's part depending on exactly what kind of credence Pym thinks he deserves. On one hand, the complaint could be taken at face value: that these events, despite Pym's unconsciousness and their fantastic qualities, are true and that Pym is recounting them faithfully. On the other hand, this complaint could be meant ironically by Poe since the reader, if the reader possesses any kind of sense himself, should not give Pym's tale any credence whatsoever since it is so fantastic as to be impossible. The latter explanation is more likely given the satiric and parodic nature of the novel. The assumption of travel literature is that the reader will believe whole-heartedly in the authority and authenticity of the writer and the content of his travelogue. Otherwise, the genre does not work: if the reader does not believe in the authenticity of the travelogue, then it fails as a work of facts and truth. Poe undermines the authority of travelogue writers with this scene from *Pym* by lampooning them with a caricature: Pym is so inept as to be laughable and his tale so untrustworthy as to be dismissed.

After the mutineers are defeated, a storm destroys the ship itself. The storm correlates to the volcano in *Four Voyages* as the natural disaster of note. Again, there is

an interesting similarity in that the volcano creates a hopeless state at sea for Morrell and the storm sets Pym and his comrades adrift and powerless as well. Pym's time spent stranded in the ocean has a mirror in Morrell's first voyage, rather than the second. In the first voyage, Morrell comes across an island on which five men are stranded (118). He describes how the men were left there by their captain to perform some duties. The captain never returned and the men's stores of supplies eventually ran out, forcing them to subsist on the very little water they had and the raw meat of fish and seals (119) until Morrell eventually rescued them. In *Pym*, the narrator and his comrades are set adrift on the ocean and, after running out of food, cannibalize one of their own. The irony in this scene is that shortly thereafter the remaining men find stores in a previously unchecked area of the shipwreck they are on. The relevance to Morrell's anecdote about the stranded men is again in parody. Poe sets his small crew adrift in apparent hopelessness and, just before finding salvation in the form of some stores below deck, has them cross a line that not many would dare. In their extreme hopelessness they make extreme decisions. Though Morrell does not recount any cannibalism between the men he saves, he does expound upon the apparent hopelessness of their situation. Despair such as this is weaved throughout Morrell's book as each unfortunate situation is made out to be the certain end of all things. Poe, by having the crew commit such a ghastly act, is satirizing Morrell's own cries of woe: just as Morrell continuously despairs and perseveres, Pym despairs and spirals downward even further, before persevering through dumb luck (emphasis on dumb).

Pym's third adventure stands out as quite different from the others and begins with his salvation aboard the *Jane Guy*. With salvation comes boredom, apparently, as



no real danger appears during this part of the novel, which is in stark contrast with the rest of the novel. The same goes for Morrell's third voyage, which has neither natural disaster nor battle with men. Putting a lull such as this in the middle of his novel seems like a dubious decision at best for Poe and, assuming at least the chronology of the events if not the content, simple happenstance for Morrell. Poe, however, had the opportunity, and the wherewithal, to do differently and chose not to. One reason for this can be found in a passage during Morrell's third voyage in which he discusses some charts that "are marked with reefs that do not actually exist" (275). Allowing for advancements in technology and the like, it may have been common or at least understandable for sea charts of the 1800s to be incorrectly marked, but the idea of Morrell relying on charts mapped with reefs that do not exist has a sort of irony to it that would not have gotten past Poe. A chart or map with portions that are determined to be erroneous begs the question: "What else may be erroneous?" This can be extrapolated to Morrell's book as a whole, which, as a travelogue, is a map of sorts in itself. This short passage on incorrect charts acts as a microcosm of not only Morrell's book, but travelogues in general. As discussed earlier in the Stephens example, at least some parts of some travelogues were factually incorrect or even completely invented. Poe uses the third section of *Pym* to poke at this aspect of travelogues – their questionable veracity – by creating the densest portion of "factual" material in the novel.

What many modern readers may see as the most difficult sections of *Pym* to get through are the so-called "digressions," which fall into the category of "factual" material, though it is clear that "factual" should be taken very loosely. At best the digressions

have been written off as filler<sup>5</sup> and at worst they are cited as evidence of Poe's complete failure at marrying the adventurous with the scientific in the travelogue<sup>6</sup>. However, I am sympathetic to other interpretations of these digressions, such as those of James M. Hutchisson and Lisa Gitelman. In Hutchisson's piece "Poe, Hoaxing, and the 'Digressions' in *Arthur Gordon Pym*," Hutchisson argues that the digressions "are consonant with the overall satirical or hoaxing character of the novel" and specifically that the first two "hint at, if they are not outright allegories of, the manipulation of verisimilitude and fantasy in a literary work" (25). Gitelman takes a similar view, arguing that the digressions are one aspect of the novel that "signal the success of the novel as a fictional comment" on travel literature as well as "advanc[ing] the novel's mimicry of exploration literature" (353). These interpretations reveal how integral the digressions were to Poe's purpose of satirizing travel literature and, as such, bear further analysis.

One of Hutchisson's main points concerning the hidden meaning in the digressions is that Poe simply knew more than he was letting on. For instance, when writing of the first digression – instruction on how to properly secure cargo – Hutchisson argues, "Poe would also have been familiar with the procedure for stowing [barrels, boxes, crates, etc.] since his adoptive father, John Allan, a merchant, exported Virginia tobacco to foreign ports" (29). He goes on to argue that the scene is actually a metaphor for writing, ending the section by arguing that the scene is a "discussion of the difficulties of authorship" and quoting this passage: "A proper stowage cannot be accomplished in a

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<sup>5</sup> See William C. Spengemann, *The Adventurous Muse: The Poetics of American Fiction, 1789-1900* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), p. 149.

<sup>6</sup> See Joseph V. Ridgely and Iola S. Haverstick, "Chartless Voyage: The Many Narratives of Arthur Gordon Pym," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 8 (1966), 63-80.

careless manner, and many most disastrous accidents, even within the limits of my own experience, have arisen from neglect or ignorance in this particular” (Poe 50).

Hutchisson’s thesis fits nicely with a satirical reading of the novel in that the digressions, while perhaps distracting, are not merely nonsense. Hutchisson’s reading of the first digression is particularly helpful in that it supports the idea that Poe had the act of writing on his mind while composing *Pym*. Moreover, if we do as Hutchisson suggests and read the above passage metaphorically, it becomes a microcosm of the circumstances and events surrounding Poe’s writing of *Pym*; i.e. that one cannot simply lower one’s self to the expectations of others and carelessly compose a narrative and hope that it will be successful. By extending Hutchisson’s argument, it becomes clear that Poe is arguing against Paulding’s advice to “lower” himself to the “generality,” because the kind of literature Poe is known for cannot be written that way.

This digression is important to Poe’s satirical purpose in another way as well. This particular digression comes in the middle of a rather tense scene in which the novel’s eponymous hero was slowly dying in a cargo hold and had just been saved by his best friend who is being kept prisoner by a group of murderous mutineers. An analog to this digression is found in *Four Voyages* in a passage entitled “Apology to the reader” (43-4). This passage occurs in almost the exact middle of Chapter II of the First Voyage. Morrell writes:

“I am well aware, that to the generality of readers this coast-surveying business and sailing directions must appear very dry, dull, and uninteresting . . . This part of our cruise will soon be finished; and admitting the possibility that the descriptions and directions here given

may prove the means . . . of preventing a single nautical disaster, I feel confident that the good-natured reader will readily forgive their deficiency in incident and interest” (43).

In the stowage digression, Poe writes:

“I must here state that the manner in which this most important duty had been performed on board the ‘Grampus’ was a most shameful piece of neglect on the part of Captain Barnard, who was by no means as careful or as experienced a seaman as the hazardous nature of the service on which he was employed would seem necessarily to demand” (49-50).

These passages are eerily similar. Morrell describes how some of the less “interesting” parts of his narration may save lives and Pym explains how improper stowage, something normally not very exciting, could cause serious catastrophe. Something else worth considering is Morrell’s use of the term “generality of readers.” This must have grated quite hard on Poe when he read it, considering how he had been instructed to appeal to the “generality of readers” by his publisher. Here, perhaps, Poe may have been sympathizing with Morrell’s own opinion on how readers receive different aspects of a narrative. However much he may have sympathized with Morrell on this point, he did not feel it necessary to apologize to his readers. On the contrary, Poe made his book as difficult an experience for readers as possible through hoax and the double-meaning contained in his satire and parody of travel literature. Poe makes a parody of Morrell’s apology by omitting one of his own. He purposely halts the action of his narrative for a digression that serves no real purpose. Where Morrell’s digressions are intended to save lives and serve a beneficial purpose, Poe’s digressions either frustrate the aforementioned

“generality” of readers or serve as a subtle clue for discerning readers to the parody and satire at work.

Poe’s other digressions further his satiric purposes. Gitelman cites the digressions on the albatross and penguin rookeries specifically, saying that Poe excerpted these directly from Morrell (354). Poe even goes so far as to cite Morrell a few pages after this digression. The passage Poe quotes concerns Morrell’s experience that the farther south he went, the more mild the temperature became (Poe 123). Poe, of course, turns the South Pole into a tropic climate, presumably extending Morrell as Pym narrates: “the reader may have an opportunity of seeing how far [Morrell’s ideas about climate] were borne out by my own subsequent experience” (124). The albatross and penguin rookery digression is introduced with the promise that Pym will have occasion to speak of these matters later on (113), but he never does. Gitelman argues that “the artificiality of Pym’s rhetoric clearly mimics” Morrell’s when he introduces a subject that Pym brings up later – the sea slug. Morrell states: “it may not be improper to give the reader a clearer idea of an article of commerce which is destined to make a considerable figure in this narrative” (Morrell 400). Gitelman criticizes Morrell’s introduction to the topic, writing “Pym’s introduction to his rookery mimics Morrell’s clumsily self-conscious rhetoric” (355) and argues that this is yet another instance of Poe satirizing Morrell specifically, but also the genre of travel literature generally. She reveals that the sea-slug became a “virtual set-piece in the literature of exploration” and that “certain sites required certain sights” (354), i.e. that if Morrell – or Poe – was going to write about a certain part of the globe (in this case, Malaysia), the expected conventions must be included. Poe includes a digression on sea-slugs not because it furthers the narrative, but because it gives his narrative the

look and feel of the travel literature he is satirizing. Though the digression on sea-slugs appears during Pym's fourth voyage rather than his third, it falls directly in line with the third voyage's theme of information dump. In this case, the satire lies in the mere inclusion of the digression as Poe places it directly in the middle of the action on Tsalal – just as travel literature would often digress by chapters at a time on similar material<sup>7</sup>. It should also be pointed out that, once again, Poe relies on Morrell to supply his scientific information, quoting the account of the sea-slug directly from *Four Voyages*.

The fourth voyage sees a return to the conflict that has characterized both Pym's and Morrell's adventures. Around the middle of the fourth voyage, Morrell lands at what he calls the Massacre Islands: named after the very bloody conflict that occurs there. The similarities between Morrell's interactions with the Massacre Islands natives and Pym's interactions with the natives of Tsalal are striking. Just as Pym does, Morrell at first has a friendly interaction with the natives and then is lured farther into the island and betrayed. Morrell's crew suffers losses, but not nearly to the extent of Pym's crew. This is where the two scenes begin to differ. Morrell, though he loses a few crew members, is able to escape with the majority of his crew intact and even returns to the Massacre Islands for revenge. Pym, on the other hand, loses his entire crew except for two other men. The similarities are greater than this, however. Morrell writes that, after the betrayal, he is able to send a boat to shore to save as many of his men as possible. After the boat lands and gets the survivors on board, the natives chase them back to Morrell's ship, the Antarctic. Morrell is able to repel the natives with canon-and gunfire and save his fleeing comrades. Pym's crew, however, is utterly destroyed in the landslide trap

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<sup>7</sup> See Gitelman, p. 354.

concocted by the natives except for six men left on the *Jane Guy*. Poe makes a point to write how these six men could not man the guns on the ship well enough to repel the natives and save themselves: “The six men left in the vessel . . . were altogether unequal to the proper management of the guns, or in any manner to sustain a contest at such odds . . . the discharge was an entire failure” (153). The men are eventually overwhelmed and the ship is burned. This episode completes Poe’s parodic reimagining of Morrell’s four voyages: where Morrell suffers and suffers but always returns home, Pym’s suffering leads not to salvation, but only more suffering.

Poe is satirizing Morrell’s own sufferings as narrated in his first, second, and fourth voyages. Aside from the already discussed sufferings found in the natural disasters and conflicts with natives, Morrell loses family members in both the first and fourth voyages and even before the voyages begin. In the introduction, Morrell explains that upon returning home from a three-month voyage in 1815, he discovered that “four of our family had perished in the most dreadful manner—namely, my mother, my grandmother, my sister, and my cousin . . . in the great gale of September 23, 1815” (xviii). So, seven years before the voyages even begin, he is returning home from being at sea and finding dead family members. Then, as mentioned earlier, Morrell loses his wife and children in the first voyage. Later, he returns home at the end of the fourth voyage to find that nearly his entire extended family has died: “her father, her aunt, and her aunt’s child were all dead! As were likewise a female cousin of my own, and her husband!” This heart-wrenching revelation occurs just one sentence from the end of the book: “Thus ends the narrative of my ‘Four Voyages’ (492). To be clear, I am not suggesting that Poe intended to make light of or satirize Morrell’s losses, but rather the

idea that a man could lose so much and then tell it so plainly. Though the ending of Poe's novel will receive more attention later, it is useful here to consider some of the criticism written by Lisa Gitelman on the matter of Poe's satirizing of Morrell's familial losses. She writes, "Poe's conclusion to *Pym*, in one sense, merely extends the excesses of *Four Voyages*. Rather than ending with the loss of Pym's family, Poe's novel ends with the loss of Pym himself." She goes on to argue that Morrell's "periodic decimation of his family" could also be interpreted as his "clumsy response to the inherently anticlimactic nature of all exploration accounts" and that Poe was parodying Morrell specifically, but also this "convention of exploration accounts in general" (492). Gitelman is arguing that Morrell's accounts may not have been completely truthful, but rather his own inept attempt at adding some drama to his book. *Four Voyages* ends with a catalog of Morrell's relatives dying. In some ways, his writing culminates in the death of his loved ones, as though he has killed them by writing the book. Poe satirizes this by taking it one step further in sending the narrator himself into oblivion. One gets the sense that Poe is suggesting Morrell left one too many people alive at the end of his book.



## CHAPTER IV

### BLACK AND WHITE AND READ ALL OVER

The other aspect of the novel that looms over any critical discussion of its underlying meaning is that of the Tsalalians and the “white ending,” so to speak. These two parts of the novel are often linked in critical discussion and analyzed in terms of race. This makes sense as the Tsalalians are depicted as “jet black, with thick and long woolly hair” and “the most barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty wretches that ever contaminated the face of the globe” (Poe 131 and 145). Juxtaposed to this, the novel ends in complete whiteness, with the travelers confronted by a white, human figure. Between the race of completely black and utterly evil people as the apparent villains of the novel and the whitewash ending, it becomes clear why *Pym* has received a great deal of criticism pertaining to race and especially race relations between blacks and whites.

On the topic of race and Poe, critics tend to fall into two categories: those who see Poe as pro-slavery and those who see a more nuanced stance on race in Poe’s works. The former can be traced back to Sidney Kaplan, who called *Pym* an “allegory of race” in the introduction to his 1960 edition of *Pym* (qtd. in Rudoff). Along the lines of this thinking, Poe is seen as a racist and a man who was upholding the ideals of the Antebellum South

in his writing<sup>8</sup>. However, critics such as David Faflik and Shaindy Rudoff see more than a simple yes or no answer to questions of race in Poe's work and specifically in *Pym*. Faflik argues that *Pym* is really a work about the search for an "American Literature" in the context of the differences seen in Northern and Southern writers of the nineteenth century, with Poe firmly straddling the Mason-Dixon Line, as it were. In his argument, Faflik sees *Pym* as less about endorsing one side of the slavery debate over the other, and more about "reproduc[ing] the conversation surrounding" the debate (272). Similarly, Rudoff argues that *Pym* is an "examination of, rather than a defense of, proslavery justification" and that it is a "critique of the form of rhetorical justification, perhaps even a refusal of its aims" (63). Rudoff argues that the hieroglyphs that Pym finds in Tsalal are an allegory for the arguments and debates surrounding race rather than an endorsement of one side or the other.

These sorts of more nuanced looks at Poe's work, and specifically *Pym*, have become more prevalent among modern scholars because they allow for the nuance in Poe's own work. Just as the hoax is not as simple as it seems at first blush, so too the Tsalal section contains more than it first seems. With his use of metaphor and allegory as well as the tropes of madness and mystery, Poe often leaves room for multiple interpretations of his work. Similarly, reading *Pym* as a satire provides a different meaning behind the Tsalal episode and the white ending than the usual arguments about race. In such a reading, the utter blackness and evil of the Tsalalians comes off as a caricature rather than metaphorical social commentary. In depicting the Tsalalians as he does, Poe is not sympathizing with racist white Southerners, but rather intensifying and

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<sup>8</sup> See Levin, Rowe, and Silverman.

personifying the idea of the “other” and the unknown. Tsalal has less to do with race than with satirizing the genre of the travelogue. As Whalen points out, Poe had access to the depictions travelogue writers gave of their own encounters with dark skinned natives. In both Jeremiah Reynolds’ *Voyage of the United States Frigate Potomac* and Benjamin Morrell’s *A Narrative of Four Voyages* there is bloody conflict between dark skinned natives and white travelers (Whalen 178). What Poe is doing with the Tsalalians is creating an almost cartoonish black race that not only hates whites, but the color white itself and actually recoils from it. Due to the extreme, cartoonish depiction of these natives, the episode becomes a satire of the conflict between blacks and whites, for even Pym and his white crew are cartoonish in a way. As Whalen argues, the white crew smiles at the Tsalalians and holds a knife against their backs at the same time, “In the Tsalal episode, Poe illustrates the inherent dishonesty of commercial expeditions such as that of the *Jane Guy* . . . primarily by emphasizing the disparity between the words and intentions of the white crew” (190). The white crew becomes cartoonish because Poe depicts them as a different sort of evil than the Tsalalians: the evil business men who promise fair trade, but intend to dupe the natives out of everything valuable to them.

Poe’s own satire becomes clearer if we turn this lens on Morrell’s *Four Voyages*. Morrell encounters several different native cultures throughout *Four Voyages* – far more than the single indigenous group that Pym encounters. At first glance, Morrell seems to have a rather progressive attitude concerning the natives and especially slavery. He first encounters native people in “Rio Janeiro.” He explains that all of the manual labor is performed “exclusively by slaves – wretched sufferers in this Eden of the south” (36). He goes on to lament about the evils of slavery, but curtails his seemingly abolitionist

attitude when he writes “Nothing but an arbitrary government can restrain them from cutting each other’s throats. Several generations must pass over the stage before the great mass of Brazilians will be capable of appreciating and enjoying liberal institutions” (37). Later, during his Third Voyage, he encounters a large slave trade and spends several pages lamenting yet again about the horrors of slavery, even going so far as to ask (rhetorically): “How is this horrible traffic to be finally and totally abolished? This is a question of vital importance to the cause of humanity” (327). Given his reaction to slavery, it seems he does at least sympathize with abolitionist aims. However, his racism becomes apparent when only one sentence after the above-quoted passage he writes:

The root, the source, the foundation of the evil is in the ignorance and superstition of the poor negroes themselves. Could they become only partially civilized and sufficiently enlightened to see the beauty of the plainest moral precepts of our religion, they would no longer feel themselves obligated to obey the unjust mandates of a ruthless despot . . . (328).

He is saying that the natives have only themselves to blame for their current predicament because they are too ignorant and superstitious to accept (presumably) Christianity and are therefore immoral or perhaps even amoral.

Throughout the book, he recounts encounters with hostile natives as well, such as in the Massacre Islands. The Massacre Island natives bear the closest resemblance to the Tsalians, but the encounter has a very different outcome, as I discussed earlier. That Poe omits any other interactions with native peoples in *Pym* is worth noting, given that at least one of his sources reports numerous and varied run-ins with indigenous people. The

most glaring difference, and the key to Poe's satire of Morrell's encounters, lies in the fact that when Pym encounters the Tsalalians, it is the natives who triumph. They not only triumph, but are in power throughout the episode. Never once are they depicted in Morrell's binary of poor wretch and bloodthirsty savage. Rather, Poe depicts them as a complete society. They have nuance in their behavior and are capable of a range of emotions between suffering and violence. Even their cartoonish hatred of all things white gives them at least a semblance of culture, which in this case would be the rather common idea of a taboo. Again, it is not my argument that Poe was using the Tsalalians as some kind of refutation of American Southern ideals or that he was making any kind of statement about race at all. Rather, the remarkable point about the Tsalalians – and the real satire – is that, even in Poe's cartoonish depiction, they still evidence more nuance than Morrell's own depictions of purportedly real native peoples. Further, Poe's native people best the whites – something Morrell never depicts or even hints at. In Morrell's narrative, the violent, bloodthirsty natives are always defeated by the superior white man. Similarly, the poor, pitiful slaves cannot be saved by revolt, but rather acceptance of the white man's ideals and religion. The Tsalalians, on the other hand, fight back against these ideals and even persevere.

The ending of the novel, with Pym and crew sailing into unending whiteness, actually has a close relation to the U.S. Exploring Expedition. As discussed earlier in brief, Jeremiah Reynolds' Expedition was something Poe was much invested in, having dedicated two articles to it in support. How the ending of *Pym* is related to the very real Expedition is that Poe did not know what the Expedition would uncover. This explains some of his rather dubious scientific claims, such as the weather on Tsalal, as well as

some of his ambiguity, specifically in the ending. As Johan Wijkmark points out, several other “Antarctic fictions” of the time were “set in utopian regions with temperate climate”; Poe also does so, despite accounts to the contrary by actual Antarctic explorers (104). In keeping with his backing of the U.S. Exploring Expedition, Poe could not necessarily endorse one view over the other before the Expedition could report, as he would risk contradicting the Expedition. Instead, he treads the line between the two extremes by incorporating aspects of both, with Pym, Peters, and Nu-Nu experiencing ills that could be the cause of either climate (Wijkmark 104-5). Henry Levin suggests that Poe “was much too shrewd to go into particulars about the Pole, at a time when real explorers were setting out for it” (qtd. in Wijkmark 105). This lends itself to the idea that Poe may have intended for the Expedition to be the true end to his novel (Ridgely 30). However, Poe’s shrewdness would cause the consternation of readers and scholars for years to come as his refusal to make a choice in turn resulted in the obfuscation of the novel’s meaning as well as his intentions.

The “shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men” with skin the color of “the perfect whiteness of snow” (Poe 175) at the end of the novel is similarly satirical. The giant white figure is the logical conclusion to the Tsalal episode, the final hoax, the final satire. After escaping an island of utter blackness, the travelers find themselves in a land of utter whiteness. Whalen reads this scene as indicative of Poe going against the travelogue where country is paramount, and instead embracing God as the final answer, “The purported divinity of the figure only underscores *Pym*’s fall from nationalism, for it suggests that . . . the sublime sanction for exploration is not country but God” (188). What seems more likely, however, is that in

this white figure's white land, it is not God, but unity or sameness that reigns supreme. What looms over the travelogue or guides its writing is not divinity, but an appalling lack of originality and nuance. At this point in the novel, even the birds all screech in the same tongue, "Many gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from beyond the veil, and their scream was the eternal '*Tekeli-li!*' (Poe 174-5). Though the Tsalalians may have shared the vocalizations of the birds in this white land, they still maintained their nuance and originality, or at least their island did. What Poe is saying is that as the traveler, or author, journeys through life he must maintain his color and his style; otherwise he becomes as blank and boring as the white page on which he writes.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Aside from satire and parody, however, there is another meaning for the ending of the novel that seems rather plausible given the examination I have done. The ending, much like the hieroglyphs that Peters and Pym find in the cave, is confounding and, to an extent, unreadable. This may have been Poe's aim in the first place: to create a novel with all the outward appearance of meaning and coherence, but in actuality being unreadable. Just as the hieroglyphs in the cave *seem* to carry meaning, so the novel seems to be a run-of-the-mill nineteenth century seafaring narrative, but is not.

To illustrate this, it is useful to return to the critical discussion concerning race and examine it a little more closely. Scott Peeples ascribes to the Kaplan school of thought in the matter of Tsalal and its natives. In his 1998 book *Edgar Allan Poe Revisited*, Peeples spends about half of his *Pym* chapter on matters of race. He cites Kaplan's assertion that several of the Tsalalian names can be interpreted in Hebrew as various definitions of black or blackness: the Tsalalian chief, Too-wit, meaning "to be dirty," the town, Klock-Klock, meaning "to be black," etc. (Peeples 70-1). Though Peeples is correct that this creates an extreme caricature of Africans, his conclusion does



not necessarily follow. This extreme “doubling down” by Poe is so absurd that it cannot possibly be taken at face value. The entire novel practically beats the reader over the head with the fact that nothing contained in its pages can be taken at face value. Even Peeples himself concedes at the end of his chapter that all of the information on Tsalal and its inhabitants is related to the reader through “the decidedly unreliable A. Gordon Pym” (Peeples 71). He goes on to say that “this observation does not ‘clear’ Poe from responsibility for creating a racist fantasy” (71) and then does basically that. Peeples cites several critics who have argued that the Tsalal chapters are not evidence of Poe’s racist tendencies, but an indictment on white travelers. This flip-flop by Peeples is not due to his not being able to make up his mind, however, but rather to the idea that he ends his chapter with. He calls *Pym* “a novel that is itself ‘unreadable’ – that is, impossible to interpret without encountering contradictions and gaps of meaning” (72). When Peeples argues that “no single concept can be said to unify *Pym*” (72), he may be both correct and incorrect. The fact may be that the single unifying concept is the lack thereof.

The idea that the novel is meant to be indecipherable is supported not just by the episode on Tsalal, but by the entirety of the novel. Patrick Pritchett argues that there is a theme of apophasis (bringing something up by saying that it will not be mentioned) throughout *Pym* that elicits “a kind of textual syncope” in which “the reader feels himself swooning along with Pym” (45-6). Syncope has a second definition beyond swooning though, which is: “the loss of one or more sounds or letters in the interior of a word” (merriam-webster.com). This definition is also applicable to Pritchett’s argument, especially when he brings up the seemingly blank note that Augustus gives Pym (49) and the so-called “death ship” that Pym encounters after the mutiny (50). The blank note,

Pym cannot read until he realizes he had not flipped it over. The death ship is an unmanned vessel that appears to the delirious Pym and his comrades to be coming to their rescue. However, the ship's crew is dead and obviously unable to help them. Pritchett writes "The death ship represents not merely the cruel caprice of fate, but a total failure of the ability to read and recognize the semiotic system Pym is enclosed in. He is ejected from the legible into the nightmare of signification without meaning" (50). Pritchett's arguments about both episodes bring into clearer focus the unreadability of the text as a whole. The protagonist is unable to correctly interpret the events surrounding him, just as the reader is incapable of understanding the text itself.

Similarly, Dennis Pahl argues that *Pym* is a novel about authorship. He brings up the preface where Pym tells the reader that an editor named "Poe" will be helping him. Pahl argues that the inability to tell the difference between when Poe is writing and when Pym is writing – the idea of authorship itself – undermines any quest for truth in the novel (52-3). In this way, *Pym* is a novel about the inability to obtain truth, which only plays into the idea that *Pym* may not be a novel that is meant to be understood. This is also in keeping with Poe's own ideas about "the single effect" from his "Philosophy of Composition." In this work, Poe describes what he believes to be the best way to write a story or poem. One of his points is about length: "it appears evident, then, that there is a distinct limit, as regards length, to all works of literary art- the limit of a single sitting" (<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/poe/composition.html>). He goes on to say that some works may transgress this rule and still prosper, but he makes it clear that the short form is preferable. When one looks at *Pym* in this context, combined with the aforementioned unreadability of the novel, it could be the case that Poe wrote *Pym* as further evidence of

the failure of the long form. The case becomes stronger when one considers that it was Poe's publisher that demanded a novel over his short fiction. *Pym* could be the ultimate proof to the hypothesis of "Philosophy."

This is not to say that my analysis of *Pym* as a satire has been undone. To the contrary, the satire and parody in the novel support the unreadability. Once double-meaning is introduced to a work, the reader has to start questioning everything they read in order to find out if a given passage is satire, parody, pastiche, irony or none of these. This is the perfect set-up for his unreadable text; once the reader accepts that *Pym* is part hoax, part satire, and part parody, confounding the meaning even further becomes much simpler. Perhaps the hoax in *Pym* was less of a failure and more of a calculated concession on Poe's part. By seeming to let the audience in on the joke – that the novel is a hoax – he actually dupes them further by presenting a novel that, on its face, only seems to be a hoax. In actuality, however, it is a parody of the genre of travel literature and its authors. It may also be a parody of a readable text.

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