

Th. Tsimpouki

**THE NARRATIVE OF ARTHUR GORDON PYM OF NANTUCKET: AN
ANALYSIS OF EDGAR ALLAN POE'S LONGEST WORK OF FICTION
AND ITS RELATION TO HIS OTHER WRITINGS**

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym falls into the category of works of art which upon their first publication pass almost unobserved until by a mere accident they become the center of critical attention. Although the *Narrative* was praised by Beaudelaire (who even undertook the task of translating it), a few scattered remarks were published about it during the first half of the twentieth century.¹ The turning point of the book's literary reputation appears to have been W. H. Auden's 1950 anthology of Poe's work which not only included the *Narrative* but it also praised it as «one of the finest adventure stories ever written.»² Since then, many articles have been published concerning such matters as the novel's theme, composition, genre, structure, and symbolism. As to genre, the *Narrative* was classified as an imaginary journey with many debts to true voyage narratives which were fashionable at the time.³ It was also seen as a picaresque novel because of its episodic nature⁴ and as a bildungsroman because Pym's adventures were those of an adolescent whose voyage initiates him into life.⁵ It was also viewed as a Menippean satire because of its satiric plot and the alazonic nature of the narrator. According to this reading, Pym was regarded as «a hallow man stuffed to arrogance with all the available conventional attitudes and clichéd responses» whereas the events of the journey he undertakes call into question the values of civilization.⁶ Furthermore, the *Narrative* was seen as a precursor of the existentialist-absurdist novel with Pym standing as «a prototype of twentieth-century existentialist non-hero» like Camus's

1. Portions of the *Narrative* were published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in Jan. and Feb. 1837 but the complete book version was not issued until July 27, 1838.

2. See W. H. Auden, *Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Prose and Poetry*, p. vii.

3. For suggested sources from which Poe drew inspiration see Randel Helms in «Another Source for Poe's Arthur Gordon Pym,» in *American Literature* 41 (1970): 572-5.

4. For other sources as well as for the stages of composition of the *Narrative*, see J. V. Ridgely and Iola S. Haverstick «Chartless Voyage: The Many Narratives of Arthur Gordon Pym,» *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 7 (1966): 63-80.

5. Roger Focaz, «A Voyage to the frontiers of the Unknown: Edgar Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*,» trans. by Gerald Bello, *American Transcendental Quarterly* 37 (1978): 45-57.

6. In her article Evelyn Hinz argues that Poe «presents a teller whose attitudes are fundamentally opposed to the import of the tale.» See «Tekeli-li: *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* as Satire,» *Genre* 3 (1970): 379-99.

Meursault or Beckett's Godot.⁷ The work has not escaped analysis from a psychoanalytic point of view which regards it as a «passionate and frenzied search for the Mother,» and interprets «the various mutinies as symbolic revolts against the Father.»⁸ Applying the structuralist approach, the *Narrative* has been read as a journey through the illusory solipsistic world of print to the end of page.»⁹

From this enumeration of but a few possible readings of the *Narrative* we realize that Poe's only completed work of long fiction is more than a mere «anomaly» as scholars of the past had treated it. The different interpretations also indicate that *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is more than a «very silly book,» as Poe himself commented on the novel.¹⁰

It is true that the *Narrative* is not characterized by careful construction. The reason may be Poe's theoretical objection to long fiction writing. In a passage from *Marginalia* (no. 214) Poe writes:

The novel certainly requires what is denominated a sustained effort — but this is a matter of mere perseverance... [Unity of effect] is indispensable in the brief article, and not so in the common novel. The latter, if admired at all, is admired for its detached passages, without reference to the work as a whole — or without reference to any general design — which, if it exists in some measure, will be found to have occupied but little of the writer's attention, and cannot, from the length of the narrative, be taken in at one view, by the reader.¹¹

Furthermore, Poe's own preoccupation with the unity of effect made him emphasize the importance of a well organized plot on the principles of cause and effect. As Sergio Perosa remarks, Poe

... distinguished the plot from the sensational or merely mechanical intrigue («a mere succession of incidents»): the plot for him was the soul of the action, that in which «no one of its component parts shall be susceptible of removal without the detriment of the whole.»¹²

7. William Peden, «Prologue to a Dark Journey: The 'Opening' of Poe's *Pym*,» in Richard P. Vaeler, ed. *Papers on Poe* (Springfield Ohio: Chantry Music Press, 1972): 84-91.

8. Marie Bonaparte, *Edgar Poe*, Paris 1933 2 vols. The book was translated by John Rodker under the title *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (London: Imago, 1949) 290-352.

9. This reading has been suggested by Jean Ricardu in «Le Caractère singulier de cette eau,» *Critique* (Aout-Sept., 1967): 718-33. The article has been discussed by Patrick Quinn in *The French Face of Edgar Allan Poe* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1957).

10. John Ostrom, ed. *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe* vol. 1 (New York: Cordian Press, 1966): 130.

11. The quoted passage is taken from Sergio Perosa's book *American Theories of the Novel 1793-1903*, (New York: New York University Press, 1983) 74.

12. *Ibid.*, *American Theories* 75.

Although these two passages seem to undercut the stature of the *Narrative*, they also provide us with a challenge: a careful study of Poe's longest work of fiction will show that even in this seemingly fragmented narrative one can find recurrent themes and motifs underlying it. The aim of this analysis will, therefore, be to argue that the *Narrative* is not a mere aggregation of scattered episodes but rather a structured work which, despite its loose plot, has unity of imagery, as well as of themes and motifs.

Reality fusing with imagination is the first apparent thematic nexus used in the *Narrative*. The interchange of real and fictitious events starts in the Preface. First person narration with the hero relating his own adventures is a technique typical of Poe's tales. This procedure gives the narrative an air of authenticity that otherwise it would lack. In the Preface, however, the writer is introduced by the hero who, having «acknowledged» a lack of writing ability, allows the editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Mr Poe, «to draw up, in his own words, a narrative.»¹³ Subsequently, the narrator explains the two episodes were published in the magazine «under the garb of fiction.» After this, the narrator realizes that this «ruse» did not persuade the public which was «not at all disposed to receive it as a fable» (248). Finally, he undertakes to write a curious «exposé.» The Preface then creates the atmosphere of the book by reversing the normal order of things, where fiction and reality are separated and not to be confused: it starts as a true narrative, it becomes fiction and then, for a second time, it simulates reality. Moreover, the protagonist becomes a real person who introduces the writer who, in his turn, serves as a chronicler of the voyage of the first.

As the narrative proceeds, Pym, the protagonist takes pains to persuade the reader of the veracity of the adventures he narrates.¹⁴ He depicts in detail the *Grampus*, its equipment and its cargo. He gives a truthful account of the way the mutiny took place and the mutineers took control of the ship. He digresses from the story and with a scientific air describes the seals, the albatrosses, the penguins, the *bêche de la mer* and the icy whiteness of the South Sea. In this way he succeeds in proliferating confusion concerning the factual and imaginary material. Moreover, by assuming this air of authority

13. See the *Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Edward Davidson (Boston: Riverside Editions, 1956), p. 248. Subsequent references to the *Narrative* which appear in parenthesis indicating the page number are all taken from the above edition.

14. Poe derived a good deal of factual events from a number of sources including a *Voyage to the Pacific* (1784) by Captain James Cook and James King, Benjamin Morell's *Narrative of Four Voyages to the Seas and the Pacific, 1822-31* (1832), J. N. Reynold's *Voyage of the Potomac* (1835) and his *Address, on the Subject of a Surveying and Exploring Expedition to the Pacific Ocean and the South Seas* (1836), R. Thomas's *The Mariners' Chronicle, Remarkable Events and Remarkable Shipwrecks* (1836), Irving's *Astoria* (1836) and Stephen's *Arabia Petraea* (1837).

he prepares the reader to accept more readily the improbabilities surrounding the narrative, a narrative that as himself admits

will be found to introduce incidents of a nature so entirely out of the range of human experience and for this reason so far beyond the limits of human credulity, that I proceed in utter hopelessness of obtaining credence for all that I shall tell, yet confidently trusting in time and progressing science to verify some of the most important and most improbable of my statements (281).

In the chapters that follow, as the Jane Guy enters the Southern Ocean, events become more and more incredible. Pym discovers that rational explanations are not to be found. The reader is led eventually to the same recognition. Finally, the authenticity of the narrative is once more subverted by the author who in the appended notes confesses «his disbelief in the entire truth of the latter portion of the narration» (406).

Revolt followed by deception are two dominant devices used in the *Narrative*, both applied for the same purpose.¹⁵ They produce action, alter the order of expected events, motivate new turns of the plot.

In the first chapter, Pym and his friend, Augustus, decide to go for a night-sail, in Pym's boat, the Ariel. But they soon regret their decision as they find themselves «completely under the foam» and «deluged with water.» (252) Pym's last words of despair are «I recommended myself to God.» When they recover they find themselves safe on the Penguin. The two friends are rescued, we learn, only after the captain's authority has been challenged by the first mate. The next morning they manage to be home in time for breakfast, pretending that nothing has ever happened.

Schoolboys, however, can accomplish wonders in the way of deception, and I verily believe that not one of our friends in Nantucket had the slightest suspicion that the terrible story... had reference either to Ariel, my companion, or myself (257).

Pym's sea-impulse mounts despite the nightmarish experience with the Ariel. But it is only after he revolts against paternal authority that objects to his going to the sea that Pym's adventures start. «My father made no direct opposition; but my mother went into hysterics at the bare mention of the design; and, my grandfather, from whom I expected much, vowed to cut me off with a shilling if I should ever broach the subject to him again» (258). Pym's scheme to accomplish his intention is based on deception. «The intense hypocrisy I made use of for the furtherance of my project — an

15. Quinn, *The French Face* 177.

hypocrisy pervading every word and action of my life for so long a period of time — could only be tolerable to myself by the wild and burning expectation with which I looked forward to the fulfillment of my long-cherished vision of travel» (258). However, before he can slip safely on board the whale hunter, the *Grampus*, he has already forged a letter with the help of Augustus. He has carried off impersonation in order to rescue his plan, when his grandfather almost recognizes him in his thick seaman's cloak disguise.

Once on the *Grampus*, Pym is concealed for almost three weeks as a stowaway in the hold of the ship and is nearly dead when Augustus comes to his rescue. He is brought back to life only to learn that he has to prolong his confinement because a mutiny took place. The mutiny is followed by a conflict among the mutineers who are divided into two groups. Pym and Augustus side with Dick Peters and the three of them devise a scheme of overthrowing the rival group. Once more the stratagem is based upon deception: Pym impersonates the corpse and, amidst general confusion which follows his apparition, the three men manage to get hold of the mutineers and remain sole masters of the ship. But the *Grampus* is no longer a ship, she is a wreck. And from this moment onward, the survivors have to struggle against famine, exhaustion and terror.

Eventually, Pym is safely transferred on board the *Jane Guy* and launches toward new adventures at the South Pole. The captain and the crew are set to explore the interior of the Tsalal island and to establish contact with the natives. After their first successful encounters, a number of crewmen, of which Pym is one, land in the island and accompany the apparently friendly islanders to their villages. From this dangerous expedition only Pym and one of his companions, Peters, come out alive, thanks to Pym's curiosity for the surrounding flora. The rest of the seamen become victims of the savages' treacherous stratagem. Once again, deception becomes a means of annihilation from which the narrator barely escapes.

Deception, we can conclude, is a dominant motif in the Poesque literary world. More than that, however, it becomes fundamental to Poe's philosophical framework as it suggests man's condition of total deception; man inhabits a universe that he cannot interpret or explain; he has to reconcile himself with the unpredictable. Instead of falling back into complete passivity the Poesque hero revolts and launches toward the unknown, searching for a primal reality which lies beneath the surface (whether Pym does this consciously is an issue which will be discussed below). Looking at the *Narrative* from this perspective, it becomes apparent that the voyage Pym undertakes is not a simple exploration travel in the fashion of those days but a quest for the discovery of the unknown. In the end, the journey itself turns into a chaotic experience upon which only the unity of the color white seems to prevail.



This leads us to the fundamental antithesis of black and white throughout the narrative. During his confinement, for example, Pym is condemned to live in absolute darkness. Yet, there are instances where the color white becomes significant as in the «brilliancy of the phosphorus» (273), the «chalky whiteness» of the corpse (302), «the paler than marble» faces of Pym's companions or the dead bear that Pym discovers, whose body is «covered with a straight silky hair, perfectly white» (365).

The contrast between whiteness and blackness becomes even more apparent in the latter phase of the narrative, and more especially after the Jane Guy reaches the island of Tsalal. The natives are black with a «jet black,» and «thick and long wooly hair» while they are clothed «in skins of an unknown black animal, shaggy and silky» (366). As to their reaction when they first encounter the white people it is depicted as follows: «It was evident that they have never before seen any of the white race — from whose complexion, indeed, they appeared to recoil» (367).

As the narrative proceeds the two colors are constantly juxtaposed. The animals of the island are covered with black wool; even the albatrosses are black (371). Moreover, as Pym discovers later, the teeth of the indigents are black (404). On the other hand, there is Nu-nu's inexplicable fear of the white color. He reacts to the sight of the white linen and «becomes violently affected with convulsions» when he sees a white handkerchief (403). He hides his face in the bottom of the boat so as not to see the «fine white powder, resembling ashes» that fell over the canoe (404). Pym and his companions are «nearly overwhelmed by a white ashy shower» which «settled upon them and the canoe.» Meanwhile, «many gigantic and pallidly white birds» fly above them. Finally, in the last pages of the narrative a shrouded human figure appears, whose hue of the skin «was of the perfect whiteness of the snow» (405).

From the above quotations it becomes apparent that Poe aimed at some kind of symbolic interpretation of the constant juxtaposition between black and white. According to Charles O' Donnell, white is the «omnicolour» representing unity, while black is the non-color, the antithesis of white, and represents deception of man's existence.¹⁶ Black can also be seen as standing for evil (the natives are associated with black and prove to be treacherous) while white is to be considered sacred in the end of the novel, given the awe and terror it creates. However, it is not easy to decipher the symbolic meaning of the two colors. Rather, Poe exploits the mystery and ambiguity of each one and especially the ambivalence of white, as Melville does in *Moby Dick*.

16. Charles O' Donnell, «From Earth to Ether: Poe's Flight in to Space,» *PMLA* 77 (1962): 87.

We have also to take into consideration Poe's own remarks about allegory (here allegory and symbol are used interchangeably). In his review of Hawthorne's *The Twice-Told Tales*, Poe writes:

One thing is clear, that if allegory ever establishes a fact, it is by dint of overturning a fiction. Where the suggested meaning runs through the obvious one in a very profound under-current so as never to interfere with the upper one without our own volition, so as never to show itself unless called to the surface, there only, for the proper uses of fictitious narrative, is it available at all.¹⁷

The difficulty, then, that we have in interpreting the exact meaning of black and white in the *Narrative* can be explained by the above theoretical notions. Poe was evidently opposed to allegorical meanings that would be self-revealing and self-explanatory. Besides, allegory applied according to this theoretical principle renders the narrative open to multiple readings and a plurality of signification.

Contrary to the indeterminacy of meaning created by this use of allegory the imagery of enclosure produces the effect of encompassment, limitation or confinement. Enclosure is typical in Poe's writing. We have only to remember of *The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*. In the *Narrative*, enclosure, whether physical or on the level of imagery, is a highly functional motif: it helps to focus the action, it assists in plot development and it provides a means to Pym's rescue, since after each confinement he emerges alive. The imagery of enclosure pervades the narrative from beginning to end, as the hero's adventures take place always in closed, box-like places, stowages, forecastles, berths or canoes. Even the idea of the ship surrounded by water without the possibility of access to the open land suggests an imagery of enclosure.

The imagery takes concrete and specific form several times throughout the *Narrative*. Pym finds himself enclosed in a coffin-like box as early as he steps on board the *Grampus*. The two friends decide to conceal Pym in an «iron-bound box,» «nearly four feet high, and a full six long.» The description evidently, suggests a tomb. Indeed, in the stowages of the ship, Pym experiences all emotions of a man buried alive:

My sensations were those of extreme horror and dismay. In vain I attempted to reason on the probable cause of my being thus entombed. I could summon up no connected chain of reflection, and sinking on the floor, gave way, unresistingly, to the most gloomy

17. Davidson, *Selected Writings* 445.

imaginings, in which the dreadful deaths of thirst, famine, suffocation, and premature interment crowded upon me as the prominent disasters to be encountered (268-9).

Submitting himself to this self-imposed confinement, Pym falls into a long, sound sleep. When he wakes up he realizes that he has «slept for an inordinately long period of time,» since his food has turned into «a state of absolute putrefaction» (263) and the water in his jug has been reduced to a half pint. Strangely, however, Pym's dreams seem opposed to his real experience. «Immense serpents held me in their embrace,» Pym relates, «then deserts, limitless, and of the most forlorn and awe-inspiring character, spread themselves out before me. Immensely tall trunks of trees, gray and leafless, rose up in endless succession as far as the eye could reach [...] The scene changed; and I stood, naked and alone, amid the burning sand-plains of Zahara» (265). Limitless deserts and burning plains of Zahara is what Pym dreams of, which provides another evidence that it is the land that stands for freedom and open space and not the sea.

Furthermore, Poe uses the enclosure device to describe the mutiny scene which turns the plot to an unexpected development. Pym is rescued temporarily only to find himself in a new hiding place, another enclosure. «Near the hole cut out through the bulkhead by Augustus there was room enough for an entire cask and this space I found myself comfortably situated for the present» (294).

As we have previously noted, the two friends with the help of Peters devise a scheme in order to subdue the mutineers. Interestingly enough, it is in the stuffy atmosphere of the cabin where the mutineers are gathered, where Pym's impersonation of a dead man occurs, and the subsequent fight takes place. Additionally, it is the flooded fore-castle, another enclosed area, that conceals the means of survival for Pym and his remaining friends.

Tsalal, as it is first seen by the Jane Guy crew, is surrounded by a «reef which appeared to encircle the island» (365). Upon landing on the island they commence communications with the natives. We have seen how Captain Guy and the crew are trapped by the savages and are annihilated by them. By mere coincidence, at the same moment Pym and his companion have entered a fissure in order to examine a species of filbert. Before they decide to return they feel a sudden concussion «resembling nothing I had ever before experienced,» as if the «whole foundations of the solid globe were suddenly rent asunder, and (...) the day of universal dissolution was at hand» (380). Pym's experience is once more that of a confinement

As soon as I could collect my scattered senses, I found myself nearly suffocated, and grovelling in utter darkness among a quantity of loose earth, which was also falling upon me heavily in every direction,

threatening to bury me entirely. Horribly alarmed at this idea I struggled to gain my feet, and at last succeeded. I then remained motionless for some moments, endeavouring to conceive what has happened to me, and where I was (380).

After he has overcome the first emotions of terror, Pym decides along with Peters, the only survivor of the group, to look for a way out of the confinement. At length, they discover «a long seam or crack extending upward» at a forty-five degree angle which permits them to discern a glimmer of light at the top. With great effort they finally manage to reach a natural platform, from which «was perceptible a patch of blue sky, at the extremity of the thickly-wooded ravine» (382). They soon realize that their happy condition will not last if they do not find a new concealment to protect themselves from the unfriendly savages. For this purpose they start the construction of a small hiding place putting «some brushwood over the aperture» (388). Their provisions of food and water do not last for long. So, after having exhausted all possible means of finding food they resolve to make attempts to descend into the chasms around the hill. For several days they wander exhausted at the bottom of the chasm, losing themselves within its labyrinthine cavities. Finally, they manage to extricate themselves and make their way toward the sea-coast. There they enter a canoe along with Nu-nu, their captive, and they all sail southward. In these final pages of the *Narrative* Poe uses once more not only the imagery but also the language of confinement. As unusual phenomena start occurring and an air of mystery surrounds the sailing, Pym experiences the last emotions of enclosure:

The grey vapour had now arisen many more degrees above the horizon, and was gradually losing its grayness of tint. The heat of the water was extreme, even unpleasant to the touch, and its milky hue was more evident than ever [...] A fine white powder, resembling ashes — but certainly not such — fell over the canoe and over a large surface of the water, as the flickering died away among the vapour and the commotion subsided in the sea [...] The whole ashy material fell now continually around us, and in vast quantities (404-5).

Finally, Pym becomes aware that «a gigantic curtain ranged along the southern horizon.» Before the «sullen darkness» covers them, they see «a shrouded human figure» being «of perfect whiteness of the snow.» At this point the narrative ends abruptly and without further explanations.

As in the past each of his confinement ended up being salutary, here, too, we may assume that Pym's luck does not abandon him. The «shrouded human figure» that appears in the end may be one of those «apparent miracles» — to use Pym's own labeling of these remarkable phenomena.

Toward them Pym has acknowledged his inclination. In one of his letters he states that he strove to write tales concerning «the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical.»¹⁸ There are several instances of this in the narrative as for example Pym's dog which he takes to be a ferocious lion or a living corpse and which turns out to be nothing but Pym's own reflection. In the same way, in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* the diabolical «person or persons» who commits the seemingly impossible murder of the two women is proved to be an escaped ourang-outang.

However, the ending of the *Narrative* is so evasive that it allows for many different readings. As a matter of fact, the «shrouded human figure» has been considered as divine, signifying knowledge or the limits of knowledge. It has also been interpreted as a symbol representing goodness, perversity, diabolic appearance, etc. Or, to offer a more rational explanation, the figure has been interpreted to be «a giant wooden penguin, the figurehead of the ship Penguin which came to rescue Pym twice.»¹⁹

Closely related to the enclosure device is Pym's fictional character. It has been argued by some critics that Poe's dramatization of Pym's seeking enclosures metaphorically suggests death to an old self, «one that is neurotic and misanthropic, and rebirth to a new, one in which the thought of death will have been eliminated and where a certain amount of psychic freedom will prevail.»²⁰ In other words, enclosure has a «profound» impact upon Pym's character since it causes personality changes, and Pym appears to emerge from each of his confinements with more self knowledge. Opposed to this interpretation, other critics have maintained, is the one that claims that Pym remains a passive character throughout the *Narrative*; that he is mainly a submissive agent whose life is governed, for the most part, by those men of action, Augustus and Peters.²¹

However, neither of the above views seems to take into account all manifestations of Pym's personality. What actually seems to happen is that in Pym two forces are constantly in conflict: the impulse of perverseness and the impulse of sanity. While perverseness pushes Pym to self-destruction, sanity restores him to reality and makes him act with lucidity and foresight. One is death-oriented, the other is life-oriented. Consequently, Pym's character becomes a stage where the two opposing forces manifest

18. Ostrom, *The Letters*, II 151.

19. The different explanations of the «shrouded human figure» are discussed in Richard Kopley's «The Secret of Arthur Gordon Pym: The Text and the Source,» *Studies in American Fiction*, 8 (Fall 1980): 203-19.

20. See Leonard W. Engle's «Edgar Allan Poe's Use of the Enclosure Device in the *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*,» in *American Transcendental Quarterly* 37 (1978): 34-45.

21. Quinn, *The French Face* 182.

themselves. After all, Pym's name is an anagram of the word Ymp. And Poe himself has given us a detailed account of this tendency or, this obsession or evil from which many of his heroes suffer. *In the Imp of the Perverse*, he states:²²

In theory, no reason can be more unreasonable; but, in fact, there is none more strong. With certain minds, under certain conditions, it becomes absolutely irresistible. I am not more certain that I breathe, than that the assurance of the wrong or error of any action is often the one unconquerable force which impels us, and alone impels us to its prosecution [...] The impulse increases to a wish, the wish to a desire, the desire to an uncontrollable longing, and the longing, [...] is indulged (226-7).

Similarly, Pym experiences many moments of this uncontrollable desire for self-destruction. He is, first, initiated to sea adventures by the fascinating stories Augustus relates to him. During the nocturnal sailing with Ariel, Pym feels «a thrill of great excitement and pleasure.» Immediately afterwards he finds out that his friend, Augustus, is totally intoxicated and this discovery fills him with an «indescribable feeling of dread» which takes him to the extremity of terror.» Far from being paralyzed by despair Pym acts with lucidity and secures Augustus before he faints near his companion. Pym, then, literally saves his friend's life during this nocturnal sailing.

Shortly after this perilous adventure with the Ariel, Pym experiences the impulse of perverseness. Although by no means an enjoyable one, this adventure triggers Pym's «enthusiastic temperament, and somewhat gloomy although glowing imagination» (257). It appears that his preferences veer more toward the calamities than the pleasures of such adventures. As he admits

My visions were of shipwreck and famine; of death or captivity among barbarian hordes; of a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears, upon some gray and desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown. Such visions or desires — for they amounted to desires — are common, I have since been assured, to the whole numerous race of the melancholy among men — at time of which I speak I regarded them only as prophetic glimpses of the destiny which I felt myself in a measure bound to fulfil. (257-8)

Augustus, who first induced him to sea-adventures, now is represented as fusing with Pym, having thoroughly entered into his «state of mind» to the

22. See «The Imp of the Perverse» in *Selected Writings* 225-30.

extent of involving «a partial interchange of character» (258). Then, Pym enters the *Grampus* where he remains concealed and experiences a whole series of intense emotions. A long period of passivity intervenes before he can emerge from his hiding place. This time, however, his and Augustus' roles are reversed as Pym plays the active role. It is he who conceives the impersonation scheme in order to overthrow the mutineers. It is he who suggests to Peters, Augustus and Parker to lash themselves to the fragments of the windless, and thus to withstand the violent storm. Later on, when they start suffering from hunger it is Pym who remembers he has put an axe in the fore-castle before gaining control of the ship. One by one the four survivors dive into the water-filled compartment but their effort proves to be unsuccessful. Pym is the first one who comes up with ham, wine and a large tortoise. As the provisions are gradually exhausted they all enter a state of horror and despair. Pym is the only one who keeps his lucidity and acts rationally, whereas his companions seem «to be brought to a species of second childhood, generally simpering in their expressions, with idiotic smiles, and uttering the most absurd platitudes» (326). Despite his hunger Pym refuses to yield to the idea of cannibalism but participates in it when it appears the only means to remain alive. On the whole, in moments of danger Pym appears very rational and lucid. Several times he takes the initiative to advise his companions and to provide them with the means of survival.

Curiously enough, once secure on board the *Jane Guy* he «began to remember what had passed rather as a frightful dream» than «as events which had taken place in sober and naked reality» (345). As he says characteristically:

I have since found that this species of partial oblivion is usually brought about by sudden transition, whether from joy to sorrow or from sorrow to joy — the degree of forgetfulness being proportioned to the degree of difference in the exchange (345).

This is the only moment in the narrative in which Pym makes a conscious effort to explain his psychological state: oblivion from the traumatic experience does not allow him to «learn» from his past. Consequently, he is not able to prevent the impulse for destruction that grows within him. Once on board the *Jane Guy*, Pym is responsible for the captain's decision to explore the South Sea. «I pressed upon him,» Pym relates, «the expediency of persevering, at least for a few days longer, in the direction we were holding» (364). When the first difficulties arise Pym manages to manipulate Captain Guy's fears and objections. «He [Captain Guy] was exceedingly sensitive to ridicule, ... and I finally succeeded in laughing him out of his apprehensions» (365). Pym remarks that «in some way hardly known to

myself, I had acquired much influence over him.» Pym's insistence on the voyage southwards leads the ship to the island Tsalil. The destructive events that follow their arrival are well-known.

When Pym recovers from the concussions he instantly reacts saving himself and Peters from being buried alive. His behavior indicates signs of resolution and leadership. He decides not to fire shots which would reveal his and his companion's presence to the natives. He also persuades Peters not to warn the rest of the crew who were still alive on the ship of the impending danger from the savages. Once more, Pym's life instinct saves him from the destruction into which his impulse of perverseness has led him. However, the moment he reaches the only way-out from the Tsalil nightmare — the descent from the precipice — he experiences an «imp of the perverse» which could be fatal for his life:

I found my imagination growing terribly excited by thoughts of the vast depths yet to be descended, and the precarious nature of the pegs and soap-stone holes which were my only support. It was in vain I endeavoured to banish these reflections, and to keep my eyes steadily bent upon the flat surface of the cliff before me. The more earnestly I struggled *not to think*, the more intensely vivid became my conceptions, and the more horribly distinct. At length arrived that crisis in which we begin to anticipate the feelings with which we *shall* fall — to picture ourselves the sickness, and dizziness, and the last struggle, and the half swoon, and the final bitterness of the rushing and headlong descent. And now I found these fancies creating their own realities, and all imagined horrors crowding upon me in fact... My whole soul was pervaded with a *longing to fall*; a desire, a yearning, a passion utterly uncontrollable (397).

Pym faints, and on recovery he finds himself in Peters' arms. «I felt a new being,» he says, «and, with some little further aid from my companion, reached the bottom also in safety» (397).

In the final scene Pym, Peters and Nu-nu are sailing in a canoe toward the south. There is no evident reason why they are pursuing this course except, perhaps, Pym's pervasive urge more explorations. They had other options, as well: they could have headed north, for example, or they could have landed on one of the islands they had passed. But Pym remarks that «upon neither of these had we any intention to venture» (402). The unexpected and abrupt ending of the *Narrative* does not make it possible to infer the way Pym has managed to escape from the new destruction his irresistible desire was leading him into. The fact that Pym happens to be the author of the narrative makes it obvious that he has overcome his pervasive impulse.

Looking at Pym's character from this perspective, we may assume that these two forces are equally powerful in him. Pym's psyche becomes a kind of battlefield where the two opposing impulses manifest themselves. In each turn of the narrative one of them prevails but neither ever takes control over the other. Therefore Pym is not a passive agent who lets himself be controlled by the other characters. On the other hand, he does not seem to develop or attain any amount of knowledge and insight after each unpleasant experience.

Closely connected with the above motives in the narrative is the act of deciphering. Taking into consideration the fragmented nature of the narrative, its deliberate evasiveness, its constant fusion of factual and imaginary events and its dream-like quality, deciphering becomes an indispensable element. To a considerable extent the «disjointedness» of the narrative (to use Poe's characterization of it) accounts for its effectiveness; an act of imaginary completion is required by the reader.

However, literally speaking, Pym is called upon twice to decipher fragmented messages. In the first case, he is in the stowage of the *Grampus* when he realizes that a paper is fastened around Tiger's neck. Amidst the total darkness of the stowage and the rising hopes that the paper may convey a note from his friend Pym panics and is at a loss to how to read it. Finally, he illuminates the paper only to find it blank. In his despair, he tears it into «three pieces» and throws them away, before realizing that the message might have been written on the other side of the paper. With mixed emotions of hope and despair he puts Tiger to nose out the three pieces. After passing his fingers carefully over the paper he concludes from its uneven surface that there were «three sentences» written on it. In his excitement, however, he manages to read only «the seven concluding words, which thus appeared — blood — your life depends upon lying close.» The whole message becomes a mystifying pun. Pym is at a loss in his effort to understand its full meaning. As it is, he is filled with «indefinable horror» by the fragmented warning particularly by the word «blood,» «that word of all words.» The impact of the word is tremendous upon him. «How chillily and heavily (disjointed, as it thus was, from any foregoing words to qualify or render it distinct) did its vague syllables fall, amid the deep gloom of my prison, into the innermost recesses of my soul!» (273), Pym says. Later on, he finds out the word «blood» which terrified him thus signified what Augustus used instead of ink — the full message being «I have scrawled this with blood — your life depends upon lying close» (286). Once more, Pym is deceived; he deduces a wrong meaning by projecting his fears to the incomplete message.

In the second case, Pym is called upon to decipher the mysterious hieroglyphics engraved on the surface of the marl. Being mistaken again, he

interprets one of the indentures to be an «intentional, although rude, representation of a human figure standing erect, with outstretched arm.» As for the rest, he takes them to be simply «the work of nature,» pieces of mark «which had evidently been broken by some convulsion from the surface where the indentures were found» (394). With his wrong assumption he also misleads Peters who has noticed «some little resemblance of alphabetic characters,» approaching, thus, more closely the real nature of the indentures. Pym's erroneous interpretations have totally deceived him.

In the appended notes the author returns to the matter and tries to correct the error. He deduces three different hieroglyphics: the Ethiopian, «To be shady — whence all the inflections of shadow or darkness,» the Arabic, «To be white whence all the inflections of brilliancy and whiteness,» and the Egyptian, «the region of the south.» The *Narrative* ends with the biblical tones, «I have graven it within the hills, and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock.»²³

In the appendix the author, Mr Poe, attempts to recapitulate the devices employed throughout the narrative and, mainly the deceptive nature of reality; the almost pervasive insistence of his hero to misinterpret signs; the hidden meaning of the colors black and white; the intermingling of reality and fiction. Although his notes do not illuminate the mysterious meaning of the hieroglyphics, they do provide the reader with a clue as to how he is supposed to read the narrative. Pym and the reader are encouraged to accept this illusionary reality which extends into a realm beyond reason and superficial appearances. As Poe has put it elsewhere:

They who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night. In their gray visions they obtain glimpses of eternity, and thrill, in awakening, to find that they have been upon the verge of the great secret... They penetrate, however rudeless or compassless, into the vast ocean of the «light ineffable» and again, like the adventures of the nubian geographer, «agressi sunt mare tenebrarum, quid in eo esset explorati.»²⁴

Thus, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* can be read in a number of different ways. Some of the readings are complementary, some not. But as one of Poe's critics has characteristically put it, Poe requires his reader «not to choose but to maintain such interpretations in a state of fluid co-existence

23. David Ketterer in «Devious Voyage: The Singular Narrative of A. Gordon Pym,» *American Transcendental Quarterly*, 37 (1978): 21-32.

24. Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Poems and Stories*, ed. Arthur Hobson Quinn and Edward H. O' Neill (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967) 121.

on the basis of deceptive unity.»²⁵ Despite the fact that the *Narrative* does not appear to be as skillful and successful as Poe's other works, it is an authentic and unique attempt to experiment with a longer piece of fiction. Whatever the evaluation of the result might be, one thing remains certain: that *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is not a work as «innocent» as it appears at first reading. It is a narrative complex, imaginative, and open to multiple interpretations.

25. Ketterer, «The Devious Voyage,» 23.

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Θεοδώρα Τσιμπούκη, *Η Αφήγηση του Άρθουρ Γκόρντον Πυμ*.

Η *Αφήγηση του Άρθουρ Γκόρντον Πυμ* αποτελεί την πιο ολοκληρωμένη προσπάθεια του Edgar Allan Poe ν' ασχοληθεί με τη συγγραφή ενός μυθιστορήματος. Η αποσπασματική μορφή του έργου καθώς και το απότομο τέλος του, το καταδίκασαν στη λογοτεχνική αφάνεια από την πρώτη δημοσίευσή του (1838) μέχρι το 1950 όπου ο W. H. Auden συμπεριλαμβάνει την *Αφήγηση* στην ανθολογία του για τον Poe, εξαίροντας συγχρόνως τη μεγάλη πρωτοτυπία του έργου. Από τότε έχουν γραφτεί πολλά κριτικά δοκίμια σε σχέση με τη μορφή και τη δομή του έργου και έχουν δοθεί πολλαπλές ερμηνείες για τη σημασία και τον παράδοξο χαρακτήρα του κεντρικού ήρωα. Στο άρθρο αυτό αναζητούνται οι κοινές θεματικές και δομικές συνιστώσες του έργου έτσι ώστε ν' αποδειχθεί ότι η *Αφήγηση* δεν αποτελείται από μια απλή συνάθροιση ασύνδετων επεισοδίων, αλλά αντίθετα πρόκειται για ένα δομημένο έργο που, παρά τη χαλαρότητα της πλοκής, διακρίνεται για τη συστηματική επανάληψη μοτίβων και τη θεματική ενότητα. Η συγχώνευση της φαντασίας με την πραγματικότητα, η έννοια της απάτης και του περιορισμού, η θεμελιώδης αντίθεση του μαύρου χρώματος με το λευκό, η παράδοξη συνύπαρξη καταστροφικών τάσεων με υγιείς στον ψυχισμό του ήρωα και τέλος οι τρόποι αποκωδικοποίησης μηνυμάτων και συμβόλων από τον ήρωα, τον συγγραφέα, αλλά και τον αναγνώστη, όλα αυτά αποτελούν ενωτικά στοιχεία του μυθιστορήματος. Κυρίως όμως μας πείθουν ότι η *Αφήγηση* είναι ένα πολύπλοκο και φιλόδοξο έργο που επιδέχεται πολλαπλές κριτικές ερμηνείες.