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Pym and Unreadability

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Abstract and Keywords

Many of Poe's stories are allegories of reading or misreading or the impossibility of reading. The first sentence of "The Man of the Crowd" intones "it does not permit itself to be read." Here, Poe is citing a "certain German book," though which one has eluded critics since the story's publication in 1840. Perhaps the most obvious reason it cannot be read is because the book simply does not exist. Such a superficial but overlooked explanation would certainly fit with Poe's penchant for sabotaging readers' expectations. But critics have correctly used this statement of unreadability as Poe's self-conscious gloss on his own writings, which feature all kinds of reading material, as it were, including documents that are sometimes purloined, hieroglyphs, anagrams, and specific letters in the alphabet. My essay will discuss images of unreadability in Poe's oeuvre with special attention to *Pym*, which contains both a narrative of white superiority and a critique of it.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, Baudelaire, cryptograph, hieroglyph, meaning, metafiction, race, unreadability

WHAT does it mean for a text to be "unreadable"? Are the letters fuzzy or is there not enough light to discern the words on the page? Is the paper waterlogged or are there passages written in a language unfamiliar to the reader? Does unreadability perhaps allude to an interpretative inscrutability or indecipherability? And if one does a reading of unreadability in a text, was it so unreadable after all? In considering the works of Edgar Allan Poe, the answer has to be "all of the above." Poe's oeuvre, I shall demonstrate, excels in establishing conditions and representations of unreadability, with *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* being the tour de force of Poe's unreadable prose. Literary critics have correctly taken the ubiquity of images and attestations of unreadability as Poe's self-conscious gloss on his own writings, which feature all kinds of reading material, including letters that are sometimes purloined and sometimes unread, hieroglyphs, anagrams, cryptographs, and specific letters in the alphabet. To be sure, there exists an intellectual allure for readers of Poe and Poe himself in the theme of unreadability. But against the hijinks of Poe's linguistic mastery—which leads the reader to enjoy, excavate, and attempt to make sense of the pile-up of unreadable words—lies a seemingly straightforward and

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readable narrative in *Pym* of white superiority. The Tsalalians represent a black, simple past that must give way to a white, progressive future. That said, one can also read in *Pym* a competing narrative that questions the claims of white superiority. The Tsalalians represent a black, complex past whose erasure will be accompanied by the decimation of that white future. In other words, according to the logic of Poe's unreadability, hermeneutic choices are not of the either/or variety, but rather the both/and.¹

Although this essay will focus on *Pym*, Poe's works evince a persistent interest in writing texts whose theme is unreadability or that themselves border on the unreadable. Several examples from the short stories come to mind. "William Wilson," for instance, includes this famous passage where the narrator explains the confusing architecture of the house where he lived and went to school as a child: "There was really no end to its windings—to its incomprehensible subdivisions. It was difficult, at any given time, to say with certainty upon which of its two stories one happened to be" (M 2: 429). Like the (p. 372) building with its two stories, Poe tells two stories at once, with one version featuring two distinct characters and another having a madman imagining an adversary. The difficulty and the fun of the tale lie in the uncertainty about knowing which story one is reading. Thus, "William Wilson" is not a story either about one character or two, but rather a story both about one character and two.

The difficulties of reading also nag at the protagonist of "Berenice," who spends a great deal of time in the family library reading unreadable books, such as Tertullian's *De Carne Christi*, whose "paradoxical sentence" about Christ being both dead and resurrected "occupied my undivided time, for many weeks of laborious and fruitless investigation" (M 2: 213). Another example can be found toward the end of "The Fall of the House of Usher," where the narrator rummages through Roderick's library and chooses to read to him "the only book immediately at hand," an "antique volume" called "the 'Mad Trist' of Sir Launcelot Canning" (M 2: 413). Some volumes in Poe are actual books, but others, like this one by Canning are "books," whose title refers to a nonexistent text written by a nonexistent author. In a similar sleight of hand, the first sentence of "The Man of the Crowd" quotes "a certain German book" that "does not permit itself to be read" (M 2: 506) and has also eluded critics since the story's publication in 1840. Perhaps the most obvious reason it cannot be read is because the book simply does not exist. Such a superficial but overlooked explanation would certainly fit with Poe's penchant for sabotaging readers' expectations; in other words, when we read the name of a book, we assume, naively as Poe's stories remind us, that it's real and readable in that technical sense.

In the case of *Pym*, the inability to read can be quite literally a problem of darkness. Pym says, "I felt hopeless of being ever able to read the note of Augustus" (P 1: 77), and that is because in the hold of the ship, where he keeps company with the objects in stowage, he has little access to light. Poe devotes many paragraphs of his novel to Pym's search for light. We read in great detail about his attempts to find bits of taper wax or "a speck or two" (P 1: 77) of phosphorous. Finding an "aperture" (P 1: 76) so that he can read Augustus's note becomes a kind of *mise en abyme* as Pym's search for an aperture requires a prior search for the materials that would supply the light—the bits of wax or

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phosphorous or “fragments of my matches” (P 1: 77). In a comical moment that wonderfully captures the absurdity of much of the novel, Pym explains the mechanics of his eyeball: “by turning the exterior portions of the retina towards it [the white slip of paper] that is to say, by surveying it slightly askance, I found that it became in some measure perceptible” (P 1: 78). Thus, inasmuch as *Pym* is about reading (and/or the inability to do so), when Poe writes about reading, he doesn’t simply start with the text to be read. That comes later. Paper, ink, pen, and light (and even the proper positioning of the retina) come first. Thus, despite the fact that we already have a text by Poe to read and presumably light to read it by, the plot of the text often revolves around the creation of another text within it, which then must find lighting inside of itself in order to be read.

Pym is not alone in calling attention to the want of light. At key points in “William Wilson,” we learn “there hung no lamp; and now no light at all was admitted”; at another moment, suddenly were “extinguished, as if by magic, every candle in the room” (M 2: 438, 442). “The Man of the Crowd” similarly highlights the weird or alternatively (p. 373) poor lights: “the rays of the gas-lamps, feeble at first in their struggle with the dying day, had now at length gained ascendancy, and threw over every thing a fitful and garish lustre. All was dark yet splendid” (M 2: 510–511). It requires little effort and imagination to see how these images of restricted and impaired vision, insofar as they apply to a character in the text who is trying to read a text, or a face or a space (like the school in “William Wilson”), might just as reasonably apply to the reader of said text.

It makes sense, then, that in other instances, unreadability has to do with the reader, oftentimes her state of mind. She simply can’t concentrate long enough to make out words because of exhaustion, fear, or inebriation. About a ship that Pym and his mates spot from a distance, Pym says, “we might have easily seen the name upon her stern . . . but the intense excitement of the moment blinded us to everything of that nature” (P 1: 126). Here, the crew’s “intense excitement makes” reading impossible. Sometimes unreadability registers both the material absence of light and an overwhelming mental state that blocks incoming information: “The glimmer, although sufficiently bright, was but momentary. Still, had I not been too greatly excited, there would have been ample time enough for me to peruse the whole three sentences before me—for I saw there were three. In my anxiety, however, to read all at once, I succeeded only in reading the seven concluding words” (P 1: 80). In this last example, an interesting distinction between seeing and reading appears. Pym sees three sentences but reads only seven words. The sentences are unreadable for the simple reason that he doesn’t read them, which he can, but in his heightened emotional state, which I shall discuss in more detail later, he can’t.

Unreadability can also look like the following in *Pym*, where the image is so horrible that no matter how many times one has read the passage, it still repulses: “There sat a huge seagull, busily gorging itself with the horrible flesh, its bill and talons deep buried. . . . [It] drew out its crimsoned head, and, after eyeing us for a moment as if stupefied, arose lazily from the body upon which it had been feasting, and, flying directly above our deck, hovered there a while with a portion of clotted and liver-like substance in its beak” (P 1: 125). Pym misreads the situation and takes the sailor’s bodily motions as an encourage-

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ment to come closer. A sickening correction follows and we learn with Pym that what seemed to be a seaman nodding his head is, in fact, a sailor's dead body being moved by a seagull that is eating its insides. Instead of human bodies that eat, bodies get eaten (first by the seagull and then by Pym, Augustus, and Peters when they eat Parker's body). On the topic of readerly revulsion, one might also point to this rendering of the rancid water aboard the *Grampus*, which Pym and the others drink despite "the jug being absolutely putrid and swarming with vermin" until they decide that it was "absolutely useless, being a thick gelatinous mass; nothing but frightful-looking worms mingled with slime" (P 1: 142). Water becomes a solid, and solids such as Augustus's body become "so far decayed that, as Peters attempted to lift it, an entire leg came off in his grasp" and "the mass of putrefaction slipped over the vessel's side" (P 1: 142). Not every reader can convert Poe's love of "mov[ing] his figures upon a ground of green or violet, where the phosphorescence of putrefaction, and the odour of the hurricane, reveal themselves" into images of "oriental palaces, mist covered, in the distance, which the sun floods with golden showers."² Contra Charles Baudelaire, the author of (p. 374) this paean to Poe, these passages' unreadability might take the form of a reader, less sympathetic to the aesthetics of putrefaction, closing her eyes. It's not that she can't read the passages—"his hair was full of fish scales"—she just doesn't want to.³

It is, however, safe to say that when literary critics talk about unreadability in Poe, they usually have something less literal in mind than actual darkness or readerly squeamishness or books that can't be read because they don't exist. One of the best (and funniest) examples of language becoming unreadable before our very eyes occurs in Chapter 18 in *Pym*, where Pym begins his January 18th log entry with the seemingly straightforward words, "This morning" (P 1: 166), and then offers this explanatory footnote: "The terms *morning* and *evening*, which I have made use of to avoid confusion in my narrative, as far as possible, must not, of course, be taken in the ordinary sense. For a long time past we had no night at all, the daylight being continual" (P 1: 166-167n). Of course, this explanation clarifies nothing and in fact creates confusion in the very act of claiming to avoid it. If the words "morning" and "evening" should not be taken to mean what they usually mean, what does it mean to use them and to read them? This passage supports J. Gerald Kennedy's claim that "even the simplest declarative sentence . . . refers not to a pure, immanent fact but to what the speaker or writer wishes his audience to construct as a fact," and thus "any textual distinction between truth and fiction must remain intractably problematic."⁴ Pym's footnote continues and shatters even more aspects of the narrative that had previously seemed so uncomplicated: "I would also remark in this place, that I cannot, in the first portion of what is here written, pretend to strict accuracy in respect to dates, or latitudes and longitudes, having kept no regular journal until after the period of which this first portion treats. In many instances I have relied altogether upon memory" (P 1: 167). Since Chapter 7, however, the narrative has deployed the journal mode, which of course includes the use of dates. Does this footnote mean that those dates and those latitudinal and longitudinal designations didn't mean what they meant? Can something that was readable become retroactively unreadable? Leaving aside the question of what constitutes the "first portion" of the narrative, when Pym says "I cannot . . .

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pretend to strict accuracy,” does that mean he was pretending before, from Chapter 7 to 18, and if he were pretending then, why should we believe that he is telling the truth now?

If this passage from *Pym* makes anything clear, it is that the interpretive move toward metafiction makes perfect sense because so many of Poe’s stories not only foreground acts of reading and writing but demand that the reader consider the credibility of the reading being presented.⁵ Is the narrator trustworthy? Does the interpretation being offered fit with elements of the plot? Is the reading a reasonable one or might it be so over-the-top as to be implausible by any measure? By posing these questions, time and again, Poe’s stories throw down the hermeneutic gauntlet. And how can one resist taking up the challenge when a character, such as William Legrand of “The Gold-Bug,” conducts a reading of an initially invisible image on parchment that comes into view “when subjected to the action of fire,” only to discover an image of a skull in addition to an image of a goat that is really an image of a kid, which is “a kind of punning or hieroglyphical signature,” playing on Captain Kidd (M 3: 832, 833)? Not finished (p. 375) making the invisible visible or the unreadable readable, Legrand once again applies heat to the parchment and uncovers “figures arranged in lines” that “form a cipher—that is to say, they convey a meaning” (M 3: 834, 835). And as any good literary critic would feel, Legrand finds himself, “sorely put out by the absence of all else—of the body to my imagined instrument—of the text for my context” (M 3: 833). We follow this close reading, which ultimately produces a cryptographic text for the context, astonished by its hermeneutical originality and associative imaginativeness and at the same time wonder, like the narrator, if Legrand’s reading has any relation to reality. In other words, has he simply substituted one kind of unreadability—there is nothing to see—with another—what is now seen makes no sense? Is the reading itself purely an act of imagination, as much a work of fiction as the fiction in which it is embedded?

Yes, of course. Poe has written a work of fiction and Legrand doesn’t exist except as a character within it, and Poe mischievously shoves the fictionality of the story in our faces. Thus, Legrand’s reading continually calls attention to itself as an exercise in interpretation. That rather obvious point is accompanied by something more complex. An essential aspect of Poe’s plot is Legrand’s production of the material foundation of his reading—the coded message within the text itself—that is required for the reading to proceed. Legrand says to the narrator, “no doubt you will think me fanciful—but I had already established a kind of *connexion*. I had put together two links of a great chain” and elsewhere, in a “paradoxical sentence” reminiscent of the kind that Berenice’s narrator chews on for long periods of time in his library, suggests that the skull that appears on the parchment “was not done by human agency. And nevertheless it was done” (M 3: 831). Upon solving the cryptograph, which includes the words “Bishop’s hostel,” Legrand instantly confronts another cryptograph: “of course, I dropped the obsolete word ‘hostel’ . . . [and] it entered into my head, quite suddenly that this ‘Bishop’s Hostel’ might have some reference to an old family, of the name of Bessop,” which then morphs into “*Bessop’s Castle*,” which then turns out not to be a castle at all, but rather a “‘castle’ [that] consisted of an irregular assemblage of cliffs and rocks” (M 3: 841). He deems the word “hostel” irrelevant. Bishop

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becomes Bessop. And castle gets its own set of quotations within the larger quotation, thereby becoming “‘castle.’” Every word, every place name is subject to change because nothing was ever real to begin with. Indiscriminately tossing out words or changing words, as Legrand does, reveals their utter made-upness.

Reality becomes fiction or, more precisely, the pretense of reality (that the castle in “The Gold-Bug” is a real castle, that the word “hostel” somehow matters) gets stripped away, making visible the fictional apparatus of every aspect of the story. Unlike the application of heat that makes the skull on the parchment visible, the human agency of Legrand underwrites these linguistic metamorphoses. And yet, at the same time that Poe foregrounds the fictional status of “The Gold-Bug,” and Legrand’s artistic interventions in solving the riddle of the bug, the interpretation that forms the basis of the story also includes the verbal signatures, as it were, of nonfiction. Sullivan’s Island, the location of the story, is a real place off the coast of South Carolina, and Captain Kidd actually existed. “Bi-chloride of Mercury” (M 3: 826), in addition to being a treatment for syphilis (p. 376) into the early twentieth century, was also used as a preservative of wood. Thus, when Legrand, Jupiter, and the narrator discover the “oblong chest of wood” whose “perfect preservation and wonderful hardness, had plainly been subjected to some mineralizing process” (M 3: 826), the narrator reasonably speculates that bichloride of mercury may have been part of the process. And, less abstrusely, it is true that “of all *words* in the language, ‘the’ is most usual” (M 3: 837). “The Gold-Bug” becomes unreadable in the sense that it affords the reader no stable cognitive foothold. Just when we come to terms with the idea that the story revels in its fictional status and makes us wonder how we ever thought a fiction might have anything to do with facts, Poe throws in a fact, which then makes us question how we ever thought fiction might be as veracious as fact.

In a slightly less complicated fashion, “The Man of the Crowd” sets up a similar dynamic between the protagonist, a reader of the crowd and then one individual in it, and the reader. The narrator offers an intensely detailed account of the man in the crowd. This characterization is based on “the brief minute of my original survey,” in which “the ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense—of supreme despair” accompany confessions of “an aching sensation in the eye” and the light that “threw over every thing a fitful and garish lustre” (M 2: 511, 510, 511). He interprets the man in the crowd with a series of descriptors that contradict one another (caution and blood-thirstiness? Coolness and excessive terror?) despite the fact that he cannot see him and because once he starts interpreting something or someone, he cannot stop. What does this unreliability mean for the words we have just read? What do these words mean?

Indeed, the question of what things mean pervades *Pym*. And unsurprisingly, when meaning does get attached to a particular person, object, scenario, or word, that meaning often seems to be mysterious, slightly off, or dead wrong, with the exception of Tiger, Pym’s dog (who appears out of nowhere). Tiger assists Pym in the retrieval of Augustus’s note. Pym writes, “having got, after a long search, a small piece of the note, I put it to the dog’s nose, and endeavored to make him understand that he must bring me the rest of it. . . .

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He seemed to enter at once into my meaning” (P 1: 79), shortly after which Tiger brings Pym all of the ripped-up shreds of the note which Pym can then piece together. But Tiger’s ability to discern Pym’s meaning relies on gestures rather than on language. When humans use words, meaning becomes less certain.⁶

At the moment when Pym finally gets enough light to see a portion of Augustus’s note, Pym writes, “Had I been able to ascertain the entire contents of the note—the full meaning of the admonition which my friend had thus attempted to convey, that admonition, even although it should have revealed a story of disaster the most unspeakable, could not, I am firmly convinced, have imbued my mind with one tithe of the harrowing and yet indefinable horror with which I was inspired by the fragmentary warning thus received” (P 1: 80). Here, Pym conducts a close reading of a fragmentary text—seven words to be exact—generating meaning in the absence of the note’s “full meaning.” What strikes me as especially interesting is the fact that because Pym is unable to read “the whole three sentences before [him]” (P 1: 80), the warning begins in medias res, with the (p. 377) word “*blood*.” Pym explains that the word *blood* is “trebly full of import” (P 1: 80), but the literal explanation of the word never occurs to him. Its import turns out to be the fact that “*blood*” is written in blood.

The fact that the note also contains a detailed history of its own mode of production—the pen, the paper, and the ink, which turns out to be Augustus’s blood—is fascinating and consistent with Poe’s perpetual return to the scene of writing. Not only does the note reference the events that comprise much of the text’s action (the mutiny, Captain Barnard, Pym’s access to food and water), but the note itself must also explain its own origins. Augustus’s task “was now to procure the materials for so doing” (P 1: 53): pen, paper, and ink. He finds “an old toothpick” (P 1: 53), which he converts into a pen with relative ease. Paper proves accessible, too, but the backstory of the paper turns out to be far less straightforward: “Paper enough was obtained from the back of a letter—a duplicate of the forged letter from Mr. Ross. This had been the original draught; but the handwriting not being sufficiently well imitated, Augustus had written another, thrusting the first, by good fortune, into his coat-pocket, where it was now most opportunely discovered” (P 1: 54). And with this revelation of a second copy of a forged letter, we find ourselves at the origin of another scene of writing and reading. Augustus had written a fake letter, pretending to be a relative of Pym who invites Pym to visit him in New Bedford. Pym’s grandfather, Mr. Peterson, will read the letter, permit Pym to visit Mr. Ross, and then Pym will escape with Augustus for his grand adventure on the *Grampus*. But having read his first forgery and finding it wanting in its simulation of authenticity (to give it “the better chance of being received as truth” [56] as the preface to *Pym* would have it), Augustus writes another one and pockets the first, which then becomes the paper upon which he writes the note to Pym. Kennedy nicely captures the enigmatic quality of the letter: “the puzzle bears the mark of intentionality: Poe incorporates a hint of his doubleness by locating a vital message on the reverse side of a duplicate of a forged letter.”⁷

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The context that informs the writing of the note is as crucial as the context that informs its reading. Given that the paper used for the note is the first and unsatisfactory attempt at a forged letter, it shouldn't come as a surprise that Pym's reading of this note proves problematic. In addition, we should also recall the "anxiety" with which he enters into Augustus's text, as well as the bad light: "The glimmer, although sufficiently bright was but momentary" (P 1: 80). In keeping with the suboptimal conditions of the reading experience, his more interpretive reading of the word "*blood*," his idea of what it means, is appropriately all over the place: "that word of all words—so rife at all times with mystery, and suffering, and terror—how trebly full of import did it now appear—how chillily and heavily (disjointed, as it thus was, from any foregoing words to qualify or render it distinct) did its vague syllables fall" (P 1: 80). The word *blood* both pops off the page and yet its "syllables" remain vague. How can the word be "rife" yet not "distinct" at the same time? Pym seems to be separating out the meaning of the word from its sonic effect. This gap or, to put the point another way, the presence of these two different registers—what words might mean and what they sound like—runs throughout *Pym* and helps illuminate in yet another way how Poe's readable words become unreadable. And there is still

(p. 378) one more register, which has to do with what words look like. It strikes me as significant that when Pym explains how the note affected him and he calls attention to the word "*blood*," he retains not only the quotations marks but the italicization as well. The look of the word "*blood*" turns out to be just as "full of import" as its meaning and as its sound.⁸

Indeed, the chapter in which Pym and Peters examine the hieroglyphs on the island is about the "look" of language, except for the crucial fact that Pym refuses to see it as such. In contrast to Peters, who thinks that the hieroglyphs "bore some little resemblance to alphabetical characters" (P 1: 195), Pym ardently denies the resemblance. Instead Pym, "convinced of [Peters's] error," persisted in his own conviction that the "black skin warriors" (P 1: 195, 180) lack the ability to write (and read). Rather than share the intellectual fun and cognitive complexity of readability and unreadability, Pym obstinately insists that the hieroglyphs "have been the work of nature" (P 1: 195) because only white men such as himself have the intelligence to keep a journal or to forge a document or misread a letter. When Pym refuses to acknowledge the possibility, laid out by Peters, that "the hieroglyphical appearance was really the work of art, and intended as the representation of a human form" (P 1: 208), Pym demonstrates the racializing aspect of readability and unreadability.

Peters's willingness to recognize that Too-wit and his tribe have written the hieroglyphs is significant. I say this because Pym famously describes Peters as a "half-breed" (P 1: 55) in the preface to the novel only later to claim that Peters is, with Pym, one of "the only living white men upon the island" (P 1: 185). Depending upon the circumstances in which Pym finds himself, Peters's racial identity flips. In the account of the mutiny, Peters appears "ferocious-looking . . . with an indentation on the crown (like that on the head of most negroes), and entirely bald" (P 1: 87). However, when Pym wishes to console himself that he is not alone with the Tsalalians who frighten him, Pym emphasizes the half of Peters that is white. The moment Peters acknowledges that Too-wit and his tribe can write, Pym puts

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Peters back into the category of not white, with Pym eager to demonstrate his mastery and reassert the racial hierarchy. White people, not the Tsalalians and not Peters (that is, when Pym decides that Peters is no longer white), get to play with words and their meanings. And lest one miss this point about who gets to write and who doesn't, Pym "luckily" has with him, even after being nearly buried alive by the treacherous actions of Too-wit and his tribe, "a pocketbook and pencil" (P 1: 193).⁹

Pym's interactions with Too-wit, the head of the village, and the inhabitants of Tsalal reveal a marked and mistaken shift away from unreadability and texts and toward (seemingly) understanding and sounds. In several scenes with the Tsalalians, the spoken word, combined with physical gestures, replaces the written word as the dominant form of communication, and perhaps because writing isn't involved (nor, by extension, is reading), Pym imagines a world absent of unreadability, a world where Pym makes gestures and is understood because he thinks that Tsalalians, because black, can neither read nor write; a world like the one he shares with Tiger, who "enter[s] at once into [his] meaning" (P 1: 79) and finds the missing scraps of Augustus's note, with the goal of getting Pym's approval. This is an interesting position for Pym to take—the transparency of the spoken word—considering that the crew of the *Jane Guy* and the members (p. 379) of Too-wit's tribe speak different languages (and are human beings, but again, Pym doesn't fully acknowledge that either). The significance of the sonic register in relation to the meaning of words takes center stage on at least two occasions, when the crew of the *Jane Guy* interacts with the Tsalalian natives. Having completed a meal with Too-wit, Pym and the others try to manoeuvre the conversation to the "chief productions of the country, and whether any of them might be turned to profit" (P 1: 176). Pym writes, "at length he [Too-wit] seemed to have some idea of our meaning" (P 1: 176) and shortly thereafter the sailors depart in order to see the extent of the *biche-de-mer* (or sea cucumbers) and how much money they might get from plundering it. In another scene, Pym and the crew leave the ship, once again, "for the purpose of visiting the village" (P 1: 180). Accompanied by "a hundred of the black skin warriors," Pym observes that no one is armed "and upon questioning Too-wit in relation to this circumstance, he merely answered that *Mattee non we pa pa si*—meaning that there was no need of arms where all were brothers" (P 1: 180). Whereas Pym thinks that he understands the meaning of their words and that they understand the meaning of his, all anyone knows for sure is that they have exchanged words and heard the same sounds. And just as Pym can't imagine Too-wit being able to write, he can't envisage Too-wit meaning something and not meaning something at the same time.¹⁰ Too-wit and the members of his tribe are readable and unreadable in the way everything and everyone else in the novel are. Being unable to grasp this fact, Pym is therefore unable to imagine that their blackness and their fear of all things white always signified the possibility of something treacherous in the offing.

It is true that Pym's concluding Note validates Peters's notion that the islanders composed the hieroglyphs, but belatedly. The racist damage has been done, not just by Pym's unwillingness to concede that the islanders may be intelligent enough to write, but also by his repeated descriptions of the Tsalalians as "savages" (P 1: 168, 172, 174, 181) with lips that were "thick and clumsy" (P 1: 174). Moreover, the key to each and every one of

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those hieroglyphs ends up being race. Thus, several of the figures, when seen in combination with one another, “constitute an Ethiopian verbal root” meaning “‘To be shady’ ” (P 1: 207). Another figure represents “the Arabic verbal root . . . ‘To be white’ ” (P 1: 208). In other words, even when the Tsalalian islanders are granted the right to read and write, as well as an origin story about their access to writing, they can only write race (or perhaps the only thing the unnamed author of the Note can read is race).

In this reading of *Pym*, Pym is the one doing the racist damage and not Poe. The distinction between the two makes possible an interpretation that sees the novel as a critique of racism. Poe is not Pym and therefore Pym’s inability to grant the Tsalalians any degree of sophistication or complexity speaks to the character’s benightedness and not the author’s. In the same way that most readers would not, for example, conflate the narrators of Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” or “The Black Cat” with Poe, we should be wary of making that interpretative move in the case of *Pym*. Yet *Pym* itself does this and most famously in the preface where the distinctions between A. G. Pym and Mr. Poe are difficult, if not impossible, to discern let alone to maintain. When Pym refers to “several letters [that] were sent to Mr. P.’s address” (P 1: 56), Mr. P. might be Pym or might be Poe.

(p. 380) More complicated are moments in the preface when Pym “stipulate[es] only that my real name should be retained” (P 1: 56) when the *Southern Literary Messenger* publishes the first installments of *Pym*. Pym’s “real name” is Pym, but in the next sentence Pym writes that “consequently . . . the name of Mr. Poe was affixed to the articles in the table of contents of the magazine” (P 1: 56). The consequence of Pym’s “stipulat[ion]” should be that the *Southern Literary Messenger’s* table of contents for January and February 1837 lists A. G. Pym as the author. Instead, E. A. Poe is listed, which truly is the “real name.” Thus, the “real name” of the author, according to the logic of *Pym’s* preface, is both Pym and Poe. This point matters in terms of making claims about the racial politics of *Pym*. If there is a difference between Poe and Pym, one can argue that Poe critiques the racial benightedness of Pym by foregrounding his inability to realize that the Tsalalians are actually human beings, embodying all of the complexities (and unreadability) such an acknowledgment would entail. However, if one can’t figure out where Poe ends and Pym begins (and the preface tells us we can’t), then Pym’s racism may also be Poe’s. To put it even more strongly, if the “real name” of Pym is Poe and vice-versa, one’s racism is the other’s. Pym’s inability to recognize the Tsalalian’s ability to read and write, his horror at blackness, his incapacity to keep track of Peters’s racial identity register typical cultural positions, what Terence Whalen calls the “average racism,” of so many antebellum Americans, including Poe.¹¹

As *Pym*, and especially this preface, makes clear, the experience of a Poe text is like walking through a hall of mirrors, where images reflect and refract each other, where characters perpetually lie, where readers read themselves reading through characters who are reading, and where the text keeps referring back to previous moments in its composition until its origin becomes undiscoverable. In the same way that Poe returns to the scene of writing and breaks down the process by which the text comes into being and becomes read, I would like to return briefly to the publishing history of “The Man of the Crowd.” The story first appeared simultaneously in the December 1840 issues of *Burton’s* and *The*

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Casket before the magazines merged to become *Graham's*. The narrator, we recall, follows the man of the crowd as the distinction between the two men becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. Toward the end of the story, the narrator makes this comment about the man of the crowd: "His clothes, generally, were filthy and ragged; but as he came, now and then, within the strong glare of a lamp, I perceived that his linen, although dirty, was of beautiful texture; and my vision deceived me, or, through a rent in a closely-buttoned, and evidently second-handed roquelaire which enveloped him, I caught a glimpse either of a diamond, or of a dagger" (M 2: 269). The passage in the 1845 version of the story that was published by Putnam's in *Tales* reads as follows: "His clothes, generally, were filthy and ragged; but as he came, now and then, within the strong glare of a lamp, I perceived that his linen, although dirty, was of beautiful texture; and my vision deceived me, or, through a rent in a closely-buttoned and evidently second-handed *roquelaire* which enveloped him, I caught a glimpse both of a diamond and of a dagger" (M 2: 224). Yet again, the question of reading arises. Here we have a character who acknowledges that he has been "ill in health" (M 2: 267), trying to make sense of another character who can barely be made out because of "the strong (p. 381) glare of a lamp" or because his "vision deceived" him. In the first version, the narrator "caught a glimpse either of a diamond, or of a dagger" and in the second, he "caught a glimpse both of a diamond and a dagger." Either/or morphs into both/and. Which is it? The versions are obviously different, but oddly similar in that both register the unreadability of the situation. Because the narrator can't see what lies beneath the roquelaire (not italicized in one version and italicized in the other), whatever is hiding beneath it could be one thing, as in a diamond or a dagger, or two, as in a diamond and a dagger. And because the narrator can't see it, we can't know if what's hiding is one thing or two—and therefore, like William Wilson we get two versions, making it "difficult, at any given time, to say with certainty upon which of its two stories one happened to be." We read the words knowing that we are one word, perhaps two, away from unreadability.

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Notes:

(1.) On temporality and race in *Pym*, see my *Time, Tense, and American Literature: When Is Now?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), especially chapter 2, "When Is Now? Poe's *Pym*," 39–63.

(2.) Charles Baudelaire, "Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Works," in *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, trans. Henry Curwen (London: John Camden Hotten, 1873), 21.

(3.) Baudelaire, *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 107.

(4.) Kennedy, *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 150–151. G. R. Thompson's essay on *Pym* notes that it "is ironically framed by complexly self-referential commentary . . . that simultaneously calls into question the authority of the text, and earnestly suggests that it is redolent with meaning" ("The Arabesque Design of *Arthur Gordon Pym*," in *Poe's Pym: Critical Explorations*, ed. Richard Kopley [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992], 201). Christopher Benfey has an essay called "Poe and the Unreadable: 'The Black Cat' and 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" in *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales*, ed. Kenneth Silverman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), but whereas his interest lies in the "theme of the unreadable in human relations" (29), specifically "the ways in which human beings have access, or are denied access, to the minds of other people" (28), I wish to explore how language in Poe can both be read and yet be unreadable.

(5.) Thus, in an essay on plagiarism in Poe, Stephen Rachman notes, "Poe allows us to see him posing; he 'ex-poses' himself . . . allegorizing plagiarism in the very act of plagiarizing" ("'Es lässt sich nicht schreiben': Plagiarism and 'The Man of the Crowd'," in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995], 66). John Irwin's reading of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" turns on Poe's use of the word *clew*, the fact that the word *clou* in French means "nail," and the significance of the nail in solving the mystery of the murder. Irwin writes: "The game Dupin plays with the narrator is at once a part and a figure of the game the author plays with the reader, as Poe suggests by making the terminus of the

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clew (the problem's solution) a *nail*, thereby testing the reader's linguistic skill and attention" ("A Clew to a Clue: Locked Rooms and Labyrinths in Poe and Borges," in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, 148).

(6.) Spelling seems to become changeable, as well. In Chapter 12, Poe lifts many passages from Benjamin Morrell's 1832 *Narrative of Four Voyages*, which includes an account of the Galapagos Islands tortoises. According to Burton Pollin, Poe "incorporates errors from the source and adds several of Poe's invention concerning the land turtle. The effect is a curious combination of precise and incredible details" (P 1: 278n12.17A). Pollin notes that Poe "consistently misspells the name which Morrell derives from galdpagos, the Spanish for land tortoise or 'terrapin'" (P 1: 278n12.17A), which means that when Poe writes, "the Spanish word Gallipago meaning a fresh-water terapin" (P 1: 137), he is wrong. Pollin has no explanation for why Poe might have indulged in this misspelling, nor do I, although, like as Pym says about Augustus's note, it seems "full of import"! (P 1: 80).

(7.) Kennedy, *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing*, 154. This account of the paper on which Augustus writes the note contradicts Pym's version of what happens in the hold when he tries to read it. Augustus's note would have had his blood-inked message on one side and the first forged note on the other. However, Pym claims that the note he read has one blank side and the other side with Augustus's words. In an illuminating essay on *Pym*, Mitchell C. Lilly deploys the notion of "unnatural narrative" to argue that the paper Augustus writes upon and that Pym reads is three-dimensional and representative of Poe's disavowal of mimesis and realism. He urges us to "reconsider what the 'unreadability' of the letter means in terms of the 'unreadability' of the narrative . . . which makes Pym unreadable as a work of uncompromising mimetic realism and yet, at one and the same time, remarkably readable as an unnatural narrative that interweaves realist and antirealist manifestations of space, time, knowledge, and matter" (Lilly, "Edgar Allan Poe's *The (Unnatural) Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*" in *Poe Studies* 48 [2015]: 42). Suggestive as this argument might be, it is also the case Poe sets up Pym's view of the paper as deeply compromised: "I have before stated more than once that my intellect, for some period prior to this, had been in a condition nearly bordering on idiocy" (P 1: 78). Given his condition, the reliability of his claim that "had there been any writing upon it, I should not have experienced the least difficulty, I am sure in reading it" (P 1: 78) seems highly suspicious.

(8.) My reading of this episode in *Pym* resonates with John T. Irwin's claims about the image of the shadow in the novel, as well as the nesting habits of the albatross and the penguins on Desolation Island: "when one finds one absolutely certain meaning in a situation where the overdeterminedness of the text makes meaning essentially indeterminate, then the reader is likely not to recognize how much any given meaning in such a case is determined by an unperceived shadow which the reader's own self casts upon the text" (Irwin, "The Quincuncial Network in Poe's *Pym*," in *Poe's Pym*, 187). Also see Jared Gardner, *Master Plots: Race and the Founding of an American Literature, 1787-1845* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), in which he argues, "Augustus's note proves that to write revolutionary stories is to write not about blood, but to write blood itself. Similarly, in the concluding lesson on Tsalal, the novel will argue, to write American stories is nec-

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essarily to write not about racial difference, but to write racial difference—the thing itself” (143).

(9.) Thank you to Dori Hale for calling my attention to the resonance between this moment in Poe and the following passage from Claude Levi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 62: “Would I be able to relive those feverish moments when notebook in hand, I jotted down second by second the expressions which would perhaps enable me to fix those evanescent and ever-renewed forms?”

(10.) In this regard, Pym is not unlike Captain Delano of Herman Melville’s “Benito Cereno.” Like Delano, Pym’s racism compels him to imagine the potential treachery of those around him and yet not quite credit them with the ability to figure out how to become master of the situation.

(11.) Critics tend to align themselves on one or the other side of the divide. Here is an admittedly small sampling. Critics who read *Pym* as evidence of Poe’s racism include Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Gardner (especially “Poe’s ‘Incredible Adventures and Discoveries Still Farther South’,” in *Master Plots*, 125–159); and John Carlos Rowe (see, for instance, “Poe, Antebellum Slavery, and Modern Criticism,” in *Poe’s Pym*, 117–140). Critics who read *Pym* as deconstructing racism include Teresa A. Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) and Dana D. Nelson, *The Word in Black and White: Reading “Race” in American Literature, 1638–1867* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

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