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## **Through the Custom-House**



*Nineteenth-Century  
American Fiction  
and Modern Theory*

**John Carlos Rowe**

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which both depends upon and is threatened by an imaginative, usurping other. If Coverdale concludes fadedly:

Fickle and fumbling, variable, obscure,  
 Glozing his life with after-shining flicks,  
 Illuminating, from a fancy gorged  
 By apparition, plain and common things,  
 Sequestering the fluster from the year,  
 Making gulped potions from obstreperous drops,  
 And so distorting, proving what he proves  
 Is nothing, . . .

then:

So may the relation of each man be clipped.<sup>43</sup>

## 4.

### Writing and Truth in Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*



Language, as sense that is sounded and written, is in itself suprasensuous, something that constantly transcends the merely sensible. So understood, language is in itself metaphysical.

— Heidegger, "A Dialogue on Language," *On the Way to Language*

That the signified is originarily and essentially (and not only for a finite and created spirit) trace, that it is *always already in the position of the signifier*, is the apparently innocent proposition within which the metaphysics of the logos, of presence and consciousness, must reflect upon writing as its death and its resource.

— Derrida, *Of Grammatology*

In the past two decades, critical interest in Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) has resulted in various interpretations of the work's coherence and organization. Most commentators basically agree with Edward Davidson's summary of Pym's spiritual education: "It is a study of emerging consciousness, a very special intelligence and awareness which is Arthur Gordon Pym's (and, to an extent, Poe's). . . . The self-as-imagination begins with the real, substantial world, follows the poetic direction of penetrating and destroying the world, and then goes even farther in order to set up on 'the other side' certain symbols and keys to the mind's perception of reality."<sup>1</sup> Davidson's general characterization of the work as *Bildungsroman*, however, has been challenged by a host of ingenious critics, each offering some historical or contextual key that will unlock the secret of *Pym's* form and meaning. In particular, recent American criticism either relentlessly tries to fit *Pym* into some predetermined generic category or marshals impressive evidence to demonstrate the basic flaws and inconsistencies in the text. In both cases, the same critical standard continues to operate: a

good work of literature ought to demonstrate internal coherence and narrative consistency.

Such an attitude implies that criticism is a process of making difficult or extraordinary texts intelligible. The degree to which a work meets the criteria of unity and coherence is more often than not a measure of its conventionality, or at least its susceptibility to analytic "translation." Since literature depends upon its ability to disrupt and violate accepted meanings and ordinary expectations, the most original work characteristically frustrates established methods and categories of interpretation. It does not, of course, follow that the text's resistance to interpretation is a guarantee of its literary value, but more attention ought to be paid to the ways in which our critical traditions tend to privilege certain "major works" and exile other "eccentric" texts. One need only review the various generic characterizations of *Pym* to realize that this work is either a monumental bungle or the achievement of transcendent genius. The title of Joseph Ridgely's review of the criticism suggests some of the prevailing confusion: "Tragical-Mythical-Satirical-Hoaxical: Problems of Genre in *Pym*."<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary French critics find *Pym* and Poe's works in general appropriate pretexts for the consideration of basic literary and theoretical questions. The *Tel Quel* theorist Jean Ricardou closely examines the episode on the island of Tsalal as an exemplary demonstration of how all writing is basically concerned with its own inscription. *Pym* is a "Journey to the Bottom of the Page" that explores the possibility of its own textual existence at the same time that it prefigures its own erasure: "No text is more complete than *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, for the fiction it presents points to the end of every text, the ultimate establishment of 'blank paper defended by whiteness.'<sup>3</sup> Ricardou's interpretation, however, concentrates on one restricted part of the narrative and disregards the formal strategies of the narration. Focusing on the hieroglyphs carved in the chasms and the "singular character" of the water on the island, Ricardou only hints at a comprehensive reading of the metaliterary possibilities in *Pym*.

In "Le tombeau d'Edgar Poe," Maurice Mourier adds some important remarks on the "Preface" and "Note" in relation to the inscriptions in (and of) the chasms. Mourier parodies the critical desire for hidden meaning by forcing the shapes of the chasms to spell out "E. A. Poe" and deciphering the alphabetical characters carved in the marl as "A. G. Pym" and "E. A. P." He concludes that the narrative displaces and hides any narrating subject, an idea that relies on Derrida's concept of *écriture* as the graphic mark of the "trace" or *différance* that characterizes the productive play of all signification: "The text of *The Adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym* mimes/refuses/exorcises the death of the narrator (of any narrator), the death of the *I* and its text wherein the narrator-character conceals the languishing sriptor who slips away,

childishly placing onto the character all responsibility for the fictional *mise-en-scène* (it does not belong to *I*)." <sup>4</sup>

The metaliterary character of *Pym* clarifies a number of problems concerning the work's form and thematic intention. In its fundamental investigation of the problematics of writing, *Pym* also questions the nature and possibility of literary form. What critics have considered difficulties and inconsistencies in the text may also be considered self-conscious disruptions of the impulse toward coherent design and completed meaning. Forever holding out the promise of a buried signified, *Pym* offers a sequence of forged or imitation truths: delivered messages, deciphered hieroglyphs, a penultimate vision. And yet, the inability of each successive sign to present its truth is ironically disclosed, increasingly entangling any reading in the signifying web it attempts to unravel.

Poe's writings have also provided the occasions for Lacan's reading of Freud in "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" and Derrida's deconstruction of Lacan in "The Purveyor of Truth."<sup>5</sup> Derrida's objections to Lacan's psychoanalytic treatment of "The Purloined Letter" might be applied generally to certain implicit assumptions made by literary critics. Derrida demonstrates how Lacan's disregard for the formal strategies of the narrator of the tale tends to reduce the text to an "exemplary content" in the analyst's own argument. Thus, Derrida suggests how all criticism (psychoanalytic, literary, historical) tends to neutralize the constraints of the pretext that continue to operate in the critical discourse. What Derrida terms Lacan's "ideality of the signifier" — the "indivisible" presence of the signifier — subtly shares the "ideality of a meaning" that governs the critical tendency to employ texts to illustrate general laws.<sup>6</sup> The violence of interpretation — the displacement of the signifier by a supplementary signifier — is repressed in the history, formalist scholarship, psychoanalysis, or psychobiography that presumes to make the historical event of the pretext semantically present. The work in question must always be the differential relation of pretext and criticism, a work produced in the interpretative supplementation of its ostensible subject. If any "literary history" is to be salvaged, then it ought to be a narrative of this disguised critical appropriation (neither by authors nor critics, but *in* language), an unveiling of the ways in which a signifying potential is generated and used.

In the introductory chapter, I suggested why traditional literary history so often seems insensitive to the idea of literary expression. In part, criticism fails when it refuses to respond to the interpretative imperatives that constitute the very meaning of such self-conscious authors as Poe. Reading and writing are so often doubled in Poe's writings that we falsify the main impulse of his poetics when we attempt either to reconstruct the author's meaning or to assign a historical context to his truth. Dupin's "understanding" of any of

the three crimes he attempts to solve is a function of poetic reconstruction, which simulates the bare facts only to transform them. If we refuse to follow Dupin's own method of poetic interpretation, then we are left with nothing but the empty significance of the actual crimes. The center or bottom of any Poe text is either a frustrating indeterminacy (the white curtain at the end of *Pym*) or a useless and contrived "unity" (the conventional solution of the detective novel).

The French *Symbolistes* were attracted to Poe's works precisely because these writings demand an active, imaginative reader, who would imitate the method of Dupin's poetic understanding by displacing the bare fact of the literary text. Thus, Poe's writings ought to be viewed primarily as evocative and suggestive, which are crucial poetic qualities for the *Symbolistes*. In one sense, of course, this poetic impulse to awaken the reader's imaginative faculties is inscribed within the romantic tradition that still governs Poe and his symbolist heirs. Yet, both Poe and the *Symbolistes* give up the ultimate *telos* of romantic intersubjectivity and the implicit goal of that universal self-consciousness in which all acts of interpretation and expression might ultimately be reconciled. In Poe, it is the absence of the principle of unity for which poet and reader long that prompts the perpetual wandering of the text; for the *Symbolistes* the "abyss" itself would prompt the delicious agonies of the alienated poet longing for an impossible ideal. The anxiety of such desire may lead to an aestheticism in which Mallarmé's "Book," or the imagination, is celebrated as a simulated ideal. However, the artifice of such transcendental principles is the constant reminder of the poet's self-conscious yearning, whose truth is manifest only in the repeated expression of poetic desire. As Joseph Riddel writes, "Poetry is textuality that can only reflect an absence of the ideal."<sup>7</sup>

The characteristic self-reflexivity of symbolist aestheticism — which mediates the romantic irony of Poe and the high modernism of Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and Stevens — is both its resource and the beginning of its subversion. As an incestuous production, this autotelic attempt to mark the boundaries of a "palace" of art remote from the tedious repetitions of *la vie quotidienne*. The logic of such metaliterary reflection, however, demands a supplementary act of reading that will break down its formal boundaries, one that requires the interpretative violation of the text as its own justification. Such a "moment" is, of course, a particular instance of what de Man has described as the dialectic of modernity; it is the moment in which the poet's longing for free and original self-expression lapses into the inevitable historicity of tradition, culture, and language. It is this "modern" Poe, both the father and son of the *Symbolistes*, whose writings may be said to reveal our own critical situation by dramatizing the inescapable dilemma of modernism. In Joseph Riddel's analysis, it is the Poe who "carried his discourse into an aestheticism which brought itself into such severe question and subjected itself to such

acute guilt that only an utterly idealistic aestheticism could reconstitute the world with a center. It was this Poe whom the *Symbolistes* discovered, an implicit Poe who most crucially realized the Modernist rupture in an art which accentuated the center as the presence of an absence, the music of nothingness."<sup>8</sup>

The "idealistic aestheticism" that seems to control most of Poe's writings is precisely what is threatened by *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*. This text enacts the deconstruction of representation as the illusion of the truth and prefigures the contemporary conception of writing as the endless production of differences. In its main outlines, *Pym* appears to follow the basic argument of Poe's poetry and to prefigure the gnostic cosmology of *Eureka* (1848). In the course of his sea voyage, Pym proves himself to be one of Poe's least perceptive characters. Pym's lack of insight in his early adventures is comparable to the myopia of the narrator in "The Fall of the House of Usher"; both characters epitomize the dangers of relying on the illusory world of sense impressions and misleading empirical data. Repeatedly baffled and frustrated by his experiences, Pym is forced to rely on various helpers and companions during his voyage. In the poetry, psychic guides generally assist the persona to interpret the cosmic message obscurely inscribed in nature. Nesace is charged by the deity with conveying his Word to the world in "Al Aaraaf," Psyche reads "What is written" on the "legended tomb" for the "I" in "Ulalume," and the "pilgrim shadow" points the way toward "Eldorado" for the "gallant knight." Pym's companions, however, are far less effective in helping him to understand either the progress or purpose of his voyage. Augustus dies of gangrene as the survivors drift aimlessly on the wreck of the *Grampus*, Tiger the Newfoundland dog simply disappears shortly after he has served his narrative function, Parker is eaten by the others, and Captain Guy and his crew are buried alive by the natives on the island of Tsalal. Dirk Peters alone accompanies Pym to the furthest limit of the voyage and returns alive, but not to tell the tale. Daniel Hoffman sees Peters as the "resilient dwarfish savage" who replaces the "rational Prefect of Police side of Pym's mind" represented by his earlier friend and guide, Augustus.<sup>9</sup> Peters calls Pym's attention to the "singular looking indentures in the surface of the marl," and Peters rather than Pym judges them to have "some little resemblance to alphabetical characters."<sup>10</sup> Although Peters has a basic intuitive sense of natural order, he can neither articulate nor communicate this understanding. To the end of the voyage, Pym remains blind to the metaphysical and spiritual implications of his adventures.

The failure of Pym's companions to help him understand his journey gives special importance to his editorial relationship with Mr. Poe, who must be considered another character in the drama and distinct from the historical Poe. The elaborate framing devices of Pym's "Preface" and the appended editorial "Note" have generally been viewed as part of Poe's parody of the

scientific voyage narratives that were in such vogue in the nineteenth century. The deliberate confusion of Pym and Mr. Poe as narrative voices also seems to reinforce the parabolic character of the tale and its relation to Poe's own inner voyagings. Mr. Poe, however, is neither a simple *Doppelgänger* of Pym nor identical with Edgar Allan Poe. As the writer of the adventure, Mr. Poe transforms the "facts" provided by Pym into the poetic expression that constitutes Pym's education and understanding. Pym explains why he has not undertaken the writing of his own story: "A distrust of my own abilities as a writer was, nevertheless, one of the principal causes which prevented me from complying with the suggestion of my advisers" (724). And in spite of the encouragement from Mr. Poe "to prepare at once a full account of what I had seen and undergone," Pym fears he "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. . . ." Thus, Pym's lack of talent as an imaginative writer is intimately bound up with his failure to understand the significance of his voyage. Pym's claim at the end of the "Preface" must be taken as a ruse to deceive the unwary reader: "This exposé being made, it will be seen at once how much of what follows I claim to be my own writing; and it will also be understood that no fact is misrepresented in the first few pages which were written by Mr. Poe. Even to those readers who have not seen the Messenger [*Southern Literary Messenger*], it will be unnecessary to point out where his portion ends and my own commences; *the difference in point of style will be readily perceived*" (725; my italics). Pym's contribution to the text remains simply the germ of Mr. Poe's poetic idea, which is the true story behind this improbable romance.<sup>11</sup> Pym still plays a crucial role in this drama of poetic composition; Mr. Poe's story is an interpretation of what is already part of Pym's psychic experience. Narrative authority is in question from the beginning, because the writing must rely on both the formlessness of Pym's unconscious and the poetic interpretation of Mr. Poe.

As we shall see, there are several other writers involved in Pym's story, all of whom are controlled by the poetic composition. The multiple authorities for the narration appear to contradict Poe's general concern in his works with poetic unity. For Poe, poetic expression moves toward the origin and end of all language: the energetic cosmic unity described in the pseudoscience of *Eureka*: "In sinking into Unity, it [Matter] will sink at once into that Nothingness which, to all Finite Perception, Unity must be—into that Material Nihilism from which alone we can conceive it to have been evoked—to have been *created* by the Volition of God."<sup>12</sup> In its referential function, language sustains the spatial and temporal dimensions of our material condition. Poetry does violence to this mode of representation and attempts to constitute itself as a self-referential system of signs. The poem imitates cosmic design and symmetry rather than offering a reflection of empirical phenomena. Thus, poetic expression strives for a physical presence in the

word itself as the embodiment of psychic and cosmic truth. The poetic aim is essentially formalist: to construct the poem *in* its being rather than *through* its meaning. In his analysis of "Tamerlane," Davidson summarizes the transcendental intention of Poe's poetry as the effacement of the self-conscious Ego; thus, the "annihilation of self" ironically becomes the ground for one's identity in Being. The poem approximates this spiritual completion by transforming the self into a full poetic image rather than a mere "name."<sup>13</sup>

Straining against ordinary temporality and its materiality, poetic writing imitates the cosmic dialectic of "Attraction and Repulsion," the consolidation and dispersion which together define the "throb of the Heart Divine."<sup>14</sup> Writing inaugurates a desire for completion that its own inscription is destined to frustrate. Unity is nowhere present for Poe, because the original act of creation "was that of a determinate irradiation—one finally *discontinued*."<sup>15</sup> Bearing as it does both nostalgia and desire for divine silence, writing substitutes the idea of order and unity as a simulacrum for the lost presence. The poetic act may prefigure a reconciliation of all things, but in so doing it only asserts more fully its own lack. Thus, the poetic image presents itself as a complex play between the extremes of self-conscious alienation and the dissolution of self in metaphysical unity. Such writing embodies the essential doubleness of Poe's cosmic metaphor: both irradiation and decentralization. Recall at this point Poe's definition of the "Poetic Principle" as "strictly and simply, the Human Aspiration for Supernal Beauty. . . ." The dialectic of desire and repression informs Poe's idea of "the Poetry of words as *The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*."<sup>16</sup>

In *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, the differential process of writing is enacted as the subject and object of the work. The tale "progresses" from an ordinary referential discourse to a poetic expression in which the metaphoric structure of language materializes in a landscape of signs. For both Pym and Mr. Poe, the true journey is into the text itself, in which a paradoxical kind of self-definition might be found. Their mutual silence at the end opens the play of writing to its necessary interpretation, marked by the appended Note penned by yet another hand. Neither in form nor content does this Note satisfy our expectation of a conclusion. We learn of "the late sudden and distressing death of Mr. Pym," only to discover "that the few remaining chapters which were to have completed his narrative . . . have been irrecoverably lost through the accident by which he perished himself." The limit of the voyage is itself the incompleteness of writing, which must be supplemented by the author of the Note or by Peters, who is "still alive, and a resident of Illinois, . . . and will, no doubt, afford material for a conclusion of Mr. Pym's account" (852). Yet, Mr. Poe declines "to fill the vacuum," as if the disclosure of the absence that grounds all writing has been the end and the beginning of his poetic task. Thus, the Preface and Note formally define Pym's metaphysical adventure by questioning beginnings and endings.

Within this frame, the text explores the nature of writing in such a way as to render ambiguous what we thought we had understood to be Poe's gnostic philosophy of composition.

Pym's motivation for going to sea originates with the stories told by his friend and occasional bedfellow, Augustus Barnard. Their brief voyage on the *Ariel* and their rescue by the *Penguin* prefigure their subsequent adventures at sea. It is Augustus's "manner of relating his stories of the ocean" that reinforces Pym's "somewhat gloomy although glowing imagination." Pym later suspects these stories "to have been sheer fabrications," but it is just this air of unreality that sparks the boys' desire for adventure. Both of them seem to long for some alternative to the superficially ordered world of Edgarton. Thus, it seems especially appropriate that their "scheme of deception" enables them to escape as well as to expose the illusion of control and order maintained by this conventional society. Augustus forges a note to Pym's father, which purports to be a formal invitation for Pym to spend a fortnight with the sons of a family friend, Mr. Ross. Augustus thus displaces the proper signified of such a message and calls into question the habitual methods of reference supporting social intercourse. Like all forgeries, this note plays upon the notion that we read a text according to a specific author, in this case the authorizing signature of "Mr. Ross." The deception threatens the fundamental rules of social behavior and communication; their departure is made absolute by this act of forgery. At first they anticipate sending a second, corrective letter, written at such a time as all possibility of "any turning back" would be "a matter out of the question." Pym confidently believes that "vessels enough would be met with by which a letter might be sent home explaining the adventure to my parents" (733). But Augustus's violation of social language suggests that such an explanation might involve a more difficult task than Pym envisions. The mutiny on board the brig makes it technically impossible to send such an explanation. And yet, it is the writing of the note that demonstrates the arbitrariness and ambiguity of reference implicit in any text. The plot itself is initiated by a reflection on language that has already been suggested in the Preface and will be the primary concern of the final Note.

There is a curious sequential relation between writing and performance in this tale. No sooner is the note "written and delivered" than Pym acts out its deception of his family. On his way to the wharf, Pym runs into his grandfather who calls him by name: "Why, bless my soul, Gordon . . . why, why — whose dirty cloak is that you have on?" (734). Pym answers him "in the gruffest of all imaginable tones," disguising his voice with a Jackson's jargon. Predictably enough, Pym's manner of speech affects the vision of his grandfather, who complains: "Won't do — *new glasses* — thought it was Gordon — d — d good-for-nothing salt water long Tom" (my italics). This error of perception is, of course, partially attributable to the morning fog, under the

cover of which Pym is stealing to the brig. Like the white curtain at the Pole and all the figures of blankness or darkness in the story, however, the fog is an objective correlative for the formlessness that motivates the desire for definition and discrimination. The grandfather's perception is also determined by the class structure coded in the social language of Edgarton. This small episode dramatizes a central issue in the entire narrative. Jacques Derrida claims that "from Plato and Aristotle on, scriptural images have regularly been used to *illustrate* the relationship between reason and experience, perception and memory."<sup>17</sup> Augustus's note and Pym's deception question this classical conception of language as a mediating representation, suggesting instead that language constitutes reason and experience, perception and memory in a differential play of which the mark of writing is a sign.<sup>18</sup>

From the obscurity of the morning fog, Pym quickly slips into the darkness of the ship's hold. When he boards the *Grampus*, he enters a space that is implicitly textual. Before he enters this darkness, Pym has a glimpse of Augustus's spacious stateroom and notices "a set of hanging shelves full of books, chiefly books of voyages and travels" (734). In the hold, Pym finds that his coffinlike "iron-bound box" is also equipped with "some books, pen, ink, and paper." Thus, Pym enters the realm of romance through a succession of intertwined metaphors of textuality: preface, fabricated stories, forged note, books, writing implements, paper, ink. Derrida remarks that in the opening of "The Purloined Letter," "Everything begins 'in' a library: among books, writing, references. Hence nothing begins. Simply a drifting or a disorientation from which one never moves away."<sup>19</sup> The voyage in *Pym* is only nominally conducted by sailors, ships, and oceans. These are mere figures for the writing itself, which is characterized by a "drifting" and "disorientation" from its own origin or end. Every effort at representation discloses only another representation, and we are quickly entangled in an inescapable metaphoric play. *Pym* is a narrative about a journey toward a metaphysical and geographical center, but in the very effort of writing such a story that center is displaced, disrupted, deferred.

The hidden textuality of Pym's voyage gradually emerges from the darkness to enter the body of the world. Shortly after he accustoms himself to his cramped quarters, Pym falls into a deep sleep that intensifies the discontinuity of Edgarton and the poetic space of the voyage. Pym dozes off while reading "the expedition of Lewis and Clark to the mouth of the Columbia," another voyage in quest of origins and ends.<sup>20</sup> Pym reads and dreams in a site that is variously described as a cloacal womb, a tomb, and a library. Riddel notes that Roderick Usher's library stands directly above the subterranean vault in which Madeline is entombed: "Moreover, the library is not only a central room, but another closure that stands outside or over the central tomb. The texts that stand for one idea signify its absence. They are signs of death."<sup>21</sup> From the beginning, Pym's confinement is associated with the



doubleness of writing, which secretes its own exhaustion and death in the very effort to discover the truth. During his first lapse into unconsciousness, Pym crosses the border separating ordinary temporality from the psychological time of writing that will govern the subsequent voyage. Augustus has left his watch with Pym, but it runs down while Pym is asleep. When he awakens, he can only guess that he has slept "for an inordinately long period of time" (737). Despite frequent references to dates in the remainder of the narrative, Pym's temporal disorientation in the hold continues throughout the rest of the voyage. Measured time is gradually replaced by a temporal sense closely related to the length of particular episodes and other kinds of narrative emphasis.

Pym's fears multiply when Augustus fails to appear. Falling into another deep sleep, Pym dreams of being "smothered to death between huge pillows, by demons of the most ghastly and ferocious aspect" and strangled by "immense serpents." Like many of Poe's characters, Pym reacts psychically to darkness and confinement as anticipations of death and burial. In this episode, dreaming is explicitly associated with "reading, writing, or conversing." Pym's confused dreams not only recall Augustus's tales of adventure and the volume of Lewis and Clark's voyages, but also prefigure the poetic goal of the narrative. At first smothered and strangled, Pym then finds himself in "deserts, limitless, and of the most forlorn and awe-inspiring character" or confronted with "immensely tall trunks of trees, gray and leafless" with roots "concealed in wide-spreading morasses, whose dreary water lay intensely black, still, and altogether terrible beneath" (738). Suffocating enclosure and unbounded expanse, like the colors black and white, are only apparent oppositions in this narrative; such contraries are actually doubles for the same absence that motivates both the writing of dreams and poetic narratives. Pym's anxieties represent Poe's own double fear: the self-annihilation that is the ultimate entropy of any writing that strains toward the undifferentiated unity of spiritual absence.

Imprisoned by the mutineers, Augustus manages to scrawl a note to Pym. Pym's Newfoundland dog, Tiger, conveniently materializes in order to deliver the message. Pym is awakened from his delirious dreams of monsters, demons, and ferocious beasts by "some huge and real monster . . . pressing heavily upon my bosom" (738). Only after an elaborate attempt to escape from the hold does Pym discover the note that is buried beneath the fur of Tiger's left shoulder. The contiguity of the dog with both Pym's dream images and Augustus's note suggests a more general movement in the narrative from a conception of language as a system of abstract referential signs to the material facts of a poetic landscape. In his search for the entrance to Augustus's cabin, Pym follows a "whipcord" attached to the trap door cut in the stateroom floor. Even when his passage is blocked by "boxes and ship-furniture," Pym is reluctant to leave this cord and strike out on his own.

Holding to this lifeline, Pym reaches the trap door only to find it blocked by "some immense weight." Failing in his Thesean labor, Pym returns to the hold where only two paragraphs later he is "tracing" the string around Tiger by means of which Augustus has attached his note. Augustus's message is intended to serve as a substitute for the freedom promised by the trap door. As the message ultimately indicates, the freedom beyond the hold has been replaced by the brutal rule of the mutineers. The only clew of thread that will lead Pym out of his labyrinth is that which ends in Augustus's cryptic scrawl.

Tiger may bear the message, but he destroys the means by which it might be read. Pym finds that the dog has "mumbled" the candles and scattered most of Pym's phosphorus. Left in the dark as a result of Tiger's ravenous appetite, Pym contrives a "multitude of absurd expedients for procuring light" before finally deciding to rub the paper with his few remaining fragments of phosphorus: "Not a syllable was there, however — nothing but a dreary and unsatisfactory blank; the illumination died away in a few seconds, and my heart died away within me as it went" (743). Pym's frustration and growing delirium cause him to tear the note into three pieces and cast them aside. Only after this impetuous act does he realize that he has looked at only one side of the paper. Once again, Pym's consciousness proves inadequate to interpret the message carried by language. Pym must appeal to Tiger and his sensitive nose to fetch the pieces from the dark recesses of the hold. Pym then carefully feels each one in hopes that the letters might show "some unevenness." What he discovers instead is an "exceedingly slight, but discernible glow, which followed as it proceeded" (744). Assuming that the glow must emanate from the traces of phosphorus he had earlier rubbed on the blank side of the note, Pym easily finds the proper combination by turning each piece dark side up. In his excitement, Pym is unable to read the entire message, even though "there would have been ample time enough for me to peruse the whole three sentences before me." Nevertheless, the seven-word fragment he does read is sufficient to convey the urgency of Augustus's warning: "*blood — your life depends upon lying close*" (745).

Pym's personal concern for his own survival blinds him to the philosophic implications of this written message. The entire episode, from Tiger's arrival to the reading of the fragment, is an education in language and its expressive function. The blank side of the note at first exasperates Pym, but it is in fact the means whereby the message itself is made legible. Like the "white curtain" at the end of the narrative, blankness and silence motivate human discourse. Unlike reflected light, the phosphorescent glow is an internal radiation analogous to the illumination of the poetic imagination. Augustus's note deals with man's fundamental situation, stressing as it does both "blood" and "life." Pym ought to have already learned the arbitrariness of human expression, which has been suggested by both the forged note from "Mr. Ross" and Pym's own willful scattering of Augustus's warning. Subject



to myriad combinations and the intentions of endless "authors," language generally disseminates its truth.

Everything in this episode contributes to the materialization of the text of Augustus's note. Pym feels each piece of paper for "some unevenness," only to see the glow of the phosphorus. Tiger smells the first piece of note in order to retrieve the other two. Although these sensory acts concentrate only on the paper itself, the words themselves are related to the physicality of the note. The crucial word "blood" is, of course, the very medium in which Augustus has been forced to write; the "red ink" perceived by Pym is a synecdoche for the body of Augustus. Augustus's first note employs the false reference of familiarity and social custom — Mr. Ross's invitation — to cover the boys' escape. In this second message, the key word "blood" refers to the writing of the note itself: "*I have scrawled this with blood. . .*" Augustus's communication is carried by the second clause: "*your life depends upon lying close*"; but Pym, Mr. Poe, and the reader concentrate on the disjointed word "blood."

The narrative makes the association between these two notes explicit. Pym learns from Augustus that "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 opportunely discovered" (755). This coincidence of the two notes contradicts Pym's earlier perception of the blank obverse of Augustus's message. Yet, what critics have generally considered an error made in the haste of composition offers an important illustration of Poe's conception of the doubleness of writing. Poe's poetic theory seems to argue that human discourse is grounded in a principle of unity that is silence: a paradoxical emptiness and fullness. In *Pym* the act of writing carries the trace of a prior representation, which defers the desired approach to an undifferentiated meaning or central signified. This minor textual "error" helps to illustrate the general metaphysical crisis being enacted in the narrative. As a simple warning to Pym, the note is little more than a convention of the popular romance. As another reflection on the question of "poetic" writing, the note demonstrates the difficulty of transcending the differential system of language to deliver a unified truth. The note is a palimpsest — *the* palimpsest of language itself, whose messages are always intertexts. Writing appears to defer the presence it desires by constituting a divided present that prefigures its own erasure. Meaning may be situated only within the functions produced by this play of differences. Augustus's message serves as a signifier whose signified is yet to be read by Pym. In this context, the blank side provides the "space" of such an interpretation. No such innocent reading is possible, however, since that supposedly blank sheet is already inscribed with a prior signification — a clumsy duplicate of a forgery. Such retention and protraction characterize the temporality of writing, which replaces the less ade-

quate measures of time in the text, such as Augustus's watch or the duration of Pym's "consciousness."<sup>22</sup>

Pym's experiences in the darkness of the hold with dreaming, reading, writing, and interpreting prefigure the world he enters on the deck. In the referential world of Edgarton, signs are employed as secondary mediations of reality. In the dynamics of deciphering Augustus's message, Pym gives the sign "blood" the status of an object in its own right. He is subsequently reborn into a poetic landscape where external phenomena have the characteristics of written signs. As Riddel has suggested in connection with the theory of animism in "The Fall of the House of Usher," "In Poe the images of nature are already metonymic substitutions for words — or substitutions for substitutions."<sup>23</sup> In this world, when one is cut off from such familiar bases for meaning as family, home, school, law, and society, the ordinary distinctions between appearance and reality no longer signify. Every "natural" phenomenon may be understood only according to what it may be said to "produce" within a semiotic system.

This is dramatically expressed by Pym's formal entrance into this world. Disguising himself as Hartman Rogers, a sailor poisoned by the brutal mate, Pym attempts to strike panic and confusion among the mutineers. He emphasizes the powerful reality constituted by his representation: "As I viewed myself in a fragment of looking-glass which hung up in the cabin, and by the dim light of a kind of battle-lantern, I was so impressed with a sense of vague awe at my appearance and at the recollection of the terrific reality which I was thus representing, that I was seized with a violent tremour, and could scarcely summon resolution to go on with my part" (769–770). Pym and Peters carefully design the context in which this phantasm will appear. "The isolated situation of the brig" makes Pym's presence especially unaccountable to the crew. The raging tempest is not only "awe-inspiring," but it also contributes to the "uncertain and wavering light" cast by "the cabin lantern, swinging violently to and fro" (772). This gloom is intensified by the huge quantities of rum the crew has consumed, as well as by Peters's conversations with them "upon the bloody deeds of the mutiny" and "the thousand superstitions which are so universally current among seamen" (771). This poetic composition has the power to strike the mate "stone dead" and cast the other mutineers into such confusion that they are easily overpowered. Pym's plot manipulates the sailors' assumption that perception constitutes a pure and direct awareness of the thing itself. Like Pym's earlier deception of his grandfather, this performance implies that perception is in fact the product of a system of heterogeneous psychic and social codes.<sup>24</sup>

Daniel Hoffman refers to the "regressive imagination" that seems to determine the imagery in this latter portion of *Pym*.<sup>25</sup> Davidson claims that a spiritual progress takes place "by the steady recession of any 'fact' world — the facts of ships and men, sequence of days, food and drink, society, law,

justice, and honor — and the gradual domination of a chimera or the world as it really is behind the mask of ostensible reality.”<sup>26</sup> Every experience and phenomenon contributes to an emerging psychic landscape. Rescued from the drifting wreck of the *Grampus* by the *Jane Guy*, Pym returns to a world of apparent order. The narrative devotes increased space to factual explanations, extracts from accounts of historical voyages, and scientific discourses on subjects as various as navigation and the drying of *biche de mer*. But the marked discrepancy between these realistic details and Pym’s uncanny experiences emphasizes the ineffectiveness of any empirical account of this voyage. On the island of Tsalal, the psychic drama is enacted in the confrontation of “civilized” whites with “primitive” natives.

Regardless of how we view the natives in relation to Pym’s inner voyage, their associations with darkness, burial, and deceit make them emblematic of a subterranean level of psychological reality. Their close ties with their surreal environment are suggested by their expressive language, which is “a loud jabbering . . . intermingled with occasional shouts” in apparent imitation of natural sounds. In fact, the word for the taboo of white is “Tekeli-li,” which is the cry of the “gigantic and pallidly white birds” that fly from beyond the veil in the final episode.<sup>27</sup> The natives treat nature as though it were sentient, a conventional indication in Poe’s writings that one has entered a “landscape of the soul.” When the cook accidentally cuts into the deck with his axe, Too-wit “immediately ran up, and pushing the cook on one side rather roughly, commenced a half whine, half howl, strongly indicative of sympathy in what he considered the sufferings of the schooner, patting and smoothing the gash with his hand, and washing it from a bucket of seawater which stood by” (821). Unlike the whites, the natives apparently do not recognize their own reflections. Glimpsing his image in the cabin mirrors, Too-wit throws himself on the floor and buries his face in his hands. In order to identify a photograph or reflected image with one’s own person, the viewer relies on a conception of iconic representation, in which the signifier and signified share an actual resemblance. The inability of the natives to view reflections as icons reinforces the notion that we have left the realm of signs and things to enter a textual space in which reference is only possible among differing signs.<sup>28</sup>

This outlook may help in synthesizing a number of the more extraordinary interpretations of the curious water on the island, which is both veined and limpid, varied purple in hue and unreflecting. Both Marie Bonaparte and Walter Bezanson emphasize the veined character of the water in order to equate it with blood.<sup>29</sup> Ricardou considers the water a metaphor for the text itself, ingeniously arguing: “If an imaginary perpendicular line is made to sever a given line of writing, the two severed fragments remain united in the idea by an intense syntactic cohesion. If, on the other hand, a horizontal separation is made between two lines, the broken link, essentially spatial in

nature, provides a very inferior sort of adhesion. This double complicity of the liquid with written language — by contiguity and similitude — encourages us to believe that what we are faced with is a text.”<sup>30</sup> Maurice Mourier also concentrates on the curious divisibility of the water — the separability of the veins along their boundary lines, the inseparability of the fluid across the veins — in order to draw an analogy between the stream and human musculature.<sup>31</sup> All of these interpretations suggest that the stream is a metonymy for another physical thing: body or text. And this confusion of body and writing/thing and word has been taking place from the very beginning of the narrative. We have entered a realm composed of objects that frustrate ordinary representation. As the episode in the chasms will illustrate, we have entered a world in which word and thing are no longer distinguishable, frustrating the illusion of self-presence that operates explicitly in iconic representations but is also implicit in other forms of mediating representation.

Burying the crew of the *Jane Guy* and driving Peters and Pym deep into the interior of the island, the natives help uncover what the writing of *Pym* has been performing: the interplay of the unconscious and the conscious. In the final episodes, this psychic relation is established both as the very scene of writing and as the generative source of human interpretation. Just as Tiger emerges from Pym’s dream to deliver the message of blood, so the natives open a path for Peters and Pym to discover the writing on the chasm walls. The “alphabetical characters” carved in the marl, however, are already inscribed within an enveloping textuality. The relation between the irreducibly figurative landscape and the graphic nature of the narrative is made explicit in Pym’s drawings of the shapes of the chasms themselves. These sketches (figures 1, 2, 3, and 5) indicate the scriptural characteristics of the world in which the message of figure 4 is inscribed. As the anonymous editor of the final Note explains: “Figure 1, then figure 2, figure 3, and figure 5, when conjoined with one another in the precise order which the chasms themselves presented, and when deprived of the small lateral branches or arches (which, it will be remembered, served only as a means of communication between the main chambers, and were of totally distinct character), constitute an Ethiopian verbal root — the root ለላግ: ‘To be shady,’ — whence all the inflections of shadow or darkness” (853). Mr. Poe’s narrative has thus reached a point at which his language and that of the world coincide. Concerned as it is with the inner voyage of Pym, the text reveals at this point the extent to which its re-presentation of the adventure must begin with that which is already a system of representation. The relation between the chasm shapes and the carvings on the walls ought to indicate how any account of Pym’s voyage must inevitably expose the original metaphors of such a journey.

What is in fact inscribed at the heart of the island is the doubleness of

writing, which we have seen enacted as a major theme of the work. The chasms present themselves as signs of the darkness and ambiguity in which man finds himself imprisoned. Carved as they are in the black marl, the "alphabetical characters" identified by Peters seem to repeat this message. Yet, if we grant the validity of the translation of these figures offered in the Note, then we recognize that what is signified — "to be white" in "the region of the south" — denies both the black signifiers and the field of their inscription. Throughout the narrative, the apparent opposition of white and black is gradually transformed into a reciprocal relationship. Neither doubles of each other nor polar opposites, white and black constitute one of several binary pairs transformed by the narrative into metaphors for metaphysical and psychic difference. For Poe, language has the power to destroy the facticity of human experience and present that "other world" for which human beings instinctively yearn. Yet, the language of both poetry and the psyche frustrates its own desire for transcendent unity by producing a self-perpetuating system of signification. Every effort to confront the purity of cosmic absence or presence — a differential desire for both extinction and survival — involves a participation in the psychic writing that is the supplementation of an immediacy that can never be retrieved.<sup>32</sup>

In the foregoing interpretation I have argued that writing itself is the central subject of *Pym*, and have attempted to rethink the "educational" aim of that work in terms of its reflection on the function of language. Assuming a paradoxical materiality in the shapes of the chasms and the traces in the marl, this writing serves to constitute an illusion of psychic depth by means of a complex interplay of metaphors. Thus, Mr. Poe makes visible through inscription what could never be discovered by any empirical journey of exploration. The implicit poetics of such a theory of writing poses no problem for Georges Poulet: "To create a beauty that cannot exist in time, the poet is obliged to recompose the elements of that time and to invent with the help of their multiple combinations a new, imaginary duration, analogous to the divine eternity. This imaginary duration is that of dream."<sup>33</sup> Yet, the "duration" of the "dream" in *Pym* has been expressed in terms of fundamental differences contributing to the temporalizing function of psychic inscription. The wholeness of consciousness presented in the poetic "dream" is an illusion disguising the interplay of past and future traces. Poe may have longed for a writing that would imitate the lost presence of cosmic unity, but he has staged in this work a writing that constitutes the differential "throb" of a cosmic or psychic process. In *Eureka*, Poe demonstrates how "Thought" relies on such difference:

*The amount of electricity developed on the approximation of two bodies, is proportional to the difference between the respective sums of the atoms of which the bodies are composed. That no two bodies are absolutely alike, is a simple corollary from all that has been here*

said. Electricity, therefore, existing always, is *developed* whenever *any* bodies, but manifested only when bodies of appreciable difference, are brought into approximation.

To electricity — so, for the present, continuing to call it — we *may* not be wrong in referring the various physical appearances of light, heat and magnetism; but far less shall we be liable to err in attributing to this strictly spiritual principle the more important phenomena of vitality, consciousness and *Thought*.<sup>34</sup>

This *élan vital* seems to be characteristic of Poe's poetic principle. The "energy" of thought and consciousness constitutes itself in the endless struggle of language both to transcend its spatio-temporal bounds and defer its ends. *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* prefigures Harry Levin's interpretation of the cosmic order in *Eureka*: "The perfection of indeterminacy."<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the final image in Pym's journey toward a metaphysical and psychological center betrays the duplicity of the sign we have witnessed throughout the voyage: "And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of snow" (852). The offered "embrace" of the opening "chasm" is checked by the exaggerated "human figure" that appears to block the path. This is the complex that has already been inscribed in the text, particularly in the relation of the chasm shapes to the carvings in the marl. Pym's vision of the end bears the traces of those prior representations, which had already offered in the pictograph of figure 4 "a human figure standing erect, with outstretched arm" (843). Death and deferral, revelation and repression all serve to compose the shifting center of this psychic voyage. I can find no fault with Marie Bonaparte's reading in this instance, because her Freudianism seems so appropriate for describing the originary difference of this creative principle:

For now we behold the form to which all Pym's wanderings and adventures led; the great maternal divinity whose sex, though unmentioned, must be that of the "shrouded" figure, the "woman in white," who appeared to the raving Poe in Moyamensing Prison; . . . it is the mother reclaiming her son. . . . On the one hand, she is white as the South Pole and warm with milk and with life, so recalling that blessed time when he was suckled at his mother's breast but, on the other, now related not to milk but to snow, representing *coldness* and death and so recalling unconscious memories of his pale, dead mother. Given the indifference to time characteristic of the unconscious, we see condensed in this figure the two main attributes Poe successively attached to his mother: *milk* and *death*.<sup>36</sup>

This is an interpretation already prefigured by Poe, who would write in *Eureka*: "Their [atoms of fragmentation] source lies in the principle, *Unity*. *This* is their lost parent. *This* they seek always — immediately — in all directions — wherever it is even partially to be found; thus appeasing, in some measure, the ineradicable tendency, while on the way to its absolute satisfaction in the end."<sup>37</sup> Found only "partially," such "unity" is in fact displaced by a contrived facsimile or clumsy duplicate. To borrow from Bonaparte's lexicon, I might suggest that the center remains the mother without the father, a lack which is disclosed in the son's attempts to supplement it.

The end has already been deferred by those inscriptions which have prepared for this ultimate representation, this final forgery — all of which is displaced again by a postscript, an appended note subverting its customary function as a final word. The Note is offered as yet another reading, a supplementation of those inscriptions in the text that have constituted the play of the psychic structure. This editorial interpretation relies on philological roots, whose scholarly authenticity John Irwin has demonstrated, in order to translate the universal writing of the psychic journey.<sup>38</sup> The text itself has become a machine for the production of surplus signifiers. The figures in the marl and the chasms themselves may serve as signifiers of the final vision, but that image remains unread in the Note. Concentrating on the problem of translating the inscriptions, the anonymous editor emphasizes the impossibility of escaping the hermeneutical circle in which any "truth" must be figured. Thus, the signifiers graven in the hills are displaced by those of the Note, both sets of which emphasize the generative qualities of a text whose signified remains "shady." In this process of inscription and reinscription a kind of psychic palimpsest has been constructed, the illusory depth of which involves an inevitable encounter with the surface of writing itself.

In his reading of Freud's "Note Upon the Mystic Writing-Pad" and Freud's general use of a graphic figure to describe the functioning of the psychic apparatus, Jacques Derrida argues that the relation between psychic strata cannot be viewed as a simple "translation" or "transcription" duplicating in consciousness "an unconscious writing." Freud himself had demonstrated that the text of the dream is a system of signifiers lacking "a permanent code" that would allow "a substitution or transformation of signifiers while retaining the same signified."<sup>39</sup> The dream content, according to Freud, is "expressed in a pictographic script (*Bilderschrift*)," which for Derrida is "not an inscribed image but a figurative script, an image inviting not a simple, conscious, present perception of the thing itself — assuming it exists — but a reading." The content of the dream assumes meaning in the traces it carries and the series of events (always textual) it activates. Derrida's analysis has the effect of deconstructing the Freudian hierarchy extending from the conscious to the unconscious, and substituting instead a fundamental *différance* of which every written sign bears the mark:

Let us note that the *depth* of the Mystic Pad is at once a depth without bottom, an endless reverberation, and a perfectly superficial exteriority: a stratification of surfaces each of whose relation to self, whose inside, is but the implication of another similarly exposed surface. It joins the two empirical certainties by which we are constituted: infinite depth in the implication of meaning, in the unified envelopment of the present, and, simultaneously, the pellicular essence of being, the absolute absence of a grounding.<sup>40</sup>

We have seen in *Pym* how such distinctions as inner and outer, lower and higher, unconscious and conscious merely metaphorize two functions in the ordinary movement of signification. In this narrative and in *Eureka*, Poe's own desire for "Unity" operates as part of a generative system for dissemination and the production of differences. Doubtless, Poe would hesitate at such an unexpected swerve in his metaphysical project and blindly reassert the transcendent ground in a "divine volition." But the writing in *Pym* and *Eureka* continues to deny any such monism. As Hoffman argues: "A double motion, where what Poe sought, what he ached to discover and return to, was a *single* motion. . . . But the nature of existence betrayed that desire. At the deepest level of his being Poe felt, Poe *knew*, that there can be no such unitary stasis."<sup>41</sup>

In *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, Poe lingers on the verge of establishing writing itself as the constitution and facilitation (*die Bahnung*) of psychic experience: "A writing advanced as conscious and acting in the world (the visible exterior of the graphic, of the literal, of the literal becoming literary, etc.) in terms of that exertion of writing which circulates like psychical energy between the unconscious and the conscious."<sup>42</sup> Derrida demonstrates how Freud moves through neurological and optical metaphors for the functioning of the psychic apparatus, only to establish tentatively the graphic metaphor of the "Mystic Writing-Pad" as an *inadequate* representation. Poe transforms the scriptural metaphor into a poetic "actuality" that facilitates the divided perception at the end of Pym's Antarctic voyage. Language may still appear to be a limitation for Poe that "veils" the signified behind and within the ambiguous drift of signifiers leading to the end of the journey. However, it is not a "veiled" but a "shrouded" figure baring the winding sheet of finitude, which is at once disclosed and repressed in the supplementary movement of psychic signification. Thus, deferral and supplementarity describe the *différance* of a writing activity carried out by a diverse cast of interpreters in *Pym*: Poe, Pym, Mr. Poe, the "editor" of the Note, as well as such lesser factorers of script as Augustus, Dirk Peters, even Tiger.

The writing itself has performed an unsettling of thought and intention we might never have expected from the ostensible author of *Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe*. Poe's gnostic and idealist attitudes appear to have been questioned by the very theory of writing that ought to have con-

firmed their values for the artist. It should no longer be necessary to account for the "accidental" death of Pym or the reluctance of Mr. Poe to offer a final explanation. They have been written *into* the text and have thus "discovered" themselves in their facilitation of the movement of signification. They have situated themselves in both the time and space of writing by effacing both the metaphysical and psychic presence that would obliterate their text. Further readings and writings are always already inscribed in this narrative, which provides its own appendix as the sign of the necessary *Nachträglichkeit* of voyaging: a literal, a literary footnote.<sup>43</sup>

## 5.

### Ecliptic Voyaging: Orbits of the Sign in Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener"



But judgment was passed on the dead by the living themselves; and that not merely in the case of private persons, but even of kings. The tomb of a king has been discovered — very large and elaborate in its architecture — in whose hieroglyphs the name of the principal person is obliterated, while in the bas-reliefs and pictorial designs the chief figure is erased. This has been explained to import that the honor of being thus immortalized was refused this king by the sentence of the Court of the Dead.

— Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*

If he lays him down, he can not sleep; he has waked the infinite wakefulness in him; then how can he slumber? Still his book, like a vast lumbering planet, revolves in his aching head. He can not command the thing out of its orbit; fain would he behead himself, to gain one night's repose.

— Melville, *Pierre or The Ambiguities*

In the preceding chapters, I have investigated basic problems of poetic representation that are related to the authors' conceptions of language, social organization, and human psychology. Each work criticizes nineteenth-century American culture for its growing disregard of those poetic and imaginative faculties that ought to be fundamental to our acts of self-understanding. The American fall is consistently interpreted in terms of our increasing neglect of our spiritual nature. Yet, these authors are not just nostalgically recalling a lost metaphysical order that would relate such a nature to a classical concept of unity or divine presence. In each case, the effort to rethink basic metaphysical problems has led these authors to study human expression and behavior, thus resituating spirituality within the domain of either self-consciousness or a language that allows such consciousness to be thought. In these texts, philosophy, poetics, and psychology have