

## A New Interpretation of Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym*

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After a century's neglect on the part of literary critics, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, Poe's only book-length story, seems to have at last begun to draw the critical attention. For a literary work, any criticism is better than neglect, and if *Pym* has not yet been firmly established as one of Poe's masterpieces, the increasing number of studies on the story, whether favorable or unfavorable in their evaluation, will certainly lead to a juster recognition of its merits and weaknesses.

One characteristic of a literary masterpiece is that its meaning can be interpreted in several different ways. Even in a work of doubtful value, a number of forced readings will be possible—some more plausible, others little more than a sheer nonsense. What could be taken seriously are only those readings which will stick consistently to their respective levels of meaning and provide intelligible interpretations. Among Poe's stories, "The Fall of the House of Usher" would be a case in point. The story's susceptibility of a number of equally tenable interpretations is a testimony to its artistic perfection. Several layers of meaning that may be shown to exist in the tale constitute the depth of its content. As the many facets of a well-cut jewel will reflect the light in many different directions, the finished form of a true masterpiece will reveal multiple layers of meaning according to the different levels of interpretation that the reader has in mind.

*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* could also be read in a number of ways. Auden chooses to read it as a straightforward adventure-narrative. Marie Bonaparte's and Gaston Bachelard's psychoanalytic reading of the story is well-known. Harry Levin and Sidney Kaplan read it essentially as a racial allegory. Patrick Quinn calls it a "truly *imaginary* voyage,"<sup>1)</sup> italicizing the word "imaginary" and thus meaning a voyage into the mind or imagination. Charles O'Donnell interprets the story as Poe's vision of a transcendent world and of the eternal life therein. An admirer of Poe would be delighted to learn that there is such an abundance of hidden meanings in the story. But the problem with *Pym* is

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1) Patrick F. Quinn, *The French Face of Edgar Poe* (Carbondale, Ill., 1957), p. 204.

that all these interpretations are not equally tenable. In fact, none of them provide a consistently satisfactory interpretation of the whole story. If a point of view explains some parts of the story quite well, it fails to do the same with other parts of the book. Quinn's study provides a fairly thorough and detailed reading of the whole story, but misses the locus of the story's power and fails to see where the true merit of the work lies. Walter E. Bezanson's essay pinpoints the highlights of the narrative and illuminates for us precisely where the power and merits of the story lie, but it simply disregards the deeper meaning of the story possibly latent in it. The present paper will first consider some of the representative interpretations on the story and their tenability in view of the story as a whole. In doing this, the paper aims to consider not only whether the story will bear out those interpretations consistently but also whether the story can lay a just claim to being a literary masterpiece on the basis of those merits which these readings believe it to possess. The paper will, then, try to evolve a new interpretation of the story and put forward evidences in support of that interpretation—evidences in the way of literary devices and stylistic techniques used in the story as well as casual hints and clues dropped by the author.

Let us consider *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, first of all, as an adventure-tale, which it undoubtedly is, at least on its surface. It would not be difficult at all to show that the story was ostensibly written, and intended to be read, as such. Recent studies have shown that Poe borrowed extensively, in some cases verbatim, from such books as *The Mariner's Chronicle* and *Remarkable Voyages and Remarkable Events*, both, factual accounts of shipwrecks, disasters, mutinies that actually happened on the sea. Poe also used *Symzonia*, a utopian novel by a pseudonymous "Captain Seaborn," as a source for the second part of his narrative. The timing of the writing and publication of the story also indicates that Poe, by writing a popular kind of sea-adventure, wanted to catch the public's imagination, which was then strongly drawn to the expeditions to the south pole. In fact, Poe's original intention was to present the story to the reading public as a factual account of real experiences of a real person. Arthur Gordon Pym was to have been not a fictional character, but the living author of the remarkable documentary. But the publisher of *The Southern Literary Messenger*, after dismissing Poe from the editorship of the magazine, revealed the true authorship of the story by attributing it to Poe when the first three chapters of *Pym* appeared in the January and February issues in 1837. That necessitated the elaborate introductory note, in which Poe, in the name of A. G. Pym, tried to repair

the damage done to the air of verisimilitude. All the circumstantial facts about the writing and publication of *Pym* makes it clear that Poe really *wanted* his story to be read and accepted by the public as an adventure story, and that a true one. This is not to say that Poe genuinely intended to write a realistic hoax and nothing else. Poe's true but hidden intention was, as will be shown later, to give the public a dream-narrative in the guise of a tale of sea-adventure. Normally, any reader who reads the story for the first time will read it as an adventure story. When *Pym* first appeared in book-form, some reviewers really believed it to be a true story. But no modern reader will be that gullible. Reading it as an adventure tale and believing it to be a true story are two different things. What one does in reading *Pym* is to suspend the disbelief for the time being and then read it *as if* it were a true account.

The story does not strike us at first as a fantasy-piece or an attempt at a dream-recital. Nor does the possibility of an allegorical interpretation readily occur to the reader till the very end of the story. No matter how many ways of reading the story there may be, it cannot avoid being first judged as an adventure narrative. Perhaps, W. H. Auden was the first modern commentator on the story who defended it strictly on this level. For Auden, *Pym* has all the merits of a fine adventure tale:

The problem for the writer of adventure stories is to invent a succession of events which are both interesting and varied and to make the order of succession plausible. To secure variety without sacrificing coherence or vice versa is more difficult than it looks, and *Gordon Pym*, one of the finest adventure stories ever written, is an object lesson in the art. Every kind of adventure occurs—adventures of natural origin like shipwreck; adventures like mutiny, caused by familiar human beings, or, like the adventures on the island, by strange natives; and, finally, supernatural nightmare events—yet each leads credibly into the next.<sup>2)</sup>

It must be admitted that Auden was quite influential in saving *Pym* from oblivion and bringing it to the attention of the critics and readers. But could Auden's high opinion of the story be justified on the level he chose to defend it? Or, to put the same question in different words, would *Pym* really satisfy Auden's standard of a successful adventure story and stand on the same ground with such masterpieces in a similar line as *Robinson Crusoe*, which Poe so much admired and was perhaps trying to imitate when he wrote his story? Now that the structure and details of the narrative have been subjected to the scrutinies of many commentators, and so many defects and faults have been pointed out, it seems

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2) W.H. Auden, in his "Introduction" to *Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Prose and Poetry* (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1950).

difficult to justify such high praises of *Pym* as Auden's, on the strength of its merits as an adventure story. *Pym* simply contains too many discrepancies, defects, and oversights to be called a masterfully-written adventure story. To list but a few of the more obvious faults: there are inconsistencies in the characterization of Peters, Pym, and Augustus; there are the now well-known oversights concerning Augustus' death and the dog Tiger; there are too many unkept promises in the earlier parts of the book about the content and direction of the ensuing parts of the story. For the most thorough exposure of such defects, the reader might consult an article by J. V. Ridgely and Iola S. Haverstick.<sup>3)</sup> In an extremely able and detailed study of external information and a minute, line-by-line analysis of all the basic texts, they pry out those major and minor errors in the story, which are too numerous to count. Then they try to explain the circumstances that allowed such errors to come in. Discrepancies and oversights are attributed to the interruptions in the writing of the story, hastiness in each stage of writing, changes of plan, and the inevitable forgetfulness that were caused by the difficult circumstances Poe was forced to write the story in, rather than to his incompetence as an artist. Yet, whether such flaws were due to adversity or incompetence, the upshot of Ridgely's and Haverstick's study is that *Pym* cannot be judged to be an excellently-written adventure story.

Auden speaks of the plausible order of succession, and views the story as a well-constructed sequence of remarkable events and adventures. But, if we rely upon our recollection of the narrative, the scenes that remain vivid in our mind are not adventures and events of external magnitude, such as the mutiny on the *Grampus*, the summary execution of its passengers and crew, or the massacre of the *Jane Guy*'s crew by a landslide on the Tsalal island. On the contrary, what stand out most in our memory are the more personal accounts of Pym's dreams, fears, fantasies, and visions—namely, the *Ariel* episode, the fantasies in the hold of the *Grampus* and grotesque events leading to the horrible vision of the death-ship and cannibalism, and the final voyage into the white ocean. That these are to be understood not as real events but as records of Pym's dream-visions will be the main argument of the paper to be put forth later. At this point, suffice it to say that the chief interest and attraction of a *bona-fide* adventure story would be in its action-filled scenes, and that the power of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* seems to lie elsewhere. It cannot be denied that *Pym* is an adventure story on the surface. Yet, if the story were

3) J.V. Ridgely and Iola S. Haverstick, "Chartless Voyage: The Many Narratives of Arthur Gordon Pym," *TSLI*, (1966) 63-80.

to be read only as an adventure narrative and evaluated as such, *Pym* has little chance of attaining the stature of a literary masterpiece. The same words of Auden, which greatly enhanced the work in the esteem of both the critics and the readers, will ultimately send it back to oblivion, if they choose to judge it only as an adventure story.

If *Pym* could not be called a well-written adventure story because of its too-numerous flaws, it could still be read and appreciated from a different point of view; for it would be possible to read it as fantasy or an oneiric drama. The inconsistencies in characterization and discrepancies in factual detail that we find in *Pym* would be inexcusable flaws in a conventional adventure story. But, if *Pym* were to be read as a symbolic account of Pym/Poe's dream-visions, those flaws could easily be disregarded as of little importance, or even explained away or justified as a characteristic of peculiarly illogical dream-mechanism. In fact, it is difficult to imagine how a perfectionist and careful craftsman like Poe could have allowed so many mistakes in his story. This is not to say that Poe did not make mistakes. The fact remains that there *are* so many mistakes in *Pym*. But in defense of Poe, it is possible to think that the blunders were made and allowed to remain, for they were mistakes of a kind that did not really concern the central meaning of what Poe was writing. Poe would not have approved this kind of defense, for it conflicts with his rigorous idea of "total effect" formulated in *The Philosophy of Composition*. However, in *Pym*, he was on an unfamiliar ground of writing a novel-length story, and we may do well to remember here what Poe said about the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of attaining a perfect plot in a novel:

In the tale proper—where there is no space for development of character or for great profusion and variety of incidents—mere *construction* is, of course, far more imperatively demanded than in the novel. Defective plot, in this latter, may escape observation, but in the tale, never.<sup>4)</sup>

Plot, properly defined, is that which no part can be displaced without ruin to the whole. It may be described as a building so dependently constructed that to change the position of a single brick is to overthrow the entire fabric. In this definition and description, we of course refer only to that infinite perfection which the true artist bears ever in mind—that unattainable goal to which his eyes are always directed, but of the possibility of attaining which he still endeavors, if wise, to cheat himself into the belief. The reading world, however, is satisfied with a less rigid construction of the term. It is content to think that plot a good one, in which none of the leading incidents can be removed without detriment to the mass.<sup>5)</sup>

4) From "Marginalia," July 1849.

5) From Poe's review of Bulwer Lytton's *Night and Morning*, 1841.

With these words, it seems, Poe could well have defended his own *Pym*. The flaws in *Pym* are not the kind of flaws that affect the narrative's central quality and power—so Poe might have said. However, in order for *Pym* to be defended in this way, it must be read from a point of view other than Auden's.

Marie Bonaparte and Gaston Bachelard were the first commentators on the story who suggested that *Pym* could, and should, be read as an oneiric drama rather than as a realistic account of an imaginary voyage. For Marie Bonaparte, the whole surface narrative of *Pym* is just a veil that covers but flimsily the biography of Poe's psychic life. Every event that occurs in the story is material for psychoanalysis, and each incident is to be identified as a symbolic manifestation of Poe's subconscious. The meaning of the whole book is read as Poe's search of the Mother—mutinies and reprisals are expressions of Poe's revolt against the Father, and the hold in the *Grampus* is a symbol for the womb. One can see how trivial and inconsequential *Pym*'s flaws seem when the book is read in this way. Not only could they be disregarded as irrelevant to the main theme of the book, but they could even be justified as characteristics of dream-logic. Mme. Bonaparte's reading certainly demonstrates that there is a deeper layer of meaning in *Pym*, besides the surface narrative of voyages and adventure. The problem with her interpretation is that she tries to explain the whole book through her psychoanalytic method. With her, the narrative loses its significance as a literary work, and becomes a sort of clinical material by means of which one can delve into Poe's psychic life. This is really an opposite extreme from Auden's viewpoint. What Auden thinks plausible as it is, Bonaparte would find significant only in its latent content. Both Auden and Bonaparte fail to distinguish between the episodes that seem to relate Pym's dream-visions and the external events that merely serve to bridge the gaps between the highlights of Pym's dream. As is generally the case with her interpretation of other works by Poe, *Pym* exists for Mme. Bonaparte chiefly as raw biographical data, not as a literary work to be judged on its own merit.

Compared with Marie Bonaparte, Gaston Bachelard has an admirably balanced view of the work. Although he reads the story essentially as a dream-narrative, he does not forget the layer of external reality. Bachelard shows us that only a double reading, in which the two layers of meaning in the story are followed at the same time, can make a true understanding and appreciation of the book possible. Bachelard's words quoted below are very enlightening in their suggestion of the true character of Pym:

When literature first began to interest me I found nothing but boredom in this book, and though I was an admirer of Poe from the time I was twenty I could never summon the fortitude needed to get through a reading of these interminable and monotonous adventures. When I came to understand the importance of the revolutions accomplished by modern psychology, I went back to my earlier readings and took up first of all those books that had proved tedious to me, a reader whose taste was warped along positivistic, realistic, scientific lines. In particular I resumed *Gordon Pym*, setting the drama this time where it really belongs, as all drama does, on the frontier between the conscious and the unconscious. I then became aware that this adventure, which in appearance hurtles across two oceans, is in reality an adventure of the unconscious, an adventure taking place in the nighttime of a soul. And this book, which to a reader of conventional literary tastes would seem weak and unfinished, was revealed instead as the full achievement of a remarkably unified dream. I thenceforth ranked *Pym* as among the great works of Edgar Poe.<sup>6)</sup>

Indeed, any re-evaluation of *Pym* and recognition of its true worth should start with Bachelard's insights.

Patrick Quinn's essay on *Pym*, titled "Poe's Imaginary Voyage" and included as a chapter in his book, *The French Face of Edgar Poe*, is perhaps the most comprehensive commentary yet written on the story. A good part of his essay is a recapitulation of Mme. Bonaparte's and Bachelard's interpretations. While he points out the limitations of Mme. Bonaparte's extreme position, he is indebted to Bachelard in a large part for his reading of *Pym* as a "truly imaginary voyage." Quinn has no illusions about where the real worth of *Pym* lies. He writes:

If *Arthur Gordon Pym* is examined from the intellectualistic point of view..... it must be set down as a failure. If Pym's voyage is not interpreted as a voyage of the mind, then it must appear as just one more sequence of adventure at sea, suitable for the adolescent readers of Stevenson and Verne but hardly worth the attention of anyone else.<sup>7)</sup>.... For *Arthur Gordon Pym*, which on the surface is an episodic tale of improbabilities, is fundamentally, at the submerged level of intuition, a truly *imaginary* voyage.<sup>8)</sup>

Yet his thesis that deception, revolt, and self-destruction are the three main themes of the story seems to confuse the manifest and the latent of the book. Self-destruction, undoubtedly, is one of the main themes of the story at the submerged level. But it is difficult to accept *deceit* and *revolt* as equally important themes on that level. For, as Bachelard says and Quinn agrees, the adventure described in *Pym* is an "adventure in solitude," and the themes of revolt and deception are themes of the social drama that unfolds on the surface

6) Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les rêves* (Paris, 1942), pp. 80-1. Patrick F. Quinn's translation is used here.

7) Quinn, pp. 201-2.

8) *Ibid.*, p. 204.

level of the narrative—in the form of mutiny and counter-mutiny on the *Grampus*, or of the treachery of the natives and their massacre of of the *Jane Guy* crew on the Tsalal island. It must be pointed out that those incidents that contain the themes of revolt and deception are there mainly for the purpose of making plausible the sequence of events that will set up the stage for the solitary drama of Pym's soul. The themes of revolt and deception belong to what Quinn calls an "episodic tale of improbabilities," rather than to the "truly imaginary" part of the story.

Finally, it is Walter E. Bezanson that tackles this controversial tale from a purely literary point of view. In a penetrating study titled, "The Troubled Sleep of Pym," he answers the question of *Pym's* literary worth with admirable insight and convincing discussion. Though Bezanson acknowledges his indebtedness to Marie Bonaparte's study for his thesis that Pym's literary worth depends almost entirely on Poe's central technique of dream-recital, he refuses to engage in the kind of analysis that tries to offer psychoanalytic interpretations of the story's latent content. Such interpretations are, in his opinion, no more than conjectures or, at best, insights that can be neither proved nor refuted. Moreover, the value of precise identification of the story's symbolism with Poe's psychic biography is doubtful. Bonaparte's interpretations may be of value in understanding Poe's life and psychology, but they are mostly irrelevant guess-works in a literary consideration of the narrative as a literary work. The value of Bezanson's essay lies in its bold and clean-cut judgment. He draws a clear line between what is merely technical, if not worthless, part of the story and what is truly powerful in it. His illuminating insight into the locus of Pym's literary worth can be best conveyed by quoting his comments on the *Ariel* incident:

The *Ariel* incident, our narrator tells us, is offered as preliminary adventure "by way of introduction to a longer and more momentous narrative." A brief, separate story of disaster at sea, the episode is prologue to a world in which meaning is most nearly captured in sudden tableaux or dream pictures, marked by visual intensity and highly charged with emotion. In their purest form these images seem to flash and disappear, giving the sense of an almost instantaneous experience. Since literature is an art form which operates in time, unlike painting, this is an effect rather than a literal achievement. The sloop *Ariel* is made visible by the wand of Pym-Poe-Prospero, and it will disappear in the twinkling of an eye "amid the roaring of the tempest." We have entered a world ruled by magic, miracle, and fortune. The event in this prologue which is least susceptible to belief provides the most memorable image. When the *Penguin* strikes the *Ariel*, she comes about only after a raging argument of "nearly five minutes" between her captain and mate. The seamanship that follows is a child's improvisation: the mate launches the jolly boat in the night, in the storm, while the ship is under way, and as she lurches far over, showing her



coppered hull nearly to the keel, and there, there the dream-image is:

"The body of a man was seen to be affixed in the most singular manner to the smooth and shining bottom..., and beating violently against it with every movement of the hull. After several ineffectual efforts, made during lurches of the ship, and at the imminent risk of swamping the boat, I was finally disengaged from my perilous situation and taken on board—for the body proved to be my own. It appeared that one of the timber-bolts having started and broken a passage through the copper, it had arrested my progress as I passed under the ship, and fastened me in so extraordinary a manner to her bottom. The head of the bolt had made its way through the collar of the green baize jacket I had on, and through the back part of my neck, forcing itself out between two sinews and just below the right ear."

It is one of Poe's better "night scenes"—wild, impossible, violent, yet precisely detailed. The false seamanship and Pym's unlikely endurance fall away before an apocalyptic vision of the self, spread-eagled against the hull, nailed to the copper sheathing, and drowned again and again.<sup>9)</sup>

The reader will have seen what Bezanson is driving at: not only does he attribute the ultimate worth of *Pym* to what he calls "sudden tableaux, marked by visual intensity and highly charged with emotion," but he is saying that these tableaux or images *are*, in reality, dream-pictures. But the evidence here is merely internal, and conviction depends upon each reader's sensibility and his recognition of oneiric qualities in the crucial passages. Bezanson's case needs to be strengthened by some supporting evidence.

The main contention of this paper is that *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is a story of a series of dream fantasies (the *Ariel* episode, the nightmare in the hold of the *Grampus*, the events on the deck of the *Grampus* leading to the vision of the deathship, and the final voyage into the white ocean), linked by realistic accounts of the voyage of the *Grampus* and the *Jane Guy* (including those typical sea-adventure episodes as mutinies and the attack of the natives). Some questions immediately arise—what evidences are there to argue that the four episodes (the *Ariel* incident, etc) are in fact dream-fantasies and others are not? Why may one not take all the parts of the book as equally realistic renderings of fantastic adventures? Exactly where would the dividing lines be between the supposed dream-fantasies and other parts? These points will be dealt with at length and in detail, in our consideration of each of the four episodes.

That the passage quoted by Bezanson is the climax of the *Ariel* episode is beyond question. It is the kind of last scene Poe delights in in many of his short stories—as scene

9) Walter E. Bezanson, "The Troubled Sleep of Arthur Gordon Pym," in *Essays in Literary History Presented to J. Milton French*, ed. Rudolf Kirk, and C.F. Main (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1960), pp. 153-5.

in which the protagonist finds himself on the brink of certain death, in the most terrible and singular manner, before he is saved by some last-minute miracle. In other cases, as in "The Pit and the Pendulum," or "The Descent into the Maelstrom," the scene is an eye-witness account by the narrator—that is, the protagonist/narrator is himself the witness of the singular situation he is in. But, here in the *Ariel* incident, Pym loses consciousness when the *Penguin* hits the *Ariel* and does not regain consciousness till hours later. For his account of the incident, Pym is, of course, relying upon the words of those who were in the rescue boat. Yet, how is it that his words are so precise, and their effect so striking, as to make the scene far more memorable and vivid than any of the other passages in which Pym describes what he saw himself? This may be too fine a point to argue, but is it not possible that Pym has seen this vision in his dream? Let us examine the passage in question grammatically before going into the more solid evidence. In the passages immediately before and after this one, the subjects of most sentences are, naturally, the rescue party: the mate, the men, they, he, etc. But in the passage quoted, they all disappear from the scene—at least, stylistically, and the result is a curious syntax of predominantly passive constructions: "The body of a man was seen to be affixed.....," "After several ineffectual efforts, made during the lurches of the ship, and at the imminent risk of swamping the boat, I was finally disengaged.....," or, "It appeared that one of the timber-bolts having started and broken a passage through the copper, it had arrested my progress....." If Pym were reporting, as he supposedly is, what he had heard from the rescue party, wouldn't it have been more natural to have written: "They saw the body of a man...," "...they finally disengaged me.....," "they found that one of the timber-bolts which.....," etc.? May we not assume that Poe had intended, at least stylistically, to eliminate all extra human-agents from the scene in order to leave the stage clear for Pym's extraordinary dream-tableau?

Once the reader agrees, if reluctantly, to accept the *Ariel* incident as a dream-recital, many other points can be added in favor of such a view. First of all, there is the choice of the name of Pym's boat. That there might have been more than one real *Ariel* floating on the sea in the 19th century America is beside the point. The point is that the choice of the name could hardly be more appropriate if Poe had been suggesting that it was an imaginary possession rather than a real one, and if there were *Ariels* around, it was so much the better for the sake of verisimilitude.

These considerations, so far, of the style of the crucial passage and of the choice of the name of the boat hardly constitute conclusive proof, to be sure. But more solid evidences

or hints reveal, upon close examination of the text, that the *Ariel* is but a metaphor for the flights of Pym's fantasy. Pym says of his boat:

I owned a sail-boat called the *Ariel*, and worth about seventy-five dollars. She had a half deck or cuddy, and was rigged sloop-fashion—I forget her tonnage, but she would hold ten persons without much crowding. *In this boat we were in the habit of going on some of the maddest freaks in the world;* and, when I now think of them, it appears to me a thousand wonders that I am alive today. (chap. I) (Italics mine)

Pym must have owned the boat for some time, to judge from the way he talks, and one would expect him to know something about handling his boat. Yet he tells us he knows nothing about its management, when Augustus falls insensible to the bottom. The wound in his neck made by the timber-bolt proves of no consequence when he wakes up, and there is no mention of any difficulty in explaining the disappearance of the *Ariel*. Let us consider Pym's words quoted below from the concluding passage of the chapter:

....and I verily believe not one of our friends in Nantucket had the slightest suspicion that the terrible story told by some sailors in town of their having run down a vessel at sea and drowned some thirty or forty poor devils, had reference either to the *Ariel*, my companion, or me.

Now, if the sailors were really referring to the *Ariel*, as Pym here implies, why would they say that they had drowned "some thirty or forty poor devils," when they knew perfectly well that there had been only two boys in the boat and that both the boys had been rescued? One might answer that Pym, here, expects us to think that the drunken sailors were exaggerating. But the case may be interpreted the other way around: Pym had no real boat, so there was no *Ariel* to explain the loss of. Pym and Augustus had never gone out on the sea, but had been sleeping and dreaming in bed. Pym had heard some sailors talk about a disaster that had recently occurred on the sea, and with his penchant for fantasy, immediately imagined a similar disaster befalling to himself. Something like this would certainly be a more plausible interpretation of Pym's incredible adventure. It is difficult to tell, in the other sections of the story, where the dream-recital ends and where technical or explanatory material begins. But in this introductory episode, the line is quite clear: Pym's dream begins at the point where he falls asleep in the same bed with Augustus, and continues till he wakes up for breakfast.

If the *Ariel* adventure *is* a dream, it would not be difficult to see some parts of the rest of the narrative also as dream. Poe seems to be suggesting to the reader precisely this way

of reading his story when he lets Pym say at the beginning of the *Ariel* account: "I will relate one of these adventures *by way of introduction to a longer and more momentous narrative.*" (Italics mine) Pym also says:

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

Since the narrative will be not about real experiences in the real world that happen independently of Pym's will or desire, but about the content of his personal dream-fantasies, a description of his own turn of mind can also be a description of the general trend of the dream-narrative that will follow. What follows, then, should not be taken as an account of Pym's real experiences, but as a fulfillment in imagination of his strange desires for disaster and self-destruction. Poe has been taken to task for having forgotten numerous promises made to the reader regarding the content of his story, but what one should realize is that Poe has kept *his* promises *implied* in the passage quoted above, almost to the letter.

When the *Grampus* puts out to sea with Pym and Augustus on board, an unsuspecting reader might expect some exciting adventures or thrilling accounts of "the details of a mutiny and atrocious butchery," that Poe promises in the subtitle of the story. But what is actually given to the reader is another of Pym's masochistic dreams, only more sustained this time than the one given in the preliminary episode. One would have expected some action-filled drama to unfold on the deck of the *Grampus*—amid rough waves, on the vast ocean, and beneath the dazzling sun. What do we actually get? Of all the imaginable places on a ship, we are taken with Pym into the hold, and then treated with an excruciating account of living entombment! Premature-burial is, of course, one of Poe's favorite themes in his tales. But who would have thought Poe would do it again on a whaling-boat? Poe certainly keeps his promise about "the details of a mutiny and atrocious butchery on board the American Brig *Grampus*," but if we try to see where Poe is really serious and where he is merely rationalizing, we will see that the mutiny is only an excuse or a technical device to make Pym's fantasy of entombment possible. Communication with the outside must be cut off, and Augustus must not come, in order for Pym to be left to himself in the hold. And the only rational sequence of events that will fulfill such

conditions is a mutiny. It may seem that Augustus' sudden and accidental death would have served equally well, but not so. This is only a ship, and Pym can shout to let his existence known and be taken out of the hold at any time. He must not be allowed to do this, and that is the purpose of the Augustus' note written in blood.

Pym's voyage is a voyage of the most solitary kind. It is a voyage into the realm of fantasy and imagination. Such a personal and psychological drama cannot take place in the company of a large crowd, for it is not the kind of drama that ensues as a result of relationship between men, but a drama of the mind and of the imagination which is most active when it has retreated from the human society into a solitary isolation. Thus, the surrounding human beings are only impediments that must somehow be got rid of. In the *Ariel* episode, the elimination of the extra personnel was achieved only stylistically, because the presence of the rescue-party was unavoidable for the last-minute rescue of Pym. But here on the *Grampus*, it is shown to be done in reality by a counter-mutiny. The mate and his party are summarily eliminated to prepare the stage for Pym's third indulgence in his gloomy dream. This time, it is a dream of long privation culminating in the horrible vision of the death-ship and cannibalism. An amazing tour-de-force that completes the long-drawn agony of the survivors, the close-up tableau of the death-ship confronts them and dashes them from the height of hope to the bottom of extreme despair and unspeakable horror:

As our first loud yell of terror broke forth, it was replied to by something.... resembling the scream of human voice.... At this instance another sudden yaw brought the region of the fore-castle for a moment into view.... We saw the tall stout figure still leaning on the bulwark, and still nodding his head to and fro.... On his back, from which a portion of the shirt had been torn, leaving it bare, there sat a huge seagull, busily gorging itself with the horrible flesh, its bill and talons deep buried, and its white plumage spattered all over with blood. As the brig moved further round so as to bring us close in view, the bird, with much apparent difficulty, 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. The horrid morsel dropped at length with a sullen splash immediately at the feet of Parker. (chap. 10)

Even after this mind-shattering vision, Pym's dream does not end. Only when he has fully tasted the agony of death-lottery, Pym finally blacks out, his dream having run its full course. After the episode of cannibalism, the narrative moves fast. Till this point, the survivors have been confined to the narrow space of the *Grampus'* stripped deck, and nothing has happened to change their external situation, although they have been suffering

so long and so much. To change the stage would mean to wake up from the dream, temporary though it may be. Now that this phase of Pym's dream has been concluded, a new stage has to be set in order to make next dream possible. An axe is found, and cutting through the deck with it, they get plenty of food from the store-room. Augustus, who has survived all the severities of the storm and privation, now dies in the abundance of food, leaving Pym with Peters, his replacement. The *Grampus* capsizes, but it proves rather a boon, for the bottom of the ship is covered with nutritious barnacles, which can last them over a month. That long wait is now not necessary, for Pym's dream in this section has been played out. What remains to be told is a brief account of the rescue by the *Jane Guy*.

The adventures on the strange island of Tsalal are an interesting mixture of what Poe gathered from his readings of the South Sea explorations and some echoes of *Symzonia*, combined with his love of mystification and cryptography. What is characteristic of Poe is again the content of Pym's dream, which begins with a brief recurrence of the entombment fantasy and leads to the unforgettable dream-image of universal whiteness in the final section of the book. This phase of Pym's dream also begins only after the stage is cleared for his solitary drama. The *Jane Guy's* crew is eliminated in a twinkling of an eye in the incredible episode of whole-sale massacre by landslide, leaving Pym and Peters alone in this strange part of the world.

So far, this study has concentrated almost solely on the highlights of Pym's dream and disregarded much of the more factual kind of material in the rest of the book. Although the sequence of events running through the surface level of the story is no contemptible performance by an author whose forte is not a realistic adventure story, what constitutes the power and real merit of *Pym* are those parts in which Poe exploits Pym's dream-life. There are some common features in Pym's dream-scenes, which seem to corroborate, first, that they are actually dream-recitals and, second, that they are dreams of one man, Pym. It has been shown how the number of extraneous characters is trimmed to permit a drama of a solitary mind. The number of dramatis personae when so reduced, varies from 2 to 4: Pym, Augustus, Peters, Parker, Nu-Nu the native. If we disregard Parker and Nu-Nu, the number is essentially two— either Pym and Augustus or Pym and Peters. In the *Ariel* and the *Grampus* episodes, the principal characters are Pym and Augustus. In the adventure on the *Tsalal* island and the white ocean, they are Pym and Peters, Peters being the replacement for Augustus after the latter's death. It could be shown that these two are in fact bifurcated personalities of one individual, Pym. Pym represents the dreaming self, and

Augustus/Peters the external and worldly facade, of the one person. Pym is the inner mind that indulges in and lives on strange dreams and terrifying fantasies. Augustus/Peters is the rational and physical being that acts, eats, gets tired, and goes to bed.

The dream-fantasy of the subconscious mind and the physical actions of the outward self cannot be carried on in the equal degree at the same time. In fact, the relative activity of the two may be compared to the action of the sea upon the land in the ebb and flow of the tide. When the one withdraws, the other is uncovered and in full view; when the one rises, the other becomes submerged. The gradual or abrupt cessation of the dream-sequence and the physical activity or waking thoughts is indicated in the story by falling asleep, loss of consciousness, or mental or physical apathy, on the part of Pym, Augustus or Peters, as the case may be. The numerous references, in the crucial scenes of the narrative, to Pym's or Augustus' loss of sense or falling-asleep, or to Augustus' or Peters' apathy, and their significance, have never been fully realized by the critics. In the *Ariel* episode, Pym and Augustus get into the same bed. Augustus falls asleep first, and Pym *remains awake* till much later. It is always when the outer world recedes and the rational mind falls asleep that the subliminal world of fantasy becomes activated. Curiously enough, despite the apparent inefficiency and general passivity of Pym, it is always he who gets ascendancy over Augustus or Peters in dream-scenes. When Augustus falls insensible into the bottom of the boat and is put out of action, Pym the dreaming self is left alone, freed at last from the rational self, to pursue his fantasy to its final climax. Similar device is in evidence in the other dream-episodes: in the hold of the *Grampus*, Pym is completely alone; on the deck, Augustus is incapacitated and apathetic due to injury; on the white ocean, Peters falls into apathy.

Lastly, there are even more obvious clues to Pym and Augustus or Peters being two divided selves of one person. The merging of the two personalities is hinted at by the close physical proximity or contact of Pym and Augustus or Pym and Peters at crucial points. The reader will remember Pym and Augustus getting into the *same* bed before the *Ariel* episode. On the *Ariel*, Augustus falls senseless into the bottom and Pym ties his other self to the ring-bolt. Augustus' posture here is itself a miniature replica of the more picturesque tableau of Pym being fastened to the timber-bolt of the *Penguin*. A few moments later, when Pym himself finally blacks out, he falls, of all places, *upon the body of his friend*. Again, on the *Tsalal* island, when Pym falls in a swoon while climbing down a cliff, he falls *into the arms of Peters*. It is strange that these obvious—perhaps too obvious—

hints have been overlooked by the numerous interpreters of the story. In fact, such glaring hints should have been rigorously avoided, if Poe had really intended the story to be read as a realistic adventure. That consideration and the unmistakably symbolical ending of the last episode lead one to believe that, after all, Poe expected this story to be read as a dream-fantasy of one, called Arthur Gordon Pym.