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# The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym and Related Tales

爱伦·坡小说精选

Edgar Allan Poe [美国] 埃德加·爱伦·坡 著



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THE NARRATIVE OF  
ARTHUR GORDON PYM  
AND RELATED TALES

EDGAR ALLAN POE was born in Boston in 1809, the son of itinerant actors who left him an orphan in 1811. He became a ward of Richmond merchant John Allan and from 1815 to 1820 lived with the family in London. Upon his return, Poe received schooling in Richmond before attending the University of Virginia for a year. In 1827, he clashed with Allan and left for Boston, where he joined the army and published a slender volume, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. He later attended the US Military Academy until his dismissal in 1831. The poet moved to Baltimore and began writing for magazines in 1832; three years later he secured a position with the *Southern Literary Messenger* in Richmond and married his cousin, Virginia Clemm. The journal prospered, but its publisher Thomas W. White fired Poe at the end of 1836. Relocating in New York, Poe endured great hardship but in 1838 published his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Subsequently he found magazine work in Philadelphia with *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*; during this period he composed 'Ligeia' and 'The Fall of the House of Usher'. His first volume of stories, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, appeared in 1839. Poe then became an editor of *Graham's Magazine*, but the onset of Virginia's tuberculosis in 1842 devastated him and led to his resignation. Returning to New York, he began to write for newspapers and in 1845 became owner-editor of the *Broadway Journal*. That same year, his poem 'The Raven' brought him fame. By 1846, though, the *Broadway Journal* failed, and Virginia's situation became hopeless. She died in 1847, leaving Poe in the despair which produced 'Ulalume'. Rallying in 1848, he composed *Eureka* and pursued platonic romances with several women. He also sought subscriptions for a long-contemplated monthly magazine. On his last trip to Richmond he courted his first sweetheart—by then a wealthy widow—and lectured on poetry. In October 1849 he collapsed in Baltimore and died in a hospital.

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## INTRODUCTION

BEST known as a poet and writer of tales, Edgar Allan Poe began to compose his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, in late 1836 near the end of his first stint as a magazine editor. Poe's association with the *Southern Literary Messenger* had been uneasy from the outset; one of his earliest contributions, 'Berenice', drew a rebuke from owner Thomas W. White for its egregious 'bad taste'. White nevertheless offered Poe an editorial position with the Richmond journal in June 1835 but soon had reason to worry about his moody and 'rather dissipated' employee. Poe himself felt increasing disdain for White, whose pedestrian mind and moralistic temperament clashed with his own mercurial style. Despite these personal tensions, however, the *Messenger* flourished under Poe's direction, becoming one of the most widely discussed periodicals in the United States. But by autumn 1836, as a monetary crisis gripped the country, relations between the two men deteriorated. White resented Poe's presumption of authority, his irritability, and the untimely 'illnesses' occasioned by drink; in September the publisher issued a notice of termination and then lamely rescinded it. As Poe drafted the opening chapters of his novel, however, he must have anticipated his impending dismissal.

Poe had started to write *Pym* not through any urge to prove himself in the longer form of the novel but because he had been unsuccessful in interesting publishers in a volume of tales. Despite the intervention of author James Kirke Paulding, who brought Poe's magazine stories to the attention of Harper and Brothers, the New York publishing house in June 1836 formally rejected his collection of 'detached tales and pieces', most of which had already appeared in print and were, they judged, 'too learned and mystical' to be relished by the 'multitude'. Harpers advised Poe (as had Paulding himself) that American readers preferred a 'single and connected story' of one or two volumes in length. For a few more months Poe persisted in his effort to place the so-called 'Folio Club' stories,

offering them unsuccessfully to Harrison Hall, a Philadelphia publisher, and to the British publishing house of Saunders and Otley. In late 1836, though, mindful of his uncertain status with the *Messenger* and his new responsibilities to his child-bride Virginia (and her mother, Aunt Maria Clemm), Poe took up the challenge of composing a 'connected story' which might appeal to the masses.

Quite apart from its crassly commercial aspect, this project vexed Poe for two principal reasons. Stung by the suggestion that his tales were too esoteric, he was forced to vulgarize his fiction to placate a public whose jingoism and lack of taste often involved it—as he complained in his famous 'Drake-Halleck' review—'in the gross paradox of liking a stupid book the better because, sure enough, its stupidity [was] American'. Behind the Defoesque posturing of the preface to *Pym*, we find wry evidence of Poe's lingering contempt for the 'shrewdness and common sense' of those native readers whose predilection for 'uncouthness' had partly occasioned the rejection of his tales by Harper and Brothers. Secondly, Poe had little critical appreciation for extended works of poetry or fiction; he later called the long poem 'a flat contradiction in terms'. He had once tried to compose a full-scale verse drama ('Politian') but gave it up. His own gift was for lyric verse and for brief narratives culminating in stunning effects. In his 1842 review of Hawthorne he would formulate a theory of brevity holding that the tale depends formally upon a 'single effect', a powerful emotional force resulting from some unified 'pre-established design' apprehensible at a single sitting. In the same review he would deem the novel 'objectionable, from its length', a prejudice doubtless reinforced by the writing of *Pym*.

As it happened, Poe's departure from the *Messenger* staff coincided with the first instalment in January 1837 of 'The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym', a rousing 'sea story' attributed in a note to 'Mr. Poe'. White had little regard for the tale—which he dismissed as an exercise in the salty style of Captain Marryatt—and considered its publication (along with a second excerpt in February) an act of charity towards his erstwhile employee, who continued to 'pester' him for money before

leaving Richmond. In a letter to a friend, White portrayed Poe as 'trying every manœuvre to foist himself' on one of the Eastern literary journals. Near the end of January, Poe moved his family to New York where he apparently expected to obtain a position with a forthcoming magazine, the *New York Review*. But the clergymen organizing that periodical finally decided not to engage the caustic editor of the *Messenger*.

Thrown back upon his own resources, Poe resumed work on his novel and composed most of the text between February and April; by May he had evidently secured a contract with Harpers, who announced that *Pym* was 'nearly ready for publication'. Compelled by dire necessity to produce a novel for which he had neither aptitude nor inclination, Poe seems to have decided—shortly after his break with White—to turn the project into a hoax, an act of literary deception couched as an authentic travel narrative by a young man just back from the South Seas 'and elsewhere'. To carry off the scheme, he concocted a preface signed by 'A. G. Pym' to explain why his own name was attached to the story in the *Messenger*. 'Mr. Poe' figures in the preface as a mentor, promoter, and temporary ghostwriter; he has expressed the 'greatest interest', Pym reports, in that part of the narrative pertaining to the Antarctic Ocean.

The topic of polar exploration held broad contemporary interest. Poe himself had drawn attention in the *Messenger* to the campaign by Captain Jeremiah N. Reynolds and others to organize an American exploratory voyage to the Antarctic, and the newspapers of early 1837 carried frequent articles about the impending government expedition. Under pressure to complete the book and capitalize on the excitement, Poe larded his narrative with material borrowed—often blatantly plagiarized—from travel accounts like Benjamin Morrell's *Narrative of Four Voyages* (1832). Reports about the South Seas furnished Poe with details that lent verisimilitude to his depiction of remote islands, while imagination and fantasy supplied images of that mysterious *terra incognita*, the Antarctic region. He must have concluded that if his hoax succeeded, it would permit him to supply the long narrative demanded by Harpers



and ease his financial situation without betraying his identity as author or thus seeming to compromise his lofty critical standards.

Collectively the personal hardships and persistent aggravations which worked upon Poe as he wrote his novel would hardly seem conducive to a classic work of fiction. To be sure, the completed text betrays a degree of unevenness, having been assembled apparently by fits and starts with conflicting purposes in view. Textual scholar J. V. Ridgely has identified four distinct stages of composition—which probably stretched into the summer of 1837—and has called attention to the novel's mixed generic signals. At different moments, Poe evidently conceived of *Pym* as a sensational potboiler, as a plausible voyage narrative, as a story of symbolic quest, and as a self-consciously parodic tale that flaunts its fictionality and mocks its own excesses. Modern critical discussion of the novel has, we might note, split roughly along the same lines, producing strikingly divergent readings. It may well be that Poe's motives remained confused throughout the composing process and that he had neither the energy nor the incentive to revise the book to integrate its disparate elements. When the novel appeared in late July 1838, just before the departure of Wilkes's expedition to the Antarctic, reviewers generally saw through the hoax, praised its imaginative pyrotechnics, and decried its incongruities. Poe himself described *Pym* as 'a very silly book' in an 1840 letter to William Burton, a critic of the novel who (as it happened) became the second magazine publisher to hire and fire the author.

Despite certain formal and stylistic infelicities, Poe's narrative has nevertheless achieved lasting importance as an early projection of what Leslie Fiedler has called 'the archetypal American story' of escape from family, domesticity, and feminine influence into those open, uncharted spaces where initiation and danger confirm the value of male companionship. The novel's claim to classic status rests (as does much of Poe's fiction) on its evocation of a psychosymbolic crisis played out in physical, material terms. Defying the conditions of its own composition, *Pym* offers a memorable portrayal of the *rite de passage* by which a young man loses his innocence and

achieves a horrifying view of the deviousness and cruelty inherent in human nature. The protagonist's voyage entails a series of terrible brushes with death which lead towards a dazzling yet cryptic final scene in the polar sea. Whatever uncertainties or distractions may have attended the writing of the novel, Poe managed to infuse its separate episodes with some of his most stunning and unforgettable effects.

What distinguishes *Pym* from the potboiler adventure novel, however, is the author's subordination of sensational events to an implicit analysis of the process by which human beings construct rational interpretations to protect themselves from unsettling ambiguities. Arthur Gordon Pym himself performs interpretative acts throughout the narrative, making inferences and drawing conclusions which his experiences repeatedly overturn. His inability to decipher problematic texts—such as the note he receives from his friend Augustus or the strange inscriptions in the caves of Tsalal—parallels his failure to comprehend physical phenomena on which his fate seems to depend. In the opening episode, Pym misconstrues the bravado of Augustus and thus nearly loses his life on a drunken voyage. Later, after mutiny and shipwreck have reduced the wretched survivors of the *Grampus* to a party of four, Pym concludes that deliverance is at hand when he spots an approaching ship and perceives a tall figure on the bow waving encouragement. But on closer inspection he confronts his own delusions: the rescue vessel—a horror straight out of Coleridge—carries only rotting corpses, and the apparent salute of a tall sailor betrays the rapacity of 'a huge seagull, busily gorging itself with the horrible flesh'. Still later, Pym and the entire crew of a British ship, the *Jane Guy*, blindly overlook the implications of a taboo against whiteness and so fail to anticipate a bloody massacre staged by the black natives of Tsalal. By negative example, the narrator's misconceptions illustrate the power of rational analysis celebrated in Poe's detective stories of the early 1840s.

During his violent journey, Pym experiences the phenomenal world as an unreadable text, and his initiation into the difficulties of interpretation leads towards the dramatic final chapter in which the narrator, his half-breed companion Dirk

Peters, and a native hostage find themselves caught in an irresistible current pulling them through a milky sea towards a region of pure whiteness. At the climactic moment—surely one of the most memorable scenes Poe ever produced—Pym confronts an enigmatic presence:

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 far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the pure whiteness of the snow.

At this moment the narrative suddenly breaks off; we are left to conjecture about the meaning of the white figure and the apparent fate of the protagonist. Having exposed Pym to a series of interpretative challenges, Poe at last quizzes the reader with an enigma that defies solution.

Such indeterminacy has only fuelled critical speculation. The biblical resonances and mystical images in the final chapter have inspired numerous readings of *Pym* as a tale of death and transfiguration in which the hero encounters an angelic form, or the radiant Christ of the book of Revelations, or even (as Richard Wilbur maintains) the 'snow-white Ancient of Days' of the book of Daniel. Such interpretations seem consistent with Pym's recurrent attention to the providential aspects of his own nightmarish experience. When a whaling ship named the *Penguin* smashes into the sailboat in which Pym and Augustus have ventured out at night, the narrator explains that their survival has been effected by some 'almost inconceivable bits of good fortune which are attributed by the wise and pious to the special interference of Providence'. Pym subsequently invokes the idea of divine protection at the end of Chapter XIII when he notes that 'by the mercy of God' he has been saved from death by the appearance of the *Jane Guy*.

Yet Poe complicates his treatment of the providential theme in Chapter X by injecting it unmistakably into the account of the ship of death. Seeing the Dutch brig approach 'more steadily than before', Pym and his cohorts construe this change as a sign of benevolent purpose:

We poured out our whole souls in shouts and thanksgiving to God for the complete, unexpected, and glorious deliverance that was so palpably at hand. Of a sudden, and all at once, there came wafted over the ocean from the strange vessel (which was now close upon us) a smell, a stench, such as the world has no name for—no conception of—hellish—utterly suffocating—insufferable, inconceivable.

This juxtaposition of expected 'deliverance' with unbearable stench not only shatters Pym's assumptions about the ship and its crew but also throws into question the providential scheme supposedly underwriting his survival.

The problem of destiny becomes even more tangled, for throughout *Pym* Poe sets in contrast his passing allusions to providential deliverance (see the opening paragraph of Chapter XIII) with constant references to fate and fortune. He thus evokes a theological problem stretching back by way of Milton to the medieval philosopher Boethius. By a stroke of 'good fortune' Pym concocts the idea of posing as a dead sailor during the struggle for control of the *Grampus*; by 'great good fortune' he manages to reach the floating hulk of the vessel which has heeled over in rough seas. Providence and fortune actually designate conflicting notions of futurity, one grounded in faith in a caring God who orders events and intervenes in personal lives to assure a certain outcome, the other in a pagan concept of *fortuna* or blind luck. The former presumes the efficacy of divine will in the unfolding of history; the latter supposes the operation of random chance. That is, belief in Providence assumes a coherent plan behind the contingencies of experience, while trust in fortune implies a resignation to the absurd unpredictability of events—metaphorized by the spinning of a wheel—and to the absence of a controlling design. From this perspective, we may note that Pym's earliest invocation of Providence in the opening chapter hints at his confusion: his rescue from the *Ariel* episode occurs, he notes, either through two instances of 'good fortune' or through the 'special interference' of a providential power.

This philosophical split at the heart of the narrative makes the final chapter especially troubling, for the suspension of the narrative may represent either the completion of Pym's spir-

itual quest or—more sceptically—his arbitrary evaporation as a narratorial presence. The note which follows the last scene announces some surprising ‘facts’: Pym is said to have survived the polar vortex but has recently died in a local ‘accident’, leaving his account incomplete. This puzzling information—which makes the ending of *Pym* technically unresolvable—accompanies the even more jarring announcement that Poe himself (who figures as Pym’s sponsor in the preface) has refused to supply the missing chapters because of his ‘disbelief in the entire truth of the latter portions of the narration’. The same author who has laboured to create a documentary authenticity now explicitly questions the veracity of his own narrator. The equivocal note threatens to convert the mysticism of the last chapter into sheer mystification.

The devious strategy by which Poe attempted to assert his ‘disbelief’ in the ending of *Pym* and thus his superiority to less perceptive readers nevertheless backfired by calling attention to the collapse of the plot and the spurious nature of the narrative itself. Contemporary readers perhaps suspected the imposture, for despite a publication timed to coincide with the Wilkes expedition, the book did not achieve commercial success. After a round of decidedly mixed reviews, popular interest in *Pym* subsided; with few exceptions, scholars and critics dismissed it for more than a century. Not until 1952 did Poe’s novel begin to stir new discussion; in a seminal essay Patrick Quinn uncovered suggestive motifs of revolt and deception as well as psychosymbolic patterns which had largely escaped the notice of earlier readers. Now, after four decades of careful scholarship and intense critical discussion, we have come to accept Quinn’s view of *Pym* as the ‘crucial text’ in understanding Poe.

The novel possesses this status in part because it incorporates many of Poe’s most characteristic and obsessive themes, and it stands in revealing relationship to the tales collected here. Nearest to *Pym* chronologically are two tales that reflect his penchant for mockery and self-reflexive irony. The earlier of these, ‘Mystification’ (1837) was probably drafted during a lull in the composing of the novel and perhaps hints at Poe’s underlying scorn for the reading public. As its title implies, the

story concerns the pleasures of deception; the protagonist, a university student named Baron Von Jung, carries out 'tricks' and 'drolleries'—ironic schemes which he seems outwardly determined to prevent. His crowning 'mystification' ensnares an arrogant rival named Hermann who fancies himself an expert in the code of duelling. Von Jung insults Hermann, elicits the expected challenge, and then composes an equivocal note, referring Hermann to a passage in an obscure treatise on duelling. The volume in question proves to be a sham: 'The language was ingeniously framed so as to present to the ear all the outward signs of intelligibility, and even of profundity, while in fact not a shadow of meaning existed.' Von Jung himself has placed this unreadable text in the hands of his adversary and directs him to the confounding passage, knowing that Hermann will die 'a thousand deaths' finding himself both unable to comprehend the nonsense and unwilling to 'acknowledge his inability to understand anything . . . about the *duello*'. Daniel Hoffman has aptly remarked that 'for Poe, satire serves to display the follies of mankind—and the personal superiority of the Artist-Genius to the generality of fools'. The manipulation of Hermann by Von Jung illustrates just such an ascendancy as the hoaxer exploits the predictable tendencies of 'a very great fool'. To what extent 'Mystification' reflects Poe's contempt for the reading public must remain, of course, a matter of conjecture, but his linking of duplicity with a book that defies comprehension seems, in retrospect, provocatively appropriate.

The other tale, 'How to Write a Blackwood Article' (1838), appeared four months after the publication of *Pym* and indicates Poe's wry awareness of the gimmickry inherent in the magazine tale of effect that he helped to popularize. Cast as an interview in which Psyche Zenobia, an aspiring writer from Philadelphia, receives advice from the Edinburgh editor Mr Blackwood, the story patently acknowledges the influence on Poe of the British magazine tradition. In a passage relevant to Poe's approach in *Pym*, Mr Blackwood declares: 'Sensations are the great thing after all. Should you ever be drowned or hung, be sure and make a note of your sensations—they will be worth to you ten guineas a sheet. If you wish to write forcibly,

Miss Zenobia, pay minute attention to the sensations.' In an ironic comment on the duplicity of *Pym*, the editor advises her to set a reassuring transcendental tone: 'Put in something about the Supernal Oneness. Don't say a syllable about the Infernal Twoness.' A writer catering to the popular audience cannot succeed, he suggests, by exposing the disturbing doubleness of experience, the breach between appearance and reality; it was a lesson that Poe the novelist had learned the hard way. His fictional magazinist, Miss Zenobia, finally puts Blackwood's method to the test in a pendant farce (not included here) called 'A Predicament', in which she blithely recounts her own beheading by the hands of a tower clock.

Three important themes associate *Pym* with other tales included here. In 'MS Found in a Bottle' (1833), Poe had first portrayed a voyage leading towards a polar vortex. He had consciously evoked John Cleves Symmes's early nineteenth-century theory of holes at the North and South Poles drawing ocean water into the centre of the earth. Poe depicted his ever-scribbling narrator aboard a phantom ship, 'hurrying onwards to some exciting knowledge—some never-to-be-imparted secret whose attainment is destruction'. The mystery of the 'southern pole' becomes in this symbolic journey synonymous with death itself, as a powerful current carries the ship into an immense and roaring whirlpool where the narrator (in his last act) reports the ship 'going down'. In 'MS Found in a Bottle', as in *Pym*, the end of the manuscript seems to coincide either with revelation or annihilation, but Poe refuses to disclose the ultimate meaning of the blankness at the end of the page. Instead, he fuses time and space, metaphorizing the end of being—and writing—as a vortex pulling the narrator relentlessly towards oblivion.

Three years after *Pym*, Poe returned to the same image in 'A Descent into the Maelström'. Here, however, the narrator tells a tale of survival which illustrates (like the Dupin stories) the power of rational analysis. This time the gigantic whirlpool lies off the coast of Norway, and the speaker, a prematurely white-haired fisherman, explains how he has survived its deadly force by clinging to a cylindrical object (a barrel), which proves to be

the geometrical shape most resistant to vortical suction. As in *Pym*, Poe extracts terror from the discovery that a watch has run down, and he emphasizes the hideous velocity of the current in which a small boat is caught. The narrator of 'A Descent into the Maelström' also shares Arthur Gordon Pym's scientific curiosity and detachment as he confronts a life-threatening spectacle. Given its analytical, retrospective nature, the later tale may in fact provide a disguised version of the 'lost' chapters of *Pym*: Poe's belated working out of a plausible ending for his novel.

Another group of tales mirrors the motif figured in Pym's two experiences of living inhumation. Poe had introduced this theme as early as 1832 in a spoof entitled 'A Decided Loss', which he revised as 'Loss of Breath' (1835). Poe's epigraph for the later version—'A Tale Neither In Nor Out of "Blackwood"'—makes clear his parodic target, the tale of sensation in *Blackwood's Magazine*. Turning a familiar expression into a literal predicament, Poe recounts the misadventures of Mr Lackobreath, who during a tirade loses his breath, then leaves his unfaithful wife and undergoes a series of indignities from medical experimentation to hanging and burial. After escaping his own coffin, the hero soliloquizes farcically over the 'carcasses' sharing the burial vault and appropriately retrieves his missing respiration from another 'corpse', Mr Windenough, the neighbour who has been romancing Mrs Lackobreath. The silly puns, bizarre sexual undercurrents, preposterous scrapes, and grotesque sight gags here resemble nothing so much as a vintage Monty Python skit. But beneath the forced hilarity lies Poe's claustrophobic fixation with being sealed up and buried alive.

If 'Loss of Breath' portrays living burial as a ridiculous mishap, other Poe tales hinge on the profound terror which it aroused. Roderick Usher's final madness, we may recall, springs precisely from his consciousness that he has entombed his sister alive. In 'The Pit and the Pendulum' (1842) the narrator's 'sickness unto death' begins with the anxiety that he has been buried prematurely. He awakens from a swoon to find himself encompassed by 'the blackness of eternal night'; a



'fearful idea' seizes him and he dreads to move 'lest [he] should be impeded by the walls of a *tomb*'. Although his predicament proves to be different and more complicated—at the centre of his dungeon yawns a vast pit, while a deadly blade descends from above—the narrator's psychic experience is that of living inhumation. Poe underscores the sense of fatal enclosure by causing the walls of the cell to converge on the victim-narrator, forcing him towards the abyss. The panic here and elsewhere in Poe's fiction expresses his relentless preoccupation with what might paradoxically be called the living conditions of the dead.

Ambiguously poised between the comic and the horrific, 'The Premature Burial' (1844) actually recycles language from the novel describing Pym's apparent entombment within the chasms of Tsalal. After piling up several documentary cases of living interment, the tale's narrator proceeds to reconstruct his personal experience, explaining the susceptibility to catalepsy which prompts his dread. Echoing *Pym* he remarks: 'No event is so terribly well adapted to inspire the supremeness of bodily and mental distress, as is burial before death.' He then recounts his awakening in a dark, enclosed space, a coming-to-consciousness reminiscent of 'The Pit and the Pendulum' which leads to the sickening fear that he has been 'nailed up in some common coffin—and thrust deep, deep, and for ever, into some ordinary and nameless *grave*'. But when he screams at the horror of his predicament, he finds himself accosted by angry sailors who remind him that he is in a ship's berth. The chastened narrator realizes that he has been the victim of his own misapprehensions, and he vows (in an act of metatextual irony) to read 'no "Night Thoughts"—no fustian about churchyards—no bugaboo tales, *such as this*'. The use of documentation and verisimilitude to encourage the reader's credulity in a narrative which subsequently exposes its own status as a 'bugaboo tale' repeats the self-cancelling deviousness of *Pym*, manifesting once again Poe's private pleasure in confounding the popular audience.

Poe's desire to hoodwink readers with a realistic treatment of a fantastic journey also informs 'The Balloon Hoax' (1844). As he had in *Pym*, Poe seized upon a topic of contemporary