The Continuing Puzzle of Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* and a Way Forward:
A Bakhtinian Approach toward a New Hermeneutic*

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In an earlier study of the critical history of Edgar Allan Poe, I concluded with the claim that Poe studies requires a hermeneutic different from any we have yet seen, one with wider rules of exclusion in order to accommodate the enormous range of play in which Poe indulges, particularly in the problematic and heterogeneous *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, published in 1838.[1] The purpose of this paper is to suggest the outline of such a hermeneutic, and the direction it points in establishing what Poe is about in this remarkably complex text. I will establish the existence of multiple discursive planes and interpretive dimensions within Poe's narrative, and suggest that any interpretation which aims to present an accurate complete picture of *Pym* must recognize and integrate these

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1) See Ronald C. Harvey, *The Critical History of Edgar Allan Poe's* The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym: *"A Dialogue with Unreason."* New York: Garland, 1998. All references to and quotations from *Pym* are from Pollin (*The Imaginary Voyages*). To facilitate the use of other editions, Pollin's notation system is retained, referring to chapter number and paragraph number, divided by a period.

dimensions.

American literary study, including Poe studies itself, was very late in coming to *Arthur Gordon Pym*. However, since the rediscovery of the work as a Poe text worthy of serious consideration, with W. H. Auden's critical introduction to a 1950 edition, it has grown in importance year by year, though many critics and scholars have reservations about its merit.

The text is offered as a travel narrative which has survived its author. It involves a boy who stows away on a whale ship leaving Nantucket, who thereby sets off a chain of adventures, including marvelous experiences, amazing discoveries, and disasters. He becomes entangled in a bloody mutiny; he spends months on a floating wreck, where he and others resort to murder and cannibalism; he is rescued by the *Jane Guy*, a British trading schooner, whose captain Pym persuades to turn south into uncharted waters in search of the South Pole; he survives a massacre of the *Jane*'s crew by South Sea islanders; and, finally, he escapes in a broken native canoe, catching a southern current.

The current carries him to the pole itself, where in serene, almost biblical style and imagery, he describes milky, hot water, falling white ash, and a vast cataract across the horizon. The narrative ends abruptly as he disappears into a great vortex at the foot of an enormous, human-like white figure--which, alas, is never explained. The anonymous editor of a postscript tells us the narrative is incomplete, and that Pym has died *since* returning home. We do not learn how he survived the vortex, or any details of his subsequent journey home.

Few reviewers were fooled into taking Poe's narrative as authentic. But most of the contemporary reviewers did accept it as an exciting adventure, as have the many Poe readers ever since: There is evidence it consistently has been popular with the reading public, having, for instance, never gone out of print (Pollin "Bibliography" "Introduction," *Imaginary Voyages*).

However, critics from Poe's day to our own have been unsure and inconsistent in their view of Poe's only book-length fiction. Many have noted that it is full of narrative and stylistic problems, confounds expectations at every turn, and resists classification.

One of the most disturbing formal problems is that the narrative fails to answer to the big questions it raises: How he escaped death at the pole; how he finally did die after returning to the US; what adventures befell him between those events, and what is in the "missing chapters" to which the postscript "Note" author refers. Most unfortunately, we never learn who the great white shrouded figure is, and we never discover the great truth, scientific or the ophanic, toward which the narrative seems to be driving. In other words, Pym breaks his promise made midway through the voyage, to reveal "one of the most intensely exciting secrets which has ever engrossed" the "eye of science" (17.12).

An additional group of problems emerge from the ways in which the text crosses the conventional boundaries of every genre of which it seems to be an example. Many have regarded it as an imaginary voyage, but the book seems to present itself as many genres, from an adventure romance to a true mariner's chronicle, from juvenilia to profound psychological drama, to Christian allegory, to satire, parody, or hoax--only to undermine its own claims. Indeed, for this reason, it often has been identified as a parody or satire of one or more of these forms; some have argued it is a hoax, similar to his "Balloon-Hoax," published in *The New York Sun* in 1844, a faked report of a balloon-crossing of the Atlantic. And some have seen it as a mere money-maker, not to be taken seriously, and probably unfinished (Ketterer; Harvey chs. 1, 4). The protagonist himself seems to be an unstable entity; Pym appears to be a child in the early episodes, and a well-educated, intelligent adult in others. Moreover, he encounters numerous mysteries and puzzles, but can never solve them.

Moreover, he is strangely passive and opaque for the 'hero' of an adventure.

Also related to genre, the text demands radically different kinds of reading by introducing different kinds of writing--resulting in confused and unstable expectations, and even disorientation. For instance, the first half seems to be a verisimilar narrative, against fantasy in the second half. In the latter half, historical and scientific reportage stand alongside oneiric or chthonic narration, as of a dream or nightmare. The expanding adventure on the high seas alternates with the lonely horror of subterranean confinement, such as the black tunnels beneath Tsalal. Suggestions of Christ-like transfiguration in the final scene compete with the sense of doom in the psychodrama on the black isle. Poe risks offending the reader with explicit morbidity; aggression and terror circulate throughout the text, culminating in a Blakean, apocalyptic vision. Poe speaks to us, as Foucault once remarked of French novelist Raymond Roussel, in "a language that comes to us from the depths of a night that is perfectly clear and impossible to dominate" (qtd. in Racevski 49).

And so it has gone. From near oblivion to a key work of Poe's oeuvre, *Pym* criticism has been a history of disagreement on almost every level at which critics and scholars read texts, a body of criticism characterized by divergence and extremity, one that answers Poe's multivalent text with its own heteroglossia, to use Mikhail Bakhtin's term. Both the work's meaning and its value remain open. Novelist John Barth methodically examined *Pym* from a variety of mythic and structural angles—and finally concluded that the book itself as lacked a "mainspring" (17).

As has been noticed by others who have looked at the history of *Pym* criticism, many attempts at interpretation have become mired in the problematic textual elements (Ketterer, Robinson, Harvey, esp. ch. 1). With its aberrations, anomalies, tastelessness, and contradictions about

intended form, it has proved resistant to criticism and indeterminate in meaning expectations become confused even with an individual study. A great many highly regarded books on Poe flounder when they come up against *Pym*, unable to make the thesis fit, and offer instead plot summaries or comments on its composition. (*c.f.* A. H. Quinn 266–67). Other studies have altered their approach midstream, in a few instances actually converting to an opposing perspective (*c.f.* La Guardia, Symons). Still others cover their bets in language as evasive and mysteriousas Poe himself uses, or argue that thematic interpretation itself is simply the wrong approach to use for *Pym* (*c.f.* Pollin "Introduction," *The Imaginary Voyages*, Ridgely).

Several readers have noticed that *Pym* has a tendency to undermine the very models and approaches it invites, snaring the critic within the text's changing frame. John Carlos Rowe best explains *Pym*'s slipperiness:

Forever holding out the promise of a buried signified, *Pym* offers a sequence of urged 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 (*Custom–House* 93).

One problem many of the most sophisticated interpretations run into is the unitary approach they tend to take, which inevitably fails to allow for the wide play that the book itself engages in. Typically, the critic has come to *Pym* with a unified, established system: a psychoanalytic, deconstructionist, or race–oriented sociological model; one or another symbolist or narratological formalist schema; a contextual focus on Romanticism or American historiography. He or she then attempts to force the book within those parameters, ignoring what does not fit. If that 'surplus' material cannot be ignored, then the narrative is condemned as lacking unity. Early critics ignored the book for a century on this basis,

and a majority of critics since who have had anything to say about it have considered it flawed in this respect, even when they admire it on other terms.

The state of *Pym* criticism is reflected in the excellent, important *Poe's Pym: Critical Explorations* (1992), the first book-length work on *Pym,* a collection of essays which leaves the (accurate) impression that commentary on *Pym* is widely scattered: It includes a psychological analysis, source studies, structural formal models, a deconstruction, a myth study, a post modern reading of *Pym* as a prophesy of Auschwitz, and several historicist analyses--a diversity reflected both synchronically and diachronically in the criticism (Kopley). Not only have the varied readings swung according to fashion diachronically, they have also coexisted synchronously. Even within individual categories, readings have grown too far apart for much dialogue. What has emerged are several distinct genealogical lines of criticism, each rarely referencing the others.

Indeed, this dialogue of criticism can be intergenerational, and in the case of *Pym*, must be. Richly insightful readings from past generations, with putatively outmoded critical theories, discovered new logical dimensions in the text that are simply overlooked by subsequent critics, and some early essays on Poe and *Pym* remain among the best. One thinks of Bonaparte's 1933 Freudian study; Levi Barton St. Armand's identification, in several studies in the early nineteen-seventies, of metaphoric alchemical processes in a "drama" of ego formation, which brilliantly account for the ubiquitous transmutations and grotesqueries, anomalies no other reading has approached; Sydney Kaplan's introduction to his 1960 edition of *Pym,* which interprets the varied, numerous linguistic materials and references to ancient peoples, and reveals an allegory of the cursed race biblical theme; and William Spengemann's *The Adventurous Muse* (1977), which concentrates on the formation of the

traveling subject's identity.

To these we might add poststructural studies that are by no means dated, but also are among the best: Dana Nelson's *The World in Black and White* (1992) which excavates a critique of colonialism played out from beginning to end; J. Gerald Kennedy's *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing* (1987) which interprets the ubiquitous presence of morbidity, and Pym's "confrontation with the body of death" and John Irwin's *American Hieroglyphics* (1980), which interprets Pym's voyage as a Romantic journey back to "origins" (the hieroglyphs, the source of the Nile, and the South Pole, all feature prominently in *Pym*) by restoring the historical context. According to Irwin, Poe has fantastically imagined the moment of the birth of language and consciousness, from a nineteenth-century Romantic point of view.

The earlier studies explained various anomalous features and textual lines that poststructural critics could handle only dismissively. Individually, each of the above interpretations mines the text according to the critic's orientation, and each returns with rich ore. One comes away from each of them convinced that whatever else Poe was doing, he was clearly on some level of consciousness involved in the project claimed for him. At the same time, the attempt at mastery falls short, and leaves the inescapable impression that only a fragment of the text's meaning has been grasped; only one side of *Pym* revealed. These interpretations, unlike many, are unified within their own individual theses, yet still seem incomplete.

Unity, in fact, is what critics keep coming back to in the debate about *Pym*. Can a work which lacks unity have high aesthetic value, in its own or any subsequent era? It seems worthwhile to examine the critical value itself. Until the past century, unity has been considered an absolute aesthetic value, and practically the dominant one in western aesthetics,

going back to Aristotle. (See especially Chapter 8 of *Poetics.*) The deconstruction of this value, in modern art and literary theory, is a process made possible, surprisingly, by that ultimate Romantic philosopher, Hegel, despite his own sweepingly unitary metaphysical system. His concept of the dialectic, operating universally through human history and throughout the natural, human, and supernatural realms, created this opening. That is to say that Hegel, in dismantling Kant's system of discrete categories, proposed that all identity, for example in art or language, has a complex relationship with all that is beyond itself; in fact, comes into being through its relations with an objective other.

In his aesthetic theory, Hegel was the first to denounce Kant's principle of autonomy of art. He argued that beauty is more than form alone; it is the sensuous appearance through form of Spirit, the ultimate consciousness unfolding itself through history and art, and unifying all contradiction in its wake. For Hegel, art, and especially literature, interpenetrates both the material world and the "prose of finitude," on one hand, and the spiritual world, on the other, and these conflicting contacts are the primary source of tension in art, and within an individual text.

In Hegel's view, this tension was a fruitful dialectic, part of the historical development of Spirit. For his modern descendants, such as German social philosopher The odor Adorno and Russian language theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, there was no such divine telos, and the ultimate unity represented by Hegel's absolute Spirit, and enfolded within the logic of the dialectic, had no place in their thinking. Romantic reconciliation gives was to the seemingly hopeless fragmentation of the twentieth century. Thus Hegel's dialectic gives way to Bakhtin's dialogic, a principle of irreducible duality at the core not only of literature but of language, and even consciousness itself.

Adorno, too, rejected Spirit as an ontological reality, but retained

Hegel's notion of art's interpenetration of the world. Art is not disinterested, as Kant said. Though art strives to mark itself off, it cannot exclude that from which it arises, the extraneous--from art's point of view--material of the real world, even the lowly and the ugly. "As soon as art sets up a barrier between art and non-art reality, it goes beyond the barrier and absorbs that which it holds apart" (ch. 3 sect. 1). In this way, art is fertilized, in a sense, by its inclusion of the "other" within itself --despite its effort at exclusion. This relationship produces tension and contradictions within the work, especially in the irreconcilable conflict between the artwork's presentation of itself as a thing apart in a realm of pure beauty, and its inescapable link to reality.

Yet emphatically, for both Adorno and Bakhtin, these tensions and contradictions are the lifeblood of literature, without which it is sterile and merely formal. The vitality of literature for them is not in an imposed unity repressing the extra-artistic 'other'beneath a falsified form; rather it is in its capacity to accommodate the 'other' within itself, *without* integrating or reconciling it. For both men, aesthetic value is synonymous neither with pure beauty nor with formal unity; rather these are only values or tendencies at work within a text, as well as the critical discourse surrounding a text.

There is so much 'other' to accommodate in *Arthur Gordon Pym* that the boundaries between fiction and factual discourse, as well as between the text and other writing, are blurred, complicated by the intricate frame involving multiple narrators and contradictory claims of its truthfulness or fictitiousness, in a preface and the post-script editorial note, which speak to us simultaneously from within and from without the text.

Pym is a marvelously omnivorous book. Like Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*, as Pym travels across the globe he encounters seemingly every element of his society and the larger world, stimulating Pym as narrator to reflect

upon and refer to countless real people, events, and books, including explorers, colonizers, and mariners and their narratives; chronicles of exploration and colonization in the south seas; natural history, both scientific and fantastic; biblical narratives; linguistic materials from Africa and Asia; and fictitious adventure stories, with overt gestures to *Robinson Crusoe, Gulliver's Travels, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, and Frederick Marryat's *Peter Simple,* among many others. Of course, beyond mere reference to these sources of influence, the text culls heavily from them. The leading textual scholar of Poe, Burton Pollin, has asserted that *Pym* is a pastiche of errors and purloining, and has established that virtually one-third of its paragraphs show traces of those sources, in *verbatim* plagiarism, in close paraphrase, or in similar situations ("Introduction," *The Imaginary Voyages* 17).

The critic who approaches this heterogeneous text with the aim of containing it within a single unified critical structure will fall into a trap Poe himself has laid--as many have. Of the scores of studies of *Pym*, or of Poe's work including *Pym,* each with its own focus, none accounts for all the major episodes, none responds to more than one or two of the dimensions or faces the text presents, and none presents an image of the work in its totality.

Critics have yet to isolate the machinery of irony that Poe uses to evade mastery. The most sophisticated interpretive strategy that is available to the reader leaves in place uncontained elements that have ironic significance. As a generic or theoretical definition is offered, the text doubles into a parody of the form identified, remaining beyond the conceptual frame. *Pym* is an adventure story, a mythic journey, a dream text manifesting Poe's unconsciousness, a textualized landscape conflating word and thing, and it is a parody of each of these. As Judith Sutherland puts it, trying to shake down the text, "worrying it" like a bone, can cost

the critic her "dignity" in the eyes of her colleagues (17).

Yet, even to identify it as an ironic form--a textualized landscape, or an imaging of the abyss--is to structure it in such a way as to exclude questions that from within the text demand consideration. In focusing upon its ironic form, positive formations escape the ironists conceptual framework in any terms other than negation. But it won't do to simply jettison the undeniable substance in, for instance, Marie Bonaparte's psychoanalysis of Poe through his work, Joel Porte's account of Pym as a guilt-driven soul futilely seeking grace, Paul John Eakin's transfigured Lazarus-figure, as Pym almost seems to have returned from the dead, or William Spengemann's traveler striving for total, Emersonian self-authoring. Whatever *Pym* "says" about these projects, it consists of more than the assertion of humanity's epistemological delimitations.

Mikhail Bakhtin has offered what is probably the most useful model for coping with a heterogeneous or disunified text. Frustrated with traditional formalist stylistics, which remains essentially Aristotle's, he uncovered a unique narrative mechanism of the European novel, thereby enabling us to understand and talk about it differently. In "Discourse in the Novel," he explains how the novel, because of its uniquely modern origin, operates differently from other genres with a pre-modern origin, such as the epic and lyric. The latter are shaped by literary precedent and convention, traditions that recede into the obscure, remote past. They also tend to become dominated by social and political institutions to reflect a prevailing ideology, such as the official version of an historical event, authorized by state or church.

On the other hand, the novel as a genre grew from the writing of all kinds circulating throughout the society of its own moment, such as news and journalism, letters and gossip, political, scientific, and legal discourse, and so forth. While a prevailing ideology sometimes controls such

discourse, it tends to be too spontaneous and recent to fall under such control. Bakhtin argues that only the novel can powerfully represent the complex, fragmentary, hierarchic condition of modern society at any moment, in writing that represents--mimics, really--the multiple, uncontained voices that make it up. He calls the novel the "maximally complete registry" of all social voices of an era:

The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions.

Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel. (263, 430)

As in society itself, the voices of diverse groups and social strata clash and collide within the novel, which, like a centrifuge, or, again, seemingly like modern society itself, threatens always to spin out of control. They bring into play voices from lower ends of the social hierarchies, voices suppressed and silenced in other kinds of writing, and make of the novel a rather fragile orchestration of centrifugal and centripetal forces.

Bakhtin's dialogic model offers a way to cope with internal heterogeneity by conceptualizing the text as the site of dialogue, not only of speech, but of views, kinds of experience, and ideas in any way represented--a dialogue which guarantees only the *simultaneity,* not the *elimination* of, difference. In other words, dialogue holds difference together. Bakhtin coined the term *chronotope* for the literary device that generates dialogue, a figure that distorts time and space literally to bring diverse voices into contact. Standard chronotopes are the road or an inn; a house; a public space; a sea voyage, for the dynamic encounters among fellow travelers on board; with others encountered along the way; and with

the alien destination on its itinerary. Time and space can be manipulated in other ways: Bakhtin cites magical extension or compression of time, as in fairy tales, and distortion of space, such as size discrepancy in *Gulliver's Travels* or *Moby-Dick*.

   The sea voyage, of course, is the core chronotope for *Pym*, but like such highly complex works that especially caught Bakhtin's attention, for instance the novels of Rabelais and Dostoevsky, *Pym* also employs a number of chronotopes Throughout the narrative, Pym is a passenger on four vessels: the small sloop *Ariel*, the whaler *Grampus*, the British trading schooner *Jane Guy*, and the black canoe from the south sea island, within which he floats into the vortex at the pole. In the process, he departs an empty, young hero from his narrow middle class New England home to encounter the world of sailing, the exotic south seas islands and cultures, men of an older generation, low-class pirates and homicidal mutineers, ship owners of a higher class, and finally the South Pole itself, an unknown geography in the 1830's which Poe fully exploits for its fantastic potential. The editor of the postscript "Note," in turn, brings into the picture philological and linguistic materials from academe. Beyond this, Pym experiences madness, delirium, terror, and confronts, in all the physical mortification of others and nearly himself, "the body of death," in Gerald Kennedy's phrase (*Poe* 146). This partial list suggests the welter of conflicts, points of view, and themes this chronotope brings into play.

   Clearly, the chronotope allows us to interpret rather than reduce the complexity of a text. One chronotope can generate multiple levels of signification which are equally valid and equally relevant. This can be seen in the analysis, for instance, of just two radically different sets of dialogue Pym's voyage enables, that of psychology and of social history. From the standpoint of psychology, a key dialogue is the struggle of the subject's ego to remain stable, coherent and unified against the centrifugal stresses

and pressures that at least change it dramatically, and at most shatter it into insanity. Such a discussion would bring into play conflicting ideas of individual within the context of Poe's own day, namely John Locke's notion of a unitary, rational self, empirically formed, as against Freud's internally divided, irrational self. Of course, while Locke an empiricism was still dominant in Poe's day, Freud's model was nonetheless on the horizon. Freud himself would specifically state that Poe, among others, had anticipated his theories (Bonaparte "Preface"). And so it has. Psychoanalytic criticism has been perhaps the dominant approach within Poe studies, including *Pym* criticism, since Joseph Wood Krutch's and Marie Bonaparte's classical Freudian interpretations in the early decades of the Twentieth Century.

By contrast, if we proceed from the context of social history, we find a key dialogue surrounding the inception of a colonial enterprise, as Captain Guy bargains with the black natives to allow and to assist the crew in harvesting the rich beds of sea cucumber. On one hand, as Pym retrospectively narrates the process, he shows his support for the enterprise, speaking the language of colonial trade. Harvesting the beds will prove "a profitable speculation," and employing the natives is "a bargain struck, perfectly satisfactory to both parties" (20.2). He hardly conceals his contempt for the ignorant savages, who seem to him foolish in mistaking the ship for a living creature. He calls them treacherous and evil for their deadly ambush of the crew.

On the other hand, like Poe's other narrators, he reveals a great deal more than he intends, opening the possibility that it is the crew that are the transgressors here: They begin erecting buildings on Tsalal, the native's island, without permission, and he notes, without comment, that the bargain was struck "beneath the guns of the schooner" (20.1) We see the crew treat the natives variously like slaves and indentured workers,

coercively "hir[ing]" them to harvest and process the resource for them while the *Jane Guy* continues its southward voyage (20.2). The terms, Pym again reports apparently without awareness of the insult, are a strip of red cloth and a blue bead for each bushel, which, we are told, will yield about $30 upon resale by Captain Guy. Condescendingly, they are told that they won't be paid until the ship's return, and the terms "were made to depend upon the exertions of the savages in our absence" (20.2). Of course, the native's ambush of the crew, from this angle, has an element of justifiable self-defense.

Is the episode a critique of colonialism and its attendant racism, which makes out the whites as the real savages? The answer is complicated by how truly repulsive Poe makes his native islanders to his readers' sensibilities: Their very teeth and eyeballs are pitch black and they eat "yard after yard" of hog intestines. We can see how Poe is playing on the insecurities of his readers, most of whom are white Americans, if we remember the social context: *Pym* was published in 1838, in the racially- and politically-heated atmosphere in pre-Civil War America. Specifically, following the Nat Turner Rebellion of 1831, fears of slave rebellion intensified. In that decade anti-literacy laws were passed in most Southern states, and vigilante groups assembled and began patrolling and terrorizing blacks in the countryside, particularly in states like South Carolina, where slaves outnumbered whites--all out of intensified fear of slave revolts. Part of the context also was the effort of the New England-centered American Colonization Society's efforts to repatriate blacks to Africa, placing 1400 in the colony of Liberia in 1830.

Confusing Poe with his unreliable narrator, Terence Whalen and John Carlos Rowe ("Poe") attribute Pym's seemingly racist disgust of blacks to Poe himself they miss the possibility of Poe's irony. Others, such as Dana Nelson and Joan Dayan, have found evidence of an interesting and

sophisticated native culture from Pym's description, visible despite is patent disgust. In the end, there are multiple points of view in conflict here, some of them ironic. In fact, Poe's attitude toward race and slavery in this and other works is the current hot issue of discord in Poe studies, particularly in *Pym* criticism. The evidence suggests that, after all, Poe condemns ironically the exploitive process. Moreover, despite zealous efforts, the thousands of pages of fiction and nonfiction Poe wrote have not yielded a single clear statement or other piece of evidence that reveals Poe to be a supporter of slavery. Poe's penchant for writing topically and sensationally to increase sales should not be a basis for interpreting his opinions on slavery, colonialism, or any other issue. This is not to exonerate Poe, but to suggest that the question of Poe's politics itself misses the point. The point here is that the tensions and contradictions that cloud any single pronouncement make complicated ambivalence a more accurate description.

It seems clear that the heterogeneous materials brought into contact create multiple dimensions--in this case, those of psychology and social history--which cannot always be discussed within a single critical language. Michael Holquist makes an analogous point in articulating the linguistic gap between sciences:

The knowledge of sociologists and psychologists differs because the discourse of each is defined by only one of several levels of possible perception; the language practices that define sociology and psychology as distinct professions are mutually exclusive. On this point [Emile] Durkheim is quite explicit: "[S]ociety is not a mere sum of individuals; rather, the system formed by their association represents a specific reality which has its own characteristics." (87)

Critical discussion of an issue like the attitude presented by the book toward race, slavery, and abolition amplify the dialogue of the alternative

perspectives within the book; but they can be discussed within a single critical language.

However, as we have seen, Poe invites alternative and incompatible lines of critical thinking about the same material within the text. Along with the dialogue of language and voice within a text, we find a dialogue of critical discourses attracted to, or generated by, the text. That may seem obvious; but it can alter our approach to the text itself if we recognize that some of these heterogeneous critical languages are indeed invited by the text itself. We ignore them, or any but our own, at the expense of any kind of a total view of what Poe is about in *Pym*.

Of course, the critical languages of any generation are conditioned primarily by the era in which the critic lives and writes, by his personal and social horizon, in Hans Robert Jauss's term. Czech theorist Jan Mukarovsky demonstrates, in his treatise *Aesthetic Function,* the instability of aesthetic value amid the welter of extra-aesthetic functions texts perform. But literary history is not a dead study. When we examine carefully Bonaparte's, St. Armand's, and Kaplan's analyses, for example, we find they are not wholly products of the 1930s, 1960s, and 1970s, respectively; they emerge from a dialectic relation between the critic's horizon and Poe's own, as perceived in the text from the critic's vantage, which might not be inferior to our own in every respect.

Any analysis of the chronotopes in *Pym* and the dialogue they generate must begin with that of the sea voyage, from which several symbolic dimensions unfold. First is the travel itself across the body of the earth, as Pym bisects the equator, sails among the South Sea islands into a fantastic landscape, wanders in subterranean chasms, and ends at the pole. On the one level this brings into play social, intercultural, and international relations, as filtered through the perception of the naïve Pym. Though critics were late in discovering it, there is no doubt that Poe is

commenting upon a wide range of social issues in his day, ranging from colonialism to slavery and the capitalist economics that underwrote these. As Dana Nelson points out, the colonial process involved the inseparable strands of exploration and the acquisition of scientific knowledge about a region and its peoples, military domination, and the trade which both are in service of, and Pym is involved in all three, both on the *Jane Guy* and in the Preface and Notes, which refer to "the society of several gentlemen in Richmond, Virginia, who felt interest in all matters relating to the regions I had visited" (Preface.1)

Anomalous material which had mystified readers can be shown to have rich and interesting significance, not only on a literal level, in all his semi-scientific description of the flora, fauna, geography, and cultures, but on a metaphoric, even allegorical, level. One example is his lengthy analysis of the interaction of different bird species on the penguin-albatross rookery on Kerguelen's Island (14.13-18). Nelson identifies Poe's use of this bird "city" based on interspecies cooperation as an alternative model of intercultural relations as a contrast to the degradation and corruption in the human colonial process (296-98).

At the same time, another subtle metaphoric significance gradually emerges from the physical act of travel, as Pym moves South--a different metaphoric dimension of the voyage chronotope: The terrain of the earth begins to resemble the anatomy of the human body on an immense scale. A number of critics, including Bonaparte, Kaplan, and Rosenzweig, among others--particularly those interpreting the work along the lines of psychoanalytic or myth criticism--have noticed geographical and certain features of landscape Pym encounters as analogous to or suggestive of parts of the human anatomy. Even more often, critics have identified the immense, shrouded white image Pym sails toward in the conclusion as a maternal figure.

But it has not been suggested before is that Pym's journey over the course of the narrative, across the body of the earth is also a fetal or infantile journey across the human body, that of the mother.In other words, the body of the earth is conflated with the body of a human. For example, much of his stay on Tsalal, the island in which everything is pitch black, Pym spends underground, buried or lost in channels and chasms that suggest either reproductive or digestive tracts. Similarly, the hold of the *Grampus* is very much like a womb from which the boy emerges reborn. Moreover, the waters close to the pole, with its warmth, viscosity, and opacity, have been thought to suggest milk (25.6, 7).

There is a corollary set of maternal symbols that reinforce this claim: The strange animal he discovers near the pole is rife with maternal association, with its white skin that felt "like silk" and its scarlet claws, which call to mind painted nails (18.1). Again, the cry of the white birds, "Tekeli-li!", even as he disappears over the cataract into the vortex: This was the title of the last play in which Poe's own actress-mother performed before her death of consumption when he was two years of age (25.13).

What is Poe doing with this? Well, we know that Pym achieves this union with the mother only after a series of rebellions against the older male figures who fail him, including deceiving his father and grandfather, overthrowing the mutineers of the *Grampus*, and assuming authority over Captain Guy. This too has biographical significance, as Patrick Quinn establishes, for in their own ways Poe's two fathers failed him in their own ways--David Poe by abandoning the family shortly after Poe's birth, and is foster father John Allan refusing the teen-age Poe's pleas for financial assistance and affection, and disowning him. Only the language of psychoanalysis has been able to cope with symbolism, which describes the failure of the oedipal family drama as Freud would formulate it.

An additional subsidiary chronotope is the ship or boat as a metaphor of the mind. Richard Wilbur and Daniel Hoffman have interpreted the house or chamber in Poe's stories as allegories of the mind. They are characterized as isolated, claustrophobic, and weirdly lit. Here it is the vessels, especially the *Grampus*, where he is trapped in the hold while his state of mind deteriorates to a state of delirium and madness. The *Grampus* is dismasted, overturned, and becomes a floating wreck; each of the other vessels in succession are utterly reduced to fragments, the *Ariel* run over by a whale ship, the *Jane Guy* blown up with its own gunpowder into a mushroom cloud, and the rickety canoe vanished into the polar vortex.

The theme of isolation and mental disintegration is reinforced by Pym's own altered states of mind in virtually every episode, including madness, terror, delirium, drunkenness, and so forth. This dimension clearly has close connections to the Freudian and Jungian dimensions, but others as well, particularly where *Pym* has been placed within a subversive and gothic American literary genealogy. In fact, *Pym* is exemplary in this line, begun by D. H. Lawrence, Harry Levin, and Joel Porte. In this vein, *Pym* is another hero for which the American dream becomes a sustained nightmare of loss—of cultural and individual identity. Their claims of freedom become the sufferings of utter alienation from God and society, and their heroic journeys become the compulsive wandering of one in search of an identity.

Coming to terms with *Arthur Gordon Pym* means coping with the various dimensions of the text, as well as the discourse surrounding it. After all, what may be the most useful approach, and the one most in keeping with the spirit of the text, may be to understand the work as something like *Gargantua and Pantagruel* or *Gulliver's Travels*, omnivorous books which are more interested in promiscuously absorbing and reflecting back as much of their world as possible—in the case of Poe, the interior, psychic

world as much as exterior--than in forming a unified, refined and aesthetically pleasing whole. The critics of *Pym*--the best of them--are not "seeing things" the Freudians, myth critics, historians, deconstructionists, and so forth, are finding real ore. The text evokes disparate discursive formations, different ways of looking at the world, including those from different fields, which come into dialogue at the site of the text, so to speak.

Like Rabelais, Swift, and Melville, Poe indulges in an enormous range of play, not to create a aesthetically refined or seamless whole, but to absorb and reflect the immense heterogeneity in his world--itself reflected in the disorderly sprawl and diversity of the printed word at that time. In order to cope with the enormous range of play in which Poe indulges the critic needs to be free to examine these collisions without the imperative to reconcile contradictions and resolve the incongruities.

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Abstract

The Continuing Puzzle of Poe's *Arthur Gordon Pym* and a Way Forward: A Bakhtinian Approach toward a New Hermeneutic

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While it has remained consisting popular with the reading public, Poe's 1838 *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* has proven a problematic text for critics and scholars from Poe's day to our own. Many have noted that it is full of narrative and stylistic problems, confounds expectations at every turn, and resists classification. The text confuses readers by introducing different kinds of writing, for example, verisimilar historical and scientific reportage, adventure romance, and Christian allegory. Many readers have concluded that the work is a satire or parody of literary forms or social praxis. In addition to its apparent disunity, the text has numerous aberrations, errors, lapses into tastelessness, and these have led many to question the seriousness with which Poe himself took the work. The critical response to *Pym* has mirrored the heterogenous composition of the text itself. Most critics have agreed that it is not a tightly unified work, but that is where agreement ends. Critics who have not dismissed the book as hackwork have often floundered trying to bring together its disparate elements into a coherent reading. Most interpretations tend to apply a particular critical model--psychoanalytic, historicist, mythic, deconstructionist, etc.--to particular elements or sections of *Pym*, with more or less success. As a result, distinct genealogical lines of criticism have emerged, with each line rarely referring to the others. One comes away from such readings with the sense that the attempt at mastery falls

short; that only a fragment of the text's meaning has been grasped, only one side of *Pym* revealed. This study attempts to address the problem of *Pym* criticism, and to point the way toward a total interpretation, first by challenging the value of unity as an imperative of aesthetic value, which has been the most common ground for dismissal of *Pym,* and second, by expanding Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic model as a means of coping with the multivalence and multiple dimensions within the text. The critics--the best of them--are not "seeing things" the Freudians, myth critics, historians, deconstructionists, and so forth, are finding real ore. The text evokes disparate discursive formations, different ways of looking at the world, including those from different fields, which come into dialogue at the site of the text, so to speak. Like Melville, Swift, and Rabelais, Poe indulges in an enormous range of play, not to create anaesthetically refined product or a seamless whole, but to absorb and reflect the immense heterogeneity in his world--itself reflected in the disorganized sprawl and diversity of the printed word in that period. In order to cope with the enormous range of play in which Poe indulges, the critic needs to be free to examine these collisions without the imperative to reconcile contradictions and resolve incongruities.