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# Lacunae and their interpretations in Edgar Allan Poe's *The narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*

Informe final del Seminario de Grado Transgression and Dissidence in American Literature of the Nineteenth Century para optar al grado de Licenciado en Lengua y Literatura Inglesas

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<b>Agradecimientos .</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Introduction . .</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket by Edgar Allan Poe . .</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Pym as a lacunae .</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>The sudden disorder .</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Pym the survivor .</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>The whiteness of the snow .</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Conclusion .</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Bibliography .</b>	<b>27</b>
Dictionaries .	28



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# Introduction

In the context of the “American Literature of the XIX Century: Transgression & Dissidence” seminary, I chose to analyze Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* in order to demonstrate how the concept of *lacunae* works as the way the author uses to guide the reader into a successful interpretation of the literary work.

A *lacunae* in literary theory is a gap, an emptiness, a crack in the way in which a literary work is written. Being these spaces filled by the reader, using their own interpretation. In spite of Poe’s traditional mathematical perfectionism in which every single part of the physical and psychological *body* of the text is meticulously chosen and designed to cause a determined preconceived effect, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*<sup>1</sup> is recognized for its unsteady structure and apparent untidiness.

Its narrative structure is a mixture of literary genders, alternating naturalistic descriptions, geography lessons, chronic, logbook, adventure story, poetical prose, explanation notes, among others. Its distinctive yet remarkably coexistence between reality, fiction and *meta-fiction*<sup>2</sup>, its symbolism, and the important gaps that the author gives to his readers are some of its singularities. It is also Poe’s only novel and its mystery contains a polemic and some interesting mind games.

<sup>1</sup> From now on we will refer to *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* only as *The Narrative*.

<sup>2</sup> Ferrada Aguilar, Andrés, *Ficción y metafiction en La Narración de Arturo Gordon Pym de Edgar Allan Poe*. Revista Signos vol. XXXV, N°s 51-52, Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, Chile, 2002.

Due to the nature of this work, I intend to prove that the correct interpretation of its *lacunas* lead to the genuine comprehension of Poe's artistic –and philosophical– intentions.

Taking into account the symbolic and meta-fictional aspects in *The Narrative* and the author's particular "method" to elaborate his works it is possible to interpret the lacunas and, in consequence, to understand the meaning in Poe's novel.

*The Narrative* is a complex story and it deals constantly with the thin boundaries between reality and fiction. This has to do with the circumstances of its publication, the way critics and readers responded to it, the contradictions that conforms it and its fraudulent atmosphere. So it has to be analyzed –or read– considering these peculiarities.

The methodology to be followed will be:

1. A brief introduction to *The Narrative*, detailing the circumstances of its publication and the critics' response to it, and also a commentary about its fraudulence and the ways Poe uses to spread this novel to meta-fiction.
2. A superficial abstract of the argument of the work.
3. An exposition of the main symbols and the criteria used to interpret them.
4. The recognition of the main lacunaes.
5. The interpretation of the lacunaes considering the meaning of symbols.

Poe's contemporary English critics confined *The Narrative* to the category of *hoax* and didn't consider it as an important work of art. That influenced further readings and it is some of the least analyzed of all Poe's work, so there are still points to sign.

This thesis will help for an extensive reading of *The Narrative* and to increase the knowledge about Poe's imaginary, taking into account the treatment given to the symbols and the suggestion of a successful interpretation.

***"It is strange, too, that he most strongly enlisted my feelings in behalf of the life of a seaman when he depicted his more terrible moments of suffering and despair. For the bright side of the painting I had a limited sympathy. My visions were of shipwreck and famine; of death and 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".***

### **Arthur Gordon Pym**

*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is, as said before, Edgar Allan Poe's only novel. Best known as a poet and writer of tales, Poe composed Pym's adventures in a conflictive mood.

Being Poe the editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*<sup>3</sup>, one of the most read and commented periodicals in the United States, the 1836 monetary crisis and the unsuccessful efforts made by Poe to get the interest of the editors and publishers in his tales, plus the fact that he was recently married to his childbride and cousin Virginia

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<sup>3</sup> He was in charge of the edition of the *Messenger* (in this way I will refer to it from now on) between 1835 and 1837.



Clemm, made up Poe's mind to accept the challenge of writing a connected story <sup>4</sup>.

*The Narrative* was first published in the *Messenger* in two instalments, in the issues of January and February of 1837. Its appearance caused numerous effects on the readers and critics. Poe did not sign it as the author, his name only appeared on the table of contents of the magazine, and the readers think it was real. The critics were severe with this work and even referred to it as an intentional hoax designed to fool the readers.

Harper and Brother issued *The Narrative* in July of 1838, and Poe included a Preface and a final Note to the original story. In the Preface –narrated by Arthur Gordon Pym himself– we get to know that “Mr. Poe” (as referred by Pym) received several letters from a public convinced that the story was true, in spite of Pym's and Mr. Poe's intentions to publish the narrative “*under the garb of fiction*”<sup>5</sup>. That is the reason that motivates Pym to expose his real name and to state that the narrative *did* happen.

In the final Note, the third voice appears as the editor of the book. From him we know that “the late sudden and distressing death of Mr. Pym” is “already well-known to the public through the medium of daily press”<sup>6</sup>. He also states that there are “two or three final chapters” that were not included in the edition because Pym was revisioning them, now irremediably missing since his sudden death. These chapters, according to this editor, “contained matter relative to the Pole itself or at least to regions in its very near proximity”. It also states that Peters –Pym's companion in the final part of the journey– is still alive but not able to meet, and provides some light upon the mysteries of the *indentures* found by Pym and Peters in the islands of Tsalal.

Apparently, Poe reacted to the judgments of the critics by extending the confusion about the veracity of the tale and even took his time to develop in a better way the masquerade. The multiplicity of voices presents in the text (including the *disappearance* of Poe as the author), the naturalistic exposition of facts, its scientific and technique language, plus the contradictions presented in the text and in “reality” and the constant references to ambiguous states of consciousness guides the reader to read it as a truth itself and promotes Pym transcendence from fiction to meta-fiction<sup>7</sup>.

In this way, Poe created a *fake* story in where *fake* events were presented pretending to be *real*. In real life, Poe fakes his authorship presenting itself as one of the fictitious characters and introducing Pym as the historical one. The first appearance in the *Messenger* created a fraudulent atmosphere<sup>8</sup> that is increased intentionally by Poe

<sup>4</sup> According to J. Gerald Kennedy, Poe failed in presenting a collection of tales –the “so-called ‘Folio Club’ stories”– to Harper and Brothers as an attractive work. Apparently they found Poe's narrative “too learned and mystical to be relished by the multitude”, and advised him that the readers preferred “a single and connected story of one or two volumes in length”. KENNEDY, J. GERALD (ed.), *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket and Related Tales*, Oxford University Press, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> POE, EDGAR ALLAN, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket and Related Tales*, Preface, p. 3. Oxford University Press, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, Note, p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> FERRADA, ANDRÉS, *op. cit.*

through the Preface and the Note. Inside the fiction everything is unusual and strange and there seems to be no boundaries between what could or could not happen, cheating and trickery are constantly present. Nothing is the way it seems and everything is possible.

According to Poe's own statements about the *right length* of literature, a novel is "objectionable, from its length"<sup>9</sup>: the genuine work of literature is a combination of brevity and the "single effect", which is carefully designed to be caused.

J. Gerald Kennedy refers to the deception experimented by Poe having to write the novel due to monetary reasons and against his own principles and preferences:

***Poe seems to have decided (...) 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' (...). 'Mr. Poe' figures in the preface as a mentor, promoter, and temporary ghostwriter (KENNEDY, ix).***

According to Poe's meticulous methodology it is possible to assume that he prepared every single detail in order to achieve its true meaning. The perspective of a hoax is even more present taking into account the meta-fictional aspects of *The Narrative*, in which the fiction is about fiction coexisting in mixture realities.

The critics' discredit *The Narrative* affected even Poe's esteem for his novel. The only mention he made was that it was "a very silly book". Due to the numerous events of cheating in and out of the novel and its symbology (which we will analyze later) we have to consider it as an articulated meta-fictional hoax full of meaning. Even when it is called silly.

The following section is an abstract of the argument of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*.

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<sup>8</sup> It refers to *The Narrative's* contemporary English critics, who expose it in that terms.

<sup>9</sup> To know more about this subject can be read *The Poetic Principle* by Edgar Allan Poe.

# The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket by Edgar Allan Poe

## ABSTRACT

### Chapter one

Arthur Gordon Pym is a wealthy young man who feels passionate about sea. His friend, August Bernard, is the son of a sea captain from Nantucket who generally sailed to the South Pacific Ocean. One night in which both friends are drinking they sail to sea in Arthur's boat "Ariel". On board they start to have some problems due to the strength of the wind. Pym, who knows little about the management of a boat, realizes that his friend is completely drunk. The storm sinks the boat and leads them to a certain death, but a whaling ship called "Penguin" rescues them and deliver them in port. Arthur and August comes back home before dawn and do not say any word about his adventure to their relatives.

### Chapter 2 to 3

The terrible adventure experienced by Arthur is not enough to change his deep desire to become a sailor. When later August's father prepares a travel by the South Seas on board of a ship called "Grampus" and August is set to sail in it, they develop a plan to include Arthur in the journey, in spite of his parents' opposition. He hid himself in a hold. He has enough food and water to survive for some days. Arthur's confinement was extended longer than he could resist. He suffered pain due to the lack of air and food. The

unbearable air did not permit him to breath. He was completely lethargic. When he woke up from one of these states, Arthur was surprised due to the appearance of his dog Tiger. After a few days, the dog as Arthur was losing his mind and he tried to attack to him, but at the same moment August appeared, to save his life, and lead Arthur to the exterior.

### Chapter 4 to 8

Eleven days Arthur had stayed in the hold when August found him. And during all this time, a mutiny had taken place in the ship. Captain Barnard and other loyal sailors had being thrown out of the ship. The rest of the crew loyal to the Captain had been brutally killed. Dick Peters, a sailor, saved Arthur and August from being condemned to die. Then there were two alliances on board, one formed by August, Arthur and Peter who wanted to arrive to the Antarctic and the other group who were gold seekers. Arthur and August made a plan in order to take by surprise to their opponents. Arthur wore the clothes of a deceased sailor, and the mutineers are defeated and killed. Later, Arthur, Augustus, Dirk Peters and Richard Parker ( a sailor from the opponent group) were the only survivors.

### Chapter 9 to 13

A horrible storm hit the vessel, The Grampus lost its masts and its hull stayed afloat without direction. After a few days, in the distance they made out a vessel. This was full of women and men corpses. Also they had the vision of another vessel but the crew did not see them. For six days the four survivors had been in constant pain due to hunger and thirst therefore they decided to eat one of them in order to survive, the choice was made at random. Parker was the chosen one. Finally they found some food and they could keep them alive. August die weak and seriously ill. Other storm hit the hull and sank it. A schooner from Liverpool called The Jane Guy saved Arthur and Peters, the only survivors.

### Chapters 14 to 25

Shortly after, they recovered their strenght and were also members of the crew. In spite that The Jane Guy was bound for Southern Pacific, its Captain turned it to the Antarctic.As they were going towards the Antarctic, the weather was getting tempered. Also they had the opportunity to meet some natives from different islands. They arrived to an island where they were gladly received by the natives. But they were cheated by the natives. Only Peters and Arthur could manage to escape, because they were exploring a mountain when the betrayal took place. They were hidden until they could not resist hunger. Desperately they run to the beach, where they wera almost captured by the natives, but finally they escaped in a canoe but taking a native with them. Nu- nu ( as the native was called) was their guide . They sailed to the South in order to avoid violent storms. Finally they went straight to a blindly whiteness. Here, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym finished and Edgar Allan Poe added a note. There he explained that it was not possible to find Peters. All his knowledge of the journey came from the incomplete Arthur Gordon Pym`s diary.

It is possible to say that when *The Narrative* ends it does not end. In fact, it opens. In terms of composition, Poe took many more licenses than he did in his earlier career: it significantly exceeds the adequate length he had designed for a literary work; it is written in several tones and mixing literary genders; it is deliberately ambiguous and it even contradicts itself, and –a fact that was severely treated by the critics– it has an open and

apparently unfinished ending. In spite of the circumstances that lead Poe to write his only connected story and considering his self-proclaimed methodology and expectation about the literary work, it is evident that it is composed this way on purpose.

But, what is Poe trying to say? Due to the distinctive nature of the work it is necessary to consider the metafictional aspects: this novel transcends the boundaries of literature by presenting itself as a true event. In this way, Poe's role as the author vanishes and the hierarchy between fiction and reality is inverted. What the public is reading is Pym's own testimony narrated by a character named "Mr. Poe"; instead of Poe the author introducing the audience in the fictitious adventures of Pym the character, the readers find the fiction faking reality. Deliberately designed by Poe, this ambiguity combines three different layers of reality: historical (Poe as a person who wrote a novel), fictional (Pym's adventures) and metafictional (inversion and mixture of reality and fiction and the exposition of its thin boundaries, the exploration of a nowhere land between them and its symbolical and literary meaning).

There is no need to read *The Narrative* as a lineal progressive tale. What Poe wrote was a hoax. J.V. Ridgely states that Poe "conceived *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"<sup>10 0</sup>. When even the work questions itself, Poe discovered a way to explore a virgin region between literature and reality. Referring to Poe's determination to develop his contemplations about the literary work through the tale, Andrés Ferrada says:

***Poe submits the real story to a definitive fictionalization through metafictional instances, emphasizing in this way the preeminence of fiction over reality (FERRADA, 61).***

In fiction, Pym breaks through awful atrocities and adventures to get to the South Pole and disappear in the "perfect whiteness of the snow" of an enormous human figure. Then he comes back in the Note as an obituary exposed by a suspicious editor who even questions Pym's credibility through the supposed opinion of Mr. Poe. It is impossible to find an answer to it. We get the same whiteness Pym gets in the form of an empty page. Poe presents the literary work as a reality itself where the illusion of control is unmasked, and he proved this theory materially by creating a fraudulent true story. Interpretation is a character in the novel.

Thus, it is possible to analyze the symbolical corpus of the tale and, in this way, it can reach its metafictional meaning. This literary experiment of manipulating reality, in which Poe "tends to examine how this last one manifests itself in fictitious contexts"<sup>11 1</sup>, also carries a fictional meaning that precedes the metafictional one.

Edgar Allan Poe was fascinated with the exploration of the *terra incognita*, the South Pole. He supported John Cleves Symmes theory about the existence of "holes at the North and South Pole drawing ocean water into the center of the earth"<sup>12 2</sup>, and had already written a story about that matter in "M.S. found in a bottle". In this story, the main

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<sup>10 0</sup> Cited in KENNEDY, op. cit., Introduction, x.

<sup>11 1</sup> FERRADA, op. cit., p. 61.

character gets to the ship of death finding his end by sinking with it in a whirlpool. On the other hand, Pym gets to the Pole, confronts the unknown forces of nature (or else) and survives them. Pym goes through the end of the world and comes back to tell the story. In "M.S. found in a bottle" the end is the darkness of death; in *The Narrative* Pym faces the white *nothing* of rebirth and there is no end. To better understand this matter it is necessary to take into account the romantic nature of the author and the novel's symbolical corpus. As said by Bettina Knapp:

***From the psychological point of view [Poe's horror tales] are expeditions in the non explored deepness of the collective unconsciousness, the true core of the mystery and the self (...) the thick darkness experimented in that deepness may be compared with the primary emptiness, a period that, according to the Genesis, precedes Creation***<sup>13 3</sup>.

Pym experiences horror in several ways and apparently tends to the usual disintegration of the ego of Poe's characters. But somehow he defies this destiny and gets to the white regions of the empty page, opening the doors of the "true core of the mystery", as conceived by Poe's mystique. Baudelaire states that "Edgar Allan Poe and his patria were not at the same level"<sup>14 4</sup>, and Poe also complained about the American readers stating that "in the gross paradox of liking a stupid book the better", the fact that "its stupidity [was] American" was crucial<sup>15 5</sup>. As a private encrypted message dedicated to the astute and sensitive reader, the hoax is presented as a commercial voyage narrative but in its bottom carries deep significations.

David H. Lawrence presents an interpretation of Poe's intentions when he drowns his imagination through shocking enlightenments:

***The moralists have always wondered in vain why Poe needed to write his morbid tales. They needed to be written because old things needed to die and disintegrate, because the old white psyche must be decomposed gradually before another thing can appear***<sup>16 6</sup>.

The descent to an interior inferno to achieve an ulterior truth is a constant issue in Poe's characters. As a symbolist and a mystic, Poe seems to indicate a way to mess up with consciousness in order to subvert the standards of reality and discover unknown regions of the psyche passing through a necessary illumination. Besides the literary aspects of what Rimbaud called "alchemy of the word" and Poe's scientific appreciations, there is the fact that he experienced this "losing the mind and go through" in his own life. David H. Lawrence states: "Poe wanted to get by all means ecstasies and elevation. He tried

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<sup>12 2</sup> KENNEDY, op. cit.,

<sup>13 3</sup> KNAPP, BETTINA L. (1984), *Edgar Allan Poe, Fraterna*, p. 110.

<sup>14 4</sup> BAUDELAIRE, CHARLES (1964), "Edgar A. Poe. Su vida y sus obras", in: Poe, Edgar Allan (1964), *Narraciones Completas*, Ediciones Aguilar S.A., Madrid, España, p. 15

<sup>15 5</sup> Cited in KENNEDY, op. cit., Introduction, viii.

<sup>16 6</sup> LAWRENCE, DAVID H. (1946), *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Emecé Editores, p. 100.

frenetically to get them (...): elevation, fluidity, ecstasies. Poe experimented the effects of alcohol and of all the drugs he could get. He also submitted every human being around him to his experiments (LAWRENCE, 105).

Poe develops this subversion of consciousness through the application of the adequate *logos*. His characters do not abandon themselves in the sensual madness of the experience with the dark regions of the mind; in fact, they assume a scientific attitude when surrounded by chaos. The objective descriptions and detailed scrutiny of the situations tend to increase their horror and to lead the mind into its insides, but also manifests the existence of an adequate interpretation of the unexplainable and the quest for a higher goal through the enlightenment of science.

Considering *The Narrative's* symbolism it is possible to indicate the presence of this psychological and literary rebirth and the active role of scientific illumination to get near to chaos. As Mathew Stephen Elder said:

***(...) though Poe was perhaps the first to apply plausible scientific knowledge and methodology to fiction, the most accurate and productive way to evaluate Poe's achievement is from the perspective of Enlightenment and even Classical philosophy, rather than from the perspective of the genre as it developed subsequent to Poe's creation of it***<sup>17 7</sup>.

Due to the fact that *The Narrative* is fictionally and literary unfinished, the metafictional texture of the novel set the basis for its interpretation. As Pym's odyssey is remarkably symbolic, the metafictional meaning can be discovered by the analysis of this symbols and its effects on fiction and reality. It is necessary to consider that it is not possible for a sensitive and methodical author like Poe to leave a work unfinished: in fact, it has to be assumed that he deliberately chose every single detail in order to achieve the desired reaction. The flexibility of the literary genders and styles gives the work the aspect of a fragmented story in which the fictional lineal progression is frequently ambiguous, seems unfinished and presents essential gaps or *lacunas*. This lacunas presents in the text constitutes the key to interpret the metafictional meaning of the work.

According to Ferrada: "By interrupting abruptly the lineal progression of Pym's narration, the author evidences the manipulation of events, remarking in this way the deliberated fictionalization of the story" (FERRADA, 68). Pym's journey through the deepest mysteries of the mind to finally get to find the invisible spot where fiction and reality mix themselves in the form of a huge lacunae can be interpreted in several ways. Marita Nadal Blasco refers to it in this way:

***Pym has been described as a quest for identity, for unity, for transcendence, as a voyage of the mind, as a biblical allegory, as a racial allegory, as revolt against the father and a return to the mother***<sup>18 8</sup>.

All those readings are possible due to the fragmented characteristics of the work. In this

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<sup>17 7</sup> ELDER, MATTHEW STEPHEN (2005), "Never Otherwise Than Analytic": Poe's Science of the Divine. Raleigh, North Carolina State University.

<sup>18 8</sup> NADAL BLASCO, MARITA (2003), *Poe's American Gothic, or the Gap between Reference and Signification*, Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nord-Americans, Universitat de Valencia, pp. 355-365.

study I will refer to the main lacunas presents in the fictional body of the text and analyze its symbology in order to fill these gaps in its metafictional meaning. Pym's travel will be conceived as a symbolical death and rebirth of the psyche and the act of writing and the extension of Poe's understanding of scientific illumination.

In order to analyze the lacunas, in the subsequent section I will examine the first one: Pym himself.



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## Pym as a lacunae

Poe presents Pym as a young man who makes a long trip in which he experiences horrifying situations and finally disappears in an undefined whiteness.

Apart from this, there is no much information about the main character of the story. There is no physical or psychological description of him; all that can be said about his temper is that he uses to examine in detail and meticulously his atmosphere. There it is the first lacunae. Even when the novel is narrated in Pym's own voice, the extraordinaire events he experienced through the trip does not seem to inspire him any poetry; he just passes by from one situation to another and limits to register the evolution of events by making naturalistic descriptions of it.

Poe does not describe many characters in the book, but the elusion of Pym is evident. As Pym narrates, he does not describe any of its own thoughts or feelings or give us a physical representation of himself. Pym eluded this deliberately to expose it as a no one, a man that could be any man. One of the few characters he describes is Peters:

***This man was the son of an Indian woman of the tribe of Upsarokas, who live among the fastnesses of the Black Hills (...) Peters himself was one of the most ferocious-looking men I ever beheld. He was short in stature (...), but his limbs were of Herculean mould. His hands, especially, were so enormously thick and broad as hardly to retain a human shape (...) the mouth extended nearly from ear to ear; the lips were thin and seemed like some others portions of his frame, to be of natural pliancy, so that the ruling expression never varied under the influence of any emotion whatever***<sup>199</sup>.

The description of Peters almost as a savage helps to remark the fact that Pym is a way "in-volving" from the occidental civilization to the primitive wildness of the unknown. The editor who speaks through the final Note revalidates Peters' opinion about the hieroglyphics in the isle of Tsalal over Pym's (Peters suggesting a meaningful alphabet and Pym stating it has no meaning), this fact demonstrates the importance of the wild knowledge and wisdom in Pym's way to develop a new state of mind by facing the death of the old one.

Pym does not act as a usual hero of this kind of adventure stories, solving puzzles and confronting bravely to the dangers: he just lives through numerous calamities as a spectator and eventually survivor, but most of the time he is not even aware of what is happening. Even when he loses himself into accurately detailed mind trances he gets back to his consciousness without learning a thing. He is just indicated to win. Pym manifests his fascination about shipwrecks and storms, but the materialization of his desires has no relation with the effort he puts on it. It seems like all he has to do is sit and wait.

Referring to this matter, Bettina Knapp says:

***It is more frequent in his characters to be passive, unilateral sorrowful beings that require a return to the primary state, that need to die to renew themselves. Dissolution of the ego overcomes rather than the enforcement of this center of consciousness, a physical and spiritual loss of identity. (...) Most of the characters of this tales perish on an early age of their lives or disappear when they are too old. This destiny (...) may be symbolically seen as an initiation rite, a way to achieve the necessary rebirth***<sup>20 0</sup>.

To interpret *The Narrative* as Pym's quest for an illumination that will make him transcend the boundaries of its own fiction, the symbolical death and rebirth of Pym are very important. To achieve the *higher state of mind* he has –consciously or not– to pass through dangerous tasks that are always about to annihilate him. For its path seems already written, everything dies around him while he continues his way to the final emptiness, surviving from one deadly situation to another.

There are at least two instances in the story in which Arthur experiments symbolic death and rebirth. The first one is related to the adventure experienced by him and his friend August on board of the *Ariel*. Here, Pym was about to die but he resists it and finds his first rebirth.

***(...) my heart ceased utterly to beat, and without having one raised my eyes to learn the source of my alarm, I tumbled headlong and insensible upon the body of my fallen companion (POE, 8). (...) In regard to myself –I was resuscitated from a state bordering very nearly upon death (POE, 12).***

And also when he was hidden in a hold on board the *Grampus*:

***(...) he was gone! He would leave me to perish miserably, to expire in the most horrible and loathsome of dungeons– and one word, one little syllable I could not***

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<sup>19 9</sup> Poe, Edgar Allan, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>20 0</sup> KNAPP, BETINA, *op. Cit.*, p. 117.

**utter! I felt, I am sure, more than ten thousand times the agonies of death itself. My brain reeled, and I fell, deadly sick, against the end of the box (POE, 34). (...) Those only who have been suddenly redeemed from the jaws of the tomb, or who have known the insufferable torments of thirst under circumstances as aggravated as those which encompassed me in dreary prison, can form any idea of the unutterable transports which that one long draught of the richest of all physical luxuries afforded (POE, 34).**

An important characteristic about Pym's survivals is the fact that they are always provided by external situations or "forces". For instance, in the first case when he was about to find death on board of the Ariel, Pym is saved by the crew of a ship named "Penguin"<sup>21 1</sup> and experiences his first rebirth. In the second case, when he was hidden, his friend August arrived to the hold just in time to release him, and in that way contributes to Pym's second reborn from the darkness, from ship's uterus to the light of the outside world. There are numerous examples of this intervention of external forces that help Pym and destroy everything else, but they will be considered later.

In spite of Pym's silence about his own feelings or learning, it is possible to interpret his journey as a quest for an ulterior truth by analysing his successive deaths and rebirths as a symbol of the steps in his initiation rite. About the progress of his spiritual quest there are no words in the novel, but the interpretation is conducted by the symbolism. Matthew Stephen Elder wrote about this subject:

**Poe symbolizes a series of rebirths in the episodic narrative that is essentially a struggle between the ratiocinate instinct of the narrator to determine meaning and acquire knowledge, and the temptation to misperceive by eschewing rational principles<sup>22 2</sup>.**

The trances he experiences, in which he mentally drowns into deep dark regions of the psyche, can also be interpreted as steps in his path. Presented as psychological storms, they represent the decomposing of the old *logos* and the arrival of a new one.

In this way, Poe does not refer to any attribute of his character but it is possible to read him as "the chosen one" to achieve the mysteries from beyond and come back. His manners are not important because he is the anonymous representation of the fulfilled development of a chaotic and metafictional knowledge.

<sup>21 1</sup> This is the first reference to the South Pole in the novel.

<sup>22 2</sup> ELDER, MATTHEW STEPHEN, *op. cit.*



## The sudden disorder

During the development of the novel there are several surprising situations in which the nature of the atmosphere changes drastically from an apparent security and stability to its complete subversion, most of the times in the form of violent and chaotic manifestations: things and living creatures appearing and disappearing with no explanation, sudden death and decomposing of organic forms, natural disasters, abrupt transformation of consciousness, among others. These events are usual in the course of the novel, and sometimes made situations unclear.

Inside the fiction, reality is presented as a succession of events that appears in a chaotic and spontaneous way with no apparent relation between them. Pym goes through different situations that seems –or pretend to be– calm and safe but twists violently into a deadly trap. This could be interpreted as a manifestation of the duplicity of nature and the **ubiquitous** duality between reality and fiction. Edward Davidson, speaking about the first chapter of the book when Pym and Augustus are about to die, refers to this subject when affirms:

***That first chapter (...) refers to one of the main subjects of the book, cheating: nothing is really what it seems***<sup>23 3</sup>.

Augustus' sudden drunkenness; the instantaneous storm that appears; Pym's wound that heals immediately; the cheating of Pym's relatives, etc., develops the idea of the ambiguity between reality and fiction.

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<sup>23 3</sup> Edward Davidson, *Poe estudio crítico*, p. 177.

***Cheating applies not only to the lives of men, but, as Pym finally understands, to the own structure of the world*<sup>24 4</sup>.**

Poe expresses his thoughts about the uncertainty of reality by creating a story in which everything presents its double side. He does not refer to the immediate causes of the sudden disorder of the apparent safeness of reality, he just puts the situations one after the other. All this, in a symbolic way to narrate Pym's mental evolution to the dissolving of the old knowledge. The abrupt transformations of the nature of events represent the necessary transition to understand this.

When Pym was hidden in the hold of the Grampus and was falling in a strange state of anguish for the first time, his dog Tiger appears in the darkness of his hiding place and then disappears without any reason or explanation. In Pym's trance, horrible images passes through his mind and in the end he is about to be eaten by a monstrous lion, when he suddenly gets back to his mind:

***(...) he commenced licking my face and my face and hands with the greatest eagernee, and with the most extravagant demonstration of affection and joy! I was bewildered (...) but I could not forget the peculiar whine of my Newfoundland dog Tiger, and the odd manner of his careness I well knew (POE, 22). (...) For the presence of Tiger I tried in vain to account; and, after busying myself with a thousand different conjectures respecting him, was forced to content myself with rejoicing that he was with me to share my dreary solitude and render me comfort by his caresses (POE, 22).***

Tiger abruptly takes part in Pym's adventure without any explanation and Pym does not question his arrival profoundly. Later on, Tiger's presence will vanish almost imperceptibly. He seems to appear as a necessary task for Pym to confront his inner beast.

Another non-sense, surprising and, in this case, horrendous event is the apparition of a vessel carrying corpses. Pym, August, Peters and Parker are the only survivors of the Grampus' shipwreck and they seem to have reached their end. When the vessel appears they feel relieved... only to find out that nothing is what it appears to be:

***I turned my head, and shall never forget the ecstatic joy which thrilled through every particle of my frame, when I perceived large brig bearing down upon us, and not more than a couple of miles off (POE, 79). (...) Twenty-five or thirty human bodies, among whom were several females, lay scattered about between the counter and the galley in the last and most loathsome state of putrefaction (POE, 81). (...) We spent the remainder of the day in a condition of stupid lethargy, gazing after the retreating vessel until the darkness, hiding her from our sight, recalled us in some measure to our senses. The pangs of hunger and thirst returned, absorbing all other cares and considerations (POE, 83-84).***

As the previous example, this is an abrupt, inexplicable, shocking situation in which Pym is involved for no apparent reason, but it has an important meaning in the progression of his spiritual quest. The apparition of this vessel only explainable through a symbolical and metafictional analysis, and it is a fact that this apparition do not seem to influence any other event in the book

About the ambiguity of the notions of illusion and reality, Ferrada says that "is

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<sup>24 4</sup> *ibid*, p. 181.

analogous to the quest for an ulterior truth”<sup>25 5</sup>. The sudden decomposing of flesh is an important symbol that is frequently presented by Poe to leads the mind through its darkest regions:

***Rogers had died about eleven in the forenoon, in violent convulsions; and the corpse presented in a few minutes after death one of the most horrid and loathsome spectacles I ever remember to have seen. The stomach was swollen immensely, like that of a man who has been drowned and lain under water for many weeks (POE, 62).***

The fact that Poe does not explain or even tries to contextualize the succession of these situation represents a lacunae in the fictional corpus of The Narration and it is referred to the “spiritual education” of young Pym by confronting close-to-death experiences.

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<sup>25 5</sup> FERRADA, op. cit., p. 61.





## Pym the survivor

Pym's major ambition was to experience navigation. The fascination he manifests for shipwrecks and disasters lead him to erase from his memory any thought or lesson related to the tragedy lived on board of the Ariel:

***It might be supposed that a catastrophe such as I have just related would have effectually cooled my incipient passion for the sea. On the contrary, I never experienced a more ardent longing for the wild adventures incident to the life of a navigator than within a week after our miraculous deliverance (POE, 13).***

In spite, he was about to die and his family was against his decision of becoming a sailor. To fulfill his dream he must hide in the hold of the Grampus and stay there for an undefined time. Even when his imagination was filled with visions of "shipwreck and famine", "death or captivity among barbarian hordes" and "a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears"<sup>26 6</sup>, his determination was solid.

When he stowed on board of the Grampus his last destination was the South Pacific Ocean, including the unknown regions of the Antarctic. There were a great number of problems which could have made Pym's arrival impossible: storms, mutiny, hunger, the death of almost everybody else, cannibalism, among others, were some difficulties he had to face to reach his goal: the Antarctic. The book is full of limit situations in which there seems to be no escaping:

***We passed the remainder of this night in a state of the most intense mental and***

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<sup>26 6</sup> POE, op. cit., p. 13.

***bodily anguish that can possibly be imagined. The morning of the sixteenth at length dawned, and we looked eagerly around the horizon for relief, but to no purpose (...) this was the sixth day since we had tasted either food or drink (Poe, 87).***

He had to suffer a lot in order to get to the Antarctic, but he never loses his route. It seems that his path is *already traced*. Being the exploration of the South Pole a subject that fascinated Poe and considering that it is there where Pym finally achieves his illumination and reaches the empty regions of the world, the mind and the page, it can be interpreted as an enlightened land. In fact, his arrival in the Antarctic is merely hazardous (the original ship sinks and Pym "casually" gets to another one that was about the same destination).

Pym appears as Providence's favorite. Everything around him collapses and dies, and the circumstances are getting worse as he continues his way, but he stays immaculate. Even when his attitude is constantly passive, he survives and goes through. He is frequently unaware of what is happening and going to happen: he abandons his will to Chance and makes his way to his goal. In "'Mr. Pym' and 'Mr. Poe'", John Phussey says that Pym has been described as "an utterly passive character 'to whom things happen'"<sup>27 7</sup>.

His luck, however, is related to his condition of progressive illumination. Blinded by the process of dissolution of the consciousness in which he experiences severe transformations on the perception of reality, he is constantly lost. His faith in Providence is evidenced in his words when he is saved by the Penguin in the first chapter.

Pym is also Poe's favorite, and he feels secure in the author's hands. Kennedy refers to the intervention of Providence:

***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***<sup>28 8</sup>.

It could be said that Poe is Pym's Providence. As in fiction the author and the adventurer actually know each other, the concept of Providence Pym uses has to be understood in the pagan way. Pym has no understanding of the situations or participate in the main events; he just gets involved and reacts. His reaction is not very effusive, though. Most of the times the situation is favorable to him due only to chance: the mutiny sailors did not kill him because he was trapped in the hold; by chance he does not get eaten instead of Parker; he gets trapped in a cavern so he saves of the massacre of the isle of Tsalal, among other examples.

As Pym represents the death and rebirth of knowledge, his path *is* traced. Providence protects him because he is somehow indicated to capitalize the interest of humanity in the South Pole, to get physical and mentally there and solve its mystery.

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<sup>27 7</sup> PHUSSEY, JOHN (1971), "Mr. Pym" and "Mr. Poe": The two narratives of "Arthur Gordon Pym", *South Atlantic Bulletin*, Vol. 39, No 2, pp. 22-32.

<sup>28 8</sup> Kennedy, *op. cit.*, *Introduction*, xiii.

## The whiteness of the snow

*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* does not have an end in terms of literary composition; in fact, after all this long journey, Pym, Peters and Nu-Nu (a native who was taken prisoner by them) just continue their travel through unmentioned adventures. Though Poe's decision to cut the narration was misunderstood by early critics that consider it a narrative mistake or even a sensational trick to shock the readers, in metafiction, this lacuna refers especially to Pym's enlightenment.

***Hereupon Nu-Nu stirred in the bottom of the boat; but, upon touching him, we found his spirit departed. And now we rushed into the embrace 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 perfect whiteness of the snow (POE, 175).***

It is impossible to establish what happens to them after the apparition of the white figure. It is deliberately silenced and suspiciously suggested by the final words of the supposed editor in the Note, but inside the fiction it has no explanation at all. Pym and Peters' survival (Nu-Nu just dies. He is not allowed to continue) is the only fact that can be assumed, because of the explanation in the Note. From meeting the white figure to the publication of the book there is a blank that can only be filled with symbolical interpretation.

Much has been said about this subject. The multiplicity of interpretations has to do with the multiple voices and symbols through the text, and specially with Poe's intentions to develop a metafictional story related to the ambiguity of the perceptions of reality and

the enlighten about a virgin psychological land between reality and fiction. The understanding of Pym as a myth is frequent, though he experiences an evolution of consciousness. Kennedy referring to mystical readings of *The Narrative*:

***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 (Kennedy, xii).***

Bettina Knapp referred to Pym as “a being who needs to return to the primary state, who needs to die in order to renew himself”<sup>29 9</sup>. The total absence of descriptions about his feelings or spiritual aspirations leads the interpretation of the gaps in the fiction to a metafictional reading. It is necessary to consider the fact that Pym's illumination has to do with a psychological death and rebirth rather than a messianic revelation.

Having analyzed Pym's journey as his own traced path in which he faces several tasks to get to his traced goal, it is possible to determine the meaning of the goal itself. Poe presents this whiteness as an end, but it can be understood as an opening. The gothic and sometimes *gore* symbols are representations of the double nature of life and the lineal decomposing of the understanding of reality. Pym goes through horrible situations in which he gets constantly close to death, presences the death and rot of everything around him, and also enters in profound trances that leads him to the darkest and most terrible regions of the mind.

Those shocking experiences can be understood as the necessary deaths of the logos, as Pym represents the path to reach a new point of view. When Pym gets to his goal he has in some way “descended” from the proudly civilized United States to a primitive and “barbarian” culture that is lost in the unknown regions of the world. To descend to a primary state of knowledge is necessary to find the core of a free consciousness.

The blank page represents the white spot of the mind in which reality is up to be made. Metafictionally it mocks about the disorder of the boundaries between reality and fiction and presents the subversion of certainty to dissolve the ego in order to reach the blankness of knowing.

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<sup>29 9</sup> KNAPP, BETTINA, op. cit., p. 117).

## Conclusion

In the fraudulent story of Pym Poe manifest his beliefs about the possibility of reaching an empty spot of the mind. By cheating and manipulating the credibility of a supposed *fact*, Poe creates an unsteady literal and extra-literal reality in which the nature of events is left to chaos and everything is possible.

By composing a confuse novel with evident gaps and contradictions, Poe left the interpretation of his thoughts in the ambiguous regions of metafiction. In this study I analyzed four of the most important lacunas present in the text and the main symbols that exist in them in order to interpret the lacunas as Poe's metafictional message through silence.

I conceived Pym as a symbol of the fulfilling of a successful evolution of consciousness, as a path to lead the mind to its illumination. Based in this I interpreted de lacunas.

The first lacuna I studied was Pym himself. Poe does not describe Pym physically or psychologically, the only way to get to know him is analyzing the facts presents in the fiction and its symbols. As Pym survives when everything dies and experiences several deaths and rebirths, but finally gets to his destination, Poe's decision of not describing Pym can be understood as a way to expose him as a generic character, as a way to illumination.

The second lacuna was the sudden disorder of the apparent calm. The unexpected and sudden distortion of everything that seems secure. This represents the ambiguity of

the notions of reality and evidences the manifestations of the unknown.

Pym's horrendous experiences can be understood as the necessary tasks in the dissolution and renewal of consciousness.

The third lacuna was Pym's constant survivals to death. Pym appears as a believer in Providence with a defined goal: the Antarctica. Pym is abandoned to chance and he makes his way through horror and death without any effort, just by the intervention of Providence. Being Poe fascinated with the exploration of the *terra incognita*, Pym's goal represents the uncertain and unknown regions of the mind. Pym cannot die because he is indicated by Providence (the author) to get to the final whiteness.

The mysterious white human figure that appears to cut the course of the story is the most evident lacuna in the text. Poe has no intentions to write about the experience with the whiteness because nothing is supposed to say about it. Pym's arrival at the white spot of the world represents the enlightenment of consciousness and the achievement of a new understanding of reality.

*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* represents the quest for an ultimate truth beyond the boundaries of right or wrong, reality or fiction. Most things have been said about this novel, and there are so many aspects to analyze in it and I am sure that many more things will be said about it.

In this study I tend to prove Poe's intention to invite human consciousness to a voyage into the wildness.

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