



## Hybridity, Anxiety, and Wombs of Destruction in Edgar Allan Poe’s Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket

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### Abstract

Within this essay, we argue that *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* by Edgar Allan Poe suggests the nascent United States was gripped by a great anxiety and that the novel functions as a gothic alternative to the traditional American bildungsroman penned by Cooper or Melville. Looking at Pym psychologically and thematically, we tease out a number of apparently unrelated themes within the novel, including masculine sexuality, feminine reproduction, racial and sexual hybridity, and human appetites for violence to show how the story mirrors national and cultural fears at the same time that it addresses those issues humorously and functions as the unconscious does. Taking our cues from Freud, we contend that in a non-linear fashion, Pym conveys anxieties about the future of the nation, particularly fears of domination, mass violence, and destruction.

### To cite as

Montwieler, K., & Boren, M.E., 2015, ‘Hybridity, Anxiety, and Wombs of Destruction in Edgar Allan Poe’s Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket’, *PsyArt* 19, pp. 31–51.

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Written when the United States was more viable than it had ever been, Edgar Allan Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1837-38)—both through its own hand-wringing nature, and its success as a serialized novel—suggests the nation was gripped by great anxiety. The internal conflicts over slavery, the ongoing violence and genocide on western frontiers, and the U.S.’s entrance onto the stage of global imperialism provide the backdrop to the angst of a young boy making his own way in the world; within this episodic thriller, Poe presents a gothic alternative to Cooper’s novels of American masculine self-reliance.

Scholarship generally acknowledges *Pym*’s psychological focus, but this strange novel that lacks a clear narrative arc, veers off on strange tangents, and

seems more concerned with creating momentary suspense than following a rational plot, defies readings that privilege logic. Noting the gothic elements, the nail-biting style, the disconnected series of events, the mixing of genres, the focus on “living exhumations,” and the varied and numerous “psychological states” of Pym’s mind, critics traditionally have explored individual facets of the text, agreeing that the book is ultimately “richly imbued with the concerns of the time,” but ultimately concurring with Henry James, that as a novel, it “fails because it stops short, and stops short for want of connexions.”<sup>1</sup> If contemporary criticism of *Pym* unveils its various preoccupations, including death, rebirth, the supernatural, psychological interiority, the conflict between civilization and anarchy, homosexuality, and racism,<sup>2</sup> when it comes time to discuss the relationship of these facets of the novel, Poe critics are, to say the least, challenged, or in the words of G.R. Thompson, prey to a “fable of misreading.”<sup>3</sup> Yet it is in the novel’s very unravelling of cohesion that we find fruitful material to explore.

The mistake many make in approaching *Pym* is attempting to read it as a linear “coming-of-age novel” in the style of *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Moby-Dick*, or *Huckleberry Finn*.<sup>4</sup> The novel simply does not work that way. Yes, Pym follows the plight and transformations of a young man, but the story unfolds in a very different way than a *Leatherstocking Tale*. A century before Freud articulated the workings of neuroses, the return of repressed, the unconscious, repetition compulsions, and the Darwinian nature of

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<sup>1</sup> *The Altar of the Dead* (New York, 1909), xix-xx. Cited in Paul John Eakin. For discussions of trends in *Pym* and Poe scholarship, see Douglas Robinson’s *Reading Poe’s Novel: A Speculative Review of Pym Criticism*.

<sup>2</sup> On Poe and imagery of death and creation, see Grace F. Lee; on themes of the supernatural, see Stephen Mainville; Maurice Levy; and Richard Haswell; of psychological interiority and realism, see Richard Kopley, “The Secret”; on Pym and homosexuality, see Brad Lint and David Greven; on Poe and race, see David Faflik and Sam Worley.

<sup>3</sup> Kennedy, “*Pym* Pourri: Decomposing the Textual Body” (Kopley, 167); cited in Marita Nadal’s “Beyond the Gothic Sublime.” Surrealist provocateur Jorge Luis Borges claims, “It is Poe’s Greatest Work”[3] (and that alone suggests the book’s unconventionality), but critics arguing for the novel’s importance often make vague gestures towards the novel’s supposed influence. In his 1999 introduction, Kopley argues: “Many scholars agree *Pym* influenced Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), especially the chapter ‘The Whiteness of the Whale,’ and clearly the novel influenced Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl* (1904).” But such cultural impact begins to sound strained the further Kopley goes with it: “*Pym* is a touchstone for James De Mille’s *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (1888) [and ...] Charles Romyn Dake’s *A Strange Discovery* (1899), Walter de la Mare’s *The Three Mull-Mugars*, [...] B. Traven’s *Death Ship* (Kopley, xxix). These assertions may be true, but in naming these obscure works Kopley undercuts the argument for the novel’s significance. Jules Zanger notes that *Pym* “has provided and continues to provide a variety of critical problems to serious readers”—which although “powerfully generative” ends with “a final effect of indeterminacy and wonder” (276). H.P. Lovecraft went so far as to suggest the failure had to do with “a missing two or three final chapters.”[3] This novel is so confusing that Poe critic Paul Rosenzweig offers Poe “encourages a movement towards meaning,” but concludes, “nothing is certain in the world of the *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, not even the certainty that nothing is” (149).

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Leslie Fiedler, the coming of age novel as a unifying archetype continues to dominate critical approaches to nineteenth-century American novels.

psychological survival, Poe, like the gothic novelist Charles Brockden Brown before him, addressed issues that only later psychotherapy would explore more fully. In *Art of Darkness*, Anne Williams argues that the Gothic is a poetics, that even the novels within the genre proceed thematically (more akin to, say, a psychological dream text) rather than following rational plots. But we can still appreciate, study, and learn from the book, if we look at it psychologically and thematically, and with an eye for humor, for as this essay will show, *Pym* is not a serious *bildungsroman* nor a depiction of the Romantic, melancholy mind. Even so, the novel's bawdy metaphorical chain of events conveys anxiety and a serious problem looming for the nation. This essay takes its cue from Poe then in looking at a number of apparently unrelated moments within the novel, including its depictions of masculine sexuality, feminine reproduction, racial and sexual hybridity, and human appetite for sex and for violence to show in fact how Pym functions in terms of narrative and psychologically mirrors national and cultural fears.<sup>5</sup> We'll also show how the novel psychologically functions similar to the narrator within the text, frantically zig-zagging through a host of mental states. It repeatedly exhibits a weirdly misogynist fascination with the feminine, a dread of pregnancy and childbirth, against which homoeroticism serves as a temporary refuge, and it repeatedly flits between these things before veering into abjection, disgust, and self-loathing. Ultimately, the novel never rests in one or another of its psychological states and thus if anything is interpretively important in revealing the extremely ambivalent nature of the anxious ego, its movements and psychological contortions.

### **Pym and Peters—Masculine Sexuality Run Amok**

Most of the critical work skims over the novel's first chapters, but significantly, they reveal that Pym is sixteen years old and his friend Augustus is eighteen. Their relationship is established at the outset as close: "I used to go home with him, and remain all day, and sometimes all night. We occupied the same bed, and he would be sure to keep me awake until almost light, telling me stories of the natives of the Island of Tinian, and other places he had visited in his travels" (7). Pym is enamored with Augustus's adventure tales (David Greven suggest he's more than enamored with Augustus),<sup>6</sup> but what's in the

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<sup>5</sup> Although one could easily make some inferences about Poe's own psychology from what is revealed (the dread and anxiety associated with images of viable feminine reproductive organs, for example), such (significant and certainly entertaining) implications are left to the reader. For example, it is easy to draw conclusions especially in light of Poe's elopement with his underage cousin.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to citing the myriad times that the two boys, well, one man and one boy bunk together, there are numerous hints at more. That it's mentioned, one night while they are drunk in bed together Pym's boat, for example, lies "at the old decayed wharf by the lumber yard of

relationship for the older boy? We contend the years between the youths mark the difference between one “experienced” in the world (Augustus is, after all, legally a man) and one not yet so experienced; furthermore Augustus is relatively poor and Pym is wealthy. Indeed, Pym owns the *Ariel*, a sailboat, even though, “at this period I knew little about the management of a boat, and was now dependant entirely upon the nautical skills of my friend” (9).

When a drunken Augustus challenges a sleepy Pym to go for a nighttime jaunt, Pym cannot help but “man up” even though he expresses fear. Pym relays,

*The words were no sooner out of [Augustus’s] mouth than I felt a thrill of the greatest excitement and pleasure, and thought his mad idea one of the most delightful and most reasonable things in the world. It was blowing almost a gale, and the weather was very cold—it being late October. I sprang out of bed, nevertheless, in a kind of ecstasy, and told him I was quite as brave as himself, and quite as tired of lying in bed like a dog, and quite as ready for any fun or frolic as any Augustus Barnard in Nantucket.* (8)

They bail out Pym’s boat and set sail, long after midnight, with a strong gale coming on. Although Pym tries for the machismo evidenced by Augustus, what we see most is anxiety, even panic, especially when he realizes the only one on board who can sail is in serious trouble: “Turning my eyes upon him, I perceived at once that, in spite of his assumed *nonchalance*, he was greatly agitated” (emphasis Poe’s; 9). Pym may not be smart, but he knows when he’s in trouble. “He was drunk—bestly drunk—he could no longer stand, speak, or see” (10). Thus, in the opening chapters, the relationship between the two is established as charged and uneven (one, the man, is experienced in the world and the other, a boy faces a world of knowledge he desires and fears).

Perhaps it’s that relationship as much as the setting that catalyzes Pym’s anxiety: “A storm was evidently gathering behind us; we had neither compass nor provisions...these thoughts flashed through my mind with a bewildering rapidity, and for some moments paralyzed me beyond the possibility of making any exertion” (10-11). After tying the now comatose Augustus to the boat, Pym grows more afraid.

*Hardly had I come to this resolution, when, suddenly, a loud and long scream or yell, as if from the throats of a thousand daemons, seemed to pervade the whole atmosphere around and above the boat. Never while I live shall I forget the intense agony of terror I experienced at that moment. My hair stood erect on my head—I felt the blood congealing in my veins—my heart utterly ceased to beat, and without once having raised my eyes to learn the source of my*

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Pankey & Co., and almost thumping her sides out against the rough logs” (9). The “hankey,” one might say, is implied.

*alarm, I tumbled headlong and insensible upon the body of my fallen companion.* (11-12)

Pym's fear is melodramatically erotic—even weirdly copulatory.

The striplings are “saved” by being run over by a larger ship (the source of the scream), *The Penguin*, and then fished from the water by its crew. Instead of discouraging Pym though, the brush with death merely whets his appetite for more excitement. “...I never experienced a more ardent longing for the wild adventures incident to the life of a navigator than within a week of our miraculous deliverance” (18). Soon the two fellows plot their next adventure, one in which they will sneak Pym aboard the ship Augustus is due to depart on. This adventure also is bound to be filled with danger, for “she was an old hulk, and scarcely seaworthy when all was done to her that could be done” (19). Pym's anxiety eroticizes danger, and his fascination is clearly tied to experiences wholly masculine. This homoerotic preoccupation is evidenced by far more than the fact that—apart from the one mention of Pym's mother, actual women are only mentioned in this entire novel thrice, and in passing. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised then, as Marie Bonaparte has noted, phallic symbols arise throughout the novel. It's not too late in the story when Augustus dies and is replaced as Pym's closest companion by the stalwart Dirk Peters. His name alone is doubly phallic, and his initial description is simply amazing.

*He was short in stature—not more than four feet eight inches high—but his limbs were of the most herculean mould. His hands, especially were so enormously thick and broad as hardly to retain human shape. His arms, and well as legs were bowed in the most singular manner, and appeared to possess no flexibility whatever. His head was equally deformed, being of immense size, with an indentation in the crown (like that on the head of most negroes), and entirely bald. To conceal this latter deficiency, which did not proceed from old age, he usually wore a wig formed of any hair-like material which presented itself....The mouth extended nearly from ear to ear; the lips were thin and seemed, like some other portions of his frame, to be devoid of natural pliancy, so that the ruling expression never varied under any emotion whatever.* (emphasis Poe's; 49)

Dirk Peters is aggressive and aggressively sexual, embodying predatory desires. Once the mutiny occurs, “it was determined at last that all the prisoners (with the exception of Augustus, whom Peters insisted in a jocular manner upon keeping as his clerk) should be set adrift” (50). Peters's remark about keeping the youngest on board (Pym's presence is unknown) as a personal “clerk” is “sailor talk,” unmistakable in its meaning for Augustus is kept in the forward hold and visited by the crew regularly. “During the day two of the crew (harpooners) came down, accompanied by the cook, all three in

nearly the last stage of intoxication...The three men went away in about an hour, and no one else entered the forecabin that day. Augustus lay quiet until nearly night.” (58). Pym—who witnesses these “visits” in hiding—is in no hurry to reveal himself.

Poe’s interest in metaphorical phalli is not confined to Peters. After Pym and Peters are rescued by the *Jane Guy*, they find themselves among sailors enthusiastically searching for *biche de mer*. Poe fills three long chapters with enough arcane maritime knowledge to render catatonic the nerdiest of factophiles.

*Like caterpillars or worms, they creep in shallow waters ....This mollusca is oblong, and of different sizes from three to eighteen inches in length; and I have seen a few that were not less than two feet long. They are nearly round, and little flattish on one side, which lies next to the bottom of the sea; and they are from one to eight inches thick. They crawl up into shallow water at particular seasons of the year, probably for the purposes of gendering, as we often find them in pairs... (178)*

Poe mentions the name, *biche de mer*, as often as possible, and the reader intent on plot will start skimming, but if one reads the last excerpt with the same levity one brings to bear on the “Dirk Peters” description, one can’t help realize that “*biche de mer*” is as euphemistic as August serving as a “clerk.” Poe continues: “The *biche de mer* is generally taken in three to four feet of water; after which they are brought on shore, and split at one end with a knife, the incision being one inch or more depending on the size of the mollusca. Through this opening the entrails are forced out by pressure...” (178). And in case one still doesn’t see what the author is getting at, Poe notes, “the Chinese, as stated before, consider *biche de mer* a very great luxury, believing it wonderfully strengthens and nourishes the system, and renews the exhausted system of the immoderate voluptuary” (178-179). The “*biche de mer, biche de mer!*” the sailors are chasing through shallows are metaphorical swimming phalli and nineteenth-century Viagra (178).

Not long after they encounter the sea slugs, Dirk and the crew turn their attention to the women of the South Pacific, who Pym notes, “were most obliging in every respect...” (180). Thus, although our analysis began by identifying a theme of homoerotic sexuality, Poe’s interest changes. For, even more so than masculine sexual appetite, feminine sexuality and reproduction terrifies our young narrator. It is no accident that immediately following the frenzied *biche de mer* harvest and subsequent encounter with those “obliging women,” the entire crew—except for Pym and Peters—is swallowed and killed in a “giant fissure” in one giant “convulsion of the ground” (180).

## **Feminine Reproductive Imagery, Anxiety and Catastrophe**

The voracious cook visiting Augustus repeats a curious phrase when asked by Augustus when he shall be freed. He answers with a cryptic, “when the brig is no longer a brig” (52). The answer sounds foreboding, but is oddly out of place; it makes no sense and the cook has no other lines. This is confusing to a reader, but for a writer, the answer to the question, “when is something in a book something else?” is when it’s a metaphor.

And thus Poe underscores how female anatomy and reproduction are connected to anxiety and catastrophe in this particular novel. It is our contention that this odd bildungsroman describes a psychological state in which there’s clearly a homoerotic fascination for our protagonist, as well as anxiety towards feminine reproduction and a linked mysogyny. Although there aren’t many women in this text, there’s a lot of feminine reproductive imagery. When Augustus sneaks Pym aboard that “old scow,” he takes Pym to his berth, teaching him how to hide until the ship is too far gone to return to port.

*He now pressed with his knuckles upon a certain spot of the carpet in one corner of the space just mentioned, letting me know that a portion of the flooring, about sixteen inches square, had been neatly cut out and again adjusted. As he pressed, this portion rose up at one end sufficiently to allow the passage of his finger beneath. In this manner he raised the mouth of the trap (to which the carpet was still fastened by tacks), and I found that it led into the after hold. He next lit a small taper by means of a phosphorous match, and, placing the light in the dark lantern, descended with it through the opening, bidding me follow. I did so, and he then pulled the cover upon the hole, by means of a nail driven into the underside—the carpet, of course, resuming its original position on the floor of the stateroom, and all traces of the aperture being concealed. (23)*

Augustus leads Pym through a dark and narrow passageway until they come to an iron-bound box large enough for Pym to sit in comfortably. Pym’s delighted with his snug “womb room,” complete with cordage running from his apartment to the “carpet covered aperture” from whence he will emerge.

But things, as they often do in this text, go awry. Pym succumbs to malignant vapors in the brig’s hold, and only with difficulty is he reanimated. “Upon waking I felt strangely confused in mind, and some time elapsed before I could bring to recollection all the various circumstances of my situation” (26). And this is important, for in every case in this text, as far as imagery goes, the wombs become tombs, and pregnancy is associated with terror and morbidity. Pym cannot issue from the passage as he should.

*In this attempt my great febleness became more than ever apparent. It was with the utmost difficulty that I could crawl along at all, and very frequently*

*my limbs sank suddenly from beneath me; when falling prostrate on my face I would remain for some minutes in a state bordering on insensibility. Still I struggled forward by slow degrees.... At length upon making a push forward with all the energy I could command, I struck my forehead violently against the corner of some iron bound crate. The accident only stunned me for a few moments; but I found... that the quick and violent roll of the vessel had thrown the crate entirely across my path, so as to effectively block up the passage. It became necessary, therefore, enfeebled as I was, either to leave the guidance of the whipcord and seek out a new passage, or climb over the obstacle and resume... (30-31)*

After various unsuccessful attempts to free himself, Pym gives into despair. “My sensations were those of extreme horror and dismay. In vain I attempted to reason on the probable cause of my being thus entombed” (32). Such death imagery should not be surprising, however, as he was making his home in an “iron bound box” to begin with.<sup>7</sup> Giving up the possibility of cutting his way out again, he returns to his crate.

Augustus, however, having been “thrown into a lower berth next to the forecandle bulkheads, with the assurance that he should never put his foot on deck again until the brig was no longer a brig” is not yet out of the game (52). “For some minutes after the cook left the forecandle, Augustus abandoned himself to despair, never hoping to leave the *berth* alive” (emphasis ours; 53), but he does revive and determines “to force a passage, if possible, to the box, and at least ascertain beyond a doubt the truth of his surmises [that Pym is probably dead] (59). Augustus cuts into Pym’s section of the ship and leads Pym to the hole he cut in the forecandle wall where until it’s prudent to show himself (remember, the harpooners are still visiting his friend daily) Pym waits.

This morbid pregnancy and birthing-gone-wrong imagery is also reflected in the two boys’ initial voyage aboard the *Ariel* for when Pym realizes his friend is insensible (“It was hardly possible to conceive the extremity of my terror”), he ties him to the “cuddy” of the boat, and indeed it is the “cordage” that saves him (emphasis Poe’s; 10).

*Upon getting hold of him it was found he was still attached by a rope to the floating timber. This rope, it will be remembered, I had myself tied about his waist, and made fast to a ringbolt, for the purpose of keeping him in an upright position, and my doing so, it appeared, had been ultimately the means for preserving his life. [...] Upon his first attaining any degree of consciousness, he found himself beneath the surface, whirling round and round with inconceivable rapidity, and with a rope wrapped in three or four folds tightly about his neck. In an instant afterwards he felt himself going rapidly upward,*

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<sup>7</sup> On images of premature burial in Poe, see Watson.

*when, his head striking violently against some hard substance, he again relapsed into insensibility.* (15)

The morbid pregnancy imagery resurfaces throughout the text. It is not surprising that upon being rescued, Pym claims that, “I never experienced a more ardent longing for the wild adventures incident to the life of a navigator than within a week of our miraculous *deliverance*” (emphasis ours; 18). Pym constantly, and often in the presence of Peters, “conceives” new terrors aboard the ship despite textual assurances that “there were four very excellent staterooms, with wide and convenient berths” (22).

Unfortunately for readers averse to novels laden with innuendo, Poe’s just getting started. In addition to the *biche de mer* section, two other long chapters are filled with arcane nautical facts. The first one, Chapter 6, concerns “Proper Stowage Onboard a Brig”: “Coasting vessels, in the frequent hurry and the bustle attendant upon taking in or discharging cargo, are the most liable to mishap from want of a proper stowage” (63). This chapter, which follows on the heels of the first mutiny seems misplaced, until one looks at it with (granted, juvenile) metaphorical implications. “In most kinds of freight the stowage is accomplished by means of a screw... This screwing, however, is resorted to principally with a view of obtaining more room in the hold.” (63). Remember, this brig is no longer a brig; it has been transformed into a pregnant female body (*à la* secret carpeted aperture, cordage, womb-room, and fetal Pym). And as in the *biche de mer* chapter, Poe signals his metaphor for pregnancy by repeating “*stowage*” so much. “Proper stowage” is important, and the dangers are not just in bursting for if the cargo is not also “properly settled,” distress can strike as well. The dangers to a brig are great; even if it is properly “screwed, stowed, and settled,” it can fall prey to outside forces, and thus Poe, instead of returning to his tale of mutiny, turns instead to a description of nautical maneuvers in a storm, most importantly, the process of “lying to,” especially as it relates to “proper stowage.”

Chapter Seven is all about “lying to,” another pregnancy reference. Johan Wijkmarkte notes Poe’s misuse of nautical terms stems from his own inexperience, suggesting he had open upon his desk narratives and maritime manuals to guide him. This may be true, but we believe a similar claim can be made for his use of nineteenth-century gynecological and obstetrical texts, which were often available in the home (where children were usually birthed), and availed of by young men curious about female anatomy. Remember, in the early nineteenth century, bourgeois women were encouraged to lie in for the last weeks of pregnancy. No Herman Melville, who easily can turn an oar into an intellectual conceit, Poe is obviously straining here—at least the limits of his metaphorical abilities—but he nevertheless forges ahead. “But When *lying to* (especially with a small head sail), a vessel which is not properly modeled in the bows is frequently thrown upon its beam ends; this occurring every fifteen or twenty minutes upon an average, yet without any serious

consequences resulting, *provided there be a proper stowage*” (emphasis Poe’s; 64). “Screwing,” “stowage,” “settling,” and “lying to” are repeatedly and clumsily over-stressed.<sup>8</sup> Our point is to underscore Poe’s anxiety about pregnancy. Immediately following these odd chapters, Pym, Peters, and Augustus themselves mutiny against the mutineers. To gain the advantage over the crew they resort to subterfuge deciding to terrify them by dressing Pym up as Rogers, one of their dead shipmates, and then setting Peters on them to wreak destruction.

Curiously, Rogers had died “of spasms” and “in violent convulsions” (his name too euphemistically refers to copulation). Indeed, “the corpse presented in a few moments after death one of the most horrid and loathsome spectacles I ever remembered to have seen. The stomach was swollen immensely. [...] The hands were in the same condition, while the face was shrunken, shriveled, and of chalky whiteness, except where relieved by two or three glaring red splotches” (77). To scare the sailors, our protagonist dresses up as the repugnant corpse of Rogers.

*As soon as I had got below I commenced disguising myself so as to represent the corpse of Rogers. The shirt which we had taken from the body aided us very much. [...] Having put this on I proceeded to equip myself with a false stomach, in imitation of the horrible deformity of the swollen corpse. This was soon effected by means of stuffing with some bedclothes... (79)*

Masquerading as the disgusting and dead, but imagistically pregnant Rogers, Pym jumps into the stateroom where the crew “were seated on several mattresses, which had been taken from the berths and thrown to the floor” (80). Pym is so terrifying that, “the mate sprang up from the mattress on which he was lying, and, without uttering a syllable, fell back, stone dead, upon the cabin floor” (84). The rest, paralyzed by fear are easily dispatched by the others.

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example:

But we are now speaking of *lying to* in a gale of wind. This is done when the wind is ahead, and too violent to admit of carrying sail without capsizing...(75)

When the vessel is in a leaky condition, she is often put before the wind even in the heaviest seas; for when *lying to*, her seams are surely to be greatly opened by her violent straining... (75)

Vessels in a gale of wind are *laid to*. (75)

When a vessel is to be *laid to*, her head is brought up to the wind... (75)

The helm is usually lashed down, but this is altogether unnecessary (except on account of the noise it makes when loose), for the rudder has no effect upon the vessel when *lying to*. (76)

Some vessels will *lie to* under no sail whatever, but such are not to be trusted at sea. (emphases ours, 76)

Almost immediately a storm threatens the boat. “It was now about one o’clock in the morning, and the wind was still blowing tremendously. The brig evidently labored much more than usual, and it became absolutely necessary that something be done with a view to easing her in some measure” (86). They cut away its sails, but cannot stop it from leaking, signal of impending disaster. “We had scarcely time to draw our breath after the violence of this shock, when one of the most tremendous waves I had then ever known broke right on board of us, sweeping the companion way clear off, bursting in the hatchways, and filling every inch of the vessel with water” (89). The water has broken on the brig indeed. “Luckily just before night, all four of us [they’ve saved one shipmate] had lashed ourselves firmly to the fragments of the windlass, lying in this manner as flat upon the deck as possible. This precaution alone saved us from destruction” (93).

The boat is distressed and fully laboring, and the birthing imagery continues: “I saw that Peters still lived, although a thick line was pulled so forcibly around his loins as to give him the appearance of being cut nearly in two; as I stirred, he made a feeble motion to me with his hand, pointing to the rope” (92). Pym cuts the “cordage” holding himself and their new comrade Parker. “We now lost no time in getting loose the rope from Peters. It had cut a deep gash through the waistband of his pantaloons, and through two shirts, and made its way into his groin, from which the blood flowed out copiously as we removed the cordage [...] No sooner had we removed it, however, than he spoke, and seemed to experience instant relief—being able to move with much greater ease than Parker or myself—this was no doubt owing to the discharge of blood” (94).

The ship is all but sunk, floating with the deck just above water, and hence comes a long passage, in which starving and dying of thirst, they watch one another grow thinner. Pym relays “We were on the brink of despair, when Peters proposed that we should fasten a rope to his body, and let him make an attempt to get up something by diving into the cabin” (97). The umbilicus tied to Peters saves him, but try as they might they cannot regain access to the cabin and the sustenance it holds. “In less than half a minute after his going down we felt the rope jerked violently (the signal we had agreed upon when he was to be drawn up). We accordingly drew him up instantly, but so incautiously as to bruise him badly against the ladder” (97). They make four more attempts to “penetrate the passage,” before they “gave themselves up to despair when they found the door steward’s room locked.” The attempt to regain the womb proves unsuccessful (97, 98).

Languishing days later they find hope in a ship on the horizon. “The vessel in sight was a large hermaphrodite brig, of a Dutch build, and painted black, with a tawdry gilt figurehead,” but when it passes they realize all aboard are dead (99-100). “Shall I ever forget the triple horror of the spectacle? 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!” (101). Although the novel is proceeding without any clear narrative trajectory, this scene is important for a few reasons, not least of which is that it is one of the few sentences that mentions actual women in the text. The fact that the men can recognize women onboard is suggestive.<sup>9</sup> And we must underscore that the one boat they run into with women onboard is corrupted: “The whole of her company had perished by the yellow fever, or some other virulent disease of some fearful kind” (103). Along with the “tawdry gilt figurehead,” suggestive of prostitution, sexual avarice is connected to the repulsion at the sight of this new brig. All of these connotations—when related to pregnancy—reinforces the morbidity associated with such entombment from the start.

As if this scene is not repugnant enough, Poe has a corpse hanging in the rigging pass over the deck the castaways are on as the ship drifts closely by. “On his back, from which a portion of his shirt had been torn, leaving it bare, there sat a huge seagull, busily gorging itself on the horrible flesh, its bill and talons deep buried, and its white plumage spattered all over with blood” (102). Their presence disturbs the seagull that rises from the body above them. “The bird hovered there a while with a portion of clotted and liver-like substance in its beak. The horrid morsel dropped at length with a sullen splash immediately at the feet of Parker. May God forgive me, but now, for the first time, there flashed in my mind a thought, a thought which I will not mention, and I felt myself take a step towards the ensanguined spot” (102).

This abhorrent scene is predicated on pregnancy imagery, diseased women, and a rotting crew, changing the developing themes of pregnancy, miscarriage, and bloody birthing into something even more abject, foul, and repulsive. Parker hallucinates an island after the ship passes, and Pym notes “it was a long time, nevertheless, before I could convince Parker of his mistake. He then burst into a flood of tears, weeping like a child, with loud cries and sobs, for two or three hours, when becoming exhausted, he fell asleep” (110). Notably, Parker is infantilized in this scene, before he is killed and eaten by the others in the next.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> What was their purpose one wonders—prostitution, slavery, marriage? The prostitution suggestion comes from the “tawdry gilt” figurehead and the women’s bright dresses; the slavery suggestion comes from the fact that this ship is of Dutch build; and the marriage suggestion—well, it’s the one that is left. One could argue they are merely passengers, but in this text, with all that is going on thematically, that is unlikely.

<sup>10</sup> Psychoanalytically, this text certainly indicates a loathing morbidity associated with women, feminine reproductive organs, and pregnancy. And should one read this in concert with “The Black Cat,” it’s impossible not to draw some conclusions about the author. Poe’s protagonist in the short story murders a cat, sees its hanging image above his marital bed, and then goes on to murder his wife. He is only caught by police when his next, “one-eyed cat” (he dug out its other eye with a knife) is found yowling “with open red mouth” on her corpse, which he entombed behind the wall in his basement.

After they satiate their thirst and hunger with Parker, Pym suddenly remembers where he put an ax before the storm that swamped them, cutting into the stateroom from above through the middle of the deck in which they find a fair amount of food, and even a live tortoise. If we ask, “Why doesn’t he remember this earlier, before they eat Parker?,” the answer of course is: “then they wouldn’t have had to eat him.” In other words, it’s important that the men become cannibals. Greven argues that eating Parker is a homosexual act,<sup>11</sup> but thematically the scene underscores human appetite more than anything else—the appetite for adventure sparked in Pym, the appetite of the cook for killing, the sexual appetite throughout, and the appetite of Dirk Peters for destruction (who is described as having a terrifyingly huge mouth [49]).<sup>12</sup>

In fact, and linking to the feminine imagery throughout, is a motif of eating, tied to violence and disgust. The repulsion first felt when that slimy morsel fell on deck reoccurs when they are about to eat Parker, and so they cut off his head, hands, and feet and toss them over the side. When the body is too rotted to chew on longer, they toss it over, in constant fear of the sharks swimming about them, these “circling monsters” that Freud would call swimming *vagina dentatas*. So while appetite (for violence and for sex) is connoted here, it also blurs into fear of and repulsion of the consuming vagina.

After a month, Augustus dies, and Pym relays

*We took courage to get up and throw the body overboard. It was then loathsome beyond expression, and so far decayed that, as Peters attempted to lift it, an entire leg came off in his grasp. As the mass of putrefaction slipped over the vessel’s side into the water, the glare of phosphoric light with which it was surrounded plainly discovered to us seven or eight large sharks, the clashing of whose horrible teeth, as their prey was torn to pieces among them, might have been heard at the distance of a mile. We shrunk within ourselves in the extremity of horror of the sound.* (127)

Pym and Peters shrivel at the sound of *vagina dentatas* gnashing their teeth. They do not actually eat Augustus, but Poe still emphasizes disgust, “The water in the jug was now absolutely useless, being a thick gelatinous mass; nothing but frightful looking worms mingled with slime. Our thirst could now scarcely be endured” (128), supporting the notion that in addition to feminine reproductive matters, human appetite repulses.

The boat subsequently rolls over and they are saved from starvation by finding “the whole bottom, from within two feet of the bends as far as the keel, together with the keel itself, *thickly covered with large barnacles, which proved to be excellent and highly nutritious food* (emphasis Poe’s, 131). We’re

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<sup>11</sup> Greven, 48.

<sup>12</sup> On Poe and cannibalism, see Grady; on primitivism, see Hinz.

tempted to say Pym and Peters are sustained by the barnacle teats of the sea before they are rescued by the hermaphroditically named *Jane Guy*. Once onboard, Pym convinces the captain to sail to the South Pole. “While I therefore cannot but lament the most unfortunate and bloody events which immediately arose from my advice, I must still be allowed to feel some degree of gratification at having been instrumental, however remotely, in opening to the eye of science one of the most intensely exciting secrets has ever engrossed its attention” (161). In Poe’s world, it shouldn’t surprise that the Arctic Circle is actually a circlet, a ring of ice that must be penetrated. Once the *Jane Guy* breaks through, they find the water growing warmer rather than colder. Indeed, after passing several smaller islands, the ship arrives and anchors forever in the bay of a curiously c-shaped island, the waters of which teem with biche de mer.

On this island the entire crew is swallowed alive in an elaborate trap set by the islanders.

*Dirk Peters, a man named Wilson Allen, and myself were on the right of our companions... a fissure in the soft rock attracted out attention. It was about wide enough for one person to enter without squeezing, and extended back into the hill... There were one or two stunted shrubs growing from the crevices, bearing a species of filbert, which I felt some curiosity to examine, and pushed in briskly for that purpose, gathering five or six nuts at a grasp and then hastily retreating. As I turned I found that Peters and Allen had followed me. I desired them to go back, as there was not room for two persons to pass, saying they should have some of my nuts. They accordingly turned, and were scrambling back, Allen being close to the mouth of the fissure, when I was suddenly aware of a concussion resembling nothing I had ever before experienced and which impressed me with a vague conception, if indeed I then thought of anything, that the whole foundations of the solid globe were rent asunder, and that the day of universal dissolution was at hand. (183)*

Having lured the crew into a gorge, the natives cause it to collapse. Pym, once again is paralyzed with fear: “I found myself nearly suffocated, and groveling in utter darkness among a quantity of loose earth, which was also falling upon me heavily in every direction, threatening to bury me entirely. [...] The walls of the fissure in which we had ventured had, by some convulsion of nature [...] caved in overhead, and that we were consequently lost forever, thus being entombed for life” (184). Pym explicitly states this fear of the metaphorical womb is the worst fear of all. “No incident ever occurring in the course of human events is more adapted to inspire the supremeness of mental and bodily distress than in a case like our own of living inhumation. The blackness of darkness which envelops the victim, the oppression of the lungs... carry into the human heart a degree of appalling awe and horror not to be tolerated—never to be *conceived*” (emphasis ours; 184-85).

Pym and Peters regain their wits and crawl out of an “angled seam or crack” on a “wet and slippery slope” (186), hiding just within the opening before stealing a canoe, kidnapping a native, and heading for the South Pole, which it turns out is actually a giant curtain of white water, a cataract reaching to the heavens. “The Heat of the water was now truly remarkable, and its colour was undergoing a rapid change, being no longer transparent, but of a milky consistency and hue” (215). Their captive dies of terror, and the journey reaches its climax:

*The white ashy material now fell continually around us, and in vast quantities [...] The range of vapour to the southward had risen prodigiously in the horizon, and began to assume more distinctness of form. I can liken it to nothing but a limitless cataract, rolling silently into the sea from some immense and far distant rampart in the heaven. The gigantic curtain ranged along the whole extent of the southern horizon. It emitted no sound.* (216-17)

Within this giant, silent white cataract, Pym detects a shrouded human figure, and then the book abruptly ends.

### **Hermaphrodites and Hybridity: Sex and Race**

Whether that figure in the cataract is the Holy Spirit or something else Pym doesn't say. In any case the ambiguity of the ending shouldn't surprise us. Apart from a “Note on the Text” at the end, in which some hieroglyphic markings on the wall of the deadly fissure are translated, the book simply ends, raising more questions than it answers. Yet that ambiguity supplies the cohesion between the themes of sexual appetite, homoeroticism, reproductive imagery, and destruction. Hybridity is initially introduced in the text through “the hybrid Peters,” but he's more hybrid than simply being the child of a European and an Upsaroka; he is also an image of sexual hybridity.<sup>13</sup>

The Galapagos tortoise that Pym and Peters find after cutting open the deck is also strangely hybrid. It's clear Poe doesn't know anything about the actual living species, as it is not a turtle and wouldn't have survived under water. But verisimilitude is not as important to him as the image rendered. The tortoise's giant rounded shell reproduces the other images of pregnancy, yet its head and neck are phallic.

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<sup>13</sup> The sexual duality is also signaled in Pym's weirdly Oedipal nightmares: “my dreams were of the most terrific description. Every species of calamity and horror befell me. Among these miseries, I was smothered to death between two huge pillows, by demons of the most ghastly and ferocious aspect. Immense serpents held me in their embrace, and looked earnestly into my face with their shining eyes” (27).

*Their appearance is singular, and even disgusting. [...] Their neck is long, and exceedingly slender; from eighteen inches to two feet is a very common length [...] the head has a striking resemblance to that of a serpent. [...] In a bag at the root of the neck they carry with them a constant supply of water. In some instances, upon killing after a full year's deprivation of all nourishment, as much as three gallons of perfectly sweet and fresh water have been found in their bags.* (120-121)

The serpent-like head and bags link up with the themes of desire, disgust, appetite and loathing. Poe further underscores hybridity with the appearance of the diseased ship, connecting it to pregnancy (and homosexual sex and sterility), which he introduces with “an incident occurred which I am *induced* to look upon [...] with the extremes of delight and then horror [...] of the most *unconceived and unconceivable character*” (emphasis ours; 99). The pregnancy (and sterility) language is all over, but the hybridity comes in when he notes: “The vessel in sight was a large hermaphrodite brig” (99-100). “Hermaphrodite” in a nautical context denotes the presence of square and triangular sails, which allows a ship to sail in any direction, a fact that doesn’t undermine the other connotations of the word. And if that is not enough, the ship that saves Pym and Peters from a life of barnacle eating is also curiously named: “She proved to be the Jane Guy of Liverpool, Captain Guy, bound on a sealing and trading voyage to the South Seas and Pacific” (133). And finally, Pym does mention the unseen “gendering” practices of the *biche de mer*, which, as luck would have it, are actually hermaphroditic creatures. Thus the novel bespeaks the ambiguity it otherwise exhibits, displaying disgust coexistent with sexual desire alternating and fused between both masculine and feminine object choices. Unsatisfying, replete with abject emotion, the text constantly moves from one object or state to another. The hybridity noted serves as an emblem, but linked with disgust, it does not offer sanctuary.

The last adventure brings the theme of race to the fore of the text, which although seemingly unrelated, is especially linked to sexuality, destruction, and thus disgust in Poe’s text. Race has been alluded to throughout (the cook’s brutality is ascribed “to his race” [48]; Peters’s racial hybridity is also remarked on; the hermaphrodite brig is of Dutch build [referring to the slave trade]; the ship names *Penguin* and *Grampus* refer to black and white creatures), but it’s not till the novel’s end that Poe circuitously, metaphorically, and laboriously addresses race in depth.<sup>14</sup>

He begins with one of those long, seemingly tangential chapters, this one on various penguin types, but his description personifies the birds. “These birds

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<sup>14</sup> See Justin Edwards, J. Gerald Kennedy, Kennedy and Liliane Weisberg, Toni Morrison, and Terence Whalen for more discussions of Poe and race.

walk erect, with a stately carriage. They carry their heads high, with their wings drooping like two arms [...] the resemblance to a human figure is very striking, and would be apt to deceive the spectator at a casual glance...” (139). Poe describes how penguins and albatross form their rookeries in these Southern waters, evoking plantation society. Furthermore, when they arrive at the curiously bayed island, race and color become central concerns of the text. They are greeted by islanders who

*were about the ordinary stature of Europeans, but of a more muscular and brawny frame, their complexion a jet black, with thick long wooly hair. They were clothed in skins of an unknown black animal, shaggy and silky, and made to fit the body with some degree of skill, the hair being inside, except where turned out about the neck, wrists and ankles. Their arms consisted principally of clubs, of a dark, and apparently very heavy wood. Some spears were observed among them, headed with flint, and a few slings. The bottoms of the canoes were full of black stones about the size of a large egg.* (164)

The islanders are described as primitive and naïve, but Pym is not sure of their intellectual inferiority. Poe nevertheless makes race the focus for while on board it is clear the islanders are afraid of whiteness. “We could not get them to approach several very harmless objects—such as the schooner’s sails, an egg, an open book, or a pan of flour” (166).

Pym also notes, prior to the discovery of *biche de mer*, that the island has black sand, black mountains, black earth, black pigs, black chickens, black albatrosses, black ducks, black gannets, and black buzzards. And not only are the natives black, but they even have black teeth (166-175). The crew has arrived, in effect, in “Black land.”

The only colorful thing noted on the island is an odd “rainbow stream”—also noted for the “limpidity” of its waters.

*Upon collecting a basinful, and allowing it to settle thoroughly, we perceived that the whole mass of liquid was made up of a number of distinct veins, each of a distinct hue; that these veins did not comingle... Upon passing the blade of a knife athwart the veins the water closed about it immediately [...] if, however, the knife was placed down accurately between two veins, a perfect separation was effected, which the power of cohesion did not immediately rectify. The phenomena of this water formed the first definite link in that vast chain of apparent miracles with which I was destined to be at length encircled.* (168-69)

Although the metaphor Poe is trying to make here is ambiguous, we can tell it has to do with veins of color, violence between those “veins” and an interest in hybridity. When all the crew except Peters and Pym are killed in the convulsions of the earth, Pym recognizes both himself and Peters as white:

“We alone escaped from the tempest of that overwhelming destruction. We were the only living white men upon the island” (188).<sup>15</sup>

The scene that follows is calculated to strike terror in Poe’s readership, and again remember that the ship has been gendered feminine by more than simply dint of maritime-naming practices.

*The whole country around us seemed to be swarming with savages, crowds of whom, we now perceived, had come over from the islands to the southward on flat rafts, doubtless with a view of lending their aid in the capture and the plunder of the Jane. [...] The decks were split open and ripped up; the cordage, sails, and everything moveable on the deck demolished as if by magic; while by dint of pushing at the stern, towing with the canoes, and hauling at the sides, as they swam in thousands around the vessel, the wretches finally forced her onshore [...] (189-190)*

She’s ravaged, plundered, and set on fire. Although the ravishment image is stereotypically racist rhetoric, the fact that everyone in this text—including Pym—has been inhumanly brutal, makes his final assessment hard to take at face value:

*In truth, from everything I could see of these wretches, they appeared to be the most wicked, hypocritical, vindictive bloodthirsty, and altogether fiendish race of men upon the face of the globe. It is clear we should have no mercy had we fallen into their hands. (210)*

Lest we forget these words are uttered by someone who has survived two mutinies, killed others, and eaten a sometime friend. While Poe is often rightly criticized for reproducing racist stereotypes, he has not painted whiteness in *Pym* in good light either; indeed, here at the bottom of the world, violence remains the same, and the only thing to have been inverted is who is more powerful.

But Pym and Peters steal a canoe and sail south towards the portentously white pole where “many gigantic and pallidly white birds flew continuously now from behind the veil. And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there rose 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 snow” (217).

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<sup>15</sup> Faflik and Worley discuss race in *Pym*, arguing that since the “black island” and the “white spectral figure” are where the text goes in the end, race is the key for understanding Poe’s work.

What do all of these racially-inflected allusions imply? Well, like so much in the text, it's ambiguous. Poe does give us a final "Note on the text," as if a scholar edited Pym's journal. The "editor" notes the inscriptions on the rock in the chasm appear to have been written in three languages: the middle range of characters come from "an Ethiopian verbal root [... and mean] 'to be shady.'" The topmost characters are "evidently the Arabic verbal root—'to be white'" and finally the third "it cannot be doubted that, in their perfect state, they formed the full Egyptian word ... which means 'The region of the South'" (220). Once again Poe underscores three races and utterances, the last one particularly having both hybrid and biblical slave connotations. Race is connected to violence, sexuality, and hybridity (which given that this is written at the height of the American slave trade, seems rather spot on).

### **Appetite and Ambiguity: Synthesizing Sex, Reproduction, and Race**

*Pym* might, according to J. Gerald Kennedy, "enact the metaphysical crisis of modernity itself" or it might be poorly written, purposely vague, or humorous.<sup>16</sup> But whereas Kennedy focuses on the abstract, "the longing for faith before the great silent void of nonbeing," we've focused on the embodied aspects of the novel; in particular, the themes we've observed are the masculine desire for violence and sex, homoeroticism, a fascination with and repulsion of feminine reproductive imagery and its connection to the abject—the miscarriages, breaches, caesarian ruptures, and bloody issuances, and lastly of racial and sexual hybridity. Finally, since "the South" is underscored so often (and Poe's readership is largely United States citizens), the novel also seems to concern the future of the young nation. This gives us at least two strong interpretive models for this text: one as metaphorically historical and the other as developmental psychological nexus.

If we see this novel as indicative of the historical development of the U.S. in embryological terms, a late stage textual sonogram if you will, the nation, which was conceived in the late eighteenth century, is metaphorically coming to term in Poe's time; and this text then conveys the anxiety that things, in effect, have gone horribly wrong or will do so soon—in no small way because of a masculine appetite for sex and violence. Poe shows us that violence is universally human, if often racialized, and *Pym* anxiously suggests that disaster looms on the horizon. The novel does not indicate whether the catastrophe is the hybridization of America, or whether that hybridization is an effect of

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<sup>16</sup> Of course, as the literary theory and criticism have come to privilege ambiguity, the "issues" surrounding Pym's cohesiveness diminished. In the last two decades, critics of the text have begun to look at that ambiguity as itself a positive. On difference in Poe, see Allen.

masculine appetite for violence (through slavery), resulting in a miscarriage of the idea conceived by the nation's forefathers. Perverse domination, mass violence, and destruction are certainly coming. For the U.S. as a ship of state (another brig that is not a brig), this novel suggests that danger looms when men band together and try to conceive something new. The masculine appetite for violence and the conception it has given rise to is both the sin (hence the disgust) and the fate of man.

The second interpretive model applicable to this text is less literary and more psychological, more convincing to us because it takes more account of the affective qualities of this text, and because it unifies these seemingly disparate themes. We contend this novel describes a constant psychological movement between unstable states: a heterosexual fascination with and fear of the feminine; a homoeroticism (sometimes as a refuge against a misogynist dread of feminine reproduction and pregnancy and sometimes simply as desire); a morbid guilt and abjection associated with both sexualities; an obsession with both masculine violence and feminine destruction and more feelings of related guilt; and finally of the recognition (and thus more disgust) of the coexistence of all of these things, intermixed in an unstable and terrifying hybridism. The anxiety that pervades this novel is thus not so much about something terrifying to come, as it is about what is already contained, but not controllable, within the prison of the human mind.

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