

The Wonders of Calculation in Nineteenth-Century American Experience and Literature

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Introduction

In a New York summer in 1842, a perturbing creature found a home in P.T. Barnum's American Museum collection: the Feejee Mermaid. It was a wonder, an animal never before seen that drew immediate, curious attention. Its form was enigmatic and grotesque. In one of Barnum's advertisements, a professor of natural history in New York describes the creature in detail: its "head, breast, arms, hands, fingers, and indeed all the upper part of the body, bear a close resemblance to those of a human being," or to those of a "monkey or ourang-outang," while the "lower portion of the body is supplied with scales, fins, and a tail, precisely like that of a fish." This "animal," claims the professor, is beyond a "shadow of a doubt" a "mermaid" (Barnum 110-11). This inscrutable animal is broken down into two identifiable parts. The top part of the animal is human, or humanoid; the bottom part looks like a fish. With these connections and resemblances, the professor describes the indescribable creature using known animal pieces. And as it turns out, a mixing of animal parts is exactly what made up the Feejee Mermaid. It was a humbug. Even the New York professor was fictitious, a character Barnum created to promote his exhibit and attract crowds. He also fashioned the creature itself, which he proves in a later publication, revealing that the "monkey and the fish were so nicely conjoined that no human eye could detect the point where the junction was formed" (Cook 81).

But it was not just the strangeness of the animal that attracted paying customers, who wanted to see a mermaid, it was also the way the animal was publicized. For instance, in an 1843 advertisement, Barnum writes that the "animal" is creating "so much

dispute in the scientific world,” and has “such *appearance of reality* as any fish lying [in] stalls of our fish markets—but [who] is to decide when doctors disagree.” He continues on to claim that “whether this production is the work of *nature or art* it is decidedly the most stupendous curiosity ever submitted to the public for inspection” (Cook 84). What is missing from this promotion is a clear sense of the animal’s veracity. It has an “*appearance of reality*,” and is either the “work of *nature or art*.” On top of these nebulous descriptions is the enticement of finding out the truth of the animal for oneself. By indicating that the oddity is in “much dispute in the scientific world” and noting in an aside marked by a dash that the decision of the animal’s realness is nearly impossible when “doctors disagree,” Barnum plays up the controversy. Finally, he calls this animal, in light of its questionable identity, the “most stupendous curiosity ever submitted to the public for inspection,” revealing his desire to spark conversation, and more importantly, to encourage the public to investigate.

Through this strange, Franksteinian project, P.T. Barnum physically constructed the figurative muddling of fact and fiction by using real animal parts to create an unreal creature. More effective than his crude representation of a mythical mermaid, however, was his ability to engender curiosity in his audience and make them question their own perception of reality. Barnum’s Feejee Mermaid stayed in his collection as a controversial conversation piece until his death because he knew how to inspire interest. As expected, the public endeavored to analyze the mermaid for themselves and make sense of what they were seeing. Barnum’s tricky exhibition style proves significant when thinking about how one observed and defined the world in nineteenth-century America.

The audience participated willingly in debating the Feejee Mermaid because they desired to understand what they were seeing and determine whether or not it was real. More importantly, his exhibit was successful because it manipulated the audience's desire to analyze parts of their world. But Barnum's devious display also prompts the question: how can one investigate and understand one's world, if the line between objects of mystery and objects of reality is so easily manipulated?

A will to understand the details of one's surroundings is a relatively recent development. In Jane Bennett's *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, she ventriloquizes late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century sociologist Max Weber's idea that before a "process of *rationalization*" the world was understood as magical. Objects, sights, and sounds that were indeterminable were thought to be products of magic. According to Bennett, "magic" is a "power to create whose mechanism [could] never be fully understood," and thus it left observers as passive participants in their environment (Bennett 46). But with developments in "mathematics and scientific experimentation" there was a change in the "style of thinking," where "[o]ne learn[ed] to relate to things by seizing upon their structure or logic...rather than, say, by discerning their inherent meaning as parts of a cosmos" (58-9). In this process of world "demagification," people desired to calculate their surroundings, observe and examine (58). They became active participants in their environment and sought to understand the "mechanism[s]" behind the wonders of the world.

Max Weber in his lecture "Science as a Vocation" presents calculability's role in the decline of magic by asserting that one can observe a magical, mysterious world as one

made up of calculable parts. This process puts mysterious worldly experiences in a new perspective, one of mastery and containment, for “one need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits,” now “technical means and calculations perform the service” (Weber 139). In this sense, the ability to calculate is synonymous with the ability to analyze—or as Bennett phrases it: the ability to “seize” upon something’s “structure or logic”—as one’s surroundings are now determinable and definable. But, demagification, he claims, is not just an “increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives;” it is instead

the knowledge or belief that if one but wished one *could* learn it at any time.

Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. (139)

Here he complicates and broadens his definition of the calculated world into a place where there is the “knowledge or belief that if one but wished one *could* learn it at any time.” The “*could*” here is key. In other words, calculating one’s surroundings is not the defining factor of understanding, it is the *possibility* of calculating one’s surroundings. Between potentially knowing and actually knowing, Weber introduces a liminal space of possibility. In this space there are no more “mysterious incalculable forces,” but “mysterious” calculable forces. The “mystery” within the realm of possibility remains. So, even though one may “master all things by calculation,” there is this liminal space of “possibility” within that overarching mastery, where there are still mysteries of the world that are left to wonder until they can be calculated. How does a “demagified” world differ

then from a world full of magic? One has the ability and will to calculate, certainly, but what of the space of possibility? Under the umbrella of calculation, and between the calculable and calculated, there is still a space of mystery and wonder. And how does calculation affect one's perception of the world? Supposedly, it allows an observer "mastery" over their surroundings, to give those surroundings definition and order.

In the nineteenth century, exhibitionist P.T. Barnum and author Edgar Allan Poe discovered ways to manipulate the calculable world. Both were notorious for hoaxing their audiences, using their knowledge of public interest in investigation to draw people to their exhibitions and literature. Through tracking how their shows and publications worked with or against calculation to attract and/or convince a crowd, one can begin to dive deeper into the understanding of how calculation has either helped or hindered understanding of the "mechanism[s]" behind the world's wonders. This paper will endeavor to examine the nuances of a calculable world, or a demagified world, through case studies of Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845), and of P.T. Barnum's exhibits, especially "The Feejee Mermaid" and "The Whale" (1842) by observing how the audiences reacted to their hoaxing works, and what those reactions reveal about the potentially problematic malleability of a supposedly calculable reality. Finally, it will analyze how Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838) and Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) probe the wavering divide between a magical and demagified reality, as well as the practice of calculation itself.

Consequences of Barnum's Humbuggery

Calculation then, in its broadest sense, means to actively analyze, to observe someone or something and define it, rather than passively accept someone or something as merely an “inherent part of the cosmos” (Bennett 58-9). It is through this practice (and potential for this practice) that one may master one's surroundings. With his controversial exhibits, P.T. Barnum used the audience member's desire to analyze against them—a strategy which later proved to blur the line between fact and fiction. He enticed guests to his shows with titillating advertisements, and once they arrived and experienced a showcase, like the Feejee Mermaid, they would form their own opinion on whether or not what they were seeing was real. In David Walker's “The Humbug in American Religion,” he examines Barnum's “theory of advertising and audience interest.” He notes that Americans in Barnum's time were “excited by the opportunity to debate the mechanics of different displays of industry, of natural specimens, and of ostensibly superhuman ability” and that “Barnum catered to that excitement by first hosting questionable displays, by raising questions about them himself, and then by encouraging debate among the audience” (Walker 38). In his own words, Barnum calls this process a “humbug,” or putting on “glittering appearances—outside show,” by which to “suddenly arrest public attention, and attract the public eye and ear” (Barnum 95). By acknowledging and defining his practices, Barnum displays a full awareness of how he is manipulating his audience, and simultaneously illustrates his own understanding of a calculable world: one in which “glittering appearances” can pose as worldly wonders and ignite public debate.

Barnum's exhibits were interactive; audience members would first observe the figure before them and then debate among themselves inside the exhibit and without. The sparked conversations would leave some convinced of an exhibit's authenticity, and others skeptical. Walker (quoting Neil Harris's biography of Barnum) reiterates: "an exhibitor did not have to guarantee truthfulness; all he had to do was possess probability and invite doubt. The public would be more excited by controversy than by conclusiveness" (Walker 38-9). So, the excitement did not come from knowing the truth or not, but from the "controversy." Controversy, evoking a dispute or debate, implies that an answer is not yet found, much like the space between the calculated and calculable. In short, Barnum disallowed definitive answers to prolong the attention to his exhibits. His humbug, then, was in a sense, the manipulation of calculation, as he kept his audience floundering in the liminal space between the calculable and the calculated.

But this process of debate became increasingly complicated as Barnum's humbugs gained infamy in the community. As in the case of Barnum's publication, "Humbugs—The Whale, The Angel Fish, and the Golden Pigeon" (1864), the skepticism and debate of the audience—kindled by Barnum's repeated humbuggery—actually goes as far as to trick the audience into believing something false about the exhibit. Barnum muses on this phenomenon, noting that "there are more persons humbugged by believing too little than too much," since skeptics have "such a horror of being taken in," and therefore have an "elevated sense of their own acuteness," "they believe everything to be a sham," and "continually humbu[g] themselves" (Barnum 92). Through hyper-awareness of humbuggery, an audience member can pursue a false path to truth. For

instance, in the case of Barnum's white whale exhibit, Barnum reports that a Yankee lady is "perfectly convinced that" the whale is "an india-rubber whale, worked by steam and machinery," which is made to "rise to the surface at short intervals, and puff with the regularity of a pair of bellows" (93). The whale, according to Barnum, is in fact a living animal, but the lady, hyper-aware of Barnum's usual tricks, is "earnest and confident" that the "whale" is an automaton. Here one can observe how Barnum's humbug complicates the Yankee lady's attempt to reason out the exhibit's structure or logic. In the lady's reality, the whale is actually made of "india-rubber" and is "worked by steam and machinery," which uses intricately engineered technology to raise and lower the contraption, even disburse "puff[s]" of steam to mimic the water spouted from a whale's blowhole with the "regularity of a pair of bellows." The lady, in her effort to deduce the humbug, fabricates an intricate contraption to account for the real whale before her, and overanalyzes it into a machine.

But Barnum capitalizes on the Yankee lady's mistake and creates an even more complicated strain of reality. Instead of arguing with the audience member, he "very candidly acknowledge[s] that she was quite too sharp" for him and that he must "plead guilty," and "be[g] her not to expose [him]" (Barnum 93). He does not have to lie to the lady at all; he simply allows her believe that her own theories are correct. And in thinking that she analyzed the scene correctly, the lady is in "happy reflection that she could not be humbugged," and that Barnum is apparently "terribly humiliated in being detected by her marvelous powers of discrimination" (93). The Yankee lady creates a problematic reality, one in which she examines what is real before her as some mischievous

machination; she sees through Barnum's exhibit so well, that she does not see it at all. Because of the lady's analytical imagination, the real whale is transformed into an almost magical object because the automaton she sees before her does not actually exist. In Weber's understanding of a calculable universe, "one can, in principle, master all things by calculation," and that potential mastery indicates the demagification of the world (Weber 139). But what does it say that calculation, the process by which the world is demagified, can be used against one's senses, and in fact veil one's vision of reality instead of clarify it?

Calculation, then, with a push from Barnum, for example, can lead to an even more complicated vision of reality. He provided what Walker calls a "space wherein people could play with the boundary between marvel and analysis and between credulity and skepticism" (Walker 40). Spectators like the Yankee lady walked in the "boundary between marvel and analysis." The whale automaton was a fabrication of her mind, yet she created it by the most analytic of means, piecing it together with mechanical parts that she knew to exist. In a strange twist of events, she was perhaps so analytical as to create the marvelous.

Edgar Allan Poe and the Problematization of Calculation

Edgar Allan Poe was also a Barnum-esque exhibitionist in that he often created public interest in his works through fabricated controversy. What is significant about Poe, however, is that through a literary medium, he had the opportunity to create entire scenes or events without depending on a physical object. Thus as a writer, Poe had a unique advantage over his audience. Because his readers could not look at the subject in person, they had to take him at his word. This advantage provides an interesting case wherein the author of a hoax can control the details of what a reader can see. For example, through one of his short fiction hoaxes, “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” Poe actually convinced his readership, through various rhetorical moves, of a completely outrageous and fictional tale: that a man through the process of mesmerism spoke from beyond the grave (Mabbott 1228). For one, asserting certainty with “*facts*,” Poe, like Barnum, appealed to the public’s calculative style of thinking. The Case of M. Valdemar appears to be quite similar to Barnum’s white whale exhibit, but instead of an audience member creating a marvel through analysis, Poe’s layering of facts wraps the marvel (the invented case of M. Valdemar) with analysis, thereby making it appear true. What is at stake here is the demagified world itself, because where Barnum encourages analysis through controversy, Poe endeavors to instigate a “suspension of disbelief” to disrupt his readers’ ability to analyze at all. And by doing so, he fosters passive readers, reversing what Bennett calls the “process” of “*rationalization*” by transporting his readers back into a magical world.

The first way in which Poe accomplishes this reintroduction into a magical—unexplainable—world is through his precise, yet uncertain diction when explaining the mesmeric experiment. The “*facts*” he provides concerning the case only seem to add to the confusion of the scene. For instance, while first observing the state of M. Valdemar before mesmerizing him, the narrator hears from the gentleman’s doctors that his “left lung [has] been for eighteen months in a semi-osseous or cartilaginous state,” and that his “right” lung “in its upper portion [is] also partially, if not thoroughly, ossified, while the lower region [is] merely a mass of purulent tubercles.” He also deems it necessary to reiterate that “[i]ndependently of the phthisis, the patient [is] suspected of aneurism of the aorta; but on this point the osseous symptoms rende[r] an exact diagnosis impossible” (Poe 835). The narrator having heard the diagnosis from the doctors decides to put the details, or the “*facts*” of M. Valdemar’s case into his prose. He mentions how long (“eighteen months”) the “left lung” has been in a “semi-osseous or cartilaginous state.” Then he moves onto the “right” lung and discusses its “upper” and “lower regions,” where the “upper portion” is “partially, if not thoroughly ossified,” and the “lower” is an inoperable “mass.” Though he details the lungs down to their left and right, then upper and lower parts, there is still uncertainty as to Valdemar’s complete diagnosis. His lungs are either “semi-osseous or cartilaginous” and “partially, if not thoroughly ossified.” He even introduces the possibility of an “aneurism of the aorta,” but admits that an “exact diagnosis [is] impossible.” Despite all the precise medical terms and detailed analysis of Valdemar’s body, there are still points of ambiguity. The narrator literally describes the lungs down to their parts, and yet there is still a need for clarification.

Similarly, after mesmerizing M. Valdemar, the narrator “perceive[s] unequivocal signs of the mesmeric influence,” for the “glassy roll of the eye [is] changed for that expression of uneasy *inward* examination which is never seen except in cases of sleep-waking,” and is “quite impossible to mistake” (837). Here, the narrator is confident in detecting “unequivocal signs” of “mesmeric influence” in Valdemar’s expression, but what exactly does that look like? Is there a specific alteration in the face of a mesmerized patient, or does the mesmerist project a difference in demeanor upon the patient? The process seems unclear, and raises yet another complication: the effect of one’s perception on one’s analysis. An observer looks at someone or something through his or her own lens that has been shaped by his or her own experience. The result is that one subject or object can have multivalenced interpretations. Poe’s use of malleable perception is reminiscent of Barnum’s white whale exhibit. For instance, where another observer may see the exhibit for what it is (a living animal in a tank), the Yankee lady—privy to Barnum’s chicanery—sees herself as a victim of humbuggery, and this perception influences how she analyzes the whale; she knows it is a machine, and yet that is not the case: the machine does not exist. Both the Yankee lady’s reaction to Barnum’s exhibit and the narrator’s vague and subjective description of Valdemar’s face in Poe’s story highlight that how one observes can cause more uncertainty, rather than discernment. Weber in his lecture “Science as a Vocation” approaches this issue, but perhaps does not consider deeper implications. When he claims a demagified world is not just an “increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives,” but the “knowledge or belief that if one but wished one *could* learn it at any time,” he accounts

for the gaps in knowledge as still potentially calculable, but he does not take into account how an observer's perception affects his or her analysis of his or her surroundings. Both Barnum and Poe knew that individual perceptions change how one analyzes. They also knew that one's perception can be manipulated; and they used this knowledge to their advantage.

Though the narrator may appear to emphasize the calculable parts of M. Valdemar's case, thus making the fictitious text appear well-informed and factual, he actually winds up emphasizing the limits of calculation. Neither the state of the lungs nor the nature of the patient's expression can be fully specified. He thus demonstrates another interesting aspect of the calculable world: that it can be made more uncertain through analysis, whether that analysis is fictional or real. Under Weber's umbrella of calculation, Poe dabbles in the liminal space of possibility between the calculable and calculated. He uses precise terms to create an impression, and leaves the rest up to each reader's imagination, thus setting the scene as one that cannot be fully explained. In using these ambiguous descriptions, Poe illustrates how each calculation of a part only leads to more gaps in our knowledge. Each push toward the calculated simultaneously pulls the reader back toward the calculable once again, because, in essence, the situation is still not completely understood. The result is that a reader continuously floats back and forth within the realm of possibility; his or her disbelief is suspended by a constant inflow of ambiguity.

Like Barnum, Poe used controversy to enhance his hoax. But his method differed in that through his narrative form, Poe employed controversy to promote a suspension of

disbelief, rather than to invite analysis. By including and addressing doubts into his prose, Poe, in a sense, pre-analyzed the situation for his readers. In other words, by having the narrator express his own concerns as to how the readers will react to the horrific events, he anticipated their doubts and agreed that what was happening sounded unbelievable. In the text, the narrator levels with the reader and agrees with them and in the process dismisses concern and the need for analysis by saying he will continue on with his facts. Another dimension to Poe's reader-manipulation is that he distorts any sense of reality by setting his "nonfiction" up with a layered sphere of convoluted tales. His narrator introduces several controversies and feigned misapprehensions of the events and then claims to be finally writing the truth. The result is that the reader is primed to believe him.

From the very beginning, for instance, the narrator brings in falsified (unbeknownst to the reader), "excited discussion" surrounding the actual Case of M. Valdemar—a case which never occurred (833). In doing so he addresses a world outside of the text to make it appear as if his event is not isolated, for an event without corroboration is difficult to prove. The narrator then claims that a "garbled or exaggerated account made its way into society" that has become the "source of many unpleasant misrepresentations" and a "great deal of disbelief" (833). Poe through the narrator, makes a false claim that the story has already gotten out and that people have been miscalculating and mis-examining the situation. He discounts these misinformed public investigations—which also at the time of the article's publication, had not yet occurred—in order to make his fiction more believable. Poe creates another space of possibility: a

fiction within a fiction within a fiction. If one imagines his story and manipulation of the (real and fictional) audience as concentric circles, at the center, the Case of M. Valdemar is a fiction, surrounding it, the public's misguided explanations of the case are fiction, and finally the opening claim to set the story straight is a fiction, as well. The narrator within the fiction itself—situating himself outside of the fictitious rabble—diverts attention from the fact that the case at its core is a complete fabrication. By claiming to be debunking other “misrepresentations,” the narrator distracts from his own fiction, thus making a perfect setting for a marvelous, yet believable story. He then addresses the already existing “great deal of disbelief,” and claims that these public doubts “rende[r] it necessary that [he] give the *facts*” (833). Now, the text is set up to be the provider of truth. Because of the nebulous positioning between *fact* and fiction, the narrator has the readers under his guidance, with the added effect of their belief in his veracity.

In a similar situation of addressing doubt and potential controversy, the narrator watches over the mesmerized corpse of M. Valdemar until there comes a “marked change over the countenance of the sleep-waker” (839). After M. Valdemar dies in front of the narrator and the others in the room, the narrator interrupts his report to address the reader, saying somewhat dismissively, “I now feel that I have reached a point of this narrative at which every reader will be startled into positive disbelief. It is my business, however, simply to proceed” (839). The narrator acknowledges that the reader will be shocked into “positive disbelief,” yet determines that it is his “business” to “simply proceed.” By brushing aside the responsibility to convince the audience of the story's factual nature, he is in fact, convincing. The narrator embraces the upcoming uncertainty so much so that

he sees no need in defending himself; he will “simply proceed” with his “business” of factual reporting. By not responding defensively, he appears to have nothing to hide.

And what happens truly is horrifying; the corpse declares in hollow tones through a “motionless jaw” that M. Valdemar is now dead (839). And after seven months of letting the corpse lie in a mesmeric influence, the “experiment of awakening” occurs. Before waking his patient, the narrator once again interrupts the prose and muses that “it is the (perhaps) unfortunate result of the latter experiment which has given rise to so much discussion in private circles—to so much of what I cannot help thinking unwarranted popular feeling” (841). The narrator laments that is it the “unfortunate result” of the succeeding experiment that gives “rise to discussion in private circles,” in other words, it gives rise to controversy. By arguing that the experiment gained “unwarranted popular feeling,” the mesmerist’s diction intimates that the ensuing events are factual, since “unwarranted” suggests that the public opinion—full of a “great deal of disbelief”—are incorrect and unjustified. With these narrative moves, Poe uses an already skeptical narrator to assuage the uncertainty in his readers, as their concerns are set up for them and then addressed. The narrator knows that the audience will most likely not believe his report, but he does not outright defend its factuality; he only emphasizes that the events that follow will sound unbelievable. In this way, the reader is disarmed. Any doubts are less likely to make them defensive, because the narrator already admits that he cannot fully comprehend what he sees; and so the reader’s need to analyze the situation withers.

Poe is even able to negate a reader's ability to analyze and think for his or herself at all. With horrific, shocking scenes, he causes readers to lose their analytical and reasoning abilities, and therefore thrusts them back into a magical reality. For example, the unexpected, sudden grotesqueness of the closing scene perhaps fosters a reader's belief that the tale recounts real events. The narrator describes M. Valdemar melting in front of him in sensational and disgusting terms, and in the process jostles the reader out of their senses as they read on in shock. In Stefan Andriopoulos's *Ghostly Apparitions*, he addresses this phenomenon by quoting Ludwig Tieck's "On Shakespeare's Treatment of the Marvelous." According to Andriopoulos's, Tieck discusses how Shakespeare's tragedies "overwhelm our disbelief by sudden shock and terror—a strategy that Tieck characterizes as if referring to the Gothic novel and the literature of the fantastic" (Andriopoulos 107). In connecting Tieck's work on Shakespeare and the "marvelous" to "literature of the fantastic," Andriopoulos opens the discussion of shock and terror to other works, such as Poe's mesmeric tale. The revolting scenes of M. Valdemar's death-throes not only engage the reader's senses, but also disrupt one's cognition (making them senseless), and "overwhelm [one's] disbelief by [the] sudden shock and terror." In other words, the reader's "disbelief," or skepticism halts in the wake of the rotting, shrieking body. However, it is not only that skepticism halts in a "suspension of disbelief" in the last moments, but that credulity takes over. The shock "engag[es]" the reader's "fantasy, even against [one's] will, to such an extent that [one] forget[s]" the "notions" of the "enlightened century" (105). Because this final, astounding moment, "engag[es]" the reader's "fantasy" "against [one's] will," there is an alarming loss of readerly agency

during this “suspension of disbelief,” for one “forget[s]” the “notions” of the “enlightened century,” in other words, one’s ability to calculate. Without the possibility of calculation in this moment, the world is once again a place of magic, and consequently a place of “shock and terror,” not only because the world’s wonders have suddenly become inscrutable—if only for an instant—but also because it happened “against [one’s] will.” In that moment, the magical world returns, and the reader falls into the narrative trap of becoming a passive observer, rather than an active one. Since the shock of the moment strips away the ability of the reader to calculate the situation, the narrator’s analytical approach to the marvel becomes the only means of calculation accessible to the reader. Thus Poe supplants reason through this process of narrative moves and is able to convince his audience that a marvelous “literature of the fantastic” is in fact true. In this paradigm, the only barrier between a demagified world and a regression into a magical world is “shock and terror.” It is a dangerous prospect, considering “shock and terror” can be easily produced. How stable then is this demagified world? And can the world be considered demagified, if access to a world of inexplicable wonders is easily within one’s grasp?

Re-magification in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*

While Edgar Allan Poe's *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar* centers around a narrator attempting to mesmerize and enter the mind of a dying man, in his novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, he uses his position of authorial power to enter into the "mind of the spectator" and is able to theorize on why his destabilizing, shock and terror methods are successful. The story focuses on the improbable-verging-on-ridiculous adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym, who experiences several tribulations on several ships during an impromptu sea voyage with his friend Augustus. From storms to mutinies to live burials and instances of cannibalism the tale covers an inordinate amount of horrors. Prefacing this narrative is a dubious note supposedly written by Pym, wherein Pym claims that a Mr. Poe from Virginia at first advises that he "should allow him to draw up...a narrative" from "facts afforded by [Pym]" and allow him to "publis[h] it in the Southern Messenger *under the garb of fiction*" (*Pym* 4). However, this plan ostensibly backfires, for "in spite of the air of fable which had been so ingeniously thrown around that portion of [his] statement which appeared in the Messenger (without altering a single fact), the public [is] still not at all disposed to receive it as fable." In response, Pym decides to write the rest of the narrative himself. The opening controversy is somewhat related to *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar*, but instead of pretending to be setting straight the facts of a fictional case, the narrator in *Pym*—as a result of public demand—reveals that the fiction written by Mr. Poe is in fact a nonfiction. In a problematic twist, Pym's experiences are so incredible that the "public" insists that they are true. But of course Pym and the entire Preface is yet another of Poe's hoaxes, a narratorial

fabrication. Muddling fact and fiction within layers of narratives, at the time of the novel's publication, Poe (just as in *M. Valdemar*) attempted to convince readers that the story really was true despite all of the extraordinary, recounted occurrences.¹

With horrors spanning from mutiny to cannibalism *Pym* is riddled with instances of shock and terror. As a result, the novel becomes a sort of case study on how an author can suddenly eliminate reason, especially when using the right circumstances. In Andriopoulos's words, there is the possibility that each horrific moment will "overwhelm [the reader's] disbelief by sudden shock and terror" (Andriopoulos 107). The author eliminating "disbelief," or skepticism, leaves the reader with credulity, and he or she is willing to accept what he or she reads at face value. In this way Poe once again uses the ability to thrust a reader out of a calculable, demagified world back into a world of wonder and passive acceptance of his or her surroundings.

Within his authorial space, Poe has the liberty to create and manipulate a fictional audience's reaction to a horrific moment on a ship called *Grampus*. Using his controlled, contained environment, he takes the opportunity to theorize on why his destabilizing methods are successful, diving into the "mind of the spectator" while illustrating a scene

¹ Of Poe's hoaxes, however, *Pym* was one of the least successful. According to J. Gerald Kennedy in "The Preface as a Key to the Satire in 'Pym,'" there is the possibility that Poe wrote *Pym* as a satire and not as a true hoax. Yet still once the novel was released "[r]ather than a clever satire of the popular novel of adventure, *Pym* was viewed as an affront to good taste and common sense" (Kennedy 195). It is less certain as to why Poe's *Pym* hoax and/or satire failed in comparison to, say, *M. Valdemar*—another hoax that entails narratorial fabrications and grotesqueness. Kennedy suggests that the "complicated though intriguing scheme which he had contrived for his novel failed, perhaps because of its very complexity" (195). Surely, adding himself as a fictional character in *Pym*'s preface (Mr. Poe from Virginia) did not help sell the lie. In the future, it would be interesting to examine why this particular hoax did not appeal to the audience's calculative style of thinking.

of horror. For instance, Pym, Augustus, and Peters decide to use terror to their advantage in order to retake the ship, *Grampus*, from mutineers before they are murdered. The plan they come up with is horrifying. Pym “disguis[es]” himself “so as to represent the corpse of Rogers,” a man they suspect the mate of the ship recently poisoned, to stun and distract the mutineers as they initiate an ambush (*Pym* 78). Wearing a stuffed shirt, white chalk on his face, and blood Peters takes from his own finger streaked across his eye, Pym walks into the cabin full of the mutineers appearing as a “sudden apparition” and produces an “intense effect” (83). But before describing what happens in the cabin, Pym begins to theorize on how and why this plan worked so well, noting that

[u]sually, in cases of a similar nature, there is left in the mind of the spectator some glimmering of doubt as to the reality of the vision before his eyes; a degree of hope, however feeble, that he is the victim of chicanery, and that the apparition is not actually a visitant from the world of shadows. It is not too much to say that such revisitation, and that the appalling horror which has sometimes been brought about, is to be attributed, even in the cases most in point, and where most suffering has been experienced, more to a kind of anticipative horror, lest the apparition *might possibly be* real, than to an unwavering belief in its reality. (83)

According to Pym, in the circumstances during which a “sudden apparition” appears, a spectator through the initial sequence of terror will still have “left in [their] mind...some glimmering of doubt as to the reality of the vision” and a “hope” that they are the “victim of chicanery.” In hoping that what he or she is seeing is a trick, the spectator reveals that he or she is thinking of the possibility that the apparition is calculable. That is to say,

even while shocked and horrified, the spectator still holds some ability to calculate and attempts to parse what he or she is seeing, thus keeping reality demagified, rather than magical. In this case, Pym goes on, the “appalling horror” where “most suffering has been experienced” comes from an “anticipative horror, lest the apparition *might possibly be real*,” rather than from an “unwavering belief in its reality.” Here, there appears a familiar space of *possibility*. Between suspecting (albeit hopefully) that the apparition *could* be calculated into some chicanery and knowing with “unwavering belief” that the apparition is real, there is a seed of doubt. The terrifying is terrifying because of the suspicion of its reality. In other words, despite the terror happening before them, the spectator still has enough of their faculties to feel skepticism, however slight.

It would seem at this point that shock and terror in this case may not completely supplant reason. But Pym reveals in the following sentence, working within his theory of shock and terror, that he is in fact able to completely eliminate any seed of doubt, or stop a spectator from attempting to calculate the situation. He muses:

in the present instance, it will be seen immediately, that in the minds of the mutineers there was not even the shadow of a basis upon which to rest a doubt that the apparition of Rogers was indeed a revivification of his disgusting corpse, or at least its spiritual image. (83)

He goes on to claim that the effectiveness of his method consists of several factors: “the awe-inspiring nature of the tempest” building outside, the “conversation brought about by Peters” only moments before reminding the mutineers that Rogers’s body should be given a sea-burial, the “excellence of [his] imitation” of Rogers, and the “uncertain and

wavering light in which they beheld [him], as the glare of the cabin lantern, swinging violently to and fro, fell dubiously and fitfully upon [his] figure” (84). It appears as if Pym, Augustus, and Peters have at their disposal several incidents and props that aid in disrupting the mutineers’ ability to analyze the vision they see before them. As Pym—in the guise of Rogers—descends into the cabin, the mutineers are already on edge because of the unsettling nature of the weather and the anxiety Peters produces by suggesting that it would be better if the corpse of Rogers is thrown overboard. So when Pym comes into view the mutineers are primed for a terrifying experience. But what sends the mutinous audience over the edge is the “uncertain and wavering light” cast by the cabin lantern. By way of the churning tempest, the light source “swing[s] violently” and falls “dubiously and fitfully” upon Pym acting as a revived Rogers. The result is that Pym’s true figure is even more obscured in the lantern’s wavering light. Even more so, the lack of clarity affects the perception of the unsuspecting men in the cabin. Under this unsteady light, a complication of Weber’s calculable world returns. Just as M. Valdemar’s unidentifiable alternation in his mesmerized facial expression and the Yankee lady’s belief that she must be a victim of humbuggery, perception affects an observer’s analysis of his or her surroundings. In this case, because the mutineers cannot see the situation in its entirety in the dim cabin and because the swinging lantern simultaneously casts “dubious” and “fitful” light on Pym, their affected perception skews what they see before them, disallowing an accurate reading of all the moving parts. Their very ability to calculate is disturbed, if not eliminated—to the advantage of Pym, Augustus, and Peters.

Thus where calculation wavers in the light of the lantern, complete shock and terror takes its place. Pym notes that the supposedly guilty mate “sp[rings] up from the mattress on which he was lying, and, without uttering a syllable, f[alls] back, stone dead, upon the cabin floor.” During this moment of confusion and terror, he continues on to say that “the only opposition [they] experienc[e] at all [is]...but a feeble and irresolute defence” (84). Despite the mate dying immediately of terror, and others in the cabin “feebly” and “irresolutely” fighting back, the fact that the mutineers’ reason and reaction are overridden with fright is further assured when Pym muses on the final three men left in the cabin: “There [are] now but three remaining; but by this time they [have] become aroused from their lethargy, and perhaps [are beginning] to see that a deception had been practiced upon them, for they” begin to fight “with great resolution and fury” (85). With the entrance of the “sudden apparition,” the mutineers succumb to a “suspension of disbelief.” Even if ever so briefly, they lose their ability to calculate what is before them and fall back into a magical world, where a man dead for days can resurrect and visit his murderer. But the effect wears off, as the three men, who did not die on the spot, or get shot by Peters, begin “to see that a deception [has] been practiced upon them” and finally fight back. In other words, their ability to calculate the “apparition” before them—especially after seeing it hit a man in the head with a pump-handle—returns and they respond accordingly, no longer in shock. The remaining men realize that they have misread (or failed to calculate) the figure before them and fight back. The “shadow of a doubt” passes as the figure before them swiftly appears as calculable and soon after

becomes calculated as a mere man dressed as something magical. The world, after a brief moment, returns to a demagified one.

Misreading and Incalculability

But the terrifying misreading of Pym is not the only situation where an observer is unable to properly calculate what he or she sees. Throughout *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* there are several instances when Pym analyzes his surroundings. When aboard the *Jane Guy*, for instance, he starts a journal documenting and recording the sights and sounds around him. But barely escaping the *Jane Guy* after natives massacre the crew, Pym and Peters find refuge in a series of mysterious chasms, where Pym's ability to analyze falters. In the third chasm, Peters notices a "range of singular-looking indentures² in the surface of the marl." One of the indentations (or carvings), Pym claims, "might have been taken for the intentional, although rude, representation of a human figure standing erect, with outstretched arm," while the "rest of them [bear] also some little resemblance to alphabetical characters," and "Peters [is] willing...to adopt the idle opinion that they [are] really such" (202). However, Pym immediately dismisses this idea by "directing his attention to the floor of the fissure," where he picks up "several large flakes of the marl," "which had projecting points exactly fitting the indentations; thus proving them to have been the work of nature" (202). His quick rebuttal is somewhat strange. He argues that because there are pieces of the wall that fit into the indentations on the chasm floor, no man could have created them. Providing no evidence to support his claim, nor considering the possibility that one could actually carve these figures, Pym ignores any other conclusion. However, at the end of

² Though at the time of publication, "indenture" most closely meant "the action of indenting or notching a thing;" an "indentation, or incision," it is mostly understood today to mean a "deed between two or more parties," or a "sealed agreement or contract between two or more parties" ("indenture"). Thus for the sake of clarity, in analyses of *Pym*, "indentures" will be referred to as either "indentations" or "carvings," etc..

the narrative, an “editor” reveals that Peters was most likely correct about the carvings, noting, “In regard to the ‘left or most northwardly’ of the indentures...it is more than probable that the opinion of Peters was correct, and that the hieroglyphical appearance was really the work of art, and intended as the representation of a human form.” He continues on to break the hieroglyph-like carvings down, writing that the “upper range is evidently the Arabic verbal root” meaning “to be white,” while the “lower range” includes “characters” that are “somewhat broken and disjointed; nevertheless, it cannot be doubted that, in their perfect state, they formed [a] full Egyptian word” meaning “the region of the south” (220). With this passage the editor reveals that “in a manner so simple,” “Mr. Pym has given the figures of the chasms without comment” and has asserted that the indentations are nothing more than a result of natural causes (219). According to this editor, Pym completely misreads the symbols on the wall. In Ki Yoon Jang’s “Edgar Allan Poe and the Author-Fiction: *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*,” she suggests the reason behind Pym’s cursory observation of the symbols is a result of his frustration:

These chasms and indentations cause a serious crisis for Pym since their figuration is totally incomprehensible: whereas he has, ever since rescued by the *Jane Guy*, provided readers with proficient analyses of whatever comes under his eyes, Pym now only remarks that he and Peters ‘could scarcely bring [themselves] to believe that [the chasms and indentations] are altogether the work of nature.’ Pym’s remark conveys his sense of frustration, as a narrator and reader, in construing and mastering what is made by ‘nature.’ (Jang 367)

Pym as a “narrator and reader” is distraught by what he cannot immediately decipher.

Jang posits that Pym’s dismissive analysis of the symbols occurs because to him “their figuration is totally incomprehensible,” a notion that frustrates a character, who up to this point “provide[s] readers with proficient analyses of whatever comes under his eyes.”

Pym’s abrupt reading of the collection of symbols as merely a work of nature is a result of his inability to calculate what he sees. He is perturbed that—especially as a consistent reader—that he cannot “constru[e]” and “maste[r]” his surroundings.

In any interpretation of the situation, with Pym’s misreading of the carvings (or rather, his inability to read them), he demonstrates an interesting scenario, where a symbol is stripped of its symbolic-ness. Jang notes that Pym “insisted on [the indentations’] inscrutability and thus left them uninterpreted” (369). By looking at the symbols before him and deeming them to be nothing more than a result of natural causes, Pym misses what the signs symbolize, leaving them inscrutable and essentially meaningless. In his eyes, they become nothing more than scratches on a chasm wall. It is only later through the editor’s note that the scratches become symbols once again, as the editor claims that they actually represent pictures and words or phrases. In this paradigm, Pym by misreading the carvings as mere natural scratches, actually strips them of their structure and logic. The symbols to Pym—and thus to anyone reading his narrative—symbolize nothing at all. Patrick Pritchett in his “Abandoning Ship: Face to Face at Zero Degree Interpellation in Poe’s “The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym,” suggests that “Poe gives us a story of decreation in which signs, no longer animated by a...logos, collapse in on themselves pell-mell. They are no longer able to deliver us to things, to a universe of

intelligible connection” (Pritchett 53). When Pym misreads the carvings, he performs the “decreation” of symbols. By seeing them as senseless, he illustrates the potential loss of meaning, or structure and logic through misreading. The prospect is dangerous, as it can result in the re-magification of the world, wherein one’s surroundings are no longer “intelligible,” or even potentially “intelligible.”

The de-symbolization of the marks on the chasm wall perhaps also foreshadows the semi-apocalyptic ending to Pym’s narrative. As Pym, Peters, and Nu-Nu—a hostage native—travel south in a quest to find safe, new land and milder climates, they begin to experience strange phenomena. Pym records a “darkness had materially increased, relieved only by the glare of the water thrown back from the white curtain before [them]” (217). Even more puzzling are the closing sentences of the narrative when Pym writes:

And now we rushed into the embraces of the cataract, where a chasm threw itself open to receive us. But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow. (*Pym* 217)

The ending is nothing short of enigmatic. While Pym, Peters, and Nu-Nu are pulled toward a gigantic cataract, the horizon turns into nothing but a “white curtain.” The only thing Pym can discern in the whiteness is an extremely large, “shrouded human figure” that is the “perfect whiteness of the snow.” The cataract and the white figure are inscrutable and, to the reader of the narrative, incalculable. With the abrupt ending of the narrative, any additional information one could potentially glean from the strange ending vanishes with the passing of Pym by way of what the editor notes merely as an “accident

by which he perished” (219). Because there is no other information with which to analyze the situation, the “white curtain” and the white, “shrouded human figure” are instead left to the multivalenced interpretations of the readers.

Where the carvings on the chasm wall lose their meaning in Pym’s failure to read them, the “white curtain” stands as another inscrutable and incalculable wall. Pritchett, again referring to the “decreation” of symbols, posits that in Poe’s novel symbols are returned to “their primordial state of muteness, a condition of all pervasive uniformity symbolized by the monochromatic whiteness of the polar cataract and its presiding daemon” (Pritchett 53). According to Pritchett then, the whiteness at the end of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* illustrates a great blankness, “muteness” of meaning, or incalculability. By leaving the reader to stare at the blankness of the page, Poe in his novel, attempts to eliminate the calculated. In other words, returning to the liminal space of calculation, Pym’s narrative forever hovers and expands between the calculable and calculated, because without any further information concerning the cataract or the white figure, the reader can never fully understand the ending. There is no definable structure or logic. Jules Zanger discusses this phenomenon in “Poe’s Endless Voyage: *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*,” by suggesting that “Poe’s intention, it seems clear, was to create precisely the enigmatic narrative that he left for us. His goal was to induce in his readers precisely the sense of terrible and wonderful *possibilities* that we feel” (Zanger 279; emphasis added). Thus Poe preserves the reader in the “possibilities” of what happened, or what could happen next. In this way, he does not completely eliminate Weber’s model for calculation, but instead erases the calculated end of the spectrum.

The result is that readers come up with infinite explanations and unending possibilities as to what Pym and Peters see in the final moments of their recorded journey. With no chance of attaining a calculated result, the white curtain and white, shrouded figure must therefore be incalculable. For there are, as Zanger puts it, no obvious “strategies for rationalizing the marvelous,” no narratological devices that would account for the abrupt blankness (278). The characters do not pass swiftly from a dream to awakened state, there is no “Radcliffean solution,” or the “revelation at the end of a work that all those horrific and supernatural occurrences were the products of rational machines and rational intentions” (277), nor is there any indication that the narrator is untrustworthy due to “madness or addiction,”—for Zanger aptly notes, Poe usually “indicates the untrustworthiness of his narrators with a heavy hand, providing clues of tone and detail which are difficult to miss” (279). Thus, readers at the end of the tale are stuck in the marvelous, the incalculable, and the magical: left only with endless possible explanations and no hope of rationalization.

Calculating the Incalculable

But if Pym's narrative ends in incalculable, indeterminable whiteness, *Moby-Dick* picks up the problematic, blank curtain-threads and addresses how different characters attempt to calculate the incalculable. In Melville's realm of multivalenced interpretations, his characters, particularly Ahab, Ishmael, and Queequeg, each react differently to the whiteness and inscrutability of the whale. Throughout the novel, Ishmael, known as both narrator and reader of his surroundings—much like Pym—endeavors to solve the puzzling inscrutability. He questions why the whiteness of the whale—or indeed the whiteness of the curtain in *Pym*—has such an impact on the observer. He wonders if by its

indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe...Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows—a colorless, all color? (Melville 165)

In Ishmael's eyes, whiteness is terrifying because it contains no color and all colors simultaneously. It is made up of parts that one cannot see. At the same time one looks upon nothingness, one knows that it is somehow structured, but one can never determine or understand how. He sees that the “dumb blankness” is potentially “full of meaning,” but mentions no way of attaining that meaning. It is in theory calculable, but never definable.

Ahab's reaction to the blankness is not to calculate it at all, but to instead project his hatred upon it. Pacing the deck of the *Pequod*, he orders all of the seamen aft and reveals that the true purpose of their voyage is to kill the white whale known as Moby Dick, who on a previous journey cost him his leg. He rants that the

white whale is [a] wall shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. (140)

Likening the white whale to a wall once again not only evokes the chasm carvings and the wall-like curtain in *Pym*, but also suggests that to attempt to calculate beyond the whale itself would be a fruitless endeavor, for there may be "naught beyond." Ahab reads the whale as mere "outrageous strength" built from "inscrutable malice" and nothing more. His inability to understand this malice is exactly what he abhors. It is to him incalculable and without reason. His solution is to rage at the beast and take it down, therefore eliminating the inscrutable, incalculable "thing" altogether.

On the other hand, Ishmael approaches the illegible whiteness with strategies of rationalization. Most of the novel itself consists of ways in which Ishmael attempts to break down the whale and observe it in understandable terms. The entire chapter "Cetology," for instance, deals with this unknowing and offers the solution to keep pressing forward. Ishmael writes that the chapter, and indeed cetology itself, is "some systematized exhibition of the whale in his broad genera, that [he] would now fain put

before [the reader]. Yet is it no easy task. The classification of the constituents of a chaos, nothing less is here essayed” (115). He then quotes a Surgeon Beale, who writes, ““It is not my intention, were it in my power, to enter into the inquiry as to the true method of dividing the cetacean into groups and families.***Utter confusion exists among the historians of the animal’ (sperm whale)” (115). This is all to say that the sperm whale in general is already elusive as it is, but even cetologists are immersed in “confusion” while attempting to classify all of the chaotic constituents. There is no simple or determinable way so far that cetology, or *Moby Dick* for that matter, can be classified, or broken down into calculable parts. And yet the only thing to do is to keep trying, as Ishmael notes, “[n]evertheless, though of real knowledge [concerning whales] there be little, yet of books there are a plenty” (115). Despite the unknowing, cetologists keep attempting to calculate the whale, filling volumes of literature in the process. Ishmael follows this model through the novel itself. He tries in any way possible to calculate the white whale. For instance, after his musings on whiteness itself, he endeavors to actually get inside the head of a sperm whale. While studying the anatomy of the animal, Ishmael claims that if you

unload his skull of its spermy heaps and the take a rear view of its rear end, which is the high end, you will be struck by its resemblance to the human skull, beheld in the same situation, and from the same point of view. Indeed, place this reversed skull (scaled down to the human magnitude) among a plate of men’s skulls, and you would involuntarily confound it with them. (275)

Where Ahab attempts to understand the inner thoughts of Moby Dick, to understand its “inscrutable malice,” and answers with his own malice, Ishmael actually dives into the head of the whale. After dissecting it, he finds that the skull has a close “resemblance to the human skull.” Though this discovery does not completely illuminate the workings of the whale, it at least brings the whale into a familiar form. In Robert Zoellner’s *The Salt-sea Mastadon: A Reading of Moby-Dick*, he claims that the “physiological facts of the whale serve [a] process of de-mythification. Much of the mystery and terror of Ishmael’s ‘murderous monsters’ dissipates as he—and [the reader]—learn that that alien Leviathan has a brain like our brain, lungs like our lungs, and an eye like our eye” (Zoellner 154). De-mythification in this case correlates with calculation. By comparing the skull of the sperm whale to that of a human skull, Ishmael demonstrates that the Leviathan is in fact calculable, even if it is not completely understood. Ultimately, he transports the whale from its mythical, incalculable level to a level where at least the “mystery and terror...dissipates.”

On the other hand, there is a prevalent theory that Ishmael, instead of a laudable, calculating character, is in fact the target of Melville’s satire. Peter Obuchowski in his novel *Emerson & Science: Goethe, Monism, and the Search for Unity*, explores the idea that Melville had little respect for and even mocked the calculative ways of thinking in the nineteenth century. Looking at “Cetology,” Obuchowski claims that the chapter is “basically a light satire on the futility of scientific classification and the accumulation of data” (Obuchowski 9). In fact, he argues that much of the novel is “Herman Melville’s response to his century’s science,” that *Moby-Dick* is a “satire on science” illustrating

“the naiveté in any attempt to codify the immensity and complexity of the universe,” as well as “a more general and simultaneous attack on scientific method” (9). Here the “scientific method” is akin to calculation (as defined in this paper) in that it functions on the principle that what one observes can in theory be broken down into calculable parts. Obuchowski reading “Cetology” as a satire on the scientific method is likewise a satire on the calculative style of thinking. As a result, Ishmael’s quote, “though of real knowledge [concerning whales] there be little, yet of books there are a plenty,” transforms into a point of mockery (Melville 115). In Obuchowski’s eyes, Melville makes fun of those attempting to calculate parts of the world, using the numerous, volume-sized failures of “scientific classification” of whales (including several chapters of *Moby-Dick*) as an example. Any other attempts of calculation in *Moby-Dick*, Obuchowski notes, exemplify the “naiveté in any attempt to codify the immensity and complexity of the universe.” In this interpretation of the novel, Melville apparently pushes back against the idea of mastering one’s surroundings through calculation, using Ishmael as the model naïve and eager observer. Whenever Ishmael attempts to determine whether or not a whale spout expels water or vapor or both (292), or whenever he tries to understand how he can determine the mysteries of a tail if he cannot see the face of the whale (296), Melville pokes fun at those who choose to look for muddled facts, rather than simply look around and accept what they see.

Obuchowski’s angle that Melville critiques the futility and failures of analyzing one’s surroundings in *Moby-Dick* casts an interesting light on how Queequeg deals with the inscrutable blankness of the whale. Queequeg, instead of directing his rage upon or

calculating the animal, merely accepts its incomprehensibility and in fact melds himself with it. For example, deciding to decorate his coffin and use it as a sea-chest after he recovers from a fever, he begins

carving the lid with all manner of grotesque figures and drawings; and it seem[s] that hereby he [is] striving, in his rude way, to copy parts of the twisted tattooing on his body. And this tattooing, had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person [is] a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself [can] read...and these mysteries [are] therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they [are] inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last. (366-67)

Here, Queequeg's tattoos presenting as "hieroglyphic marks" that apparently capture a "complete theory of the heavens and the earth" are essentially empty symbols. He knows in essence what they are supposed to mean, but the "mysteries" that they contain and their actual translations will die with his body and "be unsolved to the last." And yet Queequeg utilizes these symbols once again by carving them into the surface of his coffin. It is as if he accepts their eternal incalculability and merely reproduces them on another surface, perpetuating their importance to him, rather than their original meaning. The situation is reminiscent of the carvings in Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, where the symbols are made meaningless by Pym's misreading and are later restored by

the editor, but here the symbols on Queequeg's body are decidedly unsolvable, and yet he does not ignore them, rage at them, or attempt to calculate them like Pym, Ahab, or Ishmael. He simply replicates them. Through this act, Queequeg embodies the magical world. By inscribing indecipherable and incalculable hieroglyphics on himself (and on the coffin), he accepts that he can never analyze the symbols other than by retracing them on the coffin, just as Pym retraces the chasm symbols when sketching them in his narrative. Queequeg in "his own proper person [is] a riddle to unfold" (366-67).

Within Obuchowski's framework, Queequeg perhaps illustrates an answer to Melville's satire and critique on calculation. Instead of attempting to understand what the symbols on his body mean, Queequeg reproduces them and in essence accepts their illegibility. Though the symbols on his body are supposed to contain the "complete theory of the heavens and the earth" (Melville 366), he does not "naively" fall into the trap of trying to understand and "codify the immensity and complexity of the universe" (Obuchowski 9). Instead he merely appreciates what the symbols look like, as he passively accepts that the theory of the heavens and the earth tattooed on his body will forever be incalculable.

Calculative Conclusions?

P.T. Barnum's humbuggery and Edgar Allan Poe's literary manipulation of reality threw the notion of a demagified world into disarray. Originally the calculative process that created the demagified world was a means of defining and mastering one's surroundings. Weber observes in his lecture "Science as a Vocation" that a demagified world consists of parts that *could* be calculated. But between potentially knowing and actually knowing, there remains a liminal space of possibility, where mysteries and wonders still exist before they are calculated. Alan Sica further examines Weber's understanding of a demagified world in *Weber, Irrationality, and Social Order*, drawing attention to a potential gap in his reasoning. He notes that "Weber wisely left aside the question of whether or not a rationalized social world retained within it—in opposition to its formal nature—fragmented but still powerful magical elements," but Sica does not go on to discuss what those fragments are or could be (Sica 168). Perhaps marvelous or magical elements enter in moments of mental pause that are instigated by authors and manipulators of reality. Barnum and Poe, for instance, exploited the calculable wonders. They inspired and twisted calculation to convolute the truth of an object—even reality—proving the process of analysis to be dangerously malleable. Both Barnum and Poe revealed through their humbuggery that one can create a marvel in reality, like the Yankee lady and the whale automaton, or even confuse an object with analysis, as in M. Valdemar's shaky lung-diagnosis. But what is most alarming is the possibility of losing one's ability to analyze. By merely applying "shock and terror," or rhetorically confusing an audience into believing a fiction, the demagified world can be dissolved in moments. Poe presses on these destabilizing methods even more, theorizing on why they work in

his novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Working within his controlled, fictional environment, he manipulates his character-audience's perception in order to create the shock and terror that disrupts calculation and causes them to misread Pym as an apparition of Rogers. Even more so, Poe introduces the ability to miscalculate when Pym inadvertently strips the structure or logic away from symbols etched into a chasm wall by ignoring the possibility that they could be pictures and words. All moments of illegibility appear to lead to the inscrutable, white curtain at the end of *Pym*. The blankness of the final passage leaves the reader stuck in the realm of possibility and innumerable interpretations. But Melville picks up this unsettling end of whiteness and illustrates how one *could* react to a situation of incalculability through Ahab's rage, Ishmael's analysis of the incalculable—in order to at least dissipate its utter mystery and terror—and Queequeg's acceptance and embodiment of mystery and wonder. On the other hand, the theory that Melville satirized calculation in *Moby-Dick* reconfigures Ishmael's tendency to analyze into a futile and ridiculous practice and perhaps even retraces Queequeg's apathetic and accepting relationship with symbols as laudable. The idea that Melville in fact critiqued calculation through satire opens up new avenues for research: did other authors in the nineteenth century react in similar or different ways to the new calculative style of thinking? If so, how did those reactions manifest in their works?

In Weber's theoretical model of a demagified world, what with the several ways to disrupt calculation—affecting perception, shock and terror, misreading, multivalenced interpretations, etc.), it appears as if the world is as real and definable as Barnum's Feejee

Mermaid: equal parts fact and fiction. With such a thin barrier to the magical world, is it still safe to call the calculable world demagified? The world, it would appear, under the umbrella of calculation, becomes even more complicated, than defined and mastered.

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