“The Mystery of Our Being in Existence was now soon Explained”: Language, Hieroglyphs, and the Human in Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*

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I DOUBT it not; then more, immeasurably more,
In each old song bequeathed, in every noble page or text,
(Different, something unreck'd before, some unsuspected author,)
In every object—mountain, tree, and star—in every birth and life,
As part of each, finality of each, meaning, behind the ostent,
The mystic cipher waits infolded.

Walt Whitman, "Shakespeare Bacon's Cipher"

I care not whether my work be read now or by posterity. I can afford to wait a century for readers when God himself has waited six thousand years for an observer. I triumph. I have stolen the golden secret of the Egyptians. I will indulge my sacred fury.

Poe (paraphrasing Kepler), *Eureka*[1]

[1] The original quote, as translated from Kepler's *Harmonices Mundi*: "Nothing holds me; I will indulge my sacred fury; I will triumph over mankind by the honest confession that I have stolen the golden vases of the Egyptians to build up a tabernacle for my God far away from the confines of Egypt. If you forgive me, I rejoice; if you are angry, I can bear it; the die is cast, the book is written, to be read either now or in posterity, I care not which; it may well wait a century for a reader, as God has waited six thousand years for an observer." (Stewart 203)

Introduction

On 27 September 1822, Jean-François Champollion announced a discovery that would win him broad international acclaim and spark a renewed public curiosity about human origins. In a lecture before the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, Champollion, a French scholar of languages, proclaimed that he was the first to successfully decipher Egyptian hieroglyphs. It was a monumental feat, one which had eluded European philologists since the beginning of Napoleon's Egyptian campaign a quarter-century earlier, and proved to be the watershed moment of the West's Egypt craze[2]—which, before it tapered out in the 1840s, dominated the popular imagination of the nineteenth century. Champollion soon became a household name across Europe and the United States. His work found particular purchase among American writers: Champollion is referenced by name in Emerson's "History" (1841), Poe's *Eureka* (1848), Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), and Melville's *Mardi* (1849) and *Moby-Dick* (1851). The academy, too, was infatuated. American scholarly magazines were inundated with articles devoted to varieties of Egyptology and Egyptian miscellany (Irwin 5). It was in these publications that Champollion's translation achievements were hailed as among history's most notable. Edward Everett writes in *The North American Review*, "The discoveries of M. Champollion are perhaps the most extraordinary of a merely literary kind, which the history of modern learning contains;" he continues,

> If the mathematical discoveries of Leibnitz and Newton are the most brilliant which the modern world has produced in exact science, those of … Champollion are entitled to the same rank in critical learning, and are destined to throw, we doubt not, a flood light *on the history of mankind*, hitherto almost a blank. (As quoted, Irwin 5).

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[2] Most prominent in France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

The import of Champollion's discovery was not merely literary or historical, but also existential. The decryption of the hieroglyphs allowed access to the surviving intellectual corpus of ancient Egypt, from which (so it was broadly hoped) scholars could glean some insight into the origins of humankind. The significance attributed to Champollion's work testifies to the gravity that Egyptian hieroglyphs held in the West's popular imagination. Surely, a society capable of great feats like the pyramids would have insight into the material and spiritual questions of human existence (by which I mean, how and why we exist) and yet, this knowledge was trapped within the strictures of these cryptic glyphs. It was this context that consecrated hieroglyphs with a rich metaphysical potency. They lived: not simply glyphs (mere signifiers) but *runes*—a form with a power beyond and independent of the language they (failed to) convey. And thus, Champollion's decryption was heralded, a bridge between metaphysical essence and lingual representation.

It is at this juncture of language and the metaphysical that I locate my investigation of Edgar Allan Poe's novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), wherein Poe draws on Champollion's research on hieroglyphs and lingual development in order to propose answers to the most fundamental questions of human existence: how did we come to exist and for what purpose? In pursuing the answers to these questions, Poe traces, in reverse, language's development. Near the novel's conclusion, he diagrams glyphs that are not just literal in meaning but also naturally formed; in the preface, by contrast, he considers language's modern capacity for fiction, hoaxing, and deception. Between these two poles, marked by the novel's end and its beginning, Poe considers a variety of ways in which language is used. As the novel proceeds, the uses of language that Poe treats become less abstract and more concrete, culminating at last with the Champollion-esque glyphs. To answer the questions of human existence—or, as Arthur Gordon Pym says in the novel's opening chapter, "the mystery of our existence"—Poe posits

that we must engage in an act of decryption, a raveling, from the abstract to the concrete to the elemental. At this final elemental point (which, I shall show, Poe represents as a shrouded white figure), we find the intermingled origins both of language and man.

Below the Deck of the Grampus: The Trouble with Reading in the Dark

With this charge at hand, a quick introductory word on *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Poe wrote *Pym* during a period of utter financial destitution. By March 1837, Poe was newly unemployed and increasingly desperate to find a way to support his young bride, Virginia Clemm, and her mother. Fired yet again from his post as editor of the Richmond-based periodical *Southern Literary Messenger*,[3] he migrated to New York in an unsuccessful attempt to join the city's elite literary milieu. Poe—broke, without contacts, unable to find a buyer for his collection of short stories[4]—grudgingly accepted a Harper and Brothers contract to write a novel. While Poe considered himself a "magazinist" and was openly skeptical of a book in which "a single and connected story occupies the whole volume" ("Text: Harper and Brothers to Edgar Allan Poe"), he was without options. And thus came *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Poe's only novel, *Pym* follows the wondrous-if-hapless adventures of its titular protagonist and his companions, Augustus Barnard and Dirk Peters as they venture—essentially by chance—toward the South Pole. The plot might best be described as occurring in three sections: the introduction and Pym's imprisonment under the brig of the Grampus (a trading ship

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[3] On his departure from the Messenger, Poe wrote to his cousin William: "The drudgery was excessive; the salary was contemptible. In fact I soon found that whatever reputation I might personally gain, this reputation would be all. I stood no chance of bettering my pecuniary condition, while my best energies were wasted in the service of an illiterate and vulgar, although well-meaning man [publisher and proprietor Thomas W. White], who had neither the capacity to appreciate my labors, nor the will to reward them." (Jackson 72)

[4] Entitled *Tales of the Folio Club*; never published. In Poe's words, "They are supposed to be read at table by the eleven members of a literary club, and are followed by the remarks of the company upon each. These remarks are intended as a burlesque upon criticism. In the whole, originality more than any thing else has been attempted." Poe to E. and J. T. Buckingham, May 4, 1833; (As quoted, "Tales of the Folio Club").

initially captained by Augustus's father; Pym sneaks onto the ship with Augustus's aid, seeking adventure); the mutiny and its aftermath; and, finally, the events aboard the Jane Guy—and later, on the island of Tsalal—as it ventures toward the South Pole.

Yet a simple account of its plot is a profoundly insufficient (even, perhaps, irrelevant) means to convey a sense of the text: these sections and, indeed, most narrative events of *Pym* seem wholly disconnected from one another at first blush, as though they occur randomly, each portion related only nominally to the last. Accordingly, *Pym* vexes. Poe's style vacillates across modes as the novel progresses. The text is riddled with plot inconsistencies, and as much as one-fifth of *Pym* is paraphrased or directly appropriated from other texts (Beegle 7-19).[5] In the past, these flaws (if such a word is appropriate) contributed to a broadly dismissive treatment of the novel in Poe criticism; that is to say, when it was considered at all. John Barth once remarked that *Pym* should not be regarded as a novel, but as *"*some sort of simulacrum of a novel: not a counterfeit but an isomorph; not a hoax but a mimicry." He continues, writing that *Pym* "mimes the contours of dramatic action the way a praying mantis mimes a green twig but is not a green twig … [The] reader who approaches *Pym* as if it were a bonafide novel, like the fly who approaches the mantis thinking that [the mantis is a twig], is in for difficulties" (228). Since Barth's remarks in 1989, *Pym* has gradually become the subject of more serious critical

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[5] The bulk of these plagiarized and paraphrased sections concern sailing practice and terminology. Poe, who hadn't ever sailed professionally (though he was a passenger on ships going to and coming from his English boarding school as a boy), relied primarily on shipping manuals for these descriptions, and the work of Jeremiah N. Reynolds. For a comprehensive study of Poe's sources for *Pym*, see "Mutiny and Atrocious Butchery" In *Poe's Pym: Critical Explorations*, edited by Richard Kopley, by Susan F. Beegle, 7-19. Durham: Duke University Press, 1992.

consideration.[6] But scholars have continued to struggle with *Pym*'s narrative lapses—no one, I think, addressing them adequately. Accordingly, before moving on to a discussion of *Pym*'s lingual project, which is the primary focus of my essay herein, I would like to briefly meditate on these flaws—those narrative lapses and inconsistencies which led to Barth's critique—and their role in *Pym*. The most common form of *Pym*'s dismissal goes something like, 'Despite Poe's obvious gifts he was unfamiliar with the mode of the novel, and *Pym* suffered because of it.' This is, of course, true in a limited way—the novel *was* new to Poe and (moreover) he was skeptical of its form. But for a man whose talents span such a range of genres, it feels unlikely that the kinds of narrative lapses we see in *Pym*—namely, basic failures of storytelling—are the product of generic unfamiliarity, that "novels were truly not [Poe's] métier" (Barth 228). That is to say, this 'first-and-only novel' explanation fails to account for the almost elementary nature of the narrative flaws. The types of flaws I mean to highlight include: Pym's dog, Tiger, is both introduced abruptly to and expunged from the text, without explanation; Pym says he learns the details of the mutiny aboard the Grampus many years later from Augustus, but Augustus dies mere pages after the pronouncement; by the same token, Augustus—vital to Pym up until the point of his death—is never remembered *a single time* after his death.[7] There also seems to be confusion about Augustus's age: he is said to be two years older than Pym (himself sixteen), and yet is able to free himself from his manacles, which were "altogether ineffectual in confining

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[6] I think here, in part, of J. Gerald Kennedy and his book *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym: And the Abyss of Interpretation* (1995) as well as his edited volume (with Liliane Weissberg) *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race* (2001), and of Richard Kopley and *Poe's Pym: Critical Explorations* (1992), among others.

[7] This despite Pym at one point noting, "Augustus thoroughly entered into my state of mind. It is probable, indeed, that our intimate communion had resulted in a partial interchange of character" (67).

young persons, in whom the smaller bones readily yield to pressure" (99). Though my knowledge of human physiology might charitably be described as remedial, I suspect the bones of an eighteen-year-old man are neither categorically smaller nor more pliable than those of someone more advanced in age. For these lapses, unfamiliarity with the novel seems insufficient justification; that is to say, too, that *Pym*'s flaws are not the sort revealed only under diligent scrutiny. As documented in Richard Kopley's survey of annotations in copies of the novel's first edition, many (if not most) readers—at least those inclined to annotate—took note of these perplexing features of the text (Kopley 399-408). In truth, it is hard not to. And yet, a "simulacrum of a novel"? In a limited sense, Barth is right: the reader who approaches *Pym* as a more typical text, even a characteristic example of Poe's work, is in for difficulties. And yet to characterize the text so bluntly as an insufficient or unsatisfactory substitute for a novel—Barth adds, in case his point was unclear, "novels were truly not [Poe's] métier" (228)—is, likewise, a misreading. To simply assert the failure of Poe's gifts evades one's obligation as a scholar to think critically about what may have caused the book to falter (again, if such a term is even appropriate) and if these lapses can productively contribute to a serious treatment of the text.[8]

But the question remains, in light of these flaws, how should one approach *Pym?*—not a conventional text (for a nineteenth century novel, or for Poe), but not a failure or simulacrum of a novel either. Thus, in my view *Pym* is best thought of not as a simulacrum but a rune. That is to say—borrowing here from Jerome McGann's characterization of Poe's poetry—*Pym* is "an

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[8] I echo closely Toni Morrison's treatment of Willa Cather's *Saphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) from Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992. 21.

event of language" (2), more concerned with the mechanics and nature of its own construction as semiotic tools than with the narrative substance its prose is ostensibly intended to convey—such as the material events of its plot or the development of its characters. The nature of its writing, and how that writing evolves across the duration of the novel, I mean to suggest, is more central to the novel's semiotic process (how it manufactures meaning) than are the material events (and attendant flaws) of its narrative. Without this understanding, *Pym* may—as it did to Barth—seem hollow, a stand-in or imitation. Like Champollion's hieroglyphs, *Pym*—in its exploration of man's origin and/through language—has a power beyond and independent of its narrative aspects.[9]

[9] In the words of one contemporary reader, scrawled alongside a previous reader's complaints about plot errors in the novel, *Pym* is "without a doubt one of the most remarkable books I ever read" (Kopley 400). Mat Johnson echoes this sentiment in his 2010 satire/adaptation of the novel: "*Pym* that is maddening, *Pym* that is brilliance, *Pym* whose failures entice instead of repel. *Pym* that flows and ignites and *Pym* that becomes so entrenched it stagnates for hundreds of words at a time. A book that at points makes no sense, gets wrong both history and science, and yet stumbles into an emotional truth greater than both" (23). For all its oddity, *Pym* proves hard to dispense with.

Dreams and Drunken Drowning: The Phases of Language in *Pym*

As *Pym* progresses, the language and literary modes Poe employs gradually evolve from *abstract*, language removed from the literal state of the world (in degrees ranging from wholesale deception to merely fiction), to *concrete*, language that is the direct description of experience (the journalistic recording of observed events, the literal illustration of glyphs). The effect of this structure is a model (told in reverse) of language's evolution, from the naturally occurring symbols at the novel's conclusion to the modern abstractions of fiction and hoaxing on display in the language of the preface. In *Pym*'s opening pages, Poe models this structure by rapidly cycling through a number of compositional modes: hoaxing preface to rote personal history to playful anecdote to fantastic fiction.[10] Each of these modes entails a different relationship between language and reality. The hoaxing preface presents a false account of the novel's origin and publication history (events that actually took place, but not as the preface describes); by contrast, Pym's personal history, which opens the novel proper, conjures a state of affairs that—while internally consistent—is (of course) fictional. All of that is to say, over the course of *Pym*, the reader 1) first encounters the *absolute abstraction* of a preface whose language works to obscure, rather than describe, reality; 2) moves through stages of language that have an increasingly more concrete connection to reality, before 3) at last arriving at—and perhaps, as will be explored in the conclusion, moving *beyond*—the point at which language and object (sign and signifier) are one and the same.

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[10] By *fantastic fiction,* I mean to say the mode of writing embodied Pym and Augustus's brief-but-dramatic adventure on Pym's sailboat the Ariel, a mode (first-person terror, marked by suspense and an unreliable narrator) familiar to readers of Poe's most famous short tales; I think here of "The Fall of the House of Usher," or "The Tell-Tale Heart," among others—the mode dominates Poe's best-remembered writing.

The preface purports (as does the rest of *Pym*, discounting the concluding "Note") to be the work of none other than Arthur Gordon Pym himself. In early editions, any explicit label of Poe as the author of the text is omitted entirely. In an effort to explain away the previous publication of *Pym*'s first two chapters in Poe's name, in the *Southern Literary Messenger* (Vol. III, Issues 1 & 2), and thereby maintain the hoaxing authorship (such as it was), Pym suggests in the preface that Poe went to great lengths to encourage him to write a record of his adventure to the South Pole, including publishing representative first chapters "under the garb of fiction" (53).[11] In my estimation, this hoax (a lie) introduces the reader, in her first encounter with the text, to language that obfuscates and suppresses truth. It does this in part by adding kernels of truth (such as Poe's involvement) in order to make the lie passably coherent. It matters not at all to Poe that his hoax fails to be persuasive (it is hard to believe, even before the reader's encounter with the text's extreme fantasy, that there is a Pym who allowed a portion of his journey to be published as fiction). Rather, it is a rhetorical gesture, one meant to signpost an experimentation on the part of *Pym* and Poe with language and representation. The first state of language in *Pym* is a state of deception, language not only distanced from reality but actively obscuring it.

Pym's personal history, which opens the narrative portion of the text after its preface, establishes the basics of the boy's circumstances: "My name is Arthur Gordon Pym. My father was a respectable trader in sea-stores at Nantucket, where I was born. My maternal grandfather

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[11] *Pym*'s preface is part of a long tradition of fake prefaces from the eighteenth century, the most famous of which is *Robinson Crusoe*—presented as the story of Crusoe himself. The move was (more or less) out of vogue by *Pym*'s publication in 1838.

was an attorney in good practice. He was fortunate in everything" (51),[12] and so on. Arthur Gordon Pym is, upon our introduction, a dreamer and a lover of stories. Now sixteen, he has never left Nantucket. His friend Augustus, two years older, leads (at least, by contrast) a life of adventure. Augustus's father, Captain Barnard, commands the *Grampus,* upon which Augustus has accompanied his father on shipping missions. Poe goes on with this background for several more paragraphs—Pym's schooling, his close relationship with his grandfather, etc. This kind of language—neither true nor false, but *performative* (Austin 6)—actively manufactures the world to which it refers. While it does not obfuscate or mislead, as did the hoaxing language of the preface, the language remains, here, highly abstract—it constitutes an imaginary world, one that wrought only by words. That is to say, it is a fictive origin, told by a fictive man about a fictive boyhood—describing biographic details that the reader, even a nineteenth-century reader, is unlikely to share.[13]

Pym then relates an anecdote: he and Augustus are at a party at Augustus's home. The mode of the anecdote is an allegorical, exemplary relation of events—events that could be real—

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[12] Again, here Poe winks at his own authorship: Pym tells us he was born in "Edgarton."

[13] This narration, though straight forward, is marked as more abstract than the phenomenological language stage which follows it in the "fantastic fiction" mode I go on to describe. The language of fictive biography and personal history is more removed from reality than the narration of sensory experience, in that it is more abstract to imagine that there is a man named Arthur Gordon Pym from Nantucket than it is to imagine that a man trapped in total darkness for days on end would experience the sensation of terror. A reasonable gauge of where a passage might fall on the spectrum from abstract to concrete is how easily it can be imagined by the reader—Pym's life on Nantucket is less likely to generate a sympathetic reaction in the reader than the experience of being trapped. By sympathetic reaction here, I mean to say a reaction that mirrors—to whatever degree—the experience of a character. By the time Pym observes the hieroglyphs, the shared experience between Pym and the reader is nearly one-to-one: Pym draws them on the page, removing the need for any imaginative leap.

but intended as a broad stand-in, representative of the nature of things without describing each of them in total. Pym comments on this mode directly: "I will relate *one of these adventures by way of introduction* to …" (57, emphasis mine). They drink; it quickly becomes late. They are "not a little intoxicated toward the close of it" (57). Pym plans to stay the night at Augustus's house, as he has done many times before. They head to bed; and then, Augustus sits up suddenly and "[swears] with a terrible oath that he would not go to sleep for any Arthur Pym in Christendom, when there was so glorious a breeze from the southwest" (57). Pym, startled, initially writes off Augustus's outburst as a sign of his intoxication, until Augustus convinced him otherwise, and that the two of them—despite a brewing storm—ought to be out sailing on such a fine night. Pym, not to be thought of as cowardly or timid—quickly agrees: "[I] told him I was quite as brave as himself … and quite as ready for any fun or frolic as any Augustus Barnard … We lost no time in getting on our clothes and hurrying down to the boat" (57). As a boyhood anecdote, it stands in for a larger set of stories about youthful adventure without literally describing the totality of those experiences. This literary mode conveys both the literal circumstances of the tale and the broader feeling that this was one of many adventures—one kind of middle road between the purely fictive and biographical, and the journalistic (by which I mean to say, paratactic, reportative, documentary) modes of language to come.

But the tone of this adventure in particular marks a shift to the mode of fantastic fiction, characterized by rich sensory description—often of bodily pain and fear—and details limited to what can be perceived via the senses. The fantastic fiction mode underlies the bulk of *Pym's* central narrative—including his time trapped in the stowage of the Grampus, the mutiny, and the duration of his time adrift at sea with Augustus and Dirk Peters. When they get out on the bay in Pym's sailboat—fittingly, the Ariel—it turns out that Augustus is "beastly drunk" and unable to

help the inexperienced Pym sail the vessel. What's more, they are trapped in a brutal storm. This situation is reminiscent of those described in the short tales that constitute this era of Poe's career—"The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," and "A Descent into the Maelström" were published between 1838 and 1841. All of that to say: Pym is filled with terror.

> [A] loud and long scream or yell, as if from the throats of a thousand demons, 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 ceased utterly to beat ... (60-61)

His sailboat is run over by a much larger ship, the Penguin; he and Augustus miraculously survive. Upon his return to consciousness aboard the Penguin, he gives a retroactive account of the events of their crash—events that, in the moment of their occurrence, he was (vitally) unable to understand. What begins to emerge in Pym's relation of the Ariel's crash—indeed, what characterizes this stage of language in the novel—is a phenomenological dialogue of sensation and storytelling. I mean to say that language, for the first time in *Pym*, begins to describe fervently the experience of sensation, literal human experience of his surroundings. For the first time, language describes something existential and immediate—not tied to man as thinker, agent, artist, or creator, but to man as an embodied being experiencing the world. And it is at this vital moment at which language and the experience of being coincide for the first time, through the language and experience of sensation. With this connection between language and being inaugurated, Poe introduces and signposts the text's explicit existential proclamation (marked here as Pym's promise to explain how he and Augustus survived the wreck), that "The mystery of our being in existence [would] now soon [be] explained" (61).

Recall the reception of Jean-François Champollion's translation of the hieroglyphs. More than simply an achievement of philology or Egyptology, Champollion's work was regarded as commensurate to "the mathematical discoveries of Leibniz and Newton … the most brilliant which the modern world has produced" (as quoted, Irwin 6). But why? It was an impressive feat to be sure, but of a dead language and a bygone culture—one, though, that was thought to have lost knowledge about man's history, and perhaps even his origin. It was believed that Champollion's discovery was destined to shine "a flood light *on the history of mankind,* hitherto almost a blank" (as quoted, Irwin 6). Here, Poe makes explicit this connection for the first time. By recounting his story, Pym will make it clear to the reader how he survived the crash of his sailboat; by writing *Pym,* Poe too will instruct its reader about the development of language and, because of their inherent connection, the development of man.

I'd like to pause here to note a moment from the beginning of chapter two that is particularly charged with dialogue about sensational human experience and the language of storytelling. It comes as Pym and Augustus have begun to recuperate, quickly, from their crash. Pym is reflecting on the nature of his friendship with Augustus, and the impact of Augustus's florid storytelling of his past adventures at sea (more than half of which Pym believes, in retrospect, to have been fabricated):

> It is strange, too, that he most strongly enlisted my feelings in behalf of the life of a seaman, when he depicted his more terrible moments of suffering and despair. . . . My visions were of shipwreck and famine; of death or captivity … of a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears … in an ocean unapproachable and unknown. (66-67)

Pym, who regarded these moments as "prophetic glimpses" of his destiny, reflects that his friend "thoroughly entered into my state of mind. It is probable, indeed, that our intimate communion had resulted in *a partial interchange of character*" (67). In these moments of shared recollection

(of past pain and suffering), there is an opening for exchange and/or synthesis of being. In these brutal experiences of human suffering—sensation beyond, perhaps, what language can adequately communicate—there can be a commingling of essence.

Though Poe's project of lingual unraveling more or less stalls for many pages—until the rescue of the surviving sailors (both of the mutiny and their time adrift at sea) by the Jane Guy—there are a few moments from Pym's time hidden among the stowage of the Grampus worth highlighting. Augustus attempts to relate the details of the mutiny to Pym by way of a note tied to his dog, Tiger (a strange, language-vs.-existence problem in and of himself). The note, which Pym can't read, is written in Augustus's blood. At this middle stage of *Pym*, between the ultimate abstraction of the preface and the literal depiction that comprises its conclusion (more on this to come), Augustus using the very essence of his life (blood) to write out the language of his message is a representative moment from the novel's phenomenologically-oriented middle sections, and among the most explicit links between the lingual and the human in *Pym.* The other moment worth highlighting is the failure of Pym's speech as his body falters just before Augustus frees him from his entombment below the deck of the Grampus—Augustus is calling out for Pym, but as his existence fades, so too does his language—he is unable to summon his voice in order to respond. Pym resorts to knocking objects to the ground to let Augustus know that he is alive.

Pym's language unravels further soon thereafter, becoming ever more concrete as the novel draws to a close, moving from phenomenological to journalistic. While aboard the Jane Guy (the ship which rescues Pym and Dirk Peters—the only survivors of the Grampus's mutiny

and time stranded at sea[14]) as it heads toward the South Pole on an exploration mission, Pym diligently records the particulars of what the crew encounters and at which longitudes and latitudes, dating each day's entry, rarely more than a few paragraphs in length. Pym professes it to be a faithful account of events. It feels almost scientific—very little figuration or rhetoric between the words and the events they purport to describe. Gone is the excited, descriptive language of Pym and Augustus at the party in Nantucket, gone is the terror of being trapped in total darkness aboard the Grampus. In its stead, we encounter passages like this:

> On the thirteenth of October we came in sight of Prince Edward's Island, in latitude 46 degrees 53' S., longitude 37 degrees 46' E. Two days afterward we found ourselves near Possession Island, and presently passed the islands of Crozet, in latitude 42 degrees 59' S., longitude 48 degrees E. … The face of the country is hilly, although none of the hills can be called lofty. Their tops are perpetually covered with snow. There are several harbors, of which Christmas Harbour is the most convenient. … Its projecting point terminates in a high rock, through which is a large hole, forming a natural arch. The entrance is in latitude 48 degrees 40' S., longitude 69 degrees 6' E. (173)

This entry goes on for several more paragraphs, and entries like it fill several chapters—until the moment at which *Pym* arrives at the Tsalian portion of its narrative. That is to say, we are getting closer and closer to the moment at which language and humanity are unraveled to their mutual origin. But first, we must explore the glyphs "graven within the hills" (*Pym* 247).

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[14] Augustus dies of a festering wound, made worse by their lack of food and water—lost when the ship's hold flooded in the story. The hold was filled with empty casks, which is ostensibly why the Grampus did not sink outright.

Graven Within the Hills.

Poe's schema of lingual development in *Pym* is not only inspired by but thoroughly steeped in—ultimately indebted to—Champollion's work with Egyptian hieroglyphs. *Pym* not only inherits Champollion's lingual commitments, but rigorously foregrounds their once-latent connection between language's origin and evolution and the questions of human origin and development (how and why do we exist?) with which *Pym* is concerned. Whereas contemporary American intellectuals theorized at length about the mysteries that might be clarified once the ancient Egyptian corpus was translated (Irwin 6-11), Poe grasped onto the *mechanics* of the discovery itself as the primary step toward their elucidation—a conviction he works to substantiate through *Pym.* In light of this view, I pause here to clarify the material detail of Champollion's work—a developmental model mirrored in *Pym*. Champollion's central realization, which enabled the hieroglyphs' decryption, identified the three potential roles—and, in turn, developmental stages—of Egyptian hieroglyphic characters. These are figurative characters; symbolic, tropic, or aenigmatic characters; and, finally, phonetic characters (Irwin 6). Looking at each more closely:

1) *Figurative characters* literally represent the object meant to be expressed. In this mode, a serpent represents (or, rather, *is*) a serpent, grain *is* grain, and so on.

2) *Symbolic, Tropic,* or *Aenigmatic characters* express "an idea by the image of a physical object having an analogy true or false, direct or indirect, near or remote, with the idea to be expressed" (6). In this mode, a storm may represent strife, the sun may represent heat, and so on.

3) *Phonetic characters* represent sounds alone; on this mode, the glyph *is* the first sound of its depicted object. In Egyptian, *ahé* was the word for hawk, and the hawk glyph could be used to phonetically represent the sound of "a."

A glyph could be, variously, a literal depiction, an allegorical parallel, or a phonetic representation. Champollion's realization was met with two opposing sets of resonances by

American intellectuals, which were—to use Irwin's terms—metaphysical and scientific. The doctrinal interpretation holds that the glyph's mutation from literal to symbolic, then from symbolic to phonetic parallels man's fall from biblical simplicity into the pains of abstraction; the division between sign and referent itself a parallel to the ever-widening divide between man and his Creator. The secular interpretation holds this mutation of hieroglyphic meaning as an evolution—a progression from a mode made up entirely of "signs capable of presenting only simple, concrete ideas" (Irwin 7) into a vast network of largely phonetic signs able to convey the most complex and abstract nuances of human thought. That is to say, this evolution from literal to abstract is the essential element of language itself, the buttress of human intellectual capacity.

Poe fell, unsurprisingly, into the latter camp. By understanding, and, in turn, *unraveling*, language, we can begin to comprehend man himself. From the comparatively late possibilities of deception and abstraction backward, toward pre-history's literal and sensational mode of being, language maps and mirrors the human development. In this way, Poe considers existence—to once again repurpose McGann's terminology—as "an event of language" (McGann 2). William Carlos Williams's essay on Poe's philosophy of language helps to better enunciate what, exactly, that phrase means: he argues that, by walking language *back*, to its most elemental, Poe produces "a disassociation from anything else than thought and ideals … [which illustrates Poe's] favorite theory that the *theory includes the practice*" (as quoted, McGann 4; original emphasis). Independent of plot events, character development, and any novelistic "flaws", Poe's project in *Pym* is lingual, structural, developmental—one of lingual reduction and reversion. His métier is unraveling. And, up to this point, we have traced this process back to its most *essential* moment, back to the literal glyphs—his full embrace of Champollion.

Once rescued by the Jane Guy, Pym and his companions sailed southward toward the pole. It is a mission of exploration and prestige. After reaching a point further south than anyone had previously ventured (Poe's signal that the reader is about to enter new, revelatory intellectual territory), they arrive at the undiscovered island of Tsalal and are greeted by its inhabitants: "After searching about for some time, we discovered … men who seemed to be well armed ... a hundred and ten savages in all. They were about the ordinary stature of Europeans, but of a more muscular and brawny frame. Their complexion a jet black, with thick and long woolly hair" (196). These islanders—hereafter, Tsalalians—at first seemed peaceful, and guide the men on a tour of the island and their village. The island, its wildlife, and the Tsalalians are all documented (and heavily exoticised) by Pym.[15] The crew of the Jane Guy soon begins to exploit the islanders for their labor in farming sea cucumber, which they plan to sell upon their return from the South Pole.[16] Their situation is calm until the Tsalalians dupe the crew into following them into a narrow pass between mountains, whereupon the Tsalalians set off a landslide which crushes the crew. Only Pym and Dirk Peters—best thought of as Pym's replacement Augustus, following

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[15] It is an early foray for Poe into the scientific conjecture that appears, as in *Eureka,* later in his career.

[16] There is much to be said of Poe's and *Pym*'s racial politics; I touch on the explicit exclusion of non-white people from the project of the universal in which Poe is engaged in my conclusion. For those interested in the subject of race in *Pym*, on which there is much to say, I have three recommendations: Mat Johnson's satirical novel *Pym* (2010), which follows an African-American literature professor's quest to find Tsalal; *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race* (2001), a comprehensive collection edited by J. Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg, which takes on Poe's writing more broadly; and of course, Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992), which uses *Pym* to frame her argument the centrality of slavery to America's literary project and ideals.

Augustus's death—survive, though they find themselves trapped in the chasm. It is here they find the hieroglyphs. As I have previously noted, Poe includes a depiction of the topography of Pym's surroundings as figures (or glyphs) in the text. The first figure included below is the shape of the chasm/canyon within which Pym and his companion are trapped (1); on the walls of this canyon, too, are literal glyphs seemingly carved into the wall, which I have included as a second figure below (2):

Neither the glyph-like chasms nor the 'true' glyph carvings were created by the Tsalalians; rather, they—somehow—formed organically. That is to say, they are literal, naturally occurring language. On this, Pym writes:

> With a very slight exertion of the imagination, the left, or most northern of these indentures might have been taken for the intentional, although rude, representation of a human figure standing erect, with outstretched arm. The rest of them bore also some little resemblance to alphabetical characters, and Peters was willing, at all events, to adopt the idle opinion that they were really such. I convinced him of his error, finally, by directing his attention to the floor of the fissure, where, among the powder, we picked up, piece by piece, several large flakes of the marl, which had evidently been broken off by some convulsion from the surface where the indentures were found, and which had projecting points exactly fitting the indentures; thus proving them to have been the work of nature. (228)

Here, on this island of Tsalal, language has been stripped of all figurative, performative, or symbolic representation; it is naturally occurring, and signifies only itself. It is at this point that Poe has, now, walked language back from its most abstract to its most essential: everything has been stripped away but the glyph itself—the first stage of Champollion's hieroglyphic function.

The glyphs mean—or rather, are—the canyons that comprise their form, and nothing more. This stage of naturally occurring language is, too, mirrored in the cry of the islanders of *Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!*, a phrase which does not signify, but (re)creates. The large white birds, which Pym and the crew of the Jane Guy observe as they sail toward Tsalal, and the Tsalalians alike cry *Tekeli-li!*. The phrase gets used in reference to anything white the Tsalalians encounter, but it should not be understood as a signification of or reference to whiteness, but rather *as* whiteness itself. *Tekeli-li!* is the white bird, is the white Pym, is the white crew of the Jane Guy. It is the white haze that surrounds the canoe as Pym and Dirk head approach the South Pole, and it is—of course—the shrouded white figure who concludes the novel, whose skin "was of the perfect whiteness of the snow" (243).

The Mystery of Our Being in Existence.

"The pleasure which we derive from any exertion of human ingenuity," Poe writes in one of his literature reviews, "is in the direct ration of the *approach* to this species of reciprocity between cause and effect" (McGann 42). That is to say, the degree of pleasure we take from ingenious acts is tied to the relationship of cause and effect within these acts. And *Pym*—read without a consideration of its lingual-existential project, as it often is—is perhaps impossible to read causally. Its narrative is disjointed, its events strung together with none but the most cursory narrative logic between them. Poe continues his review, and offers what might serve as an apt foreword to the novel: "In the construction of plot," he writes, "… we should aim at so arranging the points, or incidents, [so] that we cannot distinctly see … whether that one depends [on] any one or other" (42). The ideal plot, he seems to argue, is one whose events are not related causally to one another, or at a minimum a plot whose causality is masked from the reader. In this sense, surely *Pym* is a triumph. Poe continues though, now expanding his claim to the existential and the cosmic: "In this sense, of course, perfection is unattainable in fact, —because Man is the constructor. The plots of God are perfect. The Universe is a Plot of God" (42)—an insight that is, yes, helpful for contextualizing the mercurial narrative of *Pym*. But I posit that Poe's intent is broader here, doctrinal—not simply a profession of the inability of man's creations to achieve perfection, but yet another act of fusion between language and existence. Men, the particulars of God's narrative, are imperfect constructors, just as Pym has constructed an imperfect recollection of his own narrative, filled with flaws and lapses. It must be so, for Pym is but a man. But Pym's *Universe*, the structure beyond his narrative—and its masked causal mechanism, lingual development—is much more carefully crafted, a neater arc between beginning and end. And of this Universe—that is to say, the evolution of language in *Pym*—Poe is the god.

I have worked herein to trace Poe's unraveling of language in *Pym*—its progress from wholly abstract to concrete, literal, *immediate*. I have contextualized this understanding of language in the work of Jean-François Champollion, whose methodology in the decryption of Egyptian hieroglyphs became the central tenet of Poe's linguistic philosophy in *Pym*. Language developed, as did Man, from pre-history's immediate, sensational and pre-lingual existence to ineffable abstraction and complexity. In *Pym*, Poe traces this path; viewed in reverse, from the letters graven within the hills, to the journalistic relation of events aboard the Jane Guy, to the experiential, phenomenological narration of suffering on and within the Grampus, to Pym's allegorical anecdotes, to, at last, its most abstract phase, the deceptive preface. The creation of Man and his existence is an event of, and brought about by, language. In his experimentation with the developmental stages of language, Poe is chasing his project of origin. But where does it end? Or rather, where does it begin? I have traced language *through* the moment of the geographic hieroglyphs—literal and embodied language—and to the natural language cries of *Tekeli-li!*, in what seems to be the logical beginning of man's relationship with language and the dawn of its development—but I have not yet talked about *Pym*'s ending. Its shrouded, looming whiteness. Following the logic of my argument, that moment should exist—somehow—*before* the beginnings of language, and thus, before the beginnings of man. That seems hard to conceive. You might rightly ask, *what do we make of the ending?*

The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket concludes, as Pym and Dirk Peters are being pulled rapidly toward the South Pole by the currents: "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" (243).[17] In *American Hieroglyphics,* Irwin writes of Emerson,

> As the hieroglyphical emblem represents … a basic understanding of the nature of the universe, so it dictates the form that his writing must take in treating that universe. In a sense, [this writing] is simply the decipherment of a hieroglyph. The strategy is always the same: [the writer] presents the emblem in all its outer complexity and then … he penetrates the emblem to reveal its inner simplicity, to show the hidden relationship between outer shape and inner meaning. (13)

This schema of decipherment maps (surprisingly) well onto Poe's work. Poe often depicts his subjects—as best recalled in his detective and gothic fiction—as superficially complex, but ultimately susceptible to thorough dismantling which reveals a simple inner meaning. Here, in *Pym*, there is unquestionably a breakdown—but what *is* the nature of the relationship between the outer shape of language and the inner meaning of human existence? Where is the product of this decipherment, this hieroglyphic decryption?

Instead of the answer to our origin, we have a reduction, a shrouded whiteness. It seems that, laid bare, drawn down to its essentials, "the mystery of our existence" ~~was now soon explained~~ remains utterly inscrutable—that is to say, *blank*. And what meaning can we take from

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[17] I would like to take a moment here to contend, uncontroversially, that Poe's imaginary Man consisted of a white man. His project of discerning origin was not (in truth) human origin as one might conceptualize it today, but of the origin of white men. (To this end, moments before this conclusion, the black Tsalalian Nu-Nu dies quietly in the bottom of their boat; he is prohibited from experiencing the origin of [white] Man.) With this tacit construction made explicit—Man is, and only includes, white men—I would like to move beyond an explicit discussion of the figure's racial connotations to those more central to my investigation, though I am confident that some of these observations will be implicitly resonant with *Pym*'s racial politics.

blankness? It would be a luxury, of course, to have more to work with in the ending. But the abrupt concluding paragraph, quoted to open this subsection, is all we have. "The soul is a cipher," Poe once remarked, "in the sense of a cryptograph; and the shorter a cryptograph is, the more difficulty there is in its comprehension—at a certain point of brevity it would bid defiance to an army of Champollions" (as quoted, Irwin 47).[18] And yet, we don't have an army of Champollions—just an unraveling, and a blankness from which we now must try to decipher our human origin. So here it goes, the best I can read from the blankness: the looming figure's blankness represents, or perhaps is, that of a purely blank page, unlettered by the glyphs of history and runes of meaning. The rest—over the course of *Pym*—has been unraveled, not erased but somehow *un-lettered*. Here, at the South Pole, we have followed Pym back to the point of origin—his, and ours—where meaning is, as of yet, unwritten. We have arrived, at last—at the end and at the beginning. And Poe suggests that our task as human beings—indeed our very meaning—is to craft history and to make meaning. (None is provided for us, a blank prescription.) Our purpose, in short, is the same of that of Poe: to *write*—and, in doing so, (now, or soon) to explain the mystery of our existence.

As you are now well-aware, Champollion's translation of the hieroglyphs—though an impressive feat—ultimately failed to resolve the mysteries of human origin and purpose. As to deciphering our origin, that feat was achieved, in large measure, by Charles Darwin in 1859 upon his publication of *On the Origin of Species.* Poe would likely have been overjoyed to read it, though

[18] From Poe's "Literati of New York."

he predeceased the book's publication by a decade. As to problem of deciphering our purpose… In *Eureka* (1848), Poe voices an anonymous correspondent who scoffs at the notion that the only road to truth is through the process of deductive (formal) or inductive (scientific) reasoning. He claims that such stagnant thinking has retarded "the progress of true Science, which makes its most important advances—as all History will show—by seemingly intuitive *leaps*" (*Eureka* 9). It is in this spirit, it seems, that Poe believes we progress—through creative intuition, a literary imagination working toward resonant truths about humankind and the nature of the Universe. Surely, with time, these truths change—falter, collapse, and reconstitute—in the face of a new ideas. But in Poe's view, these truths progress and advance toward something. That is to say, they *evolve*, toward a grand decryption of the cosmic hieroglyph. And such are the stakes of *Pym*—to explain the mystery of our existence. We know, at least, that existence happens through language, that it is affixed and inextricable to the very essence of our humanity. But when pushed further, when asked to go from language to meaning, perhaps Poe falters—when at last it is time for the grand flourish, the ultimate reveal, Poe comes up *blank*.

In one view, of course, this ending is cop-out, as though Poe—in his first and only novel—at the end had nothing left to say. If I were to make this claim—that Poe ran out of insight and threw up a smokescreen—I would not be the first to say so about Poe's work; as poet James Russell Lowell famously wrote of his corpus, "three-fifths of [it] genius and two-fifths sheer fudge" (78). But what if the blankness is more than that, sheer fudge? What if Poe's ending is in fact the *true extension* of Champollion's work, a veritable attempt to answer the mystery of human purpose?—a complement to Champollion's path toward human origin.

Poe's claim in *Pym*, it seems to me, is that at its core, human life is meaningless, wholly devoid of prescriptive purpose. Our human meaning, then, is to *manufacture* meaning—to letter

the blank page. Yet we are asked to write on the blankness that is, in Poe's words, "far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men" (243)—to write our purpose is an outsized task, one that we will necessarily fail to complete in the span of a lifetime. Each lifetime is new attempt to write a new and individual meaning, a task that is always and necessarily incomplete, imperfect. What results from this writing will likely be some balance of good sense and the insensible; this sort of work, it seems to me, is unavoidably an act of construction, dialogue, and co-creation between human author and the Universe's looming blank page, all toward the hope that there is something useful to be learned from the writing that results.

…

After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd,)

After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd their work,

After the noble inventors—after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,

Finally shall come the Poet, worthy that name;

The true Son of God shall come, singing his songs.

Then, not your deeds only, O voyagers, O scientists and inventors, shall be justified,

All these hearts, as of fretted children, shall be sooth'd,

All affection shall be fully responded to—the secret shall be told;

All these separations and gaps shall be taken up, and hook'd and link'd together;

The whole Earth—this cold, impassive, voiceless Earth, shall be completely justified;

Trinitas divine shall be gloriously accomplish'd and compacted by the Son of God, the poet,

(He shall indeed pass the straits and conquer the mountains,

He shall double the Cape of Good Hope to some purpose;)

Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more

The true son of God shall absolutely fuse them.…

Walt Whitman, from "A Passage to India" (emphasis mine)

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