

“The Garb of Fiction”: Edgar Allan Poe’s Notes for
*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of
 Nantucket* (1838)

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Abstract

In his elusive and eccentric 1838 novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, Edgar Allan Poe presents a sensation first-person account of his fictional title-character’s experiences of cannibalism, mutiny and shipwreck as a stowaway on the South Seas. He adds a series of footnotes and an extensive endnote that point out Pym’s factual errors and lack of documentary evidence. In the “Preliminary Notice at the beginning of the novel, Poe has the fictional character Pym admit that the real-life Poe is the author of the earlier sections, even claiming that Poe had them serialized in the periodical *The Southern Literary Messenger* “under the garb of fiction”.¹

In this article, I argue that, in spite of their ostensibly marginal position, the notes Poe creates for *Pym* help us better to understand Poe’s play with fact and fiction throughout his writing. Poe uses these annotations to achieve an effect of ludic anticlimax, in which the flaws in his plot and characterization accrete so as to disintegrate the narrative the moment before its expected culmination. Poe thereby exploits the footnote’s capacity to bring exuberant reverie into collision with plain information, and to traverse the boundary between fact and fiction, ripping away “the garb of fiction” to reveal the intricacy of his fabrication.

In his short 1844 essay “Marginalia”, Edgar Allan Poe described the personal delight he took in writing marginal comments in the books he acquired, announcing that

IN getting my books, I have been always solicitous of an ample margin...for the facility it affords me of penciling suggested thoughts, agreements and differences of opinion, or brief critical comments in general. Where what I have to note is too much to be included within the narrow limits of a margin, I commit it to a slip of paper, and deposit it between the leaves; taking care to secure it by an imperceptible portion of gum tragacanth paste.

Here Poe presents the margins as a location of peculiar freedom, providing the inscriber with the liberty to experiment with ideas without fully formulating them and to sketch out possible critical positions without committing to them. Poe claims to have been so

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¹ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, Richard Kopley ed. (London: Penguin, 1999) p. 5.

engrossed in the task of inscribing marginalia that he went to the trouble of sticking an additional page into the book itself in order that he might continue an annotation. For Poe, the private status of marginal notes encourages creative risk-taking. He states: “[i]n the *marginalia*...we talk only to ourselves; we therefore talk freshly—boldly—originally—with *abandonnement*.”² Here, according to Poe, the act of suspending our attention from the text in front of us and jotting down our responses allows us to depart from our customary patterns of thought and glimpse new ideas. He affirms that the margin of the text fulfills an essential role in his literary practice, as a site to derive original concepts through a creative exploration of earlier writings.

Strikingly, however, Poe’s description of himself personalizing successive volumes with his own critical commentary is at odds with his actual habits. According to the editor Burton R. Pollin, Poe’s account of “annotating his own collection of books...was largely mythical”:

Poe himself was not an academician, with large libraries at hand or numerous book-laden shelves along the walls of his abode and a population of stimulating colleagues nearby...Poe probably did retain copies of Isaac D’Israeli’s *Curiosities of Literature*, Jacob Biefeld’s *First Elements of Universal Erudition*, and a few more such compendia, apt for quotation and expansion of their nuggets of learning.³

As Pollin suggests, Poe’s real circumstances—as a magazine writer for the burgeoning but precarious American literary market, reliant on a handful of mass-market literary essays and guides to rhetoric—contradicts his self-representation as an aristocratic-style gentleman scholar-writer. Placed in this context, Poe’s description of the margins as a site of “*abandonnement*” is especially telling. Poe presents the margins as a site of self-discovery via self-abnegation, enabling the writer to express themselves with greater sincerity, free from inhibition, by surrendering themselves to the influence of another text. Yet, in the very act of affirming the value of open and honest introspection, Poe is engaged in a calculated and disingenuous performance. This is exacerbated by Poe’s lingering switch to French, when the English cognate would have been sufficient to carry his literal meaning, thereby further exemplifying his delight in camouflaging while appearing to clarify. With the comments in the essay, then, Poe places the margins at the centre of his complex game of deceiving via apparent delineation.

Poe was a frequent annotator of his own writings across his literary career: from the extensive notes he created for his peculiar 1829 Oriental epic poem “Al-Aaraaf” to the brief comment appended to his 1845 “The Facts of M. Valdemar’s Case”. In this article, I argue that notes Poe creates for his eccentric 1838 novel, *The Narrative of*

² Edgar Allan Poe, “Marginalia [Part I]”, *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (November 1844) 15 p. 484–94, p. 484.

³ Burton R. Pollin, “Poe’s Life Reflected through the Sources of *Pym*”, Richard Kopley (ed.) *Poe’s Pym: Critical Explorations* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992) 95–103, 97, 96, 97.

Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket are a similar example of his deployment of annotation as a site of fabrication. Poe presents an astounding and bizarre first-person account of title character and narrator Arthur Pym. Pym describes stowing away aboard the whaling ship the *Grampus* with the aid of his friend Augustus, experiencing mutiny, cannibalism and shipwreck, before evading ambush by Antarctic island people and encountering the vision of a mysterious shrouded white figure. Poe adds a series of annotations—in keeping with the conventions of the nautical adventures he appears to emulate. However, rather than reassure the reader of the narrative’s credibility, in these paratexts Poe undermines it further, drawing attention to Pym’s factual errors and lack of convincing documentary evidence. I will begin by sketching the notes’ status within Poe’s writing process. I then examine briefly some of the main ways in which paratexts were deployed in the travel accounts and sea stories that Poe draws upon, before comparing these with the self-undermining gestures in which Poe engages in his paratexts and the notes specifically. I will then discuss how examining Poe’s annotation for *Pym* enables us to reconsider his use of factual materials in his fictions. As I demonstrate, in spite of their marginal position, the notes Poe creates for *Pym* help us better to understand Poe’s play with fact and fiction in his writing more widely.

“THE GARB OF FICTION”: *PYM AND POE’S NOTES*

The textual fragmentation achieved in Poe’s footnotes reflects that *Pym* is an amalgamation of writings he created at separate times. Poe began writing the novel in late 1836 and had completed chapters one, two, three and the first few paragraphs of chapter four before resigning as editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger* on January 3 1837. The initial three chapters were nonetheless first published in two installments in the *Messenger* in January and February 1837. Poe only returned to the story in April of the same year, completing the novel in five bursts of frantic writing before publishing a full version in July 1838 with Harper and Brothers. The brief hiatus between Poe’s composition of the first few chapters and his writing of the later parts may in part explain the novel’s episodic character and the contrast between the comparatively more conventional opening section and the later fantastical incidents of famine, shipwreck and cannibalism. Poe’s intermittent compositional activity might also help account for the puzzling abrupt digressions, in which he switches from the story to discourse upon ship stowage methods, the nautical mauver of “lying to”, the physical appearance of the freshwater tortoise, the Antarctic Kerguelen or Desolation Islands, and the method of cooking the sea cucumber *bêche-de-mer*. As James M. Hutchinson describes, “[t]he reader moves from scenes of ‘unspeakable horror’ to passages that sound like a seed catalog”⁴. Poe’s blending of fact and fiction in his footnotes therefore embody the novel’s convoluted, half-made condition.

⁴ Information from: James M. Hutchisson, “Poe, Hoaxing, and the “Digressions” in *Arthur Gordon Pym*” *CEA Critic*, Vol. 58 No. 2 (winter 1996) pp. 24–34, p. 28. Information in paragraph also from this source.

Pym's misshapen, tangled status is exacerbated by Poe's extensive use of a variety of different sources: popular and classic novels Poe read while reviewing for the *Southern Literary Messenger*, books of travel, discovery and speculation and works of Biblical prophecy. According to Poe's editor Burton R. Pollin, almost one half of *Pym* is based on or copied from other writings: "[o]f its two hundred pages, perhaps one-fifth represents texts either copied or loosely or closely paraphrased from other writings, while perhaps one-third to one-quarter of its three hundred and twenty-eight paragraphs show distinct traces of his readings".⁵ The extent to which specific passages of *Pym* are either direct or indirect imitations of sections of writing to be found elsewhere also aids us in recognizing the novel's digressive and confused status. Poe patches the work together from specially-selected segments that he adapted or even duplicated. Moreover, the heterogeneous range of sources he appropriates imply that he draws on whatever captures his interest and is close to hand. What might appear the outlandish fancies of Poe's visionary imagination are in fact the result of his ruthlessly underhanded and meticulous yet miscellaneous appropriation of other writings.

In particular, Poe draws heavily on a wide range of seafaring writings, including William Falcolner's epic 1762 verse account of real-life disaster *The Shipwreck*; R. Thomas's hair-raising 1832 collection of shipwreck narratives *An Authentic Account of the Most Remarkable Events*; the sea-captain and trader Benjamin Morrell's 1832 *A Narrative of Four Voyages*; and Washington Irving's bestselling 1836 account of Pacific Northwest fur trading, *Astoria*. Such works made extensive use of paratexts. For instance, in *A Narrative*, Morell presents an "Advertisement" signed "The Author. New York, December, 1832",⁶ an "Introduction, Comprising a brief sketch of the Author's Early Life", and notes citing sources and providing additional geographical observations and tables of statistical information. Likewise, in *Astoria*, Irving provides a lengthy "Introduction" explaining the work's genesis, numerous annotations that quote intertexts, give explanations, and provide definitions of technical or local vocabulary, as well as an extensive appendix that supplies quasi-legal evidence of *Astoria*'s enterprises. And, among scholars of eighteenth-century literature, *The Shipwreck* is well known for the extensive notes that William Falcolner provides, explaining technical sea language.

By creating comprehensive paratexts, such authors reveal their anxiety to assure audiences of their truthfulness and their status as eyewitnesses: Falcolner, for instance, subtitles *The Shipwreck* "By a Sailor".⁷ At this time, the writers of nautical works compressed distance, by placing knowledge of far-flung localities in the hands of Anglophone readers. Such writers presented astonishing tales of human endurance in far-away places about which records were scarce and facts difficult to check. And often the observational information recorded and presented by them in such paratexts was used by later sailors as guides for navigation. Yet the popularity of such sensational stories gave

⁵ Burton R. Pollin, "Poe's Life Reflected through the Sources of *Pym*", Kopley, p. 95.

⁶ Morrell, *A Narrative*, p. 1.

⁷ William Falcolner, *The Shipwreck: "By a Sailor"* (London, 1762).

these writers an obvious financial motivation to fabricate. By reproducing the devices nautical writers used to assure readers of their accuracy, Poe plays with this tension. As I will discuss in more detail later, I have not been able to find an example of a reader who actually believed that the bizarre events in the novel were real, or that Poe believed that he would fool anyone. Instead, as I will show, Poe seeks to prick the pomposity of such conventions, casting the reader as an accomplice in a wry deconstruction.

In keeping with this, at first glance, by providing five footnotes and a lengthy endnote, as well as a “Preface”, Poe might appear to supply an avowal of *Pym’s* accuracy. However, if we look closer, we can see that, on the contrary, Poe deploys his paratexts to undermine the credibility of his cock-and-bull story. For instance, the “Preface” appeared initially when the novel was published for the first time in its entirety as an independent volume. It has the apparent main purpose of explaining why earlier passages of Arthur Pym’s supposedly true-life tale were printed in the “fiction” section of the journal Poe himself edited, the *Southern Literary Messenger*, with Poe named as their author. Yet, rather than explain or downplay the prior publication of these sections as fiction, the novel’s narrator and main protagonist Pym announces and underlines it, notifying the reader that “[t]wo numbers of the pretended fiction appeared, consequently, in the *Messenger* for January and February (1837), and...the name of Mr. Poe was affixed to the articles in the table of contents of the magazine”. Although Pym asserts “it will be unnecessary to point out where his [i.e. Poe’s] portion ends and my own commences”, there is no obvious stylistic difference between these sections and other parts of the novel. Pym claims these earlier sections were presented “*under the garb of fiction*”.⁸ Here Poe may be providing an alibi for this section’s republication and asserting—albeit unconvincingly—the authenticity of his outlandish sea story, perhaps to boost sales. But his turn of phrase is especially revealing, presenting truth and fiction as different costumes to be worn to the literary market-place, not as fundamental aspects of a literary work’s identity. According to Hutchinson, “Poe...blurs the distinction between reality and illusion in the preface”.⁹ In fact, Poe goes further, undercutting his elaborate fantasy by encouraging readers to view all claims of authenticity and veracity with scepticism.

Indeed, the fictional Pym compounds the doubts provoked by the real-life author Poe’s acknowledged creation of several sections by stressing that the significant time-lag between the events of the narrative and the work’s composition has encouraged him to embellish and exaggerate, claiming that “I feared I should not be able to write, from mere memory, a statement so minute and connected as to have the appearance of that truth it would really possess, barring only the natural and unavoidable exaggeration to which all of us are prone when detailing events which have had powerful influence on the imaginative faculties” (3). Far from reassure the reader of the novel’s reliability, Pym’s preoccupation with the “appearance” rather than the reality of the truth and

⁸ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, Richard Kopley ed. (London: Penguin, 1999) p. 4, p. 5, p. 5. All references to this text hereafter simply provide page numbers in parenthesis after the quote.

⁹ Hutchisson, “Poe, Hoaxing, and the “Digressions””, p. 27.

his confession to “natural...exaggeration” establish him as an unreliable narrator. Pym emphasizes that the fanatical nature of events and his inability to provide supporting evidence for them invite doubt, observing “the incidents to be narrated were of a nature so positively marvelous, that, unsupported as my assertions must necessarily be... I could only hope for belief among my family, and...my friends” (3). Elsewhere in the “Preface”, however, Pym contradicts this position, asserting his belief that “the facts of my narrative would prove of such a nature as to carry with them sufficient evidence of their own authenticity” (4). Conventionally, the role of a “Preface” in a nautical narrative is to establish the credentials of the author and to indicate to a reader how to read and receive the rest of the text. In contrast, Poe’s “Preface” for *Pym* encourages the reader to adopt an ironic stance towards the narrative—as what the editor terms “an impudent and ingenious fiction” (3).

Poe uses the notes to intensify contradictions established within the main text and its other paratexts. In one episode in the novel, Pym and his crewmates search but fail to find the existence of the phantom islands the Auroras. Poe prints a footnote in which he confirms that Captain Guy’s decision to travel to latitude fifty-three degrees south is based on sound precedent:

Among the vessels which at various times have professed to meet with the Auroras may be mentioned the ship San Miguel, in 1769; the ship Aurora, in 1774; the brig Pearl, in 1779; and the ship Dolores, in 1790. They all agree in giving the mean latitude fifty-three degrees south. (148)

Subsequently in the centred text, Pym reports that:

we found ourselves...very nearly upon the spot indicated as the situation of the most southern of the group. Not perceiving any sign of land...we were thoroughly satisfied that, whatever islands might have existed in this vicinity at any former period, no vestige of them remained at the present. (148-9)

Unlike the other fantastical elements of Pym’s adventures, the existence of the Auroras was disproven by science by the time Poe was writing.¹⁰ By citing accurately those sources that had falsely asserted the existence of the islands, Poe illustrates that such writings are open to question and therefore places in doubt the authority of the practice of citing sources to demonstrate the reliability of printed sources. Such annotations suggest that Pym’s deconstructive annotations are not simply playful, but articulate a broader attempt to cast doubt on the capacity of print culture to present and circulate reliable knowledge.

With other notes, Poe jumbles up the narrative, so as to imply incompetent

¹⁰ See “Aurora Islands”, Edward Brooke-Hitching, *The Phantom Atlas: The Greatest Myths, Lies and Blunders on Maps* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2018) pp. 30–3.

organization. Alongside his description of the lack of food on Tsalal on the fifteenth of February—“the nuts were growing scarce; our situation, therefore, could hardly be more lamentable” (198-9) —Poe inserts a footnote in which he asserts “[t]his day was rendered more remarkable by our observing in the south several huge wreaths of the grayish vapour I have before spoken of” (199). Such comments leave the reader to wonder why, if the gray vapour were so remarkable, it was not included among the more prosaic details presented in the main text. In fact, Pym makes no reference to such vapour before the footnote: his description begins a few pages later, in the entry for the sixth of March. Likewise, when Pym refers to the presence of “oil-casks” on board the ship the *Grampus*, Poe interrupts with a footnote that underscores an apparent error: “*Whaling vessels are usually fitted with iron oil-tanks—why the *Grampus* was not I have never been able to ascertain” (66). The weakness of Pym’s excuse serves to underline rather than ameliorate his possible mistake. In such examples, far from using his notes to assert his authority, Poe deploys them to highlight the haphazard disorganization of his text.

On further occasions, Poe even has his note directly contradict the text. Beside the entry for “March 1*”, Pym comments:

For obvious reasons I cannot pretend to strict accuracy in these dates. They are given principally with a view to perspicuity of narration, and as set down in my pencil memoranda. (214)

In a gesture typical for the author, here Poe amplifies Pym’s carelessness and vagueness at the very moment that the character affirms his efforts to relate information in an exacting and intelligible fashion. Poe takes this direct contradiction to greater lengths in a note he attaches to Pym’s reference to “[t]his morning” in which he claims “[t]he terms morning and evening, which I have made use of to avoid confusion in my narrative, as far as possible, must not, of course, be taken in their ordinary sense” (162). Far from prevent disorientation, such comments add to it. Pym appears to resolve this initial vagueness by going on to explain that he provided such details in spite of the fact that “we had had no night at all, the daylight being continual” (162). However, he then undermines himself once again by stating that “I cannot, in the first portion of what is here written, pretend to strict accuracy in respect of dates, or latitudes and longitudes, having kept no regular journal” (162). With Pym’s dissimulation, Poe encourages the reader to instead view textual conventions used to assert verisimilitude as drapery that can be discarded at will.

At the same time as breaking apart the fictive illusion, Poe’s notes expose his fascination with what the extreme situations related in nautical adventures can show us about human behavior and psychology. For instance, Pym reports that when he and his fellow sailor Dirk Peters first spotted the ship that ultimately would rescue them, the *Jane Grey*, they became “apprehensive that she meant to leave us to perish as we were”. When Pym asserts that this “act of fiendish barbarity” has “been repeatedly perpetrated at sea”, Poe adds a long footnote confirming to the reader that “[t]he case of the brig

Polly, of Boston, is one so much in point” (133). So intrigued is Poe by this episode that he retells it in full, italicizing so as to draw attention to the fact that the historic crew of this real ship had been at sea “one hundred and ninety-one days”, they “drifted above two thousand miles” and “were passed by more than a dozen sail” of which each “stifled the dictates of compassion, hoisted sail, and cruelly abandoned them to their fate”. Here Poe is using his annotation to accentuate the reader’s dismay at the disquieting events he presents in his frightful narrative, undermining the reader’s faith not just in the narrative but in human nature itself. Importantly, if we return to the “Preface” we can see that Pym describes his own habit of “exaggeration” as a response to “events which have had powerful influence on the imaginative faculties” (3). With his destabilizing paratexts, Poe creates a confusion and doubt in the reader’s mind at the same time as affirming a deeply cynical view of human motivation.

The readerly skepticism encouraged by the “Preface” and the notes are only compounded by the “Endnote” in which an anonymous editor-figure explains that “the few remaining chapters” that Pym was supposed to have written were “irrecoverably lost through the accident by which he perished himself” (219). Rather than seek to minimize the damage such an omission might make to the novel’s credibility and integrity, this editor actively exacerbates it, remarking that “they contained matter relative to the Pole itself...and as, too, the statements of the author in relation to these regions may shortly be verified or contradicted by means of the governmental expedition now preparing for the Southern Ocean.” By observing that the missing section could have been compared with the information currently being collected by the United States Exploring Expedition that was at that time surveying areas of the Pacific between 1838 and 1842, the writer of the endnote implies that they were deleted on purpose so as to avoid exposure. The editor even states that the narrative was so implausible that Poe himself refused to complete it: “[t]he gentleman whose name is mentioned in the preface...has declined the task—this for satisfactory reasons connected with the general inaccuracy of the details afforded him, and his disbelief in the entire truth of the latter portions of the narration” (219). While the endnote purports to provide an explanation of the missing passages of the narrative, Poe uses it to create additional narrative holes. Far from utilize his notes to consolidate his authorial interpretative control over the volume, Poe affects to disavow it.

POE’S BATHETIC SUBLIME: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NOTES

Readers of the time reacted to the ironic games exemplified by Poe’s notes with anger rather than amusement. An anonymous reviewer in the *New-York Mirror* lauded Poe’s “fine mastery over language, and powers of description rarely excelled” yet also complained that “the gross improbabilities and preternatural adventures through which his hero passes, soon destroy the interest of the reader, and revolt the imagination”.¹¹

¹¹ Unsigned review in the *New-York Mirror*, 11 August 1838, 16, 55 91-2. Reprinted: Ian M.Walker, *Edgar Allan Poe: The Critical Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1986, reprinted 1997) p. 91-2.

An anonymous writer in the *New York Review* observed how Poe had imitated some of the features of non-fictional sea-writing, claiming “an attempt is made, by... minuteness of nautical descriptions, and circumstantiality of narration, to throw over it that air of reality which constitutes the charm of *Robinson Crusoe*”. The same critic nonetheless grumbled that Poe’s novel had “none of the agreeable interest” of *Crusoe*, describing *Pym* as “not only destitute of all *vraisemblance*, but...purely perplexing and vexatious”.¹² A reviewer in the *London Metropolitan Magazine* went further in claiming Poe had insulted his reader’s intelligence by attempting to make his fiction appear factual: “[a]s a romance, some portions of it are sufficiently amusing and exciting; but, when palmed upon the public as a true thing, it cannot appear in any other light than that of a bungling business—an impudent attempt at imposing on the credulity of the ignorant”.¹³ In like manner, an 1850 reader was still more direct, writing in their copy of the novel:

I Don’t believe A damned word of this yarn do you Sir [*sic.*].¹⁴

The *Monthly Review* went so far as to claim Poe undermined any moral or civic good the novel might do by allowing his imagination to run riot, claiming that the novel’s “extravagances, and mere attempt, as it would seem, at fancying next to miraculous things, rather than the inculcation of any valuable principles or refinement, put it out of the list of those fictions which are to be recommended as models or for general perusal”.¹⁵ For Poe’s aggravated reviewers, Poe’s use of the techniques and methods commonly deployed in non-fictional writing to accommodate the reader to his blatant fantasy shattered any veneer of veracity, rendering the author morally suspect.

In a peculiar but memorable passage of his 1838 review, the playwright and critic William Burton even likened the experience of reviewing the novel to that of an Indian fighter chasing a soldier loyal to the British crown. Burton writes:

An Indian warrior pursuing a flying tory, seized his foe by the tail of his peruke [or wig], and drew his scalping knife for the purpose of consummating his victory, but the artificial head-covering of the British soldier came off in the struggle, and the bald-headed owner ran away unhurt, leaving the surprised Indian in possession of the easily acquired trophy. After gazing at the singular and apparently unnatural formation, he dashed it to the ground in disdain, and quietly exclaimed “A d—d lie!” We find ourselves in the same predicament with the volume before us.¹⁶

¹² Unsigned notice in the *New York Review*, 3 October 1838, 489 in Walker, p. 98.

¹³ Review of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, *London Metropolitan Magazine* (September 1838) Walker, p. 81.

¹⁴ University of Texas, Austin, copy quoted Richard Kopley, “Introduction”, Poe, *Pym*, ix–xxix, p. xviii.

¹⁵ Anonymous, “Novels of the Month”, *Monthly Review*, 2 (October 1838) p. 567.

¹⁶ William Evans Burton, [Review of Poe’s *Narrative of A. G. Pym*], *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine*, Sept. 1838, 3. Reprinted Walker, p. 210–1.

Although this passage has an obvious ideological and political complexity, for the purposes of this article I want to focus on how Burdon presents this unusual and suggestive analogy so as to communicate his feeling of being cheated by the novel. By presenting himself as a fierce Indian on the hunt, Burdon both acknowledges that he is writing a hatchet-job at the same time as defending this passionate response as the product of authentic feeling. He contrasts the spontaneity and sincerity of his critical mission with the untrustworthy literary sophistication displayed by Poe. With this image, Burdon casts Poe's metatextual trickery as an evasion of authorial responsibility.

In contrast to the disappointment and frustration with which readers of the time responded to the novel, more recent critics have celebrated Poe's self-undermining paratexts. So, for instance, while discussing the confusion caused by passages being published elsewhere as fiction written by Poe, Ronald Harvey notes: "rather than ignore this potential confusion, or handle it in some inconspicuous way, Poe exploits it, drawing attention to the relationship by accumulating layer upon layer of irony".¹⁷ For such critics, Pym's paratexts provide the appropriate frame for what Douglas Robinson dubs, in a frequently-quoted formation, "the interpreter's dream text".¹⁸ However, as I will explain in more detail in the conclusion, investigating the notes demonstrates that Poe is not so much seeking to liberate the reader to fashion their own vision of the work as to fraudulently offer interpretative possibilities before bringing his elaborative imaginative edifice to an abrupt and disconcerting close.

By fashioning notes and other paratexts that subvert the reader's trust in the narrative, Poe could be said to be pointing up and parodying the extent to which paratexts in nautical literature have the opposite to their declared effect, instead drawing attention to the incompleteness of the author's information. For instance, in his "Advertisement" for *A Narrative of Four Voyages*, Benjamin Morrell apologizes for his use of information garnered from additional sources, explaining that "[I] touched at many places at which I could not remain long enough to enable me to make surveys, determine soundings, or collect materials for accurate description; yet without these and general sailing directions, the work, as a while, would have been imperfect".¹⁹ By confessing to his lack of diligence in keeping records of his adventures, Morrell encourages disbelief. Famously, the explorer Jeremiah Reynolds asserted that Morrell's account contained "more poetry than truth". Moreover, Morrell's claims that he found the remote Bouvet Islands and that he was the first American sea-captain to penetrate the Antarctic Circle have been accused of being plagiarisms of British explorer James Wedell's 1825 *A Voyage Towards the South Pole*. Likewise, in his "Introduction". Irving discloses the inadequacy of his sources, confessing that "as the journals, on which I chiefly depended... were

¹⁷ Ronald C. Harvey, *The Critical History of Edgar Allan Poe's The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym: "A Dialogue with Unreason"* (London and New York: Routledge, first published 1998, reissued 2016) p. 6.

¹⁸ Douglas Robinson, "Reading Poe's Novel: A Speculative Review of Pym Criticism, 1950-80" *Poe Studies*, 15, December 1982, p. 47-52. p. 52.

¹⁹ Benjamin Morrell, *A Narrative of Four Voyages, to the South Sea, North and South Pacific Ocean, Chinese Sea, Ethiopic and Southern Atlantic Ocean, Indian and Antarctic Ocean*. (New York: J. and J. Harper 1832) p. i.

often meagre in their details...I have, therefore, availed myself occasionally of collateral lights supplied by the published journals of other travelers". Irving even asserts that the coherence he achieved made *Astoria* closer to a novel than a history: "the work...actually possesses much of that unity so much sought after in works of fiction".²⁰ By using his annotation to attenuate his sailor narrator's authority, Poe might be regarded as casting a mocking eye on nautical author's professions of veracity, underlining and undermining their use of paratexts to lend a bogus authority to their unbelievable claims.

However, the idea that Poe might have viewed the efforts with which his sources sought to assert their truthfulness with satirical detachment is challenged by Poe's warm 1837 review of Irving's *Astoria*, in which he asserts that "[t]he work has been accomplished in a masterly manner — modesty of the title affording no indication of the fullness, comprehensiveness, and beauty, with which a long and entangled series of detail, collected, necessarily, from a mass of vague and imperfect data, has been wrought into completeness and unity".²¹ While the nineteenth-century readers that form Poe's hostile critics may have smarted at the idea that factual narratives could be fabrications of some kind, such comments show that Poe was impressed by how a coherent narrative could be established from a complex composite of materials. Indeed, throughout his correspondence and critical writing, Poe reveals a fascination with how literary techniques can be deployed to establish a sense of realism. For instance, Poe praised Daniel Defoe for creating in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) a first-person voice so convincing that readers believed they were losing themselves in the mind of a real person — an effect he lauded as "the potent magic of verisimilitude".²² Here Poe rejects the distinction between the real and the imagined, revealing his relish for how gifted writers can deploy literary technique as a quasi-supernatural power to convince readers to believe in an imaginary scenario. Yet Poe was hardly a realist himself, famously claiming that his literary talent lay in his ability to amplify literary effects beyond convention: "the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque; the fearful coloured into the horrible: the witty exaggerated into the burlesque: the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical".²³ Indeed, in the review of *Astoria*, Poe praises Irving's relation of "the thrilling details of this catastrophe",²⁴ in particular the attack on the merchant ship the *Tonquin* by members of the *Tla-o-qui-aht* tribe that led to the destruction of the ship and the death of all but four members of the crew. In his review of *Astoria* and his paratexts for *Pym*, Poe displays his interest in how such narratives can excite feelings of terror and exhilaration in readers as well as demonstrating a sophisticated awareness of the

²⁰ Washington Irving, *Astoria, or Anecdotes of an Enterprise Beyond the Rocky Mountains* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea and Blanchard, 1836) two Vols., Vol. I, p. 5. and 6.

²¹ Edgar Allan Poe, "Review of *Astoria*", *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Redfield, 1856) 4: 4: 420–447, p. 421-2.

²² Edgar Allan Poe, *Marginalia (Part IV): The Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, E. C. Stedman and G. E. Woodberry (eds.) (New York: Stone and Kimball, 1895) vol. VII, pp. 300–326, p. 310.

²³ Edgar Allan Poe, "To Thomas White" (April 30, 1835) *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, John Ward Ostrom (ed.) (London: Gordian Press, 1966) 1: 57–8.

²⁴ Poe, "Review of *Astoria*", p. 431.

constructed nature of narrative authority.

In addition, Poe's sea sources do not simply furnish literary models for Poe to emulate or pastiche—they were the ingredients from which Poe created the novel. As I have mentioned, when deploying specialist terminology in *Pym*, Poe made frequent recourse to the notes William Falcolner provided in *The Shipwreck*. Similarly, many of the novel's central episodes were adaptations of incidents in these works. Poe used Irving's aforementioned account of the *Toquin* as the basis for his description of the destruction of the *Jane Grey*, and drew on the tale of "The Loss of the Peggy" in Thomas for his portrayal of the mutiny on board the *Grampus*. Moreover, significant sections of the novel comprise extended quotations, sometimes several paragraphs long, of Morrell's descriptions of ships, Galapagos tortoises and the "bouche de mer" or sea cucumber. Poe's redeploying, reworking and recycling parts of these works demonstrates that the novel's relationship with them is far more complex and entangled than that of an imitation or parody. Interestingly, in August 1836, six months before *Pym* was published, in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Poe published a series of intriguing extracts from literary works and short erudite observations purportedly copied from his commonplace book, entitled *Pinkadia*. In the "Introduction" Poe observed that such "piecemeal cullings" and "audacious pilferings" "if dexterously besprinkled over a proper surface of narrative, would be sufficient to make the fortunes of one or two hundred ordinary novelists".²⁵ In keeping with this declaration of his appetite for appropriation, Poe does not just replicate or ridicule earlier seafaring writings but rips apart and rearranges them. When we read Poe's comments it is important to remind ourselves that Poe was an editor as well as a creative writer. Poe's praise for Irving is the approval of a fellow editor for the skillful organization of pre-existing writings. Poe approaches his sea-faring sources not just as an author, seeking to analyse how they achieve their effects, but also as an editor, aiming to appropriate parts of them for his own purposes.

Poe seeks to achieve an effect of ludic anticlimax, in which the flaws in his plot and characterization accrete so as to disintegrate the narrative the moment before its expected culmination. In the very location that readers might expect factual verification, Poe provides dissimulation and outright falsehood. His notes for *Pym* reveal the novel to be a hoax not unlike the "Fiji mermaid": the sensational curiosity famously composed of the torso and head of a juvenile monkey sewn to the back half of a fish and displayed by P. T. Barnum in his *Barnum's American Museum* in New York in 1842. Like the oddity of fish scales and animal hair exhibited by Barnum, Poe sews together different texts to create an exuberant hybrid artefact. And like Barnum's bizarre fake, the response *Pym* excites is not so much belief as initial excitement swiftly followed by disillusioned frustration. Just as Poe's novel exists in an ironic and undermining juxtaposition to the sea story, so the mermaid is a counterfeit of the museum object. As hoaxes, both artefacts do not so much affirm the impossible as place the structures by which modern

²⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, "Pinkadia", *Southern Literary Messenger*, Vol. II, No. IX, August 1836, p. 573–582, p. 573.

societies construct an image of reality in doubt by mimicking and subverting real knowledge. Poe's annotations for *Pym* show him to pursue a bathetic sublime, in which the reader's intellectual elevation is abruptly broken off by a precipitous collapse into the ridiculous. Poe exploits the footnote's capacity to bring exuberant reverie into collision with plain information, and to traverse the boundary between fact and fiction, ripping away "the garb of fiction" to reveal the intricacy of his fabrication.

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