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THE PREFACE AS A KEY TO THE SATIRE IN PYM

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Probably no one would have been more happily surprised by the recent scholarly interest in The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym than Edgar Allan Poe himself, whose only novel went practically unnoticed from its publication in 1838 until the middle of the twentieth century. Two essays seem most responsible for initiating the current reexamination of this flawed but fascinating tale: W. H. Auden’s introduction to the Rinehart edition and Patrick F. Quinn’s suggestive “Poe’s Imaginary Journey.” Formerly regarded as a mere curiosity in the Poe canon, Pym has, in the past two decades, taken its place as one of the central texts in any comprehensive discussion of his fiction.

Much of the critical debate concerning the novel has to do with the thematic significance of Pym’s odyssey. Quinn and Edward Davidson have both advanced the theory that the meaning of the narrative is linked to the idea of “deception” and the appearance-reality motif.2 Harry Levin has drawn attention to the nightmarish quality of Pym’s adventure,3 while Sidney Kaplan has discovered in the black-white dialectic of the story an allegory of racial supremacy.4 Yet such readings of the novel have, in the past ten years, met with disagreement from critics urging a recognition of the book’s palpable lack of continuity.

Arguing that Pym actually contains two separate stories yoked together by authorial violence, L. Moffitt Cecil has observed that most of the critical problems surrounding the novel “have resulted from the repeated attempts to read the two stories as one.”5 A meticulous examination of textual evidence has convinced J. V. Ridgely and Iola S. Havestick that the tale is a patchwork of five different narratives, possessing “only a spurious unity.”6 The very notion of a thematic interpretation of Pym has been challenged by Sidney P. Moss,7 whose essay dwells on the

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same errors and inconsistencies that Ridgely and Haverstick found in the novel.

In an attempt to reconcile the conflicting critical viewpoints that have emerged, Evelyn J. Hinz has lately suggested that the apparently incompatible elements in *Pym*—“seriousness and humor, unity and discontinuity, verisimilitude and fantasy”—are the result of a deliberate authorial strategy. She characterizes the work as a “Menippean satire” and claims that the disjointed narrative style is consistent with the “limited consciousness” of the narrator-hero. Though the idea of *Pym* as a hoax has long been entertained, the satirical element seems heretofore to have escaped the notice of many readers. However, both types of writing do share a similar intention: to play on the folly of a particular group of readers.

The circumstances surrounding the composition of Poe’s novel help to explain why he might have wished to lash out with the potent weapon of satire. When James Kirke Paulding, Poe’s intermediary with Harper Brothers, sent word in March, 1836, that the firm had declined to publish a projected volume of tales, he advised Poe to “apply his fine humor, and extensive acquirements to more familiar subjects of satire.” In effect, Poe was being told to conform his fiction to the palate of popular literary taste; Harpers said as much in a letter three months later, informing the self-styled literary patrician that his works were “too learned and mystical” and that “the multitude” preferred a “single and connected story” of book length. Poe thus found himself obliged to abandon plans for the volume of tales and turn his energies to the fabrication of a long narrative which would please the American reading public—the same public whose fondness for “stupid” books he had decried in a review only two months prior to the letter from Harpers.

If Ridgely and Haverstick are correct in their evaluation of the composition history of *Pym*, almost eighteen months were spent piecing together various fragments of narration to fulfill the demands of the publisher. At some point in this period, Poe decided to conceal his authorship behind the persona of Arthur Gordon Pym, despite the fact that two installments of the story had already appeared under his name in *The Southern Literary Messenger* (January and February, 1837). Perhaps Poe was merely attempting to disown a work he already recognized as hopelessly inept; however, the concerted effort in *Pym* to achieve verisimilitude suggests that Poe hoped to dupe “the multitude” by passing off a deliberately gruesome and extravagant tale as a factual account of nautical adventure. He could thereby accomplish three things: satisfy the requirements of Harper Brothers, capitalize on the bad taste of the reading public, and salvage his artistic self-respect by turning the whole unfortunate episode into a kind of esoteric joke.
A key to Poe’s actual intentions in writing Pym seems to reside in the deftly ironic Preface which introduces the work. A careful examination of the Preface shows it to be a surprisingly complex statement, functioning on several levels simultaneously. On the most basic, literal level, it is an invitation to belief; Arthur Gordon Pym, the presumed author, solicits a favorable reception for the account which follows. Evincing a disarming sincerity, he expresses concern for creating “the appearance of that truth” inherent in his experience. He defends his “veracity,” though he humbly confesses a “distrust” of his own “abilities as a writer.” His comments are, on the surface at least, exactly what we might have expected from a voyager eager to interest the reader in his story.

On another level, the Preface is, of course, pure hoax; Pym’s glib testimony is Poe’s artful attempt to deceive the reader. Pym himself is a narratorial mask assumed for the purpose of deception, and the reference to the “several gentlemen in Richmond, Va.” who have encouraged him is an outright invention. Yet by mentioning Richmond, The Messenger, and its publisher, Thomas W. White, Poe connects Pym with the world of flesh-and-blood people. Clearly, Poe is trying to explain away the authorship of the two magazine installments of the narrative, but he manages at the same time to impart a definite plausibility to the comments of A. G. Pym by combining seemingly factual details with exactly the right tone of diffident equanimity.

Like the story it introduces, the Preface flows in two directions at once; what purports to be truth leads away from truth. Pym’s “exposé” exposes nothing; rather it conceals the real story behind the writing of the work. As all great hoaxers must be, Poe is a master of the art of lying. Making himself in a sense one of the characters in his fiction, he speaks in the Preface of the curiously helpful “Mr. Poe,” Pym’s literary advisor. Though he refrains from the blatant self-congratulation which would reveal his identity as the actual author, Poe does permit himself a modest compliment about “the difference in point of style” between his writing and that of Pym.

It is in this self-portraiture, however, that we perceive the most striking evidence of the satiric and ironic aspect of the Preface. The advice tendered by “Mr. Poe” to Pym is shot through with double entendre, and the object of the satire and irony seems to be the reading public, with its taste for vulgar adventure stories, of which Pym is in some respects a parody: “He strongly advised me, among others, to prepare at once a full account of what I had seen and undergone, and to trust to the shrewdness and common sense of the public—insisting, with great plausibility, that however roughly, as regards mere authorship, my book should be got up, its very uncouthness, if there were any, would give it all the better chance of being received as truth.” Only with tongue in cheek could Poe
have spoken of the "shrewdness and common sense of the public"—the very "multitude" whose collective ignorance he had already assailed. Such unrefined readers, he seems to imply, are likely to confuse "uncouthness" with truth itself.

Poe's backhanded slap at the reading public is but the most obvious manifestation of the ironic duplicity which informs the entire Preface. Approached without prior knowledge of the tale it introduces, the Preface seems an innocuous, even a pedestrian account of authorial aims; as one looks back on it from the fantastic final scenes, however, the irony of Pym's solemn regard for "veracity" and "authenticity" becomes apparent. We discover a second meaning in his remark about the "appearance" of truth, and Pym's fear that the story will be taken as "an impudent and ingenious fiction" becomes an ironic commentary on the real nature of the work. He speaks of the Messenger segments of Pym as "facts" presented "under the guise of fiction," when in truth the narrative itself is largely a reversal of that formula. Perhaps the crowning irony is his claim that the Messenger readers have refused to accept those segments as "fable"—an assertion which, while apparently demonstrating the "shrewdness" of the public, actually proves its gullibility.

In an important essay on Pym, Walter Bezanson has noted that "Poe enjoyed few things more than engaging the reader in a surface game of credibility." The devious game of credibility which is played in the narrative of Pym actually begins in the Preface, in which Poe, behind a rhetorical facade of honesty and simplicity, takes dead aim at his satirical target, the reading public. Satire, irony, and ingenious gamesmanship seem to have provided him with a means of expressing his disdain for the sort of "popular" novel which circumstances compelled him to write. Daniel Hoffman has recently commented:

For Poe, satire seems to display the follies of mankind—and the personal superiority of the Artist-Genius to the generality of fools. The satisfaction in Poe's satire seems personal, a testament of intellectual superiority, rather than, as is true of all the greater satirists of his or any age, the exposure by reason of the vices which passion (the humours of mankind) inflict on us so as to show men how to amend their ways.\(^15\)

In Pym, Poe has made his narrator into a kind of Young American Fool, whose susceptibility and naivété are matched only by the folly of the reader who pursues him unwarily into the polar seas. The culmination of Poe's tour de force, for which the Preface serves as the vital preparation, occurs in the Note appended to the tale by the apparent editor. Here it is observed that Poe, "the gentleman whose name
is mentioned in the preface," the writer who earlier "expressed the greatest interest . . . in regard to that portion of [the narrative] which related to the Antarctic Ocean," has suddenly announced "his disbelief in the entire truth of the latter portions of the narration." This must have seemed a marvellous stroke to the author, who, after leading his reader through the many cunning passages of his hoax to the moment of ultimate revelation in the milky vortex, literally abandons ship, claiming that he was not so stupid as to believe Pym's incredible tale. Poe appears determined to have the last laugh; having deceived the reader in the guise of A. G. Pym, he calmly throws off the mask and exposes the fraud he himself has perpetrated.

Unfortunately for Poe, the complicated though intriguing scheme which he had contrived for his novel failed, perhaps because of its very complexity. The last laugh did not belong to Poe, but to those readers who found Pym's story an absurdity. A few years later he lamely referred to the work as "a silly book," and so it had proved to be. Appropriately enough, the first known review of the work heaped its censure not upon Pym, the ostensible author, but upon Poe himself, for the advice he gave to Pym in the Preface: "Mr. Poe, if not the author of Pym's book, is at least responsible for its publication, for it is stated in the preface that Mr. Poe assured the author that the shrewdness and common sense of the public would give it a chance of being received as truth. We regret to find Mr. Poe's name in connexion with such a mass of ignorance and effrontery."

Thus the Preface, which Poe designed as an ironic statement of his real intention in writing *Pym*, became, ironically, a source of embarrassment and humiliation. He had originally set out to contrast his intellectual superiority against the presumed ignorance of his reading public, yet, in the end, it was Poe's own ignorance that was blasted by the Burton's reviewer. Rather than a clever satire of the popular novel of adventure, *Pym* was viewed as an affront to good taste and common sense. The scholarly revaluation of the novel in our own day has, to an extent, answered that early criticism by finding vital symbolic and thematic patterns in the work, but we have yet to consider fully the elements of satire and parody in *Pym*, suggested by the ironic Preface.

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NOTES

1 Auden, "Introduction," in *Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Prose and Poetry*, ed. W. H. Au-


10 Ibid., p. 251.

11 As late as September, 1836, Poe wrote to Harrison Hall, asking that he publish the "Tales of the Folio Club." This may well have been his last attempt to interest a publisher in the volume. See *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. John Ward Ostrom (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1948), I, 103-4.


13 *Works*, III, I. All further references to the text of the Preface are to pp. 1-3 of this volume of the Harrison edition.


16 *Letters*, I, 130.

17 *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine*, 3 (Sept. 1838), 211.