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## “FOR THE BRIGHT SIDE OF THE PAINTING I HAD A LIMITED SYMPATHY”: EMANCIPATION AND COUNTER-EMANCIPATION IN EDGAR ALLAN POE’S *THE NARRATIVE OF ARTHUR GORDON PYM*<sup>1</sup>

Some years before Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville published two masterpieces, *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick*, that wove their plots around the two most famous chromatic symbols of American literature, a red cloth and a white whale, Edgar Allan Poe had already extensively experimented with the language of colors in his only long romance, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838). What this sort of obsession of some of the most prominent 19<sup>th</sup>-century American male (and white) authors for the symbolic and narrative function of colors might mean has been of course the center of much critical attention, and the most obvious answer to the question has been that there is nothing extraordinary in a literature mirroring in its own configuration the unheard-of importance of color differences in the history of its country – white, red and black being not simply hues, in American culture, but marks of identification for the dominant, the dispossessed, and the brutally exploited. If Poe’s *Narrative* somehow anticipates Hawthorne and Melville’s stylistic techniques and moral preoccupations (from a very different perspective, needless to say), the extremely ambiguous interplay between the issues of freedom and imprisonment, and of the chromatic extremes of white and black (plus some stroke of red), that dominates his book<sup>2</sup> will also find, a quarter of a century later, a curious echo in a passage of one of Hawthorne’s last works, the equally ambiguous “Chiefly About War Matters,” published in 1862 – and when I say “ambiguous,” referring to Hawthorne’s attitude towards slavery and the predicament of African Americans, I am of course making an understatement. The passage is the famous reflection on the ominous historical circumstance of the *Mayflower* being the ship that brought to the coasts of North America both the Pilgrim Fathers and some years later one of the first “ship loads” of African slaves (the very first being that of a Dutch cargo, in 1619):

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<sup>2</sup> The inherent contradictions of the ideological dimension of the *Narrative* is refracted onto its narrative structure, described by Gianfranca Balestra as “un collage di generi popolari: la relazione di viaggio, il diario, il manoscritto ritrovato, la parodia e la satira” (“a collage of popular genres: travel narrative, diary, retrieved manuscript, parody and satire;” 1990, 42). Scott Peeples states more or less the same: “At once a mock nonfictional exploration narrative, adventure saga, bildungsroman, hoax, largely plagiarized travelogue, and spiritual allegory, *Pym* stands as one of the most elusive major texts of American literature” (1998, 55). The multilayered architecture of the story has been examined by Eco in his *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*. On the complex textuality of Poe’s romance, and on its blatant mistakes, see Rubeo 2000 and 2011. The faulty construction of the plot should in itself make the reader suspect that the *Narrative* is traversed by opposite ideological tensions never fully resolved, since Poe is famous for how he carefully builds up his stories – while on the level of pure literary style he has been the target of severe remarks by eminent colleagues like Margaret Fuller, Henry James and T.S. Eliot, or critics like Yvor Winters and Allen Tate (who nonetheless stressed that there are passages precisely in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* showing “the lucidity and intensity of Swift;” 1966, 241). See Zimmerman for a thorough investigation (and defense) of Poe’s style, and Harvey for a history of the critical response to *The Narrative*.



There is an historical circumstance, known to few, that connects the children of the Puritans with these Africans of Virginia in a very singular way. They are our brethren, as being lineal descendants from the Mayflower, the fated womb of which, in her first voyage, sent forth a brood of Pilgrims on Plymouth Rock, and, in a subsequent one, spawned slaves upon the Southern soil, – a monstrous birth, but with which we have an instinctive sense of kindred, and so are stirred by an irresistible impulse to attempt their rescue, even at the cost of blood and ruin. The character of our sacred ship, I fear, may suffer a little by this revelation; but we must let her white progeny offset her dark one, – and two such portents never sprang from an identical source before. (1862, 50)

The Mayflower had actually slaves even on her first voyage, but they were white – indentured servants, a category Hawthorne uses hither and thither in his fiction to suggest that the original myth of American freedom is not so pure as in the dominant ideology he nonetheless endorses, at least partially. Even if Hawthorne may be here historically wrong – the Pilgrim Fathers' Mayflower was probably dismantled in 1624, in England, and the ship the writer alludes to should be one of a number of others with the same name – he is, as almost always, *culturally* right in envisioning the birth of American civilization as a ship loaded with freedom and slavery at the same time, and in stressing the bonds linking the historical predicaments of white and black Americans: “they are our brethren,” and we (the whites) must have “an instinctive sense of kindred” with them (the African Americans) – we could also call it a “sympathy” for our “darkest” side. These words might and should resonate when one reads an equally famous passage in *The Narrative Arthur Gordon Pym*, where the narrator-protagonist declares his fascination with his friend's stories about sea adventures, and above all misfortunes. The almost miraculous rescue of Arthur and Augustus after the sinking of their boat in their first sea expedition does not trigger in them a safe repulsion for sea travelling, but quite the contrary, and the narrator's explanation for this “strange” attitude, as regards himself, makes a consistent use of a chromatic imagery that surprisingly (or not so surprisingly) sets him on the “dark” side of the juxtaposition:

It might be supposed that a catastrophe such as I have just related would have effectually cooled my incipient passion for the sea. On the contrary, I never experienced a more ardent longing for the wild adventures incident to the life of a navigator than within a week after our miraculous deliverance. This short period proved amply long enough to erase from my memory the shadows, and bring out in vivid light all the pleasurable exciting points of color, all the picturesqueness, of the late perilous accident. My conversations with Augustus grew daily more frequent and more intensely full of interest. He had a manner of relating his stories of the ocean (more than one half of which I now suspect to have been sheer fabrications) well adapted to have weight with one of my enthusiastic temperament and somewhat gloomy although glowing imagination. 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. For the bright side of the painting I had a limited sympathy. My visions were of shipwreck and famine; of death or captivity among barbarian hordes; of a lifetime dragged out in sorrow and tears, upon some gray and desolate rock, in an ocean unapproachable and unknown. Such visions or desires – for they amounted to desires – are common, I have since been assured, to the whole numerous race of the melancholy among men – at the time of which I speak I regarded them only as prophetic glimpses of a destiny which I felt myself in a measure bound to fulfil. (Poe 1975 [1838], 58)

Almost no sympathy “for the bright side of the painting,” and this because Arthur enlists himself in the ranks of the “melancholy among men” – that is, of the men with a *black* humor, according to the etymology of the word “melancholy.” Add to this that Arthur foresees and even *desires* such a destiny (a correct prophecy, since he will experience the shipwreck of the *Grampus* and the burning of the *Jane Guy*, both due to the active role of *black* people), and the whole structure of a romance blatantly devised in order to build up a



fantasy of the supremacy of white rational thinking over black malignant irrationality seriously risks to collapse upon itself.

As everyone knows, Poe wrote *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* under the influence of the bizarre geographical theories about the mythical *Terra Cava* (“Hollow Earth”), widespread in the 1830s, and first made popular in 1818 by John Cleves Symmes, a former army officer who lectured for more than a decade and repeatedly petitioned the Congress asking for naval expeditions to the North Pole. Already in 1820, some “Adam Seaborn” fictionalized Symmes’s theories in *Symzonia: A Voyage of Discovery*, imagining a land of perfect whiteness inside a hole at the South Pole, and what the book especially stressed was “the strange rationality of Symzonians” (1820, 156). In January, 1837, Poe enthusiastically reviewed a pamphlet by the most important of Symmes’s followers, Jeremiah N. Reynolds, the “Address, on the Subject of a Surveying and Exploring Expedition to the Pacific Ocean and South Seas” (1836). And the legend says that Poe’s last words before dying were “Reynolds, Reynolds!” (by the way, Reynolds’s efforts resulted in the organization of a seriously scientific expedition under the command of a competent explorer, Charles Wilkes: Reynolds was refused participation as chronicler of the expedition, and so was a reluctant Nathaniel Hawthorne).

Anyway, what Poe had in mind when setting to write *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* was the dream of a utopian white land where science and rationality rule – a dream that might have been on the verge of being made true. But what we have in the romance is exactly the opposite: a nightmarish descent into a black hell. The fact that all the three vessels in the romance are eventually destroyed, besides, casts a lurid light on one of the political symbols of the American nation that were current at the time, that of the “ship of state” – a metaphor forged by Plato in the 6<sup>th</sup> book of the *Republic*, first exported to America by Roger Williams in his “Letter to the Town of Providence” (1656), and later given literary expression by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in his hymn “O Ship of State” (1850). In Plato’s myth, the ship is a microcosm where direct democracy may allow demagogues to gain the popular favor, and only the philosopher-navigator, with his acquired experiences and his superior wisdom, must be given the authority of rationally steering the wheel. This authority is what throughout the romance Arthur seems to be looking for, and also somehow managing to acquire when he convinces the captain of the *Jane Guy* to go further south in search of new lands. Douglas Anderson points out that the second half of Pym’s narrative

rapidly becomes saturated with navigational terms and technicalities,<sup>3</sup> with the correction of erroneous charts and the probing for possible routes through the southern ice pack. Though only a rescued castaway, Pym plays a strangely influential role in these activities, commenting in great detail on the information contained in the logs of earlier explorers and encouraging the *Jane Guy*’s commander, Captain Guy, to sail as far to the south as he can, even to the point of ridiculing the captain’s fears when he briefly expresses a desire to turn back. (2009, 120)

Arthur’s quest for his own autonomous individual identity and authority over the others – another instance of that “air of self-generation” that, according to Geoffrey Sanborn (2002, 163), pervades all of Poe’s fiction – is therefore linked to his desire to become as much a “Southerner” as one can be, in the attempt to sever all the ties connecting him to his family, the best one could hope for at the time, since Arthur has before him a perfectly prepared path toward affluence and social prominence, son and grandson of well-to-do northern merchants and bankers as he is:

My father was a respectable trader in sea-stores at Nantucket, where I was born. My maternal grandfather was an attorney in good practice. He was fortunate in every thing, and had speculated very successfully in stocks of the Edgarton New Bank, as it was formerly called. By these and other means he had managed to lay by a tolerable sum of money. He was more attached to myself, I believe, than to any other person in the world, and I expected to inherit the most of his property at his death. (47)

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<sup>3</sup> On Poe’s literally plagiarizing technical texts in order to construct an *effet du rationnel*, rather than *réel*, see Cagliero 1993, lv.



But in the cold paratactic sentence structure Pym uses in describing his relationships with father and grandfather,<sup>4</sup> linked to him only by a “bare seriality” (Halliburton 1973, 57), we can detect a symptom of his “limited sympathy” for the brighter sides of pictures, especially for those placing him in a landscape where everything is already safely set, and no dynamic and individual assertion of will is allowed. Terence Whalen has argued that, far “from being the wild offspring of an autonomous or diseased mind, Poe’s tales were [...] the rational products of social labor, imagined and executed in the workshop of American capitalism” (1999, 9). Arthur Gordon Pym wants instead to break free from this workshop, at all costs: to the Northerners’ dream of a quiet bourgeois existence, he prefers the allures of the adventurous life of a Southerner knight-errant, roaming not the wilderness but the ocean and doomed to a solitary death, a sort of “icon of cultural dissolution: the white boy who will not accept his patrimony, who represents the end of the familial and national line” (Sanborn 2002, 165). On the other hand, here Poe projects onto Pym his ambitions for a “deviant” literary career only apparently at odds with the rules of a dominant (Northern) ideology, whose tenets were those of the most logical common sense. As Sandra M. Tomc has remarked, Poe’s “personal peculiarities, far from being incidental or antithetical to his career, played dynamically with a literary industry that embraced and cultivated dysfunction as a condition of authorial productivity and repute [...] Poe achieved his early reputation [...] by proffering his dispossession and alienation as features of his public self” (2002, 22-29). And Pym clearly replicates this attitude.

With a further paradox, in order to conquer that kind of emancipation from the constraints (but also privileges) of the social and familiar conditioning, this son of the North (like Poe himself, born as he was in Boston and then adopted by a Richmond family) embarks in a sort of initiation journey which closely mirrors the middle passage of the slave trade. First he hides as a stowaway in the *Grampus* hold, hidden in the dark among wares, apparently abandoned by his friend and left without water and food – an experience shared by so many Africans in their journey towards not the higher personal identity of the classic initiation pattern, but the irredeemable social death of slavery. Then in Tsalal he barely escapes death and is forced to run away from his pursuers, a perversely reversed version of the slaves’ flights from white patrollers summarizing the widespread hysteria generated in the Southern states by Nat Turner’s 1831 insurrection, seen as the first harbinger of a more general upheaval that could turn upside down racial hierarchies. In the middle, he “rationally” justifies an act commonly associated with the most irrationally primitive “dark” cultures, cannibalism: adrift with Augustus and Dirk Peters (more about him in a little while) on the wreck of the *Grampus*, he participates in the killing and eating of Parker, the fourth castaway, a choice by all means unnecessary, if only Arthur had remembered in time how to reach the provisions still locked in the storeroom, as he does a few days later.

At the end of the romance, we might be induced to think that Arthur has reached the authority he was looking for, since he has eventually become an “author,” and has been officially recognized by the literary world as such thanks to Edgar Allan Poe’s “editorship.” The only problem is that the book he has written is not the passport for his further cultural successes as an individual able to forge his own destiny, but a sort of tombstone epitaph, because the final “Note” informs us of “the late sudden and distressing death of Mr. Pym” (240) – and an incomplete one. Besides, in many situations in which his freedom or safety are at risk, it is not thanks to his own supposed growing maturity that Arthur manages to come out more or less unharmed: he must be saved instead by the omnipresent Dirk Peters, who brings food to Augustus (and therefore to his friend) during the mutiny aboard the *Grampus*, leads the counter-mutiny, rescues Arthur when he is

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<sup>3</sup> One should also notice, here as elsewhere, the almost total absence of women. Only indirectly Pym’s mother is alluded to, and the other notable exception is the description of Tsalal’s female inhabitants: “There were a great many women and children, the former not altogether wanting in what might be termed personal beauty. They were straight, tall, and well formed, with a grace and freedom of carriage not to be found in civilized society. Their lips, however, like those of the men, were thick and clumsy, so that, even when laughing, the teeth were never disclosed. Their hair was of a finer texture than that of the males” (Poe, 197). This is easily explicable with Poe’s intention of emancipating both his protagonist and himself from another milieu he felt as extremely constraining, that of a literary and especially poetic marketplace that to him seemed heavily colonized by such women poets as Frances Sargent Osgood, Sarah Helen Whitman, and Elizabeth Oakes Smith, who were members of his “circle” (on Poe’s relationships with these writers, see Richards). By writing an adventure prose romance, and locating its action in the ocean, Poe tried to free himself from this (for him, but Hawthorne shared the feeling) suffocating cultural context.



drowning in the wreck of the *Grampus*, stops him from a dive into the abyss in Tsalal. And at the end of the book we are left with one single man standing: not Arthur Gordon Pym, but Dirk Peters, the only person who has total knowledge of what happened after the final encounter with the mysterious white figure – he is now in Illinois, at a fairly safe distance from the ocean, and “cannot be met with at the present” (240).<sup>5</sup>

Dirk Peters, cited by Pym himself in the preface as the only but not quite reliable (being a “half-breed Indian”) source that could attest the authenticity of the events told in the *Narrative*, is in this perspective the real protagonist of the process of self-emancipation the book is devised to illustrate. From a less-than-human, beast- or devil-looking savage prone to heavy drinking, he becomes the most active and rational character in the plot. So the last survivor of this doomed expedition towards the perfect whiteness of the South is a white-Indian mixed-blood who also looks as an African,<sup>6</sup> genetically and symbolically conflating into himself the three main ethnic identities of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century United States, and their colors: white, red, and black. Besides, in the last two paragraphs of the romance Pym’s identity seems indistinctly to blend with Peters’s: we do not have anymore “I” and “me,” but only “we” and “us,” in a sort of total communion that might confirm Marie Bonaparte’s original contention that Poe’s actually dinking himself out of relationships with women who loved him, and fictionally killing beautiful women in order to reach a sublime effect, denounced his latent and unrecognized homosexuality. Bonaparte also suggests that Poe was obsessed by the memory of his dead mother, probably alluded to, as Richard Kopley stresses, in the final cries “Tekeli-li” by the “gigantic and pallidly white birds” before the “mysterious shrouded figure” (239) waiting to embrace the two survivors on their routes towards a disastrous plunge into a cataract, and which in its turn might be a ghostly image of Elizabeth Arnold herself, who in 1812 played a role in the melodrama *Tekeli* as “an incomparable vision, resplendent in bridal white” – Kopley adds that the final day of the *Narrative*’s journal matches that of the first scheduled performance by Poe’s mother (1982, 43-44).

The absurdly ambiguous and self-contradictory ending on the main plot of the romance is really something of a mystery in itself. It leaves us on the verge of an abyss, without telling us what happens afterwards, but is framed by a(n even more convoluted) narrative of how the text has been constructed that should have as its logical consequence some sense of closure, since the protagonist / narrator / “author” has of course survived together with Peters, and thus there is no reason to create a suspended finale – we know they made it. If Pym’s journey is ultimately motivated by the inner urge to free himself from the “slavery” of an already set destiny, and to create and perform some sort of autonomous, authoritative / authorial agency, its (non-) conclusion seems to refract that endless play of desire that according to Jacques Lacan always differs its satisfaction. But this also raises another question, because if Pym’s desire mirrors Poe’s, and thus Poe’s fantasy is actually a fantasy about himself, does all this imply that Poe’s desire too (that of becoming an “authority” by embracing his own “Southern” and racist identity and getting free of the original “Northern,” liberal one granted him by his ancestry) is (unconsciously) considered by the author himself as doomed to be endlessly left unsatisfied? Of course, we could accept Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s definition of the

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<sup>5</sup> It goes without saying that Peters’s final absence from the scene, and thence his impossibility to tell his own story, could well be a way to deprive him of any authority he may have gained during the journey (see Nelson 1992, 105-107).

<sup>6</sup> Here is the first detailed description of Peters: “This man was the son of an Indian squaw of the tribe of Upsarokas, who live among the fastnesses of the Black Hills, near the source of the Missouri [...] Peters himself was one of the most ferocious-looking men I ever beheld. He was short in stature, not more than four feet eight inches high, but his limbs were of Herculean mould. His hands, especially, were so enormously thick and broad as hardly to retain a human shape. His arms, as well as legs, were *bowed* in the most singular manner, and appeared to possess no flexibility whatever. His head was equally deformed, being of immense size, with an indentation on the crown (like that on the head of most negroes), and entirely bald. To conceal this latter deficiency, which did not proceed from old age, he usually wore a wig formed of any hair – like material which presented itself – occasionally the skin of a Spanish dog or American grizzly bear. At the time spoken of, he had on a portion of one of these bearskins; and it added no little to the natural ferocity of his countenance, which betook of the Upsaroka character. The mouth extended nearly from ear to ear, the lips were thin, and seemed, like some other portions of his frame, to be devoid of natural pliancy, so that the ruling expression never varied under the influence of any emotion whatever [...] To ass this man with a casual glance, one might imagine him to be convulsed with laughter, but a second look would induce a shuddering acknowledgment, that if such an expression were indicative of merriment, the merriment must be that of a demon” (84-85).



unconscious as something that “poses no problem of meaning, solely problems of use. The question posed by desire is not ‘What does it mean?’ but rather ‘How does it work?’” (1977, 109). In this perspective, the political unconscious of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* works by not working, by creating a disruption and a void in the fabric of the meaning the plot should construct and bring to a closure with its ending. And we could also recall that, according to Slavoj Žižek, there is “no connection whatsoever between the (phantasmic) real of the subject and his symbolic identity,” because Fantasy “creates a multitude of subject positions among which the (observing, fantasizing) subject is free to float, to shift his identification from one to another. Here, talk about ‘multiple, dispersed subject positions’ is justified, with the proviso that these subject positions are to be strictly distinguished from the void that is the subject” (2008, 7 n. 6). Actually, not only does the romance end into a “void,” but so does even the final note, where we have *three* notable absences that could fill the gaps – Pym’s, Peters’s, but also Poe’s, or better that of the character in the complex web of narrative frames who is the author of the two numbers of the “fictionalized” and serialized edition of Pym’s narrative, and who “might be supposed able to fill the vacuum,” but “has declined the task” (240). And we could also take Žižek’s identification of the subject with the void literally, and see in the final chasm where Pym plunges together with his double Peters the “real” self of the protagonist – a nothingness he longs for from the very beginning, as if his “white,” rational, authorative identity were only a ghost, and the “darker side of the picture” his true destiny, like also that of the American nation as a whole, if Pym is to be considered as its imperialist and racist representative. Pym’s fantasy is a fantasy of Otherness, of becoming an Other / an Author, but like all other fantasies is based on and implies the impossibility of its satisfaction (and thus makes equally impossible the satisfaction of the political fantasy of a world totally “white”): the “void of the possible Otherness is what sustains hysterical desire (that is to say, desire *tout court*)<sup>7</sup> – this non-acceptance of the ultimate closure, this vain hope that the Other Thing is waiting for us just around the corner” (Žižek, 39) – or beyond the pale.

The conflict between these two contrasting fantasies – the “rational” edenic myth of white supremacy through self-emancipation vs. the “irrational” masochistic dream of self-annihilation through the descent into darkness – seems therefore finally to be solved in favor of the latter, as is once again confirmed by Pym’s absence both in the (equally absent) conclusion of the plot and in the closing of the narrative frame, substituted as he is by Poe himself, since according to Lacan’s formalization of the phantasmic narrative structure one of its most important features is, as Žižek stresses, the “*impossible gaze*, the gaze by means of which the subject is already present at the act of his / her own conception” (21). In *The Narrative of Arthur Pym*, this gaze that should witness the subject’s rebirth into his new identity (as the hero of a heroic journey towards a new independent identity, and as the author of a book that should make him culturally powerful) is visibly absent (the narrator does not tell, hence does not “see,” Pym’s salvation, neither he sees his own authorizing the *Narrative*): his gaze is doubly blind, as it is to the meaning of the strange signs in the Tsalal chasms.

That the future of America is more than likely not designed to be white (like it should be in Pym / Poe’s colonial and racist fantasy), is as a matter of fact confirmed by the final note, where Poe (or better an anonymous narrator, because in this play of mirrors no easy identification is available to the reader) analyzes the Tsalal cryptic hieroglyphic engravings, already deciphered by Peters, while on the other hand, as Ugo Rubeo stresses,<sup>8</sup> Pym plainly misinterprets origins and meanings of the “indentures” – so much for the cultural authority he is supposed to have conquered:

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<sup>7</sup> Lacan defines hysteria as the “desire to desire” (1973, 16). Pym’s often “hysterical” answers to the various dangers he must face could in this perspective be seen as perverted instances of desire *per se*, that wants to break free from the norms of dominant (Northern) liberal ideology, according to which you do not even have to desire because the American Dream has already provided for whatever you may need.

<sup>8</sup> “Pym fa sfoggio di tutta la sua razionalità per destituire di fondamento l’ipotesi che i segni rinvenuti dall’amico sulla parete della grotta possano essere i caratteri di un qualche sconosciuto alfabeto, sostenendo che in realtà d’altro non si tratta se non di semplici tracce della naturale erosione del calcare;” ma “la ‘Nota’ conclusiva interverrà a smentire la sua ipotesi, ribaltando definitivamente la situazione” (“Pym shows all his rationality to deprive of any foundation the hypothesis that the signs found by his friend on the walls of the cave might be the types of some unknown alphabet, claiming instead that they are nothing else but mere traces of the natural erosion of limestone;” Rubeo 2000, 15). On the problem of the undecidability of the meaning of these signs, and more generally of language, in Poe see also Cagliero 1988 and Rubeo 2004.



Conclusions such as these open a wide field for speculation and exciting conjecture. They should be regarded, perhaps, in connexion with some of the most faintly-detailed incidents of the narrative; although in no visible manner is this chain of connexion complete. Tekeli-li! was the cry of the affrighted natives of Tsalal upon discovering the carcass of the *white* animal picked up at sea. This also was the shuddering exclamation of the captive Tsalalian upon encountering the *white* materials in possession of Mr. Pym. This also was the shriek of the swift-flying, *white*, and gigantic birds which issued from the vapoury *white* curtain of the South. Nothing *white* was to be found at Tsalal, and nothing otherwise in the subsequent voyage to the region beyond. It is not impossible that “Tsalal,” the appellation of the island of the chasms, may be found, upon minute philological scrutiny, to betray either some alliance with the chasms themselves, or some reference to the Ethiopian characters so mysteriously written in their windings. (242)

The narrator also remarks that nothing white could be found *beyond* Tsalal – that is, beyond the vapory white cataract and the white figure that, we could even surmise, might be a sort of ghost of a whiteness by now lost forever. And the very last words of the book are: “I have graven it within the hills, and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock” (242). When in the same sentence the words “hill” and “rock” appear at short distance, something must ring in the reader’s mind, because, even if it is true that the most direct reference is to the passage in the Bible where Job gives voice to his despair (but there we find only a rock, no hills), these are two of the foundational symbols of Puritan America, and of America as a whole with its myths of emancipation: the references might then be to Plymouth Rock, where the Pilgrim Fathers have been said to have finally put their feet on the American soil in 1620 after having unsuccessfully attempted to land at Cape Cod (this is a fiction too, of course, because there is no record of Plymouth Rock before the 1740s); and to the “City Upon a Hill,” the perfect New Jerusalem to be founded in the New World, as prophesied by John Winthrop on the *Arbella* in 1630. We are therefore left with the image of a vengeance to be exacted on these two mythical sites, a writing on the wall in a Black language that announces the dissolution into dust of every dream of a “pure,” white America.

Pym may well be a (more or less covertly) pro-slavery white supremacist, and Poe is well known for sharing this kind of attitude,<sup>9</sup> but the rift that opens up between Poe’s awareness of the (possible) hidden meaning of the syllibine signs (once again, we must anyway stress how it is not “Poe” the narrator in the Note, but someone we do not know anything about) and Pym’s conceited dismissal of them confirms James W. Gargano’s contention that “the assumption that Poe and his narrators are identical literary twins and that he must be held responsible for all their wild or perfervid utterances” is “untenable and often unanalyzed,” since “Poe understands them [his narrators] far better than they can possibly understand themselves” (1967, 165). This does not mean that Poe stages an unreliable narrator and an even more unreliable narrative to consciously reveal as a hoax the very foundations of the ideology he openly endorses. This happens (here as elsewhere in his work) *against* Poe’s best intentions, that clearly emerge in all the occasions Pym manages to have the upper hand against all odds thank to his own “white” ingenuity. But the political unconscious of the romance is a sort of hidden trap where finally all of Poe’s rational hopes finally collapse, as Pym will always be on the verge of doing at the very end of his *Narrative* at every reading of the book. According to Fredric Jameson,

the literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction. It articulates its own situation and textualizes it, thereby encouraging and perpetuating the illusion that the situation itself did

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<sup>9</sup> Roberto Cagliero summarizes the critics’ opinions on Poe’s (more than supposed) racism by dividing them into three main groups: “Alcuni ravvisano in lui un razzista, altri un autore dilaniato da un conflitto morale, mentre un terzo gruppo, sottolineando l’attrazione di Poe per personaggi di razze diverse dalla sua, ha ricercato nella sua opera un elemento sovversivo di redenzione” (“Some see in him a racist, others an author torn by a moral conflict, while a third group, stressing Poe’s attraction towards characters of races other than his own, has searched his work for a subversive element of redemption;” 2000, 69).



not exist before it, that there is nothing but a text, that there never was any extra- or con-textual reality before the text itself generated it in the form of a mirage. (1981, 67)

The social and political reality Poe's text "brings into being" is precisely what he desperately tries to exorcise by projecting it onto the farthest shores he could think of, but even there, in an imaginary land totally of his own creation, he cannot get rid of his anxieties about a future America soon to come. Pym's dream (nightmare?) of self-emancipation is a reverse fantasy in reaction to the real African Americans' quest in the pre-Civil War era, and in its ultimate failing we can see the reflection both of the (contextual, historical, "real") fate of the American South and of Poe's ominous prophecies about what he fears will be his cultural authority in the future. In his failure as the prophet of his own fall into oblivion (suggested by the author's ironical distancing from Pym and *his* fall anyway) probably lies Poe's greatest success.

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