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## THE NARRATIVE OF ARTHUR GORDON PYM OF NANTUCKET: PSYCHOLOGICAL INTROSPECTION IN A MARITIME JOURNEY

**Abstract:** *This paper aims to disclose Pym's epistemological and gnostic quest as the revelation of the psychological introspection of the author. I argue that Poe uses the arcane white shrouded figure as an apocalyptic power to paint a surreal realm that overlaps his spiritual realm discussed in Eureka. The shrouded figure is a self-reflection of Pym, or more accurately, of Poe himself. In the novel, nature engages in the process of decomposition or dissolution, by which Poe associates Gothic space with the theme of the elimination of the ego that reaches its peak when the shrouded figure appears. The three interrelated aspects of my analysis—the terrifying narrative of southwards adventure, a Hollow Earth as a Utopian / Dystopian world, and the geometric structure of the quincuncial network—all point in the same direction: Pym is a novel in which the writer / protagonist, through the narrative structure of God's providential injunction, integrates his exploration of every imaginable form of spiritual survival and transcendence into spaces of horror on Earth that do not permit transcendence.*

**Keywords:** *Self-Reflection, the white shrouded figure, the quincuncial network, a space of horror*

### Introduction

Many scholars of Poe, including Richard Wilbur, Grace Farrell Lee, Kathleen Sands, Barton Levi St. Armand, John T. Irwin, Richard Kopley, Kent Ljungquist, and Ana Hernández del Castillo, have paid attention to various arcane religious subjects in *Pym*. As Wilbur, Sands, and Armand point out, Pym's journey to the South Pole symbolizes "a gnostic quest" (Peirce and Rose III 57). Richard Kopley states that *Pym* has a "biblical connection" (Peirce and Rose III 57). However, the identification of *Pym* with an arcane rite does not mean there is a direct assertion of a particular meaning—salvation or heavenly enlightenment—in the work. As Paul Rosenzweig points out, "*Pym* reflects the inability of meaning, on every level, to assert or declare itself, and

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of any end to complete itself despite man's constant search" (140). The novel conveys to readers various patterns of fluctuation between expectations and frustrations. Whenever a meaning is established, a rejection of this meaning emerges. Deconstructionist scholars, like Paul Rosenzweig and G.R. Thompson, note the incongruity in *Pym* in terms of structure, theme, and plot, and conclude that the novel should be seen as "metafiction" or "postmodernist fiction." Poe in *Pym* expresses an epistemological problem, and the intellectual-intuitive quest is accompanied by irony. In the essay, I will orient my argument in the following direction: Pym's epistemological and gnostic quest is a sign of Poe's psychological introspection. When Poe constructs the sophisticated narrative structure composed of a southwards adventure, a Hollow Earth as a Utopian / Dystopian world, and the geometric structure of the quincuncial network, he integrates his exploration of every imaginable form of spiritual survival and transcendence into spaces of horror on Earth.

### Southwards Adventure

*Pym* is a novel where Poe integrates his "mental history" into diverse scenes or incidents of horror that he perceives from the other texts. The fantastic mariner's episodes in *Pym*—horrifying sea tales of shipwrecks and famines, the weird terrains like the gorges and the clefts, the exotic flora and fauna, and the encounter with the Tsalalians and the shrouded figure—were all borrowed from the literary materials that Poe researched or reviewed. In a discussion of the resources used in *Pym*, Burton R. Pollin mentions that the novel experienced four stages. In the first, under the advice of James Kirke Paulding, Poe tried to create a sea novel, a very popular genre at the time. The most important literary materials that affected the writing of *Pym* in this respect include *Robinson Crusoe*, *Peter Simple*, *Mr. Midshipman Easy*, *The Pilot*, *Tom Cringle's Log*, *The Cruise of the Midge*, and *The Young Crusoe* (Pollin 98-99). Poe blended the "adventurous and exotic elements" (from *Robinson Crusoe*) with "gory, horrifying sea tales" (from Michael Scott's *Tom Cringle's Log* and *the Cruise of the Midge*) (Pollin 98-99). In this period, *Pym* came into being as a work of humor, horror, and satire. In the second stage, Poe added details of actual experiences about shipwrecks and adventures, and these were borrowed from Jeremiah N. Reynolds, Lieutenant Wilkes, Washington Irving, and Benjamin Morrell (Poillin 100-

101). In the third stage, “scientific curiosity satisfied as to details of flora and fauna” came from David Porter, Morrell, Reynolds, Washings Irving, James Riley, and J. L. Stephens (Pollin 101). In the fourth stage, Poe “adapted” “graphic, mysterious, and confusing material to suggest supernatural, revelational conclusions about the degradation of the blacks” (Pollin 101-102). References include Gesenius, Charles Anthon, the Baron de Meiran, James Bruce’s Mideast travel, and Alexander Keith (Pollin 101). Poe read Faber’s *Origin of Pagan Idolatry*, from which he drew on “pagan” mythology related to the White Goddess. Through Anthon, Poe gleaned “mystic” ideas from Schlegel and Bryant (Peirce and Rose III). With regard to the Arthurian legend, as well as the Fisher King, Pym is incarnated as an initiate partaking in the rite of seeking the Holy Grail, undertaking “a journey across water to a wasteland” for “magical fulfillment” (Peirce and Rose III 62). Poe blended actual events published in journals or anecdotes with arcane subjects related to initiation rites. In addition, *Pym* reflects the imaginary form of the author, and can be seen as an autobiographical text of Poe. As Ingram points out, “Dreams of the day and of the night are plentiful in Pym’s narrative, and are rather more typical of the psychological introspection of the poet than of the healthy animalism and muscular energy of the sailor” (121). Through the four stages, Poe fabricates *Pym* as an “autobiographic fidelity of the author” that reflects not merely the extreme distress and suffering that Pym feels in the most terrible moments, but also Poe’s “psychological introspection”—a desire for heavenly enlightenment with the resulting network of sea voyages and supernatural revelations.

*Pym* is an interlaced work moving between reality or the physical realm and mystery or the spiritual realm. At the beginning of the novel, Poe involves the usual maritime life of Nantucket in an epistemological quest for an unknown realm. He locates his protagonist in a “jumping-off place” (Walden 3), who yearns to explore a world which seems to be a place of freedom and beyond the limits of civilization. Born on the island of Nantucket, which is “essentially a frontier town” (Walden 3) that “indicates its separation from America” (Walden 9), Pym might have aspirations for life at sea or fantasize about a place of “upward mobility,” beyond the limits of the town (Walden 11). The reason why Pym sails on the *Ariel* with his friend Augustus is

unknown, but we know they decide to do so when they get drunk, falling into the status of dreams. On the *Ariel* Pym and Augustus encounter a violent storm, and they are rescued by the crew of the whaling ship *Penguin*. Pym is not frustrated by this first ocean adventure, but instead a romantic notion of the sailing life is ignited in his heart. His decision to follow further adventures with Augustus by sailing on the *Grampus* for the southern seas that signifies “integrating into the community” (Walden 9) of Nantucket is imagined as going beyond the frontier of civilization. Though this maritime adventure makes Pym disconnect from his family, especially his grandfather, who does not want him to join the maritime life, Pym imagines the journey as an initiate’s participation in a tough life in preparation for the spiritual realm beyond life. The incidents on the journey for the romantic adventurer signify “God’s providential injunction.”

Although Pym has to disguise himself, hides onboard as a stowaway, and then unfortunately experiences starvation, mutiny, shipwreck,<sup>[1]</sup> and cannibalism in his south sea voyage, his distress as his inhuman status is imagined as an integral part of his epistemological and gnostic quest. Pym goes beyond the limits of his hometown, as brutality and horror repeat themselves on ships, the ocean, and in exotic lands. The oceanic wilderness is the expansion of the coastal frontier of Nantucket (Walden). When the food that Augustus promises to send to him does not arrive, and Pym thus does not eat for several days, he remains alone in the dark and cramped, suffering from starvation and becoming delirious. His condition reminds us of that which the protagonist confronts in “The Pit and the Pendulum,” a story Poe published in 1842. Both men suffer the ordeal of starvation. Poe here demonstrates two spaces overlapping at the same time. While a mutiny is taking place onboard, starvation and insanity are attacking the young folk in the stowage. However, Poe fabricates a form of God’s injunction in Pym’s hidden place: the stowaway protects Pym from being murdered and ferries the soul of the initiate to the road of gnostic initiation.

Another revelation of providential injunction appears when a ghostly ship passes by the *Grampus*. By the time a storm destroys almost all the provisions that the *Grampus* depends on, and Pym and his shipmates are starving, a Dutch ship is moving toward them. It seems that there are seamen on deck nodding to them, as if in greeting or an expression of friendliness. In ecstasy,

the survivors of the *Grampus* believe that they are going to be rescued. However, as the Dutch ship approaches they realize that the apparent nodding of the red-capped in distance is caused by seagulls jumping on the skulls of the dead sailors. Hope and ecstasy transform to despondency and horror. This vessel symbolizes the infernal ship: "The redoubtable knights of the round table are sometimes fabled to man the infernal ship and to ferry the souls of the dead over the lake of Hades" (qtd. in Peirce and Rose III 67). Again, the infernal ship is a signal of gnostic quest that conforms to Poe's form of imaginary transcendence.

In the southwards journey equivalent to apocalypse, Pym more or less senses the existence of a providential injunction when men struggle between the spiritual realm and descending into violence. Take "the custom of the sea" in *Pym* as an example of this. When the crewmen confront starvation and there is no sign of imminent rescue, cannibalism then becomes acceptable. They do not resort to combat, but draw a lot to decide who will be sacrificed. When Parker suggests the others draw straws, Pym is vehemently opposed to it. Cannibalism, though acceptable to the crewmen who "have no other choice," is indeed an expression of violence. Urged on by Parker, Pym gives up the spiritual realm: he and the other three survivors of the devastated ship draw lots. The function of cannibalism here as an attempt to maintain "order" of the ship ironically confronts the survivors with their repressed brutality on the wild ocean, where they struggle to keep rational or spiritual. If, without "the custom of the sea," a person kills and eats another to survive a famine, they are supposed to be condemned as a murderer. In other words, "the custom of sea" endows the sailors with a rationalized collective violence, consented to by all. This act of cannibalism exposes the concealed guilt in civilization—a repressed desire to devour others.<sup>[2]</sup> In the case of collective violence, we feel less pity for the destiny of Parker, the one who proposed the act. However, Pym, Augustus, and Peters, at the moment of devouring Parker, have all committed murder, and cannot be exempt from guilt. When Parker draws "the terrific lottery," death soon strikes the ship.

"Let it suffice to say that, having in some measure appeased the raging thirst which consumed us by the blood of the victim, and having by common consent taken off the hands, feet, and head, throwing them together with

the entrails, into the sea, we devoured the rest of the body, piecemeal, during the four ever memorable days of the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth of the month” (Poe 94-95).

In myth, the cannibal feast symbolizes “partak[ing] of the body of the old in the primitive mystery of the White Goddess” (Peirce and Rose III 67). Yet devouring others in *Pym* is a narrative framed for an ironic effect. It is not “internalization into the body of the old” that urges the hungry sailors to devour their shipmate, but the fear of death and starvation that force them to do so. In other words, they surrender to their secret desire—brutality, and rationalize the collective violence, thus getting a reprieve. Indeed, disintegration of order or the threat of violent chaos is recurrent in the novel, but this is usually followed by an episode of hope or triumph over some plight. The *Grampus* falls into famine. Even so, Pym prays to God to end the helpless situation, and it seems, in the case of cannibalism, a providential power punishes the diabolical Parker, as he is the one who proposes the idea. Poe exalts the miseries to the spiritual realm or idealizes certain incidents so as to ensure the existence of divine power. When Augustus’ body is devoured by the sharks in his ocean funeral, Pym “witness[es] the actual coming apart of his companion and double, a spectacle which in its grotesque detail literalizes the disintegration and loss of selfhood noted by Morin” (Kennedy 174). Augustus’ death symbolizes not only the loss of an “intimate communion,” but “the disintegration and loss of selfhood” of Pym. That is, the idealized life at sea helps adventurers integrate into the community or turn the experience into an enthralling dream or illusion, one that helps Pym to survive as he encounters brutality.

Sidney Kaplan, in “An Introduction to *Pym*,” notes Baudelaire’s worship of Poe as one of the important dark romance poets who perceive evil in both nature and men.

“For Baudelaire, Poe had many virtues, but ‘more important than anything else’ was that in ‘a century infatuated with itself,’ this ‘child of a nation more infatuated with itself than all others’ had ‘imperturbably affirmed the natural wickedness...the primordial perversity of man.’ Against all the ‘misguided

equalitarians,' Poe had proclaimed that 'we are all born marked for evil'"(146).

Poe in *Pym* shows the most abominable scenes in nature that expose not only the disintegration of the psyche but also other weaknesses in humans. With frames of meta-narratives, Poe reveals how horror in reality breaks through dream or hope. What remains with the survivors is a sense of guilt and loss of the spiritual self. As Robinson observes, Poe "explores the thought that reality is of a kind to break through the enthralling dream of innocence or of effective concealment and confront us—horrify us—with truth" (6). However, Poe believes in the existence of a significant universe (Eakin 21), and through revelation of the brutal reality Poe transforms spaces of horror into an imaginable form of spiritual survival and transcendence.

### **A Hollow Earth as Utopian / Dystopian World**

Poe's Gothic space ranges from a confined one, as we see in "William Williams" and "*The Masque of the Red Death*," to a spacious oceanic frontier, as we see in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, in which the Gothic space is characteristic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century "Arctic Obsession." The Arctic world of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was imagined as one of paradise as well as a world of violence and madness ("Literature's Arctic Obsession," Schulz).<sup>[3]</sup> In much the same vein, Poe's *Pym* is characteristic of the two minds of 19<sup>th</sup> century explorers in his description of the territories in the southwards adventures as an ice-free prelapsarian world, as well as a barbarian / hellish one in which the protagonist suffers an inhuman life.

The fantastic south sea adventure, colored by theories of a Hollow Earth proposed by Reynolds and John Cleves Symmes, Jr., is integral to Poe's imaginary spiritual realm. Pym the name may in fact be derived from Symmes, a 19<sup>th</sup> century theorist who claimed that the earth was "hollow, habitable, and widely open about the poles," and proposed an expedition to the North Pole so as to verify his theory. Pym's adventure to the South was a dramatization of Symmes' idea of a polar expedition to a hollow-earth-entrance where a perfect "undiscovered race" was thriving. Sidney Kaplan, in "An Introduction to *Pym*," mentions Symmes' theory of Hollow Earth and Adam Seaborn's *Symzonia: A Voyage of Discovery*. Symmes believed that "a warm and rich land stocked

with thrifty vegetables and animals” existed in the North Pole, an entrance to the hollow earth. Seaborn’s Symzonia, based on Symmes’ theory, was “the abode of a race perfect in their kind,” and the perfect race referred to the “polar Utopians” (Kaplan 151). Symmes was not the first theorist who proposed a hollow-earth. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the same idea was proposed by Athanasius Kircher (1664), James Burnet (1681), Edmond Halley (1692), Cotton Mather (1721), Le Clerc Milfort (1781), and more. Darryl Jones, in “Ultima Thule: *Arthur Gordon Pym*, the Polar Imaginary, and the Hollow Earth,” argues that Poe certainly knew Kircher’s *Mundus Subterraneus*, “which had entered the American imagination through a bizarre and fittingly circuitous route” (56). In the book, Kircher witnesses the eruptions of two volcanic mountains, Etna and Stromboli. He claims that the earth is hollow, with a hole at each Pole. He also believes that waters were frozen in the Arctic, but were heated as they flowed through the Earth. There were “vast Abysses” in “the Bowels and very Entrals of the Earth” (qtd. in Jones 55), and under the Earth lived “a race of giants” (Jones 56). The giants in Symmes’ hollow earth utopia are a perfect white race living in a warm and rich land. Symmes’ world is a utopian one reflecting a “desire to return to a prelapsarian state, the discovery of a lost Eden before (or outside of) time” (Jones 63). Familiar with such imagery (Jones 64), Poe integrates the blessed prelapsarian state into the horror scene of the cataract at the close of *Pym*. When Pym descends into the arm of the giant snow-white figure, he is about to enter a symbolic channel to the hollow earth and his own inner moral life.

Jones associates the scene of the white cataract in *Pym* with “Ultima Thule” in French scholar Gaston Broche’s *Pythéas le Massaliote Découvreur de l’extrême Occident et du Nord de l’Europe* (1936), since the two works share a lot in common with regard to “a space with the potential to open up vistas of numinous terror” (Jones 51). Broche explains this terror as a “religious terror” of punishment. Poe’s giant snow-white figure is characteristic of *ne plus ultra*, something that cannot be explained within a linguistic system.

The evil that tests the initiates in the spiritual journey is the race of the Talalians. If the hollow earth (a portal, tunnel, or cave) is an important entrance for the ancestors to emerge from, or a place related to afterlife, it is also a channel from which devilish creatures come out to control or capture their victims.



Those who adventure into the hollow space might die or become mad if they fail to conquer the evil they find there. Taking H. P. Lovecraft's "At the Mountains of Madness" (1936) as an example, the Antarctic expedition in this work leads to an insane world of massacred and dissected victims. In contrast, Poe distances Pym from evil in spaces of horror, as Pym is the hero who represents the psychological introspection of the author.

The black rock in Poe's *Pym* marks the North Pole—the location of the entrance to the hollow earth (Kaplan 156). It is a region possessed by a dark and hostile race—the Tsalalian—who live in caves and holes (Moldenhauer 76-77), and have a phobia of whiteness. The territory of the Tsalalian is abundant, yet it is far from an ideal world inhabited by a perfect race, as in Symmes' hollow land. The Tsalalians are an allusion to "the descendants of these Symzonian degenerates" in Captain Adam Seaborn's *Symzonia: Voyage of Discovery* (1820) (Jones 62). Kaplan points out that the word Tsalal means Hell, and geographically it is "a blend of the terrains of Ethiopia, Sinai and ruined Babylon" (157). "Tsalemone sounded vaguely like Solomon" (Kaplan 156). The Tsalalians bear "the American stereotype of the minstrel Negro" (Kaplan 155), and the "great men" among the black Tsalalians are "Wampoos or Yampoos" (Kaplan 157). The Tsalalians are compared to the rulers "descended from Solomon and Sheba" (Kaplan 158); they are "perfect demon[s]" who fear "anything white," and at the sight of white objects they scream "Tekeli-li" (Kaplan 156-157). In Poe's narrative structure, the Tsalal and the Tsalalians are evil. The Tsalal island on which the ship *Jane Guy* anchors duplicates the human evil that happened on the ship *Grampus*. As the novel enters the second part that begins with Chapter 18, those events that have happened in the previous chapters—deception, live burial,<sup>[4]</sup> shipwreck—replicate themselves in the encounter between Pym and the exotic black world of Tsalal. The Tsalalians are actually counterparts of the mutineers of the *Grampus*. Pym describes the Tsalal as a world different from that of his familiar Europe or the other lands of the south.

"At every step we took inland the conviction forced itself upon us that we were in a country differing essentially from any hitherto visited by civilized men...The trees resembled no growth of either the torrid, the temperate, of

the northern frigid zones...The very rocks were novel in their mass...[we] had difficulty in bringing ourselves to believe that their qualities were purely those of nature...the water, we refused to taste it, supposing it to be polluted..." (Poe 137).

The differentiation between "I" and "the Other" is immediately installed as the narrator and the crewmen of the *Jane Guy* arrive in a blizzard on this unnatural but abundant land. "This variation in shade" in Tsalal "was produced in a manner which excited as profound astonishment in the minds of our party as the mirror had done in the case of Too-wit" (Poe 138). The narrator further underscores the difference of the exotic people as he describes their appearance. Beauty and strength in their bodies or their carriage "[were] not to be found in civilized society" (Poe 141). They "were always addressed by the title Wampoo" (Poe 141). The Tsalalians conceal their mysterious guilt and deception. They have their own system, as do the civilized people. "There appeared so much of system in this that I could not help feeling distrust" (Poe 139). The color black prevailing in the nature of Tsalal and the Tsalalians themselves symbolizes contradiction to the color white, from which they always "recoil" (Poe 135). What the black savages fear is revelation of their evil quality. Too-wit expresses this when he sees himself in mirror:

"There are two large mirrors in the cabin, and here was the acme of their amazement. Too-wit was the first to approach them...Upon raising his eyes and seeing his reflected self in the glass, I thought the savage would go mad; but, upon turning short round to make a retreat, and beholding himself a second time in the opposite direction, I was afraid he would expire upon the spot" (Poe 135-136).

In much the same vein, the white men of the *Jane Guy* are greedy for things in the exotic land, such as the large tortoise and the *biche de mer*. Captain Guy is so intoxicated with the abundant natural resources that he is determined to stay longer on the island. Both the crewmen of *Jane Guy* and the Tsalalians exemplify greed. Deceitfulness and an incapability of perceiving

deceitfulness characterize human nature and enhance the effects of irony when the tale is told from the point of view of a naïve narrator.

In contrast, whiteness and the white figure are structured as a power of punishment as well as one of transcendence. Critics' comments on the enemy of the Tsalalians—whiteness—vary. One indicates that such whiteness is the white “vengeance of the father” on “the black wicked sons” who transgress the taboo of incest as they approach the “whiteness of the mother” (Marie Bonaparte). One says that this whiteness is an agent of death (e.g. the white goddess) that sucks Pym down to a death (S. Foster Damon). The whiteness that the Tsalalians fear is the same whiteness that drowns Pym, and suggests “figures of biblical apocalyptic judgment” (Robinson 7). In the association between Pym and myths of the white goddess, the white figure that is about to swallow Pym is believed to be a goddess (Richard Wilbur, Grace Farrell Lee, Kathleen Sands, Barton Levi St. Armand, John T. Irwin, Richard Kopley, Kent Ljungquist, and Ana Hernández del Castillo). In short, whiteness is imagined as a power which can destroy the ego, as it emerges at the moment when the evil Tsalalians descend to corruption and violence, and is self-portrait of the author, who desires the spiritual realm of *Eureka*. Pym engages in a voyage to the South Pole as an innocent initiate in a world of evil, yet his enthralling dreams and imagination of a spiritual world, such as gradually approaching a world “continuously whiter,” alien from the earthly world (a world within human limited cognition) help his transcendence. Framed in the form of metafiction, Poe paints a surreal realm that overlaps the theme of spiritual salvation in myth and religion.

The plot of the Dystopian world that takes place on the island of Tsalal is a replication of that on the ship *Grampus*, as perfidy, confinement, and famine also occur on the island. While the adventure of the *Grampus* involves a manifestation of “the divine injunction to go south” (Fukuchi 150), the narrative concerning the ambush on the land of Tsalal reveals God's vengeance on “greed and primitive ignorance” (Fukuchi 155). The second half of *Pym* thus serves as a metanarrative for the former, as things that have remained unexplainable in the first part are eventually demystified. God's providential injunction (Nature) engages in the process of dissolution of all at the apocalyptic moment when men are losing their inner morality,

and the providential power is essential in the narrative structure for the construction of a spiritual realm in an inhuman world.

### **The Geometric Structure of Quincuncial Network**

Pym is Poe's self-portrait witnessing brutality and violence in reality. Ingram notes, "We are at no loss to comprehend the autobiographic fidelity of the author...under the pseudonym of Pym" (121). Just as Poe supports a cosmological spiritual transcendence in *Eureka*, so the thought of survival somewhere beyond is designed in the geometric structure of a quincuncial network, one that implies a gnostic quest for the spiritual realm.

The idea of a quincunx is taken from the essay *Urn Burial-The Garden of Cyrus* of Sir Thomas Browne. John T. Irwin in "The Quincuncial Network in Poe's *Pym*" discusses Browne's quincuncial network. The components of the quincuncial network are the shape of a lozenge or diamond, a V shape, and X shape (decussation or hourglass figure), and the image of the network presents the world as "an object whose shape is compatible" "with the shape of the mind," that is, the reflection of "self-consciousness" (Irwin 177). It is the God-given design that "schematizes the interface of mind and world" (Irwin 178). It is a metaphor of human recognition of the world—animals, vegetables, minerals, and all in nature—as its shape (X decussation shape) demonstrates the structure by which humans grasp (recognize) objects within its loop (Irwin 184). In *Urn Burial-The Garden of Cyrus*, Browne claims that the geometric pattern of the quincunx is a divine design for "the intelligible continuity of the universe." The title *Urn Burial* concerns death, passions, and substance, while the title *The Garden of Cyrus* refers to resurrection (or life), reason, and form. *Urn Burial* and *the Garden of Cyrus* are not separate from each other, but exist on the same interface, forming the shape X. *Urn Burial* represents the shape  $\Lambda$  of a pyramid, opening downwards. *The Garden of Cyrus* represents the shape V of an upside-down pyramid, opening upwards.  $\Lambda$  and V form the shape of X as they join in the middle, and the shape X suggests corruption and death in the grave, as well as resurrection and life in the garden. "To flourish in the state of Glory, we must first be sown in corruption" (Irwin 176). The quincuncial design is "an icon of the organization of the world...forming not only the basis for the cross of Christ but

also...the design of the Garden of Eden and the cabalistic 'name' or 'letter' for God himself" (Thompson 205-206). The quincuncial network, viewed from this aspect, symbolizes a spiritual life, reflecting the underlying theory of Gnosticism: the soul rises from the underground / the realm of death to the spiritual realm.

G. R. Thompson, in "The Arabesque Design of *Arthur Gordon Pym*," points out that the quincuncial network schematizing the interface of the mind and the physical world includes "the feature of multileveled quest" (199). The mind, in its contemplation of the physical world, is engaged with epistemological or interpretative quest, like taking journey into infinite "inwardness." The mind "partakes" "the self-reflective" or "self-referential" commentary about an object it contemplates, and is unable to stabilize meaning as the center cannot be determined (Thompson 199-202). The mind can only reconcile desire into "unity" that, as Schlegel shows, "involves the incorporation of chaos or indeterminacy" in consciousness (Thompson 197). The quincuncial network is a form of "encyclopedias": the epistemological quest, Schlegel argues, is recurrent of self-creation and self-destruction as "these movements of the creative self and the critical self alternate or oscillate until 'developed to irony' " (Thompson 194). The network in which the Self embarks on "the journey into infinite inwardness" generates ambiguity of meaning, illusion-breaking, and indeterminateness. It is a plentitude or an interface of "endless signification that ends in emptying design of meaning" (Thompson 206). Take the plot of Augustus' letter and the language of Tsalal as two examples of linguistic difference that involve incongruity or ambiguity in the linguistic system. As Pym hides in the stowage, a letter written in blood—the only communication between Pym and Augustus—is fragmentary as some of the words are missing, and thus leaves to Pym some space for the imagination. On Tsalal island, Pym and his crewmen engage in danger since they do not understand the linguistic system of the Tsalal. The quincuncial network, viewed from this aspect, reflects a geometry of the void in which, ironically, "oversignification leads to undersignification and purposeful textual collapse" (Thompson 209).

In "A Platonic Dialogue; *Eureka* as Detective Story," Irwin discusses Poe's "infinite Self-Diffusion" into the destructive void in terms of "the structure of self-consciousness" associated

Pythagorean geometry. The component of self-consciousness is “basically transgressive” as it is merged with virtue and vice, along with “the divine intelligence.” To illustrate the divine intelligence in human consciousness, Irwin mentions the geometric figures D and S:

“The *D* evoking the triangular tetractys as a figure of the mathematical component of reality and the *S* evoking the line of beauty as a figure of the aesthetic, the two together (one inscribed within the other) presenting an emblem of the conjunction of these two orders in the creation of the universe” (57).

The letter D is a symbol of Pythagorean tetractys or “four group” —“an equilateral triangle each of whose sides contains four points” (Irwin 50). The D figure appears in the material world. It contains the S figure—“the serpentine line or elongated S curve” which is “THE LINE OF BEAUTY” (Irwin 53) in the art of William Hogarth. The golden section of the golden mean is associated with the Pythagorean sacred figures D and S. The myth of the Delphi oracle in *Oedipus the King* involves the sacred figures D and S. Browne’s *Urn Burial-The Garden of Cyrus* is linked to the tetractys and the serpentine curve (the quincuncial network Y shape of descending backwards and ascending forward). The two figures D and S, if put together, signify the mystery of the human condition—irrationality as part of beauty and divinity. The two figures D and S reinforce “the sense of mirror-image reciprocity between the terms in the other differential pairs” and point once again to “the V-shaped fold of the hand as the bodily given that grounds a linguistic system of differential oppositions” (Irwin 58). The difference or antagonist marked in culture, in a linguistic system, is effaced as the opposites intersect at the point indicated in the V- or X-shapes. Again, the geometric figures D and S suggest the process of spiritual rise from the underground: the soul can reach Beauty in a Spiritual Realm if it remains spiritual going through the gnostic / alchemistic experience.

In *Pym*, the shape of the quincunx reveals the message that the southwards voyage suggests a spiritual realm shaped like a pyramid upside down above the corruptive real (material) world, as well as a mind which is in its epistemological quest. The

quincunx appears in the rookery of the albatross and the itinerary of the south sea journey. Irwin points out that the rookery of albatross and penguin on Desolation Island forms a quincuncial network composed of the elements of the shape V, a lozenge shape, and the decussation X.

“Their nests are constructed with great uniformity upon a plan concerted between the two species—that of the albatross being placed in the centre of a little square formed by the nests of four penguins. Navigators have agreed in calling an assemblage of such encampments a rookery...At each intersection of these paths the nest of an albatross is constructed, and a penguin’s nest in the centre of each square—thus every penguin is surrounded by four albatrosses, and each albatross by a like number of penguins” (Poe 113-114).

Irwin associates the position of the albatrosses and the penguins in the rookery with the position of the trees in the Browne’s *The Garden of Cyrus*. Both reveal “the intelligible continuity of the universe” and the “self-reflection of the world.” Further, Thompson notes men’s epistemological problem. The rookery mirrors, Thompson writes, “the epistemological problem” in its determination of the center. (Is the albatross or penguin the center of the quincunx?) If the geometric shape of the rookery is a microcosm of the recognition of the world, then the rookery involves ambiguity and irony. Thompson notes how Pym’s itinerary of the south sea journey, extending from Nantucket, through Liverpool, the Kerguelen Islands, and the Falkland Plateau, to St. Peter and St. Paul, forms a parallelogram (lozenge or rhombus) in an X shape, with St. Peter and St. Paul as the center (208-209). The shape parallels the quincunx in Browne’s essay *Urn Burial-The Garden of Cyrus* and the rookery of the albatross in *Pym*, suggesting indeterminateness and decentralization of meaning in an ironic way.

The geometric structure is an imaginary form of spiritual quest: it implies God’s divine injunction in nature, through which the deceitfulness, illusion, and linguistic difference that characterize human nature and action are eventually revealed in the apocalyptic judgement. In other words, the geometric shape of the quincunx suggests the infinity of the

Creator absorbing all that is created by human actions into the Void. The labyrinthine space in the hold of the *Grampus* and the cavern on the island of the Tsalal where Pym suffers miseries of the human condition—famine, claustrophobia, suspicion, and so on—represent the space of  $\Lambda$ , a space on Earth composed of distress and suffering. However, Poe forms a world beyond suffering, which corresponds with the shape of  $V$ . In darkness, Pym perceives the demons which are a reflection of his own self desiring to rest at the abyss.

“I fell in spite of every exertion to the contrary, into a state of profound sleep, or rather stupor. My dreams were of the most terrific description...Among other miseries I was smothered to death between huge pillows, by demons of the most ghastly and ferocious aspect. Immense serpents held me in their embrace, and looked earnestly in my face with their fearfully shining eyes...I at length breathed a faint ejaculation to God, and resigned myself to die” (Poe 18-19).

The demons that the protagonist fears are gleaming within his soul and moving in Pym’s inner space as an uncanny “non-human being” that wraps him in death and tests his inner morality. Pym fears and describes them as “immense serpents” or “ferocious beings” since he fears the realm of death, a realm that the Gnostic initiates are supposed to pass through if they desire to spiritually rest in the realm of God. Pym’s phobia of the demons reflects his fear to approach death. In much the same vein, the cavern on the island of Tsalal leading to the entrance of abyss serves as a Gothic labyrinth where Pym encounters an uncanny entity, or more specifically, his own reflection—the shadow.

“And now I was consumed with the irrepressible desire of looking below. I could not, I would not, confine my glances to the cliff; and, with a wild, indefinable emotion, half of horror, half of a relieved oppression, I threw my vision far down into the abyss. For one moment my fingers clutched convulsively upon their hold, while, with the movement, the faintest possible idea of ultimate escape wandered, like a shadow, through my mind—in the next my whole



soul was pervaded with a longing to fall; a desire, a yearning, a passion utterly uncontrollable. I let go..." (Poe 166-167).

The mystery of self-consciousness for spiritual resurrection is characterized as the Pythagorean figure Y: descending down to the abyss parallel and rising upwards to the garden. The Self who stands on the nodal point can rise upwards to Heaven when he has experienced the underground realm that the shape  $\Lambda$  embodies.

Poe also incorporates the geometric structure quincunx with the plot of an apocalyptic moment: those who fall away in the world of violence and immorality and never rise to a spiritual world will confront their apocalyptic punishment. Curtis Fukuchi, in "Poe's Providential *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*," explores the idea of providence, noting that human actions in the narrative are "played out" against God's design, and their actions—(self)-deception, utilitarianism, and violence—are rendered ineffectual when confronting the divine injunction in nature. Pym's expedition to the south manifests the divine injunction. The Tsalalian hieroglyphics, a figure engraved into the hills gesturing southwards, Pym's lucky escapes from famine and shipwreck, the figure of a tortoise on a piece of wood, and the ship of the dead, as Fukuchi claims, are all a manifestation of "the divine injunction" (Fukuchi 150) that Pym is destined to carry out. Though Pym fails to see this divine intervention, he "fulfills," as scholars of *Pym* point out, "his role as a mythic quest hero" (Fukuchi 152).<sup>[5]</sup> Pym's journey is "a disinterested quest for knowledge" (Fukuchi 154). The mutineers, Captain Guy, and the Tsalalians, in contrast, are advocates of "the degrading spirit" of greed and utilitarianism (qtd. in Fukuchi 155). Staying in Tsalal means to dwell in the darkness of human nature. Going south signifies a spiritual quest for divine unity. It means staying with the white goddess, to have an interdependent relationship with her (nature), to accept "natural selection," even though the result is extinction. In contrast to Pym, the Tsalalians and the island Tsalal exemplify evilness in human nature and horror at confronting the vengeance of the white goddess (death). In the note, the editor explains the hieroglyphs found in the chasm as words of punishment for humans:

“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. *‘I have graven it within the hills, and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock’*” (Poe 177).

Though a pseudo-biblical document or a reference to racism, the vengeance is explainable when associated with the exposure of the guilt and evil in human actions. The Tsalalians’ horror of anything white signifies their horror of death or inevitable destiny of destruction—both physical and spiritual. The white figure in the last scene of the south sea voyage that Pym encounters is “the abyss” (death) through which he has to pass before reaching the Gnostic God. The maritime journey is Pym’s (or Poe’s) imaginary form of salvation into a spiritual realm.

### Conclusion

The melodramatic events in *Pym* are extremely outlandish. Can one experience a series of nightmarish adventures—starvation, mutiny, cannibalism, etc.—in such a short period of time, and still survive until confronting the mysterious white shrouded giant? Perhaps Poe’s ghastly scenes are somewhat exaggerated, but they reveal Poe’s “mental history in those parenthetical passages he so much affected” (Ingram 120). Pym’s survival of these many nightmarish events reflects Poe’s “psychological introspection” and desire to transcend brutal reality. Nevertheless, the series of catastrophic events reveal Pym’s desire to survive the realm of death, which ferries him to the Gnostic spiritual realm. The last scene of white mist, Irwin argues, explores the “origins of language and of human consciousness,” and the white figure is “Pym’s own projection” of his yearning to regress to the “undifferentiated unity of prelinguistic and preconscious experience.” Pym’s longing to fall is actually a desire to rise, which is mirrored in the structure of the quincunx as well as the imaginary world of Utopian / Dystopian. At the end of the narrative, Poe decides to keep the

story of the Pym's survival a mystery, unknown to readers. Pym survives his ordeal and returns to his country, yet the "two or three final chapters" regarding his southwards adventure were destroyed.<sup>[6]</sup> Eakin in "Poe's Sense of an Ending" argues that Poe does so since he is aware of "Pym's position in the earth," "his stance within the figures," that "does not permit transcendence" (20). The only person who holds the secret of Pym's (Poe's) transcendence is Pym's editor, who is, as Eakin notes, "stationed as he is at a privileged, indeed 'angelic,' vantage point looking down on the chasms from above" (20). With the fabrication of the fictional character of Pym's editor, Poe intends to consolidate the structure of providential injunction. While Pym is a Gnostic hero executing the mission of epistemological quest, Pym's editor is stationed as an omnipresent God who knows all about the secret minds of Pym / Poe.

### Notes:

[1] See also "MS. Found in a Bottle" and "A Descent into the Maelström," in which Poe presents shipwrecks, whirlpools, and mysterious vessels.

[2] The motif of devouring others varies in Poe's stories. If cannibalism in *Pym* concerns the theme of survival and collective violence, the death of a beauty in "The Oval Portrait" has something to do with the theme of devouring the soul.

[3] In "Literature's Arctic Obsession," Kathryn Schulz investigates "the two minds" that dominated 19<sup>th</sup> century explorations of the Arctic in history and literature. For example, Conan Doyle's writings, Schulz notes, contain the two minds. His "The Captain of the Pole-Star" describes a hellish, violent world while his speech concerning the subject of polar exploration presents the explorers as godlike heroes. Further, Schulz notes that these Arctic exploration arguments were rooted not so much in "geophysical realities" than "in geopolitical ones."

[4] The motif of live burial is one of the most important in the studies of Poe's stories. See also "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Premature Burial," and "The Cask of Amontillado."

[5] Stephen Mainville in "Language and the Void" gives a similar comment on Pym's mythic adventure. "That is, Pym's blindness to the possible significance of the hieroglyphics results not simply from the 'rational' explanation he offers, but from his more radical refusal to see meaning anywhere. Pym experiences passively; though open to new experience, he 'experiences the experiences' both literally and passively, both being unimaginative and ultimately inhuman. Thus Pym, the monster of literality, becomes a symbol of the gothic frontier he survives: 'naturally,' he becomes part of the landscape he inhabits" (200).

[6] Poe's *Pym* influences the Polar imaginary in science fiction writers like Jules Verne and H. P. Lovecraft. In Jules Verne's *Le Sphinx de Grace* (1897), the survivors of the *Jane Guy* return to Tsalal, and in their expedition, they find the

body of Arthur Gordon Pym, who has died and “become a part of the Polar landscape.” See Jones 58.

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