

1-1-2013

# Impossible Storyworlds and The (Unnatural) Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym

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IMPOSSIBLE STORYWORLDS AND *THE (UNNATURAL) NARRATIVE OF*  
*ARTHUR GORDON PYM*

A thesis submitted to  
the Graduate College  
of Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

In English

by

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Approved by  
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May 2013

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, thanks to Dr. John Young for trusting me to work on my thesis my own way, for providing invaluable feedback on chapter drafts, and introducing me to unnatural narrative theory. His guidance has affirmed for me how there is always more than one “implied author” behind a text.

Sincerest thanks to Dr. Anthony Viola and Prof. John Van Kirk, my committee readers, for being more than understanding when I completely changed thesis topics in October. Even though I abandoned the original thesis topic they signed on for, they did not abandon ship on me when they could have, and I would have fully understood.

I wish to thank my fellow literary studies colleagues and friends, Marissa Nelson and Haley Fedor. We learned, we laughed, and overall we survived and overcame this crucible of knowledge together. And thanks to Allegra Dishner for continuing to be my most dependable and valued reader.

For my mom, who has always set an example of hard work that I admire and am inspired by. When you worked as hard as you did for your children, and still work as hard as you do, how can I not? For my dad, who I could always trust to help me out when I was growing up—and still can—and who trusted me enough to stand back and let me grow up as I needed. For my sister, who introduced me at a young age to heavy metal music, horror movies, and Edgar Allan Poe. Basically, my more morbid academic interests are all her fault.

Last, in case this thesis does not convey my gratitude effectively, I wish to thank Edgar Allan Poe. Had he not, some one hundred seventy-five years ago, written “a very silly book,” this thesis would not nor could not exist. How strange the connection of things. How wonderful, too.

## **DEDICATIONS**

This thesis is dedicated to Dr. John Baker, Concord University, whose care for my work and my writing taught me how to care about it, too, at a time when I did not care about it at all.

I remain your most thankful pupil and friend.

And to my fiancée, Jerri, who loves me even through times when I would not if I were she, and our son, Levi, who looks at me and says, “You’re my hero, dude.” He does not yet realize that he has been my hero all along.

I love you both “a tiny whole bit.”

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## **ABSTRACT**

The following thesis defends reading Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* as an early example of an "unnatural narrative" in American literature. Adapting unnatural narrative theory, a recent area of study in narratology developed to analyze the existence of unnatural storyworlds, minds, and acts of narration prevalent in postmodern fiction, this thesis analyzes the unnatural dynamics at play in *Pym*'s storyworld and storytelling that do not comply with what the reader knows is otherwise physically, logically, or humanly impossible in the physical world. Legitimizing Poe's novel as a work of unnatural narrative coincides with arguing how the readers of unnatural narrative fiction must avoid impulses to make *Pym*'s storyworld and mode of storytelling conform to preset values of what is natural and conventional about narrative fiction, and orient their cognitive perceptions within the tale's impossible storyworld.

## INTRODUCTION

### “AN IMPUDENT AND INGENIOUS FICTION”: *THE (UNNATURAL) NARRATIVE OF ARTHUR GORDON PYM*

[*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*] is a very bad book. I do not mean that it is a great work with some technical lapses, such as *Moby Dick*, or that it is a fairly good book with moments of greatness; or even that it is a workmanlike piece of hack writing. It is worse than any of these possibilities. No editor, even of the lower-grade adventure pulps, would consider publishing as loose and disorganized, confused and ineffective a work as *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, because the veriest hack writer can turn out for him a piece more unified.

—Stuart Levine, *Edgar Poe: Seer and Craftsman*

We have entered a realm composed of objects that frustrate ordinary representation.

—John Carlos Rowe, *Through the Custom-House*

It displayed itself in a host of unnatural sensations. Some of these, as he detailed them, interested and bewildered me; although, perhaps, the terms, and general manner of the narration had their weight.

—Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher”

Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* is an enigmatic novel that fuses pseudo-autobiography with the *Bildungsroman*, gothic literature, and sea narrative genres and, according to Scott Peeples, now “stands as one of the most elusive major texts in American Literature” (55). As testament to *Pym*’s elusiveness, with arguably one of the most infamous and frustrating endings in all literature, the close of *Pym* accosts audiences with a grand mystification of meaning that unravels the tale’s closure: avoiding massacre at the hands of the Tsalalians, Arthur Gordon Pym and shipmate Dirk Peters escape Tsalal and sail onward to Antarctica when, as Pym’s final words attest, “there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the

perfect whiteness of the snow” (*Pym* 1179; XXV). What follows is a terminal, unsatisfying void of white space.

That is, except for the odd “Note” appended to the end of Pym’s tale. This postscript tells us that Pym died suddenly before finishing the manuscript of his travels, and that several crucial chapters are missing from his narrative; most notably, the record of his sojourn in Antarctica, and all that transpires after confronting the “shrouded human figure” there. The “Note” also reveals that Pym’s original editor, a Mr. Poe, doubts the truthfulness of Pym’s tale, discredits the book, and refuses to speculate about the content of the missing chapters. Following the death of the narrator, Pym, and the expressed disbelief of the editor, Mr. Poe, an anonymous editor enters and reinterprets a late episode from Pym’s text—the episode in which Pym and Peters remark on the cavern writings discovered within Tsalal, to be precise—before bringing the book to yet another unsatisfying conclusion. Poe’s novel, however, is still not finished; for after the exit of the anonymous editor, a ghostwriter—strangely appropriate given Pym’s unexpected death—ends the novel with a open-ended passage that cannot be attributed to any writer encountered in the narrative prior to the conclusion(s) that reads, cryptically but vaguely, “*I have graven it within the hills, and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock*” (1182; N). Yet, all of this narrative strangeness comprises only the final pages of the book and proves the last in a mystifying series of unusualness that is Pym’s unruly narrative and Poe’s unorthodox novel.

*Pym*’s episodic strangeness still proves problematic for contemporary readers, but the novel was most likely a nightmare for its nineteenth-century audiences, who were likely more familiar with fictional autobiography like Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, or the factuality of Mary Rowlandson’s captivity narrative, both works distinctly fictional or non-fictional, but not a novel

of *Pym*'s type that claims narrative verisimilitude while deconstructing its factuality and flaunting its status as a synthetic storyworld, at times, an unnatural and impossible storyworld. Thus, in retrospect, *Pym* was a book ahead of its time and, hence, almost unanimously misread and unappreciated following its original printing on the American literary market. I insert here that *Pym*'s initial ill reception and residual critical confounding were the result of what I term *narrative prejudice* or *narrative favoritism*. That is, favoring one type of narrative over another or judging one type of narrative inferior to the ideal of another. Narratologists Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson, progenitors of the recent "unnatural narratology" movement in narrative theory, might correlate *narrative prejudice* with the "mimetic bias" for narrative reception. More specifically, Alber and company approach narrative reception with the argument that "[m]ost definitions of the term 'narrative' have a clear mimetic bias and take ordinary realist texts or 'natural' narratives as being prototypical manifestations of narrative. That is to say, they focus far too extensively on the idea that narratives are modeled on the actual world" and overlook or downplay the very constructedness or artificialness of fictional worlds that conflict with, transgress against, or stand irreducible to mimetic readability (Alber et al. 114). In the interests of clarity, the "mimetic bias" potentially coerces "what one might call 'mimetic reductionism,' that is, the argument that each and every aspect of narrative can be explained on the basis of our real-world knowledge and resulting cognitive parameters" (115). Unnatural narratology, on the other hand, counters "mimetic bias" or *narrative prejudice* by reading texts, which do everything from shake to outright obliterate the mimetic frame directing narrative reception, along the terms put forward by the texts; thus meaning that unnatural temporalities, causalities, spaces, characters, narration are no longer marginalized or naturalized

in favor of mimetic readability. The real world has no bearing on what is possible in the story universes of fiction.

I will return below to outline the methodologies of unnatural narrative study in more detail, and argue how a nineteenth-century novel upholds postmodern narrative theory analysis. But to better orient ourselves at present around the unusual episodes and unnatural narrative dynamics of *Pym* that are the focus of the following thesis, a quick history of *Pym*'s original reception and marginalization by its American audience, later rediscovery by modern criticism, and continued reading in current scholarship, is in order before journeying out on the tides of the novel's strange and still-stranger "storyworld."<sup>1</sup>

### **The Legacy of "A Very Silly Book"**

After attempts to secure a publishing contract for *Tales of the Folio Club*, a collection of previously published tales tied together through a framing narrative, failed to interest American publishers, Thomas W. White received the rejection letter from James Kirke Paulding, writing on behalf of the publishers at Harper and Collins, in March 1836 advising Poe to "undertake a Tale in a couple of volumes, for that is the magical number" (*LJKP* 174). According to Paulding, the *Folio* manuscript failed to attract the publishers at Harper and Collins specifically because Poe's design for connecting the stories in a unified satire on literary criticism was too intellectual, "which [would] prevent ordinary readers from comprehending their drift, and consequently from enjoying the fine satire they convey" (*LJKP* 174). However, Harper and Collins proposed that if

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<sup>1</sup> As defined by David Herman, story-worlds are the narrative worlds that "storytellers, using many different kinds of symbol systems (written or spoken language, static or moving images, word-image combinations, etc.), prompt interpreters to engage in the process of co-creating" with the text (Herman et al. *Narrative Theory* 15).

Poe might “lower himself a little to the general comprehension of the generality of readers, and prepare a series of original tales, or a single work . . . they will make such arrangements with him as will be liberal and satisfactory” (*LJKP* 174). Although Poe’s writing credits by 1836 were limited to his magazine writings—i.e., tales, poetry, criticism, and reviews—and he thought the length of novels extreme and detrimental to the principle of effect he esteemed indispensable to short works of fiction, the pressures of poverty and desire for literary prestige likely coerced Poe to “[reason] that only a popular novel could raise his status and earning power and was therefore worth the gamble” (Peeples 56). Sworn to his writer’s creed that “I must either conquer or die—succeed or be disgraced” (*Collected* 1:15), but living in abject poverty with his wife, Virginia, and stepmother, Maria Clemm, on the meager income his writings secured alone, the monetary motivation to write a novel possibly moved Poe to reconsider his grudging valuation of the novel form long enough to write one of his own. Yet Harper and Collins’ stipulation that Poe write to the “general comprehension” of his American readership asked perhaps too much of the author who was sharply critical of the literary tastes and values of his American audience, particularly critical of the popular call for works of *literary nationalism*—a faulty ideal, to Poe’s estimation, that promoted a culture of readers “liking, or pretending to like, a stupid book the better because, sure enough, its stupidity was of our own [American] growth; and discussed our own affairs” (“Exordium” 632). Nevertheless, Poe accepted Harper and Collins’ proposal for a book-length tale, but rather than write the kind of novel the publishers conceivably imagined, Poe produced “an impudent and ingenious fiction” that did not secure him any measure of financial security during his lifetime (*Pym* 1007; Preface), and, perhaps more costly, drifted in a doldrums as a

marginalized, stigmatized, and ultimately disregarded work in American literature for over one hundred years.

When it was originally published by Harper and Collins in 1838, Edgar Allan Poe's first and only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, was a commercial and critical failure on the American literary market. Though the novel saw some minimal success in Britain, where Poe's *Pym* "ran through more than one edition there" (Quinn 263), the novel's nineteenth-century audiences generally received *Pym* as "a disappointment all around" (Ridgley and Haverstick 79), mostly due to its problematic and stylistic play with narrative verisimilitude. To illustrate, Poe carefully crafts *Pym* to read as the personal recollection of the narrator, Arthur Gordon Pym, who catalogues a series of maritime misadventures and catastrophes along the way to the then-unexplored region of Antarctica. As Poe knew through working as a magazine editor with the *Southern Literary Messenger*, the Antarctic regions were a topic of popular wonderment for many nineteenth-century American readers, and *Pym* exploits Antarctic sensationalism with the pseudo-memoirs of a voyager recently returned from the arctic frontier. On the problems of verisimilitude and the novel's original American reception, Arthur H. Quinn writes that "[a] very unfavorable review in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* shows that the critic took the book to be an account of a real voyage, and solemnly criticized the author [whom the reviewer misidentifies as the book's narrator, Pym] for the improbability of his incidents. In England, too, the story was treated as a narrative of real events" (264). The September 1838 review Quinn alludes to clearly states that "a more impudent attempt at humbugging the public has never been exercised" than the deception uncovered in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*:

Arthur Gordon Pym puts forth a series of travels outraging possibility, and coolly requires his insulted readers to believe his *ipse dixit*, although he confesses that the early portions of his precious effusion were published in the *Southern Literary Messenger* as a story written by the editor, Mr. Poe, because he believed that the public at large would pronounce his adventures to be “an impudent fiction.” 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 [sic] with such a mass of ignorance and effrontery. (Burton 3: 210-11)

Typically quick to defend and praise his work, in a June 1840 letter to William Burton, editor of *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine*, Poe refers to the above review of *Pym*, before dismissing his novel as “a very silly book” (*Collected* 1: 218). As it stands in his collected correspondences and magazine writings, these are Poe’s last words on *Pym*.<sup>2</sup> What is important to take away from the magazine review of *Pym* is that the reviewer originally received the novel as the true memoir of the real Arthur G. Pym, and his oceanic mishaps of mutinies, shipwrecks, and cannibalism at sea, and record of the uncharted island of Tsalal, whose peoples embody the very “blackness of darkness” (*Pym* 1153; XXI), as factual rather than fictional. And although the novel’s incredible events wear out credulity by the end, it is still quite telling that the reviewer regards Pym’s tale as a hoax of “humbuggery,” but yet, the reviewer still speaks of Pym as though he were a real

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<sup>2</sup> Although Poe dismisses *Pym* outright here, one cannot help wondering if the dismissal is truly sincere or if Poe feigns authorial deprecation.

person apart from his fictional narrative rather than a fictional character-narrator who is a part of a fictional tale. We will return to analyze how the novel creates this interpretative slipperiness between fact and fiction in Chapter One—(Anti)Mimetic Vertigo, Narrative Frame, and *Pym*'s Storytelling—and read how narrative unnaturalness exists in the fiction almost right from the beginning.

Dismissed by readers, critics, and, at last, its own author, *Pym* would long loom a specter haunting Poe's writing—the damnable proof that Poe's capacities as a writer were reserved (or doomed) to poetry and magazine writing. Henry James added another dagger to the ill reception of Poe's *Pym* when he wrote the novel off in 1909 as a book in which “the imaginative effort [is] wasted” because “the phenomena evoked, the moving accidents, coming straight, as I say, are immediate and flat, and the attempt is all at the horrific in itself” (“Preface” 103). Although by the time James wrote his critique of *Pym*, poet Charles Baudelaire produced a French translation of Poe's novel,<sup>3</sup> and Jules Verne crafted a two-volume, pseudo-sequel imagining the unknown adventures of Pym in Antarctica,<sup>4</sup> by the turn of the twentieth century, the American regard for Poe and his novel remained virtually stagnant and unchanged.

By the close of the millennium, however, Poe would occupy a more prestigious place in the American literary imagination, and, equally important, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* would no longer stand a failed fiction in the annals of American literature but would read as the most essential work in the library of Poe, and a crucial text in antebellum American writing.

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<sup>3</sup> See Charles Baudelaire, *Les Aventures d'Arthur Gordon Pym* (1857).

<sup>4</sup> See Jules Verne, *Les Sphinx des Glaces* [*The Sphinx of the Ice Fields*] (1897).

The twentieth century witnessed *Pym*'s journey back from the brink of literary oblivion, rescued by renewed critical interest and the application of new, theoretical modes that reshaped the reading of *Pym*. As a testament to the journey of "a very silly book," J. Gerald Kennedy writes that "*The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* has become the pivotal text in discussions of [its] author," ("Unreadable" 145). In fact, the range of readings treating Poe's novel are now so far-reaching and impressive that it would exceed the capacities of this introduction to outline all the valuable and critical work on *Pym*. An abbreviated overview, however, is as follows: Marie Bonaparte's psycho-biographical reading of *Pym* on how the quest to the polar whiteness symbolizes Poe's longing to return to the mother figure; Edward H. Davidson's reading that the novel depicts through Pym "the emergence and growth of the knowing and thinking self" (161). Continuing onward to Sidney Kaplan reading the novel as racial-biblical allegory: *Pym* signifies Poe's "allegorical and didactic damning" of blackness for all time (161); and Dennis Pahl analyzing the novel as playfully illustrating authorial-dissolution in its anticipation of the postmodern "death of the author": "Inscribing himself in the scene of his own writing, Poe thus dramatizes his own disappearance, his 'death,' in writing, he subverts his own self-presence" (43). And still farther to the decades-long critical dialogues between scholars like Joan Dayan, Richard Kopley, John Carlos Rowe, Shaindy Rudoff, J. Gerald Kennedy, and many others, who read how *Pym* upholds Southern racial codes and ideologies of nineteenth-century antebellum America, or parodies pre-Civil War American racial attitudes. With Dayan asserting that the "story depends upon a crisis of color" (108), particularly the latter episodes of the narrative in which whiteness and blackness conflict violently on the island of Tsalal; Teresa A. Goddu adding that "*Pym* records a complex and often contradictory vision of race and sets in motion a

national, not just regional [the American South], racial discourse” (82); and Kennedy observing that *Pym* was written during a time when all of American “culture was . . . fundamentally racist” (“Trust” 236). That is, Kennedy advises us that, when *Pym* was written, racism was of America and not simply the American South. The dialogue on race and *Pym* alone has produced some of the most passionate and thought-provoking studies on the novel to date, proving that, like the raven-haired revenant Ligeia, willed back to life in the tale bearing her name, *Pym* is returned again, this time not from the ice of Antarctica, but from the outermost margins of the literary dead.<sup>5</sup>

The above overview is quite skeletal yet still captures, however minimally, the range of reading *Pym* and how welcoming the novel is to modern theoretical discourses from psychoanalysis, to deconstruction, to new historicism, and beyond. All modes of criticism add their unique knowledge to how we read and receive the novel, and credence to Joseph N. Riddel’s conviction that, “If Poe did not exist, he would have had to be invented” (121); at the very least, “invented” to write *Pym*.

### **Purposeful(I) Errors and the Narrative of *Pym***

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<sup>5</sup> To be clear, *Pym* holds a legacy outside of nineteenth century and new millennial scholarship. Cosmic horror writer H.P. Lovecraft’s novella *At the Mountains of Madness* (1936) chronicles a classified scientific expedition to Antarctica, and divulges the strange and horrific discoveries made there. Along the way, Poe’s novel is mentioned and borrowed from on several occasions. Mat Johnson’s *Pym* (2011) is a darkly satirical tale of an African-American professor who discovers *Pym* and his travels were in fact real, and he undertakes an expedition to discover the black diaspora of Tsalal, the land uncontaminated by whiteness. Outside of literature, German doom metal band Ahab based their album *The Giant* (2012) on *Pym*; the song lyrics retell select episodes from the novel.

Complicating the above readings of *Pym* and virtually all readings of the novel regards how we make sense of the narrative along with the many manuscript errors and/or narrative discrepancies shaping and affecting our reception of and response to the novel. An overview of some of these manuscript errors and narrative discrepancies consists of an impossible three-sided letter that is at once a duplicate copy of a forged letter written to deceive Pym's father, a warning penned in blood to a stowed-away Pym telling of mutiny aboard the *Grampus*, and a blank piece of paper; continuity issues in which Pym alleges that years later Augustus tells him the particulars of the *Grampus* mutiny and how it is he came to rescue Pym, yet Augustus dies just weeks later after saving Pym from the lethal atmosphere of the cargo hold; and another continuity issue when Dirk Peters, "a half-breed Indian" (*Pym* 1007; Preface), inexplicably transforms into a white man by the close of the novel. These narrative discrepancies will be discussed further in Chapter Two—Storyreading Ethics and *Pym*'s Impossible Storyworld—but for our purposes here, some critics of *Pym* have read over the errors altogether, thus making some of their more critical expositions on the novel quite curious and bizarre.

To illustrate, Edward H. Davidson makes no mention of *Pym*'s manuscript errors either in the chapter he devotes to the novel or as an endnote addendum; yet, he writes that *Pym* is the "most complete and sustained work" Poe ever wrote, a claim problematized by ignoring how *Pym*'s discrepancies and, at times, impossibilities disrupt the novel's overall coherence (157). The same impulse to overlook *Pym*'s narrative errors undercuts Harold Beaver's introduction to the novel's 1975 Penguin Edition: "Far from rambling and inconclusive . . . nothing could be more assured, more tightly woven or concise . . . than the matching images of these folding and

reflecting halves” (29).<sup>6</sup> The “reflecting halves” constitute how the book is divided along its first thirteen chapters and the final thirteen chapters, and how events in the two sections allegedly mirror one another. But to claim this cohesive symmetry, Beaver must blatantly look past the issues in the text that might spoil this vision of consistency. Meanwhile, critics like L. Moffitt Cecil remark on *Pym* as a flawed narrative filled with “an embarrassing number of lapses and inconsistencies” (232), and Joseph V. Ridgley and Iola H. Haverstick venture so far to say that “the story lacks a controlling theme” and no amount of readerly imagination “can bring all of its disparate elements into a consistent interpretation” (80). Through the above pairing of readings, we see a very polarized and conflicting depiction of *Pym*; that is, the novel is either the most cohesive, complete, and well put together tale by Poe, or a series of editorial discrepancies that lead to an unsatisfying nowhere, and result in an authorially mishandled narrative.

Reading *Pym* along a similar line, a footnote in J. Gerald Kennedy’s Oxford edition of *Pym* marks the paradox of the three-sided letter as an “interpretive enigma” or an outright impossibility that jeopardizes reading and interpreting the novel (286; n28). Although the story’s errors are interpretatively frustrating, and quite often create mutually exclusive events, the errors only break the readability of the novel when read as charted around the laws of our natural or outside-the-book world rather than playing within the vast possibilities of a fictional storyworld in which an Indian can inexplicably change into a white man, warning letters can have three

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<sup>6</sup> More still, Beaver’s edition of *Pym* only highlights one standout error in the narrative, and that is the matter of Pym telling his readers that years later Augustus confessed that he very nearly abandoned his rescue efforts to save Pym, fearing him already expired in the lethal air of the cargo hold. And yet, Augustus dies at sea only weeks later. The rest of *Pym*’s more unusual or impossible episodes go unremarked.

sides, and the narrator can possess knowledge impossible for him to know; all of these and other strange impossibilities that trade places with the possible in *Pym*.

That is why *Pym* requires that we do not pardon nor overlook error but, at the same time, disallow *narrative prejudice* that automatically assumes that when the pieces of the narrative do not naturally and/or logically fit together (that is, a piece of paper cannot have three sides) the book is imperfect or its author poorly proofread the manuscript and missed key errors. Although even the most meticulous writers make mistakes, and errors assuredly escape the most attentive author's eyes, as Marianne Moore reminds us that "omissions" in poetry "are not accidents," *Pym* teaches us how sometimes what we mistake for authorial or textual discrepancies are *not* accidents, and errors are not book-breaking errors but can actually be *purposeful(l) errors*. That is, errors *full of purpose* for reading and grasping the narrative anew, or, to borrow a quote from Joyce's *Ulysses*, *Pym*'s errors open "portals to discovery" (190).

To be clear, *Pym*'s grievous editorial errors are not narrative accidents, they are not even errors; they help to distinguish *Pym* from more traditional, natural versions of narrative by transgressing against a mimetic ideal. Therefore, we cannot dispense with them, as their presence in the narrative is crucial, and the impossibilities and transgressions against mimetic logic they convey also create new ways to read and explore the interpretive possibilities of *Pym*. That is, *Pym* requires that we avoid *narrative prejudice* or any impulse to map the novel around preset values of what is natural and logical about narrative and orient ourselves around the novel's internal order *of the unnatural*—however mimetically illogical or impossible—lest we miss how the editorial missteps and narratorial unnaturalness all create arguably one of the first and finest examples of an unnatural narrative in American literature. Thus, in turn, missing how Poe,

writing *Pym* near the middle nineteenth century, anticipated postmodern narrative by over one hundred years, and created a timeless tale of a journey into the strange climes and exposures of writing narrative fiction. And this is a case for reading *Pym* that unnatural narratology frees us to make.

### **Unnatural Narratology, Unnatural Methodology**

To return to the dialogue begun above on unnatural narrative theory, Viktor Shklovsky's theory of "defamiliarization" proves vital for how unnatural narratologists read any narrative that transgresses against natural, conventional, or mimetic molds and, as a result, "makes the familiar seem strange" because "[t]he technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important*" ("Art" 16; emphasis original). Unnatural narratives, in a way, are narratives "made strange" or, at least, texts that estrange narrative from recreating the natural, real, or logical world in favor of playing within strange, synthetic, and unconventional fictional storyworlds. These unusual fictions make their readers seek beyond the normal, conventional ways of sense making and/or narrative pattern making to read the text's mimetically-estranging strangeness. For instance, Jan Alber regards the unnatural in literature as "physically impossible scenarios and events, that is impossible by the known laws governing the physical world, as well as logically impossible ones, that is, impossible by accepted principles of logic" ("Impossible" 80). Alber adds that unnatural texts "transgress real-world frames and urge us to stretch our sense-making strategies to the limit" (80). Brian Richardson defines an unnatural narrative as a work "that conspicuously violates conventions of standard narrative forms," and these unusual

texts “follow fluid, changing conventions and create new narratological patterns in each work. In a phrase, unnatural narratives produce a defamiliarization of the basic elements of narrative” (“What Is” 35). Henrik Skov Nielsen argues against what he and fellow unnatural narratologists claim is current narrative study’s “focus on the idea that narratives are modeled on the actual world” and cautions how an over “emphasis on real-world knowledge and the assumption that all stories are situated within a communicative context comparable to real-life narrative situations may lead to a neglect of the specific possibilities of some literary and fictional narratives—and other kinds of unnatural narratives” (71). Last, Stefan Iversen maintains that not all narratives are readable within conventional or natural narrative parameters. He asserts that assuming that narratives are naturally readable along mimetic criteria will “run the risk of creating blindness toward some types of texts, which most would call narratives but which present the reader with storyworlds, narrative acts, or experiences that act according to other logics than those that we consider to be normal, prototypical, or natural” (90). As a definition, from here forward, we will regard unnatural narratives as narratives that reject the “physical and logical” limitations of the real world for the un-real and creative logics of fictional storytelling and storyworlds.

At this point, it is most likely necessary to provide a few orienting examples of unnatural narratives other than *Pym*. To this end, Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*, the tale of a former Nazi doctor of Auschwitz told in reverse chronology (time in the tale moves backwards), is repeatedly mentioned among unnatural narratologists (particularly Richardson) for exemplifying unnatural temporality, and even causality, in narrative fiction. In Amis’s novel, not only does the narrator experience life in reverse, he begins as a retired doctor in America and defects to 1940s Europe before arriving back at Auschwitz during wartime. He also perceives the aftermath of time’s

reversal—Nazi doctors at Auschwitz appear not to kill their Jewish patients; instead, their lethal medical experiments appear to bring the dead back to life or heal the sick. Thus, the very immorality around the charnel aura of Auschwitz is undone through time’s reversal because the “doctors of death” transform into protectors of life. A strange violation against what is humanly and physically possible in the real world occurs in Franz Kafka’s novella, *The Metamorphosis*, when the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, inexplicably transforms into a monstrous insect in what is an otherwise mimetic storyworld. Similar to *The Metamorphosis*, the protagonist from Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* transgresses the laws of realism when he suddenly changes from male to female around the middle of the tale without any explanation how this gender metamorphosis is possible. And last, Robert Coover’s short story “The Babysitter” violates our knowledge of what is logically possible in the real world with a series of overlapping yet mutually exclusive scenarios in which a babysitter either attends to three children without incident, is seduced by the children’s father, raped by two lustful teenagers, murdered by accident, murdered on purpose, negligently allows one of the children to die, or is killed along with all of the children and their father, and later discovered by the mother, among other odd outcomes. What Coover’s tale never makes certain is which scenario actually happens, but implies that all of the scenarios have equal chance to have taken place, or, even more unnaturally, all of these scenarios actually happen—an outcome that is realistically impossible.

It is important to note that the term “unnatural” for Alber, Richardson, Nielsen, Iversen, and other unnatural narrative theorists is not applied in a stigmatizing or marginalizing manner but stands for texts that are typically overlooked or misread due to their antimimetic or unnatural narrative dynamics. Although unnatural narrative theory regards mainly postmodern and even

some modern narratives, I am not alone when I assert that *Pym* is a text with postmodern virtues, as Kennedy reads *Pym* in his books *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing* and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym and the Abyss of Interpretation*, David H. Hirsch writes in “‘Postmodern’ or Post-Auschwitz: The Case of Poe,” G. R. Thompson asserts in “The Arabesque Design of Arthur Gordon Pym,” and John Carlos Rowe analyzes the novel in *Through the Custom-House*. Each, in his own way and to his own conceptual purpose(s), calls attention to how *Pym* stands apart from nineteenth-century literature as a strikingly postmodern fiction, or historically out-of-place novel conveying postmodern writing practices and attitudes with its stylistic and thematic play with representing truth in writing, disregard for terminal meaning, and the deferment of closure.<sup>7</sup> To illustrate *Pym*’s postmodern virtues, the tale defers real closure with a series of (non)endings (discussed above) that reveal postmodernist fiction’s common deferment or outright rejection of closure, as the narrative repeatedly selects anti-closure over a true, terminal version of finality. That is, the tale provides no means for resolution because (1) Pym dies and can no longer narrate his tale (i.e., by real-world logic, Pym cannot); (2) by strange destiny, Pym takes “the few remaining chapters which were to have completed his narrative” to his grave (*Pym* 1180; N); and (3) the anonymous editor and ghostwriter who appear in the postscript only trouble the waters of the text more with their vague analyses and cryptic passages; all make any clear interpretation of the narrative virtually impossible. Thus, it is not unbelievable to assert that Poe’s *Pym* reads as an unnatural narrative despite preceding postmodern narrative literature. In fact, Rowe’s reading of *Pym* in *Through the Custom-House* appears to anticipate just such a non-natural reading of *narrative* and *Pym*.

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<sup>7</sup> This, of course, is not an exhaustive list of *Pym*’s postmodern qualities.

Arguably more than any other critic of *Pym*, Rowe allows the narrative's errors to signify more than authorial negligence, and along the way in his overview of *Pym* criticism, integrates unnatural narrative theory's central arguments against traditional methodologies for reading and interpreting narrative: "recent American criticism either relentlessly tries to fit *Pym* into some predetermined generic category or marshals impressive evidence to demonstrate the basic flaws and inconsistencies in the text. In both cases, the same critical standard continues to operate: a good work of literature ought to demonstrate internal coherence and narrative consistency" (91-92). Thus, as Rowe profiles the critical prejudices toward *Pym* in the late 1970s, *Pym* was not widely received as "a good work of literature" because previous critics felt that the text did not adhere to "internal coherence" and/or "consistency" that set apart "good" literary works from lesser literature. Now a touchstone reading in *Pym* studies, Rowe's deconstructive analysis of the tale anticipates unnatural narratology because it intimates the marginalization of texts like *Pym* that upset interpretive readability due to their defamiliarizing play with fictional storyworlds and modes of storytelling:

Since literature depends upon its ability to disrupt and violate accepted meanings and ordinary expectations, the most original work characteristically frustrates established methods and categories of interpretation. It does not, of course, follow that the text's resistance to interpretation is a guarantee of its literary value, but more attention ought to be paid to the ways in which our critical traditions tend to privilege certain "major works" and exile other "eccentric" texts. (92)

What Rowe calls "'eccentric' texts" like *Pym*, we might now term "unnatural narratives," works that are unruly, whose stories and narrative dynamics do not behave logically or realistically, and

make no apologies for violating the favored mimetic contract of narrative fiction.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the works that unnatural narratologists read and revalue along the lines of the unnatural are not dissimilar to *Pym*, and the novel's absurdities and disregard for narrative normativity or more conventional narrative forms endears *Pym* to the unnatural in ways heretofore left unread. Hence, Rowe proves a vital port of departure for reading and defending *Pym* as an unnatural narrative, but there is another dynamic to *Pym*'s tale, indeed, I submit, to all unnatural narrative fiction, that must be accounted for, and that is the ethical turn our reading takes when confronted with all the storyworld and storytelling impossibilities troubling the waters between the tale's telling and its reception by the reader.

### **Storyreading Ethics and Unnatural Narrative Fiction**

Were this thesis only to describe how *Pym* is a work of unnatural narrative, the analysis put forward here would be incomplete with regard to the aims of unnatural narratology. For the goal of unnatural narratology is not to build a library of unnatural narratives, but to reason how the unnatural in such narratives draws attention to or expands upon thematic, synthetic, and/or mimetic commentaries that the text is making. The mimetic, thematic, and synthetic capacities of unnatural narratives are already well-attended to in the existing literature on unnatural narrative theory; yet, to my knowledge, the field is still wanting criticism attending to the ethics of reading logical and physical impossibilities in narrative fiction to analyze what attends readers' reactions to and judgments of impossible storyworlds and modes of storytelling like *Pym*'s. Although it is a primary objective of this thesis to defend reading *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* as an

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<sup>8</sup> To this effect, Davidson provides an excellent, terse summation of *Pym*'s interpretive unruliness that is greatly conducive to perceiving the tale as unnatural narrative fiction: "The narrative gets out of hand" (160).

unnatural narrative, legitimating *Pym*'s tale as an unnatural narrative coincides with arguing the ethical weight that readers' cognitive sense-making strategies take on when reading, reacting to, and judging *Pym*'s strange storyworld and unnatural narrative. To make this argument, I propose narrative as an interactive nexus orienting storyworld and storytelling with what I term the *storyreading ethics* of unnatural narrative fiction, which involve readers' cognitive-aesthetic and cognitive-ethical responses to the narrative that enfold storyworld, storytelling, and storyreading, to analyze the ethics attending to how readers conceivably make sense of the tale or make the tale make sense with regard to *Pym*'s strangeness. In other words, how readers cognitively and responsibly cancel out *Pym*'s illogicalities and paradoxes by evoking the laws and logic of the real world into the storyworld, or come to terms with the narrative's mimetic violations to experience the tale without any reserved attitudes about what is natural or logical about fictional storytelling, and the ethics attending to these perceivable sense-making strategies.

The application of ethical criticism to unnatural narrative fiction poses thought-provoking and unavoidable questions for how we may conceivably read and evaluate unnatural narrative fiction along ethical lines. The following list is in no way all-inclusive but reveals some of the questions an ethical approach to unnatural narrative may likely raise. For instance, is it ethical to believe that we can even take an ethical approach to reading and interpreting unnatural narratives? Does an ethical approach impose a cognitive strategy onto the narrative that violates the strange order of the narrative's storyworld? In other words, can we assume that ethics even apply to non-mimetic or antimimetic fictions, or are such texts anti-ethical? More still, can we combine the approaches of ethical criticism and unnatural narratology and still leave the aesthetics and tenets of each intact, or will one method take precedence over the other? And can

we theorize a general or broadly ranging ethical approach for unnatural narratives, or must the ethical condition arise relative to each narrative's specific situations? Thus, is an ethics of unnatural narrative realistically conceivable or can it only exist intertextually, a project of many localized readings of ethics across a globalized range of unnatural narrative fiction?

With certainty, it would exceed the capacities of this thesis to undertake answering all of these questions and any others which may afterwards arise. Thus, the above list is meant to guide the ethical turn this thesis will take with regard to the unnatural in *Pym*, but also submitted with hopes of opening productive and continued thoughtful conversations on the ethics of reading unnatural narrative fiction. For now, however, we must acquaint ourselves with former constructions of ethical criticism to conceptualize an ethics of reading unnatural narrative fiction relative to *Pym*.

Arguing the values of narratives to ethics, J. Hillis Miller theorizes, "Without storytelling there is no theory of ethics. Narratives, examples, stories . . . are indispensable to thinking about ethics" (3). Through this conception, narratives and stories are where people turn to grasp and practice ethics. Thus, for Miller, narratives are not merely vessels of ethical meaning, narratives engender ethics and, ideally, ethical readers, for during any reading there is an "ethical moment" created by the text that "begins with and returns to the man or woman face to face with the words on the page" (4). Wayne C. Booth maintains that ethics are how readers make sense from narratives, and undertakes to define an ethical criticism of narrative motivated "to find ways of talking about the ethical quality of the experience of narrative in itself. What kind of company are we keeping as we read or listen? What kind of company have we kept?" (*Company* 10). Quite simply, ethics allow persons to make sense of narratives, and allow readers to discuss their

experiences in ethically constructive ways with other readers. More important, Booth speaks on “the ethics *of* readers” as constituting “their responsibilities *to* stories” (9), or how attentive readers must accept the task of reading a narrative on its own ethical terms without assigning any preconceived value judgments to the narrative. At least, this assertion appears to be the implied ethical contract most valued for reading narrative fiction, even though it is unclear whether or not the reader can realistically abide by these terms because, as Martha C. Nussbaum argues, readers will almost always bring some measure of their real-world virtues into reading because we “cannot read as an immersed participant without bringing some such views to bear; they are implicit in the very emotions with which [we] respond” (*Poetic* 8). Although Miller, Booth, and Nussbaum have different conceptual attitudes on ethics, or conduct their approaches from opposite points of value, all importantly bring ethics back to the real-world reader behind the book rather than end the ethics of reading narrative with the implied reader of the storyworld.<sup>9</sup>

Routing ethics back to the reader behind the book is imperative for conceptualizing the ethics of reading unnatural narrative fiction like *Pym*, because unnatural phenomenon such as impossible knowledge, or when Pym, our narrator, knows what he cannot by real-world logic know, is not localized to the narrative, but actually transcends the narrative and affects the real-world reader behind the implied reader of the storyworld. That is, I argue, in the space of *Pym*’s fictional narrative, when Pym communicates knowledge to the authorial audience that he cannot

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<sup>9</sup> As defined by Wolfgang Iser, the implied reader “incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning of the text, and the reader’s actualization of this potential through the reading process” (*Implied* xii). Apart from the real-world reader, the implied reader is a conceptual reader that the text predesigns to respond to the story and narrative in a particular manner: “No matter who or what he may be, the real reader is always offered a particular role to play, and it is this role that constitutes the concept of the implied reader” (*Act* 34-35).

realistically know (being able to know intimate details of an event to which he was not present or could not learn about through another person), the real-world reader now knows information that he/she also cannot, or at the very least should not, know. Moreover, with respect to *Pym*, this paradox is layered for the real-world reader in that (1) he/she recognizes that Pym knows something he cannot know, (2) he/she realizes that Pym does not seem to perceive that he should not or cannot know what he knows, and, last and most important, (3) the reader reflects on this paradox and discerns that he/she also cannot and should not know what Pym has reported. And yet, the riddle of it all is that the real-world reader, like Pym, in fact knows what logically should not be known all the same.

Unnatural narrative theorists have not remarked on the significance of what this reality might entail for how readers react cognitively and ethically to the unnatural in narrative fiction, because most of the available criticism and theory is more invested in discussing the conventions of unnatural narrative fiction without paying equal, thoughtful attention to the readerly dynamics of unnatural narratives. To that end, I argue that more than any other type of fictional narrative, unnatural narratives require a more involved order of reader-narrative interactivity between the tale *and* its authorial audience who must decide how to react to and/or resolve any real-world paradoxes or textual riddles, like those occasioned by antimimetic knowledge, revealed through the strange storyworld and mode of storytelling.<sup>10</sup> It is this project, specifically, that I begin here by broadening my reading of Poe's novel as an unnatural narrative to explore and conceive of the

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<sup>10</sup> To be clear, reader-narrative interactivity encompasses the interactions, exchanges, and tensions created, sustained, resolved or unresolved by a given narrative over the course of the reading experience.

ways readers may react to the mimetic violations in *Pym*'s storyworld that unsettle the reading experience, and the ethics interlocking this cognitively-demanding, reader-narrative interactivity.

If we are to be attentive readers of *Pym*, or any like narrative, as an unnatural narrative, we must accept the strange reading experience it conveys, as well as minimize any coinciding cognitive dissonance and mimetic disorientation that reading experience enfold. As Alber et al. submit, readers can have no reservations toward narrative fiction that can and at times does confront them with impossible storyworlds. Thus, it follows that if we are to be responsible readers of *Pym* as an unnatural narrative, we must orient ourselves around the ethics of the tale's strange storyworld and style of storytelling. Keeping in harmony with this objective, James Phelan's method of rhetorical ethics provides an excellent paradigm for advancing an ethics of reading unnatural narrative fiction. Conducting ethical criticism attentively and fairly requires readers not to impose an external ethical order, or "a pre-existing ethical system to the narrative," for ethics in reading, Phelan maintains, must always "proceed from the inside out rather than the outside in" (*Experiencing* 10). Hence, to be responsible readers, we must verify the ethical codes and values cutting across the tale to read and abide by the ethical contract that underlies the narrative at hand. Rhetorical ethics, though, is more invested in how the ethics of characters, narration, and reader receptions interrelate, and how a reader's ethical judgment enfold the judgments made by characters of other characters, narrators of characters, or even implied authors conveying judgments of both characters and narrators. I do not mean that Poe's novel does not welcome rhetorical ethics, for the cannibal lottery episode near the middle of the novel

alone invites such a reading.<sup>11</sup> However, my focus in this thesis is not primarily centered on the ethical evaluations of *Pym*'s strange storyworld and storytelling, but on the ethics of reading *Pym* as an unnatural narrative, and how readers may conceivably react and respond to the mimetic violations, or what makes *Pym* strange, throughout the novel. That is, though rooted in *Pym*'s narrative, with respect to its unnatural conventions, my critical attention pertains to the real-world reader outside of *Pym*'s strange fictional world, and the ethics around how he/she may conceivably navigate *Pym*'s unnatural reading experience. I now turn to outlining what a conceptualization of the real-world reader's potential cognitive reactions and ethical choices may unfold with respect to the novel.

Alber conceptualizes what attends to strange or non-mimetic reading experiences, or the "options that readers may try out when confronted with unnatural scenarios" ("Impossible" 83). To this purpose, he outlines five possible though non-universal ways readers may respond to the unnatural: first, readers may explain away the unnatural as dream or hallucinatory states; second and third, they may reduce the antimimetic material to a thematic or allegorical commentary the text is making; and lastly, on four and five, "a number of impossible scenarios urge us to create new scripts by combining or extending pre-existing schemata" in order to "include the strange

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<sup>11</sup> After the mutiny and wreck of the *Grampus*, and after drifting listlessly on the ocean for weeks without food, Pym, Augustus, Peters, and Richard Parker all agree to draw straws to determine who will be sacrificed to end the hunger of the others. Prior to the cannibal lottery, Pym is entrusted to fashion the straws the men will draw, and he reports how he almost (or perhaps did, his words are quite vague here) gave in to the desire to manipulate the straws to ensure his own salvation. He then challenges any who would judge him for this behavior to have his or her life placed in similar peril. Rhetorically, Pym reveals to us his ethics as a person before revealing that he is aware of how we will judge his conduct in this section (see *Pym* 1094-99; XII).

phenomena with which we are confronted” (82-83). There is, interestingly, also an unlisted sixth option that Alber terms “the Zen way of reading” unnatural narrative fiction, or the open-minded way “which might be adopted by an attentive reader who repudiates the above-mentioned explanations and simultaneously accepts the strangeness of unnatural scenarios and the feelings of discomfort, fear, or worry that they evoke in her or him” (83). Although the most ideal for an uninhibited reading experience of unnatural narrative, as Alber admits, and I add to here, the “Zen way of reading” is perhaps the most inaccessible for readers to truly achieve or practice because there is no way to completely cancel out the real-world context through which we read unnatural narrative fiction. In fact, without this out-of-textual reference point, there would be no way, nor need, to categorize the unnatural from the natural, for the two would conflate in ways that, though logically incompatible, would no longer matter for the purpose(s) of experiencing fictional narrative (for instance, antimimetic temporality would seem no more unusual than time moving chronologically). This conflation, in turn, would discard what makes unnatural narrative fiction so remarkable and worth noting apart from natural or mimetic narrative fiction in the first place.

The real world cannot and honestly is not ever truly discarded when reading an unnatural narrative, and, consequently, important decisions will have to be made by the reader along the way of reading a tale like *Pym* respecting how to respond to the strange paradoxes and unnatural scenarios that arise. Like Alber, then, I too am invested in the ways that readers may choose to respond to mimetic violations in fictional storyworlds. Rather than adopt Alber’s methodology however, I will produce my own text of conceivable ways readers react and respond relative to *Pym*’s unique narrative situation—which I believe is the correct method for conducting ethical,

unnatural narrative analysis treating both the textual *and* readerly dynamics of any narrative at hand.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter One outlines *Pym*'s narrative frame and fictional world-building to analyze how the tale takes place within a mostly mimetic space, and yet, still features episodic violations and interruptions of the antimimetic type. I set up what is a continued argument of this thesis on how *Pym*'s predominately mimetic narrative frame actually makes its mimetic violations that much harder to cope with, cognitively, for the reader. I also discuss the (anti)*mimetic vertigo* that the narrative frame imparts onto the reading experience, or how Pym establishes believability as a potentially real person only to undercut this verisimilar authenticity, and how this disorientation between the real and the fictional parallels the tale's fluctuations between the mimetic and the antimimetic.

Chapter Two argues how *Pym*'s more overt narrative discrepancies are actually mimetic violations within the storyworld that establish the novel as a work of unnatural narrative fiction. My argument targets the logical and physical impossibilities in the storyworld, with particular attention given to the paradox of the three-sided warning letter, and the novel's periodic episodes of antimimetic knowledge. Along the way, I argue how certain antimimetic phenomena create out-of-textual experiences or issues that transcend the narrative and affect the actual real-world reader. Likewise, I develop an ethics of reading *Pym* as an unnatural narrative by conceptualizing the possible ways readers react cognitively to the (anti)mimetic violations in *Pym*'s otherwise mimetic universe, and weigh the ethics of those experiential exchanges between reader and text.

Chapter Three returns to how *Pym* takes place within a mimetic universe that features episodic mimetic violations to argue against unnatural narratologist Brian Richardson's belief that only truly antimimetic narratives are actually unnatural narratives. That is, Richardson argues that only narratives with tales that present fictional worlds that completely defy real-world logic are unnatural or antimimetic narratives, all other narratives are either non-mimetic, mimetic, or pseudo-unnatural which do not qualify as unnatural. I counter argue that it is equally if not more cognitively troublesome for readers when a narrative within an originally mimetic frame presents inexplicable and random episodes of antimimetic strangeness as when a narrative framed around antimimetic logic features unnatural events throughout the tale. Moreover, mimetic violations in a mostly mimetic storyworld like *Pym*'s keep the reader in a near-constant state of perception enrichment, as he/she must, at random intervals, revise his/her perceptions of what was an originally verisimilar storyworld that becomes increasingly more unnatural. This, I argue, is not always the case with distinctly antimimetic texts, like Amis's *Time's Arrow*, due to how readers may eventually adapt to the text's continual (re)presentation of the unnatural.

Last, in the conclusion, I provide closing thoughts on what reading *Pym* as an unnatural narrative means for past and future studies of the novel, the field of Poe studies as a whole, and what an ethics of reading unnatural narratives means for unnatural narratology moving forward.

Perhaps it has long been known that there is something remarkably odd and endearingly strange about *Pym* with its mystifying textual riddles. This thesis does not claim to solve *Pym*'s lingering mysteries, only to help us read the novel anew from a new theoretical angle that may be more in harmony with what *Pym* has been all along: unnatural. Doing so, I believe, will change our perceptions of the novel. There are "discoveries still farther" to be made with *Pym* (1004).

Unless we feel that we have read all there is to read with Poe's "very silly book," or Pym's "impudent and ingenious fiction," let us now read it again, only this time with a mind for the strange and unnatural.

## CHAPTER ONE

### (ANTI)MIMETIC VERTIGO, NARRATIVE FRAME, AND *PYM*'S STORYTELLING

That is to say, the language was ingeniously framed so as to present to the ear all the outward signs of intelligibility, and even of profundity, while in fact not a shadow of meaning existed.

—Edgar Allan Poe, “Mystification”

Originator of the modern detective story, Edgar Allan Poe arguably wrote his masterwork of mystery fiction when he was not even writing one of his “tales of ratiocination” at all.<sup>12</sup> Instead, Poe’s most endearing mystery to American letters traces back to his failed and only attempt at novel writing, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. What has duped generations of readers is *Pym*’s break from meaning. That is, if some stories are plotless, *Pym* appears to be meaningless, a frustrating exercise in deception that carries its readers to the very precipice of knowledge only to ultimately withhold any true sense of things by the end. The ending, the narrative’s nucleus of critical attention and frenzy for decades now, constitutes a conspiracy against meaning with a “shrouded human figure” who radiates “the perfect whiteness of the snow,” and what looks to be a cryptic verse of mock-biblical authority that invokes the wrath of God “upon the dust” of this Earth. Thus, *Pym*’s dead-end riddles and cliffhanger endings leave readers more and more alone to wonder what, if anything, *Pym*’s narrative comes to other than “[a] mystery of mysteries” (Poe “Spirits” 33).

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<sup>12</sup> Poe created the phrase, “tales of ratiocination,” for his stories in which a detective—usually master sleuth, C. Auguste Dupin—applies extraordinary analytic reasoning and cognitive powers of deduction to solve baffling murders or puzzling thefts. See Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Purloined Letter,” and “The Mystery of Marie Roget” as examples.

Long before *Pym* terminates dubiously in “snow” and “dust,” however, it opens lucidly enough with rhetorical acts of storytelling and storyworld-making that keep in harmony with narrative theorists James Phelan’s and Peter J. Rabinowitz’s conceptualizations of narrative as a rhetorical event: “Narrative is someone telling somebody else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something” (3). On the other hand, as noted in the Introduction, *Pym* is no ordinary narrative, and perhaps we make a mistake from the outset if we assume that normal codes of rhetoric and modes of storytelling apply to *Pym*’s impossible storyworld. On that note, Richardson argues against Phelan’s and Rabinowitz’s rhetorical model to narrative, averring that “[i]f a natural narrative consists of someone telling someone else that something significant has happened within a recognizable storyworld, an antimimetic narrative may contest each of the terms in this statement” (“Antimimetic” 22). As I argue in this chapter, *Pym* fluctuates between both the mimetic and antimimetic conventions of narrative and its purpose(s), which estranges readers from more normal modes of interpretation by requiring a higher degree of reader-narrative interactivity. Moreover, rhetorically, *Pym*’s prefatory narrative exacerbates and catalyzes (anti)mimetic vertigo, or the dizzying, transgressive play between fact and fiction, storyworld and physical world, which weaves throughout the fabric and frame of the main narrative, particularly the (anti)mimetic violations in *Pym*’s otherwise mimetic storyworld.

The narrative of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* begins with a layered, rhetorical, communicative event: our narrator, Arthur Pym, tells his audience that he will soon tell us the miraculous story of his oceanic adventures and death-defying escapades that took place almost ten years prior en route to the uncharted Antarctic continent. As such, Pym’s opening admissions constitute rhetorical events that begin to (1) configure Pym, a fictional character, as a believably

real person for his audience, (2) construct the storyworld of the forthcoming narrative within the storytelling of the prefatory narrative, and (3) assemble Pym's story within a mimetic narrative frame or, to borrow a phrase from narrative theorist Monika Fludernik, a "verisimilar narrative universe" ("How Natural" 366):

Upon my return to the United States a few months ago, after the extraordinary series of adventure in the South Seas and elsewhere, of which an account is given in the following pages, accident threw me into the society of several gentlemen in Richmond, Va., who felt deep interest in all matters relating to the regions I had visited, and who were constantly urging it upon me . . . to give my narrative to the public. (1007; Preface)

At this early point, Pym does not yet formally introduce himself to the audience, but he does introduce himself in the pronominal forms of "my," "I," and "me," which reveal a first-person narrating consciousness, and one that claims to have undergone an "extraordinary series of adventure" about which a report will promptly follow. Almost immediately, as readers, we begin making cognitive-aesthetic responses to this storyteller and this story of a story in an attempt to gain our bearings in what is a still-nebulous storyworld. Going on the details shared in just these opening remarks, we are already trying to determine the appropriate conventions for reading and responding to this narrative. For instance, a prior knowledge of Poe's work may inspire us to ask whether the work is supernatural ("Metzengerstein") or horrific ("Berenice"), and whether the conventions prescribed to these narrative types apply here, or whether we are now reading something without precedent in the library of Poe. As unnatural narrative theorists might argue, however, most readers of *Pym's* narrative most likely begin with the default assumption that the

narrative reproduces the real world, or that the literary word recreates the physical world rather than the word creates a world all of its own. Thus, although Pym is in the process of configuring himself for his audience, many readers have likely already pre-configured him as a verisimilar person and his storyworld as a fictionalized version of the real world. I will discuss the pitfalls of such audience assumptions momentarily, but for now, it is worth exploring how *Pym* creates mimetic realism and how the prefatory narrative welcomes a mimetic narrative response.

The most immediate cognitive-aesthetic response to *Pym* regards whether the storytelling and storyworld mimic, parody, or traduce realism altogether. Pym tells us that he will soon tell us a story so incredible that he originally feared that it would fatigue and ultimately lose all believability with his readers, and, were it not for the gentlemen from Virginia—particularly, a “Mr. Poe,” Pym’s alleged editor—Pym reports that he likely would not divulge the tale at all for several reasons:

One consideration which deterred me was that, having kept no journal during a greater portion of the time in which I was absent, I feared I should not be able to write, from mere memory a statement so minute and connected as to have the *appearance* of that truth it would really possess. . . . Another reason was that the incidents to be narrated were of a nature so positively marvelous that, unsupported as my assertions must necessarily be (except by the evidence of a single individual, and he a half-breed Indian), I could only hope for belief among my family, and those of my friends who have had reason, through life, to put faith in my veracity—the probability being that the public at large would regard what I should put forth as merely an impudent and ingenious fiction. (1007; Preface)

By the end of the opening paragraph, our storyteller and his storyworld remain nebulous or still taking on a definite shape, but Pym begins to take on a mimetic quality by acknowledging his (character) flaws as an author and a person. That is, by questioning the capacity of his memory to recall lucid, complete, precise facts, which he anticipates his more attentive readers will do, and by mentioning his “distrust in [his] abilities as a writer” as causes for his anxiety and hesitancy to present his story to the American public, Pym seems more life-like, more human (1007; Preface). Oddly enough, by underlining his unreliability, Pym paradoxically becomes more trustworthy and believable, for we are equally, if not more, suspicious of narrators that claim to recall meticulous factual details, over a ten year span without some sort of journal for reference, as we are narrators like Pym that do not hide the potential for mistaken memories.

Pym, his storytelling, and storyworld continue to take on more verisimilar validation by referencing or textualizing actual persons and factual details from the real world. For instance, Pym reports that “[a]mong those gentlemen in Virginia who expressed the greatest interest in my statement, more particularly the portion of it which related to the Antarctic Ocean, was Mr. Poe, lately editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, a monthly magazine, published by Mr. Thomas W. White, in the city of Richmond” (1007; Preface). Mr. Poe not only seems eerily similar to the author Edgar Allan Poe, but he can actually be read as the real-world Poe, who was in fact editor for Thomas W. White’s Richmond-based magazine, the *Southern Literary Messenger*, from 1835 until early 1837. It is this Mr. Poe who persuades Pym “to prepare at once a full account of what I had seen and undergone, and trust to the shrewdness and common sense of the public . . . 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” (1007-08; Preface).

Here, Mr. Poe works to alleviate Pym's authorial anxieties by insisting that his fledgling writing abilities or rustic style will only make his narrative that much more believable as truth, which, as Pym noted earlier, he doubts due to the nature of the events he will tell. As regards verisimilar realism, mentioning and reporting to have worked with whom seems to be Edgar Allan Poe, Pym becomes more mimetically convincing as well as mimetically dynamic, for he has called into his narrative persons and facts that are true and recognizable from the real world, which makes Pym more *real* in the storyworld of the novel, but also makes him seem more autobiographical or an actual person rather than simply a mimetically-constructed character of fiction. That is, Pym not only appears truthfully-written or written with regard to fictional realism, he virtually transcends fictionality. Arthur G. Pym, for all we know here, may very well be as real a person as Edgar A. Poe.

Still more facts are admitted into the prefatory narrative that make Pym more mimetically recognizable with regards to readers' cognitive-aesthetic responses. The advice of Mr. Poe is at first unconvincing, Pym remains steadfast that the American public will not believe a word of his tale and resolves to leave it untold. However, Mr. Poe crafts one more method to persuade Pym to share his travels and travails on the Atlantic and Antarctic seas:

He afterward proposed (finding that I would not stir in the matter) that I should allow him to draw up, in his own words, a narrative of the earlier portion of my adventures, from facts afforded by myself, publishing it in the Southern Messenger *under the garb of fiction*. To this, perceiving no objection, I consented, in the Messenger that my real name should be retained. Two numbers of the pretended fiction appeared, consequently, in the Messenger for January and

February (1837), and, in order that it might certainly be regarded as fiction, the name Mr. Poe was affixed to the articles in the table of contents of the magazine.

(1008; Preface; emphasis original)

Again, Pym's report of the *Southern Literary Messenger* is accurate: in 1837, two installments of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* were published under Poe's name in the magazine prior to the novel's complete publication in July 1838. Even without this background knowledge of the novel's publication history, though, Pym still keeps within the realms of mimetic narrative here by fictionalizing the real world and real history into the world of the text. Importantly, Mr. Poe's tactic of publishing the narrative under his name, and as a work of fiction rather than non-fiction, works, for Pym, astounded, learns that "in spite of the air of fable which had been so ingeniously thrown around that portion of my statement which appeared in the Messenger (without altering or distorting a single fact), the public were still not at all disposed to receive it as fable, as several letters were sent to Mr. P.'s address distinctly expressing a conviction to the contrary" (1008; Preface). Here Pym builds the believability of his story by reporting how initial readers were not at all fooled when Mr. Poe marketed his tale as a fiction when it was so obviously a work of fact. In other words, the original readers "read between the lines" and saw the story's intrinsic truth. This, at last, convinces Pym to publish the whole narrative: "I thence concluded that the facts of my narrative would prove of such a nature as to carry with them sufficient evidence of their own authenticity, and that I had consequently little to fear on the score of popular incredulity" (1008; Preface).

Overall, the prefatory narrative yields an agreeable cognitive-aesthetic response to *Pym's* storytelling and storyworld as reproducing the real world within the space of a fictional mimetic

narrative. However, this default cognitive-aesthetic response privileges the mimetic qualities of the prefatory episode and elides the antimimetic qualities and mimetic violations within the opening narrative. That is, at the same time Pym behaves as a mimetic fiction(al) character, he also behaves in antimimetic ways that undermine verisimilitude and reinforce, or remind readers of, his fictionality or existence strictly as a literary construction. This blend of mutually exclusive forces, as J. Gerald Kennedy insists, draws attention to how *Pym*'s prefatory narrative "alludes to the unannounced risks we inevitably run as writers and readers because of the slippery relationship between word and world, between writing and truth" (*Abyss* 34). In other words, the prefatory narrative calls attention to how readers can conceivably distinguish between fact and fiction, true and untrue, when the storyteller and storyworld "have the *appearance* of that truth" characterizing the real world outside the text. This interpretative conundrum is just a microcosm of the main narrative's chronic condition of (anti)*mimetic vertigo*, or the dizzying, transgressive play between fact and fiction, real world and storyworld that is even more simply reduced to the dynamical and at times tectonic oscillations between the mimetic and antimimetic qualities of the narrative.<sup>13</sup>

Pym's fallibility and uncertainty foreground the play with mimesis and artificialness, for Pym's idiosyncrasies and peccadilloes make him lifelike, like real people with real flaws; this underlines his mimetic quality and dulls his fictionality. At the same time, Pym is hemmed in by

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<sup>13</sup> Phelan writes that "responses to the mimetic component [of narrative] involve an audience's interest in the characters as possible people and in the narrative world as like our own" while "responses to the synthetic component [of narrative] involve an audience's interest in and attention to the characters and to the larger narrative as artificial constructs" (*Living to Tell* 20).

textual reminders of his synthetic existence, or his being a *being* of writing—most notably, he appears to us in a novel written by Edgar Allan Poe—that make us wonder, with regard to his avowed worries on writing, what exactly constitutes fact in a storyworld of make-believe? How can Pym (mis)represent from memory a fact or a lie when he is fiction(al), his memories are fictional, and the world in which it all takes place is make-believe? Imaginably, the synthetic qualities of any narrative are always close in the reader's mind, for we would have to lose all awareness or ability to discern that we are reading a fictional story to lose cognizance that we are indeed reading a fictional story. And yet, the very constructedness of narrative fiction often fades to the background of the reading experience as we explore storyworlds that seem real or believable, meet characters who behave in logical, human manners, and listen to storytellers who transmit the knowledge we know of this narrative universe. Although we remain acutely aware when reading *Pym* that we are reading a novel by Poe, *Pym's* storytelling and storyworld are not bereft of the illusion of realness. However, the illusion of realness, no matter how lifelike, still never transcends illusion. *Pym* is only as real as readers will or allow, and any reading of the novel that overlooks or disregards how the verisimilitude of *Pym's* storytelling and storyworld is frequently violated by realistic or human impossibilities is incomplete. As such, there are areas in the opening narrative that break vital rules of mimetic narration that comply with the abilities of antimimetic storytelling.

Antimimetic storytelling breaks through *Pym's* prefatory narrative when Pym textualizes his own author into the fictional storyworld and testifies to his origins as a literary character by reviewing the book's actual publication history. When Pym fictionalizes Poe into the narrative as his editor and confidante who gains permission to print early portions of the narrative, and when

he then reports on the episodes of his narrative that appeared in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Pym violates the novel's mimetic integrity because, a fictional character, Pym cannot comment on, refer to, or even appear to refer to, his author because such acts of narration write the real-world author into the fictional storyworld of that author's creation. Moreover, mimetic characters do not know, as Pym knows, about the fictional lives they live, much less the fictional worlds in which those lives take place. On these points, Richardson's antimimetic explication of the opening to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* warrants mentioning with Pym's prefatory narrative:

Here we have a fictional character commenting on the work of the author who created him, and testifying (with a few qualifications) to its basic veracity before going on to relate the continuation of the story himself. This is an antimimetic violation of mimetic conventions—a character cannot know the fictional work within which he or she is a fictional character—as well as a familiar type of metalepsis, or violation of the ontological boundaries between a real author and a fictional being. (“Response” 245-46)<sup>14</sup>

Without any substantial alteration to the analysis, Richardson's reading of antimimetic violations in *Huckleberry Finn*'s opening lines is readily applicable to Pym's narrative condition because one can imagine Richardson writing these words specifically with regard to the opening to Poe's novel instead of Twain's. For example, Pym, like Huck, refers to his author, makes comments on

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<sup>14</sup> Twain's timeless novel begins, “You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There were things he stretched, but mainly he told the truth” (1).

the truthfulness of a narrative he exists within—the story was miraculously fictionalized by Mr. Poe “without distorting or altering a single fact”—and through it all he reveals an acute awareness of knowledge he should not or cannot know as a character created and locked within a mostly mimetic fiction(al) storyworld.

Richardson’s reading of *Huckleberry Finn*’s beginning expertly calls attention to mimetic violations that arise from a fictional being’s impossible real-world knowledge, like what we have with *Pym*, but does not adequately explain why this knowledge creates a mimetic violation in the first place. Instead, from this example, antimimetic knowledge creates a mimetic violation because it is, inherently, a mimetic violation—a circular logic. Moreover, it leaves unanswered why we must imagine or assume that any world in which Arthur Pym exists constitutes a world in which Poe cannot be said to exist, nor can the book of *Pym* be known to Pym. Fictionist and essayist Jorge Luis Borges explains this dilemma as follows: “Why does it disturb us that Don Quixote be a reader of the Quixote and Hamlet a spectator of Hamlet? I believe I have found the reason: these inversions suggest that if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious” (qtd. in Malina 1). As Borges writes, such violations with *Don Quixote*, *Hamlet*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Pym* threaten or dissolve the barriers dividing reality and fiction, or the reader’s point of reference to remind him/herself that he/she is what is real and these fictional persons are what are fake, rather than one is as equally fictional and real as the other. Thus, as stated above, Arthur G. Pym may very well be as real a person as Edgar A. Poe, or, equally, Poe may very well be as fictional as Pym, and readers may very well be as real and fictional as Mr. Pym and Mr. Poe.

Hence, unlike the cognitive-aesthetic responses to the mimetic qualities of *Pym*'s opening narrative, responses to the antimimetic qualities force readers not to reconcile mutually-exclusive fictional realities, but to let both coexist at once with the other in the same time and space. Doing so creates more dynamic reader-narrative interactivity because the reading experience of *Pym*'s prefatory narrative is revised and enriched at random intervals and in unexpected ways that can unmoor the reader from privileging mimetic narrative worlds. That is, juxtaposing and collapsing the mimetic and antimimetic within the same narrative space can make readers more aware of an almost default or innate narrative favoritism, what unnatural narrative theorists term a "mimetic bias," for fictions with storyworlds and people based on and subject to the laws and logic of the physical world. However, nothing prevents readers from missing or disregarding the antimimetic qualities of *Pym*, but a practice such as this misses how "the novel never allows any one reality or continuity to establish itself" (Rosenzweig 142).

A central concept for this thesis is that *Pym*'s tale takes place within a primarily mimetic narrative space that contains episodic (anti)mimetic violations; yet, what my discussion here on (anti)mimetic vertigo contends is that *Pym*'s mimetic and antimimetic schizophrenia, narratively speaking, makes it impossible or, at the very least, incorrect to privilege a certain narrative type over the other. Has my discussion, then, not contradicted my proposal? To answer this requires a clearer sense of how we conceptualize *Pym*'s narrative framework. For instance, we can consider *Pym*'s narrative frame structurally in terms of its arrangement: the prefatory and postscript narratives that bookend the tale frame the narrative with commentaries on writing truth in a work of fiction. John Carlos Rowe comments on how the prefatory and postscript narratives were often penned as the novel's framing structures, and were "viewed as part of Poe's parody of the

scientific voyage narratives that were in such vogue in the nineteenth century” (96). However, we can also approach the narrative frame from the viewpoint of the novel’s composition history: the original installments of *Pym*’s fiction that appeared in the *Southern Literary Messenger* were without the prefatory note, and began instead with Chapter One, the *Ariel* adventure, that heralds the *Grampus*, *Jane Guy*, and Antarctic adventures that follow. All are roughly structured around instances of misperception, calamity arising out of the misperception, and deliverance or pseudo-deliverance evolving from calamity.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, as Kennedy professes, the “preface to *Pym* was composed *after the fact* to account for the book it physically precedes. Properly read as a postscript, it offers a playful commentary on the already-completed narrative, discussing fact and fiction as inimical concepts” (*Abyss* 31; emphasis original). Thus, with *Pym*, we arguably need to reorient our thinking of its narrative frame as physically assigned—the prefatory and postscript narratives that precede and conclude the main narrative—to take in how *Pym*’s storytelling and storyworld are situated within a primarily mimetic narrative framework that contains erratic and unexpected (anti)mimetic violations.

The *Ariel* chapter documents an intoxicated excursion at sea undertaken by Pym and his best friend Augustus Barnard one deceptively clear night. The *Ariel*, Pym reports, was a small ship in which he and Augustus “were in the habit of going on some of the maddest freaks in the

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<sup>15</sup> The original installments in the *Messenger* ended near the beginning of Chapter Four in the finalized version of the novel. Although serialized fiction follows its own set of conventions (i.e. cliffhanger chapter endings), the majority of Poe’s novel was never serialized, in the *Messenger* or elsewhere, meaning it is not clear whether *Pym* was planned to be published incrementally in its entirety or not. Following the final installment of *Pym* in magazine print, and his fallout with Thomas White at the *Messenger*, Poe reluctantly and begrudgingly turned his attention to preparing the manuscript for publication as a novel.

world; and, when I now think of them, it appears to me a thousand wonders that I am alive today” (1009; I). As an introduction and potential framing narrative for the novel, Pym states that he “will relate one of these adventures by way of introduction to a longer and more momentous narrative” (1009-10; I). What follows is the tale of how Pym and Augustus took to sea, drunk on wine, sailed away from the Nantucket coast before Augustus fell into a drunken sleep, leaving Pym to work the vessel alone in a sudden tempest. Pym claims he misperceived his friend’s drunkenness, believing Augustus when he assured him of his sobriety, and this error nearly cost both young men their lives when a whaling-ship sailed over the *Ariel* and broke the small sail-boat into splinters. Miraculously, both Augustus and Pym are pulled from the wreckage of the *Ariel*, shocked, bloodied, but alive. As Poe scholar, Scott Peeples, informs (quoted at length here), *Pym*’s narrative patterning and arguably framework develops after the prefatory narrative because:

The *Ariel* adventure in chapter 1 establishes the pattern for the rest of the novel. Two unconscious adolescents tossed from a demolished boat would stand a slim chance for survival, even with the *Penguin*’s crew searching for them. Incredibly, Augustus is saved because Pym had tied him in an upright position to a portion of the boat that remained afloat; more incredibly, the sailors find Pym fastened to the *Penguin* by a timber-bolt that had pierced his neck. Both in the hold of the *Grampus* and on the wreck of the *Grampus* Pym nearly starves; he survives an attack by a mad dog and a battle with piratical mutineers; he comes within a splinter of being cannibalized; he and Peters survive the massacre on Tsalal only by being buried alive by a landslide and surviving *that*; and although last seen in a

canoe heading into a cataract near the South Pole, Pym somehow makes it home to write his story. These nearly continuous hairbreadth escapes seem ‘too much,’ even for an adventure novel, but their very implausibility could be satiric, parodying through hyperbole the sensationalistic plots of exploration narratives both fictional and nonfictional. (62)

The series of incredible calamities and miraculous rescues that Peeples overviews are, to him, an intrinsic, cohesive pattern connecting *Pym*'s cycle of (mis)adventures. Hence, the *Ariel* chapter perceivably mandates the narrative framework that all remaining chapters adhere to. Moreover, chapter one reorients the narrative within a storyworld that is more recognizable to the real world, after such a storyworld was all but dismantled by the prefatory narrative's dizzying, transgressive play between mimetic and antimimetic modes of storytelling. This, in turn, may account for how, despite the “Preface,” readers are still troubled by the (anti)mimetic violations they come up against when reading *Pym*'s main narrative. For, at first prepared for such violations by the prefatory narrative, readers are quickly disarmed by the *Ariel* adventure's return to the mimetic.

However, the physical placement of the prefatory narrative as the opening to Poe's novel cannot be ignored because, despite Kennedy informing us that we are better served reading the “Preface” last, the prefatory narrative is likely where the majority of *Pym*'s readers begin reading the novel. Rather than accept a static fixture, though, *Pym*'s narrative situation is more mercurial, changing and evolving, enriching reader-narrative interactivity, releasing readers to explore how what comes before modifies and revises what comes after at the same time that what comes after

amends what came before. Thus, if narrative framework is a fixed structure, then *Pym*'s narrative frame drifts atop strange and mutable waters below. In a phrase, the narrative is deeply unstable.

The prefatory narrative compresses mimetic and antimimetic narrative conventions into an intensely constricted space, but this intense constriction is unique to the novel's opening, for the (anti)mimetic violations in the main narrative are more spatially distanced from other like episodes, making the violations more unexpected, erratic, and therefore unnatural to the reading experience. Also, the prefatory narrative builds a mimetic narrative framework at the same time that its antimimetic qualities tear that framework apart, leaving readers unsure how to voyage out into the narrative that follows. The *Ariel* adventure works to amend what the prefatory narrative tears apart, and in the actual first chapter we see the reassertion of a mimetic narrative framework or a "stable storyworld" that "fit[s] readily within a mimetic framework" with Pym's story of a story about peril and rescue at sea (Alber et al. "Beyond Mimetic" 116). There are, or at least seem to be, no more detectable antimimetic passages to trouble the mimetic fabric, which represses the antimimetic narrative mode although it does not completely remove the narrative's impossible storyworld and storytelling devices. With the exception of the (anti)mimetic violations, the *Ariel* narrative through the main narrative foregrounds a storyworld recognizable to the real world—the mimetic takes precedence over the antimimetic—and remains so until the postscript narrative reasserts the synthetic quality of the novel by reminding us that Pym is a literary construction all along, even though it goes about doing so in a way that regards Pym as a real person: "The circumstances connected to the late sudden and distressing death of Mr. Pym are already well known to the public through the medium of the daily press. It is feared that the few remaining chapters which were to have completed his narrative, and which were retained by

him, while the above were in type . . . have been irrecoverably lost through the accident by which he perished himself” (1180; N).<sup>16</sup>

After analyzing the rich complexity personifying *Pym*'s opening note and chapter, it is clear that *Pym*'s narrative condition welcomes either argument that the narrative is situated within an antimimetic framework that synthesizes mimetic qualities, or, vice versa, the narrative projects a mimetic framework that contains unpredictable antimimetic violations. Recollecting Rosenzweig's assertion that no one "reality" ever controls *Pym*'s narrative entirely, no one mode of narrative ever truly cancels out the other, as one reasserts itself and represses the other only to have that other reassert itself at a later time. Poe's novel certainly welcomes just such a mad and schizophrenic conception of narrative. And yet, what I at last submit here is that *Pym* projects the illusion that the storyworld and storytelling take place within a mimetic universe, or readers trick themselves into thinking as much, because Pym never seems aware of the antimimetic violations going on in the narrative around him, or even in his own role as storyteller. Instead, despite all of the physical and logical impossibilities occurring in the storyworld around him, and at times his knowing what he cannot possibly know, Pym remains oblivious to the things that strike readers as bizarre, impossible, and unnatural. On the contrary, Pym does not remark on such things, and moves on as though all is natural with the narrative. Readers, I claim, try to do the same and this explains adverse reactions to the narrative's later discrepancies as editorial oversights, authorial

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<sup>16</sup> Obviously, there are no real reports on Pym's death beyond the report given at the end of the novel. He simply dies or is written out of the narrative, but not before allegedly taking the last chapters of his story to the grave. However, this is quite an unlikely story considering that Pym signs and dates the prefatory note "July, 1838," the same month the novel was actually published—something a ghostwriter or antimimetic character can do but not any character crafted mimetically.

negligence, or any other phrase signifying flawed material rather than antimimetic violations in an otherwise mimetic storyworld: the flawed way of thinking that Pym does not comment on the passages because they are flaws that are not supposed to be there rather than the material serves a purpose and its inclusion in the text changes the whole dynamic of reader-narrative interactivity.

To conclude, after the (anti)*mimetic vertigo* of the prefatory narrative tears apart a stable narrative structure, the *Ariel* chapter that follows reinstates a mimetic narrative world and mode of storytelling that represses *Pym*'s antimimetic condition. However, what is repressed can return and with a greater violence. Thus, within *Pym*'s mimetic universe and mode of narration drifts an antimimetic subtext that will return as violations in the narrative's illusive, unnatural storyworld.

## CHAPTER TWO

### STORYREADING ETHICS AND *PYM*'S IMPOSSIBLE STORYWORLD

Regardless of Poe's intentions . . . to read such an error-laden text [*Pym*—assuming one notices the errors—is to be constantly reminded of its fictional nature, no matter how much nautical (and botanical and zoological) detail Poe provides to convince us that the story is “real.”

—Scott Peeples, *Edgar Allan Poe Revisited*

Echoing the astronomer Edward Harrison's comment on *Eureka*, I report to you that I find *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* sometimes less credible in its more realistic stretches and more so in its less.

—John Barth, “Still Farther South”

Jan Alber writes that “some literary texts not only rely on but also aggressively challenge the mind's fundamental sense-making capabilities” (“Impossible” 80). As an unnatural narrative theorist, the “literary texts” Alber has in mind here are of course unnatural narratives that project fictional worlds with physics and logics that are incompatible with and unrecognizable to the real world. For, as Alber explains, “many narratives confront us with bizarre storyworlds which are governed by principles that have very little to do with the real world around us” (79). Many narratives merely recreate the real world in a fictional space, and other fictional narratives realize impossible or unnatural storyworlds; however, the complexion by which these narrative worlds are unnatural or impossible is in no way universal. That is, some fictional storyworlds are overtly impossible—their representations of time, persons, physics, and logic do not at all fit a real-world narrative framework—and still others are real-world oriented but portray impossible and unnatural characters, storytellers, temporal structures, paradoxes and rifts in the story-space that deeply unsettle narrative comprehension. But how are we to comprehend, classify, and respond

to *Pym*'s impossible storyworld and narrative condition when the novel virtually overflows with narrative discrepancies that may or may not be mimetic storyworld violations? And does the text project a mimetic storyworld containing (anti)mimetic violations against that story-space, or is it a narrative simply marred by "internal contradictions" that create narrative-cognitive dissonance rather than narrative comprehension (Peeples 62)?<sup>17</sup>

Pym opens the *Grampus* chapters of his narrative—a series of misadventures that include Pym's inadvertent imprisonment and near-fatal asphyxiation within a ship's cargo hold, a vicious mutiny with heavy loss of life, shipwreck at sea, cannibalism, and the protracted death of his best friend, Augustus—with a comment that prefigures how readers are to regard making sense from the strange and bizarre anomalies within *Pym*'s fictional world: "In no affairs of mere prejudice, pro or con, do we deduce inferences with entire certainty even from the most simple data" (1018; II). Kennedy interprets Pym's remark as a reflection on the human need to make interpretations even though those interpretations will, in the end, stand indefinite, for "interpretation . . . never escapes the condition of its own uncertainty, however confidently it draws 'inferences' from apparently simple textual facts" (*Abys*s 47). Beyond interpretation, though, Pym's remark reads as a warning to his readers that even what is most obvious or "simple" can still be deceptive. As such, on the surface, *Pym* projects a mimetic narrative storyworld with textual inconsistencies or continuity issues that mar the tale's telling and its reception by the audience. Some discrepancies even make narrative comprehension virtually impossible because they imply paradoxical or illogical dimensions to the tale that are irresolvable to a mimetic story-space. And yet, the flawed

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<sup>17</sup> By narrative-cognitive dissonance, I mean any textual oddity or anomaly that jeopardizes the coherence of the narrative and that undermines readers' sense-making strategies with outwardly irresolvable paradoxes and cruxes.

way of reading *Pym*—the narrative discrepancies are flaws—underlines a conceptualization of the narrative that may be inherently flawed itself. That is, these discrepancies are irresolvable as regards mimetic fiction(al) worlds and narration, but they are not flaws that mar the narrative, they are mimetic violations that mark the unnatural within *Pym*'s otherwise mimetic storyworld.

Strange and unnatural incidents take place within *Pym*'s storyworld and storytelling that directly affect the narrative level of storyreading, or how readers comprehend and respond to the text and their reading of the narrative. *Pym*'s storyworld contains an impossible three-sided piece of parchment that carries a copy of a fabricated letter to Pym's father on one side, a blank page on the other, and an impossible third side that conveys a warning written in blood to Pym. More still, Pym discloses particulars of his rescue from the toxic hold of the *Grampus* that he claims Augustus told him years afterwards; yet, Augustus dies aboard the broken hull of the *Grampus* just weeks later, succumbing to blood poisoning and gangrenous wounds. Hence, Pym cannot know what he knows. Another instance of this impossible knowledge occurs when Pym relates the poisoned, putrefied condition of the corpse of Hartman Rogers, killed by one of his fellow mutineers aboard the *Grampus*, as though he were looking over the corpse that very moment, or viewed the body prior to narrating on its "disgusting condition" (*Pym* 1067; VII). During this time, however, Pym is secreted away from the mutineers and could not have witnessed Rogers' corpse without revealing himself—at the cost of his life—to the piratical crew. Thus, yet again, Pym cannot know what he knows, or, at least, cannot know about the corpse the way he knows it: through his first-hand knowledge. And lastly, in the midst of the massacre of his *Jane Guy* crewmembers on the darkened island of Tsalal, Pym's only surviving companion, Dirk Peters, mentioned by Pym to this point as a "half breed Indian" and a "hybrid" (1058; VI)—even in the

prefatory narrative that would have been written after Pym and Peters returned from Tsalal and beyond—transforms from an Indian into a white man. In a section of the novel charged with race and racial violence, that Peters changes into a white man may speak on the very unnaturalness of race and the fiction of the racial imagination. With all of these instances, we must analyze and test whether each constitutes an unnatural phenomenon in *Pym*, or if they may be rationalized or explained away by other means—i.e., flaws in the novel and not violations in/of the narrative’s storyworld.

In the introductory chapter to this thesis, I outlined how the textual oddities in *Pym* were regularly regarded by *Pym* critics as authorial errors or proofreading oversights on Poe’s behalf. With this chapter, I will critically reposition key errors by rereading them as mimetic violations occurring within *Pym*’s otherwise mimetic storyworld, with the underlying purpose of validating Poe’s novel as an unnatural narrative. More still, I work out an ethics of reading *Pym* as an unnatural narrative by conceptualizing and weighing how readers comprehend or choose to make sense of the narrative’s textual anomalies, oddities, and cruxes that “transgress real-world frames and urge us to stretch our sense-making strategies to the limit” (Alber “Impossible” 80). That is, I analyze how readers may imaginably rationalize or explain away the mimetic violations within *Pym*, and reject or accept the text as unnatural narrative fiction, by weighing the ethics that each perceivable choice takes on and reveals through the progression of storyreading. To be clear, my focus in this chapter regards the four flaws or violations mentioned above: the paradox of *Pym*’s impossible parchment, the two counts of impossible knowledge, and the racial mutability of Peters. Not that these are the only things marked as problematic or erroneous in the novel,<sup>18</sup> but

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<sup>18</sup> For instance, Burton R. Pollin, in his critical edition of *Pym*, lists two hundred errors occurring in the narrative.

these are the most flagrant as regards mimetic violations in the tale, and the most challenging for reader-narrative interactivity and overall narrative comprehension. Analyzing these instances, I believe, will validate *Pym* as an unnatural narrative, and reveal what is involved in the ethics of reading and responding responsibly to *Pym* and unnatural narrative fiction overall.

### **Narrative Discrepancies and Storyworld Violations**

#### **I. The Impossible Piece of Parchment**

One of *Pym*'s more illustrious and overt narrative discrepancies and mimetic storyworld violations is the impossible three-sided piece of paper witnessed in the *Grampus* adventures of *Pym*'s narrative. Roughly twenty months after the doomed adventure of the *Ariel*, *Pym* takes to sea again, only this time as a stowaway within the cargo hold of the whaling vessel, *Grampus*, securing his secreted passage with the help of Augustus, who authors a forged letter to *Pym*'s father posing as "a relation living in New Bedford, a Mr. Ross" (1019; II), who requests *Pym*'s summer sojourn there. After their literary deception of *Pym*'s father is signed, sealed, delivered, and received without detection of its falsity, Augustus hides *Pym* away within the vessel's cargo hold until such a time when the *Grampus* would have "proceeded so far on her course as to make any turning back a matter out of question," at which time Augustus would reveal his stowed away friend to the crew and captain (Augustus's father), and *Pym* would "be formally installed in all the comforts of the cabin" (1020; II). However, the plan goes horribly wrong when a mutiny onboard the *Grampus* delays *Pym*'s release from the hold, and his situation becomes perilous as the air around him becomes more and more toxic from whale oil fumes, and the food and water which were enough to help *Pym* live comfortably for several days, but not for the

prolonged period of time for which he is imprisoned and cut off from escape or rescue, dwindles, rots or stagnates.

It is while trapped in the total dark of the cargo hold of the *Grampus* that Pym receives warning of a mutiny onboard the ship through a letter that Augustus ties around the waist of Pym's dog, Tiger, who carries the message to Pym. What the warning says (discussed below), however, is not nearly as intriguing or perplexing as "the physical and logical impossibilities" around the letter itself (Alber "Impossible" 80). When Pym at last manages to read the letter from Augustus within the darkened cargo hold, he reports with dismay that "[n]ot a syllable was there [upon the page] . . . nothing but a dreary and unsatisfactory blank" (1033; III). Angered by the discovery, Pym tears the blank letter to pieces, only to realize "after many miserable hours of despondency" that he "had examined only one side of the paper" (1033-34). His epiphany moves him to reflect on the possibility "that some words were written upon that side of the paper which had not been examined" (1034). When Pym finally locates all the pieces of the letter, and pieces the paper back together, he shares the following particulars of Augustus's message: "Having rubbed in the phosphorous, a brilliancy ensued as before; but this time several lines of MS. in a large hand, and apparently in red ink, became distinctly visible" (1035). Continuing, Pym tells that he was only able to read very little of the warning in that moment's light: "in my anxiety . . . to read all at once, I succeeded only in reading the seven concluding words, which thus appeared: '*blood—your life depends upon lying close*'" (1035; emphasis original). At this point, nothing seems flawed or unnatural about the letter because one side is simply blank and the other carries a message scribed with blood. It is not until later that we (readers) learn what makes the mutiny letter a narrative discrepancy and a mimetic storyworld violation.

When Augustus eventually rescues Pym from the toxic conditions of the hold, he reveals certain, unknown particulars of the warning letter. First and foremost, Pym learns that a mutiny occasioned Augustus to author the letter, and last, Pym learns that the final words of the letter read: “*I have scrawled this with blood—your life depends upon lying close*” (1049; V). What throws the narrative and storyworld into a muddle of dissonance concerns the material Augustus claims to have written the warning on; particularly, as Augustus informs and Pym reports:

Paper enough [to write the warning] was obtained from the back of a letter—a duplicate of the forged letter from Mr. Ross. This had been the original draught; but the handwriting not being sufficiently well imitated, Augustus had written another, thrusting the first, by good fortune, into his coat pocket, where it was now most opportunely discovered. (1049)

Logically speaking, if Augustus wrote the warning on the reverse side of the “forged letter from Mr. Ross” to Pym’s father, then there would be writing on both sides of the piece of paper, with one side conveying a fraudulent request, and the other a message in blood. In other words, by Augustus’s story, there must be writing on both sides of the parchment. And yet, the version that Augustus tells about the letter is contradicted by—or itself contradicts—Pym’s earlier report of having discovered a blank page on the reverse side to the warning. Paper in the real world has no more than two sides; thus, realistically, only two of the three texts (i.e., the “forged letter,” blank page, or warning) can coexist in the narrative; the third cannot exist in a mimetic storyworld. As such, either Pym or Augustus must be mistaken, or lying, in the reports each makes about the piece of paper. Regardless, the controversy over the versions of the letter is not only concerned with how reports contradict but how readers resolve or explain away the paradox the message

creates: are there three texts on the same piece of paper in *Pym*? If not, which two can we say cancel out the impossible third text—how do we reconcile the narrative discrepancy? If so, how do we resolve the storyworld violation that an impossible three-sided letter occasions within an otherwise mimetic story-space? And can the paradox of the letter be both a narrative discrepancy *and* a storyworld violation, or are the two mutually-exclusive, narrative-cognitive categories? To answer these questions, it is necessary to review how *Pym* scholars have read and explained the paradox of *Pym*'s impossible piece of parchment before venturing into new, unnatural theories of reading the paradox of the three-sided letter and the narrative of *Pym*.

Augustus's warning letter to Pym creates what Kennedy terms, in his scholarly edition of Poe's novel, an "interpretative enigma," or an outright impossibility in the tale that jeopardizes reading and interpreting the narrative (*Pym* 286; n28). Moreover, as Kennedy writes on the letter elsewhere, the letter's impossible three-sidedness "create[s] a paradigm of unreadability" with an "unreadable message" that "epitomizes the ongoing crisis of interpretation in the novel" ("Unreadable" 153; *Abyss* 45). Given his critical attention to analyzing the task of interpretation and *Pym*, Kennedy returns the implications of the message to the human quest for making and finding meaning in Poe's interpretatively dense and treacherous book. As an "unreadable" text, *Pym*'s three-dimensional page becomes a crux within the narrative—an irresolvable anomaly that becomes the bane of interpretation. Scott Peeples interprets the paradoxical letter as a symbolic representation of the novel's narrative construction: "Augustus's three-sided paper symbolizes Pym's *Narrative*: a warning to the reader on one side, a deliberate deception on the other, and on the impossible third side, 'a dreary and unsatisfactory blank'" (62). Although Peeples does not go on to explain the symbolism of the letter, he does precede his suggestion by

addressing the *error-theory* of the letter, or how mid-twentieth-century *Pym* critics frequently and erroneously read the letter-controversy as betraying Poe's inability as a novelist or careless proofreading of the manuscript—Kennedy, in his writings on the scene, does the same. Peebles and Kennedy concur that the contradictory versions of the letter share a proximal closeness in the narrative that makes it “unsafe to assume” that Poe, by Chapter V, forgot what he wrote in Chapter II (Peebles 62).

John Carlos Rowe talks on the *error-theory* or *flawed* way of reading the three-sided text in *Pym* by writing that “what critics have generally considered an error made in the haste of composition offers an important illustration of Poe's conception of the doubleness of writing” (102). A deconstructionist, Rowe's reading of *Pym*'s letter and narrative focuses on the play of language, or how language conveys and conceals truths, and draws nearer towards expressing an overall meaning at the same time it always defers ever arriving at a definite or ultimate meaning. Within *Pym*'s play of words, Rowe theorizes that the three-sided letter is not a glitch in the matrix of language, but “demonstrates the difficulty of transcending the differential system of language to deliver a unified truth. The note is a palimpsest—the palimpsest of language itself, whose messages are always intertexts” (102). Thus, the paradox of the letter seeks to escape the intertextuality of language to express a truth or possibility outside of the trap of language. Last, Ki Yoon Jang returns to Kennedy's conception of the “unreadability” of the paper by stressing “the unreadability of the letter” or how the three-sided letter functions as an “unreadable text” within *Pym*'s narrative and Poe's novel (362). Overall, *Pym*'s impossible piece of parchment, as most critical readings effect, constitutes a narrative discrepancy that thematizes the “unreadability” of *Pym*'s narrative, *Pym*'s inability to read the circumstances surrounding him,

and/or readers' inabilities to make consistent meanings from the story without coming across contradictions that make narrative coherence virtually impossible. And yet, as I will argue below, we need to reorient our thinking about what the "unreadability of the letter" creates in terms of the "unreadability" of *Pym*. As I will suggest, this narrative discrepancy "opens the portal" to a storyworld violation that makes *Pym* very much "unreadable" as strictly mimetic fiction, while at the same time remarkably readable as an unnatural narrative blending mimetic violations with an otherwise mimetic storyworld.

Rationalizing the paradox of the letter or attempting to make its physically and logically impossible three-sidedness fit a realistic or logical cognitive parameter presents provocative questions about the ethics of reading and making sense of the impossible storyworlds in unnatural narrative fiction. Of central importance, why do readers impose real-world logic onto a fictional storyworld "in order to grasp, and usually transform, textual irregularities and oddities" (Fludernik *Towards* 45)? In other words, why do readers require or expect a narrative to behave logically, or, if odd, return to normal or a sense of normalcy? Can readers even escape this sense-making practice or is it a default response that readers are not immediately—if at all—aware of? To illustrate the shortfall of reading *Pym*'s storyworld as only a mimetic story-space, I will now discuss how the three-sided letter acts as both a narrative discrepancy and a mimetic storyworld violation that makes a complete return to a natural, mimetic narrative mode virtually impossible.

As a narrative discrepancy, the paradox of the letter creates an impossible state of affairs in the narrative that branches out into mutually exclusive, or realistically impossible, ontological scenarios. That is, one side of the paper is a blank page and the other bears the warning in blood. In this version, there is not, nor can there be, a duplicate copy of the letter to Pym's father, which

cancels out what Augustus tells Pym. Or, to continue, one side of the paper conveys the copied letter and the reverse side the blank. With this scenario, there is no warning letter to Pym, which would be impossible to reconcile with what we see in the narrative because we clearly read the final words of the mutiny warning. As a final example, one side of the paper shows the copied letter and the other side the warning. Yet, here again, this scenario is impossible to resolve with what we know from the narrative because Pym unmistakably reports a blank page before later finding a message in blood written on the reverse side. Although these scenarios do not cover all possible ways readers may attempt to resolve the paradox or “unreadability” of the letter, to be clear, virtually all tries at resolution will only further upset readers’ sense-making strategies and end with more narrative-cognitive dissonance rather than narrative comprehension. Thus, trying to normalize the narrative discrepancy or make the narrative return to normal in the wake of the impossible three-sided letter will prove impossible and ultimately misguided because, however unrealistic a three-sided letter may be, to conclude that there cannot be three sides to the same piece of paper subjectively ignores how a “forged letter,” a blank page, and a warning written in blood *are* all conveyed through the same piece of parchment in *Pym*. As a result, all three of the texts coexist in the narrative and storyworld however impossibly. In other words, what Kennedy and Jang have argued is “unreadable,” I argue is actually “unnatural,” for the three-sided letter only makes *Pym* “unreadable” as a strictly mimetic narrative (the contradictions the letter creates are incompatible with real-world logic), but readable as an unnatural narrative (the contradictions accord with the physics and logic of impossible storyworlds of unnatural narrative fiction).

As a result, *Pym*’s three-sided letter constitutes a narrative discrepancy and a storyworld violation because the three-sided letter designates a textual anomaly that imperils the logical

coherence and cohesiveness of the narrative that also adds an impossible, physical dimension to what is an otherwise mimetic storyworld. Augustus's and Pym's versions of the blood-scribed mutiny letter create a scenario that is incompatible with real-world physics and logic because paper has only two sides and not three in the physical world and only two of the three texts can actually exist. The third text cannot exist and must be a fabrication told by Pym, Augustus, or a mistake made by Poe—either way, the principle remains that the discrepancy cannot or should not actually exist within the story. When we quit thinking in terms of fictional realism, however, and begin reading in terms of fictional creativity there is no real justification for why a piece of paper cannot physically be three-sided, or why all three texts cannot logically exist as reported in the narrative. As Alber theorizes on the creative capacities of fictional storyworlds, “Even though physically impossible scenarios cannot be actualized in the real world, and even though logically impossible elements are” quite unrealizable in the real world, “it is possible to construct them in the world of fiction” (“Impossible” 80). With the three-sided letter, we meet a textual anomaly that trespasses against *Pym*'s otherwise mimetic storyworld and definitively constitutes the first storyworld violation in *Pym* outside the prefatory narrative. Arguably, the letter's placement as the earliest recognizable narrative discrepancy and mimetic storyworld violation makes it “the paradigm of unreadability” for a reservedly mimetic reading of *Pym*'s narrative condition. That is, readers assume that the storyworld is modeled after the real world, and this assumption—arguably a default reaction to any narratives that do not foreground supernatural, fantastical, or science fiction storyworlds—leaves readers unprepared to meet the physically, logically, or humanly impossible episodes that take place, or have place, in the story. By reversing this logic, then, the three-sided piece of paper becomes “the very paradigm of

readability” for *Pym* as an unnatural narrative, because this impossible three-sided text opens the portal for all the storyworld violations that follow, but also makes us aware that “real-world possibilities are being transcended” in *Pym*’s storyworld, which “helps us to make sense of unnatural elements” (Alber “Impossible” 82). In other words, in order to make sense of the unnatural in Poe’s novel, we must first realize that the unnatural takes place in *Pym*. Only then will we be able to perceive and respond to the violations that follow the originary violation of the letter—mimetic violations like Pym’s impossible knowledge of things he cannot humanly know.

## II. Knowing the Unknowable

There are moments in the narrative when Pym knows what he cannot humanly know and this knowledge transgresses what readers perceivably know about the abilities and limitations of a real human mind as well as a mimetic first-person narrator. The first narrative discrepancy and storyworld violation of this type occurs when Pym reports to have learned from Augustus what fortuitous action—breaking a bottle in despondent anger—led to his rescue from the *Grampus*’s cargo hold. Stealing away from the mutineers, Augustus searches for Pym in the dark, labyrinthine hold of the whaling vessel, but quickly parts with hope that Pym still lives due to the toxicity of the cargo bay’s air. Augustus reportedly confides to Pym that he was on the verge of giving up his search when “he heard the crash occasioned by the bottle which [Pym] had thrown down,” which revitalized hopes of rescuing his friend alive rather than recovering his dead body (1052; V). The narrative discrepancy and storyworld violation that Augustus’s testimony causes not only concerns what Augustus allegedly later confesses to Pym about the incident, but *when* Augustus is finally forthcoming with the whole truth of Pym’s rescue. To illustrate, Pym reports that “many years elapsed . . . before I was aware [that breaking the bottle saved his life]. A

natural shame and regret for his weakness and indecision prevented Augustus from confiding to me at once what a more intimate and unreserved communion afterward induced him to reveal” (1052; V). However, the stated report of an “unreserved communion” that took place years later between Augustus and Pym must be mistaken, for Augustus dies only several chapters after Pym makes this admission, perishing slowly due to wounds he receives during retaking the *Grampus* from its piratical crew. More important, with regard to story-time, Augustus’s death takes place only a matter of weeks later, and not years, as Pym’s narrative clearly and gruesomely records.

As best as Pym can remember, the *Grampus* set sail on the twentieth of June, and he was rescued from the cargo bay by Augustus roughly eleven days after the launch. Only several days after Pym’s rescue, Pym, Augustus, Dirk Peters, and others retake the *Grampus* from the pirates. It was during the counter-mutiny that Augustus’s right arm was wounded and weeks later “began to evince symptoms of mortification” (1105; XIII). Last and most important, Pym unmistakably reports that Augustus died around the first of August, as readers can confirm in the length Pym gives to documenting the final agonies and death of his best friend:

We [Pym and Peters] now saw clearly that Augustus could not be saved; that he was evidently dying. We could do nothing to relieve his sufferings, which appeared to be great. About twelve o’clock he expired in strong convulsions, and without having spoken for several hours. His death filled us with the most gloomy forebodings, and had so great an effect upon our spirits that we sat motionless by the corpse during the whole day, and never addressed each other except in a whisper. It was not until some time after dark that we took courage to get up and throw the body overboard. (1106-07; XIII)

The death and burial of Augustus at sea, then, refutes how Pym knows about his rescue from the cargo bay. That is, if Augustus is not alive years later to tell Pym that hearing the bottle breaking somewhere in the dark ultimately saved Pym's life, how does Pym know that this simple action fashioned "the thread" upon which "[his] destiny depended" (1052; V)? Moreover, how can we resolve or come to terms with the narrative-cognitive dissonance this narrative discrepancy and storyworld violation occasions? In other words, how can we rationalize or come to terms with a knowledge that Pym, a mimetic first-person narrator, cannot logically have without transcending and therefore violating the knowledge parameters of a real human mind?

Another instance of *Pym's* impossible storytelling knowledge magnifies the immediacy of the above questions regarding a mimetic-first person narrator that can exceed the cognitive abilities of a real human mind, and exacerbates the narrative-cognitive dissonance the violations place on reading and responding to the narrative. At the beginning of Chapter VII, Pym writes, "To-day Hartman Rogers died, having been attacked on the eighth with spasms after drinking a glass of grog. . . . He told Augustus that he believed the mate [the head mutineer] had poisoned him" (1062). During this time, Pym is free from the cargo bay but still secreted away from the piratical crew so as not to risk his life. Thus, with what he writes here, it appears that Augustus tells Pym about the death of Rogers, as well as Rogers' suspicions about being poisoned by one of his fellow mutineers—second-hand testimony accounts for Pym's knowledge of Rogers. How strange, then, when later on in the same chapter we read what can only be Pym's first-hand and thus impossible viewing and knowledge of Rogers' corpse: "Rogers had died about eleven in the forenoon, in violent convulsions; and the corpse presented in a few minutes after death one of the most horrid and loathsome spectacles I ever remember to have seen" (1066). Originally, Pym

seemed to know what he knew about Rogers' death through Augustus—or Peters, as Pym allows when he states that “Peters had expressed . . . his opinion that [Rogers] had been poisoned by the mate” (1066)—but what Pym submits here clearly places him within an impossible proximity to Rogers' corpse. Moreover, Pym unmistakably records his own personal recollection of viewing the body in its “most horrid and loathsome” condition, but this report must be mistaken because, “when he describes the sailor's death agonies . . . and rapid putrefaction, Pym recollects a scene he could not possibly have witnessed” (Kennedy *Abyss* 47). In other words, there is no possible way that Pym can claim that Rogers' body produced “one of the most horrid spectacles I ever remember to have seen” because at no time could Pym possibly have viewed the body himself. And yet, the first-hand reported, anatomical details Pym gives about the body only solidify the narrative discrepancy and storyworld violation all the more:

The stomach was swollen immensely, like that of a man who has been drowned and lain under water for many weeks. The hands were in the same condition, while the face was shrunken, shriveled, and of a chalky whiteness, except where relieved by two or three glaring red splotches, like those occasioned by the erysipelas: one of the splotches extended diagonally across the face, completely covering up an eye as if with a band of red velvet. (*Pym* 1067; VII)

Pym's spatial-displacement from Rogers' corpse contradicts his first-hand knowledge of the state of that body in rapid and immediate decay. However, Pym clearly conveys the knowledge of one who has witnessed Rogers' body and his contradictory testimony “cannot be reconciled” with all that we know and believe to be possible for a fictional mind to know within a mimetic narrative world, or for a real human mind to know within the given fictional situation (Kennedy *Abyss* 47).

Thus, we are returned to the same questions that the original storyworld violation of impossible knowledge and storytelling invoked: how can Pym know what he cannot and should not know? What are the implications of his knowing the unknowable and our (readers) reading what should not be capable of being known let alone reported/narrated?

Similar to our recurrent questions about Pym's impossible knowledge narrative theorist Ruediger Heinze analyzes instances of impossible knowledge in first-person narrative fiction, and asks the following, apt question regarding narrators in fictions like *Pym*: "How . . . can one conceptualize first-person narrators in fictional narratives whose quantitative and qualitative knowledge about events, other characters, etc., clearly exceeds what one could expect of a human consciousness and would thus make them prone to being labeled 'omniscient'?" (280). Third-person omniscient narration is certainly not unnatural, for this storytelling device has now been conventionalized through a tradition of fictional narratives that use a godlike consciousness to record internal thoughts and feelings of characters, or to disclose information to readers that a character or characters may be unaware of. However, when mimetic first-person narrators take on or seem to have the mind-reading and/or all-knowing abilities of an omniscient narrator, the mode of storytelling becomes unnatural, for it violates the cognitive capacities of a real-human mind, as well as what can logically be expected of a narrator and character in a work of fictional realism. (Keeping in mind, however, that first-person antimimetic knowledge is only impossible when it takes place in an otherwise mimetic storyworld rather than a storyworld that synthesizes supernatural, fantastical, science fiction or other genres with devices, styles, and conventions that would account for any narrator or character with cognitive abilities or omniscient knowledge that exceeds what readers know is humanly possible.) Heinze terms any knowledge that a first-person

narrator cannot logically know “unusual knowledge,” and he theorizes that this knowledge is an outcome of “paralepsis” or “the phenomenon of a first-person narrator knowing and/or sensing something to which he/she could not have access by all that we as readers know about human cognition and perception” (282). More still, this “unusual” or unnatural knowledge originates from a “paraleptic human consciousness” that Heinze believes “will almost inevitably be judged according to what we as readers know from experience human beings could or should not know or be able to do under the specific circumstances of a fictional situation” (283). But are these “judgments” emotional-based—a reaction to the questionable aesthetics of the text’s narration—or ethical-oriented—a response enfolding how the text’s mode of storytelling adds to or takes away from other narrative levels (the storyworld and storyreading levels)? Heinze does not say. His focus does not stray from theorizing the forms and outcomes that impossible knowledge has on mimetic first-person storytelling, and does not keep in mind the narrative dynamic of reader responses to storyworld violations of that order. In this respect, then, Heinze’s theory does not go far enough in treating the range of affects that strange and problematic storytelling discovered in fictions like *Pym* perceivably has on the narrative’s readers and reading experiences.

Any narrative, whether fictional or non-fictional, mimetic or unnatural, not only implies a reader, but requires one. Heinze’s work on “violations of mimetic epistemology,” while excellent in documenting and overviewing “extreme narration” (to use Richardson’s subtitle to *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*) in postmodern narrative fiction, stands wanting more discussion and theorizing on what storyworld violations of mimetic storytelling create for the narrative level of storyreading. That is, as I will argue through *Pym*, the implications of “unusual knowledge” are not localized to the narrative and its narration, for the

narrative discrepancies and storyworld violations do not simply call upon and end with the reader playing narrative detective to uncover how the narrator can or cannot know what he knows and tells. The storyworld violation is much more complex, more extreme and unnatural than Heinze perceives, because anything that our storyteller cannot or should not know must be something that the reader cannot or should not know. In other words, what is impossible for Pym to know constitutes something that is also impossible for his readers to know because, logically speaking, Pym cannot know what he knows, much less report that impossible knowledge, and because both the narrator's knowledge and his report of it are impossible, then it is equally impossible for his readers to have the report and the knowledge it conveys. To be clear, the paradox of unnatural knowledge as a storyworld violation becomes layered for the narrative's reader because (1) the reader can recognize that Pym knows something that should be unknowable; (2) the reader can realize that Pym does not perceive that he should not or cannot know what he knows; and, last and most important, (3) the reader can reflect on the paradox of Pym's unnatural knowledge and discern that this storyworld violation trespasses narrative levels and violates the real, outside-the-text world with knowledge that the reader cannot and should not know due to the impossibility for the narrator to have and transmit that knowledge in the first place. With Heinze's theories and my amendments in mind, let us return to consider how readers may perceivably rationalize the narrative discrepancies around *Pym*'s contradictory and unnatural knowledge before forwarding how Pym's impossible knowledge constitutes another storyworld violation that justifies reading the tale as an unnatural narrative, and calls to mind the ethics of reading the unnatural in literary fiction.

To return to *Pym*'s original instance of impossible knowledge regarding Pym's rescue by Augustus, readers may begin to rationalize the narrative discrepancy by considering whether or not Pym can logically know what he knows about his rescue without Augustus's later disclosure. The simple answer is no, of course, because Pym clearly binds his knowledge of his rescue to Augustus's delayed confession years afterwards, a confession that could not have taken place when Pym reports because Augustus would have been long dead, his skeletal figure withered to a "mass of putrefaction" buried at sea, and the corpse "torn to pieces" by sharks (1107; XIII). Also, given the gruesome record of his death and burial, there can be no mistake that Augustus perished at sea—unless we mean to argue that Pym is lying about Augustus's death; a claim without a base for substantiation in the narrative. Next, and in no particular order, readers may consider whether Pym's impossible knowledge merely betrays Poe's authorial incompetence as a novelist, i.e., his negligent commitment to proofreading the novel for continuity issues, or Pym's unreliability as a fictional(ized) author and storyteller. Primarily, nothing prevents readers from explaining all narrative discrepancies in *Pym* away as authorial mistakes or errors that would not exist in the novel had Poe been more vigilant with correcting his manuscript before publication. However, this explanation reasons or assumes that all of the text's discrepancies are careless, first-draft errors that revision should have corrected and does not consider whether Poe wrote them (or left them) in the narrative intentionally, and also does not entertain how *Pym*'s more flagrant narrative discrepancies or storyworld violations open the way (and the mind) for reading the novel as an unnatural narrative. In other words, *Pym* is a fictional narrative that was never meant to be a work of mimetic realism. Moreover, such a closed-minded reading of *Pym*'s storyworld as a place littered with authorial errors cannot begin to analyze the implications that

the unnatural has on *Pym*'s fictional storyworld, storytelling, and storyreading; thus resulting in an overall flawed comprehension of the narrative.

Next, and with arguably more validity, the narrative discrepancy around Augustus's late confession and untimely death may underline the unreliability of Pym as a fictional(ized) author and storyteller. In the prefatory narrative, Pym hints at distrusting his own memory to recall the complete, intimate details of his adventures, for he "kept no journal" of record for much of his travels. Therefore, when Pym gives exact dates, or writes his story in a journal format, we may doubt the accuracy of an event's temporal placement, at least, to a certain extent. For instance, Augustus may in fact have died on the first of August as Pym claims, or he more likely may have died on a day some time around—i.e., either just before or after—that specific date. Moreover, the discrepancy of Pym's knowledge of his rescue may reveal his mistaken memory, or dramatize authorial incompetence, for, as the alleged writer of his adventures, Pym acts as an author. Thus, when Pym states in Chapter V that Augustus tells him something years afterwards that Augustus's death roughly eight chapters later contradicts, the narrative discrepancy underscores Pym's inadequacy as an author and storyteller, a shortcoming that Pym makes known to his readership in the prefatory narrative. Last, Pym's knowledge that breaking the bottle ultimately saved his life may be nothing more than projecting or fictionalizing how he was rescued. In other words, Pym does not actually know what saved his life because Augustus died without telling him. To fill the interpretative void that Augustus's death causes in the rescue narrative, Pym appends his own authored version and attempts to validate it as truth by reporting he learned what he knows through Augustus's later confession. The irony with this possibility, however, would be that Pym misses how his fictionalized version stands irreconcilable with what

we know of Augustus's death, which makes readers doubt Pym's trustworthiness as a storyteller yet again or all the more.

Rationalizing Pym's impossible knowledge of Rogers' corpse proves even more difficult than explaining the narrative discrepancy around what he knows about his rescue from the cargo hold. For this reason alone, perhaps, very few critics mention the presence or implications of the narrative discrepancy; indeed, if they mention it at all.<sup>19</sup> Kennedy stands as one of the few critics to analyze what Pym's impossible first-hand knowledge of Rogers' body implies: "the visual spectacle of death is irresistible; the sight of the corpse exerts a disquieting hold, in this case prompting the narrator to imagine a scene he could not have observed" or, as Kennedy writes elsewhere on the scene, "Pym's intense identification with Rogers and his actual handling of the body might explain the discrepancy as a Freudian slip: the 'terrific reality' of the corpse has generated in Pym unconscious projections of the death itself" ("Unreadable" 160; *Abyss* 47). The interpretations Kennedy provides ultimately reduce Pym's impossible storytelling knowledge to mental projections, or his imagining or fictionalizing what Rogers' death must have been like, or what the body must have looked like, for Rogers' death and the corpse it conceives create a void in Pym's psyche that he is compelled to fill. However, Pym does not seem to be projecting or fictionalizing the corpse of Rogers, or indirectly witnessing and testifying through the capacity of imagination, but actually testifying to having witnessed the corpse. In other words, Pym testifies

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<sup>19</sup> For instance, Rowe talks about how Pym disguises himself as the ghost of Hartman Rogers during the counter-mutiny to prey upon the superstitions of the piratical crew by using his knowledge of the corpse's condition to mime its appearance (103). However, Rowe overlooks or chooses not to comment on how Pym's knowledge of Rogers' body is impossible.

that he witnessed what he reports, for as the “I” that sees the “violent convulsions” of Rogers and the “horrid and loathsome” state of the corpse, Pym unmistakably anchors himself spatially, rhetorically, yet impossibly to the sight and site of Rogers’ death and the holding chamber for the body. Thus, the narrative discrepancy does not simply concern the power of the narrator’s psyche to imagine something that would otherwise be unknowable and inaccessible to him, but the capacity of his mind to actually know what he cannot and should not know that makes Pym’s impossible knowledge a storyworld violation irresolvable with regard to the novel’s otherwise mimetic storyworld.

As with the storyworld violation of the three-sided letter, the above attempts to resolve or explain away Pym’s contradictory and impossible knowledge prove unsatisfactory for resolving the narrative discrepancies and only lead to more narrative-cognitive dissonance, for it still holds in the narrative that Pym knows what he knows through a way that is not logically possible in the real world. Augustus’s death negates his alleged delayed disclosure to Pym many years later that places certain facts Pym knows about his rescue in a dead-space beyond human-cognitive reach. Similarly, Pym’s spatial-displacement from Rogers’ corpse negates his first-hand knowledge of the corpse’s appearance. As with the letter, though, no matter how impossible, contradictory, or inexplicable, we cannot overlook that Pym still knows the otherwise unknowable, and, more important, knows as though Augustus died just weeks after the rescue *and* lived for many years afterwards when he at last confided the truth to Pym; Pym never saw Rogers’ body *and* did see the corpse. Overstepping the limitations of a real human mind and mimetic first-person narrator, Pym’s impossible knowledge creates another unnatural rift in an otherwise mimetic story-space. This time, however, the storyworld violation reminds readers of the real-world limits placed on a

human consciousness at the same time that our storyteller breaks away from those cognitive limitations and reveals (or reminds us of) the uninhibited ability of a fictional mind to know the unknowable. And yet, what about the mind of the real-world reader—which is not a fictional mind like Pym’s—that, through Pym, vicariously knows the unknowable, and knows aspects that unfold and exceed Pym’s own awareness?

Clearly, the above reading intentionally privileges *Pym*’s impossible story-knowledge as a storyworld violation safely contained in and isolated by the narrative to now illustrate how impossible knowledge trespasses across virtually all levels of narrative—storyworld, storytelling, and storyreading. To illustrate, as previously mentioned, whatever is impossible for Pym to know must also be impossible for him to report to his readers; in turn, whatever cannot be humanly known and therefore logically reported by the narrator becomes an impossible report for readers to receive and know. In a phrase, whatever is impossible must be also impassible, or unable to be passed along by the narrator to his readership through narration. And yet, not only do we have the impossible reports, we know the impossible knowledge those reports convey. More still, and most important, we perceive what Pym does not. That is, for all that he is aware of, Pym never seems aware that he knows things he cannot or should not know, or that he narrates things that he should not possibly be able to narrate—this assuredly includes his first-hand testimony on the condition of a corpse that he could only know at most through second-hand storytelling or someone else’s testimony. Quite the reverse, Pym overlooks or exists oblivious to how he knows and reports the unknowable and untellable, but this is not the case for readers who notice the narrative discrepancies around his knowledge and who examine the storyworld violations those narrative anomalies unseal. For these readers comes a responsibility to not only determine how

Pym cannot know what he knows, but to move beyond the original role of narrative detective to analyze the implications around recognizing the storyteller's impossible knowledge, and the *storyreading ethics* of knowing that knowledge, too.

Anything that our storyteller cannot or should not know, let alone be able to narrate, must also be something that we as readers cannot or should not know nor be able to read. As I defined in the introductory chapter to this thesis, *storyreading ethics* are the cognitive responses made by readers that enfold the narrative levels of storyworld, storytelling, and storyreading. That is, the cognitive-ethical and cognitive-aesthetic responses made by readers that not only reflect on the conditions of the storyworld and narration, but also reflect on the reader-responses made across all narrative levels. To illustrate, with regard to Poe's novel, storyreading not only encompasses our reading of the narrative and its storyworld, storytelling, *and* storyreading, but our reading of that reading of the narrative and those levels of the narrative. This conception of narrative ethics sees, as narrative theorist and ethical critic Adam Zachary Newton does, reader "response as responsibility" (21). But not meaning only the reader's response-ability or ability to make responses to a given narrative, but the responsibility of readers to reflect on those readings and responses to weigh the ethics of those readings; of those particular responses to the narrative. Because as readers we realize that our narrator has and passes on knowledge he cannot know, and, after careful reflection, recognize that Pym overlooks or functions oblivious to the fact that he knows and reports the unknowable and untellable, our responsibility to *Pym's* narrative goes beyond the responsibilities of its storyteller. In other words, we have judged Pym's impossible knowledge according to what we know and believe to be logically possible in the real world, and found it wanting with regards to what can be humanly performed by a real human mind and a

mimetic first-person narrator, but now we must reflect on and judge our storyreading knowledge that enfolds and exceeds Pym's impossible storytelling knowledge. We know what Pym knows because Pym tells us, but we have already recognized and established how this is impossible for Pym to perform when these storyworld violations occur, and also reflected on how Pym seems oblivious to the impossibility of what he knows and narrates. Yet, impossibility does not actually prevent Pym from possessing and transmitting this impossible knowledge. What should be impossible in the storyworld still takes place and has place in the narrative, but also, what should be and is impossible in the physical world outside the narrative manifests in that outer story-space due to how readers know what Pym knows, which is logically impossible for either party to know.

As implied readers, we exist only in the storyworld, but as actual readers, we exist in the real world outside of the fiction. As such, we know things that are impossible in the space of *Pym's* fiction because we judge them—as I believe Heinze correctly theorizes—against what we know can be known, real-ized, performed, or not, with regard to the physics and logic of the real world. However, what I submit here is that impossible knowledge in narrative fiction cancels out the very margins demarcating what is fiction from what is real. In other words, Pym's impossible knowledge becomes our impossible knowledge which creates an intertextual or out-of-text(ual) cognitive nexus linking an otherwise fictional mind with real human minds via reader-narrative interactivity. Through this narrative-cognitive nexus, the (real) world outside the margins of the novel is made into or revealed to be a fictional storyworld or a fictional representation itself, as the transmission of impossible knowledge across narrative levels projects how if fiction may take in the qualities of reality, reality may take on the qualities of fiction, however unnatural. The

outcome foregrounds the fiction around a world outside of fiction. Reality becomes another kind of storytelling and storyworld; a master fiction or master storyworld to weigh and judge worlds of make believe, even though so much of the physical world as we know it is a construction cut from the very same fiber that makes *Pym/Pym*: language. The storyworld violation of impossible storytelling knowledge violates the integrity of *Pym*'s otherwise mimetic storyworld and, more unsettlingly, our own (story)world. Thus, at this point, we are experiencing erratic upheavals with narrative-cognitive dissonance, but also narrative-cognitive enrichment as our perceptions of the narrative—its storyworld, storytelling, and storyreading—are irregularly reshaped and/or revised with (anti)mimetic violations within an otherwise mimetic storyworld that complicate our understandings of the worlds within and outside of the narrative. That is, as a final remark, which storyworld will we say, or can we say, is unnatural when both the physical and fictional worlds have un-natural qualities?

To summarize to this point, the three-sided letter opens our eyes to “physical and logical impossibilities” in *Pym* that reorient our narrative-cognitive approach to reading the novel’s so-called “unreadability.” *Pym* originally foregrounds the construction of a mimetic storyworld that (anti)mimetic violations like the letter and *Pym*'s impossible storytelling knowledge deconstruct and then reconstruct as an unnatural narrative and fictional world. Hence, when physical logic breaks down and the novel becomes “unreadable” with all that we know possible in the physical world, our sense-making strategies must invoke “other logics” to read what the violations imply not only about the storyworld of the narrative, but the physical world outside of the novel. What the storyworld violations of the letter and impossible storytelling knowledge in *Pym* imply about the physical world evokes how much of and in what ways the real world is a construction not too

unlike a fictional world. Recalling the implications of *(anti)mimetic vertigo* from the prefatory narrative of *Pym*—Arthur Pym is at times as real as his author, Edgar A. Poe, and at other times Poe is as fictional as Pym—because storyworld and physical world margins are being repeatedly trespassed by the narrative’s unnatural storyworld violations, we become as fictional as Pym and Pym becomes as fictional as us, with both being as real as real can realistically and fictionally be. Therefore, if some texts “aggressively challenge” our sense-making strategies or stretch them to the breaking point, when we reflect on what the storyworld violations in *Pym* imply, the reading experience of the narrative is taken to the terminal limit of narrative-cognitive comprehension. For the violations revise everything we originally thought we knew about *Pym*’s world and our own, which will even include how we define race and the construction of racial identities in *Pym* and the physical world.

### **III. The Unnatural Fiction of Race**

The final narrative discrepancy and storyworld violation example from *Pym* concerns the sudden and unexplained racial transformation of Dirk Peters amidst the violence on the island of Tsalal. After Pym and Peters are rescued from the shipwrecked hull of the *Grampus*, the two find themselves aboard the *Jane Guy*, a vessel on its way to Antarctica. The chapters of the *Jane Guy* sections of the narrative are mostly uneventful and filled with pages of scientific digressions on the geography, botany, or zoology of certain South Atlantic regions. When the *Jane Guy* crew discovers a mysterious, uncharted island that the natives call Tsalal, however, *Pym*’s narrative foregrounds the politics, violence, and fiction around race, which magnifies the importance of the storyworld violation of Peters’ inexplicable racial transformation during this portion of the narrative. Not only are the people of Tsalal “jet black” in complexion, even the teeth of the

Tsalalians are black, and nothing of whiteness exists on the island (1136; XVIII). Thus, when the predominately white crew of the *Jane Guy* approaches the Tsalalians, or when the islanders see any object that is white, they react with abject anxiety: “It was quite evident that they had never before seen any of the white race—from whose complexion, indeed, they appeared to recoil” (1137; XVIII); and once more, “we could not get them to approach several very harmless objects—such as the schooner’s sails, an egg, an open book, or a pan of flour” (1138; XVIII). Clearly, Pym and his companions fail to recognize the whiteness of all of the listed objects, and thus fail to realize that the Tsalalians are not afraid of the objects themselves but of their whiteness and the lack of darkness they convey—which would be alien or “other” for the total-black Tsalalians. Moreover, as Teresa A. Goddu explicates the scene of first contact between the Tsalalians and *Jane Guy* crew, “*Pym* places whites in the position of the ‘other,’” for here, on an island of blackness, to be white is to be unlike(d), to be feared, and, as the later violence between the two ethnicities will bear out, to be white is ultimately to be destroyed (90).

In the days that follow the original encounter, the Tsalalians and *Jane Guy* crew establish commerce with one another under an appearance of mutual trust. However, Pym reports that in virtually all interactions with the Tsalalians, the men of his party “took care to be well armed, yet without evincing any distrust” (1139-40; XVIII). Or, undermining the sincerity of mutual trust with the commerce carried out between the cultures, “We established a regular market on shore, just under the guns of the schooner, where our barterings were carried on with every appearance of good faith” (1146; XX). Both passages show that the *Jane Guy* crewmembers never actually trust the Tsalalians, but they take careful steps to *appear* to trust the islanders. As a result, there exists no mutual trust when one group remains wary of the other. Yet, ironically, a later passage

reveals that the Tsalalians never actually trusted the white crew either, and, in the deceptions both parties create, they carry out a mutual distrust that will have violent outcomes for all white peoples on Tsalal:

I [Pym] believe that not one of us had at this time the slightest suspicion of the good faith of the savages . . . and, upon the whole, we should have been the most suspicious human beings had we entertained a single thought of perfidy on the part of a people who treated us so well. A very short while sufficed to prove that this apparent kindness of disposition was only the result of a deeply-laid plan for our destruction, and that the islanders for whom we entertained such inordinate feelings of esteem were among the most barbarous, subtle, and bloodthirsty wretches that ever contaminated the face of the globe. (1149-50; XX)

Obviously, we have to evaluate the honesty of some of Pym's claims here because he and his companions were always suspicious and distrustful of the Tsalalians, for the crew of the *Jane Guy* commonly carried weapons when amongst the islanders, and conducted trade within the range of the ship's cannons. More important, though, Pym foreshadows the treachery of the Tsalalians who annihilate thirty-six members of the *Jane Guy* crew either by burying them alive on the island beneath a man-made rockslide, or by storming the ship and tearing men and masts to pieces before setting all aflame. The manner in which the Tsalalians massacre the white crew shows that they not only wish to destroy whiteness, but to erase it, to bury and burn all vestiges of whiteness to preserve and protect blackness on Tsalal. Miraculously, Pym and Peters survive the rockslide that kills thirty others, having stepped into the protection of a fissure in the

surrounding hillside. As with the *Grampus* before, Pym and Peters emerge the sole survivors of the *Jane Guy*.

Almost immediately after the rockslide, a peculiar narrative discrepancy takes place when Pym, alone in the company of Peters, observes: “We alone had escaped from the tempest of that overwhelming destruction. We were the only living white men upon the island” (1156; XXI). However, as early as the prefatory narrative and throughout the novel Pym refers to Peters as “a half-breed Indian,” which foregrounds Peters’ Indian heritage and casts him as a non-white man. What, then, has changed, or, more important, how has Peters changed into a white man? We could say that it is not so much that Peters actually changes into a white man, but more so that Pym transforms Peters from a “half-breed Indian” into a white man that explains the narrative discrepancy. Certainly, we can find support for this explanation. The terrifying reality of being the actual last white man on an island violently hostile to whiteness is too alienating for Pym to confront alone, and he therefore makes Peters white so as not to have to face that awful fate by himself. In the wake of all the racial violence, then, there is an emotional and psychological motivation for Pym to cancel out Peters’ otherness to feel that he is in company he can trust. The context, too, would answer for why, ten years removed from the trauma on Tsalal, when Pym writes the prefatory note to his narrative, he returns to referring to Peters as “a half-breed Indian” again, for the psychological motivation to overlook his otherness and regard him as an equal has by that time passed. And yet, when it comes time to retell and, in a way, relive the traumatic memory of the massacre through his narrative, Pym’s psyche returns to re-cognizing Peters as a fellow white man.

Another way we might rationalize Peters' transformation from "a half-breed Indian" into a white man underlines the very racial hybridity of his character. That is, Peters can turn into a white man because he is not completely Indian. Moreover, Peters may very well be half Indian *and* half white. At no point in the narrative, however, does Pym ever clarify the other half of Peters' racial complexion exactly. We are told that Peters "was the son of an Indian woman" and that his father was possibly a "fur-trader . . . or at least connected in some manner with the Indian trading-posts on Lewis River" (1043; IV). Furthermore, we may assume from these small details that Peters' genealogy holds some whiteness, but there is much textual evidence that suggests the other, unidentified half to Peters' racial makeup hides an African-American heredity. To explain, Pym writes that Peters "was one of the most ferociously-looking men I ever beheld" and that his head had "an indentation on the crown (like that on the head of most negroes)" (1043; IV). More still, Pym tells us that the common facial expression that Peters wore looked like "that of a demon" (1044; IV). Aside from Peters, ferocity is a quality only attributed to dark-skinned characters in the narrative, especially the "barbarous" manners of the Tsalalians, and the trait of "a demon" is attributed to one other character in the tale: the black cook of the *Grampus*, who is one of the most murderous and "blood-thirsty" mutineers, and "who in all respects was a perfect demon" (1043; IV). Dennis Pahl reads Peters as the representation of "Pym's dark, savage self" by reinforcing the brute characteristics of Peters' appearance in relation to the refined manners and appearances of white characters such as Pym and Augustus (46). The fact that Pahl uses the descriptor "dark" to describe Peters is quite interesting, and highlights how, even if not black like the Tsalalians, there is a dark-ness to Peters' character that makes him the inverse to whiteness, or, in other words, a quality of darkness that bars him from fulfilling Pym's naïve vision of the

refinement of whiteness. Lastly, the “indentation” Pym alludes to on the crown of Peters’ head, and the discriminatory connection he makes between that bodily characteristic and “negroes,” implies a hereditary link between Peters and blackness—at least, in Pym’s mind and narrative. Although the textual connection cannot be made with complete certainty, were Peters to be half Indian and half African-American, the moment of his transformation into a white man would only cause more narrative-cognitive dissonance for reading and interpreting the sudden change of race and character overall in the narrative. In essence, how is such a change physically and/or logically possible, and, if impossible, how do we come to terms with the change in the narrative? Moreover, when Peters turns into a white man, does that transformation not collapse and cancel out Pahl’s reading of Peters as the “dark” half of Pym?

The racial transformation of Peters goes beyond a narrative discrepancy and constitutes a mimetic storyworld violation due to how an otherwise mimetic character suddenly changes in a way only possible for characters of antimimetic fiction. Even though his transformation is not as extreme as Gregor Samsa’s sudden change into an insect in *The Metamorphosis*, or the gender transformation of Orlando from Woolf’s *Orlando*, Peters’ racial metamorphosis still engenders narrative-cognitive dissonance with how it unsettles readers’ sense-making strategies. Centrally, how can Peters change into a white man, but, more important, what does that change imply about race in the storyworld of the narrative? To be clear, the placement and timing of the storyworld violation cannot be overlooked, for Peters transforms or is made into a white man during a time when peoples of blackness are killing peoples of whiteness. The reading that Peoples submits on the transformation intimates Pym’s psychological motivation, in the wake of extreme racial violence, to reduce the world along the lines of racial polarity: “Pym’s world—or, perhaps, his

worldview—has become polarized as he nears the Antarctic, whiteness predominating everywhere but on this one dark island where the natives fear and loathe all things white” (69). We may add, however, that the white visitors to this island also “fear and loathe” all things black, for they are never without weapons, and ever-ready to open fire at the first sign of mistrust. After seeing his white companions murdered by the devices of “the warriors of the black skin,” anything not (im)perfectly black on Tsalal becomes, for Pym, white (1159; XXII). There no longer exists any *other* distinctions; the world reduces to black and white. More still, despite all of the carnage and violence as both whites and blacks are cut open, torn to pieces, or shot through the head, the color of blood—“the redness and the horror of blood” (Poe “Masque” 485)—fades in the last chapters of the narrative, even though they are easily the most bloody of all of *Pym*’s chapters, showing that not even blood registers on Pym’s black and white color scale anymore. Therefore, Peters transforms into a white man because, in the current situation, he is not perceivably black so he can no longer be not-white. The storyworld violation enfolded within his racial transformation, then, keeps in harmony with what Goddu proposes about race and the novel, and adds to her argument in ways that she does not recognize: “The novel insists that identities are fluid” and also “claims that character can change according to environment (the white crew [of the *Grampus*] turns to cannibalism when the ship becomes disabled), and constantly inverts and collapses the poles of ‘black’ and ‘white’ (Peters is first demon, then savior)” (84). What I add to Goddu’s assertion here is what she overlooks: the transformation of Peters from “a half-breed Indian” into a white man underscores the fluidity of character *and* race in the narrative, highlights how context or “environment” gives rise to change of character, and without question “inverts and collapses” racial distinctiveness because, beyond changing from

“demon” to “savior,” Peters changes race during a time of extreme racial violence that changes our conception and perception of race and the narrative. The construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of race and racial identity in the narrative becomes irresolvable through Peters, for he cannot be a white man because he is an Indian, and he can no longer be an Indian because he turns into a white man. Thus, in the wake of his transformation, there is no stable racial identity for Peters to adopt or return to, and his transformation, as a storyworld violation of an otherwise mimetic storyworld, completely alters our worldview of *Pym*’s storyworld and narrative, as well as race in the novel. Because there is no stable racial identity to adopt or return to, there is, in the end, no stable racial identity overall.

The storyworld violation around Peters and race in the narrative not only undoes race as a stable narrative-cognitive construct by underlining the fluidity and ultimate instability of race, the violation also conveys the synthetic component or “constructed nature of race” itself (Goddu 87). When Peters undergoes his racial metamorphosis, race is both collapsed by and collapsed into his character. Thus, Pahl’s assertion that Peters is Pym’s “dark” half loses value because the argument depends on the fixedness or permanence of his character that is negated by his change into a white man. In other words, when Peters becomes white he no longer remains the “dark” half to Pym but represents the darkness of whiteness, the whiteness of darkness, and the undoing of both because he can be each *and* neither race. What Peters embodies through the unnatural alteration to his character is not merely the fixity of race versus the fluidity of race, but the unnatural fiction of race—race as fiction or make-believe. The storyworld violation created by his metamorphosis reminds us that Peters and his racial complexion are make-believe, and, as a fictional character, he can do or undergo things that would be otherwise physically and logically

impossible. Ideally, this storyworld violation requires readers to revise their perceptions of race and Peters, race and the narrative—along with their perceptions of *Pym* as unnatural rather than mimetic fiction—and race and the physical world, by opening a dialogue asking in what ways race is not make-believe. Beyond culture, that is, how much of race is natural and how much must be said to be fiction, or, if fiction is too strong a word, how much of race depends upon the social/cultural conventions, interpretations, and ideologies we have created around what it means to look and be “other” from one another?

During a pivotal scene following the violence on Tsalal and the transformation of Peters, our two white characters—one formerly “a half-breed Indian”—discover a series of cave markings within Tsalal that trigger a disagreement about the naturalness of the indentures or the synthetic quality of the etchings:

We were about leaving this fissure . . . when Peters called my attention to a range of singular-looking indentures in the surface of the marl. . . .With a very slight exertion of the imagination, the left, or most northerly of these indentures might have been taken for the intentional, although rude, representation of a human figure standing erect, with outstretched arm. The rest of them bore also some little resemblance to alphabetical characters, and Peters was willing, at all events, to adopt the idle opinion that they were really such. I convinced him of his error, finally, by directing his attention to the floor of the fissure, where, among the powder, we picked up, piece by piece, several large flakes of marl, which had evidently been broken off by some convulsion from the surface where the

indentures were found, and which had projecting points exactly fitting the indenture; thus proving them to have been the work of nature. (1167; XXIII)

Peters believes that the markings constitute a kind of language (which would mean the markings are synthetic or man-made), whereas Pym asserts that the markings are the result of an arbitrary process of nature (the markings are natural and not man-made). Shaindy Rudoff writes that “this question of whether writing etched in stone was the work of man or of nature” was “an anthropological question, a religious question, a question of race, and ultimately of politics in the years surrounding the composition of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*” (63). Above all else, however, *Pym* creates and leaves unanswered many questions of race. The above-mentioned questions on race and *Pym*'s storyworld violation of race are still significant to modern times, but around the novel's publication in American history, questions regarding the fictionality or truth, fixity or fluidity, of race were questions with overwhelming immediacy and normally violent outcomes. To illustrate, the Nat Turner Slave Rebellion, a bloody slave uprising in Southampton, Virginia in 1831, in which African-American slaves killed several dozen white citizens, caused hysteria over the possibility of further slave insurrections on American soil, and led to white retaliation against innocent black slaves. The questions of slavery and race were debated at the pulpit, with abolitionists preaching biblical injunctions decrying the practice of slavery in a nation under God, and pro-slavery advocates counter-preaching that scripture upheld that slavery was ordained by providence. Antebellum America's questions and divisions over race ultimately led to the division of the country in a bitter and bloody civil war that ended American slavery but did not, in the end, answer America's questions on race. Furthermore, in the midst of all of this national racial tension around whiteness and blackness, Amerindians were still being removed

from their lands—or killed—and relocated to territories farther and farther westward, a symbolic act of removing Native Americans from America and the national racial imagination.

Around *Pym*'s publication, all of America was deeply unsettled with and by the question of race. The racial violence on Tsalal, the killing of whites by blacks, resonates with the violence of the Nat Turner Slave Rebellion, and Poe, a native of the American South, likely capitalized on the fears and anxieties of his contemporary readership by invoking slave insurrection within the narrative. But what did Poe, the implied author, mean to imply about the question of race when during all of the violence of whiteness and blackness on Tsalal, a Native American character—the only one in the novel—transforms into a white man? At last, I can only submit that Peters' transformation is a storyworld violation with (un)clear politico-historical implications for Poe's novel overall, and as a text of unnatural narrative fiction. However, what the violation means definitely I cannot say but only propose that it opens or continues a dialogue on the synthetic or make-believe component of the American conception of race. Parallel to the questions of race haunting the history around the novel, the storyworld violation of racial mutability in *Pym* and the old questions on race and the novel the violation adds to, and the new questions on race and the narrative the violation gives rise to, remain unsettled.

### **Conclusion**

*Pym* clearly is no normal novel and narrative as many past readers and critics mistakenly assumed, nor is it, due to its more strange and unusual moments, "unreadable." However, any reading of the novel that holds fast to natural logic will ultimately discover that the narrative does not lend itself to be read without contradiction. The task of reading the narrative now is to couple natural narrative logic with unnatural narrative logic to work out what the range of *Pym*'s

storyworld violations imply about the components of the narrative, the themes of the novel, and what the storyworld violations convey about our physical world overall. To do so depends upon realizing that the storyworld violations create scenarios that are incompatible within a real-world situation, but are possible within fictional worlds that are not obligated to comply with mimetic realism, whether completely or intermittently. That is why a three-sided letter in *Pym* can have three impossible sides, a narrator can know and report what he cannot know and we, his readers, can know the unknowable too, and why an otherwise mimetic character can inexplicably change his racial identity. To be clear, *Pym* is still, as Pahl rightly states, “a text riddled with mysteries” (41). However, the mysteries no longer require only solving for how certain things cannot be or exist in the narrative, nor how the impossible can manifest, but what happens and what is implied when the unnatural carves out a place in the narrative—a violation, a portal in *Pym*’s impossible storyworld to reading the novel anew.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### THE NON-UNNATURAL NARRATIVE OF PYM/PYM?

One of the most interesting things about fictional narratives is that they do not only mimetically reproduce the world as we know it.

—Jan Alber, “Impossible Storyworlds”

At this juncture in both the development of narrative theory and the history of literature, there is no justification for ignoring the non- and antimimetic fiction that surrounds us.”

—Brian Richardson, “Beyond Story and Discourse”

[Unnatural narrative theory] ends up reinforcing the mimetic rather than escaping from its clutches.

—Monika Fludernik, “How Natural is ‘Unnatural Narratology’”

With this chapter, I wish to respond to Brian Richardson’s theory that only narratives that are primarily antimimetic are actually unnatural narratives because the theory is too limiting, too excluding, and risks marginalizing texts like *Pym* that portray unnatural storyworlds, minds, and storytelling within a mimetic narrative space. I argue that it is equally if not more cognitively defamiliarizing for readers when a narrative staging an originally or mostly mimetic world presents inexplicable and random episodes of antimimetic strangeness as when a narrative built on antimimetic storytelling modes focalizes the unnatural throughout the tale. Moreover, mimetic violations in a mostly mimetic storyworld like *Pym*’s keep the reader in a more active state of cognitive enrichment, as he/she must, at random intervals, revise his/her perceptions of what is mostly a verisimilar storyworld in which impossible things happen or are told. Such a narrative-cognitive experience is not always the case with fundamentally antimimetic narratives because readers may adapt to the text’s continual portrayal of the unnatural. That is, although the portrayal of unnatural storyworlds, minds, and storytelling never becomes natural in truly

antimimetic narratives, readers may eventually recognize the text's unnatural patterning or system and adjust to things like unnatural causality (a slap to the face heals a bruise [unnatural] rather than the slap to the face causes the bruise [natural]) or temporally reversed narration. Even if *Pym* is not an antimimetic narrative by Richardson's definition, its strange storyworld and storytelling make it no less an unnatural fiction. And what I will do in this chapter, then, is push at Richardson's too restricting "boundaries of the paradigmatically unnatural" to make a merited place for *Pym* as an unnatural narrative, antimimetic or otherwise ("What Is" 36).

In Richardson's introduction to unnatural narrative theory in the recently-published *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*, he states that "[i]t should be noted from the outset that most postmodern works of fiction are antimimetic narratives; insofar as they problematize their own ontological status, they are by that very fact antimimetic" (20). And yet, an endnote attached to this statement clarifies that, throughout his contributions in the text, he is only "concerned with narratives that are predominantly and, in fact, flagrantly antimimetic, since . . . antimimetic texts are more challenging than nonmimetic narratives in the ways they contest the conventions of nonfictional and realistic representation" (28; n19). What is unclear, however, is the distinction between an antimimetic and nonmimetic narrative, or how an antimimetic text is something wholly separate from a nonmimetic text, rather than that the antimimetic is only another type of nonmimetic narrative. In other words, how is the antimimetic apart from the nonmimetic rather than included within that narrative subset? To be antimimetic, the narrative must first be said to be nonmimetic before progressing to a further frequency of unnaturalness, but this does not mean that the narrative ever quits being a version of nonmimetic storytelling or

storyworld-making. The difference, then, regards terminology, not principle as Richardson wants to project.

Still, Richardson writes elsewhere, “[i]t is not the non-mimetic but the anti-mimetic that constitutes the unnatural. This is because anti-mimetic narrative violates the conventions of mimesis by pointing out the unrealistic nature of those conventions” (“What Is” 34). Perhaps it is because the antimimetic flagrantly satirizes, inverts, discards the conventions of mimetic fiction, or shows the unreality of reality, that Richardson discriminates between nonmimetic and antimimetic unnatural narratives. But even this possibility does not satisfactorily answer for why division is justified. Why can a nonmimetic text, according to Richardson, not perform the same inversions or satire as an antimimetic text? At this point, one may wonder why I have not clarified precisely Richardson’s conceptualization of nonmimetic narratives. I have not done so because Richardson has not clearly presented his understanding of nonmimetic narratives in his discussions outlining the principles and methods of unnatural narrative fiction and theory. He clarifies how a mimetic narrative recreates the real world within the space of fiction, and develops antimimetic narratives in contrast to mimetic realism, yet he misses discussing what exactly constitutes the nonmimetic. Instead, as far as I can tell, the nonmimetic seems to be neither mimetic nor antimimetic fiction; inhabiting a liminal or transitional space between the two narrative modes. If so, then the nonmimetic can be said to possess both mimetic and antimimetic narrative qualities, and possibly portray anti/mimetic narrative worlds and storytelling within the same narrative space without configuring or instituting one dominant narrative mode. The nonmimetic condition, as I define, is not a stable story space recognizable to the real world, or a radical inversion of the logic and conventions of realism, but the transitional,

dynamic revisions and script enrichments that take place when the mimetic and antimimetic collude in a world of fiction. A nonmimetic narrative may present a storyworld both recognizable to and incompatible with the real world, and it may contain unnatural temporalities, causalities, narration, and so on, that take place within a world otherwise like our (readers') own. That nonmimetic fiction may synthesize mimetic narrative conventions does not cancel out or diminish the narrative's unnaturalness; for, these narratives, "[t]hough nonmimetic, they bear a dialectical relationship to the concept of mimesis, since it is only through that concept that we can understand its violation" (Richardson "Beyond Story" 48).

Granted, some distinctions are necessary. Distinguishing between the mimetic and non- or antimimetic is needed in order to account for fictions that do not recreate the real world in a story space—even if distinctions between the nonmimetic and antimimetic do not seem quite as necessary. I also agree with Richardson on classifying unnatural narratives apart from "the pseudo-unnatural narrative, that is, the narrative that seems to be unnatural only to those ignorant of the conventions it adheres to" ("What Is" 37). What I am bringing to issue here, though, is the thought that only fundamentally antimimetic fictions are in fact unnatural narratives because such a mindset diminishes the unnaturalness of works that do not meet, perfectly, an antimimetic conception even though we know or feel them to be unnatural nevertheless. Fictions, that is, like Poe's *Pym*.

As stated above, it is equally if not more cognitively defamiliarizing for readers when a narrative portraying an originally or mostly mimetic world presents inexplicable and random episodes of (anti)mimetic violations, as when a narrative built on antimimetic storytelling modes continually portrays the unnatural throughout the tale. In chapter two, I argued how certain

narrative discrepancies in *Pym* are actually mimetic violations in the narrative's primarily mimetic storyworld and storytelling, or how *Pym* conveys a narrative whose storyworld contains physical and logical impossibilities that affect its storytelling and, most important, storyreading. A brief overview of the storyworld impossibilities are the paradoxical, three-sided piece of paper that is a fraudulent letter written to deceive Pym's father, a blank side of paper, *and* a warning of mutiny written in blood; Pym's impossible knowledge of things he did not see or cannot realistically know without defying the capabilities of a real-human mind (his personal knowledge of the corpse of Hartman Rogers, which he could not have seen without revealing himself to the piratical mutineers of the *Grampus*); and Dirk Peters, whom Pym calls a "half-breed Indian" in the prefatory narrative, and who inexplicably transforms into a white man during the Tsalalian adventures. What makes all of these incidences mimetic violations is that all, in some way, transgress against the laws and logic of the real world, the conventions of mimetic narration, and *Pym*'s otherwise verisimilar world. By Richardson's definition, then, they constitute antimimetic narration in *Pym*. However, the incidences are flagrant mimetic violations, but the narrative, its storytelling and storyworld, does not flaunt these violations, never calls our attention to them to make a commentary "pointing out the unrealistic qualities of [mimetic] conventions." It is the reader, not Pym, who acknowledges what is impossible and unnatural about the narrative's storyworld and storytelling, and without close, attentive reading or rereading, many readers may even miss the presence and significance of these violations in the narrative. According to Richardson's criterion for antimimetic fictions, *Pym* is a narrative with (anti)mimetic violations, but not an antimimetic and therefore unnatural narrative because it does not portray a "predominantly and . . . flagrantly antimimetic" narrative mode and world. Essentially, *Pym*

would be at the most a nonmimetic narrative due to its oscillations between mimetic and antimimetic modes and thus does not qualify as an unnatural narrative. But what, in Richardson's terms, qualifies as an unnatural narrative?

Unlike *Pym*, Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* represents an exemplary unnatural narrative in how it portrays time, causality, and narration within its storyworld.<sup>20</sup> There are several layers to the unnaturalness within *Time's Arrow*; specifically, the antimimetic storyworld and antimimetic narration all contribute to the narrative's break from mimetic conventions. The most bizarre and essential aspect about the storyworld within *Time's Arrow* is that our narrator regards the past in future tense, for temporality in the narrative is inverted as time moves backwards towards the horrors of the Holocaust.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, unlike the unsettled future, in Amis's novel, history—now the future—appears inevitable and inescapable. Also unnatural, the narrator is not the protagonist of the narrative, Tod T. Friendly, but he does share the same body as Tod, but cannot control Tod's actions or thoughts: "I," the narrating consciousness informs, "have no access to [Tod's]

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<sup>20</sup> My selection here of *Time's Arrow* as a textual example of unnatural narrative fiction is based on Richardson's usage of the text to promote and discuss unnatural narrative theory. I do not mean for its selection over other excellent textual examples (like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Coover's "The Babysitter," etc.) to imply that Amis's novel is somehow more unnatural than all other texts.

<sup>21</sup> Not all unnatural narrative theorists agree with Richardson that *Time's Arrow* is an unnatural narrative. Alber writes that *Time's Arrow* is arguably only unnatural "at first glance" because the narrative's orientation around antimimetic temporality and causality can be interpreted as "the product of traumatic experiences" ("Impossible" 84). Although not an unnatural narrative theorist, James Phelan writes that, beyond time's reversal in *Time's Arrow*, "Amis follows the conventions of standard mimesis. The characters in the storyworld . . . are bound by all other rules and restrictions on human powers of action, and they all have recognizable human psychologies" ("Ethics" 125).

thoughts—but I am awash with his emotions” (7). Furthermore, although the narrator knows of his placement within Tod, Tod is unaware of this other presence within himself: “It’s certainly the case that I appear to be hitched up with Tod like this, but he’s not to know I’m here. And I’m lonely” (29). Because the storyworld inverts time, causality or how the narrator interprets action and consequence in sequence is also inverted to strange and even nightmarish effect. For instance, observing battered women at a crisis center, the narrator makes the following statement about their condition and treatment:

The women at the crisis centers . . . are all hiding from their redeemers. . . . The welts, the abrasions and the black eyes get starker, more livid, until it is time for the women to return, in an ecstasy of distress, to the men who will suddenly heal them. Some require more specialized treatment. They stagger off and go and lie in a park or a basement or wherever, until men come along and rape them, and then they’re okay again. (31)

Oddly, here, in this storyworld, physical abuse does not cause injuries, it heals them. Rape does not traumatize, it cures trauma. Thus, with the inversion of temporality comes an accompanying inversion of (im)morality, and this inversion has drastic outcomes for how the narrator perceives right and wrong in the Auschwitz episodes. That is, even a history as inhumane and immoral as the Holocaust now appears moral and humanitarian, for victims are healed by the methods and experiments which otherwise took their lives. Through this inversion of time and cause, then, the narrator makes a moral sense out of the history and horrors of the Holocaust that otherwise does not exist. Overall, *Time’s Arrow* is unnatural throughout the duration of the narrative, and reader-narrative interactivity requires orienting one’s cognitive-aesthetic responses around the reversal

of time and causation within the storyworld, and the at times humorous and other times tragic or horrifying outcomes the inversions have on the narrative's storytelling and storyreading.

*Time's Arrow* certainly merits qualification as an unnatural narrative because it provides a unique and cognitively defamiliarizing reading experience, and disregards mimetic conventions to tell a story on the Holocaust that could not be told if the narrative's storyworld and storytelling obeyed the laws and logic of the real world. Yet, to say that *Time's Arrow* is somehow more an unnatural narrative than narratives like *Pym* seems a matter of subjective taste that ignores what should be a primary goal of unnatural narrative theory and criticism: that is, not to rank unnatural fictions on a scale of more or less unnaturalness, but to read and analyze the unique narrative situation(s) of all fictions that break from mimetic narrative modes by synthesizing or orienting antimimetic storyworlds or storytelling to whatever duration or volume. *Time's Arrow* is continually unnatural; *Pym* is erratically unnatural, and the majority of the novel's (anti)mimetic violations are concentrated to the *Grampus* episodes, but even a few violations can dramatically impact how readers experience the fiction. In other words, time may not run backwards in *Pym*, nor cause and effect, and its storyworld, with the exception of the (anti)mimetic violations, is an otherwise verisimilar narrative space, but the violations of the letter, impossible knowledge, and storytelling are no less strange and unnatural. That these violations are concentrated to one half of the narrative more than the other (the *Grampus* versus the *Jane Guy* episodes) does not lessen their significance; if anything, it only makes them that much more interpretatively irreconcilable because *Pym's* narrative constantly reasserts a mimetic story-space but there still remain strange, antimimetic rifts in the space of the storyworld that cannot be cancelled out. On the contrary, no matter how normal or close to normal *Pym's* narrative becomes—at least, that is, until the “white

shrouded figure” at tale’s end—the warning letter and impossible knowledge constitute the crux of mimesis within *Pym*’s narrative space, because these violations are logically, physically, and humanly impossible as regards the real world that mimetic fiction reproduces through narrative.

Again, my argument here is not that a narrative like *Pym* is more unnatural than one like *Time’s Arrow*, or vice versa; my argument regards how the unique narrative situations of both fictions are equally unnatural. The unnatural in *Pym* is just simply localized to certain episodes of the narrative, whereas *Time’s Arrow* globalizes the unnatural throughout. To elevate one over the other, though, highlights a matter of critical choice and personal taste. Worse, favoring a type of unnatural narrative over another type of unnatural narrative arguably illuminates a subjective, hidden bias in unnatural narrative theories like Richardson’s. Unnatural narrative theorists claim that narrative studies have traditionally preferred and privileged narratives that recreate the real world in a fictional space—what is termed the “mimetic bias.” Unnatural narratology, then, sets out to restore narratives that have been overlooked or marginalized because they do not adhere to the conventions of mimetic fiction. However, to prefer or privilege only narratives that are fundamentally, radically, “predominantly,” or “flagrantly” antimimetic as truly unnatural narratives creates its own bias within unnatural narratology. Only this time not a “mimetic bias,” but an *antimimetic bias* that risks marginalizing or overlooking the very texts unnatural narrative theory originally set out to restore. Fictions that, even if not antimimetic by Richardson’s values, are unnatural nevertheless.

Moreover, it can be argued that (anti)mimetic violations in a mostly mimetic storyworld like *Pym*’s keep the reader in a more dynamic state of cognitive enrichment as he/she must, at random intervals, revise his/her perceptions of what is otherwise a verisimilar story-space in

which impossible and unnatural things happen or are told and known. Beyond the prefatory narrative that exposes mimetic and antimimetic storytelling modes within *Pym*, the chapters that follow appear to reassert and prefer a distinctly mimetic storyworld which, in turn, makes *Pym* more cognitively challenging because the (anti)mimetic violations happen without reason or warning within this otherwise mimetic storyworld. And whereas each new violation may put us on alert to any others that may follow, the experience remains mostly one of expectant anxiety rather than pattern adaptation. Expectant anxiety regards knowing that future (anti)mimetic violations are likely to happen in the narrative, but as readers we are unsure when, why, or indeed if they will happen. Pattern adaptation, however, regards recognizing a system or pattern to the violations, and eventually adapting to the unnatural narrative design. Thus, *Pym* projects an unnatural reading experience centered on the expectant anxiety of (anti)mimetic violations; *Time's Arrow*, an exemplary unnatural narrative, projects a pattern to which readers may adapt. That is, even though inverted temporality and causality are radically unnatural phenomena, as readers, we can adjust to this narrative system. We can recognize that time moves backwards and, as a result, causation is reversed, making the more tragic and violent events in the storyworld make sense by an inverted logic and moral value. At first, it is strange that life is lived in reverse: that sex begins with climax before moving to foreplay; that people walk, drive, and talk backwards; rape victims are cured by being raped; or Holocaust casualties are resurrected and healed through the very means of their execution. At no point do these things ever feel natural, but readers can eventually recognize the pattern beneath the narrative's storyworld: the inversion of time also inverts cause and effect, and moral acuity. Thus, readers may almost see how the Holocaust makes moral sense in the storyworld of *Time's Arrow*, even if

they ultimately cannot submit to this viewpoint because they can perceive how the narrator misperceives (im)morality in the narrative world.<sup>22</sup> There is no pattern to adapt to in *Pym*; quite the reverse, the narrative projects the unnatural at random, which modifies and revises reader-narrative interactivity through the expectant anxiety of (anti)mimetic violations in the storyworld and narration.

In some ways, then, *Time's Arrow* is more unnatural than *Pym*, and in still others *Pym* is more unnatural than *Time's Arrow*; however, both are equally unnatural in how they project narratives that do not merely recreate the real world in the space of fiction, but transgress against the laws and logic of fictional realism and provide unique, strange, and challenging storyworlds, storytelling, and storyreading experiences.

Although there may be some critical or theoretical value for cataloging unnatural fictions by the duration, type, or volume of the unnatural in the particular narrative, to maintain that this system helps separate the unnatural from the truly unnatural (the antimimetic) overlooks how the system may also disregard or marginalize narratives that remain unnatural whether or not they meet the values of an antimimetic text. Additionally, Richardson needs to qualify his conception of the nonmimetic more, and why the nonmimetic does not qualify as unnatural narrative fiction,

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<sup>22</sup> Through orienting readers' ethical judgments around the unusual aesthetics and presentation of the narrative, Maria Jesus Martinez-Alfaro claims that *Time's Arrow* delivers a refreshing and harrowing way of looking at the Holocaust: "By defamiliarising the familiar, by making it strange, the author adopts a more ethical perspective on the Holocaust, since he forces us [readers] to rework our ways of looking at it" (133). Thus, the aesthetic orientation of Amis's novel revitalizes readers' perceptions of the Holocaust and their ethical engagements with narratives that foreground its history, survivors, victims, and perpetrators.

and also how antimimetic narratives stand apart from the nonmimetic category to begin with. If narrative studies have been predicated on the exclusion of texts that are not mimetic, as many unnatural narrative theorists claim, then unnatural narrative theory and criticism must promote a community of inclusion for those narratives that do not follow, to whatever degree, the practices and conventions of mimetic narratives. Doing so can only broaden our critical and theoretical horizon of knowledge for the forms, practices, and varieties that unnatural narratives may take in literary fiction. Furthermore, recalling Richardson's avowal that "there is no justification for ignoring the non- and antimimetic fiction that surrounds" contemporary narrative theory, there is likewise no need for unnatural narrative theory to discriminate between "non- and antimimetic" fictions that project impossible storyworlds, minds, and/or narration that clearly qualify as what we know to be "unnatural" to the physical world. Overall, the task of unnatural narratology must be to explore unnatural narratives regardless of the narrative form they take so as not to have to answer for whether the "unnatural" or the "narrative" is of most value to the study of unnatural narrative fiction. In conclusion, even if *Pym* does not qualify as an unnatural narrative according to Richardson's definition, as my thesis moves to a close, I believe it now stands apparent how *Pym*'s strange storyworld, storytelling, and storyreading narrative levels all make *Pym*'s fiction no less an unnatural narrative, antimimetic or otherwise.

## CONCLUSION

### AT STORYWORLD'S END: "DISCOVERIES STILL FARTHER" IN *PYM*, POE, AND NARRATIVE

At one point during Chapter IV, Arthur Pym digresses to comment on the strange course his narrative will eventually take, “a narrative, let me here say, which, in its latter portions, will be found to include incidents of a nature so entirely out of the range of human experience, and for this reason so far beyond the limits of human credulity, that I proceed in utter hopelessness of obtaining credence for all that I shall tell, yet confidently trusting in time and progressing science to verify some of the most important and most improbable of my statements” (1044). Although he places the “improbable” aspects of his story in the later extremities of the narrative, we experience several impossible and therefore “improbable” elements and events in the narrative well before we reach the “latter portions.” A three-sided letter goes “beyond the limits of human credulity” while the multiple instances of our storyteller’s impossible knowledge time and again take us “out of the range of human experience.” Thus, even before we arrive at the charnel island of Tsalal, confront the “white shrouded human figure” at the end of Pym’s tale, or the odd postscript and ghost-written verse marking the storyworld’s end, many things “beyond the limits of human credulity” have already informed us—if we have read attentively—that *Pym* is clearly no ordinary narrative. Poe’s novel, his last and only attempt at the form, foregrounds a world like our own with persons like ourselves and then unsettles and destabilizes that world and all within it, along with our perceptions of it, with violations that go against all that we know to be physically and logically possible. In doing so, Poe opens *Pym* to be read as an exercise of error and indolence—the failed attempt of a fledgling novelist—but he also opens the book to be read as a fictional narrative not fundamentally recreating the physical world, but a narrative merging

an otherwise mimetic storyworld with unnatural narrative physics, logic, characters, storyworld-making, and storytelling; all with the promise to create many unique and unnatural storyreading experiences.

Over the course of this thesis, I have developed a reading of *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* that examines the narrative discrepancies and storyworld violations, in which the narrative acts most out of the ordinary, to (re)position the text as a work of unnatural narrative fiction. To make this argument, I applied unnatural narrative theory to explain how textual details like *Pym*'s three-sided letter, the instances of impossible storytelling knowledge, and the racial mutability of one of the novel's central characters, challenge readers' sense-making strategies and perceptions of the narrative, but also (re)present possibilities and opportunities for reading the narrative by "other logics." In other words, *Pym*'s storyworld violations permit readers to engage with "physical and logical impossibilities" in the narrative to explore and analyze what those elements imply about all the levels of the narrative—the storyworld, storytelling, and storyreading—and what the violations may express about the physical world outside the text as well. Alongside validating the novel as a work of unnatural narrative fiction, I worked out an ethics of reading unnatural narratives like *Pym* by conceptualizing how readers might approach an otherwise mimetic or normal storyworld that synthesizes impossible elements and either rationalize narrative discrepancies, or probe the unnatural portals the storyworld violations open. My emphasis on the storyreading level of the narrative and the responsibilities of readers and the responses they make toward the unnatural in *Pym* grows out of unnatural narratology's current lack of an ethics of reading unnatural narrative fiction. Reading unnatural narrative fiction is a narrative-cognitive voyage through story, one on which we must be willing

to not only bring along our preconceptions of narrative fiction but to challenge them, and allow them to be challenged to sometimes extreme degrees, to reaffirm them when able, but also to revise them when they are proved wanting. Therefore, it is my critical contention that the very ethics of reading unnatural narrative fiction, a challenging and vital area of analysis, clearly deserves more attention and theorization than what has been paid by unnatural narrative theory to this point.

My overall goal has been to propose a new way of reading *Pym* and to pioneer a new, refreshing, and thought-provoking dialogue on the novel as a work of unnatural narrative fiction. And while my discussion produces analyses of the novel as unnatural, and what the unnatural aspects of the narrative imply, there still remain many questions about the unnatural narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym. For instance, race and the novel has been a central source of debate since around the 1970s, embroiling such critics as Sidney Kaplan, Joan Dayan, Harry Levin, Rowe, Kennedy, Goddu, and numerous others, in discussions of *Pym*'s and Poe's racial politics. And yet, what does (re)positioning *Pym* as an unnatural narrative spell for how we must engage with race and the novel moving forward? In what ways—if at all—does an unnatural narrative reading of race revise former critical perceptions and conceptualizations of race and *Pym*? Beyond the question of race, what does the unnatural in *Pym*'s otherwise natural or normal storyworld imply about worlds of fiction and the physical world? What does impossible storytelling knowledge and the narrative-cognitive nexus it creates between a fictional mind and the physical minds of real persons (readers) convey about reader proximity to the impossible in unnatural narratives? More still, what about Poe's stories beyond *Pym*. Many discussions of *Pym* mention Poe's other maritime tales such as "MS. Found in a Bottle" and "A Descent into the Maelstrom," but is the

setting of the sea all that entwines these tales intertextually, or could there be an impossible undercurrent and unnatural narrative subtext beneath these stories, too, that previously could not be explained nor expressed because we lacked the proper terminology—i.e., unnatural narrative theory—to discuss them? Already Alber et al. have repositioned Poe’s well-known thriller of madness, murder, and confession, “The Tell-Tale Heart,” as an unnatural narrative (“Beyond Mimetic” 125-29), but how many other Poe tales might also be unnatural narratives, especially given that *Pym* precedes, in Poe’s publishing history, fictions such as “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Masque of the Red Death,” “Ligeia,” “A Descent into the Maelstrom,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and many others? Last and perhaps most important, if the unnatural abounds elsewhere in the fictions of Poe, will it no longer be unnatural and, instead, be explainable as a convention in Poe’s writing? All of these questions and more are presented when we approach the open book of *Pym* with an open mind for the strange and unnatural.

As *Pym* and Peters draw closer to the Antarctic cataract, and the narrative draws towards its close, *Pym* writes, “Many unusual phenomena now indicated that we were entering upon a region of novelty and wonder” (1176; XXV). Unfortunately for *Pym*, that region will spell the end of the story for him. But the story after the story, the story of our reading the narrative, that story is still just beginning even one hundred seventy-five years after *Pym* first set sail upon the ink-black waters of American literary fiction. There still remain many mysteries and discoveries waiting to be charted in *The (Unnatural) Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, so let us voyage and read onward toward mysteries and “discoveries still farther” in *Pym*, Poe, and narrative.

## GLOSSARY

This glossary is meant to clarify, in as concise and thorough a manner as possible, certain terms and concepts I discuss in the preceding chapters. Although many of these terms are developed more fully above, or well established in the lexicon of narratology, the definitions I provide here reflect my own understandings and explanations of narratological terminology and theoretical models of narrative.

**Antimimetic Narrative** a narrative that may present a world that seems like the physical world but that contains impossible temporality, causality, narrators, persons, etc., or a fictional world with persons, time structures, events, etc, that are completely unrecognizable to the logic and physics of the real world. Unnatural narrative theorists argue that such narratives have been traditionally marginalized and/or stigmatized in the field of narratology in favor of narratives that (re)present the physical world as we know it (i.e., mimetic narratives).

**(Anti)mimetic Vertigo** the dizzying, transgressive play between mimetic and antimimetic narrative storyworlds and storytelling. Can also set in conflict the ways in which our physical world is based on or created from constructions of language not too unlike fictional storyworlds.

**Expectant Anxiety** when applied to reading unnatural narrative fiction, regards knowing that future, impossible storyworld violations are likely to happen in a narrative, but readers are unsure when, why, or indeed if further storyworld violations will take place. Places reader-narrative interactivity upon pins and needles.

**Impossible Storytelling Knowledge** modeled upon Ruediger Heinze's theories on "unusual knowledge" in first-person narrative fiction, denotes when an otherwise mimetic first-person

narrator knows or is able to know something which should be unknowable by all that we know about the abilities of human cognition and comprehension. Because whatever our storyteller knows is impossible to know, that knowledge constitutes something that he/she cannot or should not be able to narrate or tell to the audience.

**Mimetic Narrative Fiction** a narrative that reproduces the physical world in a world of fiction. These storyworlds present characters and narrators who are life-like, time-spaces that obey real world physics and logic, and a non-contradictory, non-impossible causality or chain of events.

**Narrative-Cognitive Comprehension** the coherence of the narrative enfolded into and itself enfolding readers' cognitive perceptions of the narrative and the interaction and cohesion of all of its elements and levels.

**Narrative-Cognitive Dissonance** created from any textual oddity or anomaly that jeopardizes the overall coherence of the narrative and that undermines readers' sense-making strategies with outwardly irresolvable paradoxes and cruxes: when the coherence of the narrative is thrown into flux at the same time and by the same story anomaly that unsettles readers' cognitive perception of the narrative to that point and/or overall.

**Narrative Discrepancy** signifies any textual detail or element that creates a contradiction or contradictory version of events in the storyworld or storytelling of the narrative.

**Narrative Favoritism/Prejudice** favoring one type of narrative over another or judging one type of narrative inferior to the ideal or conventions of another. I model this after what unnatural narrative theorist's term the "mimetic bias" of narratology, or narratology's alleged preference for narratives that are strictly and/or markedly mimetic over fictions that are antimimetic; thus, leading to the marginalization or stigmatization of narratives that are not mimetic.

**Narrative Levels** encompasses the storyworlds of narrative (the world of the narrative to which narrators, characters, time, causality, and the narrative's readers interact with) that enfolds the narration and reading of the narrative; the storytelling of the narrative (how the narrator tells the storyworld into being and shapes how readers will construct that world and all within by way of cognitive perception); and the storyreading of the narrative (the act of reading the narrative that both discovers an already constructed storyworld and storyteller in the narrative and yet also helps to construct that world and narrative voice by reading both into existence). All narrative levels enfold, and are enfolded into, the other levels; none takes precedence over the others; all depend upon one another in a ceaseless chain of reader-narrative interactions and exchanges.

**Nonmimetic Narrative** a category of fictional narrative that is not completely mimetic, yet not entirely antimimetic. May foreground a storyworld which is not recognizable to the physical world that otherwise contains life-like persons, narrators, etc; a storyworld that seems like the physical world but that contains impossible phenomenon; or a radical inversion of the logic and conventions of realism, and the transitional, dynamic revisions and enrichments that take place when mimetic and antimimetic narrative conventions collude in a world of fiction. At this time, there are some debates among unnatural narrative theorists about whether nonmimetic narratives are unnatural narratives or not.

**Outer Story-Space** (see *physical world*).

**Pattern Adaptation** as applied to reading unnatural narrative fiction, regards recognizing a system or pattern to the impossible storyworld violations, and eventually adapting to the unnatural narrative's underlying design.

**Physical World** denotes the real world outside a narrative's world of fiction. What we call reality. The storyworlds, narrators, etc, in unnatural narratives can not only threaten the margins dividing physical world from storyworld, fiction from reality, but in some ways show how those margins are not real, or in what ways the physical world is not unlike worlds of fiction (referred to at times in the above chapters as *real world* and *outer story-space*).

**Reader-Narrative Interactivity** encompasses the experiential interactions, exchanges, and tensions created, sustained, resolved, or unresolved between narratives and their readers during the duration of a reading.

**Storyreading** (narrative level). Enfolds and is enfolded into the storyworld and storytelling levels by way of the reading of the narrative. Storyreading is reflective, meaning it not only interprets and judges a narrative, but turns interpretation and judgment back upon reading to weigh the validity and responsibility of reader-responses made with respect to the narrative.

**Storyreading Ethics** encompasses the ethics of reading narrative fiction; in this case, unnatural narrative fiction. Concerns the cognitive-ethical and cognitive-aesthetic responses made by the reader that enfold the narrative levels of storyworld, storytelling, and storyreading. That is, the cognitive-ethical and cognitive-aesthetic responses made by readers that not only reflect on the conditions of the storyworld and narration, but also reflect on the reader-responses made across all narrative levels: the reading and judgment of our reading(s) of the narrative.

**Storytelling** (narrative level) the act of narration or telling, reporting, communicating a series of events that happened to a person or persons at a particular place and time. In the preceding chapters, storytelling is mainly used synonymously with narration. However, storytelling could also designate any character, who is or is not the narrator, that expresses a story to other persons

in the narrative or to the implied audience of the text (i.e., first-hand or second-hand storytelling, direct or indirect narration [the narrator tells or someone other than the narrator tells or the narrator tells what someone else told]).

**Storyworld** (narrative level). The fictional world(s) that readers help a narrative to create by “co-creating” the physics and logics of the story-space respecting how persons, narrators, time, causality, and other narrative elements, act given the overlying parameters of the narrative.

Enfolds and is enfolded into the storyreading and storytelling levels of narrative.

**Storyworld Violation** in an otherwise mimetic storyworld, denotes any element that would be impossible to take place or have place by all that we know about the physics and logic of the real world.

**Synthetic** underlines the condition of a storyworld, narrator, character, etc., that, in some way or in some manner, undermines the illusion of realism by foregrounding its fictionality, i.e., its construction as a fictional person, place, time-space, etc. To be synthetic is to be the opposite of mimetic.

**Unnatural Narrative Fiction** narrative “made strange” or by “other logics” that rejects the “physical and logical” limitations of the real world for the un-real and creative logics of fictional storyworlds and storytelling. Such narratives may present a world like our own but that contain impossible elements, or storyworlds that are completely unrecognizable to the physical world as we know it. An unnatural narrative takes readers’ sense-making strategies to the terminal limit of narrative-cognitive comprehension, forcing them to adopt new ways of reading narrative fiction.

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Office of Research Integrity

February 1, 2013

Mitchell C. Lilly  
6803 Country Club Dr.  
Huntington, WV 25705

Dear Mr. Lilly:

This letter is in response to the submitted thesis abstract that defends Edgar Allan Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* as an early example of an "unnatural narrative" in American literature. After assessing the abstract it has been deemed not to be human subject research and therefore exempt from oversight of the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Code of Federal Regulations (45CFR46) has set forth the criteria utilized in making this determination. Since the information in this study is based purely on textual analysis it is not considered human subject research. If there are any changes to the abstract you provided then you would need to resubmit that information to the Office of Research Integrity for review and a determination.

I appreciate your willingness to submit the abstract for determination. Please feel free to contact the Office of Research Integrity if you have any questions regarding future protocols that may require IRB review.

Sincerely,

Bruce F. Day, ThD, CIP  
Director  
Office of Research Integrity

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