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ET SI C'ÉTAIT PAR LA FIN QUE TOUT COMMENÇAIT?
PEN BEFORE PLOT, OR TRESCH ON POE'S REVERSALS

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ABSTRACT

This brief comment offers some reflections on John Tresch's "Compositor's Reversal." Contrasting his approach with Gaston Bachelard's, I situate Tresch in the tradition of reading Edgar A. Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* as a riddle to be decoded. I suggest that Tresch's analytical emphasis on material composition practices rather than *Pym*'s content opens up insightful ways of reading both *Pym* itself in terms of its composition, style, and narrative voice, and also Poe's well-known programmatic *Philosophy of Composition*. The key achievement of Tresch's article beyond its engagement with Poe scholarship is its contribution to the study of writing practices and media studies more broadly. By demonstrating the tight connection Poe forged between natural theology and the material practice of typography, Tresch inserts the typesetting process as an important step in the historiographical trajectory between pen and typewriter. He shows that the mid-nineteenth-century context of natural theology marks a decisive difference in connotation between Poe's compositional play with questions of authorship and plausibility, of truth and appearance both described in and performed by his narrative, and later concerns with the apparatus and its potential for the production of an *écriture automatique*.

Keywords: Edgar A. Poe, John Tresch, *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, typography, natural theology, style, Gaston Bachelard

"The book is, obviously, an impertinence," the editors of a recent translation of Edgar A. Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* open their introduction. "And a chief work of nineteenth-century American literature. It just took a little while, about 120 years, for the Poe experts and literary historians to realize that."² Even within Poe's rough reception history, *Pym* stands out as singularly puzzling to its interpreters. And perhaps that is not altogether surprising. The intentional confusion around the question of authorship is only the beginning. Poe posed as the nonauthor of the book that appeared in 1838, and that continued the story Poe had published under his name in the *Southern Literary Messenger* in two installments in January and February 1837, right after (probably) getting sacked

1. A response to John Tresch, "The Compositor's Reversal: Typography, Science, and Creation in Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*," *History and Theory*, Theme Issue 56 (December 2018), 8-31. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/hith.12083>

2. "Natürlich ist das Buch eine Unverschämtheit. Und ein Hauptwerk der amerikanischen Literatur im 19. Jahrhundert. Es hat nur ein wenig gedauert, um die 120 Jahre, bis das auch die Poe-Experten und die Literaturhistoriker verstanden hatten" (Hans Schmid and Michael Farin, *Die Geschichte des Arthur Gordon Pym aus Nantucket*. Übersetzt von Hans Schmid [Hamburg: Mare, 2008], 7).

from his editor's job at the *Messenger* for being too drunk too often. Authorial questions aside, the story itself is a challenge. A combination of shipwreck tale and adventure novel peppered with cannibalism and natural disasters, its plausibility seemed doubtful to many contemporary reviewers. The story's narrator is infuriatingly forgetful, changing dates, numbers of mutineers or survivors, and geographical locations casually from one day of his account to the other, thereby inviting sympathetic translators such as Charles Baudelaire to quietly adjust the starkest inconsistencies. The inexplicable is always part of Arthur Gordon Pym's story. Don't ask why his beloved dog goes missing from his story the day the dog has saved him by biting to death an adversary; exasperation lies the way of questioning what it takes to train a Newfoundland to aim for a human's throat.

As a riddle, a puzzle to be at least partially solved: this has long seemed to be the most promising way of approaching Pym's story to some of its readers. I'll choose a prominent example. In his introduction to a 1944 French edition, Gaston Bachelard suggests the need for a decoding gesture to understand *Pym* properly, for a "twofold reading" that yields a "key" not just for this work of Poe's but also for his other "extraordinary stories" as gathered and translated by his admirer Baudelaire.³ Because Poe worked on the "borderline between dreaming and objective thought,"⁴ we'll have to "not simply read, but to meditate, to dream" the text in order to understand *Pym*.⁵ The seemingly incoherent story will take on a "strange coherence"⁶ if we ask the right question: "Under which dreamlike thrust of the imagination have these events been imagined?"⁷ Building upon Marie Bonaparte's earlier, psychoanalytical readings of *Pym*, Bachelard's "twofold reading" consists of "seek[ing] underneath the manifest meaning a deep, dreamlike meaning."⁸ For example, we'd be mistaken to read Pym's days spent in hiding below deck at the outset of the voyage as a matter-of-fact account of the narrator being uncomfortably squeezed in among piles of badly stored merchandise. Instead, the narrative must be seen as belonging "not to the world of facts . . . but to the world of dreams. This is a dream of a labyrinth."⁹ Similarly, the book might seem "unfinished"¹⁰ to a reader taking at face value its concluding remarks about missing chapters, but a "dreamlike critique" (even if such a critique is "so often misunderstood by a literary criticism limited by an intellectualism satisfied with its naive evidences!") reveals a synthesis between labyrinthine dreams of profundity and the hieroglyphic encodings depicted in *Pym*'s closing pages.¹¹ For Bachelard, then, it is *Pym*'s content that poses riddles, and if the book's last pages retain their

3. Gaston Bachelard, "Les aventures de Gordon Pym: Introduction aux *Aventures de Arthur Gordon Pym d'Allan Edgar Poe*" (Paris: Éditions Stock, 1944). I quote the reprinted essay, Gaston Bachelard, *Le droit de rêver* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970), 138 ("lecture doublée") and 143 ("clé").

4. Bachelard, "Introduction," 134: "à la limite de la rêverie et de la pensée objective."

5. *Ibid.*: "non pas seulement lire, mais méditer et rêver."

6. *Ibid.*, 137: "étrange cohérence."

7. *Ibid.*: "Sous quelle poussée onirique de l'imagination les événements ont-ils été imaginés?"

8. *Ibid.*, 138: "une lecture doublée qui cherche sous le sens manifeste un sens onirique profond."

9. *Ibid.*, 140: "La narration n'appartient pas . . . au monde des faits. Elle appartient au monde des rêves. C'est un rêve de labyrinthe."

10. *Ibid.*, 148: "un livre inachevé."

11. *Ibid.*: "La critique *onirique* est si souvent méconnue par la critique littéraire limitée par un intellectualisme satisfait de ses naïves évidences!"

secret, it must be so: after all, it is the “human heart, the dark and suffering heart, that is at the center of everything.”¹²

Tresch’s “Compositor’s Reversal” starts its own decoding enterprise at the surface instead, at the typographical layout of *Pym*’s title page. Might not Poe’s obsession with the technicalities of writing, technicalities material (such as paper and typography) and immaterial (such as rhyme), offer a clue to the riddle of *Pym*, a subliminal clue hidden in plain sight before the reader who has not even begun to engage with the story’s content? Pictorial readings of the title page—of a ship and its reflection, of a bisected globe and pointer to an origin—produce a mirror image of the story’s symmetrical formal structure. In a reenactment of nineteenth-century typesetting processes, the explicit verbal clue to decipher the title page pictorially comes only on the book’s last page, sending the reader backward to the beginning. “Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before anything be attempted with the pen,” Poe wrote in his *Philosophy of Composition* in April 1846, investigating explicitly there not the commercial failure *Pym* had turned out to be, but the spectacular success of his poem “The Raven.”¹³ But Tresch’s argument that *Pym* provided the canvas for Poe to experiment with later successful strategies of “writing backwards” (and for dramatizing these strategies in his engagement with cryptography) is convincing precisely in its undermining of Poe’s pretense-programmatic declaration. After all, *Pym*’s exemplary plot appears to have been worked out not immaterially, as pure imagination all the way to its *dénouement*, but in a deliberate imitation of the text-production practices not of the pen but rather the typesetter. In *Pym*’s case as analyzed by Tresch, the last stage of material text production informed what Poe held up as the emphatically first, the imaginary elaboration of the plot. “[T]he poem may be said to have its beginning—at the end, where all works of art should begin—for it was here, at this point of my preconsiderations, that I first put pen to paper in the composition of the stanza.”¹⁴ If Poe’s determined insistence on the backward “mode of procedure” in the *Philosophy of Composition* has long struck its readers as ironic, Tresch’s contrasting of rhetorical pose and material composition practices reinforces this undertone.

Within the frame of reverse composition from end page to title page, a flurry of further experiments—not of meaning, but of style—play out in *Pym*, in the word’s double sense of material writing tool as well as rhetorical form, and in keeping with Poe’s projection of the possible autographical unity of both in his long-planned and never realized magazine *The Stylus*. Situated not at the level of compositional symmetry, as highlighted by Tresch, but in the storyline’s details, the exuberance of these style plays spills over the schematized shape of the plot. The experiment announces itself prominently placed in the last line of *Pym*’s preface, a line declaring that the “difference in point of style will be readily

12. *Ibid.*, 149: “c’est le cœur de l’homme, le cœur obscur avec ses souffrances, qui est au centre de tout.”

13. Edgar A. Poe, “Theory and Composition,” in *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 13.

14. *Ibid.*, 20.

perceived” between the first few pages written by “Mr. Poe,” and the remainder of the book as written by “Pym” himself.¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, no such discernible difference in writing style awaits the reader, but the explicit question of rhetorical style and form opens the narrative, and recurs throughout in gleeful mischief. Take *Pym*’s occasional elevation of dates to the narrative’s organizing principle. The resulting journal format was associated with particular reliability in the nine-teenth-century seafaring context, where logbooks with their precise recordings of locations were of interest to traders, and rapidly acquired commercial value. Worrying at the outset about “having kept no journal during a greater period of the time” and thus having to write from “mere memory,”¹⁶ the narrator later happily adopts just that trustworthy format for long spells, only to announce in a rare footnote toward the end of his voyage that “for obvious reasons,” he “cannot pretend to strict accuracy in these dates. They are given principally with a view to perspicuity of narration, and as set down in my pencil memoranda.”¹⁷ The frequent play with the role of paper and writing tools in driving the plot parallels this overt play with narrative style. A crucial such episode is the narrator’s encounter, hidden below deck and fiddling with implausible phosphorus light, with a note from his friend. First torn apart in his “disappointment at not finding some words upon the slip,”¹⁸ the note is pieced together again with the dog’s help, read from the back side after some tactile investigation of the paper and now partly deciphered as a “fragmentary warning”;¹⁹ eventually it turns out to have been written in blood with a toothpick as pen. No effort is spared to dramatize the *stylus*.²⁰

It would be just a few more decades after Poe’s *Pym* for the question of material writing and composition practices to gain prominence, most conspicuously perhaps in connection with the typewriter. Think, for instance, of Walter Benjamin’s much-cited pondering that “[t]he typewriter will only alienate the pen from the writer’s hand once the precision of typographic forms will enter the conception of his books directly,” published not long after his exchange with Siegfried Kracauer on the latter’s 1927 piece *Das Schreibmaschinen*, satirizing the writer’s quasi-romantic relationship with his machine.²¹ But by that time, the profound connection that Tresch identifies in *Pym*, the connection between the material practice of typography and cosmological certainties and uncertainties, has given way to a concern primarily with people and their writing tools.

15. Edgar A. Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1838), vii.

16. *Ibid.*, v.

17. *Ibid.*, 149.

18. *Ibid.*, 36.

19. *Ibid.*, 38.

20. That might be for the better, since the narrator suffers from an acute inability to speak just when it matters most: for example, “Had a thousand words depended on one syllable, I could not have spoken it” (*ibid.*, 41); or, when signaling to another ship is required, “I . . . stood . . . motionless, and unable to articulate a syllable” (*ibid.*, 93).

21. First published in Benjamin’s 1928 *One-Way Street*, “Die Schreibmaschine wird dem Federhalter die Hand des Literaten erst dann entfremden, wenn die Genauigkeit typographischer Formungen unmittelbar in die Konzeption seiner Bücher eingeht.” Quoted in Davide Giuriato, “(Mechanisiertes) Schreiben: Einleitung,” in “Schreibkugel ist ein Ding von mir: von Eisen.” Schreibszenen im Zeitalter der Typoskripte, ed. Davide Giuriato and Martin Stingelin (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2005), 7.

Tresch's foregrounding of the typesetting process as a composition procedure reflected as an organizing principle in *Pym*'s formal structure inserts typesetting and typography as a crucial historiographical step into the trajectory between pen and typewriter. In this historical process, the mid-nineteenth-century context of natural theology marks a decisive difference in connotation between Poe's compositional play with questions of authorship and plausibility, of truth and appearance both described in and performed by his narrative, and later concerns with the apparatus and its potential for the production of an *écriture automatique*. In the beginning was the word: *Pym*'s playful parallel between the author as compositor, adopting structural principles mirroring those taken (in Poe's later *Eureka*) to provide the organizing role in the creation of the universe, and the Creator retains its ambiguity, restating all the doubts about, in Tresch's words, the artificer's relation to the contrivance. But this parallel does, in one of those moments that might have moved George Bernard Shaw to ascribe to Poe "magic where his greatest contemporaries produced only beauty," extend to include the story's reader in the ambivalent suggestion of compositional certainty.²² "We now anticipated a catastrophe, and were not disappointed," we read toward the concluding disaster of *Pym*'s adventure, watching the hostile natives set his and his one remaining companion's vessel on fire.²³ Partaking in the compositional symmetry, what else is there to expect at this point in the story? As if personal-izing a *style indirect libre*, the pronoun "we" oscillates easily in referent here between the story's readers and its narrator. At least in this respect, if he is certain what to expect, so are we.

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22. George Bernard Shaw, "Edgar Allan Poe." *The Nation* 4, no. 6 (1909), 602.

23. Poe, *Pym*, 177.