A Literary Testimonial to Banal Evil: Dehumanization in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*

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1 This article attempts to construe Edgar Allan Poe’s “Pym” as a testimonial to psychic trauma. I’ll be firstly outlining the problematics of testimony and the adjacent one, that of (banal) evil, while showing how Poe’s tale reveals itself as (unwittingly) set on bringing to light obscured horrors, thus evoking similarities with the objectives of testimonials to psychic trauma.

2 How is the act of *writing* tied up with the act of *bearing witness*? Is the act of *reading* literary texts itself inherently related to the act of *facing horror*? If literature is the *alignment between witnesses*, what would this alignment mean? Such questions, posed by Shoshana Felman in *The Alignment Between Witnesses* will inform and shape the proceedings of this analysis.

3 Inhabiting a morbid, paranoid, and most often than not totally inexplicable world, Edgar Allan Poe’s characters can be construed as taking up the task of witnessing and testifying to the unaccountable reality. His writings document the testimonies of characters who tell of how undergone experiences can become instantly devoid of meaning and significance. Despite their unavailability to consciousness and cognitive decoding, the shocking moment of personal invalidation lingers in the subject’s mind as an inconceivable incident, but one utterly impossible to disremember.

4 The pervasive feeling of death and the obtrusive lethal imagery, often filling Poe’s fiction to the point of excrescence, could thus be interpreted as much more than a pure literary technique. It bears witness to the moment of the subject’s unanticipated transposition in the inexplicable realm *after* his/her already accomplished future, in an attempt at and need for overriding the event of psychic death and trauma.

5 Poe’s work can thus be seen as archiving the “deep memory” or the subject’s traumatic experience, providing a peculiar mode of literary testimony. In other words, his tales and poems are a performance, a re-enactment of deep, and often excessively
As readers, we are witnesses to the questions asked at the beginning of the article, and which summon and beseech us from within the literary texts. What is the relation between literature and testimony, between the writer and the witness? What is the relation between the act of witnessing and testifying, and the acts of writing and of reading? I will attempt to answer these queries in what follows, by firstly outlining the problematics of testimony and the adjacent one, that of (banal) evil, as put forth by Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub and Giorgio Agamben and secondly by performing a reading of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym” that will show its author to have been—in David Hirsch’s words¹—“the prophet of the time of dehumanization,” the prophet of Auschwitz.

1. On Literary Testimonials to Trauma

According to Felman and Laub, testimony seems to be, as a relation to events, composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, “events in excess of our frames of reference” (Testimony—Crises of Witnessing 5).

What the testimony does not offer is, however, a completed statement, a totalizable account of those events. In the testimony, language does not possess itself as a conclusion. Testimony is, in other words, “a discursive practice. To testify, to vow to tell, to promise and produce one’s own speech as material evidence for truth, is to accomplish a speech act, rather than to simply formulate a statement,” Felman argues. As a performative speech act, testimony in effect addresses “what in history is action that exceeds any substantialized significance, and what in happenings is impact that dynamically explodes any conceptual reifications and any constative delimitations.” (Testimony 13).

Felman and Laub consider Sigmund Freud’s recounting of the Irma dream as the first instantiation of testimony in the psychoanalytical discourse, since

[...]through the material process of the act of writing down, through a detailed recording of the dream’s associations, the Irma dream bears witness to the unconscious testimony of the dream in such a way as to transform it into the most reflective and most pointed conscious testimony, a conscious testimony which itself can only be grasped in the movement of its own production, and which increasingly embraces not just what is witnessed, but what is begotten by the unconscious testimony of the dream. (13)

As the mechanics of trauma, exposed in the theoretical accounts of Cathy Caruth and Jay Lifton make apparent, registration/inscription is precluded in trauma, the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out, they malfunction. The victim's narrative, therefore—the very process of bearing witness to trauma—begins with “someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence” (Felman and Laub 53).

“While historical evidence to the event which constitutes the trauma may be abundant and documents in vast supply, the trauma has not been truly witnessed yet,” argue
Felman and Laub in *Testimony—Crises of Witnessing*, it has not taken cognizance of, the emergence of the narrative which is being listened to and heard, is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the “knowing” of the event is given birth to (57). The listener (the reader, in the case of literary testimonials), therefore, is instrumental in the re-creation of knowledge. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer/reader, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time. By extension, “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself” (Felman and Laub 57).

12 Based on authors such as Giorgio Agamben, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, I shall underscore the role of testimony, which Nora Strejilevich identifies as “a means for working through traumatic memories” (Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth 701). The problematics of trauma and testimony are perforce in a closely-knit relation with the issue of evil, which has been the bone of contention ever since the time of Saint Augustine, who inquired into it for the first time. My excursus through the problematics of evil will focus on more recent propoundings on the subject, since they have felt it incumbent to factor in a strand of evil which had not been witnessed on such a scale heretofore, namely one that made possible the concentration camps in Auschwitz.

2. On the “Banality” of Evil

13 In the introduction to her book *The Many Faces of Evil*, Amélie Oksenberg Rorty refers to evil as an umbrella concept that has undergone dramatic transformations, marked by a rich vocabulary of distinctions: abomination, disobedience, vice, malevolence, willfulness, immorality, cruelty, aggression and crime. “Its source and analysis, its instances and characteristic scenarios have changed dramatically, in ways that indicate much larger changes in the conceptual worlds in which each of these notions functions” (xi). She concedes, nevertheless, that virtues and vices cannot be neatly separated into distinct classes, on account of the fact that wrong-doing—and the movement towards wrong-doing—“can be subtle, unnoticed, banal” (xv).

14 Evil is Being in excess, Alan Schrift proposes, “Being that has lost its measure” (Modernity and the Problem of Evil 182). However, Being has no measure, he adds, except “where there is an ethical point of view to delimit it, to endow it with its proper measure, to relate violence and destruction to those who produce and distribute them and to those who undergo them.” (182)

Violence destroys entities, and through this very destruction produces an excess—of suffering and loss, which have their peculiar, enduring presence in the midst of a growing absence. Evil is superfluous excess that should not have come into being.

Evil is the Being of beings stamped by a negated negation. The eruption of Evil is the negation of the should not have taken place. (Schrift 182)

15 But Evil never appears as such, it is always already enframed by one of these formations. Only evils appear, in the plural, as particular entities, “essents” with certain objective and certain subjective features. The manifold of evils relate to Evil in the same way that the manifold of beings relate to Being: making it present and concealing it at one and the same time, articulating it in and through language (that names and describes this and that particular being or evil), and making one forget the
persistence of the yet, or forever inexpressible Being/Evil and the possibility of different kinds of enframing. Kinds of ethics, moral systems, and normative codes see no Evil; they can only designate and interpret series of occurrences of suffering and pain, losses, damages, and ruin that should not have taken place (Schrift 183-4).

16 Immanuel Kant was the first to propose another kind of evil than those conceived heretofore. And ever since he used the expression “radical evil” in his Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, it has been a source of fascination and perplexity: fascination, because it has struck many of his readers (among whom Hannah Arendt) that Kant was dimly aware of a type of evil that exceeds our traditional conceptions; perplexity, because “it is not clear just what Kant means by radical evil—and how it fits (or does not fit) with his moral philosophy” (Bernstein qtd. in Rethinking Evil 55).

17 In her reading of Kant, Arendt showed distrust of the former’s ratiocination in propounding the perversion of will in radical evil, since he “immediately rationalized it in the concept of a “perverted ill will,” while being drawn, as Lauren Barthold holds, to Augustine’s notion of will, “particularly how he wrestles with the apparently competing forces of withdrawal from, and action in, the world” (Towards an Ethics of Love 1).

18 Kant’s “Radical evil” is not the name of a special type or form of evil. It is certainly not a form of evil that “we cannot conceive,” Pia Lara asserts. “On the contrary, we can clearly conceive it, and what it names is simply the propensity (Hang) not to do what duty requires, not to follow the moral law” (Rethinking Evil 70). Kant does distinguish three distinct degrees of this “capacity for evil,” but they are all related to the failure to adopt good maxims.

First, there is the weakness of the human heart in the general observance of adopted maxims, or in other words, the frailty of human nature; second, the propensity for mixing unmoral with moral motivating causes (even when it is done with good intent and under maxims of good), that is, impurity, and third, the propensity to adopt evil maxims, that is, the wickedness of human nature or of the human heart. (Religion 24)

19 We may think that “wickedness” names some horrendous form or degree of evil. And certainly, Kant’s rhetoric makes it sound this way.

Third: the wickedness (vitositas, pravitas) or, if you like, the corruption (corruptio) of the human heart is the propensity of the will [Willkur] to maxims which neglect the incentives springing from the moral law in favour of others which are not moral. It may also be called the perversity (perversitas) of the human heart, for it reverses the ethical order [of priority] among the incentives of a free will [Willkur]; and although conduct which is lawfully good (i.e. legal) may be found with it, yet the cast of mind is thereby corrupted at its root (so far as the moral disposition is concerned), and the man is hence designated evil. (24)

20 We intuitively perceive a gap between “ordinary” evil and “radical” evil. Ordinary evil can enter a relation of “definition by opposition” with the good. Lying is the negative counterpart of “telling the truth,” being loyal is the good to which being disloyal corresponds as an evil thing. Evil on the scale of Auschwitz, instead, cannot be brought into any such relation: there is no good that can be defined as “not doing what was done at Auschwitz” (Ferrara qtd. in Pia Lara 173). Simply, we feel that evil of such magnitude ought to be eradicated from the world—this sort of evil is too much even to function as “the opposite of the good.” The difficulty is that radical evil cannot be brought into a meaningful relation with the shared basis of human action.
Reporting the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem, Hannah Arendt spoke of “the banality of radical evil” and meant something quite factual, the phenomenon of evil deeds, committed on a gigantic scale, which could not be traced to any particularity of wickedness. However monstrous the deeds were, the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic, and the only specific characteristic one could detect was a quite authentic inability to think.

Is our ability to judge, to tell right from wrong, beautiful from ugly, dependent upon our faculty of thought, asks Rorty. “Do the inability to think and a disastrous failure of what we commonly call conscience coincide?” (The Many Faces of Evil 265). The question that imposed itself was: Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens, “regardless of specific content and quite independent of results,” be of such a nature that it “conditions” men against evildoing? Finally, Rorty enquires, “is not the urgency of these questions enforced by the well-known and rather alarming fact that only good people are ever bothered by a bad conscience whereas it is a very rare phenomenon among real criminals? A good conscience does not exist except as the absence of a bad one” (265).

Ron Rosebaum, in a New York Times article stated his utter disagreement with Arendt’s notion of the banality of evil:

There is great comfort in abandoning the ‘nightmare’ of radical evil for the notion of banality. But the plain fact is that the Holocaust was committed by fully responsible, fully engaged human beings, and not by unthinking bureaucratic automatons. The Nazis were human beings capable of making moral choices who consciously chose radical evil. (Evil Isn’t Banal 22)

Once again, the nagging question arises: is this the will Kant was so intent on defending? In Radical Evil, Joan Copjec believes not only that it is not, but also gives reasons why it is not. As already pointed out, Kant describes human will as alienated from itself by an internal fracture. “But the executioner experiences this impediment to his will as coming from the victim’s resistance,” Copjec states in the introduction to her study (Radical Evil xix). “Only an enemy other opposes the torturer’s unalienated will, checking its otherwise absolute power” (Copjec xix).

Relational psychoanalysis used the term projection to describe the mechanism by which what is internal to the subject comes to be viewed as imposed from outside, but she was not satisfied that the term adequately described all that was involved in this process. Copjec suggests another term by which the response to radical evil—or the internal fracture of human will—might be explained, namely the phenomenon of modern evil.

In Rethinking Evil, Maria Pia Lara explains how evil could appear “banal” and how a sense of “normality” can be sustained in perpetrating the horror. “If the source of evil cannot be located in the transgression of a moral point of view which cannot be grasped from outside a conceptual scheme,” Pia Lara holds, “but must—if we want to be coherent with the linguistic turn—be traced to the inner normativity of a moral culture called ‘evil’ only from the outside, from the observer’s point of view, one of the consequences is that evil is no less intersubjectively constituted than the good” (178).

This intersubjective character—shared assumptions, shared values, a common vocabulary of moral relevance—in turn accounts for its “banality,” for the “everyday” and “low-key” as opposed to “grandiose” and “heroic” quality of evil in our times. Pia Lara wants to square things out, though, and insists on disambiguating and settling potential misapprehensions. The phrase “banal evil” does not mean that evil is any less
horrible, but that it becomes entwined with everyday life, evil as a temporarily shared form of life rather than as the dramatic rupture of a form of life or, using yet another formulation, evil that has lost the quality of being a temptation and has turned into habit. It is this matter-of-fact, off-the-cuff strand of 'banal' evil that Edgar Allan Poe lodges within his fiction.

There is one more aspect to the “banal” evil that Pia Lara makes explicit. The nature of the major offenders can be deviated, she holds, but it is far from stupid, as Arendt seemed to believe. This is because evil, in order to be carried out, requires a certain intelligence, Pia Lara insists. “One must be especially tactful in order to identify evil and to eventually carry it out” (Rethinking Evil 178).

In order to accomplish all this, experience, a deep insight, and a refined knowledge of the human heart are required. One must know the other person very well in order to make them suffer, in order to figure out the verbal or physical abuse which might deeply wound the victim’s nature, an idea which is eerily characteristic and symptomatic, if not endemic of Poe’s fiction and poems.

However, evil is worse when dispassionate, and the criminal is more hateful when he carries out his offenses without the alibi of passion. This knowledge of human suffering can reach extreme gradations, and it is perfectly understandable because the sublime really matters when it comes to evil. In fact, this is one of the reasons for our disgust in the face of evil—we associate it with suffering and we fear suffering or the sight of someone else’s suffering. (Pia Lara 180)

If the mechanism of goodness functions on its own, Pia Lara asserts, evil is bound by detail, interruption, and a total cessation of life. Evil is not like goodness, all-encompassing. Evil is more meticulous, careful about details. Taking into account that evil is opposite to the norm, the evil nature should be as the perfectionist’s, and his hate should build up step-by-step, should gradually construe the abyss of nothingness which it pursues, should demolish the aspects of life one by one. It is obliged to detect its corresponding opposite for every virtue, graduate the scale of suffering, maintain total destruction in suspense as long as possible, invent a sublime example each time more refined and exciting. (181)

3. Giorgio Agamben’s Nonsubject of Disaster

Testimony appears... as a process that involves at least two subjects: the first, the survivor, who can speak but who has nothing interesting to say; the second, who ‘has seen the Gorgon,’ who ‘has touched bottom,’ and therefore has much to say but cannot speak. Which of the two bears witness? Who is the subject of testimony? (Derrida 53)

In Giorgio Agamben’s interpretation of Derrida, this means that testimony is “the disjunction between the two impossibilities of bearing witness; it means that language, in order to bear witness, must give way to a non-language in order to show the impossibility of bearing witness” (Remnants of Auschwitz 39). The language of testimony is a language that no longer signifies, and that, in not signifying, advances into what is without language, to the point of taking on a different insignificance—that of the complete witness, that of he who by definition cannot bear witness. “It is thus necessary that the impossibility of bearing witness,” Giorgio Agamben also declares, “the ‘lacuna’ that constitutes human language, collapses, giving way to a different impossibility of bearing witness—that which does not have language” (39).
Agamben’s book explores the dimensions of dehumanization, of desubjectivization in the concentration camps of Auschwitz, giving thus the full measure of an evil that incurs perforce inescapable pitfalls of testimony. In the person of a camp resident he calls Levi, Agamben gives the heart-wrenching account of the non-subject (that he will refer to as a “Muselmann”) trapped in the dire straits of an impossible testimony.

“Levi dares to look” is Paul Holland’s terse rendering of Agamben’s book’s punchline, and “he brings back word from inside.”

Never having been a Muselmann, Levi remains outside while inside. And once outside, a survivor, he remains inside—so as to bear witness. But his word of witness is not the remembrance of a connection or a dialogue. It is rather the ventriloquizing voice of one speaking in place of a ragged doll who cannot speak, the non-subject who dwells in chaos—in the robotic numbness and woodiness of absolute desubjectivization. (Holland 316)

“Inside the camps, the threat of death comes most imminently not from the brutality of the guards and the SS, but from the other inmates: from the shock of recognition of myself in those who are closest, who are, precisely because of their proximity, those most estranged from me” is Levi’s own testimony, reproduced in Agamben’s book.

Here the defining characteristics of Freud’s uncanny—repression, projection, the estranged familiar, automation, phantom horror, the logic of the double—all reach a feverish intensity. The encounter with the phantom figure of the Muselmann (das fremde ich) produces the effect of uncanniness—“that may be me”—to an extreme degree. The inmate touching bottom takes on the role of gettatore, the one who casts the “evil eye” and throws the dice of bad luck.

The Muselmann embodies the state of the automaton: between the animate and inanimate, between the organic and inorganic, between human and inhuman, between life and death. His “evil eye” must be understood in a special sense: not as the power of a menacing look that kills, but as the power of absolute suffering—look of lost humanity. The Muselmann is the complete witness, Holland believes, because “he, in a way structurally similar to but materially different from the Sonder commando, inhabits the ‘gray zone’ of desubjectivization” (318).

By embodying the gray zone, the warped space-time of loss of body and responsibility, the Muselmann attains to the status of “the true witness” to the disaster: “the only one for whom testimony would have a general meaning” (Agamben 82). The paradox of the Muselmann—Agamben calls it “Levi’s paradox”—emerges from non-language and desubjectivization inside the gray zone: “How can the non-human testify to the human, and how can the true witness be the one who by definition cannot bear witness?... The human being, Levi’s title implies, is the one who can survive the human being” (Agamben 82).

“How, then, bears witness? Levi, the human survivor? Or the Muselmann, the survivor of the human?” Holland asks, in an attempt to fathom the caveats of Agamben’s book. The question Agamben poses, he continues, is who is the subject of testimony?

At first it appears that it is the human, the survivor, who bears witness to the inhuman, the Muselmann. But if the survivor bears witness for the Muselmann—in the technical sense of ‘on behalf of’ or ‘by proxy’ (‘we speak in their stead by proxy’) —then, according to the legal principle by which the acts of the delegated are imputed to the delegate, it is in some way the Muselmann who bears witness. But this means that the one who truly bears witness in the human is the inhuman; it means that the human is nothing other than the agent of the inhuman, the one who
lends the inhuman a voice. To speak, to bear witness, is thus to enter into a vertiginous movement in which something sinks to the bottom, wholly desubjectified and silenced, and something subjectified speaks without having anything to say of its own (‘I tell of things... that I did not actually experience’). Testimony takes place where the speechless one makes the speaking one speak and where the one who speaks bears the impossibility of speaking in his own speech, such that the silent and the speaking, the inhuman and the human enter into a zone of indistinction in which it is impossible to establish the position of the subject, to identify the ‘imagined substance’ of the ‘I’ and, along with it, the true witness. (Agamben 120)

Testimony stakes out a position that is neither humanist nor antihumanist. It states: “human beings are human insofar as they bear witness to the inhuman” (Agamben 121). Subjectivization, the construction of the subject status as an ethical agent, consists, paradoxically, Holland believes, “in giving voice to those who have suffered destruction or who are suffering desubjectivation, the dead and the living dead, or those who are dying. This means that my subject position confronts me with a responsibility infinitely greater than I can ever assume” (320).

Witnessing consists in welcoming the uncanny nonsubject—his non-language; his undergoing of the nonhuman; his radical passivity and indifference; his ground zero of faith, love and hope—into speech. A welcoming of silence into speech: not as a creatio ex nihilo, but as testimony—”a field of force incessantly traversed by currents of subjectification and desubjectification” (Agamben 121).

In Remnants of Auschwitz, according to Holland, Agamben posits a “thesis that summarizes the lesson of Auschwitz”: The human being is the one who can survive the human being. In the first sense, it refers to the Muselmann (or the gray zone); it therefore signifies the inhuman capacity to survive the human. In the second sense, it refers to the survivor; it designates the human being’s capacity to survive the Muselmann, the nonhuman. When one looks closely, however, the two senses converge in one point, which can be said to constitute their most intimate semantic core, in which the two meanings seem to momentarily coincide. (322)

4. The Non-Subject of Desubjectivization in Arthur Gordon Pym’s Literary Testimonial

Felman and Laub offer, in Testimony—Crises of Witnessing, two examples of literary testimonials, under a subheading entitled, suggestively, “Narrative and Testimony.” Thus, the narrator-doctor-witness in Albert Camus’s novel The Plague is interpreted by the two authors as feeling both obligated and compelled to “chronicle” the “grave events” of the catastrophe (the plague) he has survived and to “play the part of a historian” (6), to “bear witness,” as he puts it, “in favor of those plague-stricken people, so that some memorial of the injustice done them might endure” (qtd. in Felman and Laub 8).

Feodor Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground yields, in Felman and Laub’s opinion, an equally unambiguous interchangeability between narrative and testimony. In the guise of a confession that seeks above all to demystify and deconstruct itself, Notes from Underground can indeed be read as a belated testimony to a trauma, a trauma which
endows with the sickness of the one who “knows—with the underground vision of the
one who has been made into a witness of his own firing-squad” (9).

In line with the propoundings so far, the piece of literature that awaits analysis in what
follows, namely Edgar Allan Poe’s Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, will be considered as
primarily an event of speech, and its testimony will be understood as a mode of truth’s
realization beyond what is available as statement, beyond what is available, that is, “as a
truth transparent to itself and entirely known, given, in advance, prior to the very
process of its utterance” (Felman and Laub 12). The testimony will thereby be
understood, in other words, not as a mode of statement of, but rather as a mode of access
to, that truth. In literature as well as in psychoanalysis, the witness might be the one
who (in fact) witnesses, but also, the one who begets, the truth, through the speech
process of the testimony.

In his Critical History of ‘The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym,’ Ronald Harvey lists some of
the recent exegeses of Poe’s tale/novel. One of these is William Peden’s essay entitled
“Prologue to a Dark Journey: The ‘Opening’ to Poe’s Pym,” in which the author attempts
a reading of Pym as a “proto-type of 20th century Existential non-hero,” moving
through an absurd and illusory world (81). Peden’s method is to focus upon images
which metaphorically define Pym as helpless, and his situation as absurd, such as the
sailors’ view from the Penguin of Pym, pinned to its hull by a spike through the back of
his neck: “the body of a man was seen to be affixed... beating violently... with every
movement of the hull” (qtd. in Harvey 108). However, Peden’s key sentences are
rendered in what Harvey believes is vague, romantic language that “doesn’t take us far:
Pym is a dark voyage from which there is no return, an existentialist trip from
nothingness to nothingness” (Harvey 109).

A richer existential-psychological interpretation is the Poe chapter of Jerome Loving’s
recent Lost in the Custom-House (1993), which reads Poe’s psyche and biography into Pym,
“The Imp of the Perverse,” and “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” finding both
subjective psychological projection and objective metaphysical implications. Pym is a
“literary drunk,” a mimesis of an intensifying series of alcoholic reveries and
nightmares, telling a story that does not end but “stops,” as the authorial persona
finally falls into unconsciousness. Like the speech of a drunk man, language itself
gradually loses its capacity for deductive order, or to communicate “any meaning in
our conduct other than the fact of the conduct itself” (57).

Pym is, according to Harvey, one of Poe’s “effectively cataleptic or posthumous
narrators who record the disintegration of their orderly lives into nightmare,
unconsciousness, and finally death” (84). In the process, a metaphysical reversal is
effected: the apparatus of a priori truth, so painstakingly constructed in Pym’s
“Preface,” as Harvey argues, is deconstructed as a fiction, “while the fantastic delirium
to which the narrative devolves is shown to be the true account: phenomenally, in the
context of dream and alcohol, and metaphysically, in the context of the disintegrating
order of life itself” (85).

Most of my analysis of Poe’s Pym will center exclusively on the meaning of the
“shrouded human figure” and the “perfect whiteness” into which Pym voyages, all to
bring a sense of closure, of determinacy, to what is represented as an open-ended text.
Unsatisfied with the abrupt ending of Pym’s Narrative—an ending that leaves much to
be answered regarding the hero’s fate—critics have attempted to close the gap in Poe’s
text with a kind of symbolizing that, depending on the theoretical orientation, has
either religious or psychoanalytic implications. Edward H. Davidson, for instance, argues that the whiteness at the end of Pym’s journey signals the culmination of Pym’s ever increasing moral and spiritual awareness; indeed “the blankness of eternal mystery engulfs him the moment he faces the white light of revelation” (Poe 748). This reading points out that Pym’s death coincides—as Dennis Pahl assumes—“precisely with his greatest self-discovery, or his discovery of his true self” (from the psychoanalytic viewpoint, Pym is returning to his origins): his death is a rebirth.

But in attempting to locate the meaning of the white mist that Pym encounters, critics have in a sense repeated Pym’s quest for ultimate truth and knowledge. Pym’s ritual search for himself in the out-at-sea adventures illustrates this very point—that while subjectivity is constitutive of a permanent libidinal cathexis of the ego, drive energy should never be completely withdrawn from the other “if the subject is to find that magic word ‘I’” (Mycak 82).

“To seek reality is both to set out to explore the injury inflicted by it—to turn back on, and to try to penetrate, the state of being stricken, wounded by reality,” Caruth holds, “and to attempt, at the same time, to reemerge from the paralysis of this state, to engage reality as an advent, a movement, and as a vital, critical necessity of moving on. It is beyond the shock of being stricken, but nonetheless within the wound and from within the woundedness that the event, incomprehensible though it may be, becomes accessible” (34).

In other words, the wound gives access to the darkness which the language had to go through and traverse in the very process of its “frightful falling-mute” (Caruth 34). To seek reality through language “with one’s very being,” to seek in language what the language had precisely to pass through, is thus to make of one’s own “shelterness”—of the openness and the accessibility of one’s own words—“an unexpected and unprecedented means of accessing reality, the radical condition for a wrenching exploration of the testimonial function, and the testimonial power, of the language: it is to give reality to one’s own vulnerability, as a condition of exceptional availability and of exceptionally sensitized, tuned in attention to the relation between language and events,” in Caruth’s wording (34).

That Pym’s death at the story’s end may be related to his disappearance in writing, to the death of the author—in Pahl’s interpretation—becomes more plausible once we realize that “narrative authority” is set forth as a problem from the very beginning of Poe’s text, in the preface. Here Poe raises the question of authorship by going so far as to call attention to his own activity of writing a work of fiction, that is, he names himself as the fictional author-character, "Mr. Poe, lately editor of the Southern Literary Messenger,” who also shares in the writing of Pym’s Narrative. 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.”

Since the “self” that Pym represents has its origins in other fiction—it is really a textual self—Pym’s “journey toward origins” may be said to mark a desire to escape the confines of fictionality, to become one with himself, to become his own author. But Pahl is diffident as to whether he can really be the author of his own text in the sense of standing outside it in a position of having complete mastery between Pym and Mr. Poe. One is never quite certain who is being written by whom, who is the writing self and who is the written self. In a sense, the plot of the narrative—Pym’s journey—plays out this sort of struggle for mastery between the writer and the written, the interpreter.
and the interpreted, with various surrogate authors (or authority figures) whom Pym must “overthrow” to fulfill his ultimate desire. In this respect we can view the entire journey as an interpretive one, analogous to the very representation of that journey in writing. Pym’s need to master his physical destiny on the high seas parallels exactly, “indeed becomes no different from, his desire to win control over the text by becoming that text’s author, its origin” (Pahl 48).

On his journey, Pym encounters not a world of self-sameness but one of self-difference. Viewing these geographical realms as external manifestations of Pym’s psychic journey toward himself, we can now say—in concurrence with Pahl’s statements—that the culmination of his journey does not signify Pym’s return to himself, to a sense of wholeness and unity, but instead points to Pym’s “identity” as one that can be understood only in terms of its essential otherness, its difference. The “shrouded human figure” that looms before Pym in the final scene is nothing less than a shadowy projection of Pym’s own self. In other words, his death (and his life) become precisely his own inscription in “nature.”

If Charles May is correct in saying that the author of these words is not “the Creator of the physical universe, but the creator of the written world of Pym” (51), we should not be surprised to find “within the hills” some clue to the creator’s identity. Like other critics, we might see in the strange designs of the chasms (aside from the verbal roots of ancient languages) the creator’s initials, “e o p,” or in the designs of the indentures the author’s last name spelled out in reverse.

This ambiguity of the author of the testimony, authored, as in Pym, by the undergone experience, and which mirrors the doubling of the traumatized self Jay Lifton identified in trauma episodes, is illustrated by Felman and Laub’s account of a Nazi survivor reunited with her son:

As if to explain the necessity—and the significance of this miraculous and improbable reunion, she says: ‘He knew who I was.... But who she was was precisely her testimony,’ ‘Who she was,’ in other words, is here implicitly expressed as a radical and irretrievable loss, one of the most devastating losses—dispossessions—inflicted by the Holocaust, one of those ‘answerlessnesses,’ of those answerless questions, through which the Holocaust inexorably made one pass. The narrator herself does not know any longer who she was, except through her testimony. This knowledge or self-knowledge is neither a given before the testimony nor a residual substantial knowledge consequential to it. In itself, this knowledge does not exist, it can only happen through the testimony: it cannot be separated from it. In its performative aspect, the testimony, in this way, can be thought of as a sort of signature. (51)

This signature testimony can be equated with an “underlying polarity between the world and the activity of consciousness” (Smith 20) that we can translate into the term “alienation.” In fact, James Werner makes just this point in talking about The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, asserting that Poe hears the call of the ocean “because this call comes from the most dramatic of solitudes, one in which man has for his antagonist the elemental world itself. There man is alone faced with a universe of monstrous forces” (29). I would say, further, that it is the fusion of this sense of alienation with Poe’s inversion of values that results in what is perhaps Poe’s most post-Auschwitz quality, his vision of the dehumanized person.

Poe’s vision of dehumanized man is apparent in the last two journal entries in the novel. As Carol Pierce and Alexander Rose have demonstrated in “Poe’s reading of
Myth: the White Vision of Arthur Gordon Pym,” the ending is a culmination of a
descent into Hell. But it is also, a return to chaos and “a disassembling of the Judeo-
Christian construct of the human form,” (Hirsch 142) an unraveling, so to speak, of the
divine creation: “We were evidently approaching it (the cataract) with a hideous
velocity. At intervals there were visible in it wide, yawning, but momentary rents, and
from out these rents, within which was a chaos of flitting and indistinct images, there
came rushing and mighty, but soundless winds, tearing up the enkindled ocean in their
course” (Poe 872). The narrator describes his state of mind just before the four
survivors are to draw lots to decide who will be cannibalized. “Even then,” he says, “I
could not bring myself to arrange the splinters upon the spot, but thought over very
species of finesse by which I could trick some one of my fellow sufferers to draw the
short straw, as it had been agreed that whoever drew the shortest of four splinters
from my hand was to die for the preservation of the rest” (872).

Kopley argues that “the schoolboy Dupin is shown to have mastered a guessing game by
converting it into a psychological game” (148). But in The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym,
the game of lots is “in earnest” (Kopley 148). Shawn Rosenheim, in “Detective Fiction,
Psychoanalysis and the Analytic Sublime,” contends that Poe’s narrators are not always
the same narrator and are not always Poe. In this instance, we have a confirmation of
Baudelaire’s observation that Arthur Gordon Pym was “a purely human book.”

David Hirsch, in his essay entitled “Postmodern or Post-Auschwitz: The Case of Poe,”
oberves that:

Poe, of all people, recognized that death was not a game, a fact which seems to have
escaped the two Jacques. Poe was, as all his readers quickly perceive, obsessed with
thoughts and fears of death…. It is not just death that Poe described, however, but
violent death and murder, in Pym as in many of the tales. But here again, Poe had
moved into the post-Auschwitz consciousness, leaving his more optimistic fellow
Romantics in the dust. While the British Romantics were still struggling with the
shadow of their great precursor, the author of Paradise Lost, trying to make some
sense of the heroic grandeur of evil as personified in Milton’s Satan. Poe had
already arrived at the post-Auschwitz recognition of what has been called
(controversially) the banality of evil. In his preface to Prometheus Unbound, Shelley
declared, obviously with Milton in mind, that ‘the only imaginary being resembling
in any degree Prometheus is Satan.’ As we can see in the lot-drawing episode, Poe
had passed beyond the belief that there was some epic grandeur in evil. (153)
Hirsch, like Pierce and Rose, looks at Poe’s work as an analysis of death, and his assessment of Poe’s work as the “disassembling of the Judeo-Christian construct of the human form of fusion of flesh and spirit” is not far from Pierce and Rose’s thesis. But his use of Poe refers to the later historical moment, imputing to him something very close to virtual prophetic status in relation to the twentieth century and the genealogy of postmodern fiction. He prefers the term “post-Auschwitz” not only as more determinant, but for its focus on what to him is the most important referent to the post-World War’s “existential despair,” a world “of total war, mass murder, and genocide; an age of the death of God and eclipse of Western culture and Judeo-Christian values” (142).

Poe’s voice is of special resonance for Hirsch, because “his imagination somehow gained access to a vision of the disintegration of the human form that was enacted in the death camps and the Gulag” (142). Allen Tate anticipated Hirsch in this discovery, a debt that Hirsch acknowledges, wishing only to refine the focus by the particular juxtaposition of Pym and Auschwitz for the light they shed on a post-war sensibility about death and “the derangement of human relations” (145). His comments on *Pym* are not extensive, but what emerges from his explication of some of the death scenes, from the gratuitousness of the violence, and the nonchalance of Pym’s report, is not the horror that Pierce and Rose find, but a sense of the casualness of death. It is, Hirsch argues, the “banality of evil” that Poe opposes to the “grandeur of evil” of a Blake or a Shelley.

Despite previous expressions of disgust, Pym’s description of the cannibal act emphasizes orderliness in a matter-of-fact tone that belies the claim of a profound impact:

> Let it suffice to say that, having in some measure appeased the raging thirst which consumed us by the blood of the victim, and having by common consent taken off the hands, feet, and head, throwing them, together with the entrails, into the sea, we devoured the rest of the body piecemeal, during the four ever memorable days of the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth of the month. (865)

The following sentence, as Hirsch points out, relates mundane information about rain and a contrivance to catch it: “On the nineteenth, there coming on a smart shower which lasted fifteen or twenty minutes, we contrived to catch some water by means of a sheet which had been fished up from the cabin by our drag just after the gale” (835). Hirsch compares this with the written renderings of the day of an Auschwitz “physician,” who recounts the details of a gassing and the menu of his subsequent meal in the same diary entry.

But this effect is not particular to criminals. Hirsch points out that it is characteristic of the age, weakening the distinctions between criminal, victim, and bystander alike. Ronald Harvey, in *The Critical History of Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym’* quotes an excerpt in the diary of a Jew in the Warsaw Ghetto before the roundup: “Death ceases to impress. We see people killed on the streets and we continue our business. People stop inquiring at the hospitals about their relatives” (qtd. in Harvey 84). Consequently, both Hirsch’s and Harvey’s exegeses are in disagreement with Joseph Moldenhauer’s, who finds a “solemn rhythm” in the description of the cannibalistic act (*Pym, the Dighton Rock* 79). We need not look far in the canon of Holocaust literature to find an analogue to Poe’s prophetic fiction, David Hirsch declares, presently providing an excerpt (which will not be reproduced, on grounds of
excessive callousness) from the account of a Nazi physician, identified as Kremer, of a day in Auschwitz.

Such behavior displays, beyond any measure of doubt, what Arendt and Pia Lara described as “banal evil” and what Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber termed as “total violence” (15). Violence is said to take place “whenever the other is not welcomed or addressed as such” (de Vries and Weber 15). Emmanuel Levinas would undoubtedly claim that this happens wherever discourse attempts to subtract itself from the realm of interlocution, which would be in concurrence with his view on ethics, which, according to the author of Totality and Infinity, begins with the appearing of the other person, or, in Levinas’ words, with his or her “face.” In other words, violence takes place where the terms of this relation are exposed not as totally other (as they should be), but as alter egos, as each other’s mirror images, each other’s negations or, what amounts to the same thing, each other’s (rational or irrational, diffuse or anonymous and neutral) “totality,” in de Vries and Weber’s words (14): “Wherever the self relates the other to the sameness of its own horizon, the other’s singularity will be effaced. But conversely, wherever the self is overtaken or absorbed by the other—by an otherness, that is, or by an obscure, diffuse, anonymous, neutral totality—violence has taken place” (14).

The dissociation of sensibility Hirsch perceives as endemic of the Nazis, and the atrophy of human conscience detectable in the Nazi Kremer’s matter-or-fact depiction of the atrocity and of his own “horror” are anticipated by Poe in the narrator’s description in “The Tell-Tale Heart” of why he has murdered his victim: “Object there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me, he had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire” (Poe 92).

Thus, violence can be found in whatever narcissistic strategy the self adopts to capture, thematize, reduce, use, and thus annul or annihilate the other. Violence can likewise be found wherever some otherness engulfs or seizes upon the self and forces it to participate in what it—in and of itself and, precisely, as other—is not. Here, one totality or, for that matter, one identity “comes to substitute for another, sublating the frenzy and anxiety that stigmatize the latter into the tranquil serenity that is the trademark of the former” (de Vries and Weber 16).

The narrator’s consciousness, here, reflects one of Kennedy’s observations about Poe that can be applied to Kremer: “We get the third hypertrophy of a human faculty: the intellect moving in isolation from both love and moral will, whereby it declares itself independent of the human situation in the quest of essential knowledge” (Poe’s “Pym” 150).

The concluding sentences of Pym’s final journal entry remain a challenge to Poe hermeneutists. Hirsch advances the interpretation according to which “the shrouded human figure” embodies “two disfigurations of the human form,” one a physical disfiguration and the other a disfiguration of color: “But 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” (Poe 886). Hirsch perceives the closing sentence as evoking echoes of Isaiah 1:18, “Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.” In the biblical verse, the whiteness of snow is equated with moral purity. But in Pym, the image of whiteness becomes associated with the disfigured human form in the previous sentence. And, once again, Poe’s inversion of the symbol of purity into an image of disgust is, I would...
say, an anticipation of the inversion of values that characterizes the post-Auschwitz age.

72 From the standpoint of relational psychoanalysis, in *Pym*, Poe presents us with a rare instantiation of pure (and banal) evil in the casually-reported scene of the cannibalization. And I will briefly supplement the philosophical response to the question of (banal) evil provided by Pia Lara, Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben with the psychoanalytical one, with a footing in the signature terminology of Melanie Klein. Pym’s failure to experience conflict, remorse and dread, presumably conflated with a recoiling upon himself in inhumane indifference means, in Kleinian language, that he ceases to project and finds that ignorance of death is “bliss.” In a psychological sense, Poe produces an answer to the problem of banal evil in this tale. It is a consequence of a failure to contain inevitable hostility towards evil in such a way that it might be mitigated, and of the choice, instead, to split love and mindfulness of (the humanity of) the other from carelessness and inhumaneness more and more, producing eventually a pure culture of indifference to anything abhorrent.

73 Whereas ordinary human badness and aggression are inevitable, evil comes about only as a consequence of “serial splitting” (Klein 183). Spitefulness is commonplace, but pure malice is the product of distillation, a Kleinian-informed conclusion that I perceive to be in concurrence with Pia Lara’s and Hannah Arendt’s meditations on the issue of banal evil. I see this dramatic story as an insightful account of a catastrophe preserved in the culture of memory that resulted from a violent fragmentation of irreducible psychic fact which was represented and experienced as a hard, unyielding object in the mind. The mind then falls into the abyss of “unknowingness” thus created. The sense of numbing estrangement that befalls the “storytold” Pym can be traced as an effect of aggression. Nothing can be seen without being colored by the fear of persecution and internal fragmentation, as a consequence of Pym’s re-introjection of his aggressive projective identifications. This reproduces itself in the disintegration of the narrative. For Poe, the act of giving voice to his experiences of encounters with threatening phenomena serves simultaneously to mitigate their threat and to intensify its power, and thus his work can be seen as a literary testimonial to a traumatic experience, similar, by all hermeneutical accounts, to that of the Holocaust.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Hirsch is the first to have read dehumanization and Agamben’s desubjectivisation in Poe’s *Pym* in his essay entitled “Postmodern or Post-Auschwitz: The Case of Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym.’”

2. In Strejilevich’s understanding, this “working through traumatic memories” is a must for the “ethical recovery of a community after the experience of utmost exclusion” (701).

3. The *Purloined Poe* is for the most part organised around Lacan’s seminar on “The Purloined Letter” and Derrida’s response to it. Though Derrida and Lacan differ in the aspects of the story they emphasise and in its final significance, they agree about the source of consciousness in the story and the nature of literary meaning. Unlike his Freudian predecessors who assume that literature expresses the unique psychological constitution of its author, Lacan’s discussion assumes that literature tells us the truth about our place in the cosmos.

As Kay Stockholder maintains, “[I]n using ‘The Purloined Letter’ to illustrate a general truth about the role of language in human life, Lacan assumes not that Poe has set out to communicate this truth, though he hints that Poe, as a poet, might know it, but that poetry itself is the veiled way by which the Universe reveals its veiled (Heideggerian) Truth. The meaning of fiction consists in its truth, for it is pervaded by a kind of universal consciousness. For Lacan ‘The Purloined Letter’ is an allegory of man’s relation to the linguistic signifier and thereby to language. By alienating us forever from the biological being that we share with animals, has confronted us with the knowledge of our own death that alone renders us human.” (340). Therefore whether a story delivers its message by means of expressing or of enacting a cosmic or existential truth, the implication remains that the story reveals the truth, in this case the truth about the relations of readers to texts. A similar combination of cognitive reader response theory and an idea of the text as containing or performing an embodied truth is found in Jane Gallop’s “The American Other” (qtd. in Stockholder 340). She argues that the “neutral, homogeneous, transparent element of the tale” is analogous to the “pure mirror of an unruffled surface” (280).


ABSTRACTS

The problematics of trauma and testimony are perforce in a closely-knit relation with the issue of evil, in particular with the strand of evil that made possible the concentration camps in Auschwitz. Edgar Allan Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* will be considered as primarily an event of speech, and its testimony as a mode of truth’s realization beyond what is available as statement. What emerges from the comments on *Pym*, from the explication of some of the death
scenes, from the gratuitousness of the violence, and the nonchalance of Pym’s report, is not the horror, but a sense of the casualness of death, the “banality of evil” that Poe opposes to the “grandeur of evil,” looking ahead to Auschwitz and the Gulag. In Pym, Poe presents us with a rare instantiation of pure (and banal) evil in the casually-reported scene of the cannibalization. I intend to supplement the philosophical response to the question of (banal) evil provided by Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben by a psychoanalytical one, with a footing in the signature terminology of Melanie Klein.

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Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, trauma studies, testimony, banal evil, dehumanization, relational psychoanalysis, Melanie Klein, serial splitting

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