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The Narrative of Benjamin Morrell: Out of "The Bucket" and into Poe's Pym

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

THE NARRATIVE OF BENJAMIN MORRELL: OUT OF "THE BUCKET" AND INTO POE'S PYM Burton R. Pollin* In his tale of 1843, "Raising the Wind," Edgar Allan Poe wrote that "diddling" or cheating, "rightly considered," is a compound of "ingenuity, audacity, nonchalance, originality, impertinence, and grin."¹ In the prominent "diddling" or hoaxing aspects of the Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of 1838, Poe amply displayed these ingredients through his borrowings from Benjamin Morrell's Narrative of Four Voyages (1832),² and yet he may have missed one well-concealed link in the complicated circumstances which would have increased his "grin," just as it does our own. Poe dipped into Morrell's best-seller, published by Harper and Brothers, the very firm with which he had a contract for Pym, and he borrowed from it by close paraphrase, by parallelism of

plot sequence, and by adoption of telling details of nautical and scientific material for almost the extent of one half his text—all this quite unknown to the readers and editors of Harpers and equally unknown to the public for seventy-five years following the publication. About sixty years later, George Woodberry, in 1895, revealed a little of the literary theft from Morrell in notes which led to a fuller revelation in 1933,³ but not without a minor debate over the truth of the charge.⁴ Meanwhile, the admirers of Poe seem to be unaware of the startling fact that not long after the publication of Morrell's book, serious doubts arose in scientific circles and among nautical experts about the validity of his whole narrative and the details of his observation, especially several of the ones used by Poe in his narrative. This new view raises the question of whether Poe himself doubted data that now strike even the most unscientific of readers as wildly improbable or impossible. Finally, we learn in 1965 that Morrell did not write his 1832 book to begin with; it was "ghostwritten" and greatly rewritten from a journal by a well-known dramatist, journalist, and popular third-rate poet—a fact unmentioned in discussions of Morrell and Pym. Now we can understand why this

"Burton R. Pollin is an Emeritus Professor of English at the Bronx Community College of the City University of New York. He has published widely on Poe, including three books and over fifty articles, and is the editor of the Harvard edition of Poe. 158

Burton R. Pollin piece of hackwork, presented as a bona fide travel book, contains melodramatic situations as well as factual details that enhanced it for Poe's use. Moreover, the real author, we can now see, takes one of the most striking sections of the work and turns it into a popular New York City melodrama about massacring cannibals, a piece that provides an early parallel on the stage for one of the major sequences of Poe's novel. Would not Poe enjoy such an intertwined, reduplicative series of hoaxes played on the publisher, the reading public, the reviewers, even some scientists, nautical men and, in a sense, the author himself, unless he was initially aware of the ghost-writing? Before we form any judgment about the aesthetic and technical significance of Poe's use of the book, we need many more details, such as the extent, locations, and nature of his borrowings from Morrell's work. It must be recalled that after an exciting introductory episode aboard a small boat rammed or overwhelmed by a whaler, the hero, Arthur Gordon Pym, is secreted in the hold of the *Grampus*; this is an outwardbound whaler captained by the father of his close friend Augustus, who survives a mutiny which immures Pym almost fatally in the hold and which ultimately results in the wrecking of the ship and the death of all but Pym, Augustus, and two sailors. This entire sequence is based largely upon various volumes of popular, semi-authentic mariners' chronicles,⁵ but now Morrell's Narrative is briefly introduced into chapter 12 (part of the *Grampus* section) for a largely transcribed description of the Galápagos tortoise, needed by Poe to keep his few survivors alive. For the next two chapters (14 and 15...

THE NARRATIVE OF BENJAMIN MORRELL: OUT OF "THE BUCKET" AND INTO POE'S *PYM*

Burton R. Pollin*

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