THE KING OF SECRET READERS

You have exhibited a power of analytical and synthetic reasoning I have never seen equalled; and the astonishing skill you have displayed—particularly in the deciphering of the cryptograph by Dr. Charles S. Frailey will, I think, crown you the king of "secret readers."

Letter from W. B. Tyler to Edgar Poe

A Few Words on Secret Writing

What precisely does Poe mean by "secret writing?" Because the answer to that question is this book, no synopsis will prove wholly satisfactory. We may, however, learn something by comparing Poe's understanding of the subject to the history of the word. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, cryptography is "a secret manner of writing, either by arbitrary characters, by using letters or characters in other than their ordinary sense, or by other methods intelligible only to those possessing the key; also anything written in this way. Generally the art of writing or solving ciphers."

Such ciphers are known as cryptographs or cryptograms. These words mean the same thing: the first Oxford English Dictionary definition for each is "a piece of cryptographic writing; anything written in cipher, or in such a form or order that a key is required in order to know how to understand and put together the letters."

Two things are striking here. The first is the newness of this lexicon. Cryptogram is barely a century old; cryptograph, a half-century older. Although cryptogram and cryptograph are, like cryptography, formed out of ancient Greek roots that signify "hidden writing," their recent coinage reflects the relatively contemporaneous elaboration of cryptography as a specialized field. Second, despite this terminological newness, the concept of secret writing goes back to the very origin of text. "A Few Words on Secret Writing" (Graham's Magazine, July 1841) begins with a history of the subject, in which Poe recognizes that cryptography is in some sense internal to writing:

As we can scarcely imagine a time when there did not exist a necessity, or at least a desire, of transmitting information from one individual to another in
such a manner as to elude general comprehension, so we may well suppose the practice of writing in cipher to be of great antiquity. De la Guilleitière, therefore, who, in his Lacedaemon Ancient and Modern, maintains that the Spartans were the inventors of Cryptography, is obviously in error. He speaks of the scylada as being the origin of the art; but he should have cited it as one of its earliest instances, so far as our records extend. . . . Similar means of secret intercommunication must have existed almost contemporaneously with the invention of letters. (SW, 114–15)

Poe’s claim that the notion of writing is bound up with the notion of cryptography is echoed by historians, who describe it as “an art practiced from time immemorial,” who observe that its origin is “lost in the mists of ancient history,” and who claim that “codes and ciphers are as old as civilised man.”

Although the rise of professional cryptography and its subsequent mathematical systematization may suggest that there is a difference in kind between “real” cryptography and its literary uses, the history and etymology of the word suggest that this is a false distinction. First introduced in 1641, the word cryptography was soon appearing in the works of such sixteenth-century essayists as Sir Thomas Browne (“The strange Cryptography of Gaffarell in his Starry Book of Heaven . . . ,” in The Garden of Cyrus), who would later prove so attractive to Poe. Remarkably enough, its cognate cryptograph is Poe’s own coinage. He introduces it in “The Gold-Bug,” where William Legrand explains how he deciphered a treasure map left by the legendary Captain Kidd by assuming that “I could not suppose him capable of constructing any of the more abstruse cryptographs.” The much greater frequency with which cryptograph is preferred today to cryptogram offers an index of the subject’s subterranean literary affiliations, which leave the concept of secret writing oscillating unstably between a narrow technical and a much broader metaphoric understanding.

The literary and technical meanings of cryptography are also united by their common task of hiding meaning from some while revealing it to others—an imperative shared by texts as different as the Talmud and a digitally encrypted electronic bank transaction. Consequently, there is always something vulnerable about encrypted writing: “Few persons can be made to believe that it is not quite an easy thing to invent a method of secret writing which shall baffle investigation. Yet it may be roundly asserted that human ingenuity cannot concoct a cipher which human ingenuity cannot resolve” (SW, 116). The particular ability needed to resolve such a puzzle is analytic: “In such investigations the analytic ability is very forcibly called into action; and, for this reason, cryptographical solutions might with great propriety be introduced into academies as a means of giving tone to the most important powers of the mind” (ibid.). Analysis is a privileged term in
Poe’s lexicon. “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” begins with a discussion of “the mental features discoursed of as the analytic,” which are, “in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis. We appreciate them only in their effects,” which are chiefly the pleasure the analyst derives from intellectual play: “He is fond of enigmas, of conundrums, of hierogliphics; exhibiting in his solutions of each a degree of acumen which appears to the ordinary apprehension præternatural” (PT, 397).

Yet if the skills needed to solve hierogliph, cipher, enigma, and conundrum are the same, the objects of analysis are not. In particular, I want to distinguish between the cipher and the hierogliph in Poe’s writing. John Irwin has shown that Poe’s understanding of language, the self, and human origins can be traced through the idea of the hierogliph:

As the hieroglyphical problem of the relationship between outer shape and inner meaning becomes the question of the origin of man and language, the image of “writing” expands until all physical shapes become obscurely meaningful forms of script, forms of hieroglyphic writing each of which has its own science of decipherment—signature analysis, physiognomy, phrenology, fingerprint analysis, zoology, botany, geology, and so on. . . . Because in pictographic writing the shape of a sign is in a sense a double of the physical shape of the object it represents, like a shadow or a mirror image, the essays and stories from this period are always, in one way or another, “double” stories.  

Ciphers and hieroglyphs share a number of characteristics, including antiquity and apparent illegibility. But the hierogliph is ultimately capable of being read in a way that tentatively reestablishes the connection between the forms of nature and the forms (and meanings) of words. By holding out the possibility of uniting percept and symbol, pictograph and arbitrary mark, the hierogliph implicitly suggests a strategy for suturing the fundamental split in human identity between corporeal presence and symbolic consciousness. Thus, recuperating the fragmentation of the ending of the Narrative of A. Gordon Pym depends, as Irwin shows, largely on the ability to decipher the “hieroglyphs” Pym has transcribed on his adventures. The “white figure” of the novel’s end is revealed as an image of the self projected on the fog—a pictograph of Pym cast upon the world. Although one could make too much of the transcendent possibilities of hieroglyphic inscription within Poe, whose writing is always full of destabilizing ironies, it should be remembered that the hierogliph, insofar as it is truly attached to an originary system of writing, seems to hold out the possibility of connecting truth and language, surface appearance and deep meaning.

The cryptograph meanwhile presumes the arbitrariness of signifying forms: in a cipher, the letter a may be represented by any other letter, number, or icon, an @ or an æ (Poe takes evident pleasure in what he calls the “queerness” of cryptographic appearance). But recognition of this arbi-
trariness is also troubling, because it undermines the relationship of image to sign that ostensibly grounds the hieroglyph by establishing a “natural” visual equivalence between the signified image—river, tree, or whatever—and the signifying “shadow.” As a model of the sign, the hieroglyph is associated with the search for an Adamic universal language; the cryptograph, by contrast, is connected with a distinctly modern awareness of the lack of linguistic motivation. By removing the basis of language’s correspondence with the world of things, the cryptograph disrupts the possibility of self-understanding, which is based on the metaphoric identity between self and script:

What Narcissus clearly exhibits in the third moment, by treating his image as if it were another person even though he knows it is not, is the essential (original) otherness of the self to itself, the indeterminate status of self-reflection as both a part of the body and a double of the body and as either a part of the body or a double of the body. What the third moment expresses is that if the self is at once both a cause and a function of self-consciousness, if it is one pole (one-half) of a mutually constitutive opposition (whose other pole is the visual image of a body) and is at the same time the entity that reflects upon that opposition (that is, doubles it in self-reflective thought), then the origin of the self is a union that differentiates, a coming together to hold apart.

The Narcissus myth, which reveals how the self is created by its mirroring in water, is also an image for the mirroring of humans in writing: Narcissus’s identity (although it is already split) is constituted by its natural “shadow” relation to his body, and the study of language seeks to discover a point of origin based on a nominalism in which the letter is the shadow of a shape, signifier and signified yoked “naturally” together. But at some point this natural relation was lost, and the writer after Babel is forced to acknowledge the randomness of the signifying shape. Writing no longer “reflects” human identity; it is as if Narcissus were to peer into the pool only to find a new unintelligible image there every time. In the passage in figure 3 (SW, 144), Poe confronts this situation in his fascinated play with illegible cryptographic symbols that rupture any naturalized reading. In “X-ing a Paragrab,” the substitution of an “x” for each “o” in the text also represents Poe’s jab at Frogpondian notions of linguistic unity and wholeness: “Dxn’t hxlx, nxr hxwl, nxr grxwl, nxr bxw-wxw-wwx! Gxxd Lxrd, Jxhn, hxw yxu dx bxxk! Txld yxu sx, yxu knxw—but stxpx rxlling yxur gxxse xf an xld pxll abxut sx, and gx and dxrw nxur sxxrxxsws in a bxwl!” (PT, 922).

The creation of the detective story followed by four years the publication of the *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*; and to some degree we may imagine that Poe has ontogenetically recapitulated the history of linguistic forms, in an evolution from hieroglyph to cryptograph. Poe, however, attempts to defend against the cryptograph’s implicit threat of linguistic alienation
(which is also a promise of discovery) by the way he conceives of decoding, which preserves the possibility of an originary hieroglyphic moment. His brilliant but absolutely specious move is to treat the cryptograph as if it were ordinary language that, once decoded, will offer up a perfectly transparent meaning. The analogy can be presented this way:

\[
\text{\underline{cryptograph}} \hspace{1em} \text{suggests a relation of signifier or of sign} \\
\text{decoded language} \hspace{2em} \text{signified meaning}
\]

But in fact, the relation is actually one of lateral translation between different encodings of the same signification:

\[
\text{\underline{cryptograph}} \hspace{1em} \text{actually gives a relation of signifier} \\
\text{decoded language} \hspace{2em} \text{signifier}
\]

Through the use of this false implicit analogy, Poe displaces his anxiety about language proper onto the special case of the cryptograph, thus eliding the fact that although the alphabetic symbols making up words are pictographic in origin, they are, in their arbitrary phonetic combination, completely without natural analogues.

Although the cryptography articles offered Poe a chance to experiment with different models of how writing signifies, they did not permit him systematically to anticipate the conclusions of Saussure. Poe originally stated that he could solve any code (because what humans make, humans can decipher), but later temporized: “We do not propose to solve all ciphers. Whether we can or cannot do this is a question for another day” (SW, 135). Indeed, Poe’s knowledge of cryptography, although far ahead of that of his readers, was by modern standards elementary. In “What Poe Knew about Cryptography,” W. K. Wimsatt notes that in an article entitled “Cryptography—Mr. Poe as a Cryptographer,” published just after Poe’s death, a Reverend Mr. Cudworth “pronounced a judgment which must have been assented to by many: ‘The most profound and skilful cryptographer who ever lived was undoubtedly Edgar A. Poe’” (778). Wimsatt adds that “to
study Poe at work on ciphers is to find not a wide knowledge and intricate method of procedure, but rather a kind of untrained wit, an intuition which more quickly than accurately grasped the outlines of cryptic principle and immediately with confident imagination proclaimed the whole. It is probable that whatever ciphers he did solve he solved very rapidly. The Reverend Mr. Cudworth testifies that his own little puzzle was unravelled five times faster than he made it” (ibid., 765).

The kind of ciphers to which Poe objects—"a species of cryptograph justly considered very difficult. . . . We do not say that we cannot solve it but that we will not make the attempt" (SW, 136)—is one in which the code key is a phrase with the same number of letters as the alphabet in which it is written. Since the twenty-six letters of the phrase *Suaviter in modo, fortiter in re*, for example, match the number of letters in the English language, there is a straightforward one-to-one correspondence between signs, and the phrase can serve as a simple encoding device as shown below:

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s/u/a/v/i/t/e/r/i/n/m/o/d/o/f/o/t/i/t/e/r/i/n/r/e/
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Here *a* stands for *c*, *v* stands for *d*, but *i*, repeated four times in the Latin phrase, stands for *e*, *i*, *s*, and *w*; hence, the word *guise* would be written in code as *eeiii*, the word *wise* as *iiii*, and so on.9 Such a code would quickly cause the cryptographer interpretive paralysis: “What is he to do with such a word as ‘iiiiiiiiii’? In any of the ordinary books upon Algebra will be found a very concise formula . . . for ascertaining the number of arrangements in which *m* letters may be placed, taken *n* at a time. But no doubt there are none of our readers ignorant of the innumerable combinations which may be made from these ten ‘i’s’” (SW, 130–31). Even should such a code be cracked, there would still be a fatal ambiguity in applying the key:

Nay, a case might readily be imagined, where the most important word of the communication . . . on which the sense of the whole depended, should have so equivocal a nature that the person for whose benefit it was intended would be unable, even with the aid of this key, to discover which of two very different interpretations should be the correct one. . . . A letter written in ciphers . . . might either be “I love you now as ever,” or “I love you now no more.” How “positively shocking,” to say the least of it.10

Positively shocking, indeed: recognition of the arbitrariness of letters is joined here with semantic ambiguity to reveal Poe’s discomfort with the problems of understanding writing. The quasi-semiotic model of language offered by the cryptographic account is undermined by Poe’s reluctant realization that every decoding is another encoding, and that the crypt of the letter cannot be penetrated in an attempt to extract its immanent meaning. Or rather, this answer is among the contradictory responses given by Poe in
his attempts to resolve these questions: “We do not say that we cannot do it, only that we have not the leisure to attempt it at present.” Poe’s need to create a model of signification, to crack the vast cipher of language itself, led him to extend his original *Graham’s Magazine* article with three addenda, and to devote an excessive amount of time (for one so poor) to the solution of readers’ puzzles. This same need manifests itself in the detective stories, in which Poe imagines a completely textual world where his readerly skills might finally come into full play.

The detective story begins by extending modes of cryptographic reading to the phenomenal world. The sleuth or private eye applies the same analytical tools used to break a code to his or her sensory experience, merely extending the use of these procedures from the two-dimensional page to the three-dimensional world. But to be effective, this semiotic technique requires that the unbroken synesthetic stream of sensory perception that ordinarily floods the self be reduced, simplified, so that the detective can establish the particular causal relationships holding between events. Objects and events in the world must be deprived of their polyvalent materiality, since the semiotic schema, as conceived by Poe, requires the replacement of contingency and indeterminacy with the detective’s single, verifiable meaning. Just as in theory a deciphered code ought to be completely intelligible, so Dupin believes in a corresponding transparency of events in the world; when he declares that his deductions from the newspaper accounts of the murder of the Mmes. L’Espayne “are the *sole* proper ones, and that the suspicion arises *inevitably* from them as the single result” ("Murders in the Rue Morgue," *PT*, 416), he is applying the analogy of cryptographic translation to the world. As in a deciphered code, all the formerly mysterious “characters” are now held in meaningful relation by the syntax of narrative, and Dupin supposes the existence of real “syntactic” lines of causality in the world. The realm of represented experience is converted into a world of signs articulating webs of effect, or, impossibly, into a world of pure meaning. The mathematically inclined Dupin works with abstract symbols alone, which he obtains by converting the depth of the material world into one uninterrupted surface of discrete signs in which nothing is hidden, and in which there is an indexical relationship between a person’s behavior and his or her physical appearance.

The unnamed narrator in “The Man of the Crowd” employs exactly the same logic when he observes of some London passersby that “they all had slightly bald heads, from which their right ears, long used to pen-holding, had an odd habit of standing off on end. . . . There were two other traits, by which I could always detect them [gambler]: a guarded lowness of tone in conversation, and a more than ordinary extension of the thumb in a direction at right angles with the fingers” (*PT*, 390). The gambler is conveniently marked by his playing in unambiguous ways, both physical and behavioral.
Elsewhere, in a single paragraph Poe uses metonyms, allusions, etymologies, and associations of all sorts to organize signs in a coherent series:

I knew that you could not say to yourself “stereotomy” without being brought to think of atomies, and thus of the theories of Epicurus.

I felt you could not avoid casting your eyes upward to the great nebula in Orion. You did look up; and I was now assured that I had correctly followed your steps.

“Perdidit antiquum litera prima sonum”—I had told you this was in reference to Orion, formerly written Urion; and from certain pungencies connected with this explanation I was aware that you could not have forgotten it. (“Murders in the Rue Morgue,” PT, 404)

The list could be extended, but it is sufficient to note that the Virgilian citation (“The first letter has lost its ancient sound”) connects Dupin’s analytic efforts with an attempt to recover an origin of language in its first “ancient sound,” before the written and the aural signifier had diverged, losing the naturalized relation—of shadow or onomatopoeia—that rooted signs in the materiality of the sensual world.

In its baroque elaboration of rhetorical figures, as in its exploration of “signs” in general, Poe’s writing foregrounds the question of the nature of language. Consider Poe’s explanation of why the analytic mind always succeeds in deciphering codes, however outre such ciphers might initially appear: “To some persons the difficulty might be great; but to others—to those skilled in deciphering—such enigmas are very simple indeed. The reader should bear in mind that the basis of the whole art of solution, as far as regards these matters, is found in the general principles of the formation of language itself, and thus is altogether independent of the particular laws which govern any cipher, or the construction of its key” (SW, 118; emphasis added).

In “The Purloined Letter,” Dupin recounts the story of his asking a boy how he consistently guesses correctly at a game of odds and evens. He is told: “When I wish to find out how wise, or how stupid, or how good, or how wicked is any one, or what are his thoughts at the moment, I fashion the expression of my face, as accurately as possible, in accordance with the expression of his, and then wait to see what thoughts or sentiments arise in my mind or heart, as if to match or correspond with the expression. This response of the schoolboy lies at the bottom of all the spurious profundity which has been attributed to Rouchefoucault, to La Bruyère, to Machiavelli, and to Campanella” (PT, 689–90). The anecdote presumes that the face is a natural index of the mind—and that the causal relationship holding between mind and index can be reversed: the physical act of modeling another person’s expression produces a knowledge of the original possessor’s affect. To know what another feels, one need only imitate that person.
Although such a fixed ratio of expression to meaning might hold true in commedia dell'arte, where the relation between sign and referent is conventional, it is obviously inadequate for the world at large. Poe knew this, I think, but he also felt a powerful attraction to such a fantasy. Nor was Poe alone: his stories reflect a wider nineteenth-century American fascination with phrenology, physiognomy, palmistry, and related practices. The semiotic models of scientific investigation developed in the last decades of the nineteenth century find their precursors, however faulty, in these "sciences" that flourished in Poe's America.

Dupin's attack on "profundity" is actually directed against its etymological meaning of "depth": a space, covert and private, that resists his inspecting eye. If, as Poe observes, the operations of cryptography are explicitly based on "the general principles of the formation of language itself," and if the detective story depends generically on a "cryptographic" attitude toward solving the crime, Poe's hostility to depth and his attention to surface are required by his project, which is to convert all experience into a system of signs. Consequently, Poe's detective stories exploit the almost seamless joining of the represented world of the stories to the signs of the representation itself. Consider the analyst's method of playing cards:

The necessary knowledge is of what to observe. Our player confines himself not at all; nor, because the game is the object, does he reject deductions from things external to the game. He examines the countenance of his partner, comparing it carefully with that of each of his opponents. He considers the mode of assorting the cards in each hand. . . . He notes every variation of face as the play progresses, gathering a fund of thought from the differences in the expression of uncertainty, of surprise, of triumph, or of chagrin. . . . A casual or inadvertent word; the accidental dropping or turning of a card, with the accompanying anxiety or carelessness in regard to its concealment; the counting of tricks, with the order of their arrangement . . . . all afford, to his apparently intuitive perception, indications of the true state of affairs. The first two or three rounds having been played, he is in full possession of the contents of each hand, and thenceforward puts down his cards with as absolute a precision of purpose as if the rest of the party had turned outwards the faces of their own. ("Murders in the Rue Morgue," PT, 399)

The central problem of Poe's fiction is that of the existence of other minds; this is an obvious undertext of the gothic romances, where it is the question of the relation between mind and body that fascinates and repels Poe's narrators, particularly when the mind and body belong to different individuals. The problem of other minds animates both Poe's exercises in solipsism and those tales that stage the collapse of difference between self and other, a state structurally identical with solipsism. The obsessive taking of revenge in such stories as "The Cask of Amontillado" or "The Tell-
Tale Heart” ends by reinforcing the identification of the narrator with his enemy, whose life is then consumed in a (horrified or exultant) retelling of the crime. Given the phantasmatic action of a story such as “William Wilson,” it makes little sense to try to separate Wilson from or to identify him with his shadow-self. The difficulty here, which I will take up in subsequent chapters, is that of knowing meum from tuum—of either finding the self frighteningly alien or losing that self in a fantasized identification with the other (an identification predicated on projection).

Although schematic, the preceding account ought to clarify Poe’s strategy in the detective stories, in which the rationalizing mind attempts to steer a course between the rocks of identification and the whirlpool of solipsism. Dupin does this by establishing indexical sets of relation between the mental and the corporeal. Again, the problem is one of depth: the self is conceived of as irretrievably lodged within a body, with which it is not identical. The difficulty lies in obtaining access to another’s self when the only information available is the unreliable flood of synesthetic perception. The appearance of the world is shifting and in need of interpretation; should one be inclined to appeal to language as a guarantor of truth, it takes very little “acumen” to realize how easily both speech and writing can be abused to private ends.

And so in the detective stories Poe first posits the absolute power of reason, bestowing on its method such power that the results may seem, to the untutored, “praeternatural.” Having done so, the “analyst”—detective, card shark, or psychiatrist—begins by assuming the potential utility of any and all evidence in the search for whatever knowledge he or she wishes to possess (“nor . . . does he reject deductions from things external to the game”). In comparing the different kinds of evidence thus obtained, the analyst looks especially to that which was unintended: “a casual or inadvertent word . . . embarrassment, hesitation, eagerness or trepidation” (“Murders in the Rue Morgue,” PT, 399). In this, the detective resembles both the psychiatrist who treats symptoms as signs and the nineteenth-century art historian Giovanni Morelli, who authenticated paintings through the minute inspection of physiognomic details such as the ear and the hand. For Poe, all things speak, and all experience is potentially convertible into signs.

This is evident in the discussion of cards quoted above. Significantly, both Dupin and Poe prefer card games to the ostensibly more intellectual game of chess. Although the latter requires more purely “concentrative” attention to remember and sort the implications of different plays, it is less satisfying than cards insofar as its focus on the complicated mechanics of motion distracts from the principal point of play—for Poe, always the testing of “one mind against another.” One does this by registering every detail of the other players’ movements and reactions and by using them inferentially, because in a card game the motives of the other players and the
possibilities of action are rigidly circumscribed. Given the ability to judge accurately the intellect of one’s opponent, and the ability to “read” his or her action (intended or not), luck is largely removed from the game. Dupin can see in the other players’ faces the nature of their hands “as if the rest of the party had turned outwards the faces of their own.” What this moment reveals is how, for Poe, cards function as a mediating figure between appearance and inner self—a figure, moreover, that is structured precisely as a sign. Behind the face, which itself is perceived as a text, Poe finds another sign, even a “face card.” The hidden card is doubled, and metonymically naturalized, by its relation to the human face. Insofar as card playing offers a model for the understanding of others, we find here evidence of the radical textuality of the self in Poe: the face is now a signifier for another signifier, rather than for any unifying quality such as its owner’s “nature” or “character.”

“The Purloined Letter” emerges, in some sense, from this discussion of cards in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”: in it, king, queen, and Minister play out the drama of the face cards—a drama that hinges on the possession and use (or nonuse) of another “letter.” Discussing the abyssal doublings of the story, Jacques Derrida observes:

But at the Minister who “is well acquainted with my MS.,” Dupin strikes a blow signed brother or confrère, twin or younger or older brother (Atreus/Thyestes). This rival and duplicitous identification of the brothers, far from fitting into a symbolic space of the family triangle . . . carries it off infinitely far away in a labyrinth of doubles without originals, of facsimile without an authentic, an indivisible letter . . .

Only four kings, hence four queens, four police prefects, four ministers, four analyst Dupins,—four narrators, four readers, four kings, etc., all more insightful and more foolish than the others, more powerful and more powerless.

Four kings, four queens, four ministers (valets, or jacks): a deck of cards, and Dupin the master player, who wins because the deck is stacked, because he alone can most transparently “read” the actions of others in order to manipulate them, as does the boy guessing evens and odds in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” Like the boy’s, Dupin’s ability is predicated on the creation of a mental “identity” between opponents, of estimating their intelligence and their motives in order to outsmart their play. And, as Jacques Lacan’s reading illustrates, in Poe’s model of the self the cards are always in play: identity and power relations are always constituted by movement, by shifting places, by the potential inherent in the sign, a signification whose meaning depends entirely on the configuration of the players.

By contrast, the Prefect’s failure derives from his inability to recognize the semiotic flatness of his textual world. His misdirected search for the letter leads him to look in places of occulted depth—in gimlet holes, in the
cracks of joints, under carpets, inside seat cushions, and so on. Still infatuated with the world of three dimensions, he sets out to take an inventory of the Minister’s apartments, in all their cubic tangibility, unaware of the essential point that Poe’s letter has no depth—only two sides—and that it is simply there, on the surface, and cannot be reached by piercing the page. Narcissus’s enchantment with his image is based on false premises; as John Irwin points out, “The illusion of reunion is based on the illusion of depth, the mistaking of a shadow or a reflected image for a physical body.”

Unlike the Prefect, Dupin is too sophisticated to make such a mistake with regard to the letter. In Barbara Johnson’s words, he recognizes that

the letter is not hidden in a geometrical space, where the police are looking for it, or in an anatomical space, where a literal understanding of psychoanalysis might look for it. It is located “in” a symbolic structure, a structure that can only be perceived in its effects, and whose effects are perceived as repetition. Dupin finds the letter “in” the symbolic order not because he knows where to look, but because he knows what to repeat. Dupin’s “analysis” is the repetition of the scene that led to the necessity of analysis.

In Poe’s treatment of card games we can see him straining after an essentially Lacanian model of signification. Instead of a sign in which the signifier refers directly to a preexisting signified in the world—a table, door, or tree—Lacan offers us a model in which a pair of identical doors can only be distinguished by the signs (reading “Ladies” and “Gentlemen”) that are posted above them. The meaning inheres not in the percept to which the signifier refers, but in the differential social value of the signifier itself, which determines through its placement who can, and who cannot, pass through each door. This echoes the situation of the card player, who cannot tell the “face value” of the king, queen, or jack from the identical backs of the cards, who cannot see how each is marked by gender and place, and who must therefore read this information out of the peripheral, metonymic languages that the opposing players speak. The value of a particular hand is not determined by the intrinsic meaning of the cards; it acquires significance only within the context of the other players’ hands. The game’s arbitrary system of rules creates value roughly the same way language creates meaning; in both cases, it is the variable system of internal relation, and not any external referent, that is the generative mechanism.

The Promethean Reader

The doubling of the sign, with its imagined front and back, finds an analogue in the dual literary roles of writer and reader that are explored in the articles on cryptography and in the detective stories. Johnson observes that Dupin’s very name
comes out of Poe’s interior library: from the pages of a volume called *Sketches of Conspicuous Living Characters of France*... which Poe reviewed for *Graham’s Magazine* during the same month his first Dupin story appeared. André-Marie-Jean-Jacques-Dupin, a minor French statesman, is there described as himself a walking library: “To judge from his writings, Dupin must be a perfect living encyclopedia. From Homer to Rousseau, from the Bible to the civil code, from the laws of the twelve tables to the Koran, he has read every thing, retained every thing.”

Johnson establishes an (as it were) literal origin for Poe’s detective in a book, in a description of one who lives for books: her historical citation grounds Derrida’s observation that “everything begins ‘in’ a library: among books, writing, references. Hence nothing begins. Simply a drifting or disorientation from which one never moves away.”

Poe’s review of *Sketches of Conspicuous Living Characters of France* suggests the intimate connection between “secret writing” and detective fiction: Dupin’s name first appears in a review that devotes two paragraphs to Poe’s superior knowledge of ciphers:

“The penetrating mind of Berryer,” says our biographer, “soon discovered [the code-key]. It was this phrase substituted for the twenty-four letters of the alphabet—*Le gouvernement provisoire.*

All this is very well as anecdote; but we cannot understand the extraordinary penetration required in the matter. ... The difficulty of deciphering may well be supposed much greater had the key been in a foreign tongue; yet any one who will take the trouble may address us a note, in the same manner as here proposed, and the key-phrase may be either in French, Italian, Spanish, German, Latin or Greek, (or in any of the dialects of these languages), and we pledge ourselves for the solution of the riddle. The experiment may afford our readers some amusement—let them try it.

Poe’s claim to solve keyphrase ciphers written in any of six languages is not merely bragging. Rather, it suggests Poe’s sense that he is capable of comprehending the structural principles of language itself, and not merely its local forms: “The basis of the whole art of solution, as far as regards these matters, is found in the general principles of the formation of language itself, and thus is altogether independent of the particular laws which govern any cipher, or the construction of its key” (*SW*, 118). But Wimsatt, in “What Poe Knew about Cryptography,” points out that since the key-phrase in any language is only a means for encoding an English text, Poe’s claim is hollow: as Poe admits, the language or appearance of the symbols used to encipher makes no difference in solving the code. Poe is guilty here, as elsewhere, of practicing “mystification.” His self-taught recognition of the semiotic foundations of the sign leads him to imagine a universal
language, a single deep structure underlying its manifold surface manifestations, for which the cryptographic investigations serve as an analogue or substitute.

After explaining why cryptographs should not be recognizable as instances of "secret writing," Poe observes that "an unusually secure mode of secret intercommunication might be thus devised. Let the parties each furnish themselves with a copy of the same edition of a book—the rarer the edition the better—as also the rarer the book. In the cryptograph, numbers are used altogether, and these numbers refer to the locality of letters in the volume" (SW, 122). This recalls the first meeting of Dupin and of Poe’s narrator, in a passage written only a few months earlier: “Our first meeting was at an obscure library in the Rue Montmartre, where the accident of our both being in search of the same very rare and very remarkable volume brought us into closer communication” (“Murders in the Rue Morgue,” PT, 400). Dupin’s “closer communication,” we note, echoes the cryptographer’s “intercommunication,” and in both cases a meeting is effected through books—“the rarer the better.” The communicative circuit is triangular: between Dupin and the narrator, mediated by a bibliophilic treasure; or between sender and receiver in a code, translated into and out of the particular language of the rare edition of a still-rarer book. There is more than a suggestion that books themselves are innately cryptographic, revisionary mediations of “rarer” works. Poe’s writing is famously intertextual, composed of citations from and pastiches of many kinds of writers: the magazine scribblers of his day, English and German Romantics, and such “curious” writers as Thomas Browne, Robert Burton, Joseph Glanvill, and Montaigne. Poe’s practice of using books as codes exactly duplicates his larger approach to writing: in both cases, authorship consists in appropriating the words (or letters) of a preexisting text and making them one’s own. If the “Marginalia” consist of scribblings made on the edges of an alien work, the more radical method suggested here begins by incorporating something already written into a new text, an act that inevitably involves rewriting the meaning of the original: all writing begins as recoding.

This is evident, in fact, in the very etymology of Poe’s central term:

Cipher, n, [ME, ciphre; OFr, cifre; LL. cifra; Ar. sifr, sefr, a cipher, nothing, from safara, to be nothing.]

1. in arithmetic, a naught; a zero; 0, which, standing by itself, expresses the absence of any quantity, but increases or diminishes the value of other figures, according to its position. . . .

3. an intricate weaving together of letters, as the initials of a name, on a seal, plate, coach, tomb, picture, etc.; a monogram.

4. a secret or disguised manner of writing meant to be understood only by the persons who have the key to it; a code; also, the key to such a code.
A naught, a monogram, a secret or disguised manner of writing, the key to a code: the dictionary definitions weave together the principal threads of Poe’s obsessions, and one can see in them emblems of several of Poe’s dominant genres—the “secret or disguised manner of writing” is to the articles on cryptography as “the intricate weaving together of letters” is to Poe’s arabesques. (“Arabesque” itself refers to the delicate and involuted patterns, originally passages from the Koran, that iconoclastic Muslims used as ornamentation.) Even the “o, which, standing by itself, expresses the absence of any quantity, but increases or diminishes the value of other figures, according to its position,” reflects Poe’s nascent attempts to theorize the purely relational quality of all knowledge—the hints, in the discussion of the children’s game of guessing hands, that look forward to the development of information theory.

In “A Few Words on Secret Writing,” Poe explains that “it is not to be supposed that Cryptography, as a serious thing . . . has gone out of use at the present day. It is still commonly practiced in diplomacy; and there are individuals, even now, holding office in the eye of various foreign governments, whose real business is that of deciphering. . . . Good cryptographers are rare indeed; and thus their services, although seldom required, are necessarily well required” (SW, 123). Dupin acts as a quasi-official agent on behalf of the Prefect, and thus of the government, in both “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Purloined Letter”; the fifty thousand francs he earns in the latter follow from Poe’s remarks on the generous requitement of cryptographers. Dupin is clearly a projection of Poe the cryptographer: alienated, aristocratic, and condescending toward the masses, he nonetheless is well paid for his work, as Poe unhappily was not. Poe’s intellectual presumption—“We will give a year’s subscription to the Magazine . . . to any person who shall read us this riddle. We have no expectation that it will be read” (ibid., 122)—is transferred to Dupin, with his contempt for the bungling police (who then bequeaths it to Sherlock Holmes, and a hundred other detectives).

In the detective stories, then, Poe the cryptographer is divided into the narrator and Dupin: “Observing him in these moods, I often dwelt meditatively upon the old philosophy of the Bi-Part Soul, and amused myself with the fancy of a double Dupin—the creative and the resolvent” (“Murders in the Rue Morgue,” PT, 402). The narrator is the actual creative half of Dupin, but this “Bi-Part Soul” also represents the division between Poe the cryptographer and Poe the reader, and between Poe as author and as critic. However one makes the division, in the detective stories, as in the articles on cryptography, the resolvent side is ascendant: Poe envisions himself not as the writer who challenges God’s monopoly on creation, but as the Promethean reader. Daniel Hoffman writes of the “so far uncracked code” of
the world that “if the detective, or to be more generic, the genius, can crack
the code of the Author, he has made himself coequal with the perpetrator
of the code.”

Billet-doux to the Self

The soul is a cypher, in the sense of a cryptograph; and the shorter a crypto­
graph is, the more difficulty there is in its comprehension.

Edgar Allan Poe, “Sarah Margaret Fuller”

As author, Poe has planted all the clues and devised the code himself: the
secrets revealed can only have been hidden by him. “We existed within our­selves alone,” the narrator says of himself and Dupin, as one gradually be­
gins to suspect that in some way the detective story itself constitutes Poe’s
private cipher. The doubleness in the detective stories—of signifier and sig­
nified, thing and shadow-name, author and reader—repeats the original
doubleness of the self, which knows itself through reading what it writes
as well as in the consciousness-engendering act of writing. Is this not the
“secret intercommunication” with the self mediated by the text the self in­scribes? In his history of cryptography, Poe quickly shifts from political
“necessities” to the realm of “desire” for “transmitting information from
one individual to another in such a manner as to elude general comprehen­sion” (SW, 114). A fuller account of this cryptographic desire is offered in
the final note on secret writing, in a letter sent by one of Poe’s readers:

I should perhaps apologize for again intruding a subject upon which you
should have so ably commented . . . but I have been greatly interested in the
articles upon “cryptography” which have appeared in your Magazine . . . . With
secret writing . . . I have found both in correspondence and in the preservation
of private memoranda, the frequent benefit of its peculiar virtues. I have thus
a record of thoughts, feeling and occurrences—a history of my mental exis­tence, to which I may turn, and in imagination, retrace former pleasures, and
again live through by-gone scenes—secure in the conviction that the magic
scroll has a tale for my eyes alone. Who has not longed for such a confidante?
(SW, Dec., 140–41)

The correspondent, Mr. W. B. Tyler, adds that cryptography serves as

an excellent exercise for mental discipline, and of high practical importance
on various occasions:—to the statesman and the general—to the scholar and
the traveller,—and, may I not add “last though not least,” to the lover? What
can be so delightful . . . as a secret intercourse . . . safe from the prying eyes
of some old aunt, or it may be, of a perverse and cruel guardian?—a billet doux
that will not betray its mission, even if intercepted . . . or, (which sometimes
occurs) if stolen from its violated depository? (Ibid., 141)
Like Poe’s, Tyler’s defense of cryptography quickly slides from the prudential worries of the general and statesman to the romance of cryptography itself, which, on his account, sounds much like the romance of literature. The appeal of the “magic scroll,” with its tale for “my eyes alone,” has to do with the preservation of the past fixed by its encoding, as if it were then magically protected from the depredations of time. Any specific reasons for encoding a text are eclipsed by the imaginative attraction of a private language that can be stored in the crypt of the code as in a time capsule. And the process of encoding and decoding—of writing and being read—evidently gives as much pleasure as does the actual memory itself. The similarities between Tyler’s style and sentiments and those of Poe should be apparent; in fact, a close reading of the letter suggests that Tyler is actually Poe himself, offering a defense of cryptography as a means of preserving the self-in-writing from a destructive world by locking it with the key of a private code.

Practically, the use of a pseudonymous correspondent would have permitted Poe to engage in the dialogues so near to his heart: Tyler could pose cryptographic questions that Poe could then answer, converting an otherwise abstruse essay into a discussion. Poe himself raised the possibility of cryptographic self-division: in “A Few Words on Secret Writing” he asks a correspondent to give his name in full, and so “relieve us of the chance of that suspicion which was attached to the cryptography of the weekly journal above mentioned—the suspicion of inditing ciphers to ourselves” (SW, 124). Tyler’s curious question—“Who has not longed for such a confidante?” (ibid., 141)—reminds one that the narrator in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” “confides” to Dupin that his company seems “a treasure beyond price” (PT, 400). Tyler’s references to cryptography’s practical use and its value in instilling mental discipline repeat points earlier made by Poe, and the “perverse and cruel guardian” may look back to John Allan, even as the “stolen” love letter and the references to statesmen anticipate the plot of “The Purloined Letter.” Most tellingly, the “violated depository” in which the billets-doux are kept recalls all the violated crypts of the gothic romances, and we see that once more one of Poe’s fictive motifs—here, the return of the sister/bride from the grave—turns out on examination to be the narrative equivalent of a textual relation. The eruptive return of the undead bride or sister (identical to the narrator and yet other) figures the transgressive relation of the author to the words, at once self and other, that it has encrypted.

The weight of circumstantial evidence suggesting that Tyler is Poe is increased by the thematic coherence that exists between Tyler’s letter and Poe’s fiction. In “A Few Words on Secret Writing,” Poe duplicates the split apparent in the composite figure of the narrator/Dupin; in Tyler, Poe creates a foil capable of appreciating his ratiocinative elegance: “You have exhibited
a power of analytical and synthetical reasoning I have never seen equalled; and the astonishing skill you have displayed—particularly in the deciphering of the cryptograph of Dr. Charles S. Frailey will, I think, crown you the king of ‘secret readers’” (SW, Dec., 141). Effusive praise, but Poe returns the compliment: the irony involved in his description of Tyler as “a gentleman whose abilities we very highly respect” would have pleased a writer capable of reviewing his own work anonymously. (“We pronounce that he has perfectly succeeded in his perfect aim,” he wrote of “The Gold-Bug”; of “The Purloined Letter,” he said: “There is much made of nothing . . . but the reasoning is remarkably clear, and directed solely to the required end.”)  

Of his life with Dupin, the narrator of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” writes: “Our seclusion was perfect. We admitted no visitors . . . We existed within ourselves alone” (PT, 401). Their time is passed “in dreams—reading, writing, conversing”; and the hermetic enclosure of this relation is repeated in that of Tyler and Poe, a relation Poe put to a final test. Of the hundred or more cryptograms sent in by readers, the only one Poe did not solve was Tyler’s; instead, pleading lack of time, he printed it for readers to try to decipher, but no solution was ever published. The last paragraph of the final entry on cryptography begins: “In speaking of our hundred thousand readers (and we can scarcely suppose the number to be less), we are reminded that of this vast number one, and only one has succeeded in solving the cryptograph of Dr. Frailey” (SW, Dec., 149). But the question remains: did any of this “vast number” solve the more intricate cryptographs that are Poe’s stories? It seems deeply uncharacteristic that Poe should have so readily abandoned the solution of this final cipher. Better, I think, to see it as Poe’s final test of his own cryptographic methods, evidence of the success of a mode of “secret intercommunication” whose meaning was safe from public readers. Certainly, Tyler (unlike Poe’s other readers) took evident pains to avoid forcing Poe to try to solve his cipher: “I wish to be distinctly understood; the secret communication above, and the one following, are not intended to show that you have promised more than you can perform. I do not take up the gauntlet. Your challenge [to solve all ciphers of certain types] has been more than amply redeemed” (SW, Dec., 145; emphasis added). For those readers inclined to challenge themselves against Tyler (or Tyler/Poe), I present in figures 4 and 5 facsimiles of both of Tyler’s cryptographs (ibid., 146).

Although Poe’s secret writing has attracted the attention of exceptional cryptographers, until recently there seems never to have been an attempt to solve Tyler’s messages, because apparently no one but Louis Renza and I suspected that the text might be by Poe. Then in 1992, Terence Whalen revealed that he had solved the first of the two cryptographs Tyler pronounced, taking his interpretive cue from Tyler’s letter, in which he discusses the difficulty in deciphering a text where the punctuation and spaces
Figure 4. Cryptograph devised by W. B. Tyler. From SW, 144.

To Edgar A. Poe, Esq.

Dr. Tyl OGXEW PjuFyA nbUH LIA VQSMcD xB Thb SNb esALnk3yG fCP TAol HTZgUc Ta Q3BTBPEe yGmdUd B A sLaAv B nuZ tocDyRc nhb AFKxdG ZcNsmell R b Lno Zoh Mfg wOvIecXhB avL nxn AfksO iyBjDV baesgplt SpZl CEWNSW bGerLh aNjmAd seAldAa laKXiDIX wA ScD IphK oFARt nOTy xct O R aiTBcr SEB dNBLoU Lph nina at3a diKy "awO cErjwxA xAJZ elf kMk xKSSGC HlitWy qBP qTc dajy RVn Udicate nk VF Ha lDah XWMITax Ye aFqW XoCwxLUAMXKx 6s b ACoLy unMy 3pc GIOQss NALEmMo nk Lcoar SaBdLs 1NzQ aGtJu 3aGCF RZnK CLo xJ dMNvUJQx gDHyBri bznL Lbtph fW eEToYdl JIA VIBSMFtv VSaBwDr nHb nb NGsI Mc Wq fRfjxI1LXkxYx 6q WuM 1QgmxvR Mc njuIKy yM AGBd Mfg ARNvAqDO cmR Irz xH0EEl qSxWtb CFo f fJe oIDLSTP fIrZ VnKayQ xLxh qdJw qsPd ludaA K VAT A b geraEc ubaI lyI Kj emy iW 66C

Figure 5. W. B. Tyler's longer cryptograph. From SW, Dec., 146.
between letters were omitted, and where the text was *written backwards*. Tyler then identifies his first cryptograph as "a short specimen of this style," and admits that he would "feel much gratified with your opinion of the possibility of reading it." Beginning with the assumption that the three-character pattern of comma, dagger, and section symbol (repeated seven times in eight lines) is very likely either "the" or "and" (it proves to be the former), Whalen has solved the text as follows: "The soul secure in her existence smiles at the drawn dagger and defies its point. The stars shall fade away, the sun himself grow dim with age and nature sink in years, but thou shalt flourish in immortal youth, unhurt amid the war of elements, the wreck of matter and the crush of worlds."

Whalen's evidence supports my contention that Tyler is actually a nom de plume for Poe, as does his observation that Poe took pains to dissuade a certain Richard Bolton from attempting to solve the cipher, claiming that it was an insoluble hash of letters bearing "not even a remote resemblance" to the original manuscript, a claim Whalen's solution shows to be false. (Poe had been shocked when Bolton had earlier solved one of Poe's own challenge ciphers. After hesitating to acknowledge the solution, Poe wrote to Bolton in terms that reveal how deeply he was invested in what he fancied were his unique cryptographic powers: "Allow me, Dear Sir, now to say that I was never more astonished in my life than at your solution. Will you honestly tell me?—did you not owe it to the accident of the repetition "itagi"? for "those"? . . . Be all this as it may—your solution astonished me. . . . For from at least 100,000 readers—a great number of whom, to my certain knowledge, busied themselves in the investigation—you and I are the only ones who have succeeded."

Even while acknowledging Bolton's triumph, Poe returns to the recurrent fantasy of a dual hermetic readership: "you and I are the only ones who have succeeded."

Although Tyler's decrypted text is prosier than most of Poe's writing, its enormities of temporal and physical scale and its references to universal cataclysm reflect the concerns of "Mellonta Tauta" and *Eureka*. Whether or not the text was intended for Virginia, as Whalen suggests, it undoubtedly illustrates the essential cryptographic opposition between matter and symbol: although the text opposes the "immortal youth" of the soul to the war and decay of the entire physical universe, the address to the soul is, significantly, in cipher, since the immortality of the soul is analogized to, and guaranteed by, the safety and permanence of the cryptograph, which, through a semiotic involution of space-time, protects its contents from "the wreck of matter and the crush of worlds."

Such faith in the preservative effects of encryption is evident as well in Poe's poetry, which often contains hidden texts. Besides "An Acrostic" (*PT*, 61), Poe wrote a progressive acrostic called "A Valentine to———
For her this rhyme is penned, whose luminous eyes,
   Brightly expressive as the twins of Leda,
Shall find her own sweet name, that nestling lies
   Upon the page, enwrapped from every reader.
Search narrowly the lines!—they hold a treasure
   Divine—a talisman—an amulet
That must be worn at heart. Search well the measure—
   The words—the syllables!
(PT, 86-87; emphasis added)

Poe concluded his verse with a disparaging comment for the reader: “Cease trying! You will not read the riddle, though you do the best you can do.”

This sense of poem-as-cryptogram is even plainer in “An Enigma” (1848), in which Poe faults other sonneteers for the transparency of their work, complaining that “through all the flimsy things we see at once/As easily as through a Naples bonnet”—a fault his own poem avoids by secreting its “true” significance beneath the surface of its verse. Note that according to Poe, such truths are not merely contingently hidden, but that it is “by dint” of their secretion that the poem obtains its immortality:

But this is, now,—you may depend upon it—
   Stable, opaque, immortal—all by dint
Of the dear names that lie concealed within’t.
(PT, 91-92)

Yet although Whalen’s admirable work is bolstered by the evidence of Poe’s verse, Tyler’s second, longer cryptograph remains unsolved—and is likely to stay so for some time. This is because the two cryptograms are in radically different ciphers. The first is a monoalphabetic substitution in which each word is spelled backward, and in which punctuation is omitted. But the second cryptograph is a polyalphabetic substitution, in which six separate alphabets (composed of different-sized, capitalized, and inverted alphabets) are used to encode an unknown text. To solve that cipher one thus needs to identify up to 156 different characters. Whoever composed the cryptogram realized that by using six alphabets to encode such a short message, frequency curves, ordinarily the cryptographer’s first resort, could be eliminated. Because of the lack of both a frequency curve and repeated letters (save for the “rvv” at the end of the ninth line), I failed in my own efforts to solve the code. This was also the case with Bill Sutton, editor-in-chief of The Cryptogram, a publication of the American Cryptogram Association. Of course it is possible that there is no semantically meaningful
message enciphered in the second cryptogram, but Sutton’s application of what is known as the Kasiski test indicates that the encrypted message is, in all likelihood, an English text rather than gibberish. Perhaps it is just as well: by remaining an enigma, Tyler’s cryptograph stands as an emblem of the seductive challenge cryptographic texts propose, and reminds us that cryptographic writing is at least as profoundly concerned with the human need for mystery as it is with the pleasures of solution.

If I am right about Tyler’s cipher, it offers a concluding instance of the ways in which the articles on cryptography prefigure the motifs of the detective stories, as Poe emulates the Minister D—— by hiding his misaddressed text (or “cipher”) in plain sight, within the pages of Graham’s Magazine. Tyler’s cryptograph bears striking resemblances to a passage from “The Purloined Letter,” in which Dupin describes his perception of the stolen item:

To be sure, it was, to all appearance, radically different from the one of which the Prefect had read us so minute a description. Here the seal was large and black, with the D—— cipher; . . . But, then, the radicalness of these differences . . . was excessive . . . and so suggestive of a design to delude the beholder into an idea of the worthlessness of the document; these things, together with the hyperobtrusive situation of this document, full in the view of every visitor, and thus exactly in accordance with the conclusions to which I had previously arrived; these things, I say, were strongly corroborative of suspicion, in one who came with the intention to suspect. (PT, 696)

Once Tyler’s cipher has been deciphered, might we not say of it what Dupin said of his? “Why—it did not seem altogether right to leave the interior blank—that would have been insulting. . . . So, as I knew he would feel some curiosity in regard to the identity of the person who outwitted him, I thought it a pity not to give him a clue” (ibid., 698).

Tyler/Poe and the narrator/Dupin are both versions of a divided self constituted by the complementary acts of writing and reading, the mirroring and perception of mirroring that prove a precondition for self-consciousness. The articles on cryptography extend Lacan’s reading of “The Purloined Letter” as “an allegory of the signifier” in a way that also bears out the narrative implications of Derrida’s remark that “the divisibility of the letter is also the divisibility of the signifier to which it gives rise, and therefore also of the ‘subjects,’ ‘characters,’ or ‘positions’ that are subject to them and that ‘represent’ them.”

If, as I have argued, the keys to Poe’s ciphers require a one-to-one correspondence for their efficacy, Poe’s creation of Tyler literalizes this relation in a “one-to-one correspondence” in which Poe covertly stages his internal self-division. In these articles Poe replaces the specular double of “William Wilson” with a textual doubling in which the secret correspondence between two interdependent texts constitutes a
single self. Throughout Poe's cryptographic writings, his choice was always to be double or nothing: to sequester "self" and "correspondent" within the code of language, or to surrender to the fear that the cipher of the self is truly sifr, nothing, empty. Records of a mind composing and disclosing for its own pleasure, these texts are love letters—billets-doux—from Poe to himself, concealed within sensational surface narratives; ones that must, at times, have seemed dead letters, unreceived in a world that resisted Poe's complex recodings of identity.

Despite the appeal to "our hundred thousand readers," during his lifetime Poe had finally to remain his own perfect confidante; he had, like Baudelaire in "Au lecteur," to transform the address to the reader—"Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon frère!"—into a deeper address to himself.34 But in the years following his death, Poe's secret writings have found their addresses with perverse force. According to Patrick Quinn, Baudelaire's imagined reader in Les fleurs du mal is none other than Poe himself, who is at the same time Baudelaire's double and his self.35 In such uncanny ways, the history of literature in the last century and a half has often been underwritten by the palimpsest of Poe's secret prose; and it is to the forms of that writing that I now turn.