The Cryptographic Imagination

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"This bug is to make my fortune," he continued, with a triumphant smile,  
"to reinstate me in my family possessions."

Edgar Allan Poe, "The Gold-Bug"

The Word Made Flesh
If we accept the testimony of the noted Poe scholar Thomas Ollive Mab-bott, "The Gold-Bug" is one of the most popular and widely imitated stories in the world, the source for hundreds of other tales, novels, and films. Like so many aspects of Poe's influence and reputation, this seems hard to believe. Can "The Gold-Bug" really have exerted such a profound influence? How should we go about accounting for this force? The story's plot is rather slight. An erudite recluse named Legrand, in exile from a world in which his fortunes have collapsed, discovers on a deserted beach a large, burnished beetle and a piece of parchment, marked by a skull or death's-head. Being something of a naturalist, he wraps the beetle in the parchment for protection and brings it back to his cottage. Later, while visiting Legrand, the narrator accidentally subjects the parchment to heat from a fire. And then the discovery: the heated parchment reveals secret images and markings, including the drawing of a goat and a series of cryptic numbers and symbols (see fig. 6). Legrand, his servant Jupiter, and the unnamed narrator together search out the lost pirate treasure of Captain Kidd. Back at home, Legrand explains how he was able to identify the parchment as a cryptographic map, and the symbols as a text that, deciphered, offered cryptic instructions on how to find the gold.

Doubtless, the story's popularity follows from a number of identifiable features, including the thrill of pirate adventures, the patent wish fulfillment embodied in the story's ending, and—less well recognized—the lure of the historical fantastic, which uses the gold as a figure to link the story's nineteenth-century present to the romance of the colonial past. Finally, though, what distinguishes "The Gold-Bug" from previous tales of adventure is the cryptographic translation of the map. Like most fictive ciphers, the basic one in "The Gold-Bug" is a simple alphabetic substitution,
the easiest variety possible. But Poe complicates the task of deciphering Kidd's message, "rudely traced, in a red tint, between the death's-head and the goat," by superenciphering the cipher with several additional levels, including the "hieroglyphical" homonymous signature of the goat (or kid) of the pirate Captain Kidd, and the indirect, unpunctuated, and almost allegorical nature of the translated text, which only slowly reveals itself as a set of directions:

A good glass in the bishop's hostel in the devil's seat twenty-one degrees and thirteen minutes northeast and by north main branch seventh limb east side shoot from the left eye of the death's-head a bee-line from the tree through the shot fifty feet out. (PT, 591)

Despite the relative simplicity of Poe's game, the pleasure of solving his cipher—or, rather, of watching it be solved by Legrand—mobilizes a deep tension in realist fiction between our absorption in the represented world of the tale and our simultaneous fascination with the process of reading, of translating signs into meaning. In "The Gold-Bug," the cryptographic imagination describes the interplay of two-dimensional language in three-dimensional lives, which is a corollary to this symbolic consciousness. Cryptography is a form of magic in which, through his mastery of language, Legrand performs the conjurer's trick of pulling a rabbit out of a hat, forcing the world to flower open. The covert logic of cryptographic adventure is not about finding a preexisting gap in the world, but about making its opaque surfaces open on command.

In what follows, I explore the alchemical logic that structures Poe's use of cryptography, using "The Gold-Bug" to clarify a set of assumptions about language and literature that, just as Poe claims, are probably coextensive with writing. In its first recorded occurrence, cryptography was employed strictly as a form of mystification. Around 2000 B.C., in Menet Khu, a town along the Nile, "an unknown scribe ordered special hieroglyphic symbols carved in Khumnhotep II's tomb for decoration or in order to impress the viewer. He employed no system of secret writing; rather he simply substituted some unique hieroglyphic symbols in place of ordinary ones. His probable purpose: to give grace and dignity to the message he inscribed on the tomb." Khumnhotep's cryptographic hieroglyphs were
at once aesthetic and political; crudely put, they were a form of propaganda that aimed to dramatize Khumnhotep’s power. In their ability to awe or abase viewers, the semantically insignificant glyphs decorating Khumnhotep’s grave reveal that hierophantic aspect that hangs like a penumbra around all written words: an investment in the idea of the code that, within the West, is imagined to be as old as the world itself.

Ultimately, the impulses behind cryptography go back to life’s sources. According to the New Testament, the first and greatest instance of cryptography was the conjuration of the universe at a word:
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
The same was in the beginning with God.
All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.
In him was life; and the life was the light of men.
And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. . . .
And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.
(John 1: 1-5, 14)

For the author of John, the mystery of Christ’s creation—the process by which the Word is invested in flesh—is a deep cryptographic enigma. John’s Hellenized version of the incarnation depends on a Platonism in which words provide matter with their informing logic. Whether glossed as reason, word, or the creative energy of God’s speech, Logos represents the unaccountable process by which the symbolic comes to animate the material world (just the question that drives Stuart Ressler’s cryptographic attack on the structure of DNA).

Between them, the stories of Khumnhotep and of Christ’s incarnation epitomize the bipolar structure of the cryptographic imagination. Although the Egyptian text presents itself as a set of glyphs or runes that are mysterious or even terrifying in their illegibility, for John cryptography seems to promise an absolute transparency of meaning. This division reflects the Janus-faced character of secret writing, which expresses itself both as a form of cloaking or covering and as a form of self-revelation—as in the code of the Beast, whose body is marked by a hidden 666, or in the ambiguous A that brands Hester Prynne.

The literary force of New Testament narratives of Christ’s life derives in no small measure from their condensed representation of both poles of the cryptographic impulse: Christ’s life begins with a mysterious investiture and ends with a mysterious divestment, after which, for the forty days between Easter Sunday and the Ascension, Christ appears purified of materiality, sublimed, stripped of the signifier’s dross. And yet even this triumph of linguistic immediation is cryptographic. The necessary agent for Christ’s purification is the crypt itself, which as the container for Christ’s transfiguration analogically resembles the “container” of the cipher. To describe the sepulcher as a site of writing may seem odd, but as a holy grave it is the etymological equivalent of the word hieroglyph, substituting the Anglo-Saxon graven (“to dig, bury, carve”) for the Greek glyphein (“to carve, hollow out”). Instead of merely surrounding the grave with hieroglyphs, as Khumnhotep did, the Resurrection story identifies Christ with language, so that the mystery of the Resurrection—whose first evidence is
the stone rolled away to reveal an empty crypt—is that of an achieved im-
manence of meaning.6

Christ's cryptic transfigurations are, as Jorge Luis Borges recognizes,
stories of our own being in the world. In “John 1:14,” Borges writes:

I was born of a womb
by an act of magic.
I lived under a spell, imprisoned in a body,
in the humbleness of a soul.7

“John 1:14” suggests that the miracle of Christ’s virgin birth has to do with
the way humans are conjured into corporeal being. The most vivid mem-
ory of my son’s birth was my shock at his arrival as if from nowhere, space
evolving to introduce a new person to the world. Today, the development of
gene therapies has made it intuitively plausible to represent impregnation
as a drama of secret (or secreted) writing, in which an autopoetic code is
produced (one belonging to neither parent alone) that writes a person into
existence. This story plays itself out in dozens of forms, including that of
Christ’s birth and transubstantiation. Both the crypt of cryptography and
that of the tomb derive from the Greek kryptos, for “hidden,” “secret,” or
“concealed.”

Cryptographic narratives perpetually return to this tension between the
crypt of writing and the hidden place in which bodies are laid. Of the many
anecdotes that illustrate this, I offer two. The first is the story of Orville
Ward Owen, a Detroit physician and Baconian author who, not content
with the evidence he had adumbrated in the six volumes of Sir Francis
Bacon’s Cipher Story,8 “became increasingly convinced that Bacon had buried
some more tangible evidence of his authorship of Shakespeare’s works in a
set of iron boxes” (F&F, 69). Remarkably, Owen was able to persuade back-
ers to finance increasingly elaborate and expensive expeditions to England
to dig for these boxes—first in a cave near Chepstow Castle, later in a rift
in the bed of the River Wye, and yet again in a grotto in Piercefield Park.
In each case, Owen’s cipher located the incontrovertible texts in crypts or
cryptlike spaces, as in the “deep caisson sunk by English engineers” a dozen
feet into the mud below the River Wye. There, according to an admirer,
Owen located “a small, gray, stone structure . . . marked by the inscriptions
of Francis Bacon,” which to Owen’s chagrin ultimately proved as empty as
Al Capone’s cellar.

Compare this to my second Baconian anecdote, this one centering on
the ostensible cipher in Shakespeare’s epitaph (a subject treated at greater
length in chapter 6). By anagramming the letters and manipulating the word
order of the epitaph placed over Shakespeare’s grave in Stratford, a certain
C. Alexander Montgomery revealed the correct text to be as follows:
Dig Honest Man dost thee forbeare
I shak-e-speare England’s Tvdor Heire
Graved belovv these mystic Stones
The mystery codes yet gab of bones.
(F&F, 57)

Although I would not want to press too hard on any gloss of Montgomery’s incoherent quatrain, Owen’s crypt search and Montgomery’s epitaph reveal an identically structured sense of the literary cryptograph. In both, writing assumed to possess a secret leads to the imagination of the text as a crypt to be broken into, “cracked,” brought to light. Thus deciphered, these texts direct readers to the contents of real, three-dimensional crypts, for which the original texts serve as an analogue. Such crypts are often graves, whether for the bones “gabbed” about in Shakespeare’s epitaph or for what Owen believed to be the sixty-six boxes of manuscripts that would undeniably prove Bacon’s authorship (manuscripts that function as substitute corpses, to be exhumed in the forensic identification of the real author of the Shakespeare canon, in an endless recirculation of texts and bodies).

Closely related to the ciphered opening of these epitaphic spaces is the way in which cryptography negotiates the tension between interior psychic states and the world. Such tensions historically have often been resolved through the logocentric narratives of origin found in the religions of the book. But similar problems lie at the heart of many psychoanalytic theories of the self. Indeed, one source of the explosive postwar interest in Poe is the consonance between the cryptographic qualities of his texts and the theoretical inclinations of his critics. Because Poe’s texts are already constructed on the model of a steganographic cipher, with an overt surface narrative and a variety of occluded, “interior” truths often having to do with the operations of language, they naturally lend themselves to analysts looking for a hidden key, regardless of whether that key concerns incest, dissemination, or the itinerary of the signifier.

Here we may think of the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok on the cryptonym, their term for a psychopathology resulting from a misalignment between the analysand’s body and his or her words. Rereading Freud’s case history of the Wolf Man, Abraham and Torok hypothesize that the Wolf Man’s physical symptoms stem from a punning, multilingual “verbarium” of key (or code) words, which indirectly name the principal traumas of his life? The words are “encrypted” in the self to avoid analysis by the self, for whom they pose insoluble psychic double binds. Freudian therapy takes the form of a full-blown cryptanalysis, designed to return the patient to the biographical trauma at the core of his or her memory, although it becomes impossible to say if the encrypted words name a real event or whether they produce the symptoms they name. Irving Malin illus-
trates the common ground between cryptography and cryptonymy when he writes that for Abraham and Torok, texts "are rarely decoded in a way that does justice to 'secrets' embedded" in them, because "all texts—especially those dealing with the 'phantom'—conceal meanings. Thus close readings must, in effect, pay attention to words not spoken or written, to cryptograms hidden in verbal structure."¹⁰

Because Poe is compulsively interested both in crypts ("The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Black Cat," "The Premature Burial") and in cryptograms, it is no surprise that psychoanalytic critics have often concentrated on his work.¹¹ Poe's writing coalesces around secrets and obscurity, almost forcing readers to imagine the text as a crypt with a hidden key. Such a homeopathic technique for the creation of mysteries produces highly cathected readers; the surface of the cipher produces a crypt in us, which we proceed to fill with our imagination, just as the semantic vacuity of Khunhnhotep's glyphs contextually signified Khunhnhotep's power and his resistance to comprehension. Crypts and cryptographs are also narratively related because it is always words that open Poe's crypts, whether through the involuntary confessions of "The Tell-Tale Heart" or through Dupin's semiotic mastery of the rooms of the Mmes. L'Espanaye in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." Poe is not alone in this association, which appears in an enormous range of writings, from the challenge of the three inscribed caskets in The Merchant of Venice to the "great cryptogram" that reveals itself as a map to the planet's hollow core in Jules Verne's Journey to the Center of the Earth.

A similar logic operates in much of the psychoanalytical criticism of Poe's writing. The psychic topography of cryptonymy is structured according to the same opposition between two-dimensional language and an (imaginary) three-dimensional psychic space that has shaped secret writing since the New Testament. Far from explaining how the psyche "really" works, cryptonymy depends for its explanatory force on this enciphered approach to language. Despite the abolishment of interiority and the flattening-out of claims to three-dimensional representation that characterize postmodern criticism, Abraham and Torok operate in the familiar rhetorical territory of the gothic. This follows from Freud, whose case studies are generic cousins of the gothic novel, and who understands the dream as a cryptogram, a rebuslike series of words and images whose transformations, substitutions, and condensations are designed to render the dream's manifest content illegible. Freud's insight is that the manifest content of the dream is not deciphered through what he calls a "fixed key," in which an image always possesses a specific meaning, but that each dreamer develops an individual key, to be teased out by the psychoanalyst on the basis of the patient's covert associations. Analysis is then structured as a drama of secret reading in which the patient is forced to decipher a text encrypted by his or her own psyche.¹²
In his introduction to Abraham and Torok's *Wolf Man's Magic Word*, Jacques Derrida also exploits such gothic rhetorical effects as encryption, paralysis, violation, and unspeakability as he describes the involutions of psychic space in which the Wolf Man's words have been trapped. The Wolf Man, Derrida writes, had "edified a crypt within him: an artifact, an artificial unconscious in the Self, an interior enclave, partitions, hidden passages, zigzags, occult and difficult traffic" (xliv). The only passage through this mental architecture is through the use of the magic words of the "verbarium," coded across English, Russian, and German, to keep the crypt impermeable (ibid., xlv). In using such gothic language to describe incorporation, Derrida's intention is obviously not to reaffirm the sovereignty of binarisms of place (the absoluteness of the distinction between inside and outside) but to vex such topological distinctions through what might be called his toroidal or Moebian punning, a punning centered on the word *fors*. Both within and without, in the "inner heart and the public space," the word-thing *fors* allows Derrida to describe encryption as "both a secretive inclusion and an exclusion of the object outside of the subject, a partitioning of it off inside the vault of its signifier," leaving the crypt in a dual inside/outside space.\textsuperscript{13}

Derrida's fissile language is implicitly an attack on the fixity of Lacan's spatial algebra. My point in revisiting this debate is only to note that despite their well-recognized differences, *all* of the major psychoanalytical figures interested in Poe turn to cryptographic language in their search for a rhetoric adequate to the experience of Poe's writing. Although they apply them to different ends, Freud, Lacan, Derrida, and Abraham and Torok rely on the rhetorical resources of the gothic, the genre that most fully displays the anxiety about words and spaces that is the province of the cryptographic imagination.\textsuperscript{14}

**Bird or Devil?**

To say that even dialogically opposed theorists such as Lacan and Derrida use cryptographic language in describing the psyche does not mean that rhetorical analysis alone can adjudicate the debates that have preoccupied literary theorists for the past quarter-century. It is, however, a way of attending to what I take to be the virtual ubiquity of cryptographic language—a form of writing organized around an imagined (even if so imagined only to be undone or deconstructed) difference between linguistic surface and depth.

Indeed, aspects of the cryptographic imagination operate in far less likely forms of writing than psychoanalytic criticism. In the following pages, I want to consider the relation between the writing of Poe and that of Daniel Defoe, an author from whom Poe derives much of his cryptographic impetus. Such a pairing must look odd: who could be less like Poe
than Defoe, a figure celebrated for the virtual invention of the reality effect and the prose transcription of the phenomenal world? Defoe was, however, hardly immune to the attractions of cryptography: anticipating the desire for comparative linguistics, if not its methods, his *Essay upon Literature; or, An Enquiry into the Antiquity and Original of Letters* traces the origins of all alphabets back to the Hebrew, with several pages devoted especially to the nature of secret writing and its relation to the origins of writing. By reading Poe reading Defoe, we can recognize how Poe’s texts operate as a secret translation machine, intensifying Defoe’s nascent cryptographic awareness and simultaneously converting Poll, the parrot from *Robinson Crusoe*, into the Raven.

Despite its ostensible realism, much of the power of Defoe’s prose stems from the way it allegorizes the reading process. That power is sufficient, I might add, that Poe became a writer partly because of his contact with Defoe. In his 1836 *Southern Literary Messenger* review of a new edition of *Robinson Crusoe*, Poe acknowledges finding in “that invaluable work” not only powerful and “enchaining” memories of a favorite childhood text, but his own beginnings in literature: “How fondly do we recur, in memory, to those enchanted days of our boyhood when we first learned to grow serious over Robinson Crusoe!—when we first found the spirit of wild adventure enkindling within us, as, by the dim fire light, we labored out, line by line, the marvelous import of those pages, and hung breathless and trembling with eagerness over their absorbing—over their enchanting interest! Alas! The days of desolate islands are no more!” (*ER*, 201). Instances of Defoe’s influence on Poe include Poe’s imitation of plainstyle in “The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade” (“I now bitterly repented my folly in quitting a comfortable home to peril my life in such adventures as this; but regret being useless, I made the best of my condition, and exerted myself to secure the good-will of the man-animal that owned the trumpet” [*PT*, 793]), and Poe’s extension of Crusoe’s terrestrial explorations in such works as “The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall” and “The Balloon-Hoax.”

Defoe also makes a telling appearance in “The Raven.” A clue to the poem’s origins is given midway through “The Philosophy of Composition,” when Poe explains how he chose a bird as his subject. In need of a “pretext for the continuous use of the one word ‘nevermore,’” Poe found himself hard-pressed to invent “a sufficiently plausible reason for its continuous repetition” by “a human being.” The difficulty, Poe adds, “lay in the reconciliation of this monotony with the exercise of reason on the part of the creature repeating the word. Here, then, immediately arose the idea of a non-reasoning creature capable of speech; and, very naturally, a parrot, in the first instance, suggested itself, but was superseded forthwith by
a Raven, as equally capable of speech, and infinitely more in keeping with the intended tone” (ER, 18).

Just pages earlier, while arguing for the “distinct limit, as regards length, to all works of literary art—the limit of a single sitting,” Poe had acknowledged that “in certain classes of prose composition, such as ‘Robinson Crusoe,’ (demanding no unity), this limit may be advantageously over­passed” (ibid., 15). That Poe makes an exception of Defoe’s novel is a sign of his esteem, but readers familiar with Robinson Crusoe may also recognize a more profound indebtedness in the figure of Poe’s Raven. Recall that after discovering Poll in the wild, Crusoe spends years training his parrot until it “talked so articulately and plain, that it was very pleasant to me; and he lived with me no less than six and twenty years; how long he might live afterwards, I know not . . . perhaps poor Poll may be alive there still, calling after Poor Robin Crusoe to this day. I wish no English man the ill luck to come there and hear him; but if he did, he would certainly believe it was the devil.”16 Although the coincidence of parrot, raven, and Robinson Crusoe in Poe’s essay is suggestive, the antepenultimate stanza of “The Raven” clinches the bird’s provenance. “‘Prophet!’ said I, ‘thing of evil!—prophet still, if bird or devil!’” (PT, 85), Poe’s narrator exclaims, revealing through the allusion how Poll’s devilish appearance inspired Poe’s uncanny bird.

Both Poll and the Raven offer figures for the reading process. In order to be affected by a work, a reader must engage with the conflicts staged within it. Poe uses the Raven to address problems of identification and trans­ference much like those Freud acknowledged when he wrote that in analysis “the patient hears what we say but it rouses no response in his mind. He probably thinks to himself: ‘That is very interesting, but I see no sign of it in myself.’” The reader is “‘stimulated’ only by those passages which he feels apply to himself, i.e., which refer to conflicts that are active in him.”17 Hence the Raven emerges as a model for the process by which literary trans­ference takes place:

At length the lover, startled from his original nonchalance by the melancholy character of the word itself—by its frequent repetition . . . is at length excited to superstition, and wildly propounds queries of a far different character—queries whose solution he has passionately at heart . . . propounds them . . . not altogether because he believes in the prophetic or demoniac character of the bird (which, reason assures him, is merely repeating a lesson learned by rote) but because he experiences a phrenzied pleasure in so modeling his ques­tions as to receive from the expected “Nevermore” the most delicious because the most intolerable of sorrow. (ER, 19)

The ceaseless, mechanical repetitions of the Raven offer a striking emblem of the interlocutory manner in which a literary work addresses its readers.
Although operating under a suspicion that the text’s answers are not truly prophetic, but only “lessons learned by rote,” the reader obtains a perverse, “delicious,” and even “phrenzied pleasure” by “so modeling his question as to receive” the expected “Nevermore.” Poe accurately captures the active cooperation that the reader brings to his literary bereavement; the work itself is only an intermediary device for creating an affect in the minds and bodies of particular readers.

This process of readerly transference typically centers on images or figures of crypts, a motif Poe seems to have developed especially from the work of Defoe. “The Raven,” *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym,* and “The Gold-Bug” all represent idiosyncratic revisions of *Robinson Crusoe,* and in each case Poe borrows from Defoe a notion of the crypt that he converts into the cryptograph. Cryptography, that is, represents Poe’s technical adaptation of the hieroglyph. Today we know that the obsession with the hieroglyph as an originary form of language was based on false assumptions about the nature of the Egyptian script, which is not an originary nor even a wholly hieroglyphic form of language, but a complex mix of semantic and phonetic elements. But as John Irwin shows, the hieroglyph offered a metaphor through which the Romantics could figure their version of the relations between the origins of language and the origins of the self. Similarly, the cryptograph has become a way of imagining our relation to language, epistemology, and identity. It provides a way of doubling the text within the reader, reproducing within his or her body and mind the particular effects Poe wishes to create. It is, one might say, a way of extending hieroglyphic doubling into the very process of reading.

The cipher accomplishes this doubling by revealing the unmotivated nature of the sign, fostering the reader’s awareness of the text as a code full of secrets. The cryptograph also contributes to Poe’s sense that literature, as Valéry said, is “l’art se jouer de l’âme des autres.” Realizing that only the reader’s investment renders the text meaningful, Poe shifted his attention from the nature of mimetic representation to that of signification. (In “The Raven,” for instance, Poe’s emphasis is wholly on the speaker’s attempt to read meaning into the bird’s simulation of speech.) Finally, the illegibility of the ciphered sign actually promotes identification, blurring the difference between the doubled reader and the writer. The hieroglyph is a fantasy about uniting the split in human beings between these two dimensions, which tends to diminish the specifically linguistic aspect of the self; the cryptograph provides an emblem for thinking about language qua script, *before* it becomes Narcissus’s mirror.

One can clarify the difference between hieroglyph and cryptograph by comparing how each is employed by Jacques Lacan, whose “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” has reinvigorated American readings of Poe. Recall Lacan’s famous assertion that “The Purloined Letter” allegorizes the
origins of subject formation in the symbolic order by showing how the subject receives its “decisive orientation” from the “itinerary of the signifier.” It is this truth, he continues, that “makes the very existence of fiction possible. And in that case, a fable is as appropriate as any other narrative for bringing it to light—at the risk of having the fable’s coherence put to the test in the process. Aside from that reservation, a fictive tale even has the advantage of manifesting symbolic necessity more purely to the extent that we may believe its conception arbitrary.”

Although it is “no accident that this tale revealed itself propitious to pursuing a course of inquiry which had already found support in it,” Lacan says nothing more about why this particular tale should come to bear such weighty meaning. Why “The Purloined Letter” rather than “The Pit and the Pendulum” or “The Masque of the Red Death”? Or, for that matter, Barnaby Rudge, or Uncle Tom’s Cabin? If the itinerary of the signifier “makes the very existence of fiction possible,” does this mean that all fictions have the same itinerary? Lacan avoids such questions by insisting that the burden of coherence falls on the tale, and not on his analysis; this evasion, however, does not explain why some texts—including “The Purloined Letter”—seem to insist on metalinguistic readings. Certainly Lacan never admits in the “Seminar” that Poe influenced him; it is the “fable’s coherence” that is “put to the test” by his reading.

In fact, Lacan—who, like the other members of the French avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s, read Poe closely—is undoubtedly indebted to Poe’s writing. That Lacan’s debt is not immediately apparent is due partly to a confusion of terms: both Lacan and Poe often employ the terms hieroglyph and cryptograph interchangeably. But like Poe, Lacan affirms the symbolic, even algebraic, nature of the subject. Indeed, the identity of Lacan’s hieroglyph and Poe’s cryptograph becomes evident when Lacan invokes the hieroglyph to ridicule any connection between sign and image. Freud, Lacan tell us, “shows us in every possible way that the value of the image as signifier has nothing whatever to do with its signification, giving as an example Egyptian hieroglyphics in which it would be sheer buffoonery to pretend that in a given text the frequency of a vulture, which is an aleph, or of a chick, which is a vau, indicating a form of the verb ‘to be’ or a plural, prove that the text has anything at all to do with these ornithological specimens.”

This loss of the sign’s Adamic properties follows from Jean François Champollion’s discovery that although the hieroglyph may have originated as a pictograph, it rapidly evolved into a quasi-alphabetic code. Lacking the transparent self-evidence of the image, the hieroglyphs would have been doomed to remain incoherent marks in a lost tongue had it not been for the rules of transformation implied by the Rosetta stone. This search for rules is functionally equivalent to cryptanalysis; as Abraham Sinkov notes in *Ele-
mentary Cryptanalysis: A Mathematical Approach, cryptanalysis has “aided in the reconstruction of lost languages which had been dead for so long that nothing was known about them so that they were, in effect, secret languages.”

This is Lacan’s point in insisting on the closed and illegible system of representation Champollion faced in confronting the hieroglyphs: “The mental vice ['in favour of a symbolism deriving from natural analogy'] denounced above enjoys such favour that today’s psychoanalyst can be expected to say that he decodes before he will come around to taking the necessary tour with Freud (turn at the statue of Champollion, says the guide) that will make him understand that what he does is decipher; the distinction is that a cryptogram takes on its full dimension only when it is in a lost language.” And in fact, in the excerpted translation in figure 8, Lacan is clearly right: the owl glyph functions prepositionally, and has nothing to do with the appearance or behavior of the real bird.

Although the right-minded psychoanalyst must take “the necessary tour with Freud,” what can we say of Lacan’s unnamed “guide,” who figures only once in the text before disappearing? Lacan could as easily have written the instruction himself (“turn at the statue of Champollion”); instead, he has gone to the trouble of introducing an additional figure. But who is the guide that Lacan has in mind? My hunch is that it is Poe. Certainly it is the case that Lacan sounds a good deal like Pundita in the following excerpt from “Mellonta Tauta,” in which Johannes Kepler is described as “essentially a ‘theorist’—that word now of so much sanctity, formerly an epithet of contempt. Would it not have puzzled these old moles, too, to have explained by which of the two ‘roads’ a cryptographer unriddles a cryptogram of more than usual secrecy, or by which of the two roads Champollion directed mankind to those enduring and almost innumerable truths which resulted from deciphering the Hieroglyphics?” (ER, 877). Lacan’s allusion to “Mellonta Tauta” indicates that it is Poe himself who stands at the statue of Champollion. As Champollion provided Poe with a precursor in “Mellonta Tauta,” so Lacan uses Poe in this Egyptian costume drama of literary history, aligning Poe with himself, Freud, and Champollion as cryptographic readers.

However abstruse it might seem, this distinction between ciphers and hieroglyphs has not been lost to detective fiction. Paul Auster’s City of Glass (a book quite clear about its sourcing in Poe) is explicitly an investigation into the differences between a natural hieroglyphic language, grounded in the body and in vision, and an arbitrary Saussurean system. Even Arthur Conan Doyle captures the distinction correctly. In “The Adventure of the Dancing Men,” Sherlock Holmes (who describes himself as someone “fairly familiar with all forms of secret writings,” and indeed as “the author of a trifling monograph upon the subject, in which I analyse one hundred and
Secret Writing as Alchemy

of the fields of the gods, likewise

the measure

of wine of the fields of

the vine; he hath done things great for Aphis,

[and] Mnevis, and for every shrine containing a sacred animal,

expend ing very much more than did they [his] ancestors;

1 Line 3 of the Rosetta Stone begins here.

sixty separate ciphers”) is sent to investigate the “childish prank” of some drawings of stick figures sent to Elsie Cubitt, which frighten her for reasons her husband cannot understand. Holmes recognizes the drawings as a steganographic cipher, designed “to give the idea that they are the mere random sketches of children.” As Holmes realizes, “these hieroglyphics have evidently a meaning. If it is a purely arbitrary one, it may be impossible for us to solve it. If, on the other hand, it is systematic, I have no doubt that we shall get to the bottom of it.”26 Armed with a sufficient number of samples to obtain correct letter frequencies, and “having applied the rules which guide us in all forms of secret writings, the solution was easy enough.” The Dancing Men proves to be a simple monoalphabetic substitution cipher, in which each letter of the alphabet is represented by a
He unfolded a paper and laid it upon the table. Here is a copy of the hieroglyphics:

```
X X X X X X X X X X X X
```

"Excellent!" said Holmes. "Excellent! Pray continue."

"When I had taken the copy I rubbed out the marks; but two mornings later a fresh inscription had appeared. I have a copy of it here."

```
X X X X X X X X X X X X
```

Holmes rubbed his hands and chuckled with delight. "Our material is rapidly accumulating," said he.

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different dance position. Through his translation ("Am Here Abe Slaney At Elriges"), Holmes discovers that Elsie Cubitt is being harassed by "the most dangerous crook in Chicago," a man who had been in love with her before her marriage. Repeating Dupin's use of a phony message from "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Holmes dupes Slaney into calling on Elsie by using a forged cipher message. (The achievement leaves Slaney dumbfounded: "There was no one on earth outside the Joint who knew the secret of the dancing men. How came you to write it?" he inquires of Holmes, who replies with a page out of Poe: "What one man can invent another can discover.")

The mode by which Holmes solves the Dancing Men cipher is unsurprisingly like that used by Poe in "The Gold-Bug" and elsewhere. More striking is the degree to which both Poe and Conan Doyle repeat the process of hieroglyphic translation used by Champollion and other translators of Egyptian hieroglyphics. In its ciphering of Defoe and Champollion, as in its ciphering by Lacan, Poe's writing represents a series of exercises in the agency of the letter, which begin by repudiating a connection with Adamic language (the "turn" at Champollion's statue is equivalent to the destruction of Adamic thought). At the least, the theoretical itinerary of Lacan's signifier seems to mimic Poe's cryptographic model. But in the allusion above, Lacan seems tacitly to admit more; he seems to admit finding direction through his reading of Poe, who stands as the "guide" to his theory of sig-
signs (Nos. 3 and 4) \( \frac{\ell}{\ell} \) and \( \frac{j}{j} \) must represent \( E \) and \( o \), for those are the two letters which come between \( L \) and \( r \) in the Greek name \( KLEOPATRA \). In the name \( PTOLEMY \) we have also had the sign \( \frac{j}{j} \) where it comes after \( r \) and before \( L \), and it must therefore have some sound like \( o \); this being so \( \frac{j}{j} \) must have some sound like \( E \). The only letter of the name \( KLEOPATRA \) now unknown to us is \( s \), and as it comes in the name in a place where the Greek has \( T \), we may assume that it is \( T \). Passing to cartouche No. 4 we may write down the signs thus:–

\[
\begin{align*}
1 & \quad 2 & \quad 3 & \quad 4 & \quad 5 & \quad 6 & \quad 7 & \quad 8 & \quad 9 \\
\frac{\ell}{\ell} & \quad \frac{\ell}{\ell} & \quad \frac{j}{j} & \quad \frac{j}{j} & \quad \frac{j}{j} & \quad \frac{j}{j} & \quad \frac{j}{j} & \quad \frac{j}{j} & \quad \frac{j}{j}
\end{align*}
\]

Now of these we know the values of Nos. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8, and setting down the values we have: \( A \ldots S \). The only Greek personal name which contains these letters in this order is \( ALEXANDROS \), and this fact tells us that No. 9 sign \( \frac{j}{j} \) must have the value of \( s \). Champollion’s knowledge of Semitic languages told him that the transcription of the Greek \( \xi \) in Hebrew and Syriac forms of Greek names was \( ks \), and the value of signs Nos. 3 and 4 \( \frac{\ell}{\ell} \), must be \( K \) and \( s \) respectively. From the same source Champollion knew that the Hebrew and Syriac alphabets contain two \( s \) sounds, and two kinds of \( k \) sounds, and he would not therefore be surprised at \( \frac{j}{j} \) having the value of \( s \), and \( \frac{j}{j} \) and \( \frac{j}{j} \) having the value of \( \kappa \). If we collect the alphabetic letters which we now know they may be thus written down in a column as at the side of this page, thus:–

\[
\begin{align*}
\frac{\ell}{\ell} & = A \\
\frac{\ell}{\ell} & = B \\
\frac{j}{j} & = E \\
\frac{\ell}{\ell} & = F \\
\frac{j}{j} & = I \\
\frac{j}{j} & = K \\
\frac{j}{j} & = L \\
\frac{j}{j} & = M \\
\frac{j}{j} & = N \\
\frac{j}{j} & = O \\
\frac{j}{j} & = P \\
\frac{j}{j} & = R \\
\frac{j}{j} & = S \\
\frac{j}{j} & = T \\
\frac{j}{j} & = \text{or } R
\end{align*}
\]

As the cartouche comes side by side with that of \( PTOLEMY \), it is clear that it represents some title of that king, and on running through the titles of kings which were common at that time, the only one which we find resembling it is \( KAISAROS \), or “Caesar,” and we may therefore assume that \( KISRS \) is the hieroglyphic equivalent of that title. We will now attack the cartouche

\[
\begin{array}{cccccccc}
1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & 5 & 6 & 7 & 8 \\
\frac{\ell}{\ell} & \frac{\ell}{\ell} & \frac{j}{j} & \frac{j}{j} & \frac{j}{j} & \frac{j}{j} & \frac{j}{j} & \frac{j}{j}
\end{array}
\]

As we know all the values of every sign in it except

---

Figure 10. Budge, Rosetta Stone, 124–25.

nification—an admission only visible through a close (not to say ciphered) reading of Poe’s presence in Lacan.

A Meer Chimera of My Own

Summer nights
Are wet and sticky. Lonely women
Patrol the shoreline . . .
Words are footprints
On the endless sighing page.

Mitchell Cohen, “Along the Ocean”

As “The Philosophy of Composition” and the Narrative of A. Gordon Pym demonstrate, Lacan’s description of “The Purloined Letter” as an allegory of the itinerary of the signifier is itself a repetition of Poe’s reading of Defoe; Poe’s writing is already a theoretical, language-centered appropriation, designed to reduce Defoe’s literary practice to a set of technical precepts organized around the nature of the signification and its use in creating identification. Consider Poe’s selective reading of Robinson Crusoe. The great crisis of the middle of the Defoe novel is the discovery of a human footprint on
a beach that Crusoe is sure he never frequents: on seeing it, Crusoe “stood like one Thunder-struck, or as if I had seen an Apparition.” For there, he continues, “was exactly the very print of a Foot, Toes, Heel, and every Part of a Foot; how it came thither I knew not, nor could in the least imagine. But after innumerable fluttering Thoughts, like a Man perfectly confus’d and out of my self, I came Home to my Fortification, not feeling, as we say, the Ground I went on, but terrify’d to the last Degree” (153-54). Crusoe’s ensuing paranoia deprives him of his own identity, and he runs home “like a man perfectly confused and out of my self,” even as the footprint deprives his own feet of sensation: “not feeling . . . the Ground I went on.” This is not merely fear of the other, but fear that one can barely distinguish self and other, a possibility suggested by Crusoe’s realization that “all this might be a meer Chimera of my own, and that this Foot might be the Print of my own Foot, when I came on shore from my boat. This cheared me up a little too, and I began to perswade my self it was all a delusion; . . . if at last this was only the Print of my own Foot, I had play’d the Part of those Fools who strive to make stories of Spectres and Apparitions, and then are frighted at them more than any body” (ibid., 157-58). The semiotic status of the footprint is bivalent. On the one hand it is that rare thing, a true hieroglyph: an Adamic sign, marked by the body that produced it. Hence, by comparing the anonymous footprint with his foot, Crusoe can be certain that it is not his own. But until Crusoe thinks to do this, the footprint is frighteningly ambiguous: it seems a sign whose ownership Crusoe cannot resolve. In this sense, the footprint is a metaphor for the antihieroglyphic uncertainty of print, which, while it testifies to the existence of another mind, fails to identify its maker (fails to identify, that is, who writes the world that Crusoe inhabits). In the discovery of the footprint, Defoe stages the necessary uncanniness of writing in its relation to the self.

Crusoe’s first response to the footprint is to flee to his hut, which is now transformed into a “castle,” “for so I think I call’d it ever after this” (ibid., 154). From this point, self-immurement becomes a dominant motif of the novel, as if Defoe would multiply representations of enclosure as a defense against the threats signification poses to Crusoe’s autonomy. The compulsive repetition of the word “thick” betrays Crusoe’s panic: he plants “a thick grove” in front of his dwelling, “so monstrous thick and strong, that it was indeed perfectly impassable” and he “thickned [his] Wall to above ten foot Thick” (ibid., 161). Not trusting these precautions, Crusoe remains anxious until he discovers “a meer natural cave in the earth.” Despite these elaborate defenses, Crusoe’s self continues to fission, proliferating in the pathological distribution of the grammatical subject: “I recover’d my self, and began to call my self a thousand Fools, and tell my self, that he that was afraid to see the Devil was not fit to live twenty Years in an Island all alone; and that I
durst to believe there was nothing in this Cave that was more frightful than my self” (ibid., 177).

Eventually, Crusoe collects himself sufficiently to penetrate into the cave’s innermost recess, where he finds the most “glorious Sight seen in the Island”: “The Walls reflected 100 thousand Lights to me from my two Candles; what it was in the Rock, whether Diamonds, or any other precious Stones, or Gold, which I rather supposed it to be, I knew not. . . . I fancy’d my self now like one of the ancient giants, which are said to live in caves and holes in the rocks, where none could come at them; for I persuad’d my self while I was here, if five hundred savages were to hunt me, they could never find me out” (ibid., 179). Only in this “vault or cave” does Crusoe feel safe from the incursion of others. Although Crusoe’s response makes narrative sense as an attempt to defend himself from attack, the vault is also a defense against the peculiarly linguistic alienation provoked by the footprint. Having lived on his island for fifteen years without having “met with the least Shadow or Figure of any People” (ibid., 160), Crusoe uses the cave as a place to reunite the fragmented selves released by the sight of the print. The vault proves an ideal place for this because it only reflects the self, epitomized in the “100 thousand Lights” refracted from Crusoe’s two candles.

Once secure in his cave, though, our isolato begins to brood on his aloneness, and to despair from his lack of “what I so earnestly longed for, viz. some-body to speak to” (ibid., 194). This somebody will be Friday, the antithesis of the cannibals who would incorporate Crusoe into themselves. Although technically he is a native of a neighboring island, Friday’s true birthplace is Crusoe’s cave, for he is produced by the desire for an other that follows first from the discovery of the print and second from Crusoe’s hermetic self-reflection. Of Friday, Crusoe says that “it was very pleasant to me to talk to him; and now my life began to be so easy, that I began to say to my self, that could I but have been safe from more savages, I cared not if I was never to remove from the place while I lived” (ibid., 207). This comment repeats almost verbatim his description of Poll, who “talked so articulately and plain, that it was very pleasant to me.” Poll and Friday are Crusoe’s idealized interlocutors, doubles who provide a social reflection without the threatening otherness that drove him to his cave. Crusoe’s insatiable desire for walls, castles, and vaults stems from his wish to use the representational world of the novel to defend his sense of identity against the self-alienation provoked by the immaterial footprint (a version of Narcissus).

Crusoe’s cave provides the prototype of the cryptograph, an imagined space that encourages the psychic doubling Poe found in his relation with Tyler. The caverns and gorges of the last chapters of the Narrative of A. Gordon Pym also represent Poe’s revision of the discovery of the footprint and the retreat into the cave in Robinson Crusoe. Pym and Dirk Peters are
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saved from destruction only by Pym’s decision to enter “a fissure in the soft rock” along the ravine, just “wide enough for one person to enter without squeezing,” which extends “back into the hill some eighteen or twenty feet” (PT, 1151). Like Crusoe, Pym is obsessed with the privacy of this cavern, which leaves him and Peters “completely excluded from observation.” Like Crusoe’s cave, it has never been penetrated by the other: “We could perceive no traces of the savages having ever been within this hollow” (ibid., 1160). When the natives bring down the walls of the ravine, it is this space that saves them from “overwhelming destruction” (ibid., 1160). As their subsequent adventures make clear, the gorges they explore are versions of a hieroglyph, images that are also signs, but they are also cryptographs, interior spaces that may be either tomb or haven. Pym is decidedly ambivalent about this life within the sign: “We again went round the walls of our prison, in hope of finding some avenue of escape” (ibid., 1164); “after satisfying ourselves that these singular caverns afforded us no means of escape from our prison, we made our way back, dejected.” Whereas Crusoe’s flight into the cave represents an attempt to escape from the semiotic (or cryptographic) into the solidly representational, Poe combines the feared, quasi-semiotic footprint with the represented refuge of the cave to foster a concept of a sign as the place in which reader and character merge. In discovering their text-based existence, Pym and Crusoe double the reader’s interpretation of signs: eventually the cryptograph provides an imagined location for the reader’s literary identification, simultaneously thought of in two and three dimensions. Like Crusoe’s discovered footprint, the signs in the Narrative of A. Gordon Pym waver uneasily between hieroglyph and cryptograph, but after 1839 Poe’s writing was dominated by the cryptograph’s model of the text as a code. Instead of attempting to ground the origins of language (and of humanity) in the hieroglyphic mirroring of the human body, Poe increasingly thought of language as a refuge from the world’s distressing materiality, penetrable only by those who possessed the key.

The Alembic of the Code

If I am right to claim that Defoe’s crypt becomes Poe’s cryptograph, this is because in Poe’s imagination the code offers a space for the transformation of matter. It is, in short, an alembic. To understand the alembic effects of cryptography, one must take seriously Legrand’s early comment to the narrator that the gold bug “is to make my fortune” and “to reinstate me in my family possessions.” The sentence explicitly connects the bug (and therefore the cipher), fortune (the gold to be found), and Legrand’s “family possessions.” Long ago, Marie Bonaparte read “The Gold-Bug” as a displaced account of Poe’s desire for the treasure of his mother’s body—for, that is, his “original family possession.” Bonaparte anchored her reading on no less
an authority than Freud himself, who, “one day, in reference to ‘The Gold-Bug’ said something like this”:

“One hardly dares venture it, lest it seem too far-fetched, but there must be, in the unconscious, a connection between tales of seeking or finding treasure and some other fact or situation in the history of the race: something that belongs to a time when sacrifice was common and human sacrifice at that. The ‘buried treasure,’ in such cases, would then be the finding of an embryo or foetus in the abdomen of the victim.” At the time, this seemed to me too far-fetched, and I could not see its connection with Captain Kidd’s treasure. And yet, even the name of the pirate hero (Kidd = kid = child) hints at the latent content of this tale.

This fetus is associated both with anality and with its opposite, as the psyche in its anal-erotic phase phylogenetically passes “from an original interest in faeces, dirt, mud and mud-pies, to what appears its very opposite: pleasure in hard, shining clean surfaces, pebbles, coins and metals, including the most precious of all, gold.” The buried treasure stands in for the fetus in its mother, which is in turn equated with her other bodily products. “With its stream of treasure from the earth’s bowels,” Poe’s story is, “like the story of Arthur Gordon Pym, a sort of epic of the beneficent, nurturing mother, but with the difference that now the emphasis is on the wealth hidden in her bowels, and, no longer, on the primal gift of milk from her breasts.”

Bonaparte inadvertently identifies the covert alchemy on which “The Gold-Bug” is secretly predicated. The ultimate goal of alchemy—the transmutation of baser substances into gold—was not to obtain wealth but to realize a hierarchical materialist metaphysics. Gold “is not just any substance but is the most rarefied form of the prima materia that is the true substance of things”; it is the condition to which other substances aspire over time. “As Simone de Colonia put it: ‘This Art teaches us to make a remedy called the Elixir, which, being poured on imperfect metals, perfects them completely, and it is for this reason that it was invented.’ . . . The same idea is expounded by Ben Jonson in his play The Alchemist (1610). One character says that ‘lead and other metals . . . would be gold if they had time,’ and another adds, ‘and that our Art doeth further.’”

A psychological dimension was essential to alchemical metaphysics, in which sublimation had both a chemical and an analytic meaning: “The sublimation of base material into gold actually sublimates the primordial desire for the mother.” This is because “smelting entails something like a regressus ad uterum that returns matter to its original matrix. Mother, material, and matter meet in mater that is their common origin.” With the aid of fire, alchemists “transform the ores (the ‘embryos’) into metals (the ‘adults’). The underlying belief is that, given enough time, the ores would
have become ‘pure’ metals in the womb of Mother Earth. Further, the ‘pure’ metals would have become gold if they had been allowed to ‘grow’ undisturbed for a few more thousand years.”

Unlike the chemist, the alchemist did not seek to advance the art of alchemy by discovery of new methods but by “the rediscovery and new interpretation of older writers whom he believed to have possessed the secret. Consequently he wished his books to appear to be ancient.” The project of the original alchemists was always dual. The manipulation of the physical materials of the world was only a figure for the achievement of philosophical perfection; in later centuries such manipulation was explicitly understood as a metaphor, in which the exoteric was internalized as the esoteric.

This manipulation included a significant cryptographic emphasis. Alchemical transformation required incantations or readings over its raw materials; alchemical texts themselves were written in codes to render them safe from uninitiated readers. “Anagrams, acrostics, and other enigmas were introduced, and various secret alphabets and ciphers came to be used by alchemists; in some of these, letters and numerals were represented by alchemical and astrological signs.” In the last two centuries, scientists and engineers have made enormous inroads into the manipulation of matter; but what has happened to the alchemical desire to order substance? Wonderful as they are, the achievements of contemporary chemists have almost no purchase on our imagination of the matrix of the world. Here the cryptographic imagination comes into play, providing stories and images to explain the underlying relations among the manifold forms of matter and the processes of its transformation. In “The Gold-Bug,” Legrand’s discovery of the parchment, his ability to tease out the rebus of its message and to follow the directions to the gold, represents a displaced alchemy. His relation to the gold is not merely one of fortune or cleverness: the constant repetition of specific words and images, like Legrand’s fussy cryptanalysis, is a semimagical way of conjuring the substance he so desires. Nervously, the story keeps playing on the ambiguous relation between images and symbols: the “bug” itself, to choose the story’s central example, is alternately a death’s-head scarab, warning people away in what might have been a Chaucerian exemplum, and “de goole bug,” a gold bug that, having “bitten” Legrand, will not let up until it leads to his treasures, which are defended by the bones of Kidd’s assistants.

Again, what is most salient about the cryptographic imagination of “The Gold-Bug” is not the particular content of the symbols employed. Although some version of Bonaparte’s psychoanalytic narrative is probably right, the point of the cryptographic imagination is not to validate her literalizing Freudianism, but to underwrite this kind of reading in the first place. All cultures, I imagine, need some account of a prima materia: a foundational mythology that will explain, first, what things are, and second, how
the relation between things and symbols might be imagined. The construction of such myths is a task of the cryptographic imagination. Its muttered words and hidden writings cast us back from matter to mater to matrix, the unimaginable stuff that requires informing words to call it into being.

Predictably, the cryptographic imagination often turns toward the source of life in the mother. Yet the cryptographic imagination need not always return to the womb. When Arthur Conan Doyle revised “The Gold-Bug” in “The Musgrave Ritual,” the dominant fantasy was not of reconnection to the lost mother, but of the restitution of buried English history. The ritual, an apparently meaningless set of phrases repeated by each Musgrave as he comes of age, turns out to be a steganographically obscured map (again, one keyed to a tree) that leads to the recovery of jewels (now the crown jewels of the deposed Charles II) hidden in an underground crypt. (This crypt, too, is a place of death—here, the death of the butler, Brunton, who, having deciphered the ritual’s meaning, is suffocated in the crypt by a spurned lover.)

As “The Gold-Bug” and “The Musgrave Ritual” indicate (and as “The Adventure of the Dancing Men,” Conan Doyle’s other revision of “The Gold-Bug,” shows as well), there is something dangerous in the relation of cryptography and human bodies. At the end of “The Gold-Bug,” the act of cryptographic deciphering leads Legrand and company not only to the sight of “a treasure of incalculable value” (PT, 578), but to a scene of buried violence: “In a few seconds he had uncovered a mass of human bones, forming two complete skeletons, intermingled with several buttons of metal, and what appeared to be the dust of decayed woolen” (ibid., 577). Legrand concludes the tale by dryly observing that “it is clear that Kidd—if Kidd indeed secreted this treasure, which I doubt not—it is clear that he must have had assistance in the labor. But, the worst of this labor concluded, he may have thought it expedient to remove all participants in his secret. Perhaps a couple of blows with a mattock were sufficient, while his coadjuvants were busy in the pit; perhaps it required a dozen—who shall tell?” (ibid., 595-96).

With its connotations of permanence and spiritual worth, the gold is not only a material reward that accrues to Legrand; it is also a symbol of pure meaning. In a currency based on the gold standard, a banknote is merely a cipher for the bullion for which it may be redeemed; just so, the relation of Legrand’s “meaningless” cipher and the treasure to which it leads captures Poe’s sense that only a cryptographic intelligence can translate the opaque code into the immanent value represented by the gold it reveals. At the same time, this substance seems to be a metamorphic product of the bodies found with it: “Full fathom five thy father lies;/Of his bones are coral made;/Those are pearls that were his eyes” (The Tempest, 1.2.397-99). A similar sea change has occurred with the bodies of Kidd’s assistants, in a highly secular analogue to Christ’s spiritual transformation. Recovering
the pirate's treasure requires that Legrand understand the whole repertoire of literary-cryptographic forms, including the use of invisible inks, substitution ciphers (with letter-frequency tables), “hieroglyphical signatures,” mysterious stamps, and rebuses, and that he translate Kidd’s allegory into a series of practical directions for the treasure’s recovery. Among these instructions is the requirement to drop the gold bug on a plumb line through the eye of the skull, a reminder of the mortality associated with the gold, and Poe’s punning way of suggesting that, having been bitten by the gold bug, man can only “see” gold, even at the cost of his life.

Without much effort, one could elaborate a Lacanian reading of Poe’s story. On this account, the tale’s systematic cryptanalysis would function as a myth about the ability to master language, as we see Kidd’s unmeaning signs waver into meaning: first “٨٤٨٤٨٥٧٧٨٤٨,” then “the tree ٨٤٨٥٧٧٨٤٨ the,” then “the tree thr٨٤٨٥٧٧٨ the,” then “the tree through the.” This decipherment would in turn promise the cryptographic reader a return to the pre-Oedipal plenitude of the mother’s body, now in its secular incarnation as material wealth. (The synonymy of Kidd’s name with pirate treasure punningly suggests that only the possession of the gold will maintain one as a kid, in a state of maternal dependence.) But that is not my purpose. I would not have the force of a tendentious reading diminish my emphasis on the blankness of the cryptographic machine, into which one can plug a wide range of possible symbolic values. Although much of “The Gold-Bug” is devoted to the translation and explication of a coded map, cryptography is not, finally, a form of mapping. It is not topographic, but thaumaturgic, leading the reader into mysteries of sign, depth, and transformation—mysteries notably figured in the West by the story of Christ’s birth, death, and transubstantiation. Nearly every reading of “The Gold-Bug” emphasizes the balked nature of the alchemical relations between signs and bodies—a quality that will be even more pronounced in Poe’s detective stories, where it quickly leads to violence.