The Cryptographic Imagination
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Sheymov’s Escape

The story took place in Warsaw during the closing days of the Cold War. Our protagonist, Victor, was a high-ranking KGB officer trying to lose his official watchers in order to defect to the American embassy. The setting was a well-secured bathroom in a cultural center where Victor would attend a movie that night, and from which he would escape. His suspicious driver waited just outside. With only minutes alone, Victor set to work preparing his own disappearance, surveying the bathroom’s empty stalls as he hurried to the window at the end. Once there,

he unlatched and pulled open the center pair of inside windows. Then he went to work on the two nails that security personnel had hammered into the outside windows to prevent them from opening outward. Using the blades of two chisels, he carefully eased out the head of the first nail from the frame of one outer window. If only one chisel were used, the nail would bend and make a small, but irreparable mark on the wood next to it. The nail squeaked and started to move. One-eighth of an inch was enough. With pliers he steadily pulled the nail straight out. He was very careful—old rusty nails have a nasty habit of breaking.

Having pulled out the second nail and put it away, he peeked through a scratch in the paint that covered the outside windows. There was nobody outside near the window. He carefully unlocked the latches and, holding the sharp ends of two replacement nails in his right hand, he softly pushed the left half of the window slightly open. The replacements were rusty nails similar to the originals, but broken into two pieces. He then inserted one of the half-nails into the hole of the old one in the sill and pushed it down with the flat
side of a chisel. He quickly repeated the operation with the right frame and closed the window. . . . He pushed the top halves of the nails into the frames with a chisel, using a soft cloth to avoid leaving any shiny marks on the heads. He then closed and latched the inner windows. The tools went back into his pockets. Victor looked at his watch. Just under five minutes. . . . He took off the gloves and returned to the car. The driver was reading a book.¹

This story, which sounds much like an early John Le Carré novel, records a preliminary moment in the escape of Major Victor Sheymov, who in May 1980 defected to the West, in a disappearance so successful that for a decade Soviet authorities believed that he had been murdered on a weekend trip out of town. Sheymov was the highest-ranking officer ever to defect from the KGB; he had a deep knowledge of its byzantine bureaucratic structure. The book from which I have taken this story—*Tower of Secrets: A Real-Life Spy Thriller*—aims to capitalize on the way in which Sheymov’s story enacts the conventions of the spy novel. In this, *Tower of Secrets* is hardly alone: the spy thriller is perforce a genre that splits its allegiance between its literary antecedents and the true experiences of spies in the world. Le Carré worked in MI5 under Maxwell Knight (later using his own Foreign Service career as a cover for work in espionage) until he quit to become a full-time writer. The spy thriller represents an outgrowth of the detective story, which preserves its emphasis on evidence and signs, even as the drama of spy against spy intensifies the specular confrontation of detective and prey. But even such an observation oversimplifies the situation, for Sheymov was not merely a high-ranking spy, he was a cryptographer—a math whiz in charge of the security of all the KGB’s overseas cipher systems—and the detective story as a genre is literally underwritten by Poe’s essays on cryptography. In *Tower of Secrets*, this doubling of cryptographer and spy is evident in the way in which Sheymov’s sensitivity to codes translates into an extraordinary awareness of the traces left by his body in the world.

I will say more about the relations of real spies and cryptographers to literature in chapter 6, but first it is necessary to note how eerily the ontogeny of *Tower of Secrets* recapitulates its phylogeny, as Sheymov in his escape unwittingly repeats the solution of the world’s first detective story. Arriving at the rooms of the murdered Mmes. L’Espanaye, Dupin discovers that aside from the locked doors, the only way out is through two windows, each of which is fastened by “a very stout nail” pushed into a gimlet-hole drilled through the frame and the casement. Reasoning that “the impossibility of egress, by means already stated, being thus absolute, we are reduced to the windows,” Dupin decides that the sashes

*must*, then, have the power of fastening themselves. There was no escape from this conclusion. . . . I had traced the secret to its ultimate result—and that result was *the nail*. It had, I say, in every respect, the appearance of its fellow in
the other window, but this fact was an absolute nullity (conclusive as it might seem to be) when compared with the consideration that here, at this point, terminated the clew. “There must be something wrong,” I said, “about the nail.” I touched it; and the head, with about a quarter of the shank, came off in my fingers. The rest of the shank was in the gimlet-hole, where it had been broken off. (“Murders in the Rue Morgue,” PT, 419)

Sheymov’s repetition of the ape’s defenestration provides an exemplary instance of the overdetermined ties between cryptography and literature. What could be less likely than that a real spy would be forced to employ Poe’s wildly improbable stratagem of the broken nail as the means of his escape? Cryptography, it seems, positions itself at the uncertain join between texts and bodies, fact and fiction. Not only is the detective’s effort to make a text of the world entailed by Poe’s secret writing, but particular characters, plots, and narrative formats follow from it as well. And yet to insist on the detective story as a purely two-dimensional, metatextual narrative form is sterile: as Sheymov’s story shows, even a cryptographer must inhabit a three-dimensional body in a three-dimensional world.

This tension—between the desire to read the world and the need to inhabit it—was built into the detective story from the start. A close reading of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” will show how the cryptographic analytics discussed in chapter 1 are complicated by Poe’s awareness of bodily experience, and how this tension between two and three dimensions, matter and sign, goes to the very core of the genre. Through its play of surface and death, detective fiction manifests the same fascination with the thaumaturgical force of cryptography that is evident in “The Gold-Bug.” Whereas that story employs cryptography as an alchemical code-key for the sublimation of matter, the detective story as begun by “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” concerns itself with the occulted spaces represented by the locked room where the murders occur. Dupin’s ability to enter and leave this space, like his ability to identify the murderer from the evidence at the crime scene, is an attenuated form of his ability to read minds (an ultimate cryptographic end). But if the detective’s ability to read the world as a text serves as a form of magic, cryptography also presents a crisis for individual bodies in terms of their capacity for language.

That the mode of Sheymov’s escape coincides with that of the ape in “Rue Morgue” is, one must reluctantly admit, merely a moment of literary-critical serendipity. Yet detective fiction as a genre is designed to move dialectically from Sheymov’s escape to the ape’s recapture, where the first moment equals the analyst’s (reader’s) wish to lose his or her body, and where the last—the recapture of the ape at story’s end—implies the reader in a transferential somatic effect (the reader leaves as the analyst and returns as the ape). Forced to reinvent the locked-room mystery—to disappear
into thin air, leaving an apparently sealed chamber behind him—Sheymov stands as a figure for the reader of ratiocinative detective fiction as he probes both the attractions and the limits of the analytical sublime.2

**Butchery without Motive**

Although “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” initiated the genre of detective fiction, twentieth-century fans have often been put off by Poe’s seemingly capricious violation of an implicit narrative convention. The ape, it is alleged, represents an instance of bad faith, because no reader could reasonably be expected to include animals in a list of potential murderers. More generally, we may take Poe’s ape story as an index of a deeper bad faith on the part of the whole genre, in its frequent imbalance between the detective story’s protracted narrative setup and its often unsatisfying denouement. Some readers of detective fiction have an embarrassing feeling that its typically gothic revelations are incommensurate with the moral weight suggested by the genre’s narrative form. In this sense, too, Poe’s orangutan is an emblem of the story’s readers, who—their attention solicited by an unworthy narrative dilemma—find that the real crime has been practiced on their sensibilities. In the words of Geoffrey Hartman: “The trouble with the detective novel is not that it is moral but that it is moralistic; not that it is popular but that it is stylized; not that it lacks realism but that it picks up the latest realism and exploits it. A voracious formalism dooms it to seem unreal, however ‘real’ the world it describes. . . . The form trusts too much in reason; its very success opens to us the glimpse of a mechanized world, whether controlled by God or Dr. No or the Angel of the Odd.”3 Hartman’s caution is apt, but hardly original: in the first detective story, Poe had already recognized the problem. As Poe indicated in a letter to Phillip Cooke, the promise of detective fiction to unriddle the world was ultimately tautological: “Where is the ingenuity of unravelling a web which you yourself have woven for the express purpose of unravelling? These tales of ratiocination owe most of their popularity to being something in a new key. I do not mean to say that they are not ingenious—but people think they are more ingenious than they are—on account of the method and *air* of method.”4

Poe’s comment interests me because, while on the one hand he demystifies the detective story, insisting that the narrator’s solution to the crime is, in fact, no “solution” at all, but a *coup de théâtre* staged by the author from behind the scenes, on the other he recognizes the willingness of readers to be deceived by the story’s “method and *air* of method.” Such an air of method might also be described as the genre’s penchant for analysis, a term that recurs throughout the Dupin stories.5 “Rue Morgue” begins with a discussion of “analysis,” and in a letter describing “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” Poe emphasizes the same term: “under the pretense of showing how Dupin . . . unravelled the mystery of Marie’s assassination, I, in fact, enter into a very
rigorous analysis of the real tragedy in New York” (CW, 3:718). Although it may seem curious that the literary genre most vocally devoted to the powers of the ratiocinative mind should vex those powers on the mindless acts of an orangutan, Poe’s use of the ape in “Rue Morgue” serves as something more than a simple narrative miscalculation or mere sideshow. In brief, the ape permits Poe to elaborate a cryptographic argument about language and human identity, in which the extreme contrast between the ape’s physicality and Dupin’s inhuman reason reveals something about the genre’s constitutive oppositions. And because detective fiction in general, and Poe’s more particularly, has enjoyed a long and privileged relation to psychoanalytic reading, Poe’s experiments with the monkey may tell us something about how we, as readers, are ourselves made to ape his ape.

“Analysis” in several senses has been key to the theoretical ubiquity of “The Purloined Letter.” But although that story is unquestionably a great achievement, Poe purchases the analytic force of his narrative only by purging the text of any attempt at realist representation. Hence, Barbara Johnson’s now too-familiar claim that Minister D—’s letter is “not hidden in a geometrical space, where the police are looking for it . . . but is instead located ‘in’ a symbolic structure” is correct only because of Poe’s refusal to engage in the difficult project of representing the texture of social experience. In sharp contrast to the outdoor settings of “Marie Rogêt,” or even to the street scenes in “Rue Morgue,” “The Purloined Letter” retreats from the boulevards, parks, and waterways of the teeming city, with their social and sexual ambiguities, into the enclosed and private spaces of Minister D—’s chambers. The remarkable success of “The Purloined Letter” as a locus for literary and psychoanalytic theory—indeed, as one of the venues in which French theory has translated itself into American theory—begins to seem the consequence of playing cards with a stacked deck. The tale’s theoretical richness arises because “The Purloined Letter” is already supremely two-dimensional, already overtly concerned with allegorizing the operations of the signifier.

In fact, the semiotic purity of “The Purloined Letter” is an exception in Poe’s detective fiction, which focuses more generally on the tension between representations of three-dimensional bodies and language, which is either two-dimensional in its printed form or, as speech, proves uncannily disembodied and invisible. The dominant form of the genre is far closer to “Rue Morgue” or, in its true-crime mode, to “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” in which Poe is less concerned with the “itinerary of the signifier” narrowly conceived than he is with the problems posed by the difficult intersection of the human capacity for language and the brute fact of incarnation. Poe’s obsession with corpses, especially prominent in the late fiction, reveals his anxiety over the body’s refusal to suffer complete encipherment into language. Significantly, Poe’s deaths are almost invariably associated
with injuries to the organs of speech. The horror of Valdemar’s mesmeric dissolution in “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” stems from the grotesque contrast between his putrefying body and his “wonderfully, thrillingly distinct . . . syllabification” (PT, 839–40), as “ejaculations of ‘dead! dead!’” burst “from the tongue and not the lips of the sufferer” (ibid., 842).

In “Rue Morgue” the strangled Camille L’Espanaye’s tongue is “bitten partially through” (ibid., 410). Marie Rogêt bears “bruises and impressions of fingers” about her throat, and “a piece of lace was found tied so tightly around the neck as to be hidden from sight; it was completely buried in the flesh, and was fastened by a knot which lay just under the left ear” (ibid., 513). And in “Thou Art the Man,” often considered Poe’s fourth detective story, the narrator exposes and destroys the murderer, Charley Goodfellow, by confronting him with the speaking corpse of his victim, who bursts out of a wine cask with impressive consequences: “There sprang up into a sitting position, directly facing the host, the bruised, bloody and nearly putrid corpse of the murdered Mr. Shuttleworthy himself. It gazed for a few moments . . . with its decaying and lack-lustre eyes . . . uttered slowly, but clearly and impressively the words, ‘Thou art the man!’ and then, falling over the side of the chest as if thoroughly satisfied, stretched out its limbs quiveringly.”

Such obsessive instances of mutilated language suggest that for Poe the disjunction between linguistic and physical identity is always traumatic. The violence attendant on social relations in “Rue Morgue” results from the represented encounter between two-dimensional signs and three-dimensional bodies. To an extraordinary degree cryptography provides secret organizing principles for Poe’s trilogy of detective stories. The cryptograph reflects on the level of the sign what Dupin embodies on the level of character, and what the form of detective fiction implies on the level of narrative: the fantasy of an absolutely legible world. In Poe’s essays on secret writing, cryptography is imagined as a utopian moment of reading in which reader and writer are fully present to one another within their two-dimensional cipher. Conceptually, analysis is closely associated with cryptography. Both depend on the “separating or breaking up of any whole into its parts so as to find out their nature, proportion, function, relationship, etc.” and both emphasize the abstract, symbolic force of mind over matter, which provides a form of mental leverage over the world. But even in the moment of creating detective fiction, Poe suggests that the only “analysis” it can offer may itself be a fiction. Although cryptography seems to offer a detour around the gothic aspects of embodiment, it takes on disturbingly violent features whenever Poe attempts to represent bodies. The problem is that cryptography provides an alternative body in conflict with one’s corporeal investment: because even in cryptography language is never truly free
of the material shell of the signifier, this linguistic self finds itself in tension with one's physical identity.

Despite the story's promise of legibility, "Rue Morgue" intimates that the triumph of the detective's analytics cannot be clearly distinguished from its effects on the reader's body. To the degree that we as readers invest our belief in this formal drive toward legibility, we become Poe's dupes; should the reader attempt to imitate Dupin, he would quickly find his analysis devolving into mere repetition. And yet, to that same degree, these stories threaten to become meaningful; if the uncanny anticipation of the story's own interpretation is at all significant, it is so because the text discloses in the reader's body the nature of the interpretive desires that initiate his reading. Like the purloined letter, the lesson of "Rue Morgue" is hidden in plain sight, announced in the story's first lines: "The mental features discoursed of as the analytical are, in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis. We appreciate them only in their effects" (PT, 397). Although our readings certainly produce "effects," the desire to discover the right relation of analysis to literature is ultimately doomed by the impossibility of establishing a metalanguage uncontaminated by the materiality of signification. In this respect, the narrator's attempt in "Rue Morgue" to keep his analytic discourse free from the corporeal opacity of his subject resembles Freud's procedure in his case studies. If detective fiction is notoriously susceptible to psychoanalytic interpretation, this is only because psychoanalysis, too, has often seemed to presume the separation of its analytical procedures from the materiality of its objects—a separation between language and the body that "Rue Morgue" both constructs and, finally, destroys.

A Voice Devoid of Intelligible Syllabification

Critics have long recognized speech in "Rue Morgue" as a symbolic expression of identification, noting that Dupin's use of a high and a low register links him with the high and low voices of the sailor and the ape. But Poe is less interested in pitch than in syllabification, which runs on a continuum from the orangutan's grunts to Dupin's "rich tenor," with its "deliberateness and entire distinctness" of enunciation (PT, 401–2). Hence Poe's deliberation in staging the ape's crime within earshot of such a polyglot group of auditors, each of whom hears in the orangutan's voice someone speaking an unfamiliar language. Henri Duval: "The shrill voice, this witness thinks, was that of an Italian... Was not acquainted with the Italian language." William Bird: The voice "appeared to be that of a German... Does not understand German." Alfonzo Garcia: "The shrill voice was that of an Englishman—is sure of this. Does not understand the English language, but judges by the intonation" (ibid., 408-10). Similarly, Isidore Muset, —— Odenheimer, and Alberto Montani attribute the voice to Spanish,
French, and Russian speakers, respectively. Poe even has Dupin supplement his references to the “five great divisions of Europe” with mentions of “Asiatics” and “Africans,” in what amounts to a Cook’s Tour of the varieties of human speech:

Now, how strangely unusual must that voice have really been, about which such testimony as this could have been elicited!—in whose tones, even, denizens of the five great divisions of Europe could recognize nothing familiar! You will say that it might have been the voice of an Asiatic—of an African. . . . Without denying the inference, I will now merely call your attention to [the fact that] . . . no words—no sounds resembling words—were by any witness mentioned as distinguishable. (Ibid., 416)

What is at stake in this inventory? As in the case studies of deaf-mutes and feral children that appeared toward the end of the eighteenth century, the orangutan offered Enlightenment thinkers a liminal figure of the human at a time when language was crucial to the definition of humanity. Given Poe’s insistence on the syllabic nature of speech, it is important to recognize the orangutan’s affiliation with a tradition of philosophical inquiry. The most comprehensive discussion of the orangutan’s relation to language is given in The Origin and Progress of Language, by James Burnet, Lord Monboddo, who devotes sixty pages to this question in order to understand “the origin of an art so admirable and so useful as language,” a subject “necessarily connected with an inquiry into the original nature of man, and that primitive state in which he was, before language was invented.” Monboddo hypothesizes that the orangutan is actually a member of the human species, belonging to “a barbarous nation, which has not yet learned the use of speech” (ibid., 270). The taxonomic name of the orangutan, Homo sylvestris, is merely a translation of the Malay “Ourang-Outang,” which, according to the naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, “signifies, in their language, a wild man” (ibid., 272). According to Monboddo, orangutans use tools, grow melancholy when separated from their tribes, and are capable of conjugal attachment and even shame. Monboddo cites an explorer who saw a female orangutan that “shewed signs of modesty . . . wept and groaned, and performed other human actions: So that nothing human seemed to be wanting in her, except speech” (ibid., 272–73).

By enlisting orangutans in the same species as humans, Monboddo intends to demonstrate that what separates the two is less biology than culture, epitomized by the possession of language. For Buffon, this lack of speech discredits the orangutan’s evolutionary pretensions. Monboddo ridicules Buffon, however, for making “the faculty of speech” part of the essence of humanity, and for suggesting that “the state of pure nature, in which man had not the use of speech, is a state altogether ideal and imaginary” (ibid., 293). Buffon thus anticipates the current association of language and human
origins. For Poe as for Buffon, the “state of pure nature” is “altogether ideal” and precisely “imaginary,” because, ontogenetically if not phylogenetically, human consciousness is a function of the subject’s mirroring in language.

This tradition provides a context for understanding the dramatic process by which the narrator discovers the identity of the killer. Poe has already planted plenty of tongue-in-cheek clues: the crime is “brutal,” “inhuman,” “at odds with the ordinary notions of human conduct.” Now Dupin remarks on the crime’s strange combination of features:

We have gone so far as to combine the ideas of an agility astounding, a strength superhuman, a ferocity brutal, a butchery without motive, a *gratiesquerie* in horror absolutely alien from humanity, and a voice foreign in tone to the ears of men of many nations, and devoid of all distinct or intelligible syllabification. . . . What impression have I made upon your fancy?

I felt a creeping of the flesh as Dupin asked me the question. “A madman,”
I said, “has done this deed—some raving maniac escaped from a neighboring *Maison de Santé.*” (PT, 423)

The narrator’s suggestion is close, but “the voices of madmen, even in their wildest paroxysms . . . have always the coherence of syllabification” (ibid.). Identification of the criminal depends, again, on Dupin’s understanding of language; in fact, the testimony of the crime’s auditors constitutes an aural cryptogram. The origin of this moment goes back to “A Few Words on Secret Writing,” in which Poe remarked that of the hundred ciphers he received, “there was only one which we did not immediately succeed in solving. This one we *demonstrated* to be an imposition—that is to say, we fully proved it a jargon of random characters, having no meaning whatsoever” (SW, 123). Poe’s ability to interpret signs requires him to recognize when a set of signs violates the “universal” rules of linguistic formation. The claim to cryptographic mastery depends on the logically prior ability to recognize when a set of characters is not even language. By having the solution to the crime in “Rue Morgue” turn on the aural cryptogram, Poe dramatizes both the power of human analysis and his fear of what life without language might be like.

After its recapture the orangutan is lodged in the Jardin des Plantes. Until his death in 1832, the Jardin was Georges Cuvier’s center for research; as the repeated juxtaposition of Cuvier and Dupin indicates, Poe finds in the zoologist’s mode of analysis an analogue to his own technique of detection. Cuvier was famous for his ability to reconstruct an animal’s anatomy from fragmentary paleontological remains, through systematic structural comparison. As a contemporary of Poe’s wrote: “Cuvier astonished the world by the announcement that the law of relation which existed between the various parts of animals applied not only to entire systems, but even to parts of a system; so that, given an extremity, the whole
skeleton might be known . . . and even the habits of the animal could be indicated.” Like Cuvier’s bones, and in implicit analogy with them, syllables are for Poe linguistic universals, basic morphological units that form the necessary substrate to thought. Individual words possess meaning for the linguist only through their participation in a global system: “the word is no longer attached to a representation except in so far as it is previously a part of the grammatical organization by means of which the language defines and guarantees its own coherence.”

Cuvier seems to provide a methodological justification for Poe’s cryptographic reading of the world. But Poe is not above warping his sources for dramatic effect. Having teased the reader’s narrative appetite with oblique clues concerning the killer’s nature, Dupin introduces the text of Cuvier with a theatrical flourish, sure that his revelation will produce its intended effect: “It was a minute anatomical and generally descriptive account of the large fulvous Orang-Outang of the East Indian Islands. The gigantic stature, the prodigious strength and activity, the wild ferocity, and the imitative propensities of these mammalia are sufficiently well known to all. I understood the full horrors of the murder at once” (PT, 424). This is a curious passage, not least because in Poe’s version the description of the orangutan virtually reverses Cuvier’s actual claims. Not content to note that the orangutan is “a mild and gentle animal, easily rendered tame and affectionate,” Cuvier disparages “the exaggerated descriptions of some authors respecting this resemblance” to humans; he at once deflates both the ape’s anthropic pretensions and its wildness. (That Poe knew this text seems certain; M’Murtrie, who translated Cuvier’s book, seven years later published with Poe and Thomas Wyatt The Conchologist’s First Book, with “Animals according to Cuvier.”) Poe’s intellectual allegiance to Cuvier was subservient to his need to magnify the melodramatic and gothic aspects of the murders. In the final analysis, it is not the crime but the solution that produces the reader’s uncanny shiver, not the violence but the minute and clinical attention that Dupin requires of the narrator. To understand why the killer’s simian origins produce “the full horrors” of which the narrator speaks, we need first to examine the effects of the revelation that Poe’s narrative produces.

The Analytic Sublime

Throughout the Dupin stories, Poe offers models for the nature of analysis, including games of odd and even, theories of mental identification, and an elaborate comparison of the respective merits of chess and whist. Yet in “Rue Morgue,” analysis itself must remain disappointingly invisible to the reader, except through its intensely pleasing effects: “We know of them, among other things, that they are always to their possessor, when inordinately possessed, a source of the liveliest enjoyment. As the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles
into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which *disentangles*. He derives pleasure from even the most trivial occupations bringing his talent into play: He is fond of enigmas, of conundrums, of hieroglyphics" *(PT, 397)*. In its basic narrative structure, “Rue Morgue” is itself an enigma whose effects, according to its own logic, should clarify the nature of analysis. But the opening discussion reverses the ordinary process of interpretation: the crime and its solution “will appear to the reader somewhat in the light of a commentary upon the [analytic] propositions just advanced” (ibid., 400), rather than the other way around. Nor is it clear why we should experience “the liveliest enjoyment” from the ensuing tale of violence. Might we understand the tale as an allegory of the superiority of brain to brawn, in which Dupin handily defeats both the sailor’s evasions and the ape’s brute difference? Certainly; but the pleasure of such a reading is not itself analytical, and hence brings us no closer to understanding the properties that the narrative so ostentatiously foregrounds.

Because the narrator has compared analytic pleasure to that enjoyed by the strong man, we ought perhaps to consider the two “strong men” of the tale as guides. The first of these is the orangutan (*Homo sylvestris*), possessed of “superhuman” strength; the second is its owner, “a tall, stout, and muscular-looking person” who comes equipped, as in a fairy tale, with “a huge oaken cudgel” (ibid., 426). But these seem to exercise their powers only in violence: the elder L’Espanaye’s head is “nearly severed” “with one determined sweep” of the ape’s “muscular arm” (ibid., 430), and although the sailor seems amicable by comparison, even he spends his energy whipping the ape into submission, and his muscles tense at the thought of killing Dupin (“The sailor’s face flushed. . . . He started to his feet and grasped his cudgel” [ibid., 427]). In practice, although the pleasures of the analyst seem only figurally related to those of his muscular counterpart (“As the strong man exults . . . so glories the analyst”), the narrative that follows demonstrates that the relation between the two is causal: the analyst’s skills are called for because of the strong man’s exertion, as Dupin pits his thought against the unwitting power of the ape and the sailor’s potential for violence.

According to Peter Brooks, any given story has a central metaphor that, however dissolved into the narrative, articulates the story’s primary relationships. And because all narrative can be mapped rhetorically as a relation between the poles of metaphor and metonymy, one can describe the narrative’s duration as a metonymic “acting out of the implications of metaphor,” which at once reveals the meaning of the impacted initial metaphor and transforms it through its narrative embodiment. Citing the example of Conan Doyle’s “Musgrave Ritual,” Brooks shows that the obscure and apparently meaningless ritual practiced by the Musgraves is actually a metaphor that condenses and shapes the action of the story. Regardless of whether Brooks is right to contend that the relation between
initial metaphor and narrative metonymy holds for all stories, it is undeniably true of detective fiction in general, and of its founding text as well. The first rhetorical figure encountered in “Rue Morgue” — the analogy between the pleasures of analysis and of strength — provides the story’s structuring metaphor; in fact, the tale has everything to do with the proper way of understanding the relationship between the physical and the mental, and the pleasures associated with each.

Take as an emblem of this disjunction the difficulty that the Mmes. L’Espanaye find in keeping head and body together: Camille L’Espanaye is strangled; her mother’s throat is “so entirely cut that upon an attempt to raise her, the head fell off” (*PT*, 411, 406). “Rue Morgue” repeatedly stages the violent separation of heads and bodies, literal and figurative, and although Dupin and the orangutan are the most visibly polarized emblems of this split, the form of the tale repeats this pattern, joining its analytic head to its fictive body by the most insecure of narrative ligatures: “The narrative to follow will appear to the reader somewhat in the light of a commentary upon the propositions just advanced” (ibid., 400). However one wishes to allegorize this relation of heads to bodies — as an opposition between spirit and matter, analysis and effects, or ego and id — it is the distinguishing structural feature of the text at every level. But although “Rue Morgue” formally repeats the opposition between body and head in the relationship of narrative and commentary, one can identify Brooks’s initial metaphor only in retrospect, because Poe’s text conceals its metaphors as metonymies until the narrative’s climactic revelation, by which time we as readers have been thoroughly implicated in a scene at which we imagined ourselves only spectators.

Generically, this implication has already been built into the text through its combination of the gothic with what I call the analytic sublime. Besides its extravagant setting in a “time-eaten and grotesque mansion, long deserted through superstitions into which we did not inquire, and tottering to its fall” (ibid., 400-401), “Rue Morgue” reveals its generic debt in the sensational violence of the killings, the segmentation of space into barely permeable vesicles, and the uncanniness of the crime’s resolution. Although Eve Sedgwick argues compellingly that as a genre the gothic is preeminently concerned with male homosocial desire, Poe’s detective stories find their activating tension less in the closeting of sexual difference than in the closeting of consciousness within the body. Despite its overt disavowal of the gothic (“let it not be supposed,” the narrator reminds us, “that I am detailing any mystery, or penning any romance” [ibid., 402]), Poe employs an aura of analytical reason only to intensify the reader’s experience of violence and disorder.

In the gothic’s implicit spatial model, Sedgwick suggests, an “individual fictional ‘self’” is often “massively blocked off from something to which
it ought normally to have access": air, personal history, a loved one. Regardless of the specific lack, it is the unspeakability of this occlusion that is generically distinctive: “The important privation is the privation exactly of language, as though language were a sort of safety valve between the inside and the outside which, being closed off, all knowledge, even when held in common, becomes solitary, furtive, and explosive.”

Although Poe’s detective stories employ many of the gendered conventions (the doubling of criminal and detective, the detective’s social and physical alienation, the violence directed against female bodies) that have long characterized crime fiction, Poe’s homosocial pairs keep turning into repetitions of a single self (Dupin and the narrator, Dupin and Minister D——, D—— and his imagined brother), without the triangulation of difference needed to put sexual desire in play.

Although the detective story, with its long retrospective reconstructions, seems par excellence the genre in which language is adequate to its task of description, in the end the apparent rationality of the detective is a device used to create Sedgwick’s gothic division. Far from offering a safety valve between inner and outer, language itself separates the analyst from the object, thereby creating the pressure differential between self and world that language is pressed to describe. The impalpable tissue separating inside and outside is consciousness itself, which can never be identical either with itself or with the body. The more intensely Poe pursues disembodied reason (the analytic sublime), the more powerfully gothic will be the moment in which the reader’s identification with the body of the ape is revealed.

This use of reason against itself appears with particular clarity in the episode in which Dupin discovers the exit by which the killer escaped from the quarters of the Mmes. L’Espanaye. In this first instance of the locked-room mystery, the doors to the L’Espanayes’ home are locked; there are no secret passages or “preternatural events”; and the condition of the bodies rules out suicide. The two windows are shut, each fastened by “a very stout nail” pushed into a gimlet-hole drilled through frame and casement. Yet on visiting the house, Dupin displays absolute confidence in his logical powers: “The impossibility of egress, by means already stated, being thus absolute, we are reduced to the windows. It is only left for us to prove that these apparent ‘impossibilities’ are, in reality, not such.” Reasoning that “the murderers did escape from one of these windows,” Dupin decides that the sashes

\textit{must}, then, have the power of fastening themselves. There was no escape from this conclusion. I had traced the secret to its ultimate result—and that result was \textit{the nail}. It had, I say, in every respect, the appearance of its fellow in the other window, but this fact was an absolute nullity (conclusive as it might seem to be) when compared with the consideration that here, at this point, terminated the clew. “There \textit{must} be something wrong,” I said, “about the
nail.” I touched it; and the head, with about a quarter of the shank, came off in my fingers. The rest of the shank was in the gimlet-hole, where it had been broken off. (PT, 419)

This is what Freud called the “omnipotence of consciousness” with a vengeance: the evidence of the senses is “an absolute nullity” against the locked room of Dupin’s logic (“There was no escape from this conclusion”). In apparent confirmation of his hypothesis, the nailhead pops off at Dupin’s touch, as if his analysis were a type of narrative thaumaturgy, able to bring about changes in the world through mere enunciation (“‘There must be something wrong,’ I said, ‘about the nail’”). It is Dupin’s speech that solves the mystery of how the closed space was entered and exited; his words here repeat the function of the coded treasure map in “The Gold-Bug”: in both cases, they are forms of language that permit the opening of an otherwise sealed space. In this scenario, the nail functions as a lock on the L’Espanaye’s home—a home that, thanks to the violence of the orangutan, has now become a literal crypt. Surprisingly enough, Dupin’s analytic solution to the gory mystery of the bodies is yet another form of decryption, a diffused and narratively enlarged scene in which the crypt is opened through signs.

Finally, this decryption is itself another version of the tale’s split between analysis and action, an indication that Poe’s analytical sublime contains the seeds of its own undoing. The abstract introduction to a tale of horror (also familiar from “The Imp of the Perverse”) intensifies the shock of the narrative by increasing the contrast between the narrative’s ratiocinative calm and the brutality to follow. And because excessive contrast is itself a gothic convention, “Rue Morgue” stages the relation between the story’s introduction and its main body as another instance of the gothic. Indeed, the nail itself anticipates my conclusion: its status as a token of the power of reason is immediately undermined by Dupin’s recognition that the nail itself is fractured. Like everything else in “Rue Morgue,” the nail—an apparent integer—divides into head and body.

This constant recurrence of heads and bodies is structurally parallel to the separation in detective fiction of the metonymic and metaphoric poles of language. Working with clues associated with the narrative’s originating crime, the detective’s analytical method is primarily a form of metonymy, which is, in turn, associated with the frame narrative of the detective’s analysis, and with its origins in cryptography. Conversely, the core narrative of most detective stories obsessively concerns itself with bodies, most commonly with their violation and murder. Metonymy, Lacan suggests, is evidence of the displacement of desire for the mother onto the signifying chain itself. As the law of the signifier, the Law of the Father separates the infant from the mother at the moment when Oedipal injunctions manifest
themselves in, and as, the child's newly acquired language. The child attempts to recapture its original plenitude through the use of language, but this displaced search turns into an identification of suspended desire with the process of signification itself: "And the enigmas that desire seems to pose for a 'natural philosophy'—its frenzy mocking the abyss of the infinite, the secret collusion with which it envelops the pleasure of knowing and of dominating with a jouissance, these amount to no other derangement of instinct than that of being caught in the rails—eternally stretching forth towards the desire for something else—of metonymy."22 In place of the child's imaginary, there are only the "rails" of metonymic linkage, which, far from leading back to the mother, constitute the bars separating the child from the mother's being. But this "desire for something else" is not without compensatory pleasures, chief among which is the "jouissance" of employing language to structure the observable world, investing it with the sense of an almost tangible approach to the object of desire. The rails teeter constantly along the edge of remembrance, "at the very suspension-point of the signifying chain."23

In its concern with evidence, the detective's search is a variation on the metonymic suspension displayed by the narrator of the gothic romances, who tends "to muse, for long unwearied hours, with [his] attention riveted to some frivolous device on the margin or in the typography of a book" ("Berenice," PT, 227). This obsessive attention is a defense mechanism designed to turn the mind away from something that must seem to be repressed, but which, in fact, hovers teasingly close to consciousness:

There is no point, among the many incomprehensible anomalies of the science of mind, more thrillingly exciting than the fact . . . that in our endeavors to recall to memory something long forgotten, we often find ourselves upon the very verge of remembrance, without being able, in the end, to remember.

And thus how frequently, in my intense scrutiny of Ligeia's eyes, have I felt approaching the full knowledge of their expression—felt it approaching—yet not quite be mine—and so at length entirely depart! ("Ligeia," PT, 264-65)

Compare this to the narrator's reaction to Dupin's description of the strength, ferocity, and "harsh and unequal voice" possessed by the orangutan: "At these words a vague and half-formed conception of the meaning of Dupin flitted over my mind. I seemed to be upon the verge of comprehension, without power to comprehend—as men, at times, find themselves upon the brink of remembrance without being able, in the end, to remember" ("Murders in the Rue Morgue," PT, 421). In both cases, the quality of this near-memory, and the habits of both excessively attentive narrators, correspond to Lacan's metonymic subject "perversely" fixated "at the very suspension-point of the signifying chain, where the memory-screen is immobilized and the fascinating image of the fetish is petrified."24
Lacan’s rhetorical analysis permits us to see how completely the metonymic frame narrative of the tale disembodies both analyst and reader, even as the gothic narrative core of the detective story foregrounds corporeal metaphors.25 This metaphoric pull toward embodiment is crystallized in the basic scenario of “Rue Morgue,” which, as Marie Bonaparte noted long ago, is a particularly nasty Oedipal triangle. For Bonaparte, the orangutan represents the male infant, whose obsession with the question of the mother’s sexual difference is only settled through the symbolic castration involved in Mme. L’Espanaye’s decapitation. Bonaparte’s reading depends on a style of anatomical literalization now out of fashion, discredited in an era in which psychoanalytic critics rightfully prefer textual and rhetorical criticism to readings that, as Brooks notes, mistakenly choose as their objects of analysis “the author, the reader, or the fictive persons of the text.”26

The problem is that “Rue Morgue” continually solicits what can only be described as bad Freudian readings. Bonaparte’s biographical interpretation of Poe’s fiction is, in the main, enjoyabley unconvincing, but her monomaniacal inventory of sexual symbols (of, for instance, the L’Espanayes’ chamber as a gigantic projection of the interior female anatomy) is difficult to dismiss. From the rending of the double doors of the L’Espanayes’ home (“a double or folding gate . . . bolted neither at bottom nor top” forced “open, at length, with a bayonet”), to the ape’s futile ransacking of Mme. L’Espanaye’s private drawers (“the drawers of a bureau . . . had been, apparently, rifled, although many articles of apparel still remained in them” [PT, 421]), to the identification of the broken and the whole nail, the story overcodes its anatomical symbols. Discovered in its crimes, the orangutan’s “wild glances” fall upon “the head of the bed, over which the face of its master, rigid with horror, was just discernible.” The ape stuffs Camille “head-down” in the chimney; the L’Espanayes live in a room “at the head of the passage”; the nail in the window behind the bed is fixed “nearly to the head”; Dupin looks over “the head-board minutely”; the other nail too is “driven in nearly up to the head.” The ape flees from its master’s bed to the L’Espanayes’, where it swings itself through the window “directly upon the headboard of the bed.” “Head” is used twenty times, “bed,” “bedstead,” or “bedroom” seventeen times; as well as rhyming aurally, “head” and “bed” continually chime through their contiguity in the text, inviting the reader to link them through metaphor. Even the fractured window-nail can represent the mother’s phallus: “Il y a le mystère du clou mutilé d’une des fenêtres, sans doute symbole, sur le mode ‘mobilier,’ de la castration de la mère.”27 Dupin’s inductions about the broken nail constitute a fort-da game in which he resolves the question of the maternal phallus by both denying its presence (“‘There must be something wrong,’ I said, ‘about the nail.’ I touched it; and the head . . . came off in my fingers”) and affirming it (“I now carefully replaced this head portion and . . . the fissure was invisible”). Such an
explanation helps explain why the analysis of the nail musters such weird intensity, particularly in the quasi-performative sense of Dupin's must.

My claim is not that such anatomical allegorizing substantiates psychoanalytic criticism, but that Freudian readers have long been attracted to detective fiction because the genre's structure and themes so often echo central psychoanalytic scenarios. What looks like Poe's eerie anticipation of psychoanalytic motifs may say as much about generic as about psychic structure. Certainly, the literary interest of Freud's case studies depends in no small part on an essentially cryptographic sense of power over the body. Despite Freud's frequent attempts to distance himself from writers of fiction, his early conception of psychoanalysis as "the task of making conscious the most hidden recesses of the mind," of rendering the body transparent to language, is driven by the same themes of cryptographic interiority at play in Poe's detective fiction. And Dupin's boast that "most men, in respect to himself, wore windows in their bosoms" (PT, 401) is actually a more modest version of Freud's famous declaration in his study of Dora: "He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his finger-tips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore."

Although critics have remarked on the embarrassing frequency with which detective stories draw on stock psychoanalytic imagery, no one has yet called attention to how thoroughly "Rue Morgue" seems to gloss the analytic process itself. Freud describes the "essence of the psychoanalytic situation" as follows:

The analyst enters into an alliance with the ego of the patient to subdue certain uncontrolled parts of his id, i.e., to include them in a synthesis of the ego. . . . [If] the ego learns to adopt a defensive attitude towards its own id and to treat the instinctual demands of the latter like external dangers, this is at any rate partly because it understands that the satisfaction of instinct would lead to conflicts with the external world. (Under the influence of its upbringing, the child's ego accustoms itself to shift the scene of the battle from outside to inside and to master the inner danger before it becomes external.)

Freud's clinical observations would serve equally well to describe the sailor's visit to Dupin, with Dupin standing in for the analyst, the sailor for the analysand, and the orangutan as a figure for the remembered "primal scene." In Dora, Freud notes that "the patients' inability to give an ordered history of their life insofar as it coincides with the story of their illness is not merely characteristic of the neurosis," but is, in fact, a defining feature of mental illness; Freud's essential test for recovery simply is the patient's newfound ability to narrate his or her life, to "remove all possible symptoms and to replace them by conscious thoughts." In this case, the sailor must recount under duress the story of the crime, which is formally parallel to the dreams
that provide the analytic material for Freud’s case studies. His wish to hide his knowledge makes sense in terms of the plot, but it is less easy to explain away Dupin’s insistence, at once solicitous and stern, that the sailor narrate what he knows. Dupin, one might say, enters into an alliance with the sailor in order that he might “subdue certain uncontrolled parts of his id,” unmistakably represented by the ape. As a corollary, Dupin repeatedly insists that the sailor acknowledge the beast as his own—“Of course you are prepared to identify the property?” (PT, 427)—even as he declares that the sailor is both innocent and complicit: “You have nothing to conceal. You have no reason for concealment. On the other hand, you are bound by every principle of honor to confess all” (ibid., 428). Pressed to take a reward for ostensibly recovering the ape, Dupin continues the same theme: “You shall give me all the information in your power about these murders in the Rue Morgue” (ibid., 427).

Forced at gunpoint to answer, the sailor responds first by losing the ability to articulate (“The sailor’s face flushed up, as if he were struggling with suffocation. . . . He spoke not a word”), and then by threatening compensatory violence (“He started to his feet and grasped his cudgel”), as the story of the ape homeopathically reproduces itself in the sailor’s telling. The stress of confession threatens to produce a repetition of the original crime, but Dupin’s paternal firmness (“I perfectly well know that you are innocent of the atrocities in the Rue Morgue. It will not do, however, to deny that you are in some measure implicated in them” [ibid.]) permits him to redirect his symptomatic repetition into narrative—precisely the result of a successful analytic intervention predicted by Freud. The sailor explains how, having brought the ape from Borneo to Paris in order to sell it for profit, he returned one night to find that the orangutan had escaped into his bedroom, into which it had broken from a closet adjoining, where it had been, as was thought, securely confined. Razor in hand, and fully lathered, it was sitting before a looking-glass, attempting the operation of shaving, in which it had no doubt previously watched its master through the key-hole of the closet. Terrified at the sight of so dangerous a weapon in the possession of an animal so ferocious, and so well able to use it, the man, for some moments, was at a loss what to do. He had been accustomed, however, to quiet the creature, even in its fiercest moods, by the use of a whip, and to this he now resorted. Upon sight of it, the Ourang-Outang sprang at once through the door of the chamber, down the stairs, and thence, through a window, unfortunately open, into the street. (Ibid., 428-29)

Having only heard up to this point about the animal’s “intractable ferocity,” this image of the orangutan is rather touching; even when the ape imitates “the motions of a barber” with the Mmes. L’Espanaye, its purposes, we are told, are “probably pacific” (ibid., 430). Poe offers us a Darwinian revision
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of Freud, a primate scene in which the ape—still “in the closet,” forced to peep through a keyhole—sees its master shaving, and tries to imitate him. Shaving codes the body as a part of culture, not nature; and as in David Humphreys’ contemporary poem “The Monkey” (printed in Duyckinck’s Cyclopaedia of American Literature),\(^3\) the ape takes up the razor out of a wish to be human.\(^3\) But without language, the developmental scenario implied by the ape’s mimicry stalls: whatever his “imitative propensities,” as a mute the ape cannot readily make its intentions known. The ape’s frustrated turn from gesture to violence reveals the abject inadequacy of mimesis in comparison with speech. Unable to manipulate abstract symbols, the ape takes out its rage on the flesh; although the story’s focus on injured mouths and throats may be an instance of displacement upward, it is also a direct attack on the organs of speech. The orangutan represents both Bonaparte’s murderous infant, poised at the moment of discovering sexual difference, and a liminally human, highly evocative image of the body’s resistance to signification. These elements are synthesized in a Lacanian revision of the primal scene as the entry into signification. Poe’s use of the orangutan serves as his own myth of human origins, which condenses within itself both individual and evolutionary history, both linguistic and sexual desire.

The Ape’s Recapture

Thanks to Dupin’s narrative therapy, the sailor is afforded the opportunity to break the cycle of repetition through the type of analytic transference that, in Brooks’s words, “succeeds in making the past and its scenarios of desire relive through signs with such vivid reality that the reconstructions it proposes achieve the effect of the real.”\(^3\) Although it is meaningless to speak of curing a fictional character, this protoanalytic scene is one way in which Poe stages the reader’s textual cathexis, although such a proleptic parody may suggest that, like “Rue Morgue” itself, the psychoanalyst’s function is to manufacture a narrative rather than to reveal one. The sailor’s mistake has been to assume that once he had succeeded in lodging the ape at his own residence, the danger that it posed was over. The sailor has yet to learn to “treat the instinctual demands of the [id] like external dangers.” Hence, the captive ape escapes from the sailor, forcing him to face the violent consequences of its acting-out. The process of admitting his possession of the ape is a precondition for its taming, which requires that the sailor objectify and confront as an external danger (“no mean enemy”) the fact of the bodily unconscious. The recapture of the erstwhile brute (a story Poe does not even bother to recount) represents the sailor’s psychic reintegration. As Freud writes: “The struggle between physician and patient, between intellect and the forces of instinct, between recognition and the striving for discharge, is fought out almost entirely on the ground of transference-manifestations. This is the ground on which the victory must be won, the final expression of
which is lasting recovery from the neurosis. . . . In the last resort no one can be slain in absentia or in effigie.”35 By contrast, literature might be defined as just such an effigy of the real, staging ego-training sessions in which the reader learns “to shift the scene of the battle from outside to inside,” from behaviors to an internalized encounter with the text.

Once the sailor owns up to his implication in the killings, the story is finished; the narrator has “scarcely anything to add,” and hastily concludes by noting that the ape “was subsequently caught by the owner himself, who obtained for it a very large sum at the Jardin des Plantes. Le Bon was instantly released, upon our narration of the circumstances (with some comments from Dupin) at the bureau of the Prefect of Police” (PT, 431). Because the real story of “Rue Morgue” concerns the production of uncanny effects in the reader, Poe has no qualms about violating notions of the well-made story. Instead, the extreme brevity of the denouement and the untidiness of the story’s conclusion remind us that Poe’s characters are merely puppets, technical apparatuses deployed in the attempt to intensify our affective transference onto his tales. Although the allegorical reading sketched here could be elaborated further, the parallels between Freud’s method in the case studies and Poe’s narrative are clear. The baroque sexual symbolism, the fetishization of analysis, the literalization of the “talking cure,” and, above all, the story’s peculiar staging of metaphor and metonymy are coordinated devices through which Poe enhances the reader’s identification.

Thus far, the reader has had little incentive to identify with anyone except Dupin. But although Dupin’s cryptographic power is specifically predicated on his linguistic prowess, the resolution of this case is not a matter of language alone. Instead, Dupin now finds himself confronting the tangible world, carefully measuring the “impression” made by the orang-utan’s fingers on Camille L’Espanaye’s neck against the span and pattern of a human hand, only to find that the prints on the strangled woman are not even approximately the same (“‘This,’ I said, ‘is the mark of no human hand’” [ibid., 423]). Dupin continues his physical investigation: “‘Besides, the hair of a madman is not such as I now hold in my hand. I disentangled this little tuft from the rigidly clutched fingers of Madame L’Espanaye. Tell me what you can make of it.’ ‘Dupin!’ I said, completely unnerved, ‘this hair is most unusual—this is no human hair’” (ibid.). Recall that in the opening paragraph of the story, the analyst is said to glory “in that moral activity which disentangles”: just the word Dupin uses to describe the process of physically extracting his tuft of hair from the “rigidly clutched” hand of the corpse. For all the text’s insistence on the separation between the pleasures of the strong man and those of the analyst, the solution of the Rue Morgue murders requires that Dupin make forceful, even violent, contact with the traces of the ape.
After producing his assembled physical evidence, Dupin asks the narrator: “What impression have I made upon your fancy?” repeating as a metaphor the word used to refer to the uncanny and inhuman marks left on the dead woman’s neck. Prior to the moment in which Dupin histrionomically reveals the orangutan as the culprit, the reader’s body has been anesthetized by Dupin’s disembodied analytics (an anesthetization also evident in Dupin, who in moments of excitement becomes “frigid and abstract,” his eyes “vacant in expression”). In the “creeping of the flesh” that follows, the narrator’s body identifies with the ape through Dupin’s recreation of the crime, revealing that he, too, by his direct somatic response, is implicated in the narrative to which he listens. “A symptom,” writes Lacan, is “a metaphor in which flesh or function is taken as a signifying element”; in the moment when the reader’s skin shivers in sympathy with the narrator, the reader witnesses the overthrow of the metonymic order. In the shift to the metaphoric, in the symptomatic reproduction within the reader’s body of a sensational response, the reader reveals his or her collaboration with the ape. Through the creation of this response, Poe circumvents Freud’s complaint that in analysis “the patient hears what we say but it rouses no response in his mind.” To rouse the mind, a text must also arouse the body; only through the symptomatic commitment of the reader’s flesh can the text realize its transferenceal effects.

Appropriately, it is the knowledge of his own embodiment that permits Dupin to solve the mystery of the L’Espanayes’ deaths. This is the implication of Dupin’s final comments on the Prefect, in which he takes pains to emphasize the futility of the latter’s “bodiless” wisdom: “In his wisdom is no stamen. It is all head and no body, like the pictures of the Goddess Laverna—or, at best, all head and shoulders, like a codfish. But he is a good creature after all. I like him especially for one master stroke of cant, by which he has attained his reputation for ingenuity. I mean the way he has ‘de nier ce qui est, et d’expliquer ce qui n’est pas’” (PT, 431). Although the Prefect is figured as a “creature,” it is just his failure to negotiate between head and body that prevents him from imagining the animal nature of the killer. As a kind of walking bust, all head and shoulders, the Prefect, not Dupin, is an emblem of excessive rationality, unable to accommodate the ape’s physical presence. By contrast, Dupin twice notes his admiration for the animal. “I almost envy you the possession of him” (ibid., 427) he admits to the sailor, and we may suppose that Dupin longs for the animal’s intense physicality, even as he revels in the physical effects, the “creeping of the flesh” (ibid., 423) he produces in his listeners. (Once more, Dupin appears as a stand-in for Poe, who relies for his very bread and butter on the ability to conjure identification.) “Where is the ingenuity of unravelling a web which you yourself have woven for the express purpose of unravelling?” Poe asked of Cooke; we may answer that it lies in having in the meantime
caught something in that web. In the present case, Dupin’s greatest exertions are expended to catch not the monkey, but his owner, lured in by the text placed in the newspaper. Just so with the story’s readers: drawn in by another piece of paper, by another thread or web, we find ourselves trapped within its self-dissolving structure, as any assumptions about the nature of analysis are undone by our own somatic performance.

As “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” concludes, the divergent senses of the word *stamen* crystallize its irreconcilable oppositions:

*stamen*, n.; pl. *stamens* rare *stamina*, [L., a warp in an upright loom, a thread; lit., that which stands up, from *stare*, to stand].

1. a warp thread, especially in the ancient upright loom at which the weaver stood upright instead of sitting. [Obs.]

2. in botany, the male reproductive organ in flowers, formed principally of cellular tissue.

Insofar as *stamen* refers to the male generative organ of a flower, it marks the (male) reader addressed by the text; call this the Freudian reading, in which to have a male body seems inseparable from complicity in the orangutan’s gendered violence. But the first meaning, now obsolete, indicates the warp thread in a loom, and through familiar paths (loom, weaving, text), we arrive at the stamen as the narrative thread running throughout Poe’s text. The story’s overdetermined treatment of heads and bodies, words and things, analysis and its effects, implies the close association of the origins of narrative with the discovery of sexual difference, although it is impossible to tell which came first. Instead of reinforcing an evolutionary hierarchy that would separate us from our simian relations, the cryptographic narrative structure of “Rue Morgue” reminds us of our corporeal investment: through the story’s self-enacting rhetoric, the reader lives out the distance between the tale’s opening metaphor and its closing one—between the simile comparing analysis and the strong man’s pleasure, which safely separates its terms even as it joins them, and the metaphor of the stamen, which reveals the degree to which the reader, too, finds himself hopelessly entangled.