CHAPTER 3

To Have Been Possessed

We know that a capitalist society more willingly pardons rape, murder, or kidnapping than a bounced check, which is its only theological crime, the crime against spirit.

—GILLES DELEUZE, “THE PHILOSOPHY OF CRIME NOVELS”

He has made a slave of me with his looks. He has forced me to understand him, without his saying a word; and he has forced me to keep silence, without his uttering a threat.

—CHARLES DICKENS, THE MYSTERY OF EDWIN DROOD

“You will say that man cannot hold property in man,” James Henry Hammond argued in his 1845 “Letter to an English Abolitionist,” then pointed out that quite the opposite was true: “The answer is, that he can and actually does hold property in his fellow all the world over, in a variety of forms, and has always done so” (104). According to American advocates for the “peculiar institution,” slaves were indispensable acquisitions, assets that could not be properly relinquished. More importantly, if the slave might be read as a “sign and surrogate” of his or her proprietor, explains historian and literary critic Saidiya Hartman (120), in manumission the captive did not exchange slavery for self-possession. Manumission could not resurrect the slave from a state of social death, only submit him to an arithmetic of double negatives, enacting “the negation of the negation of social life” (Patterson 211). The manumitted man was, in a word, an unthinkable entity. For one, the Janus-faced picture that proslavery propagandists had so carefully formulated—one part simpleton and Sambo, another part savage—would grip him long after emancipation (Frederickson 53). Nevertheless, as the proslavery apologist Professor Thomas Roderick Dew explained, in the wake of that “inhuman massacre” in Haiti and, more recently, in Southhampton, and given the ferocity of that “fanatical negro preacher” Nat Turner, “the imagination
was suffered to conjure up the most appalling phantoms” of slave insurrection (290). A niece of George Washington referred to Turner’s rebellion, or perhaps to Turner himself, as “a smothered volcano—we know not when, or where, the flame will burst forth, but we know that death in the most repulsive forms awaits us” (qtd. in McDougall 64). Neither the collapse of slaveholding in the South nor the “universal ruin and desolation” of its white citizens could be avoided in the face of any abolition scheme (Dew 290).

Every free Negro in the antebellum South was, therefore, as W. E. B. DuBois would reflect in Black Reconstruction, “a contradiction, a threat and a menace” (7). Villain or vagrant, tradesman or hired hand, he jeopardized the tenure of King Cotton and “must not be. He must be suppressed, enslaved, colonized” (7). Hammond, who served variously as congressman, governor, and senator from South Carolina in the decades before the Civil War, insisted that southerners “cannot be flattered, duped, nor bullied out of their rights or their propriety” (151). They were as little likely to surrender their human property as their New England adversaries were to turn over their estates to “the descendants of the slaughtered red men” who first possessed them (103). And yet the proprietary rights Hammond revered might engender a distressing reliance, a dependent state. There was no guarantee that slavery as an economic and social enterprise could be prolonged either peacefully or indefinitely, since the slaveholder’s economic and social existence was in every respect contingent upon his human “property.”

These psychodynamics of property and possession are the subject of Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Gold Bug” (1843) and Robert M. Bird’s two-volume novel Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself (1836). This chapter argues that “The Gold Bug” and Sheppard Lee reside at the periphery of the detective genre, as they make use of metonymy and metaphor, two of the principal mechanisms we associate with detection fiction, to survey antebellum interracial sociabilities. In other words, they avail themselves of detection’s devices to contend with the lopsided, indefinite, and sometimes brutal allocation of agency between former slaves and former masters, for whom solvency and self-possession hang upon an unsteady compact. Metonymy is the rhetorical device enlisted in our interpretations of a “clue,” and foregrounds contiguity and direct relations by substituting a trace or part for its whole, or an effect for a cause. Metaphor, by contrast, is a species of analogy that links distinct domains of meaning; Kenneth Burke calls it “a device for seeing something in terms of something else” (qtd. in Ritchie 6). In detection texts, metaphor typically emerges in acts of “imaginative identification”
between doubled, oppositional figures (detective and criminal, for example), as the former strives to access the sensibilities of the latter. Both the forensic utility of metonymic traces (as chains or collections of partial objects that lead the detective to the criminal agent) and the “bilateral asymmetry” that typifies imaginative identification, situating the detective as the criminal’s “antithetical double” (Pyrhönen, Mayhem 31) are explicated at length in Poe’s tales of ratiocination, especially “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841). As “The Gold Bug” and Sheppard Lee move between speculative lines and imaginative leaps, between metonymy and metaphor in an antebellum terrain, however, they supply historiographies of interracial sociability, limning the fraught territory between enslavement and self-possession in a slave-holding society.

“The Gold Bug” is a tale of treasure hunting whose protagonist, William Legrand, recoups his fallen fortunes after he discovers a coded message and treasure map on a bit of “dirty foolscape” (Poe 200). By pretending violent lunacy, Legrand cajoles his uneasy physician-friend (the narrator) and his steward Jupiter, a manumitted slave, to assist him in the enterprise; at the end of the story, the three men find themselves in possession of Captain Kidd’s buried plunder. Though the title of Poe’s story references an unfamiliar species of scarabaeus Legrand and Jupiter discover on the South Carolina beach, it also alludes to a crisis of monetary policy during the Jackson and Van Buren administrations, particularly the quarrel between the “paper money” men and the “gold bugs” who despaired of “the tendency of paper money to distort our ‘natural’ understanding of the relationship between symbols and things” (Shell 18). Along these lines, when Legrand struggles to manufacture meaning of the gold-colored insect, scribbles on parchment, hieroglyphic puns, and coded messages, he appears to be making something of nothing. Meanwhile, the physician-narrator aches to diagnose Legrand’s idiotic follies and prescribe treatment suited to his conduct, which seems to him to indicate some form of madness.

Receiving a bit of correspondence conspicuously changed from Legrand’s ordinary style, the narrator muses, “What new crotchet possessed his excitable brain?” (204). That Legrand is seemingly crazed by some “crotchet” (“a perverse conceit” or “peculiar notion”), that he poses a threat as an apparently deranged individual, is sufficient incentive for the steward Jupiter and the physician to placate him (OED). Consequently, Legrand’s performance economizes on actual displays of violence when he enlists their assistance in his hunt for Captain Kidd’s buried treasure. Yet Poe also supplies an ad-
ditional dose of duplicity in the comings and goings of the manumitted slave Jupiter, whose acute solicitude for his former master approximates surveillance, and whose “savage kind of style” is a source of semantic digressions that subtly chip away at the unified effect of Legrand’s performance (214). This critical appearance of something other than a “public transcript” (a realm of discourse that undercuts the “hegemonic aspirations” that regulate public contact) is a “hidden transcript,” a clandestine dissent cultivated by a superficially subordinated individual, and it invites us to inspect Legrand’s and Jupiter’s deceptions more closely—and their habits of detection as well.

By contrast, the eponymous, first-person protagonist of Robert Bird’s text tours the antebellum landscape by means of metempsychosis (a transmigration of the soul akin to mesmerism), which allows the untethered spirit of the protagonist to take temporary residence in a variety of recently deceased bodies. Over the course of the novel, Lee peripatetically takes on and closely scrutinizes the identities of an affluent squire, a dandified city-dweller, a despised Jewish shaver, a naive Quaker philanthropist, a black slave, and a dyspeptic plantation owner—in short, an abbreviated lineup of the antebellum classes and social strata—before he finally recovers his body and sets about a career of honest labor. Bird’s representations of psychosocial phenomena in Sheppard Lee delve into not only the civic presence and personality of Sheppard Lee’s subjects, but also delineate the constitution and “innate” characteristics of each body the protagonist inhabits. Joseph Buchanan compared the mesmerist’s long-distance “power of diagnosis or detection of character, of disease, and of thoughts” to a process of “mental sympathy” in Neurological Systems of Anthropology (1854) (qtd. in Fuller 44); by contrast, Sheppard Lee’s spirit sightseeing is both analytical and sympathetic, and habitually blurs the boundaries between the personalities of the protagonist and the bodies he inhabits. Lee swings between metonymic and metaphoric talk in his diagnostic tourism, or as Poe complains in his review of Bird’s text, “The hero, very awkwardly, partially loses, and partially does not lose, his identity, at each transmigration” (137).

To access and represent a sociology of racialized labor, “The Gold Bug” and Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself develop and draw upon an anatomy of genre conventions that would be associated with the clue-puzzle mystery. Poe and Bird avail themselves of detection’s devices to schematize the interracial sociabilities at stake in the total conscription of a subordinate’s body, and also to imagine the end(s) of such conscription: the capacity of such bodies to have been possessed. In the dynamic interplay of imaginative identification
and metonymic inquiry, these works explore whether men might swap captivity for self-possession, and plot the economic interdependencies at the core of antebellum interracial sociability. We can gain some insight into the social uses of the rhetorical devices these works employ, and their particular value for exploring interracial sociability in the antebellum period, by examining Poe’s first tale of ratiocination, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.”

A GRAVE HOAX?

A striking aspect of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), in which Poe’s detective C. Auguste Dupin tracks down the creature that brutally assassinated Madame L’Espanaye and her daughter, is its fixation on that curious word possession, which takes both transitive and intransitive forms. Of the analytical faculties, Dupin’s companion (the narrator) explains, “They are always to their possessor, when inordinately possessed, a source of the liveliest enjoyment” (92); indeed, at a game like Whist, the intellect will find himself “in full possession of the contents of each hand,” though he has not laid a hand upon them (94). Poe’s detective “designates” a sailor of a Maltese vessel “the possessor of the beast” that carved Madame L’Espanaye with a razor, ventriloquizing, “Should I avoid claiming a property of so great value, which it is known that I possess, I will render the animal at least, liable to suspicion” (118). Soon afterward, Dupin will coax a confession from the sailor, to whom he remarks, “I almost envy you the possession of him” (118). When the sailor arrives at their doorstep, his complexion is sunburned and “half hidden” by hair, and he bears a “dare-devil expression of countenance,” comportment that the narrator painstakingly characterizes as “not altogether unprepossessing” (118, my italics)—this last pair of negatives or semantic “double take” a triumph of idiomatic prestidigitation that dislodges the very notion of self-possession—though after Dupin resolves the affair of the Rue Morgue he finds the police prefect is “fain to indulge in a sarcasm or two, about the propriety of every person minding his own business” (122).

What I am getting at is, of course, a provocation roused by the uneasy traction of self-possession in Poe’s earlier detective story: that quite apart from the question of the orangutan who was supposedly in the sailor’s custody and apparently the perpetrator of these gruesome murders, the story only just hints Poe’s sailor is a escaped captive, perhaps a black one, and in disguise. We might consider, however preposterously, that Poe’s tale takes its
cues from certain tantalizing biographical details attributed to ToussaintLouverture, whom the French government deported from Saint Domingue in 1802. Poe’s sailor’s “Neuchatel-ish” accent situates him somewhere near the Jura Mountains, where Toussaint was imprisoned in a secure cell of the Fort de Joux and allowed only the courtesy of a cursory daily shave (Girard 268). James Stephen’s *The History of Toussaint Louverture* (1814) describes Toussaint’s detention sympathetically, lamenting that the hero was deprived of all company and conversation “with the exception only of a single Negro attendant, who was as closely confined as his master” (88), though Citizen Baille, commandant of Fort Jura, wrote to naval officer Denis Decrès on October 30, 1802, that Toussaint “can shave himself only before me, who give him his razor, and take it back when he has finished” (qtd. in Adams 154). While Toussaint was reported to have died in France in 1803, Stephen’s *History* nevertheless observes, “Some people entertain a notion that this great man is still living” (92).

Straight razors, silent attendants, and shades of Haiti aside, it is Poe’s production of a spectacularly violent if extradiegetic animal assassin and not a Maltese sailor that has purchased the attention of literary critics interested in Poe’s representations of blackness and of slavery. Elise Lemire rigorously argues that Poe’s inclusion of a “barbering primate” reflects the commonplace Cuvier-styled racism of the day and replicates the precise logic of a taxidermy exhibition at Philadelphia’s Peale Museum “whereby [the stuffed] monkeys are black barbers and thus barbering blacks are bestial” (188)2—though Charles Rzepka locates an important tension in Dupin’s discovery that the fugitive ape went through the motions of shaving himself as well as Madame L’Espanaye, one of the women whom he murdered.3 “If any symbolic meaning can be attached to this bizarre gesture,” Rzepka argues, “it must be that the orangutan is trying to bestow the only sign it understands of the freedom and authority culturally reserved for those who make second-class creatures of both slaves and women” (*Detective Fiction* 86). Along these lines, we might place Poe’s text at odds with the unfinished business of the Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen (1789), particularly the “imprescriptible” right to “la liberté, la propriété, la sûreté et la résistance à l’oppression” it describes in its second article. Rzepka tops this talk of self-possession, however, by observing that “Rue Morgue” finesses the *Memoirs* of Eugène François Vidocq, that notorious thief turned celebrated thief-taker and finally director of the Sûreté Nationale, with which Poe was undoubtedly familiar. Vidocq spent part of his youth with a traveling circus, where he was made to grow his hair
wild and turn naked and “savage,” taking “for your model the ourang-otang who is in cage number 1” (qtd. in Rzepka 88).

We might contrast such accounts with Richard Kopley’s astonishing excavation of the Philadelphia Saturday News, which locates the “raw” materials for “Rue Morgue” in this newspaper’s pages. Kopley directs us to an article titled “Deliberate Murder in Broadway, at Midday” (August 4, 1838), a report of the “atrocious murder” perpetrated by one Edward Coleman, a black man who, suspecting his wife Ann of infidelity, slit her throat, “nearly severing her head from her body with a razor,” and afterward adopted insanity as his defense (qtd. 33). Many other items from the Philadelphia Saturday News were enlisted in creation of Poe’s tale, proposes Kopley: one of its articles details the escapes of an “Orang Outang” from the London Zoo (May 26, 1838); it recounted how “A Mischievous Ape” escaped from a livery stable and nearly tore the hair off of a boy (September 22, 1838); and “Deaths in New York” describes how two black women suffocated from a charcoal furnace (January 12, 1839). Kopley’s reading of “Rue Morgue” fixates on Poe’s compositional activity, interpreting the tale as issue of its journalistic contexts, whose inherited properties (or trace) Poe acknowledges by his deliberate inclusion of contrived newspaper articles as a principal source of information for Dupin’s investigation—a strategy the author would employ again in “The Mystery of Marie Roget.” Along these lines, the most arcane riddle in “Rue Morgue” is a superficial one. It asks to be decoded at the narrative surface where metonymy achieves its aims, rather than prying beneath it for the sort of allegorical dimensions that Rzepka pursues (Martin Priestman qtd. in Pyrhönen, Mayhem 38).

The interpretive approaches these literary critics employ are easily as intriguing as the human and literary relations in Poe’s short story. Lemire’s associative inquiry takes the Philadelphia Peale Museum exhibit as the secret of the text (her metonymic interpretive act opens up an allegorical interpretation). Rzepka sees metaphor as the explicit activity of “Rue Morgue,” even as Poe apes Vidocq, a literary rival and antecedent. Kopley is content to discover the tale’s print relations through textual fragments. Jeanine Marie DeLombard has recently cautioned against discerning any “imaginative identification” between man and orangutan that presumes “access to the ape’s presumed criminal intent” (199). If we accept it, we are too easily seduced into the habit of “assigning personhood to just any perpetrator of a violent act,” she insists (204)—a slippery slope that Dupin does not himself pursue, even if the Maltese sailor makes such conjectures in the story, at least
according to the narrator’s synopsis of the sailor’s account of the crime. Instead, Dupin’s solution to the mystery relies precisely on his “discerning appreciation for ‘that startling absence of motive’ that has, from the beginning, constituted the mystery” (204). DeLombard’s apodictic warning against imaginative identification underscores the role that Dupin’s reading habits might play in instructing our own. As readers of Poe’s “tales of ratiocination,” what amount of “deep reading” are we invited to pursue? How should we engage with metonymy and metaphor as interpretive methodologies, and what sorts of instructions for reading do these critical approaches supply?

As “the basic figure governing the creation and interpretation of clues,” metonymy plays on direct relations of close association (Rzepka 18). It operates according to contiguity rather than similarity, but lingers in a single conceptual domain, so the knowledge it yields is circumstantial: effect stands for cause, part for whole, and so on. A variety of associative thought, metonymy frequently incites inductive activity that leads the detective to the culprit. Its methods are not fail-safe, however. Dupin, for one, finds them of limited value. Certainly, his preliminary solution to the crime in “Rue Morgue” is built from bits of circumstantial evidence: tresses of tawny hair at the crime scene; a small bit of greasy ribbon knotted in a manner “peculiar to the Maltese”; the astonishing bruises on Mademoiselle L’Espanaye’s throat and other signs of a “prodigious strength” and “wild ferocity” that Cuvier attributes to the orangutan; the exclamation “Mon Dieu!”; and so on (117, 116). This bit of abduction concluded, Dupin surmises, “A Frenchman was cognizant of the murder” (117); still, he demurs:

I will not pursue these guesses—for I have no right to call them more—since the shades of reflection upon which they are based are scarcely of sufficient depth to be appreciated by my own intellect, and since I could not pretend to make them intelligible to the understanding of another. (117)

Even Dupin’s inspired account of the hypothetical sailor’s calculations stresses the flimsiness of metonymic relations in establishing a person’s guilt: “It would be impossible to prove me cognizant of the murder, or to implicate me in guilt on account of that cognizance,” and when the sailor arrives Dupin assures him that there is “nothing, certainly, which renders you culpable” (117, 119, my italics). Dupin’s conjectures, based on “shades of reflection,” are traces twice over, scarcely to be “appreciated.”
While metonymy yields only circumstantial evidence and is an odious if indispensable tactic in Dupin's repertoire, metaphor emphasizes a distinct agency of perception in the person who attempts it. Dupin boasts in "Rue Morgue" that "most men, in respect to himself, wore windows in their bosoms," a phrase that, by its orientation ("in respect to himself"), merges a geography of metonymy with the epistemological audacity of imaginative identification. His is an act of aggressive insight by which the detective "throws himself into the spirit of his opponent" and "identifies himself therewith," seducing his adversary into error (Poe 96, 93). The narrator of "Rue Morgue" fancies this talent is connected to the Orphic philosophy of the "Bi-Part Soul," whereby the conscious soul is a mere sliver of the Oversoul (an unconscious intelligence that animates the universe and makes transmigration possible) (Rzepka 87). And yet imaginative identification must also account for a "structural antagonism" central to that "positional constellation" which situates the detective and criminal as inverted doubles (Pyrhönen, Mayhem 31–32). Such antagonism is certainly crucial to Poe's third tale of ratiocination, "The Purloined Letter," where Dupin matches wits with the seditious Minister D—. Lindon Barrett has brilliantly observed, however, that Dupin's accessory is the anarchy of the street: a "pretended lunatic" and "man in my own pay" whose musket disrupts their tête-à-tête, drawing Minister D— to the window of the apartment, so that Dupin might seize the queen's stolen missive and replace it with his own vicious and vengeful memorandum (Barrett 192). A "report" from the street is the belligerent codicil that turns the tables to Dupin's advantage, but is violence integral to such schemes of mental sympathy?

Appraising René Girard's theory of mimetic desire, Pierre Saint-Amand concedes that the concept of imitation can be considered only through its principle of ambivalence; it operates fundamentally as a double bind. . . . Reciprocity's sudden crazes, the way it brings mimetic interferences to a head, lead to processes of undifferentiation, to a collapse of hierarchies, to forms of social desymbolization. The silence maintained around the antagonistic dimension of imitation represents a scandal that Girard's theory relentlessly attempts to denounce. (8)

In "Rue Morgue," there is an uncanny reciprocity implicit in the sailor's fantasy of the terror he inspires in his prized possession: he imagines he...
is the “the dreaded whip” whose flourish converts “fury” into “fear,” rendering the razor-wielding orangutan suddenly “conscious of having deserved punishment” (121). Dupin intuits this strange brew of malice and civility engendered by the sailor’s association with the orangutan in his “exclusive possession” when he (Dupin) finds evidence of the two interlopers in the L’Espanaye apartment—and one of these conceivably “innocent of all participation in the bloody transactions which took place” (116). In doing so, Dupin joins the associative work of metonymy with imaginative identification and fathoms, more than the mind of an adversary, the stakes of an interpersonal enmity. Dupin’s apprehension of a hostile reciprocity between two others (their subservient order violently skewed by insubordination) belongs to a different register of perception. As with that “inordinate possession” of the analytical faculties, Dupin fully appreciates, at one remove, the back-and-forth between them, taking in tandem the metonymical and metaphorical relations at hand. His talent is to puzzle out the hostile reciprocity that engendered the “bloody transaction” on Rue Morgue, and to make the terms of an equivocal possession his business.

This theme of possession in “Rue Morgue” takes immediate terms in “The Gold Bug.” The bug is to “to reinstate me in my family possessions,” Legrand vows as he embarks on his treasure hunt, coaxing his browbeaten valet and the befuddled narrator to assist him in a series of eccentric directives that are, unbeknownst to the narrator, taken from Captain Kidd’s coded commands on a scrap of foolscap (205). Legrand’s succession of strange behaviors is finally redacted by a meticulous cryptography lesson at the end of the tale. His conspiracy of misrepresentation, or “sober mystification,” was a deliberate guise of madness, it turns out: a strategic deception aimed at punishing the bewildered narrator for his “evident suspicions touching my sanity” (229). And yet what first gave the physician pause was another strange bit of correspondence, which Jupiter hand-delivers. “There was something in the tone of this note which gave me great uneasiness,” the narrator explains. “Its whole style differed materially from that of Legrand. What could he be dreaming of?” (204). A distinction between Legrand’s odd letter, his “sober mystification” and actual derangement, however, is not easily resolved. Instead, the story ends at the moment Legrand suggests an sinister addendum to the order he has just offered: that the death of Kidd’s minions was the indispensable coda to Kidd’s work, so that the secret of the treasure could remain concealed: “Perhaps a couple of blows with a mattock were sufficient,
while his coadjutors were busy in the pit; perhaps it required a dozen—who shall tell?" (229). "By how thin a thread hang the lives of the Doctor and old Jup?" speculates Daniel Hoffman, gauging the effect of this macabre postscript on the reader (128).

Intimations of lunacy in this alarming denouement leave the reader reeling at the prospect, or even recursive inevitability, of additional deaths—what we might call a narrative-contract killing. However, Poe's uneasy ending does more than reorient the explanatory narrative within a framework of new criminal possibilities. Instead, the structure of the story says something: events come to meaning and to sense only when we retrace our steps, relieved of whatever stupefaction the tale initially afforded. Add to this, moreover, that it was not merely Legrand's plotting that determined the precise site of their excavation, nor yet the bit of subterfuge or "sober mystification" that drafted his steward, his dog Wolf, and the narrator to his errand, but the coordinates supplied by Jupiter, who shouldered all the "risk of the achievement," scrambling up the tulip tree and onto a nearly dead limb to establish the location of the buried hoard (208). Still, Jupiter mistakes right for left, which wrecks all of Legrand's delicate measurements and nearly turns the grueling enterprise into a fruitless expedition. As they dig in the wrong spot (wide of the mark), however, the enterprise elicits a "grave chuckle" from the valet. Proceeding from a pit, a makeshift mausoleum, this "chuckle"—which the OED defines as "a laugh of triumph and exultation: formerly applied to a loud laugh, but now chiefly to a suppressed and inarticulate sound by which exultation is shown"—calls into question the subjugation Jupiter has tolerated, however uneasily, throughout the story. Does Jupiter play the confidante or adversary in the grave hoax Legrand has concocted? Is the exslave, like the narrator, another stooge of Legrand's pretend psychosis, or does he calculatingly sabotage Legrand's directives, determined to possess the treasure himself?

Jupiter's relationship with Legrand remains inscrutable—the narrator, at least, hardly interrogates the odd relations between them. Though Legrand routinely berates the former slave, Jupiter remains alert to Legrand's stratagems, reporting that he (Jupiter) "Hab for to keep mighty tight eye pon him [Legrand's] noovers" (Poe 202). This intent surveillance apparently extends to eavesdropping on Legrand's dreams to learn about his former master's search for gold: "why cause he talk about it in he sleep—dat's how I nose" (203). Jupiter's monitoring talk and its dividends (or lack thereof) have garnered much critical attention. In his well-known essay "Gold in the Bug,"
Jean Ricardou issued the following declaration: “Legrand est seul capable de déchiffrage; Jupiter et la narrateur, en revanche, sont en mauvais termes avec le langage” (36), though Daniel Kempton points out that it is the critic who, “through the mediation of his [Legrand’s] authoritative voice,” reasserts Legrand’s linguistic authority, “evidently encouraged to legitimize and duplicate an obliteration in the text” (2). Decrying Legrand’s ruthless and punitive approach to the other characters’ linguistic practices, Kempton sees in Jupiter a “valuable, if unorthodox, model of literary interpretation” (3), while Richard Hull observes that Jupiter’s semantic slipups and “silly words, about the bug being of solid gold,” are what lead Legrand to the treasure in the first place: Jupiter’s “doubling of meaning lets a truth happen” (2). Jupiter’s presence and utterances in “The Gold Bug” reconfigure our understanding of the tale no less than Legrand’s put-up job; then, Legrand’s act of “sober mystification” theorizes a structure of deception, rather than a single instance of deceit.

In “The Gold Bug,” as in “Rue Morgue,” to parse the “hostile reciproc- ity” that characterizes an implausible affiliation between two individuals, we wade into the thick of an interdependency that registers in curious instances of metonymic slippage and metaphoric leaps. Poe mobilizes metaphor and metonymy—devices that, respectively, model the figure of the “clue” and the acts of “imaginative identification” at the core of classical detective fiction—not solely in pursuit of Kidd’s gold, but also to conceptualize an elaborate structure of possession. “The Gold Bug” deliberates the implications of conscripting bodies and imagines prospects for interracial sociability and competition in the antebellum period. What is more, Jupiter’s manumitted state and the absent physical record of his manumission are central subtexts of the story because they pull together questions of metonymic kinship and metaphoric relation, signaling what, in a slavery economy, it might mean “to have been possessed.”

A NERVOUS POSSESSIVENESS

Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value, is just as much a social product as language.

—KARL MARX, CAPITAL
Jupiter’s manumission certifies that this man has ceased to be another man’s commodity, even if its possession is no guarantee he acts according to his free will. In a slavery economy, this document divests Legrand of capital; it is the antithesis of Kidd’s treasure map, which restitutes the fallen fortunes of Legrand’s ancient Huguenot family. Poe writes that Jupiter was manumitted prior “to the reverses of the family,” an unpropitious act, it seems, given their impending descent into penury (199). Nevertheless, Jupiter has not deserted his charge, even in the face of “threats” and “promises”; Kempton wryly observes that an official release from bondage “has brought no palpable relief from the rigors of domestic servitude” (10). Jupiter has refused to take his manumission, a discharge from the hand of the master, at its letter. At the same time, however, the circumstances surrounding his service are suspect, given that Legrand’s family has “contrived to instill this obstinacy into Jupiter,” or somehow conspired to sustain this dogged devotion (Poe 199). Thus with Jupiter’s manumission we see something like the familiar figure from Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter,” of which Lacan writes, “We are quite simply dealing with a letter which has been diverted from its path; one whose course has been prolonged (etymologically, the word of the title), or, to revert to the language of the post office, a letter in sufferance” (“Purloined” 43). In the case of “The Gold Bug,” mettre à gauche the manumission of Jupiter is to ensure his “right of attendance upon the footsteps of his young ‘Massa Will’” (199).

Yet Jupiter’s entitled presence—a sort of absence in turn because there is no proper title with which to address him, and he generally retains the old mark of slavery in the text—is now charged with the character of pursuit. Jupiter’s “attendance” suggests acts of reading or detection as he follows the traces left by William Legrand. He has become the former master’s shadow, tracking his footsteps, though perhaps inadvertently according to the wishes of Legrand’s family, who have encouraged in Jupiter the “supervision and guardianship of the wanderer” (199). Jupiter’s function is authoritative, protective, and at the service of Legrand’s clan. His vision sticks to Legrand’s movements, a policy that reveals some foresight since Legrand will finally uncover the treasure necessary to overturn the “misfortune” of his wealth. Meanwhile, Legrand’s “misfortune” is a legacy of missed fortune for Jupiter, who apparently holds his manumission in reserve, who inhabits a position in an order of things that has been evacuated. His presence is sanctioned by a past servitude from which he was dismissed; the manumission testifies to this earlier relation. A loss of the document, on the other hand, would
signify an equally precarious set of relations, which would in antebellum America be quickly shored up via the reinstatement of Jupiter’s slave status. Consequently, his condition is noted with fluctuating terms—his value as commodity can neither be pinned down nor negated.

Orlando Patterson has noted that insofar as manumission resuscitated slaves from a state of social death, it entered into an arithmetic of double negatives, enacting “the negation of the negation of social life” (211). This peculiar transaction, configured, as it seems to be in the case of Jupiter, to relieve Legrand of the responsibility for his slave in light of his own fiscal “mortification,” implies that Jupiter’s manumission is less an effect of revolutionary idealism than evidence of a recession in his master’s power. That Jupiter should profit from Legrand’s loss of fortune, though, is an unexpected contingency. Patterson contends that manumission is “an act of creation brought about by an act of double negation initiated by the freely given decision on the part of the master to part with something—his power—for nothing” (211). But has Legrand parted with power if Jupiter has not parted with Legrand? By 1841, manumission throughout the South was no longer simply a prerogative of the master, as it had been in the wake of independence. Instead, from the 1820s on, manumission required sanction from legislative and judicial bodies and generally carried with it stipulations that the freed bondsman depart immediately the state in which he had been enslaved (Berlin 28–29). To ensure the freed bondsman’s departure, legislation permitted emancipated slaves to be seized as payment for debts held by their former masters (138). Though he is newly established on Sullivan Island—a port of entry where slaves were once quarantined in anticipation of induction to that “peculiar” institution—Jupiter’s unremitting proximity to his former master suggests that, the manumission notwithstanding, his place is of a handy retainer. Their continued association, a metonymic link never entirely severed, lends Jupiter the air of bound labor.

Thus the missing manumission might function as a map of the meaning of Jupiter’s body, a map of floating signifiers and prevaricating signs, since the document that manumits reveals both a history of servitude and its subsequent termination, all present evidence to the contrary. His black skin, for instance, is no longer an indicator of servitude. And the manumission takes up the position of the fetish, since it simultaneously acknowledges and disavows the dehumanizing circumstances of master-slave relations. Still, it also points to an ironic mimicry of those relations, since the rendering of his own value to Jupiter gives way to a comedic upheaval of fates, with Jupiter
acting as LeGrand’s warden. Having been sent, he now tails after his former master, a piece of circular logic that evokes a relationship of debt in which Jupiter, though no longer technically compelled to extend his services, does so compulsively and of his own inclination. Poe’s ex-slave who remains a slave is evidence of the repressed returned, anticipating a cycle of indebtedness that would characterize the relations of blacks and whites in America following emancipation, where “the very bestowal of freedom established the indebtedness of the freed through a calculus of blame and responsibility that mandated that the formerly enslaved both repay this investment of faith and prove their worthiness” (Hartman 131). Unspoken stipulations of debt suspended the subject in a state where his or her freedom was necessarily affixed to a moment of futurity. Along these lines, Jupiter’s manumission is unwieldy currency at best.

The failure (or the success) of writing to confer value upon the reader and writer alike is clearly one of the concerns of “The Gold Bug,” and it is an interest that links the terms of aesthetics to the terms of production. The perception that paper and coined money could be an insubstantial or “shadow” stand-in for gold (rendered thus purely by an act of Congress in the early Republic) corresponded to a view of aesthetics that allowed a voluntary suspension of disbelief to convert the written word into “the real thing” (Shell 18). From 1825 to 1845, however, the proliferation of “ghost notes” from “phantom banks” that masqueraded as legitimate tender did little to enhance the case for paper. Notes that “passed” destabilized economies and aesthetics, drawing attention to the uneasy relations between symbols and the things to which they referred, and engendering public wariness toward an unsound system of signs. Marc Shell comments, “The sign of the monetary diabolus, which many Americans insisted was like the one that God impressed in Cain’s forehead, condemns men to misunderstand the world of symbols and things in which they live” (18–19). This mark of Cain—which was also, incidentally, employed unfailingly as a justification for the differentiation and enforced labor of blacks in antebellum America—was evidence of a distortion or failure of natural relations between the sign and its substance, leading to a postlapsarian state of commodity, and linguistic, slippage.

Jupiter’s presence as shadow in “The Gold Bug,” and the slippage that results, is perhaps best revealed by a vaudevillian encounter in which Jupiter makes a report of LeGrand’s activities to the narrator.8 A “dispirited” Jupiter recounts, “Todder day he gib me slip fore de sun up and was gone de whole
Legrand had shrewdly discovered the means to detach himself from his shadow (by departing before sunrise) in consequence of which Jupiter had prepared “a big stick ready cut for to gib him d——d good beating when he did come” (202). Moments later, the narrator reads this letter from Legrand that Jupiter has conveyed to the mainland: “Would you believe it?—he had prepared a huge stick, the other day, with which to chastise me for giving him the slip, and spending the day, solus, among the hills on the main land” (203). Jupiter’s words dovetail neatly with Legrand’s report, a reverberation of an identical tale heard in advance, or conversely, Legrand’s letter substantiates the claims Jupiter has already made. In this scene, Jupiter, the narrator, and the letter are a threesome; the letter makes Legrand an absent presence, though his stand-in, his “shadow” is there already. Does that make Jupiter the shadow to a dispatch? He is at the same time an echo and an emissary (making the encounter merely a twosome—or perhaps a foursome): he is a doubled shadow. Jupiter and the letter he carries jointly describe the giving of “the slip” on Legrand’s part, an activity that (like the manumission) associatively combines a scrap of paper with the termination of contact and contractual relations. In addition, both point to the stick that Jupiter had proposed to use to discipline the subject who eluded his pursuit, who did not “stick” to him, though Legrand’s letter tenders another moment of slippage by construing Jupiter’s brutal intent, a “d——d good beating” as a rhetorical gesture, chastisement. Whatever the intended punishment, it ultimately went undelivered on account of Legrand’s manner; he notes, “I verily believe that my ill looks alone saved me a flogging” (203). This hint at a reversal of master-slave relations and Jupiter’s potential to inflict damage on his former master is curtailed by Legrand’s “ill looks alone,” a phrase that may describe the decline of his health as a result of “spending the day, solus,” without his shadow—or possibly the malevolent glance of Legrand is sufficient to regulate Jupiter’s own arm, turning it to his wishes.

Legrand’s capacity to regulate Jupiter, to exploit him as both follower and field guide, is essential to his treasure-hunting project. It is no wonder that Kempton identifies Jupiter as the “slave at hand” and “prosthetic extension” Legrand requires to succeed with his project (10). Since Jupiter is not a slave, however, Legrand’s achievement is to make Jupiter revert to his former status, which he manages to do through rhetorical and monetary inducements. And to the extent that Jupiter offers a sort of amplified dexterity to Legrand’s pursuit of treasure, he comes to exemplify the function of the slave-commodity. He embodies Legrand’s aims by becoming emptied of his own. Saidiya Hartman explains,
The fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master’s body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and domination. (21)

Already at one remove from his own will through his status as prosthesis (the greenback to Legrand’s specie), but no longer a slave, Jupiter is and is not what he is not (a slave, a sign of the master’s power); he fills the space of the sign that technically does not exist because the manumission signifies its erasure.

To the extent that Jupiter is depicted as under the sway of Legrand, the two replicate the parts of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, where the lord or master is posited as “a pure self-consciousness,” while the bondsman or slave is the “dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another” (115). What is of particular interest in Hegel’s conceptualization of lordship and bondage, however, is the unsatisfactory stalemate precipitated by the master’s discovery that he is handcuffed to that being whom he dominates—insofar as the lord’s evidence of “being-for-self” is mediated through the bondsman, one for whom “thinghood is the essential characteristic,” there can exist between the two only “a recognition that is one-sided and unequal” (116). Given that the “servile consciousness” of the slave cannot supply the recognition he desires, and seeing as he is, nevertheless, utterly dependent on the bondsman, the master finds himself restricted to the parasitic enjoyment of the products of slave labor (Bull 227). This is “the unthinkable and productive episode during which the master both recognizes and represses the fact that his mastery is slave-made, he and his are blacks in whiteface,” which Richard Godden points to in his writing on slavery in Faulkner (3–4), or what Alexandre Kojève has described as “an existential impasse” experienced by the master (9).

The relationship between Jupiter and Legrand is not so easily grasped, however, especially as Jupiter plays both the domestic and an antagonistic quest-companion to Legrand in the eyes of a narrator whose scopic insight is highly suggestible. That “thinghood” Hegel ascribes to the slave, his existence as sign and surrogate (the substance of some other self), hardly gets at the precariousness of the antebellum economy Jupiter inhabits or the inconsistencies of perception and attribution in the eyes of every party. Consider, for instance, that the American enthusiasm for racial slavery required slaves embody the incongruous aspirations at the core of a capitalist ethos: they
must be of “fixed character” and flexible worth, yielding to market volatility (O’Malley, *Face Value* 15). Moreover, the structure of interracial socialization that restricted the social existence of enslaved persons was not buttressed by a homogenous regime of disciplinary tactics; on the contrary, spectacular physical penalties and panoptic surveillance colluded to govern the status of the slave (Wiegman 39). But social regulation was always uneven, piecemeal, the antebellum world a social text characterized precisely by lapses, overlaps and perforations in the administration of racial hierarchies, including manumission. Robert Olwell points out that even in pre-Revolutionary South Carolina, “Low Country Slaves were regarded as property, first, last, and always”; the Negro Act of that state designated slaves “subjects of property, in the hands of particular persons”—and yet slaves could, in various ways, bend market laws to their own interests by acquiring property, the first step necessary for “transcending, or at least disguising, their legal condition as property” (145). Under these conditions, the slaveholder (a disciple of “possessive individualism” whose station was conferred in part or in sum by ancillary possessions) might suffer from what historian Ronald Takaki calls a “nervous possessiveness” (74). Accordingly, a manumitted man or, for that matter, any variety of free labor was a distressing sign of his dissolution, or a dispersal of his interests. One defense against this irritation, however, was to forcibly reincorporate free(d) men into the antebellum economy, subjecting them to new forms of bonded labor—forms that often anticipated the fate of the emancipated slaves at the end of the Civil War, when, “reduced to the machinery of bodily physical labor, black people learned to appear before whites as though they were zombies” (bell hooks qtd. in Holland 15, my italics). To put this slightly differently, a mutual duplicity born of hostile reciprocity superficially preserved preexisting relations (and for the emancipated slave, a pretense of “thinghood” safeguarded its opposite).

In the same way that Jupiter wraps the gold bug in a covering of invisible text in order to incapacitate it, Legrand’s manumission paralyzes rather than emancipates the former slave—or at least it appears to. Jupiter leaves traces of Legrand’s authority at every turn. As Legrand’s shadow and prosthesis, Jupiter is, like the gold bug, a metonymic curiosity, but he is also something like the “unknown bivalve” that Legrand claims to have discovered in conjunction with the gold bug at the opening of the tale. We first discover Jupiter as a benign stereotype “grinning from ear to ear,” mimicking, perhaps, the appearance of the hinged shell the mollusk sports (199). Like the coin-shaped shells, restricted to the enormous bank of Sullivan Island
that stretches “about three miles long” (198), Jupiter is consigned to a liminal space, neither strictly commodity nor strictly free. And if Legrand has discovered in the bivalve a “new genus,” Jupiter is no less a new species of bivalue, whose worth has been both distorted and prolonged by the manumission. He is, like the joined shell of the mollusk, intrinsically a doubled figure.

What can be said finally about Jupiter’s manumission? The most grotesque implication is the possibility that the restitution of Legrand’s fortune would return Jupiter to slavery, facilitating a perverse chiasmus whereby the rise of one reverses the fortune of the other. A more elusive proposition takes Jupiter’s subservience for the guise of hostile reciprocity. Then his manumission is currency held in reserve and waiting only to be redeemed.

MORE THAN KIN

One morning, very early, before the sun was up,
I rose and found the shining dew on every buttercup;
But my lazy little shadow, like an arrant sleepy-head,
Had stayed at home behind me and was fast asleep in bed.

—ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON, “MY SHADOW”

“The Gold Bug” performs a sleight of hand by which, as I have suggested, Jupiter appears in the part of the slave rather than the independent agent. Yet Legrand depends on Jupiter to track down the landmarks that lead to Kidd’s treasure. Though Jupiter may seem a vestigial appendage to his former master, the treasure hunt sheds light on the precise nature of their relationship. It spurs them to consider the management and manipulation of a man’s body according to another man’s whims.

When Legrand instructs Jupiter to crawl out on the near-rotten bough of the tulip tree with the gold bug in tow—a service for which he will be compensated with a silver dollar—Jupiter complies, and discovers, with the series of exclamations “o-o-o-o-oh!” that there is “noffin but a skull” attached to the branch (209–10). Jupiter’s observation that “somebody bin lef him head up de tree” suggests two competing insights in one: first, there is a voluntary act of disembodiment (some body, a subject, has left its head), and second, an act of abandonment (somebody, an object, has “bin lef”) (210). Critically, the skull located on the tulip tree is affixed to what Jupiter and Legrand determine is a “dead limb,” and the use of catachresis here foreshadows the discovery of the bones of Captain Kidd’s murdered associates, mean-
while suggesting the assembly of an untidy and very compressed skeleton (209). The skull corresponds to the image of the death’s-head on Legrand’s treasure map. On the mainland, however, an actual skull cannot function exclusively as a signpost for the treasure. It divulges its own chronology, and the tree branch it is fixed to involuntarily re-members its living antecedent, as the limb that keeps it in its place. When Legrand demands, “How is it fastened to the limb?—what holds it on?”—a question that is perhaps immaterial to a treasure hunter, but indispensable to another kind of code-cracker—Jupiter answers, “Dare’s a great big nail in de skull, what fastens ob it on to de tree” (210). Jupiter had remarked of the rotten branch that “him dead as de door-nail”; in this case the nail on the disintegrated limb suspends, or rather clinches, the death’s-head (209).

According to Legrand’s treasure map, the skull establishes one of the coordinates required to locate the treasure. The map instructs him to “shoot from the left eye of the death’s-head” (228). In order to plot the point, however, it is necessary for Jupiter to do the legwork by shadowing the laborer who deposited the skull there in the first place at the behest of Captain Kidd. Legrand instructs him:

“Pay attention, then!—find the left eye of the skull.”
“Hum! hoo! dat’s good! why dar aint no eye lef at all.” (210)

Jupiter’s ironic comment implies that the absent eye, an organ apparently gouged long ago by scavenging birds, empties the skull of its subjectivity (its “I”), stressing its indexical and cautionary functions. Jupiter associates the “eye” with the “I”: whereas “somebody bin lef him head,” a mere figure or unit, there was “no eye lef at all.” Legrand insists, on the other hand, that the left eye can be discovered.

“Curse your stupidity! do you know your right hand from your left?”
“Yes, I nose dat—nose all bout dat—tis my left hand what I chops de wood wid.”
“To be sure! you are left-handed; and your left eye is on the same side as your left hand.” (210)

Terms of servitude are most literally (if not unambiguously) figured in the guidelines Jupiter uses to locate the correct eye. This technique for distinguishing right from left requires a laboring subjectivity; an “I” can be seen
only in relation to the hand with which Jupiter chops wood. Additionally, that Legrand's initial demand, "Do you hear?" is followed by Jupiter's unwitting enumeration of other sensory organs (the "nose" and "eye") suggests that the matter at hand is dismemberment or deprivation, the severing of body parts and their dissection from the world—the "division" of a laborer. It is also in this sense that the topic that Jupiter knows "all about" (seemingly skirts) is the slip that allows a nose to transform into a noose. Interestingly, Jupiter employs both the terms "left" and "lef" but not according to some pattern of semantic differentiation; instead the term that suffers from dismemberment ("lef") is used to single out the disembodied skull. Kempton remarks, "The 'left' eye of the skull is the portal to gold, for it is through this eye that the shot must be dropped; but because no eye is 'lef,' the 'left' eye, which is a hole (or cipher), is also associated with emptiness and loss: discovery is linked to deprivation, the golden plentitude to the absent eye, via the nexus 'left'('/') 'lef'" (12). In this case the "o-o-o-o-oh!" becomes the series of bullets Jupiter expels when he confronts the skull, a string of missing "eyes," or, like a noose, the articulation of the loss the "o-o-o-o-oh" embodies.

The conundrum Jupiter faces is that insofar as the skull is construed as pure sign, it ceases to have a correspondence with the body. Should he lower his gaze to locate its absent arm, no hand is in sight. The struggle to locate the left eye of the skull produces "a long pause," following which he demands of Legrand, "Is de lef eye of de skull pon de same side as de lef hand of de skull too?—cause de skull aint got not a bit ob a hand at all—nebber mind!" (210). Later, Legrand will speculate that "the mind struggles to establish a connexion—a sequence of cause and effect—and being unable to do so, suffers a species of temporary paralysis" (217). At this moment in the tale Jupiter's hesitation marks an attempt to reconstruct the conditions of servitude, to make the connection between the anatomical cavity of the "lef eye" in the human carcass that makes the skull valuable to Legrand, and the missing "I" to which it refers, the ghastly act of invisible labor that generated the skull (its morbid production). Paradoxically, the laboring body must momentarily materialize for the sign to function, which in turn requires an imaginary repetition of the act of violent dismemberment; the imaginary restitution of the labor behind the commodity is the flip side to this act of erasure. The distinction here is between metonymy and metaphor. To read the skull as sign, as Legrand does, is to locate the treasure (using what is "left"), but Jupiter imaginatively retrieves that skull's lost limb—a bit of wordplay that hoists the eyes again upward (a measure of the physical interval between the
homographs “limb” and “limb”) and suggests the contours of another paralyzing circuit: a perpetual recollection of the terms by which the skull came to be fixed to the tree.

And what of the distinction between right and left that Kidd's map requires of the treasure hunters? Some clue to the meaning of this directive may be found in Poe's 1836 essay “Maelzel's Chess Player.” In this work, Poe investigates an exhibition piece that he calls the Automaton Chess-Player, an apparatus invented in 1769 by one Baron Kempelen and subsequently taken possession of by Maelzel. This device, worthy of mention in M. Brewster's Letters on Natural Magic, takes the form of an oversized “Turk” seated cross-legged on a maple box or cabinet, and typically engages a member of the audience in a game of chess. Poe's essay is devoted to challenging the supposition that the automaton is “unconnected with human agency in its movements” (138). One anonymous author, Poe’s speaker reports, concluded that the human who controls the “automaton” conceals his operations by shifting from one end of the cabinet to another, so that the doors of the cabinet, opened in turn, expose only machinery and never a human agent. The man peeks out at the chess game in progress through a curtain of gauze in the chest of the cabinet, but scuttles from any opening that would disclose his position. Accordingly, his presence remains veiled to the senses. As a result, the true operations of the automaton are impossible, on the one hand, to arrive at “by any inductive reasoning” and, on the other, superfluous to demonstrate: “It was altogether unnecessary to devote seven or eight pages for the purpose of proving what no one in his sense would deny—viz.: that the wonderful mechanical genius of Baron Kempelen could invent the necessary means for shutting a door or slipping aside a panel, with a human agent too at his service in actual contact with the panel or the door” (155–56). Thus one object of fascination is exchanged for another. The “wonderful mechanical genius” who pretends to have engineered a mechanical “Turk” has concocted something altogether more wonderful: an apparently mechanized device that actually operates by the effect of an invisible human hand, a puppeteer all “entirely out of the reach of the observation of the spectators” (156).

Poe’s speaker goes on to detail seventeen particulars that substantiate his claim that the device functions through human intervention, but it is the last of these that is of interest for our purposes. If the arrangement were purely mechanical, he asserts, if it were merely a contraption set into motion by Baron Kempelen, the use of its machine arms should be arbitrary. It ought to be equally capable of handling the chess pieces with its left or right
appendage. This is in stark contrast to the principles that govern the human body, “wherein there is a marked and radical difference in the construction, and, at all events, in the powers, of the right and left arms” (173). Poe concludes that because the automaton’s dexterity is confined to its left arm, however, it implies the presence of a man inside the maple box comfortably controlling the mechanism with his right arm: “The Automaton plays with his left arm, because under no other circumstances could the man within play with his right—a desideratum of course” (173). The absence of an ulterior, or rather interior, hand would secure the automaton’s emergence as a thing, while its “preference” for the left hand, a gesture distinctly alien to the human body, finally proclaims the presence of a right-handed individual in the cabinet. In “The Gold Bug” Jupiter intimates his own left-handedness, but he also seems to recognize his arms indifferently, given that for some reason he shoots the gold bug through the wrong eye of the skull, the right rather than the left. Is this due to a misapprehension that the orientation of the skull on the branch is identical to his own, rather than its mirror image? Is it that Legrand presumes Jupiter’s left-handedness, though Jupiter is actually right-handed? For Poe, it is this problem of mirroring—“We must imagine some reversion—for the Chess-Player plays precisely as a man would not”—that ultimately exposes a concealed human presence (173). John Irwin comments that

whether Jupiter is actually left-handed, as his master suggests, is not clear from the story, but what is clear is that the difference between master and slave, between the mind that gives the orders and the physical mechanism (the body) that carries them out, is associated here with the difference between right and left, a knowledge that “Massa Will” (as Jupiter calls him) possesses and that his body servant does not. (Mystery to a Solution 107)

If Legrand only imagines that Jupiter is left-handed, then he (Legrand) asserts that his is the hand that maneuvers Jupiter, the “head” that props up Jupiter’s arm. What then of the tree limb Jupiter has attained; whose is the head that propped up that arm which props up the head somebody “bin lef”?

At this point, the point worth pressing is the degree to which Poe’s tale and its critics (including myself) are preoccupied with veering to the left, when such an examination obviously comes at the expense of contemplating Jupiter’s rights. The difference between left and right seems critical in a situa-
tion where confusion apparently prevails over where and even what Jupiter’s
devils might be and actually are. His impulse to choose the right eye rather
than the left results in violent threats—though Legrand can rectify the “er-
ror” through computation—while Jupiter’s supposed preference for his left
hand implies some hidden management. So far we have accounted for the
story’s play on the terms “right” and “left” and its insistence on confusing
one with the other: the right to have left, the right of attendance, the right
to wait, the right to “be left.” Kidd’s message, too, colludes in a disciplinary
act that reproduces the laboring “I” slaughtered to safeguard treasure. The
line of reasoning that has yet to be examined is whether the right is a line
that can be pursued. Is it possible, for instance, that Jupiter has calculatingly
dropped the bug through the right eye to deliberately misdirect (i.e., double-
cross) Legrand so that he can later assert proprietary rights, returning to
drop the gold bug through the left eye and dig up the treasure for himself?

And yet the conscription of his body as commodity and currency sur-
faces again. After Kidd’s hoard is unearthed, Jupiter submerges himself
in the treasure chest. The narrator observes that “Jupiter’s countenance
wore, for some minutes, as deadly a pallor as it is possible, in the nature
of things, for any negro’s visage to assume,” a physical transformation that
suggests the golden coins have produced a vampiric effect and mesmer-
ized the man—“He seemed stupefied— thunderstricken” (Poe 214). This
fading in the face of gold also brings to mind the practice by which cur-
rency floats. Jupiter, whose labor had afforded him some value, now pales
in comparison to the specie in the pit; his value is exhausted, or it has
become invisible—or white? Shortly afterward, Jupiter tumbles into the
chest, a posture that evokes as fellows the two laborers whose “complete
skeletons” were discovered in the pit alongside the precious metals. Or
perhaps Jupiter is himself a poor kind of coin—corroborating the narra-
tor’s deadpan observation about the contents of the treasure chest: “There
was no American money” (215).

The narrator’s assertion that Jupiter lounges in the treasure “as if enjoy-
ing the luxury of a bath” seems wide of the mark (214), as does Kempton’s
suggestion that he is “receiving baptism at the sacred font of the treasure
chest” (13). Instead, this event is both an allegory for Jupiter’s function as a
commodity and a reenactment of the murders that Legrand will soon specu-
late may have occurred: Jupiter falls into the set of social relations according
to which his value is established: the “stupefied” man plunges forward and
onto his knees, “burying his naked arms” in the gold—almost as if he has re-
ceived the “couple of blows with a mattock” that Legrand later intimates was
the fate of Kidd’s companions (214, 229). Moreover, this picture of Jupiter, dazed and prostrate, recalls earlier occasions in the tale when Jupiter risks defying Legrand’s orders. When he resists climbing up the tree with the gold bug in tow, and again when he insinuates he might drop the thing, Legrand terrorizes him: “I shall be under the necessity of breaking your head with this shovel” (207). And when it occurs to Legrand that their failure to find the treasure might be due to errors on Jupiter’s part, he seizes Jupiter by the collar, after which “The astonished negro opened his eyes and mouth to the fullest extent, let fall the spades, and fell upon his knees” (212). Violence, in Poe’s story, finally intervenes to refute the question of the laborer’s rights. This is a discipline that would reinstall subjugation. Under such circumstances, Jupiter seems to submit to Legrand’s will, meekly responding, “Yes, massa, needn’t hollo at poor nigger dat style” (209).

Let me attempt to sketch the structure of the proprietary relations I have related thus far. The central object in “The Gold Bug” is a fortune found by deciphering a map whose markers are made, in part, of a man’s body. I have suggested that, when they confront the map, Legrand and Jupiter part interpretive ways: the former adopts metonymy, the latter metaphor as his modus operandi. Tied to a metonymic chain of circumstance, Legrand finds himself “under the necessity” of pursuing it to its end, even violently recruiting a manumitted man to stick to the chase. By contrast, Jupiter’s imaginative identification with the bare bones of the treasure map moves him to mirror the person the skull summons to mind, and to picture this laborer’s fate. And yet in the moment Legrand seizes Jupiter by the collar, a face-to-face exchange admits they too are doubles, joined perhaps by Legrand’s desperate dependency or Jupiter’s misgivings toward Legrand’s master plan. If Legrand terrorizes the manumitted man into mimed or actual subservience, Jupiter is also both the profound and the obscure object of Legrand’s desire, the target of a hostile reciprocity whose form is vitiating hailing (“hollo” words). At this point, Jupiter becomes the ever unattainable, phantasmatic individual (the “poor nigger”) Legrand proposes to possess.

CRANIA AMERICANA

It may be asked, why I made no efforts to retrieve my fortunes? I answer to that, that I made many, but was so infatuated that I never once thought of resorting to the obvious, rational, and only means; that is to say, of cultivating with industry my forty acres, as my father had done before me.

—ROBERT M. BIRD, SHEPPARD LEE: WRITTEN BY HIMSELF
The interdependencies figured in “The Gold Bug” are central to another antebellum text preoccupied with treasure hunting: Robert M. Bird’s Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself (1836). In this book, imaginative identification takes the form of metempsychosis (spirit possession), and “foreign” bodies become objects of knowledge the protagonist fathoms as their contours become his own. And yet the transitive and intransitive experiences of possession also give rise to metonymic relations, structures of associative thought that reframe metempsychosis as diagnostic tourism and make the protagonist a spectator before the “alien” bodies he inhabits. Sheppard Lee leverages this combination of detection’s mechanisms to parse the hostile reciprocity between different classes of persons in the antebellum landscape, and to delineate a continuum of interracial sociabilities that extends from pure parasitism to strange forms of symbiosis.

Like Legrand in “The Gold Bug,” the protagonist of Sheppard Lee initiates a search for treasure, though his quest in the New Jersey swamps is explicitly indebted to a slave. Sheppard Lee’s familial inheritance includes one Jim Jumble, who, despite Lee’s conscientious attempt to release him from bondage, emphatically refuses to comply with this design. Instead, “He burst into a passion, swore he would not be free, and told me flatly I was his master and I should take care of him” (1:23). In Bird’s text, Lee lays the motives of the slave clear: Jim Jumble prefers a lackadaisical existence of permanent servitude (at the hands of a master whose indolence and incompetence matches his own) to “labouring hard to obtain a precarious subsistence as a free man” (1:23). Consequently, Lee’s servant’s devotion is figured as matter of debt, if not pure parasitism, since Jim Jumble is “determined to stick by me to the last, whether I would or not” (1:24). Sheppard Lee unembarrassedly disavows the economics by which slave owners profit from master-slave relations, even contending that the old slave has no value to speak of—though there is an evenhandedness to Lee’s confession, which further unsettles proprietary relations: “I had but one friend, if I dare call him such; though I should have been glad half the time to be rid of him” (1:23). And Sheppard Lee’s halfhearted proclamations of friendship still pale against Jumble Jim’s enthusiastic legalisms: “The absurd old fool ended by declaring, if I made him a free man he would have the law of me, ‘he would, by ge-hosh!’” (1:23). Jim invokes slavery as a restitution of his rights, rather than a deprivation of them, and yet he also implies that the upshot of freedom would be a reversal of master-slave relations, resulting in his control over and management of his former master. Significantly, Lee is depicted as at the mercy of Jumble
Jim so long as the slave remains in his possession. Jim had “the upper hand of me” (1:23), Lee explains, and Jumble Jim eventually comes to (mis)manage Lee’s rapidly disappearing estate. Curiously, Lee resists holding Jim liable for the depreciation of his fortune. On the contrary, he naively insists that “Jim would never have cheated me, except on a small scale” (1:25).

Jim obstinately consigns himself to Lee’s custody, despite the latter’s efforts to invoke a more amicable than proprietary kinship. By maintaining this attachment, however, Jim obtains access to Lee’s coffers and indefinite profits, so long as he does not fully squander the estate. By contrast, in “The Gold Bug” gestures at reversal are short-lived: they are curbed by “ill looks” and threats of violence, or taken for comedy, rather than assessed at face value. For instance, Jupiter’s name follows “the condescending practice of giving slaves imposing names” (Weissberg 136). “Jumble Jim,” by contrast, suggests something of the Saturnalia that is at work in Bird’s tale, which has Sheppard Lee reject the proceeds of honest labor in favor of a run at treasure hunting.

Jumble Jim supplies the lore from which Sheppard Lee gleaned his mystical directives. In stark contrast to Legrand’s strict use of Kidd’s memorandum, Lee sticks to the letter of Jim’s legends and, according to Jim’s counsel, consults his dreams for a spirit guide who will lead him to the treasure. Lee does not succeed in this adventure, however. After digging a hole of some depth in a swamp, the aggravated Lee drives his mattock into the ground with great force and accidentally plunges the tool into his own foot! A break in the narrative indicates that Lee briefly loses consciousness at this point, only to resume his account by remarking upon a marvelous turn of events: “There I lay on the ground, stiff and lifeless; and here I stood on my feet, alive, and surveying my own corpse, stretched before me” (Bird 1:61). The violent injury, albeit self-inflicted, has resulted in a mysterious doubling of the protagonist, a separation of his corpse from another “I” that surveys it, wandering aimlessly in the forest only to return to its duplicate.

The Lee that narrates becomes preoccupied with the fate of the Lee that lies lifeless, commenting, “I forgot my extraordinary duality in my concern for myself—that is to say, for that part of me, that *eidolon*, or representative, or duplicate of me, that was stretched on the grass” (1:61). Lee’s conception of his physical self as phantom, substitute, and copy systematically enumerates the breadth of metonymic relations, and indeed, this preoccupation with the proliferation of half-lives seems to overshadow the mere fact of duplicity. But Lee is two selves, each autonomous of the other: a body and an “I” that ought to have that body in its possession, but does not. He bewails the state
in which he is “two persons, one of which lives and observes, while the other is wholly defunct” (1:62).

His treasure hunt abandoned, the protagonist (or at least his untethered spirit) takes up temporary residence in a variety of recently deceased bodies, peripatetically taking on the identities of an affluent squire, a dandified city-dweller, a despised Jewish shaver, a naive Quaker philanthropist, a black slave, and a dyspeptic plantation owner, before he is finally reunited with his body and sets about a career of honest labor. Every step along the way, Sheppard Lee meets with disagreeable conditions: he is driven to suicide by the indignities the wealthy Squire Higginson endures at the hands of his insufferable wife and from a painful case of the gout; he despair in the body of the duplicitous fop Dulmer Dawkins, who has incurred unimaginable debts for his frivolities, and so on. However, it is frequently difficult to distinguish the possessor (Lee) from the subject whose body he possesses. This complex affiliation between Lee and his bodily subjects suggests Lee’s metempsychosis is something like mesmerism: under the influence of the mesmerist, the somnambulist “becomes, as it were one body with himself—the egoism or self-consciousness of the one being blended with the egoism or self-consciousness of the other” (Haddock 69). In each instance, however, Lee’s enmity toward his corporeal host is attended by a gradual undifferentiation between the body and its ungrateful tenant, underscoring a hostile reciprocity that builds between the protagonist’s “I” and the “other” he inhabits.

This is a variety of “nervous possessiveness.” Finding his social existence fundamentally intertwined with another body’s yet unable to secure that body as his property, Lee makes that body a criminal object whose rude gestures and ill deeds he anatomizes with uncanny fluency. As the phrenologist traces emotional temperament and cognitive aptitude to the bulges on the subject’s skull (Rzepka 41), Lee takes every suspect act for a defect of an entire race. Moreover, through its proliferation of ethnic slurs and stereotypes, Sheppard Lee foregrounds how metempsychosis and mesmerism pretend to investigate human bodies as objects of knowledge. In practice, however, mesmerism also entailed the mesmerist’s exercise of influence upon “the somnambulist,” depicting it as a kind of (potentially adversarial) possession. As Chauncy Hare Townshend would attest in his widely circulated textbook Facts in Mesmerism, with Reasons for a Dispassionate Inquiry into It (1841), “Man can act upon man, at all times and almost at will, by striking the imagination”; “Signs and gestures the most simple may produce the most powerful effects,” namely hypnotic inducements to act on the desires
of the mesmerist (60). This account of mesmerized subjects as mere marionettes evokes a dynamic of subordination that was distinctly reproduced in the relationships between masters and slaves in the antebellum period. Still, in magnetic sleep, “The intuitive and the ratiocinative meet in the borderland between wakeful and ecstatic states,” and the somnambulist, though subordinate to the mesmerist, partakes in the universal while retaining her own consciousness (Mills 56). As a result, the complex rapport between the mesmerist and his patient offered a model of domination and subordination distinct from master-slave relations.12

But what we see in Sheppard Lee is the apparent incompatibility of one soul with another, since Lee and the various individuals whose bodies he appropriates are depicted as wrestling tenants—even as Lee is nearly subsumed by the personality associated with the other’s form. The regularity with which Lee’s personality is eclipsed and partially subsumed by the entity he hopes to displace does not merely call into question the duality of the soul of the Jew, the Quaker, the slave, and so on. It also registers each of these personalities as a single-mindedness anchored in the body, whose domination of the protagonist is anathema, and, as such, an obstruction to the observance of republican ideals. In this case, Lee’s acts of imaginative identification (which paradoxically double as attempts to exonerate his own choices by indicting his proximate hosts) are predicated on pure projection, an effect of aggressive insight that willfully misses its mark. To imagine the “other” one inhabits as burlesque comes perilously close to divesting oneself of the obligations of possessive individualism. It divulges a masochistic longing to have one’s “I” swallowed up by a caricature.

Poe’s review of Sheppard Lee also scrutinizes this “conception of the metempsychosis which is the basis of the narrative”: the protagonist’s habitation of various bodies once released from his own corpse (137). It is this shared property that is the pretext for abandoning self-propriety. When out of necessity, for instance, Sheppard Lee’s spirit plunges into the dead body of the Jewish shaver Abram Skinner—the “old Goldfist,” as he has called him in a previous incarnation—the protagonist is immediately seized by a single-minded aim: “The only idea that possessed me was, ‘What am I worth? how much more can I make myself worth?’” (Bird 1:258). At the first opportunity, the sickly Skinner (now inhabited by the spirit of Sheppard Lee) unearths his book of accounts “over which I gloated with the mingled anxiety and delight that had doubtless distinguished the studies of the true Goldfist,” and proceeds to engage in dubious financial dealings designed to swindle his
clients (1:258). Poe calls Lee’s “adventures” by proxy in the world of Abram Skinner “full of interest,” applauding the “racy details of stock-jobbing and usury” with an unpleasant vigor, though Bird’s poorly elaborated notions of metempsychosis are also most evident here (“Sheppard Lee” 134).13

In depicting the transmigration of his protagonist’s spirit from one body to the next, Bird clumsily lodges two consciousnesses in one body, but never manages to definitively designate which part controls its other. The result is, in the person of Abram Skinner, a kind of stuttering anti-Semitism. For instance, while Lee volubly protests against “the love of money” that “was the ruling passion” of Abram Skinner when he describes the time spent in the man’s body (1:260), Skinner is also his alibi, since Lee’s activities energetically embody the forces of social antagonism he otherwise condemns. His careful attribution of his treacherous dealings to “I, or rather my prototype, Abram Skinner,” implies that Skinner’s body enjoins Lee to act the part of the avaricious “Jew”—as if the body’s biology were the source of moral putrefaction or some other dark influence that would imprison the soul (1:259). Lee at least concedes that he is himself to blame for selecting so unpromising a specimen as the chief residence for his soul, judiciously commenting, “He who rides with the devil must put up with his driving; and he who deals with his nephews must look for something warmer than burnt fingers” (1:268). The protagonist’s internalization of the nefarious transactions of the “Jew” only multiplies the confusion. Is it the body that would fleece the soul who dares enter it? What are we to make of the exact equivalence between Lee’s impersonation of Abram Skinner and his moral estimation of the Jew? Poe’s critique of Sheppard Lee, which advises a strict ratio of one soul per body, is a call for a soul-segregation that would preclude such messy dealings. By contrast, Sheppard Lee suggests that the “other” is conjured by equal parts association and imaginative identification. In this way, a mix of metonymy and metaphor (a protective projection that allows Lee to profit while guarding against “contamination”) transforms proprietary relations into hostile dependency and allows interpersonal affiliation to double as its opposite.

In Sheppard Lee, a complex interplay of interpersonal affiliation and forensic sightseeing produce anti-Semitic confusion and ontological seesawing. This disorder persists in the second volume of the novel, when Lee is obliged to escape the body of the Quaker philanthropist Zachariah Longstraw—who has been taken for an abolitionist, kidnapped, and “sent downriver” for a spectacle lynching—and plunges into the body of an injured slave known only as “Nigger Tom.” At first, this turn of events affords
Bird the opportunity to paint a degrading racial caricature. After discovering upon his head a “mop of elastic wool, such as never grew upon the scalp of a white man” (2:158), Lee catches a glimpse of himself and is repulsed by his own appearance: “Miserable me! my face was as black as my arms—and, indeed, somewhat more so—presenting a sable globe, broken only by two red lips of immense magnitude, and a brace of eyes as white and as wide as plain China saucers, or peeled turnips” (2:158). As his spirit “settles in” and assumes the disposition of “Nigger Tom,” however, Lee’s memoir of plantation life turns Edenic. When the other slaves dance and sing, Tom is “seized with an unaccountable desire to join them” (2:168). Intuiting Tom’s view, Lee is vastly pleased by this reversal of fortune; he ceases to consider “my own bitter state of servitude” and instead declares, “I was filled with a foolish glee” (2:168). The droll slave happily submits to being made use of as child’s toy by his master’s son Tommy: “Down I dropped on my hands and knees, and taking him on my back, began to trot, and gallop, and rear, and curvet over the lawn, to the infinite gratification of himself” (168).

Lee repeatedly describes his satisfaction with his life as a slave, emphasizing that “I sought no opportunity to give my master the slip, and make a bold push for freedom.” Instead he is “content, or very nearly so, with my condition, free from cares, far removed from disquiet, and, if not actually in love with my lot, so far from being dissatisfied, that I had not the least desire to exchange it for another” (2:170–71). Should this statement strain all credulity, Lee protests that a “defect of memory will account for my being satisfied with my new condition”: “I forgot that I once had been a freeman, or, to speak more strictly, I did not remember it, the act of remembering involving an effort of mind which it did not comport with my new habits of laziness and indifference to make, though perhaps I might have done so, had I chosen” (2:171). Tom’s conquest of this habitual spirit traveler—even to the point of depriving Lee of the faculty of memory—is, paradoxically, the sign of the slave’s malfunctioning intellectual engine. And despite Lee-as-Tom’s professed contentment, the text undermines the protagonist’s reconciliation with bondage, since in this part of the text slave’s vernacular is firmly distinguished from the narration, which retains the character of Sheppard Lee’s original voice. (By comparison, when Lee impersonated the Quaker Zachariah Longstraw, the narration gave itself over to a profusion of “thee” and “verily” that peppered the man’s speech.) Here, Lee’s narration is impervious to the dialect spoken by “Nigger Tom.” This failure of affect unsettles Bird’s enterprise, since Lee never ventriloquizes Tom’s predilection for the institu-
tion of slavery except in his (Lee’s) private, noncolloquial ruminations on the subject.

This episode in Sheppard Lee is more properly a cautionary tale on the effects of incendiary literature, namely, the dangers of abolitionist pamphlets that might incite slaves to revolt. Yet the text also seems to argue against this alarmist position, given its portrayal of slaves as both illiterate and congenial beings, taken with “mimicry and merriment” when they come across some woodcuts that show “negroes in chains, under the lash, exposed in the market for sale” and so on (2:182). So far are these images from the purview of the southern slave’s experience, Sheppard Lee insists, that their conception of slavery is completely inconsistent with its reality. The slaves initially respond by cursing the pamphlet and abolition more generally, crying out, “Little book big lie!” (184) when Tom (who for reasons unexplained has inherited Lee’s literacy or has been literate all along) reads the pamphlet aloud to them. In fact, the slaves object to representations in the pamphlet, since “the chain and scourge appeared no longer as the punishment of an individual; they were to be regarded as the doom of the race” (2:183–84).

Thus an argument chastising the slaveholder elicits a revolutionary impulse among the slaves, whom the pamphlet informs that “the horrors of Hayti would be enacted a second time, and within our own borders” and teaches “to look on themselves as the victims of avarice, the play-things of cruelty, the foot-balls of oppression, the most injured people in the world” (2:191). This “fatal book,” Lee reports, “infected my own spirit,” delivering him over to “sentimental notions about liberty and equality, the dignity of man, the nobleness of freedom, and so forth” (2:193)—notions that were presumably organic to his personality as a white man, if rendered foreign by his habitation of a black body. Significantly, these reading habits (and not self-realization through labor) incite the slaves to emancipate themselves. Moreover, the uprising Bird invents depends on Lee’s assertion that slaves do not work. In fact, Lee never extorts labor from the indolent, lounging, and unproductive “Nigger Tom.” Consequently, it is Bird’s exaggerated depiction of a self not fit to govern itself that comes closest to his original image of the protagonist Sheppard Lee, who is a foe of honest labor.

But if Bird’s defense of slavery is his picture of Negro ungovernability and imminent rebellion, what are we to make of the slaves’ collective refusal to observe a protocol of subservience, or their becoming an organized force prepared to revolt against the master and to battle to their deaths? When the mesmerist takes control of the somnambulist, Hegel explains, “There is
only one subjectivity of consciousness: the patient has a sort of individuality, but it is empty, not on the spot, not actual” (qtd. in Bull 238). This is not the case with Sheppard Lee, however. In contrast to his other “in-body” experiences, where time induces an exculpatory sympathy between Lee’s spirit and the alien body he inhabits, the revolutionary cause jolts Lee and Tom from their easy rapport and pits each against the other. Sheppard Lee stops Tom dead in his tracks when the slaves, initiating plans for revolt, prematurely install themselves in the positions of future king, emperor, president, and so forth, and proceed to divvy up the master’s daughters as their prospective brides. Aghast, Lee (Tom) sounds the alarm at the suggestion of contact between black men and white women, a contact so depraved it would surpass “the horrors of Hayti.” He attempts to expose the planned insurrection but has no opportunity to do so; his fellows have placed him under surveillance. “I conceived that they were watching me, dogging my every step, prepared to kill me the moment I attempted to play them false” (2:200–201), Lee explains, until finally “My disorder of mind became so great, that I was in a species of stupid distraction when the moment for action arrived” (2:201). Lee sees himself always under the eye of the slaves; his “second sight,” which is broadened to include the gaze of all the slaves on the plantation, patrols the first and keeps it from betraying the rebellion or disowning the cause. Tom seizes the upper hand in this clash of incompatible ideals, however, and Lee must accompany him to the gallows. There is no chance of transmigration; even should Lee enter the dead body of one of his accomplices and bring him again to life, there is no doubt that “my fate must be equally certain to be hanged” (211). The slave revolt is subdued and its chief perpetrators, including Tom, are executed; the soul of Sheppard Lee quickly locates a new domicile, this time the body of the dyspeptic, dissipated southern aristocrat Arthur Megrim.15

This episode in Sheppard Lee seems intent on unpacking (or at the very least imagining) the explanatory narrative that would satisfactorily elucidate another violent rebellion in “Old Vawginnee.” (Nat Turner’s initials are eerily echoed in the debased moniker “Nigger Tom,” and the moral of Bird’s account corroborates the positions of proslavery alarmists like Thomas Dew, whose 1832 “Abolition of Negro Slavery” emphasized the danger of elevating ignorant slaves to “the condition of free men,” and pumping them full of “dangerous notions of liberty and idleness,” and denounced emancipation as a “chimerical scheme” [qtd. in Faust 45].) Lee chalks up his calamitous sojourn in the body of “Nigger Tom” and the “stupid distractions” that plagued
him to a “disorder of the mind,” yet he does not establish whose mind was so grievously disordered, nor is the rehearsal of his experiences as “Nigger Tom” anything more than a “confused recollection” (2:201). All the same, his relations with the revolting slave equivocate between metaphor and metonymy, sometimes allowing for a convergence of mind through imaginative identification, sometimes taking that convergence as an effect of association.

Once restored to his body at the end of the novel, Lee marvels at the strange powers of the mesmerized slumberer “who reads a sealed letter laid on his epigastrium, sees through millstones and men’s bodies, and renders oracular responses to any question that may be proposed him,” and, in fact, each of the bodies he possesses exerts an irresistible influence over him (2:274). But Sheppard Lee finally imagines himself the slumberer in question, and one whose mummified body has all along been in the possession of the eccentric, nefarious corpse-robber Dr. Feuerteufel, who exhibited it for profit—some small comfort for a creature whose experiments in treasure hunting and spirit possession resulted in death. And even this model of spirit possession is too terrifying to contemplate at length, for Bird ends his novel by sequestering Lee’s adventures in the realm of dreams.¹⁶

A FRETFUL SELF-REFLECTION

What is of special interest to us in Poe’s analysis is the notion that the difference between mind and machine, between a human and nonhuman organization, is that a human organization possesses, or is capable of producing, “a marked and radical difference” within itself, a difference that creates the possibility of “parts” in the self, the possibility of physically representing the self’s relatedness to itself.

—JOHN IRWIN, THE MYSTERY TO A SOLUTION

When Poe’s treasure hunters depart the mainland to return to Sullivan Island with sack loads of gold, they leave two gaping holes, like enormous eyes, in the landscape. Shortly afterward, Legrand confesses that a proliferation of “money-seekers” and a dearth of “money-finders” informed him of the existence of Kidd’s treasure. He reasons, “It seemed to me that some accident—say the loss of a memorandum indicating its locality—had deprived him of the means of recovering it, and that this accident had become known to his followers, who otherwise might never have heard that treasure
had been concealed at all” (221). It is paradoxically this absence of evidence that confirms the presence of buried treasure. Rumors are launched, put in circulation; they are “given first birth,” Legrand explains, “and then universal currency” (221). But this chain of association turns to imaginative identification in the final moments of the tale when Legrand reflects upon Kidd’s homicidal predilections and its human cost.

By contrast, Jupiter’s last words in “The Gold Bug” are spoken, it seems, to himself:

And dis all cum ob de goole-bug! de putty goole-bug! de poor little goole-bug, what I boossed in dat sabage kind ob style! Aint you shamed ob yourself, nigger?—answer me dat! (214)

Jupiter appears to relinquish metaphor for metonymy, conceeding that the gold bug guided the men to treasure—though Poe finally discloses that the bug’s association with Kidd’s horde is pure invention, a piece of Legrand’s “sober mystification” (229). Yet Jupiter takes the bug for substance and shadow: It is handsome and supple (“putty”), unpolluted and penniless (“poor”), both phantom and plunder (“ghoul”). And his crooning apostrophe calls a double into being. This is a self that must account for the abuse of the bug, a self that relinquishes possession of an imagined other, a self of whom the manumitted slave demands, “Aint you shamed ob yourself, nigger?—answer me dat!” (214). His fretful self-reflection (an internal doubling) corresponds with Sheppard Lee’s concerns about his own doubleness: his “anxiety in relation to my poor body,—or myself, as I could not help regarding my body” (Bird 1:64).

No less than his tales of ratiocination, Poe’s “The Gold Bug” negotiates the interplay of metonymy and metaphor in Legrand’s and Jupiter’s acquisition of clues and their exploration of the (criminal) “Other”—in this case a pirate, Captain Kidd, and the men he made dig their grave. Poe’s text theorizes a hostile reciprocity that orbits a missing document (Jupiter’s manumission) and, in doing so, delineates an interracial sociability situated between metaphor and metonymy. In Robert M. Bird’s Sheppard Lee, transmigration of the soul provides a template for exploring the mix of imaginative identification and association that would be central to classical detective fiction. Though they are not detection tales per se, “The Gold Bug” and Sheppard Lee reside at the periphery of the genre as repositories of “generic intel-
ligence” avant la lettre. That their respective authors used detection’s tools to examine the nature of possession in the antebellum economy indicates that the social function of these literary devices was to embody and interrogate the psychodynamics of interracial dependency. In this way, Poe and Bird provide glimpses of the persistent, inescapable hostilities and exceptional sociabilities that might surmount what DuBois called the “more complex form of misrecognition” that followed emancipation (qtd. in Bull 247).