Poe's *The Gold-Bug*: from the Reading of Madness to the Madness of its Readings

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In Edgar Allan Poe's *The Gold-Bug* reading, featured in its interpretative sense, that is, reading as deciphering or as an analytical activity, becomes the central driving force of the plot. As Jean Ricardou remarks, in the case of *The Gold-Bug*, it is not the text which results from the story, but rather the story which "appears as result of the text" (Ricardou 1976: 36). Regarded as a precursor to the detective tales and often included with Poe's tales of ratiocination, the story follows William Legrand's discovery of a long-lost treasure buried by Captain Kidd. The discovery comes as a result of Legrand's solving of a cryptogram which contained clues on the location of the treasure. As *The Gold-Bug* constitutes, in many ways, a dynamic scene of reading in itself, it is not surprising that critical approaches frequently focus on the presence and function of interpretation and, or as, reading within the tale.

Joseph Kronick, for instance, reinforces one of Renza's observations on the double structure of the text: the first part containing the puzzle and the second part revealing its solution. Noting how in the text, which involves the joining of "two systematic narratives by an implausible series of accidents" (Kronick 1992: 222), the second part of the narrative "displaces the first narrative" and "mimics a critical reading of the first part" (Kronick 1992: 220; Renza 2002: 35), Kronick sees *The Gold-Bug* as "one of the more heavy-handed examples of the romantic allegory of reading" (Kronick 1992: 220). Yet, if Felman speaks of a text's potential integration of its own reading, in his analysis of Poe's story, Kronick, on the other hand, brings into question the possibility of the text's incorporation of its "own misreading" (Kronick 1992: 210). Poe's tales, he finds, contain "clues that reflect both upon himself as a writer and on the reader as well" (*Ibidem*). What these "clues" ultimately point to is the text's scene of misreading. The scene of misreading becomes a double presence, extending from the text to its surrounding critical discourse. For Kronick, it is precisely through error that interpretation may take place.

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Legrand's discovery results from a series of coincidental *acts of misreading*, the first of which occurs when the narrator, having been handed the drawing of the bug, sees instead what appears to be the drawing of a skull. What essentially takes place is, as Kronick observes, "the substitution of an image for another" (Kronick 1992: 220). Yet this accidental substitution is the first to trigger the succession of un-puzzlements which will eventually lead to the discovery of the treasure itself. For Michael Williams, this particular scene attests to the interdependent relation of meaning and context. Interpretation, for Willams, can only occur through a mode of reading attentive to the "intended frame of reference" (Williams 1982: 648). Kronick, on the other hand, believes that it is precisely the error of reading which opens up language to the possibility of interpretation.

The story of Legrand's discovery is relayed to the reader by an unnamed narrator, who thus automatically becomes an interpreter, a reader of the events within the story. In the first part of the narrative, our "narrator-interpreter" looks for "a signifier that would translate the encoded signifier" (Kronick 1992: 220-221). As he finds "no relation between the gold bug and the-skull", the narrator finally "believes Legrand is mad" (*Ibidem*: 221). The disjunction at the level of the signifier, observes Kronick, is reduplicated at the level of the narrative, between "the story proper" and the "decipherment of the code" (*Ibidem*). The latter part of the narrative ultimately shows the narrator's failure of interpretation and what emerges is, "the ultimate fictionality of any interpretation" (*Ibidem*). Taking a similar stance, Louis Renza focuses on the function of misreading within the text. If, in Kronick, as earlier discussed, the double structuring at the level of narrative, finds itself reduplicated on the level of language and signification, Renza's reading contains a comparable binary approach. Thus, he delimits, on the one hand, the esthetic effect produced by the tale and on the other hand, he identifies a parallel undercurrent, a "subtext", which, like the second part of the narrative, displaces or undermines the first. This subtext points, for Renza, to Poe's own "performing, autobiographical self" (Renza 2002: 35). The "autobiographical self" that Renza speaks of constitutes a textual construct. As such, it does not concern, as one would expect, the details of Poe's private life, but the self-referential nature of his writing. It is within this self-referential frame, Renza argues, that Poe's scenes of misreading are developed. The text thus unwittingly anticipates or incorporates its own imagined misreading. Viewed as "allegories of their process of misreading", Poe's tales, Renza affirms, thus "never quite exist except as ghost stories" (*Ibidem*: 39). They appear as "fictions motivated in the direction of their imagined reception" (*Ibidem*: 29).

Jean Ricardou addresses the aspect of the characters' function as readers. The characters in the story, he believes, are defined by, and in their turn, they themselves define, particular modes of reading. Therefore, as surrogates for the tale's readers, as Renza considered them, the narrator, Jupiter and Legrand represent, for Ricardou various interpretative models. Of all three models, he says, "only Legrand is capable of decoding". Both literally and figuratively, it is Legrand's mode of reading which makes out and makes sense of the invisible text, the text inscribed upon the parchment and the text which determines the story. Extrapolating this intre-textual scene of reading to the scene of its reading, or the

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critical reception of Poe's story, Ricardou implies that the text entails precisely the type of reading or approach consistent with Legrand's model: "the text requires and defines the kind of reading which can decipher its workmanship" (Ricardou 1976: 36).

Like the cryptogram within the cryptogram in the tale, the text of *The Gold-Bug*, contains a series of readings embedded within readings. The reader of the tale, the receiver of Poe's text, must therefore follow the story of the reading of a text (Legrand's decipherment of the doubly-coded text of the cryptogram inscribed upon the parchment) by a reader (Legrand), relayed to him/her by yet another reader (the unnamed narrator). The narrator's reading constitutes an *interpretation* of the events, but also, more importantly, an interpretation of Legrand himself; or, in other words, an interpretation of the *interpreter*. If critical approaches usually focus on Legrand's reading, what will be of interest in the following is, however, the narrator's interpretation of Legrand' behavior. Why this will prove to be of interest is because it may be subsequently correlated with a certain mode of reading characteristic to the "first-phase", early psychoanalytic interpretations of Poe.

It may be remembered that, discussing the narrator's puzzlement at Legrand's demeanor, Joseph Kronick, at one point, notes the fact that the narrator, seeking to establish a logical connection between signifiers and finding "no relation between the gold bug and the-skull", ultimately "believes Legrand is mad" (Kronick 1992: 221).What Kronick seems to imply is that the narrator's hypothesis of madness comes *as a result* of the seemingly illogical lack of connection between signifiers: in this case, the bug and the death-skull. Yet if one returns to the text of *The Gold-bug*, what may be observed is the fact that the narrator already suggests the possibility of Legrand's madness well before the scene involving the bug. In fact, this is something which is hinted at from the very beginning of the text. Before learning of his discovery of the bug, the reader becomes acquainted with Legrand through a series of the narrator's remarks on his character. From the first paragraphs of the tale, introducing Legrand to the reader, he mentions the fact that, although "well educated" and "with *unusual* powers of mind", he seems to suffer from an extreme form of moodiness, being, he tells us, "subject to perverse moods of alternate enthusiasm and melancholy" (Poe 1896: 78).

Legrand, who, we are told, is somewhat of a recluse: "…for there was much in the recluse to excite interest" (Poe 1896: 78), is strangely always accompanied by an old, freed slave named Jupiter. What is interesting here is the explanation that the narrator provides for Jupiter's constant attendance of his young "Massa Will". He assumes that Legrand's family, deeming him "unsettled in intellect", delegated Jupiter to keep an eye on him. A recluse "with *unusual* powers of mind", "subject to perverse moods of alternate enthusiasm and melancholy", whose own family conceives him so "unsettled in intellect" as to require the constant "guardianship" and "supervision" of Jupiter: this is part of the image of Legrand which the narrator conveys to the reader even before one learns of the story of the bug. Returning to the passage in which the narrator provides his explanation for Jupiter's presence, one may remark the fact that he employs the phrase "it is not improbable that…". Therefore, what one essentially deals with here is not a fact, but an interpretation, a

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reading. Better said, it constitutes the narrator's own assumption. This assumption creates the *premise* on which and from which the narrator develops his reading of Legrand and of the events which follow. And this premise, as was seen, has something to do with the "unsettled nature" of Legrand's intellect. Why this is important in regards to the nature of interpretation within the tale, is because it actually inverses Kronick's stance of the causal relationship between the un-relatedness of signifiers (bug-death skull) and the narrator's belief in Legrand's madness. In other words, it is not because of the events or the facts (the strangeness of the bug, the inconsistency between the bug and the drawing), that the narrator believes Legrand is mad. This belief, as shown earlier, already manifests itself as a pre-existing premise which the unfolding events of the story will only serve to reinforce and strengthen.

Otherwise said, the narrator's presupposition of Legrand's madness does not come from interpretation, but rather his interpretation results from a pre-existing presupposition of madness. It may be observed, throughout the text of *The Gold-Bug*, that almost everything Legrand does is analyzed by the narrator in light of this initial suspicion of madness. Finally, it appears evident that what the narrator's reading looks for is not an explanation, but a confirmation of its own premise. In the first part of the narrative, it may thus be said that the narrator's reading constitutes a *reading of madness*; a suspicion looking for its own proof. Much more interested in Legrand's conduct than his actual discoveries, for the narrator, everything than ensues translates back as a corroboration of his original premise. In other words, coming with an assumption of madness, everything that Legrand does translates back as madness. The narrator regards, for instance, Legrand's scientific interest in a new species of bivalve he had discovered, as one of his "fits": "Legrand", he says "was in one of his *fits* – how else shall I term them? – of enthusiasm" (Poe 1896: 79).

His reading of madness also becomes evident in his attitude towards Legrand's behavior which, as will be shortly seen, comprises a mixture of bewilderment, prudence and condescendence as one would normally have towards someone fairly "unsettled in intellect". "Puzzled" by "his ill humor", for example, the narrator, at the same time, defers any comments on the affair of the scarabaeus, "not wishing to ruffle his temper" (*Ibidem*: 82). A little later on, he similarly remarks that while "greatly astonished" by Legrand's "conduct", he deems it however "prudent" "not to exacerbate the growing moodiness of his temper" by making further remarks on the matter (*Ibidem*: 83).

About a month later, the narrator receives a visit from Jupiter who appears increasingly concerned with "Massa Will's" condition. Jupiter, as it turns out, develops his own interpretation, his own reading of Legrand's incongruent behavior: he believes his master's "illness" is due to his having been bitten by the bug. Legrand's obsessive thoughts of gold are read by Jupiter as some form of delirium brought on by the bite. Jupiter then hands him a note from Legrand. The narrator, choosing to focus on the style of the note rather than its content, takes it as further evidence of his madness: "What new crotchet," he asks himself, "possessed his *excitable* brain?" (*Ibidem*: 87). He attributes this further puzzling development to Legrand's "continued pressure of misfortune" (in the beginning of the tale one is

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informed that although descending from an ancient family, Legrand, like Dupin, has been reduced to want) whose effect was, he says, that it probably "fairly *unsettled the reason* of my friend" (Poe 1896: 87). The stress, once more, falls on Legrand's "unsettled reason" and its possible relation to his poverty. Complying with the request expressed in the note, the narrator leaves with Jupiter in order to meet Legrand. He describes Legrand's greeting as a "nervous empressement" which „strengthened the suspicions already entertained" (*Ibidem*: 88). Once more, the narrator's reading of Legrand's behavior leads to yet another confirmation of the suspicion of madness. Bearing the appearance of a madman, "his countenance", we are told, "was pale even to ghastliness" and his eyes "glared with unnatural luster" (*Ibidem*).

If for Legrand every clue leads onto the direction of the discovery of the treasure, for the narrator however, every new development in the narrative reads as a marker, as a symptom, of Legrand's growing psychological instability. Therefore, when Legrand suggests that the narrator accompany him in an expedition connected to the affair of the bug, he takes this as a final, unquestionable confirmation of his suspicion, of the premise of his reading and exclaims "the man is surely mad!" (*Ibidem*: 90). So, from the *possibility* of madness ("it is not improbable that…") in the beginning of the text, his interpretation gradually arrives at the *certainty* of madness ("…surely"). Legrand's demeanor during the expedition (he had attached the scarabaeus to a whipcord, "twirling it to and fro, with the air of a conjurer") translates, for him, as the "last, plain evidence of" his "friend's aberration of mind" (*Ibidem*: 91).

More and more convinced of the accuracy of his reading, the narrator's interpretation, at this point, reaches its definitive conclusion:

> by this time what little doubt I might have entertained of my poor friend's insanity was put finally at rest. I had no alternative but to conclude him stricken with lunacy (*Ibidem*: 95).

Now positive in his findings, he refers to Legrand as "the lunatic" (*Ibidem*: 99). The conclusion having been reached, everything seems to make sense through his interpretation of madness: „A mind disposed to lunacy would readily be led away by such suggestions" (*Ibidem*: 99-100). Interestingly enough, we learn that the the narrator is also a physician (*Ibidem*: 91). Keeping this in mind, it may be observed how his reading starts from a pre-established premise, or a *diagnosis*, which is subsequently projected onto everything that Legrand does. What the narrator's interpretation thus looks for is the confirmation of its own diagnosis which he evidently finds in every detail of Legrand's puzzling behavior.

Yet, if one looks at some of the early psychoanalytic approaches to this text, one may find that the narrator's mode of reading is not very different from the "traditional" psychoanalytic approaches to the tale and to Poe himself. Like the narrator of *The Gold-Bug*, the "first-phase" psychoanalytic critic similarly starts from a diagnosis, from a pre-established premise: that of Poe's abnormality, or of his, to quote the text, "unsettled intellect", his "aberration of mind". The narrator of the tale and the psychoanalytic critic share the same premise: that of Poe's/Legrand's instability of mind. Like the narrator's interpretation of Legrand's

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behavior, the critic also looks for the details of the text which confirm his/her hypothesis. If the narrator takes Legrand's behaviors as symptoms, so the critic takes Poe's texts as symptoms of his unconscious malfunctioning. What therefore appears particularly interesting is the way in which the narrator's interpretative model, his mode of reading, finds itself mirrored in the critical discourse. The narrator's reading of Legrand's madness, it may be postulated, becomes the madness of the psychoanalytic reading of Poe's text.

Poe's pathology, like Legrand's supposed madness within the text, is the premise which Lorine Pruette, in her analysis of the short story, appears intent on demonstrating. Including it with the tales of ratiocination, the text, she believes, is indicative of Poe's masochism:

> the careful study of the tedious details of the mysteries of the first three as well as the solving of the cipher in the last tale represent the delight of a mind which loved to torture itself (Pruette 1920: 394).

Yet it is really with Marie Bonaparte's interpretation that the "reading of madness" truly becomes "a madness of reading". An interesting detail, if one draws a parallel from the text to its reading, is the fact that the narrator mentions, in relation to Legrand's apparent madness, his family and his poverty. Incidentally, there are also the areas in which Bonaparte concentrates her demonstration of Poe's pathological manifestations. At a conscious level, the "impetus" for writing *The Gold-Bug* comes, Bonaparte argues, from Poe's own poverty. The theme of the treasure, she believes, is derived from Poe's own "fantasies of real wealth" which occupied him as "the son of poor strolling players and, later, as the disinherited 'son' of John Allan" (Bonaparte 1949: 650). Moving from this surface layer to the "deep and unconscious drives" which, according to her, represent the real motivation behind the text, in the demonstration of her initial thesis, Bonaparte then proceeds to a series of implausible, yet insistent symbolic associations. For instance, she indentifies in the "burial fantasy" represented by the treasure, a typical "return-to-the-womb" motif: "the earth," she says, "also symbolizes the mother and its 'bowels', her bowels or womb" (*Ibidem*: 649). At the core of the tale she places the unconscious memory of Poe's dead sister: "the unconscious memory of little Rosalie… and his ruminations on her birth, are what unconsciously inspire Legrand's inductions" (*Ibidem*: 650). Consequently, the buried treasure "emerges as a substitute for the infant sister whose sojourn in her mother's womb he had guessed" (*Ibidem*). An even bolder, or rather said, "madder" claim is advanced in Bonaparte's discussion of the symbol of the gold, which, she finds, "as a result of factors specific to Poe's childhood and early life", embody, within the text, "the ancient and universal equation *feces = gold = child = penis*" (*Ibidem*).

The madness of the text is thus transferred onto the madness of the interpretation. As Shoshana Felman points out:

> whenever it *explains* literature, particularly when it locates *madness* in literature, psychoanalysis is in danger of revealing nothing more than its own madness: the madness of its interpreter (Felman 2003: 30).

What is interesting concerning this aspect however is, if one again turns to *The Gold-bug,* the fact that the text appears to both contain and *anticipate* precisely

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this type of reading. Even before the narrator introduces Legrand's character, a reading of madness is already suggested from the epigraph preceding the story: "What ho! what ho! this fellow is dancing mad!/ He hath been bitten by the Tarantula" (Poe 1896: 77). From the epigraph, the text therefore appears to purposely lead into the direction of the reading of madness, thus supporting Renza's thesis that Poe's tales seem "fictions motivated in the direction of their imagined reception" (Renza 2002: 29) and that part of a "Poe tale mise en scene includes his imagination of its misreading" (*Ibidem*: 33).

If the first part of the narrative in *The Gold-bug* contains the narrator's reading of madness, the second part, it may be said, constitutes a point-by-point deconstruction of this reading. The role of Legrand's lengthy explanation of the decipherment of the code leading to the discovery of the treasure is to reveal the narrator's interpretation as being, essentially, a *misreading*. The narrator's approach being quite similar to the early psychoanalytic approach, it may thus be said that the text both anticipates and discredits this type of reading. Both the narrator and the psychoanalytic critic follow but one direction: that of the supposition, of the premise of madness. This is why Legrand's reply to the narrator, in the second part of the story, seems to be addressed not only to the narrator, but also, in anticipation, to the psychoanalytic critic as well:

> But your grandiloquence, and your conduct in swinging the beetle -- how excessively odd! I was sure you were mad. And why did you insist upon letting fall the bug, instead of a bullet, from the skull?
>
> Why, to be frank, I felt somewhat annoyed by your evident suspicions touching my sanity, and so resolved to punish you quietly, in my own way, by a little bit of sober mystification (Poe 1896: 129).

"Annoyed" by the "evident suspicions" touching his "sanity", it is as if the text resolves to "punish" the critical reader "by a little bit of sober mystification". The paradoxical nature of the literary text can be fully observed in the case of Poe's *Gold-bug*. If its first part, not only anticipates, but almost *invites* a reading of madness, its second part demonstrates the text's *resistance* to this type of reading by ultimately exposing the madness of the reading. The psychoanalytic critic, with his/her "evident suspicions touching" Poe's "sanity" cannot but unconsciously replicate or reenact the narrator's misreading. Consequently, the scene of reading the unconscious (Poe's unconscious) therefore becomes the scene of the unconscious of reading (of the text).

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Poe's *The Gold-Bug*: from the Reading of Madness to the Madness of its Readings

Poe's *The Gold-Bug: from the Reading of Madness to the Madness of its Readings* seeks to establish a relationship between the scene of reading within Poe's tale and the scene of the tale's early psychoanalytic readings. By first following the function of interpretation within the text and subsequently moving to some of the characteristics of its critical interpretations, we aim to show how "The Gold-Bug", not only anticipates its misreadings, but also how it ultimately deconstructs them. One of the paper's main objectives, therefore, is to bring into the foreground what Pierre Bayard calls "the paradoxical nature" of the literary text, by illustrating the way in which Poe's short story invites a reading of madness, while simultaneously exposing the "madness" of its readings.

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