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The 'Hidden' Ideology in Edgar Allan Poe: "The Gold Bug"

My inquiry focuses on the evolution of the critical approaches that regard Edgar Allan Poe's "The Gold Bug" (1843) in terms of how critics see or how they don't see the role of the black Jupiter in the story, either as a '*hidden*', *secret* proof of racism under the surface of an innocent detective story, or, on the contrary, as an irrelevant element to be ignored.

In the first part of my paper I will present the historical, political and literary context in which Poe lived and wrote, and then the traditional perspective from the 19th and 20th centuries, that sees the story only as an adventure, focusing on the idea of deciphering a rather complicated secret message in order to discover a buried treasure.

In the second part of my paper I will discuss the most recent trend of rereading "The Gold Bug", as represented by several young Poe scholars for whom the story is just a racist depiction of a black person in South Carolina - the slave trade center - before the Civil War. I'll also talk about Terence Whalen's 2001 article "Average Racism: Poe, Slavery, and the Wages of Literary Nationalism" that uses history and politics in order to contradict them.

I use the word *ideology* in the title of my paper because I think that *ideology* tells people what to see and what to ignore; and the word *hidden* - between inverted commas - in order to show that I don't see Poe as a promoter of the racist ideology.

My thesis is that Poe needed the black Jupiter in order to create unity and reality in mid 19th century America when to have a slave, or at least a black ex-slave, was the natural order, especially in a place like South Carolina.

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Gold Bug" was published in 1843, that is, in antebellum America. As the story goes, we have three characters: the narrator, Legrand, and the black Jupiter. One evening the narrator visits Legrand in his little house in South Carolina, and Legrand wants to present him his latest discovery: a very interesting bug.

But, since he has lent the bug to a friend, he tries to draw its picture on a sheet of paper, that he later shows the narrator. All this time he is attended by the old black Jupiter. The problem begins when the narrator says that the precious bug thus drawn resembles the head of a dead person. After a long dispute, the narrator goes home and, some time later, he receives Jupiter's visit, who is very scared of Legrand's possible madness, i.e., at Jupiter's superstitious and naïve suggestion that the bug is a golden one, Legrand becomes convinced he is about to discover a real treasure. The narrator pays another visit to Legrand and, although he too thinks Legrand crazy, accompanies both Legrand and Jupiter in the search for the treasure. After some quarrels between Legrand and Jupiter, the result is most amazing for the narrator of the story: not only does Legrand find the buried treasure but he even proves to be completely sane and proceeds to explain the narrator, step by step, the whole process of deciphering some complicated cipher discovered on that odd sheet from the beginning of the story.

In the history of the United States the year 1843 belongs to the period known as "launching the nation" (Woloch 1), a period characterized by geographical expansion and by dramatic changes in the economy and slavery. The geographical expansion was represented by the Louisiana Purchase, the Indian Removal Act - which helped white migrants -, and the annexation of Texas to the United States, the later under the banner of "the manifest destiny" (Woloch 1) doctrine, a term coined by John Sullivan in 1840. Economically speaking, we are talking about rural America that shifts from tobacco slave-labor based plantations to grain plantations with fewer slaves, leading either to blacks' freedom or to their removal to towns as rented or bought Negroes, the center of their trading being the very South Carolina from our story.

And, what is even more important, we are in *antebellum* America, that is, in the middle of political conflicts between North and South concerning the problem of slavery, among other issues. (Woloch 1)

All these geographical and political events are well reflected in the literature from the first half of the 19th century. This "nationhood" (Reid 1) combines a variety of genres, from patriotic histories and legends, through depictions of the west and the "noble savage" (Clements 1), to the Romantics, the detective stories and the travel-adventure books.

Opposing the optimist American Romantics, called transcendentalists, who “relied on the imagination and subjectivity of approach, freedom of thought and expression, and an idealization of nature” (Clements 1), and:

wanted to undermine the common values, everything that meant preestablished order, a rejection of the imperfect, ugly and fragmented truth, a passionate desire to rethink the world as a unity, to reevaluate the ego in relation to this unity” (Busulenga 42),

Edgar Allan Poe:

“demonstrated that asking questions about the nature of the universe could lead to answers illuminating the darker side of life. In the depth of the imagination, [he] saw hints of unfathomable evil rather than rays of divine light” (Reid 1).

As the first “true detective story writer” (Greene 1) at the beginning of the 1840s, Poe combined in his “The Gold Bug” the ratiocination principle, the “puzzle” (Greene 1) from the modern definition of this genre, with the Romantic exaggeration of the cliché-images that depicted either Natives or Blacks (Conn 86), and with the discovery of buried treasures hidden by pirates from the travel-adventure genre of his time.

And now let’s see the readers’ responses to such a complex story, from the moment it was written till today.

From Sherwin Cody’s 1899 book *Four Famous American Writers: Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, James Russell Lowell, Bayard Taylor. A Book For Young Americans*, we can find out the public’s reaction to the story at the very time of its publication.

As this magazine [Stylus] was never published, the story of "The Gold-Bug" was sent to Graham some time after Poe had left him; but he did not like it, and made some criticisms upon it. Poe got it back from Graham in order to submit it for a prize of \$100 offered by The Dollar Newspaper. It won the prize, and became Poe's most popular story. (Cody 24)

From the quotation above one may wonder what was it that made this story so appealing to the antebellum American public? Was it the detective story as such, was it the idea of deciphering a secret code or the idea of discovering the buried treasure? Were they satisfied with black Jupiter there? We cannot be sure what would have been the right answer. All we can see for a fact is Sherwin Cody’s own response fifty years later, already in postbellum America: “ ‘The Gold Bug’ was Poe's most famous work, [...]perhaps the best detective story that was ever written, for it is based on logical

principles which are instructive as well as interesting” (Cody 24). In his thirteen chapters dedicated to Poe, Sherwin Cody is neither interested in the history of the United States, nor in the history of literature. For him, the only context that matters in order to explain Poe’s ideas is the author’s entire life, from childhood through college until death. A nightmarish college life in England added to his melancholic way of being, to his desperate struggle for a living as a writer in 19th century America, and to the illness of his beloved beautiful young wife, seem to have influenced most of his work, in Cody’s almost psychoanalytical approach. He is very interested in the entire evolution of Poe as a writer, from the unsuccessful poems of his youth till the famous detective stories and “The Raven”, that is, his literary maturity. The mathematical calculus called literary theory, which will be the result of many years of learning from great classics, like the Greeks, and great Romantics, like Coleridge, - as he states in “The Philosophy of Composition” or in “The Poetic Principle” - and early detective story writers, is what really fascinates the American critic from the end of the 19th century. He doesn’t seem to see or care about the presence of Jupiter, either positively or negatively. Neither is he disturbed about the location of the story. In my opinion Cody was either very much attracted to what he perceived as *the secret*, that is, the writing, and too curious to decipher it, so he simply didn’t care about the rest, or, he perceived the presence of the black ex-slave as something only too natural in the story, given the year of publication and the place:

The story of the gold-bug is that of a man who finds a piece of parchment on which is a secret writing telling where Captain Kidd hid his treasure off the coast of South Carolina. The gold-beetle has nothing whatever to do with the real story, and is only introduced to mystify. It is one of the principles of all conjuring tricks to have something to divert the attention. Poe’s detective story is a sort of conjuring trick, but it is all the more interesting because he fully explains it. (Cody 24)

A little change of perspective appears in the 20th century, in William J. Long’s *Outlines of English and American Literature: An Introduction to the Chief Writers of England and America, to the Books They Wrote, and to the Times in Which They Lived* where Cody’s “most brilliant poetic genius in the whole range of American literature, the most unfortunate and unhappy” (21) becomes an author who “secrets himself in the shadow” (Long 25), “one of the most debatable figures in our literature” (Long 26).

This time we have references to the controversy Poe's style has already generated among readers, but in a negative way:

Though the controversy has long endured, it has settled nothing of importance; for one reader regards Poe as a literary *_poseur_*, a writer of melodious nonsense in verse and of grotesque horrors in prose; while another exalts him as a double master of poetry and fiction, an artist without a peer in American letters. (Long 26)

And then he places Edgar Allan Poe in the literary context of 19th century America, characterizing his fiction as a mixture of “ himself, of the fantastic romanticism of his age, and of the taste of readers who were then abnormally fond of ghastly effects in fiction” (Long 28). The first element Long speaks of is the “personal” (Long 28) which is the morbid side of the poet. According to Long, it seems that Poe as a person, was very afraid of darkness, and strangely interested in graves, ghouls and the terror of superstition, all of which we can find either in prose or in poetry. As a writer he had to live by literature, so he had to cope with the type of fiction most in demand at the time, that is, “the ‘gothic’ or *_Mysteries of Udolpho_* kind, with its diabolical villain, its pallid heroine in a haunted room, its medley of mystery and horror.” (Long 28).

In his book Long defines “The Gold Bug” as a good ingenious-mystery story, also focusing, like *Cody*, in the “ingenious cryptogram” or “*secret writing*”:

"The Gold Bug" is a good story, having the adventurous interest of finding a pirate's hidden gold; at least, that is how most readers regard it, *though Poe meant us to be interested not in the gold but in his ingenious cryptogram or secret writing* [my emphasis]". (Long 29)

Another remark that I find really interesting in Long's book regards Edgar Allan Poe's intention when writing a piece of literature:

"Poe's chief purpose *was not to tell a tale for its own sake or to portray a human character*;[my emphasis], he aimed to produce an effect or impression in the reader's mind, an impression of unearthly beauty in his poems and of *unearthly horror* [my emphasis] in his prose" (Long 29)

This is another interesting perception, in my view. If we pay attention to the story we can see, besides the black Jupiter and South Carolina, as the slave and the slave trade center as the location, the time of the visit and of the search for the treasure: *evening and night*. I think we can see Poe's usual pattern here, especially if we take into account Long's suggestion that Poe was very afraid of darkness, but he was interested in graves, and the terror of superstition. The superstition here is expressed through the character of the black Jupiter, the terror through Legrand's possible madness and Jupiter's act of

whipping or his desire to whip his master in order to cure him, and, why not, through the idea of digging in the night far away from home. And the grave might be suggested by the head of the dead person from the sheet of paper, and from the buried treasure, even if what they are looking for is gold, that is, the very symbol of the treasure. But, in Long's comments, we don't have any black slave, we don't have any character at all. This might be for two reasons: the first, because just like Cody before him, he too was much attracted by the secret message and the way to decipher it, so he just ignored everything else; the second, since he is shocked by Poe's way of creating horror in his prose, through darkness and superstition, he may have taken the black Jupiter only as part of the whole atmosphere, a Romantic American cliché from the 1840s.

A crucial change of perspective regarding the analysis of the "The Gold Bug" came in the 1990s with African-American Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*. Ideologically speaking, this change came with the beginning of the Multiculturalist trend that made his advocates rewrite history and reread literature so as to emphasize the minorities. From this new perspective Morrison placed Edgar Allan Poe "at the center of our literature in its forging of national identity" (qtd in Kennedy and Weissberg xiii), claiming that "the concept of the American self was bound to Africanism, and was similarly covert about its dependency (57-58)" (qtd in Kennedy and Weissberg xii). Instead of the action or the atmosphere, instead of beauty or horror she sees "ludicrous caricatures of black servants" (Kennedy and Weissberg xiii) and instead of the secret message she can only perceive that "The black slave Jupiter is said to whip his master in 'The Gold Bug'" (qtd in Kennedy and Weissberg xv). In her own words:

The black slave Jupiter is said to whip his master in "The Gold Bug"; the black servant Pompey stands mute and judgemental at the antics of his mistress in "A Blackwood Article". And Pym engages in cannibalism *before* he meets the black savages; when he escapes from them and witnesses the death of a black man, he drifts toward the silence of an impenetrable, inarticulate whiteness.(58) (Kennedy and Weissberg xv)

What I think is very interesting here is her way of calling racist such a prolific writer and poet like Edgar Allan Poe by analyzing only three of his novels. Besides the " 'estranging dialect, fetishized gestures, and blatant stereotypes"(qtd in Weissberg xv), which are just the so common Romantic American cliches from antebellum America, she also notices how the slave "is said to whip his master" (qtd in Kennedy and Weissberg xv). I think this is one of those details that one sees only if he or she is deliberately

looking for it. Everyone can see the stereotypic depiction of Jupiter, through language, stupidity and extreme loyalty, but the usual reader can be too distracted by Legrand's obvious madness to notice that Jupiter wants to whip him in order to cure him. Multiculturalist ideology taught an African-American from the end of the 20th century to notice what nobody had noticed before and to turn the "Eminent American Poet" (50) in Peter Ackroyd's words from his 1999 *The Plato Papers*, so much appreciated for the beauty of his poetry and for the horror or ratiocination of his prose by Europeans and Americans alike for more than a century after his death, into a deliberate promoter of racism and slavery.

On the other hand, one might argue, there is no other slave in the American literature, especially in antebellum America, that whips his master. Could that be a proof of a pro-slavery attitude in Poe's work? We know that he wrote in a period when there were slaves, as well as free blacks and a lot of farms without slaves. And as we will see later, in Terence Whalen's article, the publishers' politics either from newspapers or publishing houses was to be *neither- nor* in terms of racism in order to get published and have money. And from "The Gold-Bug" we know that the narrator believes Legrand insane, but he has nothing bad to say about Jupiter. Could that whipping act be an irony in order to show that the Black is actually more powerful than the White? Could that be an inversion of the master-slave hierarchy, as in "The Man That Was Used Up" ? Could he actually have hated the idea of a master and so he made the loyal slave whip him? We know that Poe himself wasn't very happy with his 'masters' at the newspapers, he was always fighting them till he got fired. I think that we could take this gesture of Jupiter as a sort of revenge of Poe on those directors he hated.

One of Toni Morrison's followers in the interpretation of "The Gold Bug" is Liliane Weissberg in her 2001 article "Black, White and Gold" published in *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race* whose editor she is. In the introduction to the book we are told that:

Liliane Weissberg's chapter, "Black, White and Gold", is both a geographic study and an archeological project. She concentrates on Poe's story "The Gold Bug", and returns it to its setting on Sullivan's Island. To what extent does the tale reflect the history of this island, she asks, and what did Poe have to hide in order to uncover his own mystery of the gold bug? Weissberg not only reintroduces the history of the island as a port of entry for the slaves; in her description of its current landscape, she also depicts what might be

called the “Poe effect”, as Poe’s work itself is used as an instrument to rewrite the island’s history. (Kennedy and Weissberg xvii)

As I already said at the beginning of my paper, South Carolina with the Sullivan’s Island was indeed the center for the slave trade in the first half of the 19th century. According to William J. Long, Sherwin Cody and the Poe Studies Association’s *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* magazines, it seems that Poe was reading a lot of newspapers and literature from his time, and this was his main source of inspiration when choosing his themes. He was also inspired by real life and his own experiences, by words said by others in a totally different context, like “The Bells”, by sound, etcetera, and he wanted to create a unity and produce a strong impact on the reader’s mind. He also wanted to make money from literature, and he was too poor to have his own slave. According to Dan Grigorescu in his *Dictionarul Literaturii Americane*, Edgar Allan Poe was conscripted in the American Army in 1827 and sent to the Sullivan’s Island in South Carolina (221). Considering all the facts mentioned above I do think he might have written “The Gold Bug” in the memory of his former journey there, and, since that was the slave trade center it was compulsory for the authenticity and the unity of the story to have a black slave/ex-slave as one of his characters.

In contradiction with this last trend, Terence Whalen reconstructs the ideology of antebellum America in his article “Average Racism: Poe, Slavery, and the Wages of Literary Nationalism” where he tries to prove Poe’s neutrality in politics and his adaptability to the literary market:

Curiously, Poe’s most virulent pronouncements on race are contained in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, a book more or less consciously written for a national audience. The book was published by the New York firm of Harper and Brothers in 1838. To years prior to publication, James Kirke Paulding had quietly urged Poe to “lower himself a little to the ordinary comprehension of the generality of readers. In another letter, Harper and Brothers advised Poe that “readers in this country have a decided and strong preference for works (especially fiction) in which a single and connected story occupies the whole volume”. [...] There is no obvious link between the racist representation and a specific position on slavery, especially since abolitionists and colonizationists were themselves prone to accept and repeat racist stereotypes. [...] When composing a novel for a New York publisher and a national audience, Poe would have paid even closer attention to divisive issues, and if *Pym* had contained “horrifying because unprofitable doctrines”, the Brothers Harper undoubtedly would have objected. (29)

The quotation only refers to *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, but, taking into account that it was written and published in 1837, that is, before “The Gold-Bug”, and

that the “The Gold-Bug” won a prize of \$100 and become a popular story (Cody 24), I think we can say it worked after the same principles.

Regarding “the Gold Bug”, the most important point in Whalen’s analysis is the relationship between master and servant, taking into account the depiction of Jupiter.

First, he calls the loyalty of Jupiter “the staunchy-loyalty and heart-felt devotion” (Whalen 31) usually the term of Southern anti-abolitionists, and then he comments upon Jupiter’s language. For the usual reader this is just the way Negroes spoke at the time, for an expert like Terence Whalen, Poe’s intention was to make his character talk in Gullah, “a creole spoken by blacks on the coastal island of South Carolina and Georgia” (Whalen 31). Another element that Whalen wants to clarify is the social status of the black: his exaggerated devotion towards his master, “if taken in isolation, [...] seems derived from plantation narratives, and some critics have accordingly described Jupiter as a ‘black slave’. But as Poe carefully specifies at the beginning of the story, Jupiter is actually free” (31). And here comes the quotation from Poe:

[Legrand] was usually accompanied by an old negro, called Jupiter, who had been manumitted before the reverses of the family, but who could be induced, by neither threats nor promises to abandon what he considered his right of attendance upon the footsteps of his young “Massa Will”. (qtd in Whalen 32)

Whalen’s explanation for using a free negro instead of a slave, but with all the natural characteristics of a slave regards, once again, the relationship between antebellum America’s ideology and the literary market:

Recognizing the political divisions in the national audience, Poe shrewdly tries to have it both ways. On the one hand, he exploits conventions about the intimate, loyal bonds between white masters and black servants. On the other hand, he attempts to evade any outcry over such a portrayal by making Jupiter free, and although Legrand is referred to as “master” on several occasions, never once in the entire story does Poe use the word *slave*. In other words, Poe capitalizes on the average racism of his audience while neutralizing the sectional conflict over slavery. Through a crucial yet subtle change in Jupiter’s legal status, Poe attempted to create a sanitized South that could circulate freely in the national literary market. (32)

Besides Poe’s original way of “having it both ways”, I think Jupiter’s language is fundamental for the authenticity of the story in the year 1843. It is well known that blacks were brought to America as slaves from many different parts of Africa, so there must have been a whole variety of dialects that came with them. And we know that when Poe wrote a story he really wanted it to sound like unity-reality, so, not only did he chose a

black ex-slave for a place like South Carolina in order to make his story real, but he also tried to imitate, if we cannot prove he took it, the specific dialect of the region:

"Dey aint no tin in him, Massa Will, I keep a tellin on you," here interrupted Jupiter; "de bug is a goole bug, solid, ebery bit of him, inside and all, sep him wing - neber feel half so hebby a bug in my life" (Poe 5)

The desire for accurateness and authenticity is underlined by Poe in a fragment quoted by Terence Whalen from an "unsigned review of himself":

"The characters are well drawn. The reflective qualities and steady purpose, founded on a laboriously obtained conviction of Legrand, is most faithfully depicted. The negro is a perfect picture. He is drawn accurately - no feature overshadowed, or distorted. Most of such delineations are caricatures." (qtd in Whalen 31)

I conclude my paper by remarking how different trends and ideologies can make different generations note different *secrets behind the surface*, starting with the secret writing and the secret code in the 19th and 20th centuries, and ending with *the hidden ideology* of promoting slavery, from the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. I should add that the justified need for the presence of a black character *either as a slave or as an ex-slave* in an *antebellum* American story, either to create the *black unity* of Poe's writings, or *the unity-reality* of a place like South Carolina, results in a certain proof of rabid racist manifestations for American minorities one century later.

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