

## **Gold-Bugs and False Gemstones:**

### **Hermeneutics, Ekphrasis and Coincidence in Edgar Allan Poe and**

**Jakub Arbes**

That Edgar Allan Poe needed French literature, most directly in the person of Charles Baudelaire, to establish his reputation within world literature is a familiar tale. Poe—perceived as misfit, eccentric, failure, drunkard, even pervert—baffled and was in turn belittled by the cultural power brokers in his American homeland, yet he found sympathy among the most urbane and sophisticated of observers on the other side of the ocean.<sup>1</sup> Baudelaire’s translations of Poe into French first brought international fame to the American. Equally importantly, Baudelaire’s essays shaped Poe’s reputation as maligned genius. Baudelaire felt that

[L]es États-Unis ne furent pour Poe qu’une vaste prison qu’il parcourait avec l’agitation fiévreuse d’un être fait pour respirer dans un monde plus amoral,—qu’une grande barbarie éclairée au gaz,—et que sa vie intérieure,

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<sup>1</sup> In the words of Jonathan Culler, ‘Nowhere else in world literature, as far as I know, has a writer been so scorned by the literati of his own language and so celebrated by the best minds of another culture and language’. Culler, ‘Baudelaire and Poe,’ in *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur* 100 (1990), 61–73 (p. 61). Patrick F. Quinn, in *The French Face of Edgar Poe* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), is sceptical of Poe’s literary qualities and thus perplexed by Baudelaire’s advocacy.

spirituelle, de poète ou même d'ivrogne, n'était qu'un effort perpétuel pour échapper à l'influence de cette atmosphère antipathique. Impitoyable dictature que celle de l'opinion dans les sociétés démocratiques.<sup>2</sup>

Baudelaire mythologized Poe as a late Romantic standing in splendid isolation amongst the moralizing and swashbuckling trends of American literature—in short, as a misplaced and misunderstood European. For Baudelaire, Poe was not simply 'ce poète incomparable' but one of the seminal thinkers of the age, 'ce philosophe non réfuté, qu'il faut toujours citer à propos des maladies mystérieuses de l'esprit'.<sup>3</sup> Inspired by Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Valéry extended the French fascination with Poe. Baudelaire's Poe, with his intricate explorations of the grotesque, thus plays a pivotal role in transforming impulses from late Romanticism into inspiration for early Symbolism and *Décadence*, or in the common German literary historiographical terms, in transposing *Romantik* to *Neoromantik*.<sup>4</sup> Poe is one of the very few American authors before the late nineteenth century widely acknowledged as contributing to the broader development of European early literary modernism.

This tale about Poe centres on the transformation of an outsider into a canonical figure, on the dramatic intrusion of an eccentric American into the major European literatures. But Poe quickly became influential in some of the 'minor' European literatures as well. In the case of Czech literature, the key mediating figure was the

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'Edgar Allan Poe, sa vie et ses œuvres', in Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols., ed. by Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), II: 296–318 (p. 297).

<sup>3</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Les Paradis artificiels*, in *Œuvres complètes*, I: 399–517 (p. 427).

<sup>4</sup> See in particular the opening paragraphs of Baudelaire's 'Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe', in *Œuvres complètes*, II: 319–37.

journalist and fiction writer Jakub Arbes (1840–1914), who published some of the earliest essays on, and Czech translations of, Poe’s work in the 1860s and 70s.

Subsequently, Arbes’s own strange novellas—combining elements of the Gothic with proto-science fiction—show clear inspiration from Poe. The most obvious way to understand this influence is through the model of concentric circles: after the first splash of Baudelaire’s advocacy of Poe come further waves, first very quickly in German literature and then later, more modestly, in Czech literature. Dates seem to bear this out.<sup>5</sup> Another model, more parochial yet perfectly compatible with the first, would see Poe’s influence on Arbes and Czech literature in the light of the overriding francophilia characterizing Czech culture in this period; Poe’s influence would in effect really be

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<sup>5</sup> The first French translation (or adaptation) of a Poe tale was published in 1844, with Baudelaire’s first collected volume appearing in 1853; the first German translation of a Poe tale appeared in 1846 (published in Prague), and the first collected edition between 1853 and 1858; and the first Czech translations appeared in 1853. ‘The Gold-Bug’ is in each case among the earliest translations. See Lois Davis Vines, ‘Poe Translations in France’, in Emron Esplin and Margarita Vale de Gato, eds., *Translated Poe* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 2014), pp. 47–54; Marius Littschwager, ‘Poe in Germany: A Panoramic and Historical View of His Works Translated Into the German Language’, in Esplin and Vale de Gato, *Translated Poe*, pp. 55–64 (p. 55); Daniel Göske, ‘The German Face of Edgar Poe: New Evidence of Early Responses in a Comparative Perspective’, in *American Studies – Amerikastudien*, 40 (1995), 577–78; and Aleš Haman, *Trvání v proměně: Česká literatura devatenáctého století* (Prague: ARSCI, 2010), p. 244.

Baudelaire's influence.<sup>6</sup> Both models contain an element of truth, yet they also typecast Arbes as epigone. These models presuppose Baudelaire's canonization of Poe and portray the influence of a newly minted major figure on a minor figure, leaving pale imitation or regional variation as the most one might expect from Arbes. What is lost is Poe's original status as outsider. Understanding the relation between Poe and Arbes as that between outsiders across cultures, however, opens interpretive perspectives that the models above preclude. Arbes, in short, is more than a mere epigone writing in a minor literature, and his near invisibility in Poe scholarship is regrettable. Consideration of Arbes's particular reception and reworkings of Poe is overdue among readers of the great American dark Romantic.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> On Czech francophilia, see Stéphane Reznikow, *Francophilie et identité tchèque (1848–1914)* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002), especially Part 4.

<sup>7</sup> There is almost no discussion of Arbes in English-language scholarship on Poe. A notable exception is Marcel Arbeit's brief discussion in 'Poe in the Czech Republic', in Lois Davis Vine, ed., *Poe Abroad: Influence, Reputation, Affinities* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), pp. 94–100 (pp. 96–97). Arbes is not mentioned in Barbara Cantalupo, ed., *Poe's Pervasive Influence* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 2014); Esplin and Vale de Gato, eds., *Translated Poe*; Kevin J. Hayes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Poe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); J. Gerald Kennedy and Scott Peeples, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Edgar Allan Poe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Philip Edward Phillips, ed., *Poe and Place* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); or on the website of the Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore ([www.eapoe.org](http://www.eapoe.org)). Paucity of translations of Arbes's work is obviously a central cause of this neglect. Two works by Arbes, his important

In an influential discussion of the mobility of literary forms, Franco Moretti states ‘What I know about European novels [...] suggests that hardly any forms “of consequence” don’t move at all; [...] movement from one periphery to another (without passing through the centre) is almost unheard of; [...] movement from the periphery to the centre is less rare, but still quite unusual, while that from the centre to the periphery is by far the most frequent’.<sup>8</sup> This formulation effectively denies movement from periphery to periphery without the detour through the centre. Further, it assimilates such periphery-centre-periphery movement to the more straightforward centre-periphery movement; the original ‘peripheral’ status of the influence drops out of the equation. Finally, this model effectively relegates influence on the ‘periphery’ to imitation—perhaps coloured by local circumstances, but not marked by an original response to the source text. The present article, by contrast, presents a comparative reading of Poe and Arbes that traces what Moretti describes as the ‘almost unheard of’ movement from periphery to periphery. In doing so I aim to show the limitations of what is still too often an overly simplified understanding of literary reception and influence, in particular in studies situated within the World Literature discourse. I am not, to be clear, denying the

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‘romanetto’ (I discuss this term below) ‘Newton’s Brain’ and the shorter tale ‘Under a Bush of Lilacs’, are included in Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke (eds), *Clever Tales* (Boston: Copeland and Day, 1897), pp. 120–204 and 225–42 (available online at <http://tinyurl.com/leopold-clevertales00portgoog>). An English translation of the Arbes work discussed in this article currently exists in manuscript, and it is hoped that it will be published soon.

<sup>8</sup> Franco Moretti, ‘More Conjectures’, in *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 107–20 (p. 112).

mediating work of Baudelaire; rather I am arguing that one must understand cases where movement from periphery to periphery travels via ‘the centre’ as something distinct from the simple centre-periphery model. To ignore this distinction assumes that the source text exerts influence principally or solely through those aspects that overlap with and allowed its assimilation by the ‘centre’: that is, that it was not Poe, but Baudelaire’s Poe, who influenced the broader theatre of European literature. This assumption effectively establishes a hierarchy within the source text, whereby whatever is specific to Poe’s status as outsider within his own culture is subordinate to Baudelaire’s recognition of him as a central figure of European late Romanticism or early Decadence. Similarly, in accordance with this assumption, whatever Arbes saw in Poe, and made relevant to Czech literature, must overlap with what Baudelaire picked up on. This article argues, by contrast, that the situation of ‘mediated outsiderhood’ that links Arbes to Poe requires that one be attuned to forms of influence and transformation that are more complex and original than the straightforward centre-periphery model acknowledges.

The following discussion focuses on ‘The Gold-Bug’ (1843)—Poe’s most commercially successful tale and the first to be translated, successively, into French, German, and Czech—and the novella that established Arbes’s fame within Czech letters, *Svatý Xaverius* (*Saint Xavier*, 1873). The latter work is widely understood as a loose variation on Poe’s tale of clever exegesis and treasure-hunt, though *Svatý Xaverius* contains no direct borrowings from Poe’s plot or imagery, and thus any influence must be understood in the most general sense possible. ‘The Gold-Bug’, which centres on the resolution of an encrypted message rewarded by the finding of treasure, asks to be understood as an allegory of interpretation, of the hermeneutic process itself. *Svatý Xaverius* takes over this broad structure but projects it through a further literary device,

that of ekphrasis, which Arbes ultimately develops into a sharply pessimistic reflection on aesthetic autonomy and the possible social functions of art. Arbes's novella seems, in fact, far more bleak than Poe's uncharacteristically optimistic tale—but Arbes emphasizes the significance of an under-examined theme in Poe's text: the unsettling function of coincidence. Appreciating the significance of this theme casts Poe's tale in a more socially pessimistic light. Rather than being a pale imitation, therefore, *Svatý Xaverius* uncovers a dark core that 'The Gold-Bug' keeps veiled.

### **Treasure Hunt as Hermeneutics: 'The Gold-Bug'**

'The Gold-Bug' is a tale about money on several levels. Most obviously, it tells of a treasure hunt. The central figure, William Legrand, comes from an illustrious family but for reasons never explained has become impoverished, living in a hut on a small island just off the South Carolina coast. The first part of Poe's tale depicts Legrand following clues that are entirely missed by the other two characters—the narrator, about whom we know little except that he adopts an unjustifiably patronising attitude towards the others, and Jupiter, Legrand's manumitted servant, who is portrayed in starkly racist stereotypes. The culmination of this first part has Legrand leading his two friends through a series of baffling undertakings that ends with the discovery of an enormous buried treasure, thus restoring Legrand to his previous position of wealth and prestige (and revealing the narrator's intellectual blinkeredness as well). The second part of the story consists of Legrand's detailed first-hand account of how he unravelled the puzzles and deciphered a cryptogram that revealed to him the location of the treasure. But 'The Gold-Bug' is a tale about money in another manner as well, as Poe published it in 1843 following a competition for stories about money for *Dollar Magazine*, in which 'The Gold-Bug' won the \$100 prize. The story then sold extremely well, and there are

indications that Poe had commercial success overtly in mind when composing it.<sup>9</sup> The idiomatic expression to which the title alludes—that one has been ‘bitten by the gold-bug’, that is, become obsessed with gaining wealth—thus may apply not only to the central character Legrand, but to Poe as well. That Poe appears to have hoped ‘The Gold-Bug’ would provide him with something of a treasure-chest of his own (which it briefly did, though it did not break the cycle of financial trouble that followed Poe throughout his life) might incline a reader to cynicism about whether there is anything to be found here beyond a simple adventure tale intermixed with clever exotica from the field of encryption, in which Poe had a strong interest.<sup>10</sup>

In fact Poe uses the thematic combination of treasure-hunt and decipherment to construct a powerful allegory of the hermeneutic process itself, and the rewards that follow successful interpretation. What seems surprising, given Poe’s usual thematic concerns, is how optimistic the tale seems: perhaps in a nod to commercialism, everything works out. Also surprising is that this happy ending is achieved by the middle of the tale; the second half of the story merely retraces and explains the steps of

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<sup>9</sup> See Terence Whalen, ‘The Code for Gold: Poe and Cryptography’, in *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses: The Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 195–224 (pp. 196–97).

<sup>10</sup> Poe published several early essays on cryptography in *Alexander’s Weekly Magazine* and *Graham’s Magazine*, the most important of which is ‘A Few Words on Secret Writing’. On the relation between this interest and ‘The Gold-Bug’ see in particular Whalen, ‘The Code for Gold’; and Shawn James Rosenheim, *The Cryptographic Imagination: Secret Writing from Edgar Poe to the Internet* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), especially chapter two.



the interpretative process, dazzling the reader with Legrand's cleverness. In this focus on the process of deduction itself as much as on the events depicted, 'The Gold-Bug' counts as a forebear of the detective-story genre as much as Poe's Dupin stories 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' and 'The Purloined Letter'.<sup>11</sup> The two-part structure of 'The Gold-Bug' first depicts a series of perplexing events taking place on the surface reality within the narrative, and then reveals the hidden, underlying logical structure that has guided those events and dissolves their mystery. The first phase baffles the reader because causes and effects, premises and conclusions, which are separated by great distance, are juxtaposed without the complexities of their relation being explained. The second phase unfolds the individual steps that lead from cause to effect, premise to conclusion, bridging the distance between them through shorter, comprehensible links. The explanation of the treasure hunt is therefore at least as important as the hunt itself, even though the reader knows the outcome.<sup>12</sup>

The second part of 'The Gold-Bug' thus follows what could be called an interpretive chain, in which a sequence of translations leads Legrand to the solution of

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<sup>11</sup> The narration of hermeneutic processes is central to the genre of detective fiction as a whole: see, e.g., Peter Thoms, 'Poe's Dupin and the Power of Detection', in Kevin J. Hayes, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 133–47 (p. 133).

<sup>12</sup> Louis A. Renza discusses how 'the second part of the story comes to take narrative precedence over the first'. Renza, 'Poe's Secret Autobiography', in Walter Benn Michaels and Donald E. Pease, eds., *The American Renaissance Reconsidered* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp. 58–89 (pp. 65–66).

his mystery. The first links involve happy accident: Legrand finds a parchment, apparently blank, but then accidental exposure of the parchment to heat reveals the beginning of a message that had been written in disappearing ink. The next links involve deduction. The first part of the parchment to be revealed shows the image of a goat, though closer scrutiny leads Legrand to conclude that it is in fact a kid. This seemingly moot distinction proves significant as, supported by further circumstances, Legrand connects this cipher with the figure of Captain Kidd, thus providing the first indication that the parchment may contain coded instructions for finding that pirate's rumoured buried treasure (and also that those instructions are intended for an English-speaker). Indeed, further treatment of the parchment reveals a long sequence of seemingly random letters, numbers, and typographical symbols—clearly a message, though one still illegible. Over several pages Poe recounts each of the logical inferences that Legrand applies to this code, decrypting one symbol after another, deciding how to punctuate the words revealed, and thereby transforming the code into a text in legible English. Legible, but not yet intelligible, for the words themselves remain mysterious, referring to things such as 'the bishop's hostel' and 'the devil's seat'. Legrand's next task is to uncover what these strange phrases might refer to in the real world. It is only after ingenious deduction of the geographical landmarks these phrases designate that Legrand is able to carry out the instructions at the proper site and then find the buried treasure. Legrand's sleuthing thus represents a *tour-de-force* across an astonishing range of hermeneutic challenges leading from blank parchment out to the real world, through a range of distinct translations: from chemical experiment to various linguistic exercises (rebus, decoding of the symbols, interpretation of the revealed words) to geographical exploration, carrying out the parchment's instructions in the correct sequence and at the

correct place. The rewarding of Legrand's hermeneutic dexterity with enormous wealth appears to cast 'The Gold-Bug' as a tidy allegory of successful interpretation.

Yet one element of Poe's tale remains unexplained: the gold-bug itself. This strange creature sets the entire allegory in motion, yet remains oddly peripheral to the explanatory system. The unusual appearance of this bug and its extraordinary weight, suggesting it might literally be made of gold, constitute the original mystery of the tale. Regarding the bug's gold colour Legrand says: "you never saw a more brilliant metallic lustre than the scales emit", and regarding its weight Jupiter says "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".<sup>13</sup> The narrator, despite his patronising belief that Jupiter is deluded by ignorance, confesses: "The weight of the insect was very remarkable, and, taking all things into consideration, I could hardly blame Jupiter for his opinion respecting it" (*GB*, p. 621). Is this a real bug, or an inanimate object? When first found it struggles wildly and gives Legrand a bite, but shortly thereafter it is treated like a harmless paperweight, casually passed around and put in pockets. Indeed when Legrand later needs a small, heavy object to carry out one task in the treasure hunt (the parchment instructed him to use a bullet) he substitutes the bug itself as a joke to mystify his companions (*GB*, p. 646). If it has died, this significant event is never noted. The extraordinary weight and colouring of the bug, which in the beginning promise to hold the key to the tale, remain unexplained and are effectively forgotten at the end. That the bug gives the tale its title, resembles real gold, and sets the treasure hunt in motion implies that it occupies a central role in the events depicted. But as the story unfolds, the

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<sup>13</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Gold-Bug', in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Knopf, 1992), pp. 614–47 (p. 616). Hereafter '*GB*'.

underlying irrelevance of the bug to the treasure hunt becomes increasingly apparent. Poe himself admitted this, writing ‘[t]he bug, which gives the title to the story, is used only in the way of mystification, having throughout a seeming and no real connection to the subject’.<sup>14</sup> Poe scholar Marc Shell is more blunt: ‘the gold-bug is a humbug’.<sup>15</sup>

Poe’s association of the gold-bug with mystification appears to associate it with the widespread understanding of the tale as portraying Legrand’s intellectual superiority over his companions and, indeed, over the reader as well.<sup>16</sup> But the gold-bug can be understood in another way as well: as marking the rude intrusion of coincidence into the hermeneutic process. Coincidence—a phenomenon that haunted the nineteenth-century

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<sup>14</sup> The review of Poe’s *Tales* published in the October 1845 issue of *Aristidean* is widely held to have been written by Poe himself. It is quoted in John Cullen Gruesser, *Edgar Allan Poe and his Nineteenth-Century American Counterparts* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 106–107.

<sup>15</sup> Marc Shell, ‘The Gold-Bug: Introduction to “the Industry of Letters” in America’, in *Money, Language, and Thought: Literary and Philosophical Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 5–23 (p. 12).

<sup>16</sup> In the same review cited in note 14 Poe continues: ‘[The bug’s] purpose is to seduce the reader into the idea of supernatural machinery, and to keep him so mystified until the last moment’. Gruesser discusses how Legrand himself indicates that he has been playing with the narrator’s credulity in order to ‘punish’ him for doubting his sanity; see Gruesser, *Edgar Allan Poe and his Nineteenth-Century American Counterparts*, p. 106; see also Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, ‘Solving Mysteries in Poe, Or Trying To’, in Kennedy and Peeples, *The Oxford Handbook of Edgar Allan Poe*, pp. 189–204 (p. 198).

imagination—is a significant, though less commonly discussed, theme for Poe.<sup>17</sup> As Valerie Rohy has recently claimed, ‘Readers have long noted Poe’s fascination with science and logic, but equally strong is his concern with contingency—that is, chance, accident, luck, and coincidence’.<sup>18</sup> Poe explicitly thematizes the role of coincidence in two of the Dupin stories, attributing ambiguous import to its operation: at times coincidence appears to supplement the process of ratiocination, at times to undermine it.<sup>19</sup>

In ‘The Gold-Bug’, every stage at which the bug moves the narrative forward is the result of barely credible coincidence. This begins with the very discovery of the bug, which occurs at the precise spot on a beach where the parchment lies half buried next to the remnants of a ship’s longboat. The proximity of these three objects is what eventually leads Legrand to connect the dots and conclude that there is a treasure to be found. The boat presumably carried Captain Kidd and his associates and thus explains the provenance of the parchment. The proximity of these objects is therefore not a

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<sup>17</sup> On coincidence in nineteenth-century thought, see Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> Valerie Rohy, ‘The Calculus of Probabilities: Contingency in “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt”’, in Kennedy and Peeples, *The Oxford Handbook of Edgar Allan Poe*, pp. 224–35 (p. 224).

<sup>19</sup> ‘The Mystery of Marie Rogêt’ opens with a meditation on the role of coincidence, and in ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ Dupin states ‘Coincidences, in general, are great stumbling-blocks in the way of that class of thinkers who have been educated to know nothing of the theory of probabilities’ (Poe, *The Complete Stories*, pp. 473–505 (p. 496)). See Rohy’s discussion in ‘The Calculus of Probabilities’, pp. 224–26.

coincidence. But that Legrand should happen upon a rare, hitherto unknown species of *scarabeus*, resembling gold in such striking fashion, right next to a parchment bearing encrypted instructions for finding enormous treasure, is the sheerest of coincidences. Nonetheless, Legrand takes this juxtaposition as one of correlation. He goes so far as to say: ““since Fortune has thought fit to bestow [the gold-bug] on me, I have only to use it properly, and I shall arrive at the gold of which it is the index””.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the treasure hunt is set in motion when Legrand unjustifiably ascribes an *indexical* relation to what is in fact sheer contingency.

The association of the gold-bug with coincidence is strengthened through the next episode in which the bug plays a decisive role. The tale opens with Legrand describing the bug to the narrator, since he is unable to show the bug itself, having lent it to an acquaintance with entomological interests. Legrand sketches the gold-bug on the nearest surface available, which happens to be the parchment he had absentmindedly put in his pocket and the significance of which he has not yet guessed. A strange comedy of errors then takes place as the narrator insists that the sketch only slightly resembles a scarab but looks quite strikingly like a death's-head, and Legrand takes offence at the slight to his drawing skills. What has in fact occurred is that the parchment has in the meantime been exposed to the heat from the fireplace and started to reveal the markings written in invisible ink. The exposure of the parchment to heat is itself the result of layered coincidences: the narrator comments on how unusual it is to have a fire going in that clime at that time of year, and it is only the friendly gambolling of Legrand's large Newfoundlander dog that pushes the narrator, to whom Legrand has passed the

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<sup>20</sup> *GB*, p. 621. Later the narrator sceptically repeats this reference to indexicality (*GB*, p. 628).

parchment, near the hearth. But these contingencies have remarkable consequences. The death's-head—the traditional emblem of piracy—has emerged, at the precise spot where Legrand had drawn the gold-bug but on the reverse side of the parchment. Legrand later explains to the narrator that he

‘proceeded to scrutinize the parchment more closely. Upon turning it over, I saw my own sketch upon the reverse, just as I had made it. My first idea, now, was mere surprise at the really remarkable similarity of outline—at the singular coincidence involved in the fact that, unknown to me, there should have been a skull upon the other side of the parchment, immediately beneath my figure of the *scarabaeus*, and that this skull, not only in outline, but in size, should so closely resemble my drawing. I say the singularity of this coincidence absolutely stupefied me for a time. This is the usual effect of such coincidences. The mind struggles to establish a connection—a sequence of cause and effect’. (GB, pp. 633-34)

Despite the fact that this overlap of Legrand's sketch and the matching image of the death's-head is a coincidence that nearly beggars belief, Legrand later states: “No doubt you will think me fanciful—but I had already established a kind of *connection*. I had put together two links of a great chain” (GB, p. 635). Ultimately Legrand takes over Jupiter's mental association, and what was originally presented as ignorance or superstition is recast as necessary connection and logical deduction: “do you know that Jupiter's silly words, about the bug being of solid gold, had a remarkable effect upon my fancy? And then the series of accidents and coincidences—these were so *very*

extraordinary” (GB, p. 637).<sup>21</sup> Thus a triple coincidence—the coincidental exposure of the death’s-head that coincidentally overlaps with Legrand’s sketch of the gold-bug coincidentally found near the parchment—leads Legrand to posit an indexical relation between parchment, piracy, and gold. Who would not make the next logical association, with treasure?

Some commentators have associated the odd role of the gold-bug in Poe’s tale with the function of language itself. This is strongly suggested by the way the bug embodies both metaphor (Legrand is both literally and figuratively ‘bitten by the gold-bug’) and metonymy (the juxtaposition of Legrand’s sketch of the bug and the death’s-head in the cryptogram, the physical proximity of the gold-bug and the parchment on the beach). Michael Williams has written that ‘The Gold-Bug’ centres on ‘Poe’s recognition of the instability of the arbitrary relationship between word and referent and, as a consequence, the contingency of meaning upon conventions of use and context’. This instability is nowhere more evident than in the ‘sign that proves to be empty’ of the

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<sup>21</sup> Daniel Kempton is one of the few readers to credit Jupiter’s ‘strange’ speech as providing ‘the critic with a significant perspective on the story and with a valuable, if unorthodox, model of literary interpretation’. Legrand, for Kempton, ‘treats the whole English language, through which the chain of substitutions passes, as if it were a signifying system as primitive as the Morse code or a finger post’, and Kempton reads Jupiter’s language as corrective to Legrand’s ‘utilitarian’ understanding of language as performing a ‘narrow technological function’. Kempton, ‘The Gold/Goole/Ghoul Bug’, in *ESQ*, 33 (1987), 1–19 (p. 9).



gold-bug.<sup>22</sup> While this sounds pessimistic Williams maintains that Poe offers the reader ‘consolation’ that a ‘text can be recovered by clarifying definition, establishing a determining context, recognizing authorial intention’.<sup>23</sup> Williams argues that Poe ‘swings [the empty sign of the gold-bug] before the eyes of the reader right from the point of entry into the story’, tempting us into falsely ascribing it symbolic significance, a trap into which both the narrator and Jupiter fall.<sup>24</sup> But he understands Legrand’s hermeneutic acuity as corrective to those naïve linguistic attitudes, which are shared by the narrator and Jupiter.

What Williams overlooks, however, is that Legrand himself has overlooked the role of coincidence in his success.<sup>25</sup> From this perspective, Legrand’s mastery comes into question, for he does not debunk but in fact echoes Jupiter’s allegedly ignorant understanding of the significance of the gold-bug (“do you know that Jupiter’s silly words, about the bug being of solid gold, had a remarkable effect upon my fancy?”). Hermeneutic and social relations shadow each other as the apparently clear dynamic of master-servant in Legrand’s relationship to Jupiter, and the implied subordination of ignorance to insight, are brought into doubt. Here we must recall a small yet striking plot

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<sup>22</sup> Michael Williams, “The Language of the Cipher”: Interpretation in “The Gold-Bug”, in *American Literature*, 53 (1982), 646–60 (pp. 647 and 658).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 660.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 658-59.

<sup>25</sup> As Rohy notes: ‘Though Legrand is a brilliant cryptographer and logician, the outcome is equally attributable to what he calls a “series of accidents and coincidences”’ (‘The Calculus of Probabilities’, p. 226).

detail: at one point Jupiter comes close to beating Legrand.<sup>26</sup> Toni Morrison has argued that with this detail we see Poe's

desperate need [...] for the literary techniques of 'othering' so common to American literature: estranging language, metaphoric condensation, fetishizing strategies, the economy of stereotype, allegorical foreclosure; strategies employed to secure his characters' (and his readers') identity. But there are unmanageable slips. The black slave Jupiter is said to whip his master in 'The Gold-Bug'.<sup>27</sup>

The attempt to ensure Legrand's mastery, and to embody and thereby limit the reign of supposed ignorance and the contingency of the Real to the figure of Jupiter, falters. As Henri Justin states, 'the tables are turned on Legrand, the reader sensing that Jupiter and his "goole-bug" could well be the key to deeper meaning', and thus 'the interpretive authority has moved from Legrand to Jupiter'.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> In a reversal of the master-slave dynamic Jupiter brandishes 'a big stick' to punish Legrand for what is effectively an escape attempt. But Jupiter ultimately shirks at the violence of the master-role and instead takes pity: 'Todder day he gib me slip fore de sun up and was gone de whole ob de blessed day. I had a big stick ready cut for to gib him deuced good beating when he did come—but Ise sich a fool dat I hadn't de heart arter all—he look so berry poorly' (*GB*, pp. 618–19).

<sup>27</sup> Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 58.

<sup>28</sup> Henri Justin, 'No Kidding: "The Gold-Bug" Is True To Its Title', in Alexandra Urakova, ed., *Deciphering Poe: Subtexts, Contexts, Subversive Meanings* (Bethlehem,

Rather than describing the triumph of Legrand's mastery of context and clarity of definition, as Williams argues, 'The Gold-Bug' thus depicts an unwarranted slide from the logic of coincidence into that of indexicality. Instead of defeating contingency, Legrand succumbs to it. In this interpretation Legrand is not a hero who subtly manoeuvres through the complexities of language in a way his mystified companions—and Poe's mystified reader—cannot, but is rather an extraordinarily lucky dupe who misunderstands a sequence of coincidences as an interpretive chain.<sup>29</sup>

Yet Legrand nonetheless finds treasure. Surely that indicates perspicacity, not benightedness. Here is where Poe is most radical in his message, and where he most forcefully diverges from the crass monetary obsessions that, at the outset of this discussion, we saw might be understood as motivating this tale. On a superficial reading, Legrand has earned his fortune: the treasure is the reward for his ingenuity and

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PA: Lehigh University Press, 2013), pp. 97–106 (pp. 99–100). Rohy frames this dynamic in Lacanian terms as the 'eruption of the Real into the symbolic order' ('The Calculus of Probabilities', p. 230).

<sup>29</sup> Kempton writes: 'Could it be that Legrand owes his success not to science but to *chance*, whose prodigious intervention has favored him throughout the adventure—serendipities of weather, coincidence, *mis*calculation?'. Kempton, 'The Gold/Goole/Ghoul Bug', p. 6. Rohy comments that 'a radical contingency remains unassimilated in the text' (her reference is to 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' but applies equally to 'The Gold-Bug') ('The Calculus of Probabilities', p. 227). See also Jason Puskar's contrast of Poe's 'overblown claims for ratiocination' to his 'stories that persistently undermine them' in his *Accident Society: Fiction, Collectivity, and the Production of Chance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 147.

enterprising spirit. A more attentive reading, however, reveals how far he has simply been unbelievably lucky: without the original coincidence of the gold-bug wandering on the beach next to the parchment, and the even more unlikely coincidence of his sketch overlapping with the revealed death's-head, he would never have been set on the trail of the treasure. The relation between his hermeneutic activity and the 'real-world' reward bestowed upon them, therefore, must not be understood as causal, but as spanning a yawning gap of contingency. The irony is that the second, explanatory section of the story should ostensibly serve to clarify the connections between cause and effect, which had appeared baffling in the first section narrating the treasure hunt itself. But in fact the second section only deepens the disjuncture between cause and effect. In contrast to a more conventional treasure-hunt story such as Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual' (1893), in which Sherlock Holmes's triumph of deduction is cast explicitly as socially normalizing and restorative (the treasure proves to be the remains of the ancient royal crown of England, lost after the execution of Charles I), Poe's adventure is quietly destabilizing. 'The Gold-Bug', in fact, can be read as deconstructing one of the foundation myths of American capitalism: that cleverness and hard work will be rewarded by material wealth. Poe himself had painful personal experience of the cruelty of this myth from the moment he attempted to support himself through writing.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> John Cullen Gruesser has described the young Poe's rejection and parodying of Benjamin Franklin's carefully crafted image of the 'self-made man' in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*; see Gruesser, *Edgar Allan Poe and his Nineteenth-Century Counterparts*, pp. 10–11. For a detailed reading of 'The Gold-Bug' in the context of the economic logic of early American capitalism, see Heinz Tschachler,

Legrand's luck reveals this myth as an incipient form of what Lauren Berlant has termed cruel optimism. In Berlant's account optimism becomes 'cruel' when it retains its affective hold over a subject even after the hopes and promises it has raised are revealed to be empty.<sup>31</sup> Poe's veiled—one might say, encrypted—description of Legrand's success to mere coincidence is thus caustically ironic, and the enigmatic gold-bug appears to be the emblem precisely of this cruel, ironic optimism. Reading 'The Gold-Bug' as allegory of hermeneutic proficiency is revealed as a superficial understanding, one that bears more relation to the benighted narrator's than to Legrand's interpretive attitude. Once the true function of the gold-bug and the reason for its central position in Poe's tale have been made clear, 'The Gold-Bug' appears as an allegory not of hermeneutic prowess but of the extraordinary and unsettling power of coincidence.

#### **Treasure Hunt as Ekphrasis: *Svatý Xaverius* (Saint Xavier)**

As mentioned above, 'The Gold-Bug' was a major influence on Jakub Arbes's 1873 novella *Svatý Xaverius*, and Arbes was the major conductor of Poe's influence upon Czech literature. *Svatý Xaverius* is technically not a novella but rather the first example of a sub-genre that Arbes invented and that was given the intentionally exotic-sounding name 'romanetto' (*romaneto*). *Svatý Xaverius* appeared in the first issue of the 'resurrected' journal *Lumír*, arguably the most influential Czech literary journal in the second half of the nineteenth century. The name of the journal provided a label (*lumírovci*) for many prominent authors of the time who were regular contributors, including Arbes. The term *romaneto* was invented by Arbes's friend and mentor Jan

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*The Monetary Imagination of Edgar Allan Poe: Banking, Currency, and Politics in the Writings* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013), chapter 2.

<sup>31</sup> See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

Neruda (1834–1891), another of the most prominent Czech authors of the period and co-editor of the renewed *Lumír*.<sup>32</sup> The typical Arbes romanetto is roughly the length of a novella and combines elements of the fantastic or proto-science fiction with an interest in scientific and social questions. Arbes's romanettos hint at fantastic or supernatural events but, in the tradition of Ann Radcliffe, end with rational explanations, though these are often tinged with a sense of melancholy banality.<sup>33</sup> *Svatý Xaverius* established Arbes's literary fame (though he was already a prominent journalist when it was

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<sup>32</sup> An earlier run of *Lumír* had been prominent in the 1850s (and had been the venue for the first Czech translations of 'The Gold-Bug' and 'Some Words with a Mummy'; see Arbeit, 'Poe in the Czech Republic', p. 97), but the journal then lapsed in the 1860s. Arbes provides an account of the genesis of his first romanetto in 'První romaneto' (The first romanetto), reprinted in Jakub Arbes, *Literaria, Dílo Jakuba Arbesa*, Vol. 19, ed. by Jan Řezáč (Prague: SNKLHU, 1954), pp. 195–200.

<sup>33</sup> Much of the critical literature on Arbes has focused on the 'invention' of this sub-genre (often at the expense of interpretation of Arbes's individual works themselves). See Patrycjusz Pająk, *Hrůza v české literatuře* (Prague: Academia, 2017), pp. 202–31; Jaroslava Janáčková and Martina Sandlerová, 'Komentář', in Jakub Arbes, *Romaneta*, ed. by Jaroslava Janáčková and Martina Sandlerová (Prague: Lidové noviny, 2006), pp. 643–48; Jaroslava Janáčková, *Arbesovo romaneto: Z poetiky české prózy* (Prague: Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Monographia LIX, 1975), pp. 14–47; Jaroslava Janáčková, 'Romaneto v české proze 19. století', *Acta Universitatis Carolinae, Philologica* (1972), pp. 183–98; Karel Polák, 'Co je romaneto?', in *Listy filologické* 72 (1948), 236–44; and Karel Krejčí, *Jakub Arbes: Život a dílo* (Ostrava-Prague: Josef Lukasík, 1946), pp. 114–15.

published) and became something of a cult book, turning the baroque-era painting of the dying St Xavier located in the imposing St Nicholas church in Prague's Lesser Town, which features centrally in the plot, into a pilgrimage site for literary enthusiasts. Indeed, while 'The Gold-Bug' is set amidst desolation—a scarcely inhabited island, the bleak coastal wilderness of South Carolina—*Svatý Xaverius* is one of the foundational 'Prague texts', in which the topography, monuments, and atmosphere of the city feature prominently.<sup>34</sup>

The identification of 'The Gold-Bug' as a source text for *Svatý Xaverius* is widely accepted, though most commentators have noted the connection without close comparison of the texts.<sup>35</sup> Yet it bears noting that, apart from the general motif of a

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<sup>34</sup> Janáčková and Sendlerová, 'Komentář', pp. 639–40; and Janáčková, *Arbesovo romaneto*, p. 11. Daniela Hodrová links Arbes's romanettos and *Svatý Xaverius* in particular with the emergence of the Prague 'novel of atmosphere', the visual counterpart of which she sees in the moody Prague-scape paintings of Jakub Schikaneder (1855–1924) and which she sees as leading to Kafka's *Der Process*; Daniela Hodrová, *Místa s tajemstvím: Kapitoly z literární topologie* (Prague: KLP, 1994), pp. 95–96.

<sup>35</sup> See Haman, *Trvání v proměně*, pp. 244–45; Janáčková and Sendlerová, 'Komentář', 639; Blahoslav Dokoupil, 'Vliv E. A. Poea na tvorbu Jakuba Arbesa', in *Sborník prací Filozofické fakulty brněnské university (Řada literárněvědná) 25–26/D23–24* (1976–1977), pp. 31–38; Krejčí, *Jakub Arbes*, p. 205; and F. X. Šalda, 'Několik slov o Jakubu Arbesovi', in *Šaldův Zápisník VII* (1934–35), 153–65 (pp.154–55), though Šalda deems the comparison superficial. More detailed comparative discussions occur in Janáčková,

treasure hunt and the interest in the logical process of interpreting clues, there is almost nothing in the way of direct borrowing. A connection of some sort is undeniable, not least because of Arbes's well documented interest in both the works and biography of Poe.<sup>36</sup> Further, Arbes provides one teasing clue in the romanetto itself in the form of a character's passing and otherwise pointless reference to 'a strange gold and silver bug I once found'.<sup>37</sup> Yet a list of the ways Arbes's text differs from Poe's would be much longer than a list of their similarities.

Structurally, *Svatý Xaverius* is considerably more complex and its plot more convoluted—not surprising, given its greater length. 'The Gold-Bug', as we have seen, falls into two sections, the first depicting the treasure hunt, and the second presenting

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*Arbesovo romaneto*, pp. 85–90; and Adéla Prchlíková, 'Arbes a Poe', in *Lumír* 65 (1939), 289–95.

<sup>36</sup> See Arbeit, 'Poe in the Czech Republic', p. 96; and Josef Moravec, *Jakub Arbes* (Prague: Svobodné slovo, 1966) p. 28. Arbes published two portraits of Poe: the extensive and well informed 'Edgar Allan Poe' (1870), reprinted in Jakub Arbes, *Nesmrtelní pijáci: Novely a povahopisné studie*, in *Sebrané spisy* Vol. XXI (Prague: J. Otto, 1906), pp. 245–91; and the shorter, more journalistic 'Edgar Allan Poe' (1879) reprinted in *Z duševní dílny básníků II: Příspěvek k filosofii a technice tvoření*, in *Sebrané spisy*, XXXVI (Prague: J. Otto, 1910–13), pp. 45–61.

<sup>37</sup> '[O] podivném zlatém a stříbrném brouku, kterého jsem kdysi našla'. Jakub Arbes, *Svatý Xaverius*, in Arbes, *Romaneta*, pp. 283–375 (p. 310). Hereafter 'SX'. Translations from the Czech are my own. The narrator's references to his drawing skills (see SX, p. 285) seems another teasing reference to Poe's text, as it is reminiscent of Legrand's prickly pride in his sketch of the gold-bug.



Legrand's account of how he interpreted the cryptogram. One effect of this structure is that the reader is able to marvel without reservation at Legrand's ingenuity, since the successful outcome has already been confirmed. *Svatý Xaverius*, by contrast, presents a detailed account of the main character's hermeneutic efforts before he and the narrator set out to uncover a treasure they have come to believe is hidden in an isolated spot in Prague—and, in the main contrast with Poe's tale, their search ends in disappointment and confusion. The failure of the treasure hunt produces a new mystery, however: the subsequent madness and disappearance of the main character, a mystery whose later resolution only deepens the pessimistic tone of the romanetto. This double mystery is framed by a brief account of the narrator's involvement in an abortive venture to publish a book celebrating the great artworks of Prague, a venture that seems to have little connection to the central treasure-hunt narrative. Both works thus take what one would expect to be a straightforward and linear narrative device, the treasure hunt, and mould it into surprisingly convoluted shapes.

The frame narrative in *Svatý Xaverius*, so tenuously connected with the doomed treasure hunt at the heart of the romanetto, calls for further examination. Much like Poe's strange metallic scarab, which could have been removed from 'The Gold-Bug' entirely without damaging the narrative integrity of the treasure hunt, the frame narrative could be peeled away from *Svatý Xaverius* and one would still be left with a comprehensible—indeed, perhaps more coherent—story. Yet I shall argue that the frame narrative (again like the gold-bug) has a significance that belies this appearance as mere ornament to the main plot.

For the frame narrative prompts an understanding of this romanetto as a whole through the device of ekphrasis.<sup>38</sup> The project conceived by the narrator and his friend visiting from Vienna—to publish a book containing a history and colour reproductions of major works of art displayed in the churches of Prague—immediately conjoins textual and visual media, and establishes visual art as a central theme of the novella. Further, this frame narrative underscores that the conjuncture of text and visual image applies not only to the narrator’s projected art-historical volume but to Arbes’s romanetto itself, since the very title *Svatý Xaverius* refers in the first instance to a painting. ‘The Death of Saint Francis Xavier’ is an altarpiece by the Silesian old master Franz Xaver Karl Palko (1724–1767?), which hangs in a side chapel of the early eighteenth-century church of St Nicholas, a masterpiece of Prague baroque architecture that competes with the St Vitus cathedral to dominate the silhouette of the Prague Lesser Town. Palko—whose name is also spelled Balko, which is how Arbes renders it—was one of the principal decorators of the interior of St Nicholas, also completing the fresco in the massive cupola of the church. Centring on a chapel painting by one of the main artists of one of the major architectural monuments of Prague, Arbes’s romanetto embeds its central narrative of a treasure hunt within questions of art and artistic heritage. This is arguably the most significant change Arbes has introduced to Poe’s theme: the object of hermeneutic investigation is not an encrypted code but a work of art, rendering *Svatý Xaverius* a story largely about the interpretation and social efficacy of art.

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<sup>38</sup> Arbeit connects *Svatý Xaverius* not only with ‘The Gold-Bug’ but also with ‘The Oval Portrait’ (see Arbeit, ‘Poe in the Czech Republic’, p. 97). In ‘The Oval Portrait’ Poe associates ekphrasis with death, an association that, as we shall see, resonates in *Svatý Xaverius*.

Artistic heritage and its social uses are explicitly thematised in the frame narrative, since the friend from Vienna proposes the volume about Prague masterpieces as a way of addressing the neglect of Czech art among foreign audiences. Indeed, the friend attributes that neglect at least partially to hostile motives: 'It appears or indeed is certain that there is some system to this disregard for Czech art. Our German neighbours, living in animosity with the Czech nation since time immemorial, have disparaged everything they could that was Czech, and whatever they were unable to disparage directly they systematically ignored.'<sup>39</sup> This patriotic if not nationalist concern drops away in the body of the romanetto (as does the entire motif of the book of colour reproductions), only to be revived in muted form at the end; but it signals right from the outset that 'art' in this romanetto is a theme that carries broader, extra-aesthetic implications.

Therefore, the reader must pay close attention to the ekphrastic moment when Arbes describes the painting of St Xavier itself::

On a desolate shore by the sea a man in the black attire of a monk lies alone, dying. He lies in semi-repose on an improvised bed, on a crude couch, his back pressed against a rockface, at the top of which a sort of roof has been quickly constructed from rough stone, wooden boards, and dried southern weeds, intended to protect the dying man from at least the most intense rays of the flaming Indian sun.

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<sup>39</sup> 'Zdá se, ba jest jisto, že je v tomto nevšímání sobě českého umění systém. Němečtí naši sousedé, žijíce od pravěku v nepřátelství s národem českým, tupili vše, co bylo českého, a co nemohli přímo tupiti, aspoň systematicky ignorovali' (SX, p. 289).

His black monk's habit lies slightly open at the breast, while the lower part of his body is covered by a rough blanket, under which one sees simply bony, bare feet of pallid hue. In his left hand the dying man holds a wooden cross with a figure of Christ; his right arm, bent at the elbow, lies limply from the bed.

His head, once a source of energy and strength though now conveying only resignation and complete acceptance of his inevitable fate, inclines slightly to the back. His face, livid and covered with a slight beard, with its strong cheekbones, deeply sunken eyes, and overall features indicating a man who was once uncommonly vehement, passionate, indeed fanatical, now turns towards the skies over the sea, as if the gaze of the dying man were bathing in the reflections from the sun, whose golden glow in the background indicates is either rising or has just set.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> 'Na pustém břehu mořském umírá o samotě muž v černém řeholním oděvu. Pololeže odpočívá na improvizovaném loži, na hrubé rohožce, jsa zády opřen o skalisko, nad nímž je z hrubých kamenů, prken a jižních travin narychlo sdělán jakýsi druh střechy, mající umírajícího chrániti aspoň před nejprudšími úpaly plamenného slunce indického. / Černé řeholní roucho je na prsou poněkud rozhaleno; dolní část těla je pokryta hrubou houní, zpod které je vidět jen obnažené kostnaté nohy zsinálé barvy. V levici drží umírající dřevěný kříž s Kristem, pravice pak v lokti ohnutá visí bez vlády z lože. / Hlava, jevící druhy energii a sílu, nyní pak již jen rezignaci a úplné oddání se v neodvratný osud, je poněkud nazad nachýlena; zsinálý, krátkým vousem zarostlý obličej, jehož mocně vyvinuté lícní kosti, hluboko zapadlé oči a vůbec všechny tahy jeví muže druhy neobyčejně prudkého, vášnivého, ba fanatického, obrácen je k nebesům

As an example of ekphrasis this passage proves disappointing. Arbes offers a degree of speculation about the figure in the painting, some of which—primarily the attribute of ‘fanaticism’—becomes a significant theme later in the romanetto. But what stands out most prominently is the low affective value of this ekphrasis. The description of the painting is sober and matter-of-fact: we receive only the sparsest of details regarding the painting technique (colour palette, brushstrokes, etc.) or the composition of the image, and only in the final paragraph does the narrator make some attempt to recreate on the reader the effect that the painting would presumably have on a viewer. Arbes limits himself to a single interpretive observation: that the painting depicts a figure once driven by fanatical energy yet now resigned to his fate. Indeed, Arbes admits the inadequacy of his ekphrasis, for immediately following the passage above he writes: ‘The expression on the pallid face, especially the eyes sunk deep in their sockets and fixed on some indefinite void, is beyond my ability to describe.’<sup>41</sup> So Arbes falls short in the central task given by traditional notions of ekphrasis: recreation of the aesthetic effect of a work of visual art in the ‘fraternal’ medium of words. Arbes’s passage on the painting in this romanetto is better understood as mere description than ekphrasis proper, doing little of the ‘verbal “conjuring”’ that ‘would seem specific to the genre of ekphrastic poetry’.<sup>42</sup>

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směrem k moři, jako by se zrak umírajícího stápl v lesku slunce, jehož žlutavá záplava v pozadí obrazu nasvědčuje, že slunce buď teprve vyjde anebo že bylo právě zapadlo’ (SX, pp. 292–93).

<sup>41</sup> ‘Výraz zsinalého obličej, obzvláště očí hluboko v důlkách zapadlých a do neurčitého prázdna upřených nelze mi popsati’ (SX, p. 293).

<sup>42</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, ‘Ekphrasis and the Other’, in *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 151–81 (p. 158).

Nor does Arbes appear to be intentionally failing here, which might be understood as ‘a possible reference to or thematizing of this sort of dissonance’ between representational media—in other words, as thematizing the gap between description and depiction.<sup>43</sup> Even with Arbes’s confession that he is unable to convey the expression on Xavier’s face, his description of Balko’s painting feels serviceable and pragmatic rather than sceptical and problematic. Thus while Arbes builds his novella around an ekphrastic moment, he seems indifferent to the broader questions raised by the verbal representation of visual representation.

One might be tempted to conclude that Arbes simply is not terribly good at ekphrasis. Shortly after the passage just quoted, however, an ekphrastic transposition of a different sort occurs—and this one is much more striking. The narrator sits down in a confessional from which he can comfortably view the painting. He watches as the sacristan, ready to close the church for the day, leads the last churchgoers out, and he himself is about to leave when he sees a mysterious figure crouching near the painting, an encounter that proves the crucial event of the romanetto.<sup>44</sup> He remains still, allowing

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<sup>43</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>44</sup> Several commentators have noted that this scene—together with a similar scene at the outset of Arbes’s later romanetto *Poslední dnové lidstva* (*The Last Days of Mankind*, 1895) bears a striking resemblance to the chapter ‘Im Dom’ (In the cathedral) in Kafka’s *Der Process*. The point was first made in Karel Krejčí, ‘Arbes a Franz Kafka’, reprinted in idem, *Česká literatura a kulturní proudy evropské* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1975), pp. 345–57, and has been echoed in Hodrová, *Místa s tajemstvím*, p. 83; and Marie Kubínová, ‘Prostory víry a transcendence: Kostel, chrám, a boží muka v novodobé české literatuře’, in Daniela Hodrová, Zdeněk Hrbata, Marie Kubínová, and

himself to be locked in the now empty church alone with the suspicious young man, who approaches the painting and examines it ‘as if he were trying to fathom the painter’s most hidden motive.’<sup>45</sup> Finally the young man turns, allowing the narrator to see his face:

Just once my gaze flew to the picture of the dying St Xavier and then fixed again on the unknown man, for at that moment I thought my eyes had deceived me: the face of Xavier was the same as that of the man in front of me absorbed in his thoughts.

The same low forehead, the same nose, the same chin, the same lips, in a word the same facial expression, as if he had served the painter as a model.

I carefully examined this resemblance; but the more I looked from the picture to the man and from the man to the picture, the more striking was the likeness between their faces. It consisted in something inexpressibly bitter that yet irresistibly convinced one that it was impossible to achieve peace and salvation other than through the most steadfast faith, that the thought we let

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Vladimír Macura, *Poetika míst: Kapitoly z literární tematologie* (Jinočany: H&H, 1997), 125–76 (p. 133). It is quite likely Kafka would have been familiar at least with *Svatý Xaverius*, though less clear what significance the parallel might hold. Hodrová identifies the topological motif of the ‘mysterious painting in a cathedral’ as a device generating a magnetic power drawing the narrative towards exceptional states.

<sup>45</sup> ‘[J]ako by chtěl vypátrati nejtajnější motiv malířův’ (*SX*, p. 295).

lead us and that is everything to us will, in the end, become reality, even if it is false and deceptive...<sup>46</sup>

The similarity between these two figures becomes a central conceit of the romanetto. We soon learn that the mysterious young man is even named Xavier, which suddenly puts into question whether the title *Svatý Xaverius* refers to the painting, the historical figure of the saint in the painting, or this character, who at the end dies a death that smacks of martyrdom.

As we learn about his background, we see that more is at work than just implausible coincidence. Xavier's grandmother had been servant and nurse for the aged, ill painter Balko; her daughter carried on that loyalty, worshipping the painting *Saint Xavier* with fanatical piety; when she gave birth to Xavier her cultish devotion to the painting not only led her to choose the name, but also to pass on the likeness of the

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<sup>46</sup> 'Jenom jednou zalétl zrak můj na obraz umírajícího svatého Xaveria a ihned svezl se zase na neznámého, leč v okamžiku tom se mi zdálo, jako by mě byl zklamal zrak: tvář Xaveriova byla tatáž jako tvář přede mnou v myšlénkách pohříženého muže. / Totéž nízké čelo, tentýž nos, táž brada, tytéž rty, slovem celý výraz obličejje, jako by byl muž ten malíři obrazu sloužil za vzor. / Zkoumal jsem podobnost tu bedlivěji; čím déle však jsem se díval z obrazu na muže a z muže na obraz, tím nápadnější byla mi podobnost obou tváří. Spočívaloť v obou cosi nevýslovně trpkého, a přece zase cosi neodolatelně přesvědčujícího, že nelze nabyti klidu a dojíti spasení jinak kromě skalopevnou vírou, že myšlénka, kterou se zanášíme a která je nám vším, posléze přece stane se skutkem, byť byla i lživou a klamnou...' (SX, p. 296).



figure in the painting.<sup>47</sup> Most importantly, Xavier himself is also obsessed with the painting, although not out of religious zeal like his mother—Xavier in fact rejects her excessive piety as a form of bigotry—but because of his conviction that it harbours a great secret that will be revealed only through the most profound observation.<sup>48</sup>

This might appear an assemblage of fairly standard, even clichéd, motifs of the mystery tale, but something more significant is taking place. For Arbes is presenting the first in what becomes a series of increasingly radical variations on the notion of ekphrasis. The features of this particular face step out of the painting, as it were, and become the features of a literary character. As the narrator's gaze flickers back and forth from the painting *Saint Xavier* to the character of Xavier, it thus enacts not a medial transposition between visual and linguistic representation, but a narrative shift from a figure in a painting to a literary character, from *Xavier* to Xavier. The figures are linked by the shared motifs of 'bitter conviction' and 'steadfast faith'. This shift introduces the character Xavier as a figure confronting the question of how to 'translate' between

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<sup>47</sup> Arbes rather tongue-in-cheekily invokes the venerable superstition that a pregnant woman who looks obsessively at an object will 'imprint' those traits upon her child; see *SX*, p. 316.

<sup>48</sup> Xavier tells the narrator that "I come from a very religious family; I would add that this family was not simply religious but bigoted in the truest sense of the word" ("pocházím z rodiny velmi nábožné; dodávám nyní, že rodina ta byla nejen pouze nábožná, nýbrž v pravém smyslu bigotní", *SX*, p. 308). He later describes his mother's "blind worship of the extraordinary picture" ("slepé toto zbožňování podivuhodného obrazu"), arousing the narrator's concern that Xavier's own obsession with the painting may itself be a sign of mental illness (*SX*, p. 316).

representational, and by extension, hermeneutic codes. Xavier himself embodies such a translation from painted to literary figure, and his main mission in the romanetto—a mission he pursues meticulously and often obsessively—is to understand and master how one performs such hermeneutic translations.

Xavier's conviction that the painting harbours some great secret requires that he translate the painting into another, as yet unknown code. His efforts at decryption take a similar structure to Legrand's in 'The Gold-Bug': a series of transpositions of the painting into different codes that each present a particular hermeneutic challenge. In a tone of pride similar to Legrand's as he explained how he decrypted his parchment, Xavier relates to the narrator how after intense observation he discovered a series of barely visible spots on the canvas where the paint had a different character. He carefully sketched these, thus translating the painting into an abstract geometric scheme of points and lines. His next insight was to try to superimpose this scheme onto an old map of Prague from the period when Balko painted his picture, though this produced confusing results. The final breakthrough was to locate a matching 'central point' on the scheme and the map—the Archimedean hermeneutic point—that would reveal the proper superimposition of the two. He eventually succeeds and sees the lines of the scheme lead neatly and precisely through the streets on the map from Balko's final residence to a spot near the outskirts of Prague. Here, he concludes, lies buried treasure, and he invites the narrator to go with him to dig it up. This two-stage translation of the painting first into a schematic diagram and then into a map of Prague constitutes a further expansion of the notion of ekphrasis in the tale: the transposition of a work of art into a guide for action in the real world. The earlier transformations—the painting, the geometric diagram, the map—had all remained on paper (or canvas). But the map allows Xavier to

step off the paper and out into the real world: “I now had a starting point not just on the plan, but *in reality*”<sup>49</sup> The reward will be treasure.

Thus far Arbes’s Xavier seems a fine pupil of Poe’s Legrand.<sup>50</sup> But here the differences between the two tales take over. First, the very idea that the ‘secret’ of Balko’s painting consists in a map leading to buried treasure constitutes a fundamental misjudgement. Xavier’s obsessive conviction that the painting harbours a secret originated with words the dying Balko had dictated to Xavier’s barely literate grandmother. Balko wrote:

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<sup>49</sup> “‘Měl jsem tedy východiště nejen v plánu, nýbrž i ve skutečnosti’”<sup>49</sup> (SX, p. 338, emphasis added).

<sup>50</sup> On another level, Arbes is a fine pupil of Poe: it seems highly likely that Arbes’s most influential act of literary journalism—his deciphering of the encrypted, sexually explicit diaries of the most important Czech Romantic poet, Karel Hynek Mácha (1810-1836)—was facilitated by techniques he may have learned from Poe’s essays on encryption, specifically, the realization that each line was written in a different direction. Arbes described his decryption of the diaries in terms that sound almost like an adventure story and that are strikingly reminiscent of Legrand’s own account in the second part of ‘The Gold-Bug’. Arbes did not publish the most candid passages from the diaries (they were not published in full until the late twentieth century). See Jakub Arbes, ‘Máchovo tajemství’ (Mácha’s secret), in Arbes, *Karel Hynek Mácha, Dílo Jakuba Arbesa*, 10, ed. by Karel Janský and Karel Polák (Prague: Melantrich, 1941), pp. 313–19 (originally published in *Rozhledy literární*, 1886); and *Intimní Karel Hynek Mácha*, ed. by Miloš Pohorský (Prague: Český spisovatel, 1993).

‘The picture of the dying Xavier was not painted simply to please the eye and to rouse the thoughts of pious Christians. It contains something more than works by Old Masters usually do, it contains something at which many thousands might shrug their shoulders, but which none the less could lead to the salvation of millions...

‘The one who is capable of spending years lingering over this picture, who concentrates all his thought on the picture in order to fathom the secret hidden therein and succeeds in doing so, cannot remain without great worth for humanity; for his soul will have attained the strength and grounding required for a great work that would benefit all humanity.

‘Just one thing is required for this, however: diligence and iron will. To whomever is armed with these attributes and who persists in front of the painting and finds its secret, St Xavier will reveal a priceless treasure’.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> “‘Obraz umírajícího svatého Xaveria nebyl malován pouze pro oko a pro povznesení mysli zbožných křesťanů. Je v něm více, nežli bývá v obrazech největších mistrů, je v něm cosi, nad čímž by tisícové s pohrdáním krčili ramenoma, z čehož však by přece mola vzejítí spása milionům... / Kdo dovede třeba po léta dlít před obrazem tím, kdo upne veškerou svou mysl na obraz, aby tajemství v obraze skryté vypátral, a komu se podaří tajemství to vypátrati, nemůže zůstat pro lidstvo bez ceny, neboť duch jeho nabude oné síly a průpravy, jaké je potřebí k obrovskému dílu na prospěch veškerého lidstva. / Jediné však věci je především třeba: vytrvalosti a železné vůle. Kdo těmito obrněn bude před obrazem dlít, by vypátral tajemství obrazu, tomu svatý Xaverius zjeví neocenitelný poklad” (SX, pp. 312–13).

Balko's words seem clear: the 'priceless treasure' is some sort of spiritual or social gift to humanity, not a pirate's treasure; it promises the 'salvation of millions', not gold and gemstones. Yet despite his undeniable intelligence and evident lack of greed, Xavier quickly translates his task into a treasure hunt.<sup>52</sup> Ironically, the more absorbed Xavier becomes in his hermeneutic adventure of uncovering deeper meaning, the more he is unable to see beyond the superficial meaning of the phrase 'priceless treasure'. Xavier's process of translation across hermeneutic codes has thus cheapened Balko's original idealistic mission into mere pursuit of material gain. What Xavier has performed here is effectively alchemy in reverse: by searching for gold, he transforms the mystery of Balko's painting into something base.<sup>53</sup>

The other major difference from Legrand's adventure is, as already noted, that Xavier fails. And the manner of that failure is devastating. Despite the fact that the diagram extracted from the painting corresponded perfectly with the streets on the old Prague map, despite the map leading them to a spot entirely suitable for buried treasure,

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<sup>52</sup> In their first meeting after he has deciphered the map, Xavier says to the narrator: "if you wish, you may go with me this very evening to pick up the treasure. [...] Here is the path to the treasure marked out clearly and correctly. There is no doubt that it is right" ("[A] libo-li ti, můžeš dnes v noci se mnou vyzvednouti poklad. [...] Zde je už správně a určitě naznačena cesta k pokladu. Není pochybnosti, že je pravá", *SX*, p. 317).

<sup>53</sup> Secondary literature has barely registered this slippage, instead generally following Xavier's assumption that the secret of the painting concerns literal treasure. See, for example, František Všečetka, *Jakub Arbes* (Prague: Pražská imaginace, 1993), pp. 9–10. The implausibility of a painter such as Balko possessing 'priceless treasure' to be buried has also escaped attention (the romanetto offers not even the pretence of an explanation).

despite finding several semi-precious gemstones (topaz, amethyst, and sapphire) just under the surface at that spot, even despite uncovering an ancient metal box buried deeper there and containing further stones, there is no treasure. The stones in the box prove to be false gemstones without value; their presence at that precise spot as well as the presence of those few semi-precious stones is all just a mind-boggling coincidence. In Xavier's own words: "The box only found its way to that valley by coincidence, just as by coincidence I found the first three gemstones".<sup>54</sup> Early on the narrator tells us that when he first met Xavier the latter was

working quite truly on solving the 'problem of coincidence', and his claims and calculations that were founded on scientific principles were exceptionally persuasive, while other hypotheses and conclusions of his were so unusually daring that they seemed something between the creations of a brain so inflamed by imagination as to cloud judgment, or of one suffering from occasional illness.<sup>55</sup>

Even after his treasure hunt fails, Xavier expresses arrogant confidence that he has mastered the problem, and when the narrator wonders whether the overlap between the diagram and the map may not have been coincidental, Xavier shouts: "Coincidence!?"

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<sup>54</sup> "Krabice nedostala se do rokle jinak nežli náhodou, právě tak jako jsem tam já náhodou našel první tři drahokamy" (SX, p. 363).

<sup>55</sup> 'V době, kdy jsme se seznámili, zabýval se zcela opravdově řešením "problému náhody" a výroky i kombinace jeho, opírajíce se o vymoženosti vědy, měly vždy neobyčejnou přesvědčující sílu, kdežto zase smělé hypotézy a konkluze jeho právě jen pro svou neobyčejnou smělost zdály se náležeti buď mezi výtvořiny mozku na útraty soudnosti obrazotvorností rozpáleného neb občasnou chorobou trpícího' (SX, p. 306).

[...] I do not believe in coincidence, for me coincidence does not exist! Don't you know that I have been working to resolve—admittedly, unsuccessfully until now—the ‘problem of coincidence’?”<sup>56</sup> But in the end, coincidence—a prospect that has haunted Xavier from the beginning of his hermeneutic undertaking—has dealt a vengeful blow.

If Legrand's successful discovery of his treasure was predicated on his extraordinary luck in coincidence, Xavier's failure, and the maddening results that led him to believe he was on the edge of success, represent a nightmarish counterpart. Xavier's failure, no less than Legrand's success, beggars belief. Further, that failure initiates a cruel sequence of events: Xavier flees the scene in what appears a fit of madness; the narrator does not see him for several years; and eventually learns that Xavier is being held in a prison in Vienna, accused of having stolen items from—where else?—the very church in Prague containing *Saint Xavier*, on the very night he and the narrator were engaged on their futile mission. The romanetto ends with the narrator visiting the prison and finding Xavier, who dies shortly thereafter. His pose in death resembles that of St Xavier in Balko's painting.

Does Xavier's failure have any meaning? Is his death anything other than a cruel joke? Most importantly, is there any connection between that failure and the reverse alchemy that transposed the ‘priceless treasure’ Balko claimed his artwork could reveal into material, monetary terms? One way to interpret this dénouement would be to see it as an example of the Czech ‘martyr complex’, a deeply rooted cultural tradition in which

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<sup>56</sup> “‘Náhodou!? [...] Nevěřím v náhodu, pro mě náhoda neexistuje! Což nevíš už, že zabýval jsem se, ovšem doposud marně, řešením ‘problému náhody’?’” (SX, p. 365).

Czechs have cast themselves as victims of more powerful foreign nations.<sup>57</sup> Surely it is no coincidence that Xavier ends up imprisoned in Vienna of all places, the Habsburg capital and locus of much animosity from patriotically minded Czechs at the time Arbes was writing.<sup>58</sup> The ending of the novella thus seems to pick up on the nationalistically tinged frame narrative describing the patriotic project of the art historical volume of Prague works of art, explicitly cast as a corrective to hostile efforts by foreign nations to ‘disparage [...] everything they could that was Czech’ (SX, p. 289). Indeed the final paragraphs of the romanetto, following the death of Xavier, mention that project once more, though only to note that it never materialized. Yet for several reasons the ‘national martyrdom’ scheme does not hold here. First, the choice of painting at the heart of this tale is conspicuously unsuited to carry such an ideological charge. At the outset of the romanetto, as the narrator and his friend are visiting Prague churches and planning their volume, the friend asks, ““Was Balko Czech?” “No, he wasn’t”, I responded. “He was born in Breslau. He spent merely the final years of his life in Prague, and also died

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<sup>57</sup> See in particular Robert B. Pynsent, *Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1994), chapter four, esp. pp. 190–96.

<sup>58</sup> There are autobiographical echoes here. During the period when Arbes was writing his first romanettos, including *Svatý Xaverius*, he was himself in and out of prison on account of his journalistic activities: for a few days in Vienna, and then for over a year in Böhmisches Leipa (Česká Lípa), a northern Bohemian town with at that time a predominantly German-speaking population.



here”.<sup>59</sup> The friend goes on to remark that Balko’s style reminds him distinctly of German Old Masters.<sup>60</sup> Further, the Jesuit-founded church of St Nicholas, where the painting is located, is the centrepiece of the high Baroque transformation of Prague’s Lesser Town, which in the ideology of mid-nineteenth-century Czech nationalism was associated with Habsburg-led displacement of the historical Bohemian Estates following the ‘national tragedy’ of the Battle of White Mountain (1620). Finally, the subject matter of the painting itself—St Xavier, a Jesuit martyr who was chief instigator of the brutal Goa Inquisition—is not only associated in the romanetto, as we have seen, with the theme of zealotry or even bigotry, but is also distinctly suggestive of the charge of Roman Catholic-Habsburg oppression central to Czech nationalist discourse at the time. The awkwardness of this fact comes to the surface when Xavier explains that despite his

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<sup>59</sup> “‘Byl Balko Čech?’ ‘Nebyl’, dím. ‘Narodil se ve Vratislavi. V Praze strávil toliko poslední dobu svého života a zde také zemřel’” (SX, p. 287).

<sup>60</sup> Had Arbes’s aim been to lament the malign neglect of ‘Czech’ Old Masters, a far more suitable subject would have been Karel Škréta (1610–1674), the outstanding figure of Bohemian Baroque painting and a figure easily adapted for patriotic mythologizing. Škréta, born into the faith of the Bohemian Brethren, went into exile for several years to avoid persecution following the Battle of White Mountain. One popularizing account later dubbed Škréta ‘the Czech Raphael’ (Josef Flekáček, *Drobné povídky dějepisné* [Prague: Alois Hynek, 1890], p. 41). Arbes later wrote a story called ‘Škrétův poslední souboj’ (Škréta’s last duel) in which the painter fights a duel to defend the honour of Czech art.

obsession with the painting, ‘till today, to be honest’ he knows only the most basic facts about the saint portrayed therein.<sup>61</sup>

Another way to interpret the dénouement would be to seek a positive side to Xavier’s failure. One might identify a tragic dimension to Xavier’s fate, understanding the ambition and devotion he brought to his hermeneutic mission as admirable despite his ultimate defeat by a reality that proved indifferent to such ideals. One interpreter of the romanetto, Jaroslava Janáčková, has argued that the disturbing ending ‘expresses the acuity of a searching human intellect vis-à-vis an alienated reality [...] although it also discerns the effective powerlessness of the individual in the face of given social relations’.<sup>62</sup> But understanding Xavier as a quixotic or tragic figure defending

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<sup>61</sup> Xavier concedes that St Xavier’s actions in India were those of a soldier as well as a priest, and then states: ‘however, he had a much greater effect on the population to the benefit of Christianity through his disciplined life and the impeccable model he presented than through weapons’ (‘však svým přísným životem a vzorným příkladem daleko více mezi obvatelstvem působil na prospěch víry křesťanské nežli zbraní’, *SX*, p. 322) – a contentious claim. Xavier further states, incorrectly, that St Xavier died in Goa, an error reflected in Arbes’s initial description of the painting as well (St Xavier in fact died on the island of Shangchuan off the southern coast of China.) It is unclear whether Arbes is simply mistaken or whether this error is intended as a subtle reminder of St Xavier’s role in the Goa Inquisition.

<sup>62</sup> Janáčková, *Arbesovo romaneto*, p. 94. Similarly, Dokoupil claims that Xavier ‘comes to realize that the greatest treasure is the ability to engage in independent reflection, which he has cultivated through his extensive seeking and through which alone he can

intellectual and spiritual ambition against crude, intractable reality overlooks Xavier's own implication in the corrupting, degrading dynamic of materialism: his 'reverse alchemy' that transmutes Balko's ideals into a mere search for gold. Xavier's failure is not that he didn't find treasure; it is that he sought treasure at all. By doing so, he has betrayed the idealism Balko wished to invest in his painting.

A different explanation of Xavier's failure is therefore needed. Here is where the notion of ekphrasis, and the various transmutations that that notion has undergone in the romanetto, reveals its full relevance. To understand the final form that ekphrasis assumes it is necessary to be quite precise about just how Xavier's 'reverse alchemy' diverges from Balko's original aspirations. The crude materialism of the treasure hunt Xavier invents might induce one to think of Balko's ideal by contrast as some sort of spiritual or even aesthetic quest.<sup>63</sup> But the figure of Balko was originally motivated by his sense of the inadequacy of mere spiritual or aesthetic activity to change the world. Xavier relates his grandmother's account as follows:

'In the final period of his life [Balko] was often pensive and taciturn. My grandmother also noticed in him dissatisfaction, deeply rooted dissatisfaction. He would often work in his studio in the strangest fashion; he would frequently stand motionless in front of a blank canvas or a picture just begun

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benefit humanity'—a claim difficult to reconcile with the image of a broken Xavier dying in a Viennese prison; see Dokoupil, 'Vliv E. A. Poea', p. 36.

<sup>63</sup> This is effectively what both Janáčková and Dokoupil do, though they regard Xavier as following, not betraying, this ideal (see previous note).

for several hours deep in thought, as if frozen; but then he would throw down his brush or palette and growl between his teeth:

“Vanity! It is all in vain!” or “What is the point? It is all just to please the eye; one looks at it and then turns away and goes one’s way”<sup>64</sup>.

So Xavier in fact accurately understood the source of Balko’s dissatisfaction: aesthetic autonomy, the disjuncture between art and real life. The character of Balko was a philanthropist at heart and a would-be social reformer, and found that art was an insufficient tool to achieve the change he desired. Xavier describes an old letter in which Balko expressed how “the most horrible hopelessness gnawed away at his soul. He often thought that by becoming a painter he had missed his calling in life, that he should have become a scientist [...] and committed himself to reform”<sup>65</sup>. Artists merely represented the world in various ways, but the point was to change it. This insight is what first leads Xavier to conclude that ‘the secret of the painting [of *Saint Xavier*] does not consist in the painter’s art’, and that ‘the secret lay in the painting itself but in such

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<sup>64</sup> ‘V poslední době svého života býval prý často velmi zamyšlen a málomluvný; také nespokojenost, a jak se zdá, nespokojenost hluboko zakořeněnou, babička má u něho pozorovala. Ve své pracovně pracoval mnohdy velmi podivným způsobem; často stával před holým plátnem nebo započatým obrazem v hlubokých myšlenkách po kolik hodin nepohnutě, jako přimrazen, nato pak skoro vždy mrštil štětcem a paletou mručce mezi zuby: / “Marnost, samá marnost!” nebo “K čemu to? Není to vše než pro oko; člověk se podívá a odvrátí a jde zas po svých” (SX, p. 309).

<sup>65</sup> “Nejděsnější beznadějnost vžírala se v jeho ducha. Často se mu zdalo, že stav se malířem, minul se cílem svého života, že měl se stát vědátorem [...] a zasadil se pak o reformu” (SX, p. 366).

unusual fashion that we do not find its like even in the pictures of the greatest Old Masters; it was, so to speak, something “unpainterly”, it did not refer to and did not reside in the painter’s art’.<sup>66</sup> Xavier’s ‘reverse alchemy’, therefore, cannot be understood straightforwardly as misguided materialism. For the injunction to move beyond painting, to have an effect in the real world, to transcend the limitations of the aesthetic and to give his work of art material efficacy, was in fact Balko’s central message. He wished his art to become something other than, and more than, just painting.

Here we see the final, most profound transformation of ekphrasis: not simply a transposition from one aesthetic medium to another, but a transposition from the aesthetic to the extra-aesthetic realm—a transposition from ‘art’ to ‘reality’. The first significant ekphrastic moment in the romanetto, which saw the slide from the image of St Xavier in the painting to the character of Xavier in the romanetto, involved, as we have seen, a shift from art to ‘reality’, though the reality in question was still contained within the narrative framework of Arbes’s text. But Balko’s injunction calls for something greater: a shift to a reality that is not confined within any aesthetic framework at all.

In this respect Arbes is commenting on the powerful impulse within Czech culture of the time to strive for social efficacy and to act as an instrument for social or political struggle. Balko’s longing that his painting should serve as a tool for ‘the salvation of millions’ represents in hyperbolic form the call for art to serve a social as

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<sup>66</sup> ‘[T]ajemství obrazu nezakládá se v umění malířském’; ‘spočívalo tedy tajemství v malbě samé, a přece bylo tak zvláštním, že neshledáváme cosi podobného ani v malbách největších mistrů; bylo tudíž dle všeho, abych tak řekl, “nemalířským”, netýkalo se a nezakládalo se v umění malířském’ (*SX*, pp. 328, 327).

well as aesthetic function, to overcome aesthetic autonomy. This represented a central aspiration of Czech cultural politics for much of the nineteenth century. The subordination of aesthetic to socially effective criteria in Czech literature and art in the nineteenth century represented a persistent dynamic (in particular in view of the implicit competition with German culture as a bearer of social and national prestige).

Commenting on an earlier phase of the early to mid-nineteenth century Czech National Revival (*Národní obrození*), Vladimír Macura has written of the ‘marked type of that time of putting art into the service of a national programme. Josef Kajetán Tyl [author of Czech patriotic plays and prose in the 1830s and ’40s] found ultimate motivation for his prose expressly in the extra-aesthetic component, [writing literature so that] he “could speak to our most worldly affairs”’.<sup>67</sup> Alexej Kusák has written that ‘Czech culture [in the nineteenth century] took on a value system that placed functional value above immanent value. The criterion for evaluation thus could not be the greatness or originality of a cultural act [...] but rather its utility, its usefulness in the political struggle of the nation’.<sup>68</sup> Yet Arbes in his romanetto takes a radically pessimistic stance towards such aspirations. The ‘master ekphrasis’ of translating aesthetic expression into extra-aesthetic action falls into the trap of ‘reverse alchemy’: any artwork that manages to break out of its aesthetic limitations becomes cheapened, quantified, corrupted. This trap subjects one to the rule of coincidence, which is indifferent to human aspirations. Arbes’s equation of ‘extra-aesthetic function’ with ‘subjection to coincidence’ is the fundamental meaning of Xavier’s failure. The pessimism of this conclusion—especially

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<sup>67</sup> Vladimír Macura, *Znamení zrodu a České sny* (Prague: Academia, 2015), p. 21.

<sup>68</sup> Alexej Kusák, *Kultura a politika v Československu, 1945–1956* (Prague: Torst, 1998), p. 23.

in view of the social claims so prominent in the Czech cultural context—is difficult to overstate.

### **Conclusion: From Periphery to Periphery**

What emerges from close comparison of Poe's 'The Gold-Bug' with Arbes's *Svatý Xaverius* is the central role that the notion of coincidence plays in both texts.

Coincidence functions as corrosive agent for hermeneutic activity, and this is no less evident in an informed reading of Poe's 'successful' treasure-hunt than in the more obviously pessimistic tale told by Arbes. But equally importantly, coincidence operates for both Poe and Arbes in a manner that problematizes the relation between literature (or art in general) and the social structures it might ostensibly serve. For Poe, the idea that hermeneutics provides an allegory for material success is revealed as the ideology of early American capitalism (even while it generated Poe's most commercially successful story): the ostensible optimism of the tale is revealed as cruel optimism. For Arbes, the idea that art provides a tool for social and national reform is revealed as an ideological delusion of Czech patriotism, and cruelty and pessimism are made explicit in his tale.

This shared reflection on art and venerated social ideals is more important for understanding Arbes's adaptation of Poe than is the emphasis on the dazzle of decryption and treasure-hunt. Baudelaire, too, downplayed the importance of Poe's puzzling and his sleuthing—the central components not only of 'The Gold-Bug' but also of the Dupin stories—as an unfortunate 'Americanism', a distraction from his true achievement. But for Baudelaire, Poe's importance lay in his obsessive diagnosis and dissection of the 'maladies mystérieuses de l'esprit', not in criticism of social ideology. So while Poe's influence on the 'peripheral' literature of the Bohemian lands may indeed have required, as Moretti claims, a 'passage through the centre' in the form of Baudelaire's advocacy, that influence itself had its origin in a different periphery, and

contained dynamics beyond those that Baudelaire identified. What Arbes has sensed in and taken over from Poe is a disturbing and subversive conception of coincidence that has little to do with the late Romantic concerns that so inspired Baudelaire. Arbes's Poe is not Baudelaire's Poe.

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