

## **With a Little Help from Edgar Allan Poe (Deciphering a cryptographic text produced by a Modern Greek writer)**

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When I was fourteen years old I discovered the American Center in Nicosia. It is in an old building surrounded by a garden, near the archaeological Museum of Cyprus. Its library is rich in books by American authors written in English. There was however only a poor section of books on American history and American literature translated into Greek in a far away corner. It was then that I began to study American literature. I have read virtually all the Greek section of the American Center. It was also there and then that I read books by Edgar Allan Poe for the first time in my life. One of his books, *The Gold-Bug*, amazed me when I was fifteen years old. I was amazed then and still I am now because of his other books. After so many years, I still admire this great man. He remains one of my favorite writers.

The following quotation of a critic speaks of Poe's talent and importance: "The 1830s and the 1840s American literary world that he inhabited was at once genteel and rough-and-tumble, and Poe was its enfant terrible, a prolific but unpredictable talent of distinctive opinions and little restraint".

For Baudelaire, Edgar Allan Poe was "a fallen angel who remembered heaven". Whereas Emerson looked down upon that "jingle man" who shook his bells and called their sound poetry, Tennyson admired him as an equal and Yeats (on an official occasion, however), proclaimed that he was "so certainly the greatest of American poets, and always, and for all lands, a great lyric poet".

In 1843, Poe published his famous tale *The Gold-Bug* and won a prize of one hundred dollars offered by the *Dollar Newspaper*. This brought him belated fame. Poe's tale was a popular success. One newspaper reviewer called *The Gold-Bug* the most remarkable American work of fiction in the past fifteen years. *The Gold-Bug* became famous world-wide and one of the most popular stories ever written.

\* Ministry of Education and Culture, Cyprus

*The Gold-Bug* is a treasure-hunting tale. William Legrand, the hero of this tale, discovered by accident, a scrap of parchment containing a cryptographic message. Cryptography deals directly with secrets. It is the medium through which secrets are hidden. In this tale, if Legrand manages to decipher the message he will be the owner of the secret, a pirate's treasure.

Later, in an anonymous review of himself, Poe attributed the popularity of his tale *The Gold-Bug* to the same materialistic predictions of the American mass audience: money, and the finding of money being chosen as the most popular thesis". A similar desire to exploit or control the mass audience underlies Poe's great innovations in literary form, such as the tale of "ratiocination" or, more, specifically, the detective story (which Poe is credited with inventing). Attentiveness to an emerging mass market even informs Poe's aesthetic writings, for his is perpetually investigating the possibility of creating a single literary text capable of satisfying both "the popular and the critical taste".

Poe was very interested in cryptography and had written texts on the subject (see "A few words on Secret Writing"). As the Reverend Mr. Cudworth claimed: "The most profound and skilful cryptographer who ever lived was undoubtedly Edgar Allan Poe." Poe, with his belief that no cipher devised by the human mind could go unresolved by human examination, himself claimed he would solve any cryptogram sent to him in challenges published in both *Alexander's Weekly Messenger* and *Craham's Magazine*. In his own words, Poe's challenge is stated as follows:

"It would be by no means a labor lost to show how great a degree of rigid method enters into enigma-guessing. This may sound oddly; but it is not more strange than the well fact that rules really exist, by means of which it is easy to decipher any species of hieroglyphical writing—that is to say writing here, in a place of alphabetical letters, any kind of marks are made use of at random. For example, in place of A put % or any arbitrary character—in place of B, a \*, etc., etc. Let an entire alphabet be made in his manner, and then let this alphabet be used in any piece of writing. This writing can be read by means of a proper method. Let this be put to the test. Let anyone address us a letter in this way, and we pledge ourselves to read it forthwith—however unusual or arbitrary may be the characters employed".

The challenge initiated numerous responses. Edgar Allan Poe found the solutions of all the ciphers that fall into the simple substitution category that Poe gave as a condition for the challenge.

Let us return to *The Gold-Bug*. The cryptographic message about the pirate's treasure was the following:

'53†††305) )6\*;4826)4†.) 4†) ;806\*;48†8¶(60) )85;1†(;:†8†83(88)  
5\*†;46(;88\*96\*?;8)\*†(;485) ;5\*†2:\*†(;4956\*2(5\*—4)8¶8\*; 40692  
85);)6†8)4††;1 (†9;48081;8:8†1;48†85;4) 485†528806\*81(†9;48;  
(88;4(†?34;48)4†;161;:188;†?;'

William Legrand, the hero of this tale, tried to break the code of this cryptographic text. His first step was to ascertain the predominant letters, as well as the least frequent. Counting all, he constructed a table with the cryptographic characters and the frequency of them. In the first position was one cryptographic character like the number 8, it was written in the text 33 times. The most frequent letter in the English language is “E”. So the first cryptographic letter had been recognized. The symbol 8 represents the letter e. Second step: Of all the words in the English language “the” is the most usual. So he recognized two other cryptographic characters that represented the letters t and h. In this way he managed to decipher the cryptographic text.

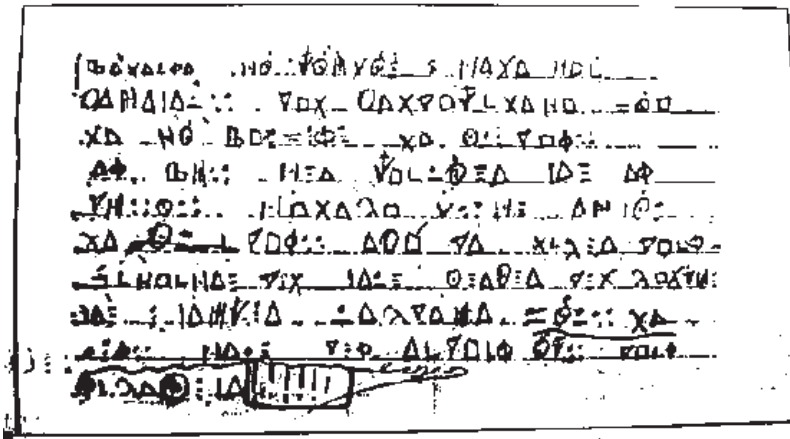
This is the deciphered text:

*“A good glass in the Bishop’s hostel in the devil’s forty – one degrees and thirteen minutes northeast and by north main branch seventh limb east side shoot from the left eye of the death’s –head a bee-line from the tree through the shot fifty feet out.”*

After the decipherment, it was very easy to discover the location of the treasure trove of gold, coins and diamonds worth one and a half million dollars in those days.

Let us proceed to the second cryptographic text. Giorgos Ioannou (1927 – 1985), the famous Greek prose writer of the post-war period, started writing a diary about his every day life during the Nazi occupation of Greece when he was only 16. Topics included hunger, oppression and other problems of the occupation, the progress of the Second World War, the weather, the situation at home, his personal thoughts and experiences). The future author stopped writing his diary after four months. In ten pages of his diary, some sentences were written in a cryptographic way using a symbolic alphabet created by the young man himself. He did that to hide some personal thoughts and experiences that he did not want to share with

anybody. At the beginning of the diary, he had written his self-created alphabet with the explanation for every symbol but he destroyed that first page because he was afraid that somebody might find out what he had written. Giorgos Ioannou himself admitted that even he was unable to decipher the cryptographic texts from his diary written such a long time before. The diary was published many years ago when Giorgos Ioannou was alive. In this edition a photo of one of his cryptographic texts was included. What follows was dated 13 December 1943:



When I saw it I was reminded of the decipherment in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Gold Bug*. I wondered if I could decipher this text. I re-read *The Gold Bug* to remember the method and started working. After many hours of working hard and following Poe's guidelines, I managed to decipher the first word and then with more ease the first sentence: "[They behave to me] in a cruel way, my mother hit me", this was the first sentence.

I was in tears, I realized that I was possibly the first man in the world to read this personal and cryptographic text. My favourite writer, Giorgos Ioannou, expressed himself in this text in 1943, at age sixteen, and after 57 years, in 2000, I was the first to receive his message. I continued and deciphered the whole message, which goes as following: "[They behave to me] in a cruel way, my mother hit me. I pray to God to help me and save me. I wish I could find a job to be able to have even only bread but to be saved from these people's hands. I remember the fat grandmother and my heart wants to live with her. All those in the house, I loath them, I am disgusted."

There is more, though. The novelist Giorgos Ioannou visited Kalavryta in

1963. There, thirty years before, on 13 – 12 – 1943 the Nazi troops of Germany executed all the men of Kalavryta, 1,200 victims age 16 and over. During his visit, the brother and sister of one of the victims, who was sixteen years old on the day of the execution, came to have their sibling's bones exhumed. In this place of martyrdom Giorgos Ioannou was curious to find out what was written in his Diary on that very date, December 13<sup>th</sup> 1943, promising himself to check the Diary entry when he returned home. This visit and his subsequent intention to check his diary is referred in a short story written by Giorgos Ioannou himself entitled: "13 – 12 – 43."

This is unbelievable! In his Diary, on December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1943, Giorgos Ioannou wrote the cryptographic text that in 2000 I, myself, deciphered.

So in Kalavryta a sixteen-year-old boy was faced with an execution squad of the Nazi troops and at the same time, on the same day, another boy of the same age, in Salonica, confronted hell in his home. It is important to understand that the major tragedies of a people and a nation go side by side with the tragedies of ordinary people, or the tragedies of every day life. The latter must not be ignored if we want to understand our society and our environment.

In conclusion, we have examined the decipherment of a literary text by Edgar Allan Poe and a diary entry by Giorgos Ioannou. Of course, we are living in a time when scientists have deciphered the human genetic code, and with telescopes, we are trying to understand the evolution of the universe from the Big Bang to today. I believe that the liberation process of humanity is really a process of decipherment: deciphering ourselves, deciphering society and nature, and deciphering the universe.