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Lacan and Derrida on "The Purloined Letter"

SERVANNE WOODWARD

The classical complaint about Marie Bonaparte's interpretation of Poe's writings is that she did not give a literary analysis of Poe. Lacan reproves Baudelaire for a translation which betrays Poe's encoded mathematical play on words. Yet Lacan's seminar on "The Purloined Letter" is not altogether involved with Poe's novel, nor with his mathematical poeology as demonstrated in "The Raven." Rather, and its place before the introduction of *Ecrits I* clearly demonstrates it, Lacan uses Poe's novel as a pretext to elaborate on the object *a*, the object of desire, the letter, which he investigates in this first volume. In the process of interpreting "The Purloined Letter," Lacan is extremely selective. He concentrates on the two first thefts of the letter (from the Queen and from the minister), quickly discarding Dupin's dealings with the police. Derrida takes due notice of this haste, while restituting the context of "The Purloined Letter." However, "what is at stake" is obviously not Poe, nor his "Purloined Letter." Barbara Johnson ironically notices that if there is a letter under these two commentaries, by Lacan and by Derrida, it would rather be Freud's prefacing of Marie Bonaparte's work.¹ In fact she finds that Lacan and Derrida are engaged in a fight reminiscent of Dupin's rivalry with the Minister D. already echoing the feud between the enemy brothers "to be found in Crébillon's 'Atrée.' "

My project here is not to enter the ring in order to play even and odd with masters perfectly practiced at this game. Rather, I shall reflect on

their respective interpretation of the letter, as demonstrated through their rewriting of Poe's "Purloined Letter."

Lacan's word comes through a tortured syntax with incomplete negations inviting to dual readings if not to rereadings. After all "The Purloined Letter" is to be read twice, once at the beginning and once at the end of his volume. His etymological use of words also brings the reading to a halt. Locative pronouns are introduced where they are unexpected and hardly justified but for a folding of the sentence on itself. This writing strategy is in full accord with Lacan's conception of the "word-knot," self-referential, to be understood only in terms of the addressee: "Le style c'est l'homme. . . . à qui l'on s'adresse."² Thus the image of a nineteenth-century letter folded on itself with an address on its verso lends itself well to the illustration of the Lacanian letter.

Lacan announces that he shall end his *Écrits* with the purloined letter under the name "a" minuscule. But "The Purloined Letter" is at once the alpha and the omega of this new bible where in the end was the beginning:

Car nous déchiffrons ici en la fiction de Poe, si puissante, au sens mathématique du terme, cette division où le sujet se vérifie de ce qu'un objet le traverse sans qu'ils se pénètrent en rien, laquelle est au principe de ce qui se lève à la fin de ce recueil sous le nom d'objet *a* (à lire: petit *a*).³

By the depiction of such an illusionist trick, one is to hear echoes of psychoanalysis, of the unconscious as essentially other yet constitutive of the subject—Lacan will say later, "*L'inconscient, c'est le discours de l'Autre.*"⁴

But the vocabulary used also refers to mysticism since the subject is *verified*, indeed comes to truth, to existence, only when traversed by the spirit of the letter. The baptism by the letter authenticates the beingness of the subject. Without such verification, the subject disintegrates according to Saint Augustine: "That evil then which I sought, whence it is, is not any substance: for were it a substance, it should be good. For either it should be an incorruptible substance, and so chief good: or a corruptible substance; which unless it were good, could not be corrupted."⁵ Hence, the subject who does not know the spirit of the letter is dead to the world, because the whole creation issues from the verb. Therefore, the letter

without the spirit (or the breath) kills: "La lettre tue."⁶ "Tue" can be read as "the letter kills" or "the letter unspoken" if "tue" is but the past participle of *taire* (to silence).

This double use of words opens the Lacanian text to multiple rereadings. His position of mastery as an author includes a style which favors multidirectional understanding, affirmations of certainty which are also expressions of doubts, such as "sans doute," which may mean "doubtlessly," as Derrida ironically decides,⁷ but also "possibly" or "probably." According to Derrida, this style is nothing but a defensive rhetoric, veiling and unveiling a unidirectional or circular interpretation centered (from a masculine vantage point), located on lack, the lack of castration as revealed Truth.

In keeping with a biological metaphor Derrida seems to argue not for lack, which implies the presence of what should have stood where it is missing—the phallogocentrism as the unification of contraries—, but rather for true loss, or better for true difference as assuring dissemination, multiplications, fragmentation.⁸ It is only logical then that Derrida should choose Poe's even numbers (his four kings from the introduction of "The Murders of the Rue Morgue") over the odd numbers (also to be found in Poe's trilogy): "To be less abstract, let us suppose a game of draughts where the pieces are reduced to four kings, and where, of course, no oversight is to be expected."⁹ "Le double carré de rois" is indicative of Derrida's concern for multiplication of frames, places, laws, and intertextuality.

However, if one is to pay closer attention to the introduction of "The Purloined Letter," and it is advisable to do so since Poe is well known for his careful introductions, one may note a facetious game of odd and even: "At Paris, just after dark *one* gusty evening in the autumn of 18—, I was enjoying the *twofold* luxury of *meditation and a meerschaum*, in company with my friend, C. Auguste Dupin, in his little back library, or *book-closet*, *au troisième*, No. 33 Rue Dunot, Faubourg St. Germain. For *one* hour at least *we* had maintained a profound silence; while *each*. . ."¹⁰ Poe plays on numbers, at first with ones and twos, but also with the doubling of odd numbers. The game of numbers continues with the arrival of the Prefect, who has signed a check to Dupin in the past. For who knows "The Mystery of Marie Roget," where the Prefect of the Parisian police, Monsieur G., had already proposed a business deal to Dupin, the latter being

notorious for his analytic powers and his lack of funds. Indeed Dupin was “reduced to such poverty” that the narrator rented their common abode during his stay in Paris.¹¹

It is thus not altogether clear that Dupin lives on a strictly restricted economy, nor that he is to turn his letters inside out in order to justify the narrator’s investment, as it is Derrida’s contention when he quotes Baudelaire.¹² In fact Dupin is parasitical, but specifically in his ability to transform other’s desire into money: the narrator values his company, the Prefect values his advice. That which the Queen, Minister D., and the Prefect consider to be matters of life and death, engaging their honor and power, Dupin reduces to a piece of trivia: to a substantial check. Dupin’s intellectual feat is mainly motivated by an unintellectual common denominator for humanity, a need for bread (*du pain* if one adds an “a” to Dupin’s name.) This pun is made by Dupin himself when he makes his “D-cipher” out of bread in order to sign his *fac-simile*.¹³

If one were to follow Deleuze and Guattari’s guidelines in *Anti-Oedipus*, one could say that Dupin has found the system of capitalism: “And money is fundamentally inseparable, not from commerce, but from taxes as the maintenance of the apparatus of the State. . . . In a word, money—the circulation of money—is *the means for rendering the debt infinite*.”¹⁴ Indeed the Prefect will remain in Dupin’s debt because Dupin enabled him to collect the Queen’s check, and the narrator is indebted to Dupin for his charming stay in Paris, which allows him to report the events forming the trilogy. Yet one must depart from Deleuze and Guattari since this lack is truly beneficial to all concerned, including for those who finance the reward, since in the end they get their money’s worth if nothing else. At the most, Dupin is guilty of a little inflation, since he waits for the reward to be doubled in order to produce the (a) “purloined letter.”

Dupin’s sensationalist’s staging evolves in the setting of the real world outside the fantasy world of the minister’s apartment. Minister D. and the police evolve on separate planes while Dupin has access to both. The minister transforms the real letter into an imaginary love letter disguising it under an unauthentic seal, or rather under his own seal: a black D—cypher. In fact, neither the Minister nor the Prefect lack access to the real or to the imaginary, but they are locked up in their own imagination: the Prefect, when imagining hiding places for the letter, judges according to his own mind, while Minister D. gives himself away with his own seal—a detail strangely unstressed by Poe. The Prefect is as blind as the minister

who satisfies himself with the mock play put up by Dupin outside his window. Dupin, on the other hand, feels that "Most men, in respect to himself, wore windows in their bosoms."¹⁵ Thus Dupin bears resemblance to the psychoanalyst who sees into the mind of others. But in so doing, Dupin reproduces their thoughts; moreover, Derrida points out, his personality is altered, doubled.¹⁶

Lacan deems the Prefect blind to symbolic order (which prevents him from finding the place of the missing letter—lack in its place), blind to the castrated phallus, and deprived of an imagination which prevents him from grasping the immaterial materiality of the letter—the feminine phallus—the "impalpable" to quote a term Lacan uses to describe the feminine room. Derrida will object to this differentiation between the symbolic and the imaginary: "C'est bien sur cette partition entre le symbolique et l'imaginaire qui, de manière problématique, parait soutenir, avec la théorie de la lettre (place du manque à sa place et indivisibilité du signifiant), tout le propos du Séminaire dans son recours à la vérité."¹⁷ Derrida reproaches Lacan for following too closely Dupin's clue on Epicurian atomism (the indivisibility) of the letter, disregarding the multiplication of letters, and of doubles in the Dupin trilogy: "Toutes les relations '*unheimlich*' de duplicité, déployées sans limite dans une structure duelle, s'y voient omises ou marginalisées."¹⁸

A first objection to the dismissal of money as a signified is obvious even without recourse to Derridian philosophy: while the Queen and Minister D. are left with useless words on litter-letters, Dupin has exchanged the letter for numbers. He does not lose the letter, he sells it. His desire is not centered on the letter, rather it is grafted on the Prefect's and on the Queen's want of the letter. Dupin has found how to exploit economically the trajectory of the letter, by levying a tax on the Prefect's pay. Derrida insists on Dupin's relation, not to the Queen (she should never know of the Prefect's dealings with Dupin), but to the representant of the law for both, the King and the Queen.¹⁹ Also, he rejects the Joycian litter-letter pun while considering that the leftovers result from the multiplication of the letter into meaningful differentiated doubles. Indeed the letter left by Minister D. instead of the original one, the true letter left by Dupin to Minister D., the check signed by the Prefect, all witness to the multiplication of the signifying which implies the multiplication of the subjects involved with letters.²⁰

However, Derrida's efforts to curb this multiplication into loss is to a

certain degree foreign to Poe's fiction. Dupin has to fully repeat the cycle of the theft without omissions: "You have precisely what you demand to make the ascendancy complete--the robber's knowledge of the loser's knowledge of the robber."²¹ And it is probably in order to approximate legitimacy, as the Queen and the Prefect are trying, that Dupin chooses to sell the letter to the representant of the law. Breaking this chain of knowledge might break the ascendancy, the effects of power transmitted with the circulating letter, or interrupt the circulation of letters.

The opposition between Lacan and Derrida issues from an ambiguity which may be rooted in Poe's work after all. Lacan claims that the letter remains singular even if morcelled, the pieces being only incomplete objects from the original letter. The fragmented materiality of the letter remains ideally unified by the original letter which the Queen has read. The materiality of the letter is now indifferent to Lacan: "Mais si c'est d'abord sur la matérialité du signifiant que nous avons insisté, cette matérialité est *singulière* en bien des points dont le premier est de ne point supporter la partition. Mettez une lettre en petits morceaux, elle reste la lettre qu'elle est, et ceci en un tout autre sens que la Gestalttheorie ne peut en rendre compte avec le vitalisme larvé de la notion du tout."²² However, the relation of the parts to the original whole relies on a closed economy often reflected on by the narrator of the Dupin trilogy. The introduction of "Marie Roget" refers to chess games as a series of parts governed by laws which the experienced analyst perceives, thanks to his synthetic mind. But a clearer example of such Poesque system is best described in "The Power of Words" in which God is depicted as a *primum mobile*, whose creative gesture determined the world: "You are well aware that, as no thought can perish, so no act is without infinite result. . . . And while I thus spoke, did there not cross your mind some thought of the physical power of words? Is not every word an impulse of the air?"²³ Seemingly, this closed economy denounced by Derrida in Lacan's seminar is partly due to Lacan's reference to Poe's novel. Poe is fond of systems in which there is no perdition after all, only in all encompassing unity within which little is left to chance, or to creation. It was more or less this determinism which he exploited in "The Raven." After a few choices determined by chance, the poem generates itself on a repetitive mode.²⁴

Yet Lacan effectively departs from Poe—and while referring to his authority, in a very curious manner, when determining the femininity of the Minister's room:

Aussi bien l'aura de nonchaloir allant jusqu'à affecter les apparences de la mollesse, l'étalage d'un ennui proche du dégoût en ses propos, l'ambiance que l'auteur de la philosophie de l'ameublement sait faire surgir de notations presque impalpables comme celle de l'instrument de musique sur la table, tout semble concerté pour que le personnage que tous ses propos ont cerné des traits de la virilité, dégage quand il apparaît l'*odor di femina* la plus singulière.²⁵

However, if one reads the "Philosophy of Furniture," one will find nothing but a criticism of bad taste in American homes. Americans are criticized for their taste for garish objects of cut glass, blinding rugs of bright colors, and fragmented effects, as opposed to the unified appearance of a British home. Thus there is no mention whatsoever of musical instruments, nor of femininity versus virility. Only bad taste is associated with blindness and glare, while good taste is based on unified dark colors, the comfort of which may be reminiscent of a womb—but what room is not so according to Melanie Klein-like principles. If nothing else, the Minister's disorder could be indicative of lack of feminine presence if one refers to other stereotypes—unless Lacan simply decides that nonchalance and boredom are trademarks of femininity on the account of the passivity they imply.

What is too visible is (paradoxically) blinding to the viewer according to the "Philosophy of Furniture." However, this thesis was also perfectly elaborated in "The Purloined Letter" itself, and it is the only common ground which may be found between the two texts. That Lacan misrepresents the "Philosophy of Furniture" simply emphasizes a need for him to read the room as feminine. It is possible that he is simply misled by Marie Bonaparte's interpretation even though she might have doubted the universal legitimacy of Truth as castration for females. It is also possible that Lacan's pretext (psychoanalysis) finds itself when reading itself, as Derrida writes at the beginning of his article: "La psychanalyse, à supposer, se trouve. Quand on croit la trouver, c'est elle, à supposer, qui se trouve. . . ."²⁶

But neither Lacan nor Derrida consider that in Dupin's logic the letter would be not only half destroyed or potentially destroyable in its very materiality (as a mark on the page), but close to its center of destruction (the chimney fire) as well as ready at hand: "Its susceptibility of being

produced?" said I. 'That is to say, of being *destroyed*,' said Dupin."²⁷ Derrida actually considers that the letter's production depends on the possibility of the letter being destroyed, through multiplication: "Si le phallus était par malheur divisible ou réduit au status d'objet partiel toute l'édification s'effondrerait et c'est ce qu'il faut à tout prix éviter. Cela peut toujours arriver si son avoir lieu n'a pas d'idéalité. . . . Cela *arrive* toujours. . . ." ²⁸ The letter is always destroyed because its materiality is always virtually destructible. In this sense, he is closer to Poe's Dupin. As for Lacan he is more radical: he posits the perishable nature of the material written letter as opposed to the indestructible unforgettable phonemic letter.

This Lacan/Derrida duel draws strange limits to the vitality of the letter—dead, silent, killing, reproducing. This literal being is a personified letter—another verb turned flesh: " 'bien que d'abord, avouent ces braves gens, ils aient eu le soupçon que ce pouvait bien être une simple fiction. Poe répond que, pour son compte, il n'en a jamais douté.' Baudelaire."²⁹

Another novel, "The Angel of the Odd," denies the possibility of accident since the will of the angel is implied in all the narrator's misfortunes. However, this novel has an ironical twist to it since it appears to be nothing but a drunkard's dream. If any ambiguity is still allowed in these pieces of fiction, "The Poetic principle" clearly rejects the notion of truth as inherent to poetry: "He must be theory-mad beyond redemption who, in spite of these differences, shall still persist in attempting to reconcile the obstinate oils and waters of Poetry and Truth."³⁰ Prefacing his article by a similar quotation by Baudelaire on behalf of Poe, Derrida may take Lacan's poetry more seriously than Lacan himself.

Lacan also seems to differentiate between fiction and reality. He finds "The Purloined Letter" true enough to depict the functioning of repetition as described by Freud, yet it is false (as a fable) in the context of reality, in which he would not recommend hiding a letter by leaving it in the most visible place: "C'est là un leurre dont pour nous, nous ne recommanderions l'essai à personne, crainte qu'il soit déçu à s'y fier."³¹ Lacan stresses here his awareness that he is dealing with a work of Art, maybe relevant to real imagination, to be found in characters—created by an author—as well as in the mind of human beings, yet relevant only to the dimension of the letter.

Lacan may accuse his followers as well as his retractors of misreading, because of the careful restrictions and tongue-in-cheek affirmations of his

writing. He counts on some obscurity to assure the authenticity of his word, self-protectively covering his word while uncovering it: "Ce que j'avais écrit alors, n'était nullement abstrus (si peu que je rougirais de publier ma thèse, même si elle ne relève pas de ce que l'ignorance alors enseignante tenait pour le bon sens en l'illustrant de Bergson."³² If we are to follow Lacan's own system, his "feminine" blushing at the thought that his thesis is too easy to read may be that such a reading of him could uncover a lack—of knowledge? of complexity? the circular destiny of castration?—hence a more defensive style arises in the *Écrits*.

However, what is more defensive than silence? Sam Sheppard, a contemporary playwright, feels that his heroes should remain silent, for their great words of truth only reveal the shallowness of a silence which was supposed deep. After all this is known from the psychoanalyst. Serge Leclair comments on the silence of psychoanalysis in *Démasquer le Réel*: the five o'clock patient finds out that what he thought to be attentive silence was but the silence of a dead ear.³³ The same style of suspicion—and it is a question of authenticity after all—weighs on Lacan's text, when Derrida, with a false or true naive tone complains of Lacan's lack of clear answer: "La question restera sans réponse claire."³⁴

But a question arises from Derrida's and Lacan's writing strategies: Why should they center their talk on Poe? Why should they need pretexts at all? Derrida argues for reproductive letters, interrelated, borderless, in opposition to Lacan's sterile unified letter. Derrida depicts a letter without original origin. Yet this duplication admits an order of precedence, and Lacan will then retain a referential position of mastery if he remains before all grammatology.³⁵

When Derrida pretends to return to Marie Bonaparte her proper letter from Lacan's *Écrits*, he does not only reenact Dupin's postman-like gesture, as Barbara Johnson notes, he also locates the text, in an unexpected manner, in the kitchen. It remains doubtful that he means to ground his argument in an area designated to blindness and ignorance, as Lacan does: "Certains 'maîtres de vérité,' en Grèce, savaient, de la cuisine, tenir lieu de penser."³⁶ Could there be food for thought in the kitchen? Food that stands for thought or food that replaces thought, literal thought? Strange opening on a nonverbal knowledge issuing from the kitchen. Food the antinomy of speech ("Ne parle pas la bouche pleine"). Or is there (a) room for speech or letters along with food in a mouthful? With stones or sea-washed pebbles in a mouthful? Anyways what is the *matter* of the

letter, letters, speech, and thought? Could it be, as some have suspected for a long time, that in the beginning was not the word?

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NOTES

1. Barbara Johnson, *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977): 457–505.
2. J. Lacan, *Écrits I* (Paris: Seuil, 1966) 15–16. Cesar's folded cars also take their meaning from the address as well as from their location. Meaning (if any) arises during the trip from the junk yard to the museum.
3. Lacan, *Écrits*, 16.
4. Lacan, *Écrits*, 24. Incidentally, Lacan will justify this capital A from Freud's writings, *Écrits I*, 288.
5. St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. E. B. Pusey (New York: Washington Square P, 1960).
6. Lacan, *Écrits*, 33.
7. Jacques Derrida, "Le Facteur de la vérité," in *Poétique* 21 (1975): 120.
8. Elizabeth Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism: Theory in Practice* (London; New York: Methuen, 1984) 110–11. In these pages, she exposes her interpretation of the interaction between the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic in Lacan's *Écrits*.
9. Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," in vol. II of *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Cambridge: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1978) 527–68.
10. Poe, "The Purloined Letter," in vol. III of *The Collected Works*, 974.
11. Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," 531.
12. Derrida, "Le Facteur," 135–36. Of course Derrida is also in the process of readdressing letters, as well as showing his letters.
13. Poe, "The Purloined Letter," 992. These exchanges of seals are akin to Derrida's problematization of authenticity. Reproductions are authentic, and authentic signatures may be in quotation marks.
14. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1977) 197.
15. Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," 533.
16. Derrida, "Le Facteur," 137.
17. Derrida, "Le Facteur," 123.
18. Derrida, "Le Facteur," 123.
19. Derrida, "Le Facteur," 120: "Dupin agit dès le début en vue de la lettre, de la détenir pour la rendre à qui de droit (ni le Roi ni la Reine mais la Loi qui les lie). . . ." It could be noted that if the Queen is violating legality while preserving it with her letter, so is the Prefect: he is certainly not authorized to talk to Dupin, or to the narrator.
20. Derrida, "Le Facteur," 136: "La divisibilité de la lettre est aussi celle du signifiant auquel elle donne lieu, et donc des 'sujets,' 'personnages' ou 'positions' qui y sont assujettis et qui les 'représentent.' "
21. Poe, "The Purloined Letter," 976–77.

22. Lacan, *Ecrits*, 33–34.
23. Poe, “The Power of Words,” in vol. II of *The Collected Works*, 1213.
24. Derrida, “Le Facteur,” 122.
25. Lacan, *Ecrits*, 26.
26. Derrida, “Le Facteur,” 96.
27. Poe, “The Purloined Letter,” 978.
28. Derrida, “Le Facteur,” 132.
29. Derrida, “Le Facteur,” 96.
30. Poe, “The Poetic Principle,” in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Random House, 1965) 893.
31. Lacan, *Ecrits*, 26.
32. Lacan, *Ecrits*, 9–10.
33. Serge Leclair, *Démasquer le réel: un essai sur l’objet en psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1971) 122–23.
34. Derrida, “Le Facteur,” 118.
35. Lacan, *Ecrits*, 11.
36. Derrida, “Le Facteur,” 118.