

The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida

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The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida

1. *The Purloined Preface*

A literary text which *both* analyzes itself *and* shows that it actually has neither a self nor any neutral metalanguage with which to do the analyzing, calls out irresistibly for analysis. And when that call is answered by two eminent French thinkers whose readings emit an equally paradoxical call-to-analysis of their own, the resulting triptych, in the context of the question of the act-of-reading (-literature), places *its* would-be reader in a vertiginously insecure position.

The three texts in question are Edgar A. Poe's short story *The Purloined Letter*,¹ Jacques Lacan's *Seminar on The Purloined Letter*,² and Jacques Derrida's reading of Lacan's reading of Poe, *The Purveyor of Truth* [*Le Facteur de la Vérité*].³ In all three texts, it is the *act of analysis* which seems to occupy the center of the discursive stage, and the *act of analysis of the act of analysis* which in some way disrupts that centrality. In the resulting asymmetrical, abyssal structure, no analysis—including this one—can intervene without transforming *and* repeating other elements in the sequence, which is thus not a *stable* sequence, but which nevertheless produces certain regular effects. It is the functioning of this regularity, and the structure of these effects, which will provide the basis for the present study.

¹ In *Great Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, The Pocket Library, New York, 1951, hereafter designated as "Poe."

² In *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966). Quotations in English are taken, unless otherwise indicated, from the partial translation in *Yale French Studies* 48, *French Freud*, 1973, hereafter designated as "SPL."

³ This article was published in French in *Poétique* 21 (1975) and, somewhat reduced, in *Yale French Studies* 52, *Graphesis*, 1975. Unless otherwise indicated, references are to the English version, hereafter designated as "PT."

The subversion of any possibility of a position of analytical mastery occurs in many ways. Here, the very fact that we are dealing with *three* texts is in no way certain. Poe's story not only fits into a triptych of its own, but is riddled with a constant, peculiar kind of intertextuality (the epigraph from Seneca which is not from Seneca, the lines from Crébillon's *Atrée* which serve as Dupin's signature, etc.). Lacan's text not only presents itself backwards (its introduction *following* its conclusion), but it never finishes presenting itself ("*Ouverture de ce recueil*," "*Présentation de la suite*," "*Présentation*" to the *Points* edition). And Derrida's text is not only preceded by several years of annunciatory marginalia and footnotes, but it is itself structured precisely by its own deferment, its *différance* (cf. the repetition of such expressions as "*Mais nous n'en sommes pas encore là*," "But we are getting ahead of ourselves," etc.). In addition, all of these texts are characterized by an unusually high degree of apparent digressiveness, to the point of making the reader wonder whether there is really any true subject matter there at all. It is as though any attempt to follow the path of the purloined letter is automatically purloined from itself. Which is, as we shall see, just what the letter has always already been saying.

Any attempt to do "justice" to three such complex texts is obviously out of the question. But it is precisely the *nature* of such "justice" that is the question in each of these readings of the act of analysis. The fact that the debate proliferates around a *crime* story—a robbery and its undoing—can hardly be an accident. Somewhere in each of these texts, the economy of justice cannot be avoided. For in spite of the absence of mastery, there is no lack of *effects of power*.

As the reader goes on with this series of prefatory remarks, he may begin to see how contagious the deferment of the subject of the purloined letter can be. But the problem of how to *present* these three texts is all the more redoubtable since each of them both presents itself and the others, and clearly shows the fallacies inherent in any type of "presentation" of a text. The fact that such fallacies are not only inevitable but also *constitutive* of any act of

reading—also demonstrated by each of the texts—is small comfort, since the resulting injustices, however unavoidable in general, always appear corrigible in detail. Which is why the sequence continues.

The question of how to present to the reader a text too extensive to quote in its entirety has in fact long been one of the underlying problems of literary criticism. Since a shorter version of the text must somehow be produced, two solutions constantly recur: paraphrase and quotation. Although these tactics are seldom if ever used in isolation, the specific configuration of their combinations and permutations determines to a large extent the “plot” of the critical narrative to which they give rise. The first act of our own narrative, then, will consist of an analysis of the strategic effects of the use of paraphrase vs. quotation in each of the three texts in question.

2. *Round Robbin'*

Round robin: 1) A tournament in which each contestant is matched against every other contestant. 2) A petition or protest on which the signatures are arranged in the form of a circle in order to conceal the order of signing. 3) A letter sent among members of a group, often with comments added by each person in turn. 4) An extended sequence.

—The American Heritage Dictionary

In 1845, Edgar A. Poe published the third of his three detective stories, “The Purloined Letter,” in a collective volume entitled—ironically enough, considering all the robberies in the story—*The Gift: A Christmas, New Year, and Birthday Present*. “The Purloined Letter” is a first-person narration of two scenes in which dialogues occur among the narrator, his friend C. Auguste Dupin, and, initially, the Prefect of the Parisian police. The two scenes are separated by an indication of the passage of a month’s time. In each of the two dialogues, reported to us verbatim by the narrator, one of the other two characters tells the story of a robbery:

in the first scene, it is the Prefect of Police who repeats the Queen's eyewitness account of the Minister's theft of a letter addressed to her; in the second scene, it is Dupin who narrates his *own* theft of the same letter from the Minister, who had meanwhile read-dressed it to himself. In a paragraph placed *between* these two "crime" stories, the narrator himself narrates a wordless scene in which the letter changes hands again before *his* eyes, passing from Dupin—not without the latter's having addressed not the letter but a *check* to himself—to the Prefect (who will pocket the remainder of the reward) and thence, presumably, back to the Queen.

By thus appearing to repeat to us faithfully every word in both dialogues, the narrator would seem to have resorted *exclusively* to direct quotation in presenting his story. Even when paraphrase could have been expected—in the description of the exact procedures employed by the police in searching unsuccessfully for the letter, for example,—we are spared none of the details. Thus it is all the more surprising to find that there *is* one little point at which direct quotation of the Prefect's words gives way to paraphrase. This point, however brief, is of no small importance, as we shall see. It occurs in the concluding paragraph of the first scene:

"I have no better advice to give you," said Dupin. "You have, of course, an accurate description of the letter?"

"Oh, yes!" — And here the Prefect, producing a memorandum-book, proceeded to read aloud a minute account of the internal, and especially of the external, appearance of the missing document. Soon after finishing the perusal of this description, he took his departure, more entirely depressed in spirits than I had ever known the good gentleman before. (Poe, pp. 206-207.)

What is paraphrased is thus the description of the letter the story is about. And, whereas it is generally supposed that the function of paraphrase is to strip off the *form* of a speech in order to give us only its *contents*, here the use of paraphrase does the very opposite: it *withholds* the contents of the Prefect's remarks, giving us *only* their form. And what is swallowed up in this ellipsis is nothing less than the contents of the letter itself. The *fact* that

the letter's message is never revealed, which will serve as the basis for Lacan's reading of the story, is thus negatively made explicit by the functioning of Poe's *text* itself, through what Derrida might have called a repression of the written word (a suppression of what is written in the memorandum-book—and in the letter). And the question of the strategic use of paraphrase versus quotation begins to invade not only the critical narrative, but the literary text as well.

Lacan's presentation of Poe's text involves the paraphrase, or plot summary, of the two thefts as they are told to the narrator by the Prefect and by Dupin. Since Derrida, in his critique of Lacan, chooses to *quote* Lacan's paraphrase, we can combine all the tactics involved by, in our turn, *quoting* Derrida's quotation of Lacan's paraphrase of Poe's quoted narrations.⁴

There are two scenes, the first of which we shall straightway designate the primal scene, and by no means inadvertently, since the second may be considered its repetition in the very sense we are considering today.

The primal scene is thus performed, we are told [by neither Poe, nor the scriptor, nor the narrator, but by G, the Prefect of Police who is *mis en scène* by all those involved in the dialogues — J. D.⁵] in the royal *boudoir*, so that we suspect that the person of the highest rank, called the "exalted personage," who is alone there when she receives a letter, is the Queen. This feeling is confirmed by the embarrassment into which she is plunged by the entry of the other exalted personage, of whom we have already been told [again by G — J. D.] prior to this account that the knowledge he might have of the letter in question would jeopardize for the lady nothing less than her honor and safety. Any doubt that he is in fact the King is promptly dissipated in the course of the scene which begins with the entry of the Minister D.... At that moment, in fact, the Queen can do no better than to play on the King's inattentiveness by leaving the letter on the table "face down, address uppermost." It does not, however, escape the Minister's lynx eye, nor does he fail to notice the Queen's distress and thus to fathom her secret. From then on everything transpires like clockwork. After dealing in his customary manner with the business of the day, the Minister draws from his pocket a letter similar in appearance to the one in his view, and, having pretended

⁴ Such a concatenation could jokingly be called, after the nursery rhyme, "This is the text that Jacques built." But in fact, it is precisely this kind of sequence or chain that is in question here.

⁵ We will speak about this bracketed signature later; for the time being it stands as a sign that Derrida's signature has indeed been added to our round robin.

to read it, places it next to the other. A bit more conversation to amuse the royal company, whereupon, without flinching once, he seizes the embarrassing letter, making off with it, as the Queen, on whom none of his maneuver has been lost, remains unable to intervene for fear of attracting the attention of her royal spouse, close at her side at that very moment.

Everything might then have transpired unseen by a hypothetical spectator of an operation in which nobody falters, and whose *quotient* is that the Minister has filched from the Queen her letter and that—an even more important result than the first—the Queen knows that he now has it, and by no means innocently.

A *remainder* that no analyst will neglect, trained as he is to retain whatever is significant, without always knowing what to do with it: the letter, abandoned by the Minister, and which the Queen's hand is now free to roll into a ball.

Second scene: in the Minister's office. It is in his hotel, and we know—from the account the Prefect of Police has given Dupin, whose specific genius for solving enigmas Poe introduces here for the second time—that the police, returning there as soon as the Minister's habitual, nightly absences allow them to, have searched the hotel and its surroundings from top to bottom for the last eighteen months. In vain,—although everyone can deduce from the situation that the Minister keeps the letter within reach.

Dupin calls on the Minister. The latter receives him with studied nonchalance, affecting in his conversation romantic *ennui*. Meanwhile Dupin, whom this pretence does not deceive, his eyes protected by green glasses, proceeds to inspect the premises. When his glance catches a rather crumbled piece of paper—apparently thrust carelessly in a division of an ugly pasteboard card-rack, hanging gaudily from the middle of the mantelpiece—he already knows that he's found what he's looking for. His conviction is reinforced by the very details which seem to contradict the description he has of the stolen letter, with the exception of the format, which remains the same.

Whereupon he has but to withdraw, after “forgetting” his snuff-box on the table, in order to return the following day to reclaim it—armed with a facsimile of the letter in its present state. As an incident in the street, prepared for the proper moment, draws the Minister to the window, Dupin in turn seizes the opportunity to seize the letter while substituting the imitation, and has only to maintain the appearances of a normal exit.

Here as well all has transpired, if not without noise, at least without all commotion. The quotient of the operation is that the Minister no longer has the letter, but, far from suspecting that Dupin is the culprit who has ravished it from him, knows nothing of it. Moreover, what he is left with is far from insignificant for what follows. We shall return to what brought Dupin to inscribe a message on his counterfeit letter. Whatever the case, the Minister, when he tries to make use of it, will be able to read these words, written so that he may recognize Dupin's

hand: "...Un dessein si funeste/ S'il n'est digne d'Atrée est digne de Thyeste,"⁶ whose source, Dupin tells us, is Crébillon's *Atrée*.

Need we emphasize the similarity of these two sequences? Yes, for the resemblance we have in mind is not a simple collection of traits chosen only in order to delete their difference. And it would not be enough to retain those common traits at the expense of the others for the slightest truth to result. It is rather the intersubjectivity in which the two actions are motivated that we wish to bring into relief, as well as the three terms through which it structures them.

The special status of these terms results from their corresponding simultaneously to the three logical moments through which the decision is precipitated and the three places it assigns to the subjects among whom it constitutes a choice.

That decision is reached in a glance's time. For the maneuvers which follow, however stealthily they prolong it, add nothing to that glance, nor does the deferring of the deed in the second scene break the unity of that moment.

This glance presupposes two others, which it embraces in its vision of the breach left in their fallacious complementarity, anticipating in it the occasion for larceny afforded by that exposure. Thus three moments, structuring three glances, borne by three subjects, incarnated each time by different characters.

The first is a glance that sees nothing: the King and the police.

The second, a glance which sees that the first sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides: the Queen, then the Minister.

The third sees that the first two glances leave what should be hidden exposed to whomever would seize it: the Minister and finally Dupin.

In order to grasp in its unity the intersubjective complex thus described, we would willingly seek a model in the technique legendarily attributed to the ostrich attempting to shield itself from danger; for that technique might ultimately be qualified as political, divided as it here is among three partners: the second believing itself invisible because the first has its head stuck in the ground, and all the while letting the third calmly pluck its rear; we need only enrich its proverbial denomination by a letter, producing *la politique de l'autruiche*,⁷ for the ostrich itself to take on forever a new meaning.

Given the intersubjective modulus of the repetitive action, it remains to recognize in it a *repetition automatism* in the sense that interests us in Freud's text. (SPL, pp. 41-44.)

⁶ "So infamous a scheme/ If not worthy of Atrous, is worthy of Thyestes."

⁷ *La politique de l'autruiche* combines the policy of the ostrich (*autruche*), others (*autrui*) and Austria (*Autriche*).

Thus, it is neither the character of the individual subjects, nor the contents of the letter, but the *position* of the letter within the group, which decides what each person will do next. It is the fact that the letter does *not* function as a unit of meaning (a *signified*) but as that which produces certain *effects* (a *signifier*), which leads Lacan to read the story as an illustration of “the truth which may be drawn from that moment in Freud’s thought under study—namely, that it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject—by demonstrating (...) the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier” (SPL, p. 40). The letter acts like a signifier precisely to the extent that its *function* in the story does not require that its meaning be revealed: “the letter was able to produce its effects *within* the story: on the actors in the tale, including the narrator, as well as *outside* the story: on us, the readers, and also on its author, without anyone’s ever bothering to worry about what it *meant*” (not translated in SPL; *Écrits*, p. 57, translation and emphasis mine). “The Purloined Letter” thus becomes for Lacan a kind of *allegory of the signifier*.

Derrida’s critique of Lacan’s reading does not dispute the validity of the allegorical interpretation on its own terms, but questions rather its implicit presuppositions and its *modus operandi*. Derrida aims his objections at two kinds of targets: 1) what Lacan *puts into the letter* and 2) what Lacan *leaves out of the text*.

1) *What Lacan puts into the letter*. While asserting that the letter’s meaning is lacking, Lacan, according to Derrida, makes this lack into *the* meaning of the letter. But Derrida does not stop there: he goes on to assert that what Lacan means by that lack is the truth of lack-as-castration-as-truth: “The truth of the purloined letter is the truth itself (...) What is veiled/unveiled in this case is a hole, a non-being [*non-étant*]; the truth of being [*l’être*], as non-being. Truth is ‘woman’ as veiled/unveiled castration” (PT, pp. 60-61). Lacan himself, however, never uses the word “castration” in the text of the original Seminar. That it is *suggested* is indisputable, but Derrida, by filling in what *Lacan* left blank, is repeating precisely the gesture of blank-filling for which he is criticizing Lacan.

2) *What Lacan leaves out of the text.* This objection is itself double: on the one hand, Derrida criticizes Lacan for neglecting to consider “The Purloined Letter” in connection with the other two stories in what Derrida calls Poe’s “Dupin Trilogy.” And on the other hand, according to Derrida, at the very moment Lacan is reading the story as an allegory of the signifier, he is being blind to the disseminating power of the signifier in the *text* of the allegory, in what Derrida calls the “scene of writing.” To cut out part of a text’s frame of reference as though it did not exist, and to reduce a complex textual functioning to a single meaning, are serious blots indeed in the annals of literary criticism. Therefore it is all the more noticeable that Derrida’s own reading of Lacan’s text repeats precisely the crimes of which he accuses it: on the one hand, Derrida makes no mention of Lacan’s long development on the relation between symbolic determination and random series. And on the other hand, Derrida dismisses Lacan’s “style” as a mere ornament, veiling, for a time, an unequivocal message: “Lacan’s ‘style’, moreover, was such that for a long time it would hinder and delay all access to a *unique* content or a single unequivocal meaning determinable beyond the writing itself” (PT, p. 40). The fact that Derrida repeats the very gestures he is criticizing does not in itself invalidate his criticism of their *effects*, but it does problematize his statement condemning their *existence*.

What kind of logic is it that thus seems to turn one-upmanship into inevitable one-downmanship?

It is precisely the logic of the purloined letter.

3. *Odd Couples*

Je tiens la reine!

O sûr châtement...

—Mallarmé, "L'après-midi d'un faune"

L'ascendant que le ministre tire de la situation ne tient donc pas à la lettre, mais, qu'il le sache ou non, au personnage qu'elle lui constitue.

—Lacan, "Séminaire sur 'la Lettre volée' "

We have just seen how Derrida, in his effort to right (write) Lacan's wrongs, can, on a certain level, only repeat them. And how the rectification of a previous injustice somehow irresistibly dictates the *filling in of a blank*, which then becomes the new injustice. In fact, the act of clinching one's triumph by filling in a blank is already prescribed in all its details within Poe's story, in Dupin's unwillingness to "leave the interior blank" (Poe, p. 219) in the facsimile he has left for the Minister, in place of the purloined letter he, Dupin, has just repossessed by means of a *precise* repetition of the act of robbery he is undoing. What is written in the blank is a quotation-as-signature, which curiously resembles Derrida's initialed interventions in the passages he quotes from Lacan, a resemblance on which Derrida is undoubtedly playing. And the *text* of the quotation transcribed by Dupin *says* precisely the structure of rectification-as-repetition-of-the-crime which has led to its being transcribed in the first place:

—Un dessein si funeste,

S'il n'est digne d'Atrée, est digne de Thyeste.

Atreus, whose wife was long ago seduced by Thyestes, is about to make Thyestes eat (literally) the fruit of that illicit union, his son Plisthenes. The avenger's plot may not be worthy of *him*, says Atreus, but his brother Thyestes deserves it. What the addressee of the violence is going to get is simply his own message backwards. It is this vengeful anger which, as both Lacan and Derrida show,

places Dupin as one of the “ostriches” in the “triad.” Not content simply to return the letter to its “rightful” destination, Dupin jumps into the fray as the wronged victim *himself*, by recalling an “evil turn” the Minister once did him in Vienna, and for which he is now, personally, taking his revenge.

Correction must thus posit a previous pretextual, pre-textual crime which will justify its excesses. Any degree of violence is permissible in the act of *getting even* (“To be *even* with him,” says Dupin, “I complained of my weak eyes . . .” [Poe, p. 216]). And Dupin’s backwards revision of the story repeats itself in his readers as well. The existence of the same kind of prior aggression on Lacan’s part is posited by Derrida in a long footnote in his book *Positions*, in which he outlines what will later develop into *Le Facteur de la Vérité*: “In the texts I have published up to now, the absence of reference to Lacan is indeed almost total. That is *justified* not only by the *acts of aggression* in the form of, or with the intention of, reappropriation which, ever since *De la grammatologie* appeared in *Critique* (1965) (and even earlier, I am told) Lacan has multiplied. . . .”⁸ The priority of aggression is doubled by the aggressiveness of priority: “At the time of my first publications, Lacan’s *Écrits* had not yet been collected and published . . .”⁹ And Lacan, in turn, mentions in his *Presentation* to the *Points* edition of his *Écrits*: “what I properly call the instance of the letter *before any grammatology*.”¹⁰ The rivalry over something neither man will credit the other with possessing, the retrospective revision of the origins of both their resemblances and their differences, thus spirals backward and forward in an indeterminable pattern of cancellation and duplication. If it thus becomes impossible to determine “who started it” (or even whether “it” was started by either one of them), it is also impossible to know who is ahead, or even whose “turn” it is. This is what makes the business of “getting even” so *odd*.

⁸ J. Derrida, *Positions*, Minuit, 1972, pp. 112-113 (translation and emphasis mine).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁰ J. Lacan, *Écrits*, Seuil (“Points”), 1966, pp. 11 (translation and emphasis mine).

This type of oscillation between two terms, considered as totalities in a binary opposition, is studied by Lacan in connection with Poe's story of the eight-year-old prodigy who succeeded in winning, far beyond his due, at the game of—even and odd. The game consists of guessing whether the number of marbles an opponent is holding is even or odd. The schoolboy explains his success by his *identification* with the physical characteristics of his opponent, from which he deduces the opponent's degree of intelligence and its corresponding line of reasoning. What Lacan shows, in the part of his seminar which Derrida neglects, is that the *mere* identification with the opponent as an *image of totality* is not sufficient to insure success—and in no way explains Dupin's actual strategy—since, from the moment the opponent becomes aware of it, he can then *play* on his own appearance, and dissociate it from the reasoning that is presumed to go with it. (This is, indeed, what occurs in the encounter between Dupin and the Minister: the Minister's *feigned* nonchalance is a true vigilance but a blinded vision, whereas Dupin's *feigned* blindness (“weak eyes”) is a vigilant act of lucidity, later to succumb to its own form of blindness.) From then on, says Lacan, the reasoning “can only repeat itself in an indefinite oscillation” (*Écrits*, p. 58: translation mine). And Lacan reports that, in his own classroom tests of the schoolboy's technique, it was almost inevitable that *each* player begin to feel he was losing his marbles . . . ¹¹

But if the complexities of these texts could be reduced to a mere combat between ostriches, a mere game of heads and tails played out in order to determine a “winner,” they would have very little theoretical interest. It is, on the contrary, the way in which each mastermind avoids *simply* becoming the butt of his own joke that displaces the opposition in unpredictable ways, and transforms the textual encounter into a source of insight. For if the very possibility of *meeting* the opponent on a common ground, without which no *contact* is possible, implies a certain symmetry,

¹¹ Cf. Lacan's description of the “effect of disorientation, or even of great anxiety,” provoked by these exercises (*Écrits*, p. 60).

a sameness, a repetition of the error which the encounter is designed to correct, any true avoidance of that error entails a non-meeting or incompatibility between the two forces. If to hit the target is in a way to become the target, then to miss the target is perhaps to hit it elsewhere. It is not the way in which Lacan and Derrida *meet* each other, but rather the way in which they *miss* each other, which opens up a space for interpretation.

Clearly, what is at stake here has something to do with the status of the number 2. If the face-off between two opponents or polar opposites always simultaneously backfires *and* misfires, it can only be because 2 is an extremely odd number. On the one hand, as a specular illusion of symmetry or metaphor, it can either be narcissistically reassuring (the image of the other as a reinforcement of my identity) or absolutely devastating (the other whose existence can totally cancel me out). This is what Lacan calls the *imaginary* duality. It is characterized by its absoluteness, its independence from any accident or contingency which might subvert the unity of the terms in question, whether in their opposition or in their fusion. To this, Lacan opposes the *symbolic*, which is the entrance of difference or otherness or temporality into the idea of identity—it is not something which *befalls* the imaginary duality, but something which has always already inhabited it, something which subverts not the symmetry of the imaginary couple, but the possibility of the independent unity of any one term whatsoever. It is the impossibility not of the number 2 but of the number 1. Which, paradoxically enough, turns out to lead to the number 3.

If 3 is what makes 2 into the impossibility of 1, is there any inherent increase in lucidity in passing from a couple to a triangle? Is a triangle in any way more “true” than a couple?

It is Derrida’s contention that, for psychoanalysis, the answer to that question is “yes.” The triangle becomes the magical, Oedipal figure that explains the functioning of human desire. The child’s original imaginary dual unity with the mother is subverted by the law of the father as that which prohibits incest under threat of castration, and the child has “simply” to “assume castration” as

the necessity of substitution in the object of his desire (the object of desire becoming the locus of substitution and the focus of repetition), after which the child's desire becomes "normalized." Derrida's criticism of the "triangles" or "triads" in Lacan's reading of Poe is based on the assumption that Lacan's use of triangularity stems from this psychoanalytical myth.

Derrida's criticism takes two routes, both of them numerical:

1) The structure of "The Purloined Letter" cannot be reduced to a triangle unless the narrator is eliminated. The elimination of the narrator is a blatant and highly revealing result of the way "psychoanalysis" does violence to literature in order to find its own schemes. What psychoanalysis sees as a triangle is therefore really a quadrangle, and that fourth side is the point from which literature problematizes the very possibility of a triangle. Therefore: $3 = 4$.

2) Duality as such cannot be dismissed or simply absorbed into a triangular structure. "The Purloined Letter" is traversed by an uncanny capacity for doubling and subdividing. The narrator and Dupin are doubles of each other, and Dupin himself is first introduced as a "Bi-Part Soul" (Poe, p. 107), a sort of Dupin Duplex, "the creative and the resolvent." The Minister, D—, has a brother for whom it is possible to mistake him, and from whom he is to be distinguished because of *his* doubleness (poet *and* mathematician). Thus the Minister and Dupin become doubles of each other through the fact of their both being already double, in addition to their other points of resemblance, including their names. "The Seminar," writes Derrida, "mercilessly forecloses this problematic of the double and of *Unheimlichkeit*—no doubt considering that it is confined to the imaginary, to the dual relationship which must be kept rigorously separate from the symbolic and the triangular. (...) All the 'uncanny' relations of duplicity, limitlessly deployed in a dual structure, find themselves omitted or marginalized [in the Seminar]. (...) What is thus kept under surveillance and control is the Uncanny itself, and the frantic anxiety which can be provoked, with no hope of reappropriation, enclosure, or truth, by the infinite play from

simulacrum to simulacrum, from double to double" (omitted in PT; FV, p. 124, translation mine).

Thus the triangle's angles are always already bisected, and $3 =$ (a factor of) 2.

In the game of odd versus even, then, it would seem that Derrida is playing evens (4 or 2) against Lacan's odds (3). But somehow the numbers 2 and 4 have become uncannily odd, while the number 3 has been evened off into a reassuring symmetry. How did this happen, and what are the consequences for an interpretation of "The Purloined Letter"?

Before any answer to this question can be envisaged, several remarks should be made here to problematize the terms of Derrida's critique:

1) If the narrator and Dupin are a strictly dual pair whose relationship is in no way mediated by a third term in any Oedipal sense, how is one to explain the fact that their original meeting was brought about by their potential rivalry over the same object: "the accident of our both being in search of the *same* very rare and very remarkable volume." Whether or not they ever found it, or can share it, is this not a triangular relationship?

2) Although Lacan's reading of "The Purloined Letter" divides the story into triadic structures, his model for (inter-)subjectivity, the so-called "schema L," which is developed in that part of the Seminar's introduction which Derrida glosses over, is indisputably quadrangular. In order to read Lacan's repeating triads as a triangular, Oedipal model of the subject instead of as a mere structure of repetition, Derrida must therefore lop off one corner of the "schema L" in the same way as he accuses Lacan of lopping off a corner of Poe's text—and Derrida does this precisely by lopping off that corner of Lacan's text in which the quadrangular "schema L" is developed.

But can what is at stake here really be reduced to a mere numbers game?

Let us approach the problem from another angle, by asking two more questions:

1) What is the relation between a divided unity and a duality? Are the two *two's* synonymous? Is a "Bi-Part Soul," for example, actually composed of two wholes? Or is it possible to conceive of a division which would not lead to two separable parts, but only to a problematization of the idea of unity? This would class what Derrida calls "duality" not in Lacan's "imaginary," but in Lacan's "symbolic."

2) If the doubles are forever redividing or multiplying, does the number "2" really apply? If $1 = 2$, how can $2 = 1 + 1$? If what is uncanny about the doubles is that they never stop doubling up, would the number 2 still be uncanny if it *did* stop at a truly dual symmetry? Isn't it the very limitlessness of the process of the dissemination of unity, rather than the existence of any one duality, which Derrida is talking about here?

Clearly, in these questions, it is the very notion of a number which becomes problematic, and the argument on the basis of numbers can no longer be read literally. If Derrida opposes doubled quadrangles to Lacan's triangles, it is not because he wants to turn Oedipus into an octopus.

To what, then, does the critique of triangularity apply?

The problem with psychoanalytical triangularity, in Derrida's eyes, is not that it contains the wrong number of terms, but that it presupposes the possibility of a successful dialectical mediation and harmonious normalization or *Aufhebung* of desire. The three terms in the Oedipal triad enter into an opposition whose resolution resembles the synthetic moment of a Hegelian dialectic. The process centers on the phallus as the locus of the question of sexual difference: it is when the observation of the mother's lack of a penis is joined with the father's threat of castration as the punishment for incest that the child passes from the *alternative* (thesis vs. anti-thesis; presence vs. absence of penis) to the *synthesis* (the phallus as a sign of the fact that the child can only enter into the circuit of desire by assuming castration as the phallus' *simultaneous* presence and absence; that is, by assuming the fact that both the subject and the object of desire will always be *substitutes* for some-

thing that was never really present). In Lacan's article on "La signification du phallus," which Derrida quotes, this process is evoked in precisely Hegelian terms:

All these remarks still do nothing but veil the fact that it [the phallus] cannot play its role except veiled, that is to say as itself sign of the latency with which anything signifiable is stricken as soon as it is raised (*aufgehoben*) to the function of signifier.

The phallus is the signifier of this *Aufhebung* itself which it inaugurates (initiates) by its disappearance. (*Écrits*, p. 692; PT, p. 98.)

"It would appear," comments Derrida, "that the Hegelian movement of *Aufhebung* is here reversed since the latter sublates [*re-lève*] the sensory signifier in the ideal signified" (PT, p. 98). But then, according to Derrida, Lacan's privileging of the spoken over the written word annuls this reversal, reappropriates all possibility of uncontainable otherness, and brings the whole thing back within the bounds of the type of "logocentrism" which has been the focus of Derrida's entire deconstructive enterprise over the past ten years.

The question of whether or not Lacan's "privileging" of the voice is strictly logocentric in Derrida's sense is an extremely complex one with which we cannot hope to deal adequately here.¹² But what does all this have to do with "The Purloined Letter"?

In an attempt to answer this question, let us examine the way in which Derrida deduces from Lacan's text the fact that, for Lacan, the "letter" is a symbol of the (mother's) phallus. Since Lacan never uses the word "phallus" in the Seminar, this is already an *inter-*

¹² Some idea of the possibilities for misunderstanding inherent in this question can be gathered from the following: In order to show that psychoanalysis *represses* "writing" in a logocentric way, Derrida quotes Lacan's statement against tape recorders: "But precisely because it comes to him through an alienated form, even a retransmission of his own recorded discourse, be it from the mouth of his own doctor, cannot have the same effects as psychoanalytical interlocation." This Derrida regards as a *condemnation* of the "simulacrum," a "disqualification of recording or of repetition in the name of the living and present word." But what does Lacan actually *say*? Simply that a tape recording *does not have the same effects* as psychoanalytical interlocation. Does the fact that psychoanalysis is a technique based on verbal interlocation automatically reduce it to a logocentric error? Is it not equally possible to regard what Lacan calls "full speech" as being *full* of precisely what Derrida calls *writing*?

pretation on Derrida's part, and quite an astute one at that, with which Lacan, as a later reader of his own Seminar, implicitly agrees by placing the word "castrated"—which had not been used in the original text—in his "Points" *Presentation*. The disagreement between Derrida and Lacan thus arises not over the *validity* of the equation "letter = phallus," but over its *meaning*.

How, then, does Derrida derive this equation from Lacan's text? The deduction follows four basic lines of reasoning, all of which will be dealt with in greater detail later in the present essay:

1) The letter "belongs" to the Queen as a substitute for the phallus she does not have. It feminizes (castrates) each of its successive holders and is eventually returned to her as its rightful owner.

2) Poe's description of the position of the letter in the Minister's apartment, expanded upon by the figurative dimensions of Lacan's text, suggests an analogy between the shape of the fireplace from the center of whose mantelpiece the letter is found hanging, and that point on a woman's anatomy from which the phallus is missing.

3) The letter, says Lacan, cannot be divided: "But if it is first of all on the materiality of the signifier that we have insisted, that materiality is *odd* [singulière] in many ways, the first of which is not to admit partition" (SPL, p. 53). This indivisibility, says Derrida, is odd indeed, but becomes comprehensible if it is seen as an *idealization* of the phallus, whose integrity is necessary for the edification of the entire psychoanalytical system. With the phallus safely idealized and located in the voice, the so-called "signifier" acquires the "unique, living, non-mutilable integrity" of the self-present spoken word, unequivocally pinned down to and by the *signified*. "Had the phallus been per(mal)chance divisible or reduced to the status of a partial object, the whole edification would have crumbled down, and this is what has to be avoided at all cost" (PT, pp. 96-97).

4) And finally, if Poe's story "illustrates" the "truth," the last words of the Seminar proper seem to reaffirm that truth in no

uncertain terms: "Thus it is that what the 'purloined letter', nay, the 'letter in sufferance' means is that *a letter always arrives at its destination*" (SPL, p. 72, emphasis mine). Now, since it is unlikely that Lacan is talking about the efficiency of the postal service, he must, according to Derrida, be affirming the possibility of unequivocal meaning, the eventual reappropriation of the message, its total equivalence with itself. And since the "truth" Poe's story illustrates is, in Derrida's eyes, the truth of veiled/unveiled castration and of the transcendental identity of the phallus as the lack that makes the system work, this final sentence in Lacan's Seminar seems to affirm both the absolute truth of psychoanalytical theories and the absolute decipherability of the literary text. Poe's message will have been totally, unequivocally understood and explained by the psychoanalytical myth. "The hermeneutic discovery of meaning (truth), the deciphering (that of Dupin and that of the Seminar), arrives itself at its destination" (PT, p. 66).

Thus, the law of the phallus seems to imply a reappropriating return to the place of true ownership, an indivisible identity functioning beyond the possibility of disintegration or unrecoverable loss, and a totally self-present, unequivocal meaning or truth.

The problem with this type of system, counters Derrida, is that it cannot account for the possibility of sheer accident, irreversible loss, unreappropriable residues, and infinite divisibility, which are in fact necessary and inevitable in the system's very elaboration. In order for the circuit of the letter to end up confirming the law of the phallus, it must begin by transgressing it: the letter is a sign of high treason. Phallogocentrism mercilessly represses the uncontrollable multiplicity of ambiguities, the disseminating play of *writing*, which irreducibly transgresses any unequivocal meaning. "Not that the letter never arrives at its destination, but part of its structure is that it is always capable of not arriving there. (. . .) Here dissemination threatens the law of the signifier and of castration as a contract of truth. Dissemination mutilates the unity of the signifier, that is, of the phallus" (PT, p. 66).

In contrast to Lacan's *Seminar*, then, Derrida's text would seem to be setting itself up as a *Disseminar*.

From the foregoing remarks, it can easily be seen that the disseminal criticism of Lacan's apparent reduction of the literary text to an unequivocal message depends for its force upon the presupposition of unambiguousness in *Lacan's* text. And indeed, the statement that a letter always reaches its destination seems straightforward enough. But when that statement is reinserted into its context, things become palpably less certain:

Is that all, and shall we believe we have deciphered Dupin's real strategy above and beyond the imaginary tricks with which he was obliged to deceive us? No doubt, yes, for if "any point requiring reflection," as Dupin states at the start, is "examined to best purpose in the dark," we may now easily read its solution in broad daylight. It was already implicit and easy to derive from the title of our tale, according to the very formula we have long submitted to your discretion: in which the sender, we tell you, receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form. Thus it is that what the "purloined letter," nay, the "letter in sufferance" means is that a letter always arrives at its destination. (SPL, p. 72.)

The meaning of this last sentence is problematized not so much by its own ambiguity as by a series of reversals in the preceding sentences. If the *best* examination takes place in darkness, what does "reading in broad daylight" imply? Could it not be taken as an affirmation not of actual lucidity but of *delusions* of lucidity? Could it not then move the "yes, no doubt" as an answer not to the question "have we deciphered?" but to the question "shall we *believe* we have deciphered?" And if this is possible, does it not empty the final affirmation of all unequivocality, leaving it to stand with the force of an assertion, without any definite content? And if the sender receives from the receiver his own message backwards, who is the sender here, who the receiver, and what is the message? It is in fact not even clear what the expression "the purloined letter" refers to: Poe's text? the letter it talks about? or simply the *expression* "the purloined letter"?

We will take another look at this passage later, but for the moment its ambiguities seem sufficient to problematize, if not

subvert, the presupposition of univocality which is the very foundation on which Derrida has edified *his* interpretation.

But surely such an oversimplification on Derrida's part does not result from mere blindness, oversight, or error. As P. de Man says of Derrida's similar treatment of Rousseau, "the pattern is too interesting not to be deliberate."¹³ Being the sharp-eyed reader that he is, Derrida's consistent forcing of Lacan's statements into systems and patterns from which they are actually trying to escape must correspond to some strategic necessity different from the attentiveness to the letter of the text which characterizes Derrida's way of reading Poe. And in fact, the more one works with Derrida's analysis, the more convinced one becomes that although the critique of what Derrida *calls* psychoanalysis is entirely justified, it does not quite apply to what Lacan's text is actually saying. What Derrida is in fact arguing against is therefore not Lacan's *text* but Lacan's *power*—or rather, "Lacan" as the apparent cause of certain *effects of power* in French discourse today. Whatever Lacan's text may *say*, it *functions*, according to Derrida, as if it said what *he* says it says. The statement that a letter always reaches its destination may be totally undecipherable, but its assertive force is taken all the more seriously as a sign that Lacan himself has everything all figured out. Such an assertion, in fact, gives him an appearance of mastery like that of the Minister in the eyes of the letterless Queen. "The ascendancy which the Minister derives from the situation," explains Lacan, "is attached not to the letter but to the character it makes him into."

Thus Derrida's seemingly "blind" reading, whose vagaries we shall be following here, is not a mistake, but the positioning of what can be called the "average reading" of Lacan's text, which is the true object of Derrida's deconstruction. Since Lacan's text is *read* as if it said what Derrida says it says, its actual textual functioning is irrelevant to the agonistic arena in which Derrida's anal-

¹³ Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight*, Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 140.

ysis takes place, and which is, in fact, suggested by the very first word of the epigraph: *ils*, “they”:

They thank him for the grand truths he has just proclaimed, — for they have discovered (o verifier of what cannot be verified!) that everything he said was absolutely true; even though, at first, these honest souls admit, they might have suspected that it could have been a simple fiction ... (PT, p. 31; translation mine.)

The fact that this quotation from Baudelaire refers to Poe and not Lacan does not completely erase the impression that the unidentified “him” in its first sentence is the “Purveyor of Truth” of the title. The evils of Lacan’s analysis of Poe are thus located less in the letter of the text than in the gullible readers, the “*braves gens*” who are taken in by it. Lacan’s ills are really *ils*.

If Derrida’s reading of Lacan’s reading of Poe is thus actually the deconstruction of a reading whose status is difficult to determine, does this mean that Lacan’s text is completely innocent of the misdemeanors of which it is accused? If Lacan can be shown to be opposed to the same kind of logocentric error that Derrida is opposed to, does that mean that they are both really saying the same thing? These are questions which must be left, at least for the moment, hanging.

But the structure of Derrida’s *transference of guilt* from a certain reading of Lacan onto Lacan’s *text* is not indifferent in itself, in the context of what, after all, started out as a relatively simple crime story. For what it amounts to is nothing less than ... a *frame*.

4. *The Frame of Reference*

Elle, défunte *nue* en le miroir, encor
Que, *dans l’oubli fermé par le cadre*, se fixe
De scintillations sitôt le septuor.

—Mallarmé, “Sonnet en X”

If Derrida is thus framing Lacan for an interpretative malpractice of which he himself is, at least in part, the author, what can this

frame teach us about the nature of the act of reading, in the context of the question of literature and psychoanalysis?

Interestingly enough, one of the major crimes for which Lacan is being framed by Derrida is precisely the psychoanalytical reading's elimination of the literary text's *frame*. That frame here consists not only of the two stories which precede "The Purloined Letter," but of the stratum of narration through which the stories are told, and, "beyond" it, of the text's entire functioning as *écriture*:

Without breathing a word about it, Lacan excludes the textual fiction within which he isolates the so-called "general narration." Such an operation is facilitated, too obviously facilitated, by the fact that the narration covers the entire surface of the fiction entitled "The Purloined Letter." But *that* is the fiction. There is an invisible but structurally irreducible frame around the narration. Where does it begin? With the first letter of the title? With the epigraph from Seneca? With the words, "At Paris, just after dark . . ."? It is more complicated than that and will require reconsideration. Such complication suffices to point out everything that is misunderstood about the structure of the text once the frame is ignored. Within this invisible or neutralized frame, Lacan takes the borderless narration and makes another subdivision, once again leaving aside the frame. He cuts out two dialogues from within the frame of the narration itself, which form the narrated history, i.e. the content of a representation, the internal meaning of a story, the all-enframed which demands our complete attention, mobilizes all the psychoanalytical schemes — Oedipal, as it happens — and draws all the effort of decipherment towards its center. What is missing here is an elaboration of the problem of the frame, the signature and the *parergon*. This lack allows us to reconstruct the scene of the signifier as a signified (an ever inevitable process in the logic of the sign), writing as the written, the text as discourse or more precisely as an "intersubjective" dialogue (there is nothing fortuitous in the fact that the Seminar discusses only the two *dialogues* in "The Purloined Letter"). (PT, pp. 52-53, translation modified.)

It is well known that "The Purloined Letter" belongs to what Baudelaire called a "kind of trilogy," along with "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt." About this Dupin trilogy, the Seminar does not breathe a word; not only does Lacan lift out the narrated triangles (the "real drama") in order to center the narration around them and make them carry the weight of the interpretation (the letter's destination), but he also lifts one third of the Dupin cycle out of an ensemble discarded as if it were a natural, invisible frame. (Not translated in PT; FV p. 123; translation mine.)

In framing with such violence, in cutting a fourth side out of the narrated figure itself in order to see only triangles, a certain complication, perhaps a complication of the Oedipal structure, is eluded, a complication which makes itself felt in the scene of writing. (PT, p. 54; translation entirely modified.)

It would seem, then, that Lacan is here guilty of several sins of omission: the omission of the narrator, of the non-dialogue parts of the story, of the other stories in the trilogy. But does this criticism amount to a mere plea for the inclusion of what has been excluded? No: the problem is not simply quantitative. What has been excluded is not homogeneous to what has been included. Lacan, says Derrida, misses the specifically literary dimension of Poe's text by treating it as a "real drama," a story like the stories a psychoanalyst hears every day from his patients. What has been left out is precisely *literature* itself.

Does this mean that the "frame" is what makes a text literary? Interestingly enough, in a recent issue of *New Literary History* devoted to the question "What is Literature?" and totally unrelated to the debate concerning the purloined letter, this is precisely the conclusion to which one of the contributors comes: "Literature is language (...), but it is language around which we have drawn a *frame*, a frame that indicates a decision to regard with a particular self-consciousness the resources language has always possessed."¹⁴

Such a view of literature, however, implies that a text is literary because it remains inside certain definite borders: it is a many-facetted object, perhaps, but still, it is an object. That this is not quite what Derrida has in mind becomes clear from the following remarks:

By overlooking the narrator's position, the narrator's involvement in the content of what he seems to be recounting, one omits from the scene of writing anything going beyond the two triangular scenes.

And first of all one omits that what is in question — with no possible access route or border — is a scene of writing whose boundaries crumble off into an abyss. From the simulacrum of an overture, of a "first word," the

¹⁴ Stanley E. Fish, "How Ordinary is Ordinary Language?," *New Literary History*, Vol. V, No. 1, p. 52 (emphasis mine).

narrator, in narrating himself, advances a few propositions which carry the unity of the "tale" into an endless drifting-off course: a textual drifting not at all taken into account in the Seminar. (PT, pp. 100-101; translation modified.)

These reminders, of which countless other examples could be given, alert us to the effects of the frame, and of the paradoxes in the parergonal logic. Our purpose is not to prove that "The Purloined Letter" functions within a frame (omitted by the Seminar, which can thus be assured of its triangular interior by an active, surreptitious limitation starting from a metalinguistic overview), but to prove that the structure of the framing effects is such that no totalization of the border is even possible. Frames are always framed: thus, by part of their content. Pieces without a whole, "divisions" without a totality—this is what thwarts the dream of a letter without division, allergic to division. (PT, p. 99; translation slightly modified.)

Here the argument seems to reverse the previous objection: Lacan has eliminated not the frame but the unframability of the literary text. But what Derrida calls "parergonal logic" is paradoxical precisely because *both* of these incompatible (but not totally contradictory) arguments are equally valid. The total inclusion of the "frame" is both mandatory and impossible. The "frame" thus becomes not the borderline between the inside and the outside, but precisely what subverts the applicability of the inside/outside polarity to the act of interpretation.

The "frame" is, in fact, one of a series of paradoxical "borderline cases"—along with the tympanum and the hymen—through which Derrida has recently been studying the limits of spatial logic as it relates to intelligibility. Lacan, too, has been seeking to displace the Euclidean model of understanding (*comprehension*, for example, means *spatial inclusion*) by inventing a "new geometry" by means of the logic of knots. The relation between these two attempts to break out of spatial logic has yet to be articulated, but some measure of the difficulties involved may be derived from the fact that "to break out of" is still a spatial metaphor. The urgency of these undertakings cannot, however, be overestimated, since the logic of metaphysics, of politics, of belief, and of knowledge itself is based on the imposition of definable objective frontiers and outlines whose

possibility and/or justifiability are precisely what is here being put in question. If “comprehension” is the framing of something whose limits are undeterminable, how can we know *what* we are comprehending? The play on the spatial and the criminal senses of the word “frame” with which we began this section may thus not be as gratuitous as it seemed. And indeed, the question of the fallacies inherent in a Euclidean model of intelligibility, far from being a tangential theoretical consideration here, is in fact central to the very plot of “The Purloined Letter” itself. For it is precisely the notion of space as finite and homogeneous which underlies the Prefect’s method of investigation: “I presume you know,” he explains, “that, to a properly trained police-agent, such a thing as a ‘secret’ drawer is impossible. Any man is a dolt who permits a ‘secret’ drawer to escape him in a search of this kind. The thing is *so* plain. There is a certain amount of bulk—of space—to be accounted for in every cabinet. Then we have accurate rules. The fiftieth part of a line could not escape us” (Poe, p. 204). The assumption that what is not seen must be hidden—an assumption Lacan calls the “realist’s imbecillity”—is based on a falsely objective notion of the act of *seeing*. The polarity “hidden/exposed” cannot alone account for the fact that the police did *not* find the letter—which was entirely exposed, inside out—let alone the fact that Dupin *did*. A “subjective” element must be added, which subverts the geometrical model of understanding through the *interference* of the polarity “blindness/sight” with the polarity “hidden/exposed.” The same problematic is raised by the story of “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” which Derrida cites as an example of psychoanalysis’ *failure* to go beyond the polarity “hidden/exposed” (in Freud’s account). We will return to the letter’s “place” later on in this essay, but it is already clear that the “range” of any investigation is located not in geometrical space, but in its implicit notion of what “seeing” is.

What enables Derrida to problematize the literary text’s frame is, as we have seen, what he calls “the scene of writing.” By this he means two things:

1) The textual signifier's resistance to being totally transformed into a signified. In spite of Lacan's attentiveness to the path of the letter in Poe's story as an illustration of the functioning of a signifier, says Derrida, the psychoanalytical reading is still blind to the functioning of the signifier *in the narration itself*. In reading "The Purloined Letter" as an *allegory* of the signifier, Lacan, according to Derrida, has made the "signifier" into the story's truth: "The displacement of the signifier is analyzed as a signified, as the recounted object in a short story" (PT, p. 48). Whereas, counters Derrida, it is precisely the *textual* signifier which resists being thus totalized into meaning, leaving an irreducible residue: "The rest, the remnant, would be 'The Purloined Letter', the text that bears this title, and whose place, like the once more invisible large letters on the map, is not where one was expecting to find it, in the enclosed content of the 'real drama' or in the hidden and sealed interior of Poe's story, but in and as the open letter, the very open letter which fiction is" (PT, p. 64).

2) The actual writings—the books, libraries, quotations, and previous tales which surround "The Purloined Letter" with a *frame* of (literary) *references*. The story begins in "a little back library, or book-closet" (Poe, p. 199) where the narrator is mulling over a previous conversation on the subject of the two previous instances of Dupin's detective work as told in Poe's two previous tales, the first of which recounted the original meeting between Dupin and the narrator—in a *library*, of course, where both were in search of the same rare *book*. The story's *beginning* is thus an infinitely regressing *reference* to previous writings. And therefore, says Derrida, "nothing begins. Simply a drifting or a disorientation from which one never moves away" (PT, p. 101). Dupin himself is in fact a walking library: books are his "sole luxuries," and the narrator is "astonished" at "the vast extent of his reading" (Poe, p. 106). Even Dupin's last, most seemingly personal words—the venomous lines he leaves in his substitute letter to the Minister—are a *quotation*. A quotation whose transcription and proper authorship are the last things the story tells us. "But," concludes Derrida, "beyond the

quotation marks that surround the entire story, Dupin is obliged to quote this last word in quotation marks, to recount his signature: that is what I wrote to him and how I signed it. What is a signature within quotation marks? Then, within these quotation marks, the seal itself is a quotation within quotation marks. This remnant is still literature" (PT, pp. 112-113).

It is by means of these two extra dimensions that Derrida intends to show the crumbling, abyssal, non-totalizable edges of the story's frame. Both of these objections, however, are in themselves more problematic and double-edged than they appear. Let us begin with the second. "Literature," in Derrida's demonstration, is indeed clearly the beginning, middle, and end—and even the interior—of the purloined letter. But how was this conclusion reached? To a large extent, by listing the books, libraries, and other writings *recounted* in the story. That is, by following the *theme*—and not the functioning—of "writing" within "the content of a representation." But if the fact that Dupin signs with a quotation, for example, is for Derrida a sign that "this remnant is still literature," does this not indicate that "literature" has become not the signifier but the *signified* in the story? If the play of the signifier is really to be followed, doesn't it play beyond the range of the *sème* "writing"? And if Derrida criticizes Lacan for making the "signifier" into the story's *signified*, is Derrida not here transforming "writing" into "the written" in much the same way? What Derrida calls "the reconstruction of the scene of the signifier as a signified" seems indeed to be "an inevitable process" in the logic of reading the purloined letter.

Derrida, of course, implicitly counters this objection by protesting—twice—that the textual drifting for which Lacan does not account should not be considered "the *real subject* of the tale," but rather the "remarkable ellipsis" of any subject. But the question of the seemingly inevitable slipping from the signifier to the signified still remains. And it remains not as an *objection* to the logic of the frame, but as its fundamental *question*. For if the "paradoxes of parergonal logic" are such that the frame is always being framed

by part of its contents, it is precisely this slippage between signifier and signified—which is *acted out* by both Derrida and Lacan against their intentions—which best illustrates those paradoxes. Derrida's justification of his framing of the "Lacan" he is reading as neither being limited to the "Seminar" nor as including Lacan's later work, itself obeys the contradictory logic of the frame: on the one hand, Derrida will study that part of Lacan's work which seems to embody a *system* of truth even though other writings might put that system in question, and on the other hand this same part of Lacan's work, says Derrida, will probably some day be called the work of the "young Lacan" by "university types eager to divide up *what cannot be divided*." Whatever Derrida actually thinks he is doing here, his contradictory way of explaining it obeys the paradoxes of parergonal logic so perfectly that this self-subversion may have even been deliberate.

If the question of the frame thus problematizes the object of any interpretation by setting it at an angle or fold [*pli*] with itself, then Derrida's analysis errs not in opposing this paradoxical functioning to Lacan's allegorical reading, but in not following the consequences of its own insight far enough. If the frame is that which makes it impossible for us to know where to begin and when to stop, for example, why does Derrida stop within the limits of the Dupin trilogy? And if the purpose of studying "writing" is to sow an uncanny uncertainty about our position in the abyss, isn't the disseminal library Derrida describes still in a way just a bit too comfortable?

"The Purloined Letter," says Derrida, is signed "literature." What does this mean, if not that the letter's *contents*—the only ones we are allowed to see—are in *another* text? That the locus of the letter's meaning is not *in* the letter, but somewhere else? That the *context* of that meaning is precisely the *way* in which its context is lacking, both through the explicit designation of a proper origin (Crébillon's *Atrée*) *outside* the text and through a substitutive structure from letter to letter, from text to text, and from brother to

brother, *within* the text, such that the expressions “outside” and “within” have ceased to be clearly definable? But until we have actually opened that other text, we cannot know the modality of the *precise* otherness of the abyss *to itself*, the way in which the story’s edges do not *simply* crumble away.

In order to escape the reduction of the “library” to its thematic presence as a *sign* of writing, let us therefore pull some of the books off the shelves and see what they contain. This is a track neither Lacan nor Derrida has taken, but we will soon see how it in some way enfolds them both.

First of all, the name “Dupin” itself, according to Poe scholars, comes out of *Poe’s* interior library: from the pages of a volume called *Sketches of Conspicuous Living Characters of France* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1841), which Poe reviewed for *Graham’s Magazine* during the same month his first Dupin story appeared. André-Marie-Jean-Jacques Dupin, a minor French statesman, is there described as precisely himself a walking library: “To judge from his writings, Dupin must be a perfect living encyclopedia. From Homer to Rousseau, from the Bible to the civil code, from the laws of the twelve tables to the Koran, he has read every thing, retained every thing . . .” (p. 224). Detective Dupin’s “origin” is thus multiply bookish: he is a reader whose writer read his name in a book describing a writer as a reader—a reader whose nature can only be described in writing, in fact, as irreducibly double: “He is the personage for whom the painters of political portraits, make the most enormous consumption of antithesis. In the same picture, he will be drawn as both great and little, courageous and timid, trivial and dignified, disinterested and mercenary, restive and pliable, obstinate and fickle, white and black; there is no understanding it” (p. 210). And the writing which serves as the vehicle of this description of written descriptions of double Dupin, is *itself* double: a translation, by a Mr. Walsh, of a series of articles by a Frenchman whose name is not even known to the translator, but who is said to

call himself “an *homme de rien*, a nobody” (p. 2). “Nobody” thus becomes the proper name of the original author in the series.¹⁵

But the author of the last word in “The Purloined Letter” is clearly *not* nobody. It is not even Poe; it is Crébillon. What is remarkable about Crébillon’s *Atrée*, when read as the context from which Dupin’s letter to the Minister has been purloined, is not simply that it tells the story of revenge as a symmetrical repetition of the original crime, but that it does so precisely by means of . . . a purloined letter. It is a *letter* which informs King Atreus of the extent of his betrayal, and serves as an instrument of his revenge; it is the King himself who has purloined the letter—written by the Queen to her lover Thyestes just before her death. The letter reveals that Plisthenes, whom everyone believes to be Atreus’ son, is really the son of his brother Thyestes. Having kept the letter and its message secret for twenty years, Atreus plans to force Plisthenes, unaware of his true parentage, to commit patricide. Thwarted in this plan by Plisthenes’ refusal to kill the father of his beloved, Theodamia, who is, unknown to him, his sister, Atreus is forced to produce the letter, reunite the illicit family, and transfer his revenge from Plisthenes’ patricide to Thyestes’ infantophagy. A Queen betraying a King, a letter representing that betrayal being purloined for purposes of power, an eventual return of that letter to its addressee, accompanied by an act of revenge which duplicates the original crime—“The Purloined Letter” as a story of repetition is *itself* a repetition of the story from which it purloins its last words. The Freudian “truth” of the repetition compulsion is not simply illustrated *in* the story; it is illustrated *by* the story. The story obeys the very law it conveys; it is framed by its own content. And thus “The Purloined Letter” no longer simply repeats its own “primal scene”: what it repeats is nothing less than a previous story of repetition. The “last word” names the place where the non-firstness of the “first word” repeats itself.

¹⁵ In a final twist to this *mise en abyme* of writing, the words “by L. L. de Loménie” have been penciled into the Yale library’s copy of this book under the title in a meticulous nineteenth-century hand, as the book’s “*supplément d’origine*” . . .

This is not the only instance of the folding-in of the frame of references upon the purloined letter's interior. Another allusion, somewhat more hidden, is contained in the description of the Minister as someone "who dares all things, those unbecoming as well as those becoming a man" (Poe, p. 201). These words echo Macbeth's protestation to his ambitious wife: "I dare do all that may become a man./ Who dares do more is none" (I, vii). The reference to *Macbeth* substantiates Lacan's reading of the description of the Minister as pointing toward femininity: it is indeed Lady Macbeth who dares to do what is unbecoming a man. And what is Lady Macbeth doing when we first catch sight of her? She is reading a letter. Not a *purloined* letter, perhaps, but one which contains the ambiguous letter of destiny, committing Macbeth to the murder of the King, whose place Macbeth will take, and whose fate he will inevitably share. The King seems to be precisely that which cannot remain intact in the face of a letter: Atreus betrayed by his wife's letter to his brother; Duncan betrayed by Macbeth's letter to Lady Macbeth; Macbeth himself betrayed by his own confidence in his ability to read the letter of his Fate. And of course, the King in the "Purloined Letter," whose power is betrayed precisely by his not even knowing about the existence of the letter that betrays him.

The questions raised by all these texts together are legion. What is a man? Who is the child's father? What is the relation between incest, murder, and the death of a child? What is a king? How can we read the letter of our Destiny? What is seeing? . . . The crossroads where these stories come together seems to point to the story of what occurred at another crossroads: the tragedy of *Oedipus Rex*. We seem to have returned to our starting point, then, except for one thing: it is no longer "The Purloined Letter" which repeats the story of Oedipus, but the story of Oedipus which repeats all the letters purloined from "The Purloined Letter" 's abyssal interior.

But that is not where the letter stops. For the very Oedipal reading which Derrida attributes to Lacan is *itself*, according to Derrida, a purloined letter—purloined by Lacan from Marie Bona-

parte's psychobiographical study of the life and works of Edgar Allan Poe: "At the moment when the Seminar, like Dupin, finds the letter where it is to be found, between the legs of the woman, the deciphering of the enigma is anchored in truth (...) Why then does it find, at the same time that it finds truth, the same meaning and the same topos as Bonaparte when, leaping over the text, she proposes a psycho-biographical analysis of 'The Purloined Letter'?" (PT, p. 66). In that analysis, Bonaparte sees Dupin's restitution of the letter to the Queen as the return of the missing maternal penis to the mother. The letter's hiding place in the Minister's apartment, moreover, is "almost an anatomical chart" of the female body—which leads Bonaparte to note that Baudelaire's translation of "hung from a little brass knob just beneath the middle of the mantelpiece" as "suspendu à un petit bouton de cuivre au dessus du manteau de la cheminée" ["above the mantelpiece"] is "completely wrong" (quoted in PT, p. 68). Bonaparte's frame of reference—the female body—cannot tolerate this error of translation.

It is by means of a note which Lacan drops on the subject of the letter's position that Derrida is here able to frame Lacan for neglecting to mention his references: "The question of deciding," says Lacan, "whether he [Dupin] seizes it [the letter] above the mantelpiece as Baudelaire translates, or beneath it, as in the original text, may be abandoned without harm to the inferences of those whose profession is grilling [*aux inférences de la cuisine*]." * Lacan's note: "And even to the cook herself" (SPL, pp. 66-67). In this cavalier treatment of Bonaparte as the "cook," Lacan thus "makes clear" to Derrida "that Lacan had read Bonaparte, although the Seminar never alludes to her. As an author so careful about debts and priorities, he could have acknowledged an irruption that orients his entire interpretation, namely the process of rephallization as the proper course of the letter, the 'return of the letter' restored to its 'destination' after having been found between the legs of the mantelpiece" (PT, p. 68). The *interpretation* of the letter (as the phallus which must be returned to the mother) must *itself* be returned to the "mother" from whom it has been purloined—Marie Bona-

parte. Derrida himself thus follows precisely the logic he objects to in Lacan, the logic of rectification and correction: "to return the letter to its proper course, supposing that its trajectory is a line, is to correct a deviation, to rectify a divergence, to recall a direction, an authentic line" (PT, p. 65). But the mere fact that Derrida's critique repeats the same logic he denounces is in itself less interesting than the fact that *this* rectification itself presupposes another, which puts its very foundations in question. For when Lacan says that the question of the exact position of the letter "may be abandoned without harm" to the grillers, Derrida protests, "Without harm? On the contrary, the harm would be decisive, within the Seminar itself: *on* the mantelpiece, the letter could not have been 'between the cheeks of the fireplace', 'between the legs of the fireplace' " (PT, p. 69). Derrida must thus *correct* Lacan's text, *eliminate* its apparent contradiction, in order to return the letter of the interpretation to its rightful owner. And all this in order to criticize Lacan's enterprise as one of rectification and circular return. If "rectification" as such is to be criticized, it is thus difficult to determine where it begins and where it ends. In *rectifying* Lacan's text in order to make it fit into the logic of rectification, Derrida thus problematizes the very status of the object of his criticism.

But if the correction of Lacan's text is thus itself a mutilation which requires correction, how *are* we to interpret the contradiction between Lacan's description of the Minister's apartment as "an immense female body" (SPL, p. 66) and his statement that the letter's exact location does not matter? This, it seems to me, is the crux of the divergence between Derrida's and Lacan's interpretation of what the equation "letter = phallus" *means*.

For Bonaparte, it was precisely the *analogy* between the fireplace and the female body which led to the letter's phallic function. The phallus was considered as a real, anatomical *referent* serving as the model for a figurative representation. Bonaparte's frame of reference was thus *reference* itself.

For Derrida, on the other hand, the phallus' frame of reference is precisely "psychoanalytical theory" 's way of preserving the phal-

lus' referential status *in the act of negating it*. In commenting on Lacan's discussion of "The Meaning of the Phallus," Derrida writes:

Phallogocentrism is one thing. And what is called man and what is called woman might be subject to it. The more so, we are reminded, since the phallus is neither a phantasy ("imaginary effect") nor an object ("partial, internal, good, bad"), even less the organ, penis or clitoris, which it symbolizes [*Écrits*, p. 690]. Androcentrism ought therefore to be something else.

Yet what is going on? The entire phallogocentrism is articulated from the starting-point of a determinate *situation* (let us give this word its full impact) in which the phallus *is* the mother's desire inasmuch as she does not have it. An (individual, perceptual, local, cultural, historical, etc.) situation on the basis of which is developed something called a "sexual theory": in it the phallus is not the organ, penis or clitoris, which it symbolizes; but it does to a larger extent and in the first place symbolize the penis. (...) This consequence had to be traced in order to recognize the meaning [the direction, *sens*] of the purloined letter in the "course *which is proper to it*." (PT, pp. 98-99.)

Thus, says Derrida, it is the very non-referentiality of the phallus which, in the final analysis, insures that the penis is its referent.

Before trying to determine the applicability of this summary to Lacan's actual statements in "The Meaning of the Phallus"—not to mention in the "Seminar"—let us follow its consequences further in Derrida's critique. From the very first words of "The Purveyor of Truth," psychoanalysis is implicitly being criticized for being capable of finding only *itself* wherever it looks: "Psychoanalysis, supposing, finds itself" (PT, p. 31, translation mine). In whatever it turns its attention to, psychoanalysis seems to recognize nothing but its own (Oedipal) schemes. Dupin finds the letter because "he knows that the letter finally *finds itself* where it must *be found* in order to return circularly and adequately to its proper place. This proper place, known to Dupin and to the psychoanalyst who intermittently takes his place, is the place of castration" (PT, p. 60; translation modified). The psychoanalyst's act, then, is one of mere *recognition* of the expected, a recognition which Derrida finds explicitly stated as such by Lacan in the underlined words he quotes from the Seminar: "Just so does the purloined letter, like an im-

mense female body, stretch out across the Minister's office when Dupin enters. But just so does he already *expect to find it* [emphasis mine—J. D.] and has only, with his eyes veiled by green lenses, to undress that huge body" (PT, pp. 61-62; emphasis and brackets restored).

But if recognition is a form of blindness, a form of violence to the otherness of the object, it would seem that, by eliminating Lacan's suggestion of a possible complication of the phallic scheme, and by lying in wait between the brackets of the fireplace to catch the psychoanalyst at his own game, Derrida, too, is "recognizing" rather than reading. And what *he* recognizes is, as he himself states it, a certain classical conception of psychoanalysis: "From the beginning," writes Derrida early in his study, "*we recognize* the classical landscape of applied psychoanalysis" (PT, p. 45; emphasis mine). It would seem that the theoretical frame of reference which governs recognition is a constitutive element in the blindness of any interpretative insight. And it is precisely that frame of reference which allows the analyst to *frame* the author of the text he is reading for practices whose locus is simultaneously *beyond* the letter of the text and *behind* the vision of its reader. The reader is framed by his own frame, but he is not even in possession of his own guilt, since it is that which prevents his vision from coinciding with *itself*. Just as the author of a criminal frame transfers guilt from himself to another by leaving *signs* which he hopes will be read as insufficiently erased *traces* or *referents* left by the other, the author of any critique is himself framed by his own frame of the other, no matter how guilty or innocent the other may be.

What is at stake here is thus the question of the relation between referentiality and interpretation. And here we find an interesting twist: while criticizing Lacan's notion of the phallus as being too referential, Derrida goes on to *use* referential logic against it. This comes up in connection with the letter's famous "materiality" which Derrida finds so odd. "It would be hard to exaggerate here the scope of this proposition on the indivisibility of the letter, or rather on its identity to itself inaccessible to dismemberment (...), as well

as on the so-called materiality of the signifier (the letter) intolerant to partition. But where does this idea come from? A torn-up letter may be purely and simply destroyed, it happens . . ." (PT, pp. 86-87; translation modified). The so-called materiality of the signifier, says Derrida, is nothing but an *idealization*.

But what if the signifier were precisely what puts the polarity "materiality/ideality" in question? Has it not become obvious that neither Lacan's description ("Tear a letter into little pieces, it remains the letter that it is") nor Derrida's description ("A torn-up letter may be purely and simply destroyed, it happens . . .") can be read *literally*? Somehow, a rhetorical fold [*pli*] in the text is there to trip us up whichever way we turn. Especially since the expression "it happens" [*ça arrive*] uses the very word on which the controversy over the letter's *arrival* at its destination turns.

Our study of the readings of "The Purloined Letter" has thus brought us to the point where the *word* "letter" no longer has any *literality*.

But what is a letter which has no *literality*?

5. A "*Pli*" for Understanding

I pull in resolution, and begin
To doubt the equivocation of the fiend
That lies like truth.

—Macbeth

"Why do you lie to me saying you're going to Cracow so I should believe you're going to Lemberg, when in reality you *are* going to Cracow?"

—Joke quoted by Lacan after Freud

The letter, then, is that which poses the question of its own rhetorical status. It moves *rhetorically* through the two long, minute studies in which it is presumed to be the literal object of analysis, *without* having any *literality*. Instead of simply being explained *by* those analyses, the rhetoric of the letter problematizes the very rhetorical mode of analytical discourse itself. And if "*literal*" *means*

"to the letter," the literal becomes the most problematically figurative mode of all.

As the locus of rhetorical displacement, in fact, the letter made its very entrance into Poe's story by "traumatizing" the Prefect's discourse about it. After a series of paradoxes and pleas for absolute secrecy, the Prefect describes the problem created by the letter with a proliferation of *periphrases* which the narrator dubs "the cant of diplomacy":

"Well, then; I have received personal information, from a very high quarter, that a certain document of the last importance has been purloined from the royal apartments. The individual who purloined it is known; this beyond a doubt; he was seen to take it. It is known, also, that it still remains in his possession."

"How is this known?" asked Dupin.

"It is clearly inferred," replied the Prefect, "from the nature of the document, and from the non-appearance of certain results which would at once arise from its passing *out* of the robber's possession—that is to say, from his employing it as he must design in the end to employ it."

"Be a little more explicit," I said.

"Well, I may venture so far as to say that the paper gives its holder a certain power in a certain quarter where such power is immensely valuable." The Prefect was fond of the cant of diplomacy. (Poe, p. 200.)

The letter thus enters the discourse of Poe's story as a rhetorical fold which actually hides nothing, since, although *we* never find out what was written in the letter, it is presumable that the Queen, the Minister, Dupin, the Prefect—who all held the letter in their hands—and even the narrator, who heard what the Prefect read from his memorandum-book, *did*. The way in which the letter dictates a series of *circumlocutions*, then, resembles the way in which the *path* of the letter dictates the characters' *circumvolutions*—not that the letter's contents *must* remain hidden, but that the *question* of whether or not they are revealed is immaterial to the displacement the letter governs. The character and actions of each of the letter's holders are determined by the rhetorical spot it puts them in *whether or not* that spot can be read by the subjects it displaces.

The letter, then, acts as a signifier *not* because its contents are lacking, but because its function is not dependent on the knowledge

or nonknowledge of those contents. What Lacan means by saying that the letter cannot be divided is thus not that the phallus must remain intact, but that the phallus, the letter, and the signifier *are not substances*. The letter cannot be divided because it only functions as a division. It is not something with “an *identity* to itself inaccessible to dismemberment” as Derrida interprets it; it is a *difference*. It is known only in its effects. The signifier is an articulation in a chain, not an identifiable unit. It cannot be known in itself because it is capable of “sustaining itself *only* in a displacement” (SPL, p. 59; emphasis mine). It is localized, but only as the non-generalizable locus of a differential relationship. Derrida, in fact, *enacts* this law of the signifier in the very act of opposing it:

Perhaps only one letter need be changed, maybe even less than a letter in the expression: “missing from its place” [*manque à sa place*]. Perhaps we need only introduce a written “a”, i.e. without accent, in order to bring out that if the lack *has* its place [*le manque a sa place*] in this atomistic topology of the signifier, that is, if it occupies therein a specific place of definite contours, the order would remain undisturbed. (PT, p. 45.)

While thus criticizing the *hypostasis* of a lack—the letter as the *substance* of an absence—which is not what Lacan is saying), Derrida is *illustrating* what Lacan *is* saying about *both* the materiality *and* the localizability of the signifier *as the mark of difference* by operating *on* the letter as a material locus of differentiation: by removing the little signifier “^,” an accent mark which has *no* meaning in itself.¹⁶

The question of the nature of the “lack,” however, brings us back to the complexities of the meaning and place of the “phallus.” For while it is quite easy to show the *signifier* as a “difference” rather than a “lack,” the question becomes much more tricky in relation to the phallus. There would seem to be no ambiguity in

¹⁶ It is perhaps not by chance that the question here arises of whether or not to put the accent on the letter “a.” The letter “a” is perhaps the purloined letter *par excellence* in the writings of all three authors: Lacan’s “objet a,” Derrida’s “différance,” and Edgar Poe’s middle initial, A, taken from his foster father, John Allan.

Lacan's statement that "Clinical observation shows us that this test through the desire of the Other is not decisive insofar as the subject thereby learns whether or not he himself has a real phallus, but insofar as he learns *that the mother doesn't*" (*Écrits*, p. 693; translation and emphasis mine). The theory seems to imply that at some point in human sexuality, a referential moment is unbyassable: the *observation* that the mother does not have a penis is *necessary*. And therefore it would seem that the "lack" is localizable as the substance of an absence or a hole. To borrow a joke from Geoffrey Hartman's discussion of certain solutionless detective stories, if the purloined letter is the mother's phallus, "instead of a whodunit we get a whodnut, a story with a hole in it."¹⁷

But even on this referential level, is the object of observation really a lack? Is it not rather not an observation at all but already an *interpretation*—an interpretation ("castration") *not* of a lack but precisely of a *difference*? If what is observed is irreducibly anatomical, what is anatomy here but the irreducibility of *difference*? Even on the most elementary level, the phallus is a sign of sexuality *as* difference, and not as the presence or absence of this or that organ.

But Lacan defines the phallus in a much more complicated way than this. For if the woman is defined as "giving in a love-relation that which she does not have," the *definition* of what the woman does not have is not limited to the penis. At another point in the discussion, Lacan refers to "the gift of what one does not have" as "love" (*Écrits*, p. 691). Is "love" here a mere *synonym* of the phallus? Perhaps. But only if we modify the definition of the phallus. "Love" is, in Lacan's terminology, what is in question in the "request for love" [*demande d'amour*], which is "unconditional," the "demand for a presence or an absence" (*Écrits*, p. 691). This *demande* is not only a reference to "what the Other doesn't have," however. It is also language. And language is what alienates human desire such that "it is from the place of the Other that the subject's message is

¹⁷ Geoffrey Hartman, "Literature High and Low: the Case of the Mystery Story," in *The Fate of Reading*, University of Chicago Press, 1975, p. 206.

emitted" (*Écrits*, p. 690). The "demand" is thus a request for the unconditional presence or absence not of an organ but of the Other in answer to the question asked by the subject from the place of the Other. But this *demande* is not yet the definition of "desire." Desire is what is left of the *demande* when all possible satisfaction of "real" needs has been subtracted from it. "Desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference which results from the subtraction of the first from the second, the very phenomenon of their split [*Spaltung*]" (*Écrits*, p. 691). And if the phallus as a signifier, according to Lacan, "gives the *ratio* of desire," the *definition* of the phallus can no longer bear a *simple* relation either to the body or to language, because it is that which prevents *both* the body *and* language from being simple: "The phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark where logos is joined together with the advent of desire" (*Écrits*, p. 692; all translations in this paragraph mine).

The important word in this definition is "joined." For if language (alienation of needs through the place of the Other) and desire (the *remainder* which is left from the subtraction of the satisfaction of real needs from absolute demand) are neither totally separable from each other nor related in the same way to their own division, the phallus is the signifier of the articulation between two very problematic chains. But what is a signifier in this context? "A signifier," says Lacan, "is what represents a subject for another signifier." A signifier *represents*, then, and what it represents is a subject. But it only does so *for* another signifier. What does the expression "for another signifier" mean, if not that the distinction between subject and signifier posed in the first part of the definition is being subverted in the second? "Subject" and "signifier" are co-implicated in a definition which is unable either to separate them totally or to fuse them completely. There are *three* positions in the definition, *two* of which are occupied by the same word, but that word is differentiated from *itself* in the course of the definition—because it begins to take the place of the *other* word. The signifier *for which* the other signifier represents a subject thus acts like a subject be-

cause it is the place where the representation is “understood.” The signifier, then, situates the place of something like a reader. And the reader becomes the place where representation *would be* understood if there were any such thing as a place beyond representation; the place where representation is *inscribed* as an infinite chain of substitutions whether or not there is any place from which it can be understood.

The letter as a signifier is thus not a thing or the absence of a thing, nor a word or the absence of a word, nor an organ or the absence of an organ, but a *knot* in a structure where words, things and organs can neither be definably separated nor compatibly combined. This is why the exact representational position of the letter in the Minister’s apartment both matters and does not matter. It matters to the extent that sexual anatomical difference creates an irreducible dissymmetry to be accounted for in every human subject. But it does *not* matter to the extent that the letter is not hidden *in* geometrical space, where the police are looking for it, or in anatomical space, where a literal understanding of psychoanalysis might look for it. It is located “in” a *symbolic* structure, a structure which can *only* be perceived in its effects, and whose effects are perceived as repetition. Dupin *finds* the letter “in” the symbolic order *not* because he knows where to look, but because he knows *what to repeat*. Dupin’s “analysis” is the *repetition* of the scene which led to the necessity of analysis. It is not an interpretation or an insight, but an act. An act of *untying* the knot in the structure by means of the repetition of the act of tying it. The word “analyze,” in fact, etymologically *means* “untie,” a meaning on which Poe plays in his prefatory remarks on the nature of analysis as “that moral activity which disentangles” (Poe, p. 102). The analyst does not intervene by giving meaning, but by effecting a *dénouement*.

But if the act of (psycho)analysis has no identity *apart from* its status as a repetition of the structure it seeks to analyze (to untie), then Derrida’s remarks *against* psychoanalysis as being always already *mise en abyme* in the text it studies and as being only capable

of finding *itself*, are not *objections* to psychoanalysis but in fact a profound insight into its very essence. Psychoanalysis is in fact *itself* the primal scene it is seeking: it is the *first* occurrence of what has been repeating itself in the patient without ever having occurred. Psychoanalysis is not itself the *interpretation* of repetition; it is the repetition of a *trauma of interpretation*—called “castration” or “parental coitus” or “the Oedipus complex” or even “sexuality”—the traumatic deferred interpretation not *of* an event, but *as* an event which never took place as such. The “primal scene” is not a scene but an *interpretative infelicity* whose result was to situate the interpreter in an intolerable position. And psychoanalysis is the reconstruction of that interpretative infelicity not as *its* interpretation, but as its first and last *act*. Psychoanalysis has content only insofar as it repeats the dis-content of what never took place.

But, as Dupin reminds us, “there is such a thing as being too profound. Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the more important knowledge, I do believe that she is invariably superficial” (Poe, p. 119). Have we not here been looking *beyond* Lacan’s signifier instead of *at* it? When Lacan insists on the “materiality of the signifier” which does not “admit partition,” what is *his* way of explaining it? Simply that the *word* “letter” is never used with a partitive article: you can have “some mail” but not “some letter”:

Language delivers its judgment to whomever knows how to hear it: through the usage of the article as partitive particle. It is there that the spirit—if spirit be living meaning—appears, no less oddly, as more available for quantification than the letter. To begin with meaning itself, which bears our saying: a speech rich with meaning [“*plein de signification*”], just as we recognize a measure of intention [“*de l'intention*”] in an act, or deplore that there is no more love [“*plus d'amour*”]; or store up hatred [“*de la haine*”] and expend devotion [“*du dévouement*”], and so much infatuation [“*tant d'infatuation*”] is easily reconciled to the fact that there will always be ass [“*de la cuisse*”] for sale and brawling [“*du riffi*”] among men.

But as for the letter—be it taken as typographical character, epistle, or what makes a man of letters—we will say that what is said is to be understood *to the letter* [*à la lettre*], that a *letter* [*une lettre*] awaits you

at the post office, or even that you are acquainted with *letters* [*que vous avez des lettres*] — never that there is *letter* [*de la lettre*] anywhere, whatever the context, even to designate overdue mail. (SPL, pp. 53-54.)

If this passage is particularly resistant to translation, that in itself is a result of the fact that its message is in the “superficial” play of the signifier. Like the large letters on the map which are so obvious as to be invisible, Lacan’s textual signifier has gone unnoticed in the search for the *signified*, “signifier.”

But the question of translation in connection with a message which is so obvious that it goes unseen is not an accident here. For in his discussion of Dupin’s statement that “‘analysis’ conveys ‘algebra’ about as much as, in Latin, ‘*ambitus*’ implies ‘ambition’, ‘*religio*’, religion, or ‘*homines honesti*’ a set of ‘honorable men’” (Poe, p. 212), Lacan asks:

Might not this parade of erudition be destined to reveal to us the key words of our drama? ¹⁸ Is not the magician repeating his trick before our eyes, without deceiving us this time about divulging his secret, but pressing his wager to the point of really explaining it to us without us seeing a thing. *That* would be the summit of the illusionist’s art: through one of his fictive creations to *truly delude us*. (SPL, pp. 50-51.)

But the trick does not end there. For has Lacan himself not slipped into the paragraph on the quantification of the letter a parade of “key words” for *his* reading of the situation? “Full of meaning,” “intention,” “hatred,” “love,” “infatuation,” “devotion,” “ass for sale,” and “brawling among men”—all of these words occur as the possible *signifieds* of “The Purloined Letter” in the Seminar. But if the key words of a reading of the story thus occur only in the mode of a *play of the signifier*, the *difference* between “signifier” and “signified” in Lacan’s text, as well as in Poe’s, has been effec-

¹⁸ *Ambitus* means “detour”; *religio*, “sacred bond”; *homines honesti*, “decent men.” Lacan expands upon these words as the “key words” of the story by saying: “All of this (...) does not imply that because the letter’s secrecy is indefensible, the betrayal of that secret would in any sense be honorable. The *honesti homines*, decent people, will not get off so easily. There is more than one *religio*, and it is not slated for tomorrow that sacred ties shall cease to rend us in two. As for *ambitus*: a detour, we see, is not always inspired by ambition” (SPL, p. 58).

tively subverted. What the reader finally reads when he deciphers the signifying surface of the map of his misreading is: "You have been fooled." And it is precisely in this discussion of "being fooled" that Lacan, far from excluding the narrator, situates him in the dynamic functioning of the text, as a reader *en abyme*, duped by Dupin's trick explanations of his technique, a reader who, however, unconscious of the nonsequiturs he is repeating, is so much in awe of his subject that his admiration blinds *us* to the tricky functioning of what he so faithfully transmits.

To be fooled by a text implies that the text is not constative but *performative*, and that the reader is in fact one of its effects. The text's "truth" is what puts the status of the reader in question, what performs *him* as its "address." Thus "truth" is *not* what the fiction *reveals* as a nudity hidden behind a veil. When Derrida calls Lacan's statement that "truth inhabits fiction" an *unequivocal* expression or revelation of the truth of truth (PT, p. 46), he is simply not seeing the performative perversity of the rest of the sentence in which that "statement" occurs: "It is up to the reader to give the letter (...) what he will find as its last word: its destination. That is, Poe's message deciphered and coming back from him, the reader, from the fact that, in reading it, he is able to say of himself that he is not more feigned than truth when it inhabits fiction" (*Écrits*, p. 10; translation mine). The play between truth and fiction, reader and text, message and feint, has become impossible to unravel into an "unequivocal" meaning.

We have thus come back to the question of the letter's *destination* and of the meaning of the enigmatic "last words" of Lacan's Seminar. "The sender," writes Lacan, "receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form. Thus it is that what the 'purloined letter', nay, the 'letter in sufferance' means is that a letter always arrives at its destination" (SPL, p. 72). What the reversibility of the direction of the letter's movement between sender and receiver has now come to stand for is precisely the fact, underlined by Derrida as if it were an *objection* to Lacan, that *there is no position from which the letter's message can be read as an object*: "no neutraliza-

tion is possible, no general point of view" (PT, p. 106). This is also precisely the "discovery" of psychoanalysis—that the analyst is *involved* (through transference) in the very "object" of his analysis.

Everyone who has held the letter—or even beheld it—including the narrator, has ended up having the letter addressed to *him* as its destination. The reader is comprehended by the letter: there is no *place* from which he can stand back and observe *it*. Not that the letter's meaning is subjective rather than objective, but that the letter is precisely that which subverts the polarity subjective/objective, that which makes subjectivity into something whose position in a structure is situated by the passage through it of an object. The letter's destination is thus *wherever it is read*: the place it assigns to its reader as his own partiality. Its destination is not a place, decided *a priori* by the sender, because the receiver *is* the sender, and the receiver is whoever receives the letter, including nobody. When Derrida says that a letter *can* miss its destination and be disseminated, he reads "destination" as a place which pre-exists the letter's movement. But if, as Lacan shows, the letter's destination is not its literal addressee, nor even whoever possesses it, but whoever is possessed *by* it, then the very *disagreement* over the meaning of "reaching the destination" is an *illustration* of the non-objective nature of that "destination." The very rhetoric of Derrida's differentiation of his own point of view from Lacan's *enacts* that law:

Thanks to castration, the phallus always stays in its place in the transcendental topology we spoke of earlier. It is indivisible and indestructible there, like the letter which takes its place. And that is why the *interested* presupposition, never proved, of the letter's materiality as indivisibility was indispensable to this restricted economy, this circulation of propriety.

The difference I am *interested* in here is that, a formula to be read however one wishes, the lack has no place of its own in dissemination. (PT, p. 63; translation modified, emphasis mine.)

The play of *interest* in this expression of difference is too interesting not to be deliberate. The opposition between the "phallus"

and “dissemination” is not between two theoretical objects but between two interested positions. And if sender and receiver are merely the two poles of a reversible message, then Lacan’s very *substitution* of “destin” for “dessein” in the Crebillon quotation—a misquotation which Derrida finds revealing enough to end his analysis upon—is in fact the quotation’s message. The sender (“dessein”) and the receiver (“destin”) of the violence which passes between Atreus and Thyestes are *equally* subject to the violence the letter *is*.

The reflexivity between receiver and sender is, however, not an expression of symmetry in itself, but only an evocation of the interdependence of the two terms, of the *question* of symmetry as a *problem* in the transferential structure of all reading. As soon as accident or exteriority or time or repetition enters into that reflexivity—that is to say, *from the beginning*—Otherness itself becomes in a way the letter’s sender. The message I am reading may be either my own (narcissistic) message backwards or the way in which that message is always already traversed by its own otherness to itself or by the narcissistic message of the other. In any case the letter is in a way the materialization of my death. And once these various possibilities are granted, none of them can function in isolation. The question of the letter’s origin and destination can no longer be asked as such. And whether this is because it involves 2, 3 or 4 terms must remain undecidable.

The *sentence* “a letter always arrives at its destination” can thus either be simply pleonastic or variously paradoxical: it can mean “the only message I can read is the one I send,” “wherever the letter is, is its destination,” “when a letter is read, it reads the reader,” “the repressed always returns,” “I exist only as a reader of the other,” “the letter has no destination,” and “we all die.” It is not any one of these readings, but all of them and others in their very incompatibility, which *repeat* the letter in its way of reading the act of reading. Far from giving us the Seminar’s final truth, these last words *enact* the impossibility of any ultimate analytical metalanguage.

If it at first seemed possible to say that Derrida was opposing the unsystematizable to the systematized, "chance" to psychoanalytical "determinism," or the "undecidable" to the "destination," the positions of these oppositions seem now to be reversed: Lacan's apparently unequivocal ending says only its own dissemination, while "dissemination" has erected itself into a kind of "last word." But these oppositions are themselves misreadings of the dynamic functioning of what is at stake here. For if the letter is precisely that which dictates the rhetorical indetermination of any theoretical discourse about it, then the oscillation between unequivocal statements of undecidability and ambiguous assertions of decidability is precisely one of the letter's inevitable effects. Thus it is, for example, that the "indestructibility of desire," which could be considered a psychoanalytical belief in the return of the *same*, turns out to name repetition as the repetition not of sameness but of *otherness*, which results in the *dissemination* of the subject. And "symbolic determination" is not *opposed* to "chance": it is precisely what emerges as the *syntax* of chance.¹⁹ But "chance," out of which what repeats springs, cannot in any way be "known," since "knowing" is precisely one of its *effects*. We can therefore never be *sure* whether or not "chance itself" exists at all. "Undecidability" can no more be used as a last word than "destination." "*Car*," said Mallarmé, "*il y a et il n'y a pas de hasard*." The "undeterminable" is not *opposed* to the determinable; "dissemination" is not *opposed* to repetition. If we could be sure of the difference between the determinable and the undeterminable, the undeterminable would be comprehended within the determinable. What is undecidable is precisely whether a thing is decidable or not.

¹⁹ This is what the mathematical model in the Seminar's "Introduction" clearly shows: beginning with a totally arbitrary binary series, a syntax of regularity emerges from the simple application of a law of combination to the series. When it is objected that that syntax is *not*, unless the subject *remembers* the series, Lacan responds, "That is just what is in question here: it is less out of anything real (...), than precisely out of *what never was*, that what repeats itself springs" (*Écrits*, p. 43; translation mine). Memory could thus be considered not as a *condition* of repetition, but as one of its syntactic effects. What we call a random series is, in fact, already an *interpretation*, not a given: it is not a materialization of chance itself, but only of something which obeys our conception of the laws of probability.

As a final fold in the letter's performance of its reader, it should perhaps be noted that, in this discussion of the letter as what prevents me from knowing whether Lacan and Derrida are really saying the same thing or only enacting their own differences from themselves, my own theoretical "frame of reference" is precisely, to a very large extent, the writings of Lacan and Derrida. The frame is thus framed again by part of its content; the sender again receives his own message backwards from the receiver. And the true otherness of the purloined letter of literature has perhaps still in no way been accounted for.