

*The Purloined Poe*

Lacan, Derrida  
& Psychoanalytic  
Reading

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*Nil sapientiae odiosius acumine nimio.*

Seneca

At Paris, just after dark one gusty evening in the autumn of 18—, I was enjoying the twofold luxury of meditation and a meerschaum,<sup>1</sup> in company with my friend C. Auguste Dupin, in his little back library, or book-closet, *au troisième*,<sup>a</sup> No. 33, Rue Dunôt, Faubourg St. Germain.<sup>2</sup> For one hour at least we had maintained a profound silence; while each, to any casual observer, might have seemed intently and exclusively occupied with the curling eddies of smoke that oppressed the atmosphere of the chamber. For myself, however, I was mentally discussing certain topics which had formed matter for conversation between us at an earlier period of the evening; I mean the affair of the Rue Morgue, and the mystery attending the murder of Marie Rogêt.<sup>b</sup> I looked upon it, therefore, as something of a coincidence, when the door of our apartment was thrown open and admitted our old acquaintance, Monsieur G——, the Prefect of the Parisian police.<sup>3</sup>

Translation from *Magasin Pittoresque*, August 1845, as “Une lettre volée,” reprinted in *L’Echo de la Presse*, August 25, 1845.

Motto omitted in A.

<sup>a</sup>troisième, (A, B, C, D)

<sup>b</sup>Rogét. (A)

We gave him a hearty welcome; for there was nearly half as much of the entertaining as of the contemptible about the man, and we had not seen him for several years. We had been sitting in the dark, and Dupin now arose for the purpose of lighting a lamp, but sat down again, without doing so, upon G.’s saying that he had called to consult us, or rather to ask the opinion of my friend, about some official business which had occasioned a great deal of trouble.

“If it is any point requiring reflection,” observed Dupin, as he forebore to enkindle the wick, “we shall examine it to better purpose in the dark.”

“That is another of your odd notions,” said the Prefect, who had a fashion of calling every thing “odd” that was beyond his comprehension, and thus lived amid an absolute legion of “oddities.”

“Very true,” said Dupin, as he supplied his visiter with a pipe, and rolled towards him a<sup>c</sup> comfortable chair.

“And what is the difficulty now?” I asked. “Nothing more in the assassination way, I hope?”

“Oh no; nothing of that nature. The fact is, the business is *very* simple indeed, and I make no doubt that we can manage it sufficiently well ourselves; but then I thought Dupin would like to hear the details of it, because it is so excessively *odd*.”

“Simple and odd,” said Dupin.

“Why, yes; and not exactly that, either. The fact is, we have all been a good deal puzzled because the affair *is* so simple, and yet baffles us altogether.”

“Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault,” said my friend.

“What nonsense you *do* talk!” replied the Prefect, laughing heartily.

“Perhaps the mystery is a<sup>d</sup> little *too* plain,” said Dupin.

“Oh, good heavens! who ever heard of such an idea?”

“A little *too* self-evident.”

“Ha! ha! ha!—ha! ha! ha!—ho! ho! ho!” roared<sup>e</sup> our visiter, profoundly amused, “oh, Dupin, you will be the death of me yet!”<sup>4</sup>

“And what, after all, *is* the matter on hand?” I asked.

“Why, I will tell you,” replied the Prefect, as he gave a long, steady, and contemplative puff, and settled himself in his chair. “I will tell you in

<sup>c</sup>a very (A)

<sup>d</sup>Omitted (D)

<sup>e</sup>roared out (A)

a few words; but, before I begin, let me caution you that this is<sup>f</sup> an affair demanding the greatest secrecy, and that I should most probably lose the position I now hold, were it known that I confided it to any one."

"Proceed," said I.

"Or not," said Dupin.

"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.

"Still I do not quite understand," said Dupin.

"No? Well; the disclosure of the document to a third person, who shall be nameless, would bring in question the honor of a personage of most exalted station; and this fact gives the holder of the document an ascendancy over the illustrious personage whose honor and peace are so jeopardized."

"But this ascendancy," I interposed, "would depend upon the robber's knowledge of the loser's knowledge of the robber. Who would dare—"

"The thief," said G., "is the Minister D——, who dares all things, those unbecoming as well as those becoming a man. The method of the theft was not less ingenious than bold. The document in question—a letter, to be frank—had been received by the personage robbed while alone in the royal *boudoir*. During its perusal she was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of the other exalted personage from whom especially it was her wish to conceal it. After a hurried and vain endeavor to thrust it in a drawer, she was forced to place it, open as it was, upon a table. The address, however, was uppermost, and, the contents thus unexposed, the letter escaped notice. At this juncture enters the Minister

<sup>f</sup>Omitted (D)

D——. His lynx eye immediately perceives the paper, recognises the handwriting of the address, observes the confusion of the personage addressed, and fathoms her secret. After some business transactions, hurried through in his ordinary manner, he produces a letter somewhat similar to the one in question, opens it, pretends to read it, and then places it in close juxtaposition to the other. Again he converses, for some fifteen minutes, upon the public affairs. At length, in taking leave, he takes also from the table the letter to which he had no claim. Its rightful owner saw, but, of course, dared not call attention to the act, in the presence of the third personage who stood at her elbow. The minister decamped; leaving his own letter—one of no importance—upon the table."

"Here, then," said Dupin to me, "you have precisely what you demand to make the ascendancy complete—the robber's knowledge of the loser's knowledge of the robber."

"Yes," replied the Prefect; "and the power thus attained has, for some months past, been wielded, for political purposes, to a very dangerous extent. The personage robbed is more thoroughly convinced, every day, of the necessity of reclaiming her letter. But this, of course, cannot be done openly. In fine, driven to despair, she has committed the matter to me."

"Than whom," said Dupin, amid a perfect whirlwind of smoke, "no more sagacious agent could, I suppose, be desired, or even imagined."

"You flatter me," replied the Prefect; "but it is possible that some such opinion may have been entertained."

"It is clear," said I, "as you observe, that the letter is still in possession of the minister; since it is this possession, and not any employment of the letter, which bestows the power. With the employment the power departs."

"True," said G.; "and upon this conviction I proceeded. My first care was to make thorough search of the minister's hotel;<sup>5</sup> and here my chief embarrassment lay in the necessity of searching without his knowledge. Beyond all things, I have been warned of the danger which would result from giving him reason to suspect our design."

"But," said I, "you are quite *au fait* in these investigations. The Parisian police have done this thing often before."

"O yes; and for this reason I did not despair. The habits of the minister gave me, too, a great advantage. He is frequently absent from home all night. His servants are by no means numerous. They sleep at a distance

from their master's apartment,<sup>8</sup> and, being chiefly Neapolitans, are readily made drunk.<sup>6</sup> I have keys, as you know, with which I can open any chamber or cabinet in Paris. For three months a night has not passed, during the greater part of which I have not been engaged, personally, in ransacking the D—— Hotel. My honor is interested, and, to mention a great secret, the reward is enormous. So I did not abandon the search until I had become fully satisfied that the thief is a more astute man than myself. I fancy that I have investigated every nook and corner of the premises in which it is possible that the paper can be concealed."

"But is it not possible," I suggested, "that although the letter may be in possession of the minister, as it unquestionably is, he may have concealed it elsewhere than upon his own premises?"

"This is barely possible," said Dupin. "The present peculiar condition of affairs at court, and especially of those intrigues in which D—— is known to be involved, would render the instant availability of the document—its susceptibility of being produced at a moment's notice—a point of nearly equal importance with its possession."

"Its susceptibility of being produced?" said I.

"That is to say, of being *destroyed*," said Dupin.

"True," I observed; "the paper is clearly then upon the premises. As for its being upon the person of the minister, we may consider that as out of the question."

"Entirely," said the Prefect. "He has been twice waylaid, as if by footpads, and his person rigorously searched under my own inspection."

"You might have spared yourself this trouble," said Dupin. "D——, I presume, is not altogether a fool, and, if not, must have anticipated these waylayings, as a matter of course."

"Not *altogether* a fool," said G., "but then he's a poet, which I take to be only one remove from a fool."<sup>7</sup>

"True," said Dupin, after a long and thoughtful whiff from his meerschaum, "although I have been guilty of certain doggerel myself."

"Suppose you detail," I said, "the particulars of your search."<sup>8</sup>

"Why the fact is, we took our time, and we searched *every where*. I have had long experience in these affairs. I took the entire building, room by room; devoting the nights of a whole week to each. We examined, first, the furniture of each apartment. We opened every possible drawer; and I presume you know that, to a properly trained police agent, such a thing

<sup>8</sup>apartments, (A)

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. After the cabinets we took the chairs. The cushions we probed with the fine long needles you have seen me employ. From the tables we removed the tops."

"Why so?"

"Sometimes the top of a table, or other similarly arranged piece of furniture, is removed by the person wishing to conceal an article; then the leg is excavated, the article deposited within the cavity, and the top replaced. The bottoms and tops of bedposts are employed in the same way."

"But could not the cavity be detected by sounding?" I asked.

"By no means, if, when the article is deposited, a sufficient wadding of cotton be placed around it. Besides, in our case, we were obliged to proceed without noise."

"But you could not have removed—you could not have taken to pieces *all* articles of furniture in which it would have been possible to make a deposit in the manner you mention. A letter may be compressed into a thin spiral roll, not differing much in shape or bulk from a large knitting-needle, and in this form it might be inserted into the rung of a chair, for example. You did not take to pieces all the chairs?"

"Certainly not; but we did better—we examined the rungs of every chair in the hotel, and, indeed, the jointings of every description of furniture, by the aid of a most powerful microscope. Had there been any traces of recent disturbance we should not have failed to detect it instantly.<sup>b</sup> A single grain of gimlet-dust,<sup>i</sup> for example, would have been as obvious as an apple. Any disorder in the glueing—any unusual gaping in the joints—would have sufficed to insure detection."

"I presume<sup>j</sup> you looked to the mirrors, between the boards and the plates, and you probed the beds and the bed-clothes, as well as the curtains and carpets."

"That of course; and when we had absolutely completed every particle of the furniture in this way, then we examined the house itself. We

<sup>b</sup>*instantly*, (A)

<sup>i</sup>gimlet-dust, or saw-dust, (A)

<sup>j</sup>"I presume/" Of course (A)

divided its entire surface into compartments, which we numbered, so that none might be missed; then we scrutinized each individual square inch throughout the premises, including the two houses immediately adjoining, with the microscope, as before."

"The two houses adjoining!" I exclaimed; "you must have had a great deal of trouble."

"We had; but the reward offered is prodigious."

"You include the *grounds* about the houses?"

"All the grounds are paved with brick. They gave us comparatively little trouble. We examined the moss between the bricks, and found it undisturbed."<sup>k</sup>

"You looked among D——'s papers, of course, and into the books of the library?"

"Certainly; we opened every package and parcel; we not only opened every book, but we turned over every leaf in each volume, not contenting ourselves with a mere shake, according to the fashion of some of our police officers.<sup>9</sup> We also measured the thickness of every book-cover, with the most accurate admeasurement, and applied to each<sup>1</sup> the most jealous scrutiny of the microscope. Had any of the bindings been recently meddled with, it would have been utterly impossible that the fact should have escaped observation. Some five or six volumes, just from the hands of the binder, we carefully probed, longitudinally, with the needles."

"You explored the floors beneath the carpets?"

"Beyond doubt. We removed every carpet, and examined the boards with the microscope."

"And the paper on the walls?"

"Yes."

"You looked into the cellars?"

"We did."<sup>m</sup>

"Then," I said, "you have been making a miscalculation, and the letter is *not* upon the premises, as you suppose."

<sup>k</sup>After this are two additional paragraphs:

"And the roofs?"

"We surveyed every inch of the external surface, and probed carefully beneath every tile." (A)

<sup>1</sup>them (A)

<sup>m</sup>"We did."/"We did; and, as time and labour were no objects, we dug up every one of them to the depth of four feet." (A)

"I fear you are right there," said the Prefect. "And now, Dupin, what would you advise me to do?"

"To make a thorough re-search of the premises."

"That is absolutely needless," replied G——. "I am not more sure that I breathe than I am that the letter is not at the Hotel."

"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.

In about a month afterwards he paid us another visit, and found us occupied very nearly as before. He took a pipe and a chair and entered into some ordinary conversation. At length I said,—

"Well, but G——, what of the purloined letter? I presume you have at last made up your mind that there is no such thing as overreaching the Minister?"

"Confound him, say I—yes; I made the re-examination, however, as Dupin suggested—but it was all labor lost, as I knew it would be."

"How much was the reward offered, did you say?" asked Dupin.

"Why, a very great deal—a *very* liberal reward—I don't like to say how much, precisely; but one thing I *will* say, that I wouldn't mind giving my individual check for fifty thousand francs to any one who could obtain me that letter. The fact is, it is becoming of more and more importance every day; and the reward has been lately doubled. If it were trebled, however, I could do no more than I have done."

"Why, yes," said Dupin, drawlingly, between the whiffs<sup>n</sup> of his meerschau, "I really—think, G——, you have not exerted yourself—to the utmost in this matter. You might—do a little more, I think, eh?"

"How?—in what way?"

"Why—puff, puff—you might—puff, puff—employ counsel in the matter, eh?—puff, puff, puff. Do you remember the story they tell of Abernethy?"

"No; hang Abernethy!"

"To be sure! hang him and welcome. But, once upon a time, a certain

<sup>n</sup>which (D) misprint

rich miser conceived the design of spunging upon this Abernethy for a medical opinion.<sup>10</sup> Getting up, for this purpose, an ordinary conversation in a private company, he insinuated his case to the physician, as that of an imaginary individual.

"We will suppose," said the miser, "that his symptoms are such and such; now, doctor, what would *you* have directed him to take?"

"Take!" said Abernethy, "why, take *advice*, to be sure."

"But," said the Prefect, a little discomposed, "I am *perfectly* willing to take advice, and to pay for it. I would *really* give fifty thousand francs<sup>o</sup> to any one who would aid me in the matter."

"In that case," replied Dupin, opening a drawer, and producing a check-book, "you may as well fill me up a check for the amount mentioned. When you have signed it, I will hand you the letter."

I was astounded. The Prefect appeared absolutely thunderstricken. For some minutes he remained speechless and motionless, looking incredulously at my friend with open mouth, and eyes that seemed starting from their sockets; then, apparently recovering himself in some measure, he seized a pen, and after several pauses and vacant stares, finally filled up and signed a check for fifty thousand francs, and handed it across the table to Dupin. The latter examined it carefully and deposited it in his pocket-book; then, unlocking an *escritoire*, took thence a letter and gave it to the Prefect. This functionary grasped it in a perfect agony of joy, opened it with a trembling hand, cast a rapid glance at its contents, and then, scrambling and struggling to the door, rushed at length unceremoniously from the room and from the house, without having uttered a syllable since Dupin had requested him to fill up the check.

When he had gone, my friend entered into some explanations.

"The Parisian police," he said, "are exceedingly able in their way. They are persevering, ingenious, cunning, and thoroughly versed in the knowledge which their duties seem chiefly to demand. Thus, when G—— detailed to us his mode of searching the premises at the Hotel D——, I felt entire confidence in his having made a satisfactory investigation—so far as his labors extended."

"So far as his labors extended?" said I.

"Yes," said Dupin. "The measures adopted were not only the best of their kind, but carried out to absolute perfection. Had the letter been

deposited within the range of their search, these fellows would, beyond a question, have found it."

I merely laughed—but he seemed quite serious in all that he said.

"The measures, then," he continued, "were good in their kind, and well executed; their defect lay in their being inapplicable to the case, and to the man. A certain set of highly ingenious resources are, with the Prefect, a sort of Procrustean bed,<sup>11</sup> to which he forcibly adapts his designs. But he perpetually errs by being too deep or too shallow, for the matter in hand; and many a schoolboy is a better reasoner than he. I knew one about eight years of age, whose success at guessing in the game of 'even and odd' attracted universal admiration. This game is simple, and is played with marbles. One player holds in his hand a number of these toys, and demands of another whether that number is even or odd. If the guess is right, the guesser wins one; if wrong, he loses one. The boy to whom I allude won all the marbles of the school. Of course he had some principle of guessing; and this lay in mere observation and admeasurement of the astuteness of his opponents. For example, an arrant simpleton is his opponent, and, holding up his closed hand, asks, 'are they even or odd?' Our schoolboy replies, 'odd,' and loses; but upon the second trial he wins, for he then says to himself, 'the simpleton had them even upon the first trial, and his amount of cunning is just sufficient to make him have them odd upon the second; I will therefore guess odd;—he guesses odd, and wins. Now, with a simpleton a degree above the first, he would have reasoned thus: 'This fellow finds that in the first instance I guessed odd, and, in the second, he will propose to himself, upon the first impulse, a simple variation from even to odd, as did the first simpleton; but then a second thought will suggest that this is too simple a variation, and finally he will decide upon putting it even as before. I will therefore guess even;'—he guesses even, and wins. Now this mode of reasoning in the schoolboy, whom his fellows termed 'lucky,'—what, in its last analysis, is it?"

"It is merely," I said, "an identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent."

"It is," said Dupin; "and, upon inquiring of the boy by what means he effected the *thorough* identification in which his success consisted, I received answer as follows: 'When I wish to find out how wise, or how stupid, or how good, or how wicked is any one, or what are his thoughts at the moment, I fashion the expression of my face, as accurately as possible, in accordance with the expression of his, and then wait to see what thoughts or sentiments arise in my mind or heart, as if to match or

<sup>o</sup>francs, every centime of it, (A)

na solitary (A)

correspond with the expression.<sup>12</sup> This response of the schoolboy lies at the bottom of all the spurious profundity which has been attributed to Rochefoucault,<sup>q</sup> to La Bruyère,<sup>r</sup> to Machiavelli, and to Campanella.<sup>13</sup>

"And the identification," I said, "of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent, depends, if I understand you aright, upon the accuracy with which the opponent's intellect is admeasured."

"For its practical value it depends upon this," replied Dupin; "and the Prefect and his cohort fail so frequently, first, by default of this identification, and, secondly, by ill-admeasurement, or rather through non-admeasurement, of the intellect with which they are engaged. They consider only their *own* ideas of ingenuity; and, in searching for anything hidden, advert only to the modes in which *they* would have hidden it. They are right in this much—that their own ingenuity is a faithful representative of that of *the mass*; but when the cunning of the individual felon is diverse in character from their own, the felon foils them, of course. This always happens when it is above their own, and very usually when it is below. They have no variation of principle in their investigations; at best, when urged by some unusual emergency—by some extraordinary reward—they extend or exaggerate their old modes of *practice*, without touching their principles. What, for example, in this case of D——, has been done to vary the principle of action? What is all this boring, and probing, and sounding, and scrutinizing with the microscope, and dividing the surface of the building into registered square inches—what is it all but an exaggeration of *the application* of the one principle or set of principles of search, which are based upon the one set of notions regarding human ingenuity, to which the Prefect, in the long routine of his duty, has been accustomed? Do you not see he has taken it for granted that *all* men proceed to conceal a letter,—not exactly in a gimlet-hole bored in a chair-leg—but, at least, in *some* out-of-the-way hole or corner suggested by the same tenor of thought which would urge a man to secrete a letter in a gimlet-hole bored in a chair-leg? And do you not see also, that such *recherchés* nooks for concealment are adapted only for ordinary occasions, and would be adopted only by ordinary intellects; for, in all cases of concealment, a disposal of the article concealed—a disposal of it in this *recherché* manner,—is, in the very first instance,

<sup>q</sup>In all texts

<sup>r</sup>Bougive, (A, B, C, D) corrected editorially

<sup>s</sup>recherches (A)

'presumable and presumed;<sup>t</sup> and thus its discovery depends, not at all upon the acumen, but altogether upon the mere care, patience, and determination of the seekers; and where the case is of importance—or, what amounts to the same thing in the policial eyes, when the reward is of magnitude—the qualities in question have *never* been known to fail. You will now understand what I meant in suggesting that, had the purloined letter been hidden any where within the limits of the Prefect's examination—in other words, had the principle of its concealment been comprehended within the principles of the Prefect—its discovery would have been a matter altogether beyond question. This functionary, however, has been thoroughly mystified; and the remote source of his defeat lies in the supposition that the Minister is *à* fool, because he has acquired renown as a poet. All fools are poets; this the Prefect *feels*;<sup>14</sup> and he is merely guilty of a *non distributio medii*<sup>15</sup> in thence inferring that all poets are fools."

"But is this really the poet?" I asked. "There are two brothers, I know; and both have attained reputation in letters. The Minister I believe has written learnedly on the Differential Calculus. He is a mathematician, and no poet."

"You are mistaken; I know him well; he is both. As poet *and* mathematician, he would reason well;<sup>u</sup> as mere mathematician, he could not have reasoned at all, and thus would have been at the mercy of the Prefect."

"You surprise me," I said, "by these opinions, which have been contradicted by the voice of the world. You do not mean to set at naught the well-digested idea of centuries. The mathematical reason has long been<sup>v</sup> regarded as *the reason par excellence*."

"*Il y a à parier*,"<sup>w</sup> replied Dupin, quoting from Chamfort, "*que toute idée publique, toute convention reçue, est une sottise, car elle a convenu au plus grand nombre*."<sup>16</sup> The mathematicians, I grant you, have done their best to promulgate the popular error to which you allude, and which is none the less an error for its promulgation as truth. With an art worthy a better

<sup>t</sup> . . . 'presumed and presumable; (A)

<sup>u</sup>well; as poet, profoundly; (A)

<sup>v</sup>long been/been long (A)

<sup>w</sup>'*parier*,' (A, B, C, D) *accent deleted editorially*

<sup>x</sup>*convenu* (A, B, C, D) *corrected editorially*

<sup>y</sup>*This sentence not italicized* (A)



cause, for example, they have insinuated the term 'analysis' into application to algebra. The French are the originators of this particular deception; but if a term is of any importance—if words derive any value from applicability—then 'analysis' conveys 'algebra' about as much as, in Latin '*ambitus*' implies 'ambition,' '*religio*' 'religion,' or '*homines honesti*,' a set of *honorable* men."<sup>17</sup>

"You have a quarrel on hand, I see," said I, "with some of the algebraists of Paris; but proceed."<sup>18</sup>

"I dispute the availability, and thus the value, of that reason which is cultivated in any especial form other than the abstractly logical. I dispute, in particular, the reason educed by mathematical study. The mathematics are the science of form and quantity; mathematical reasoning is merely logic applied to observation upon form and quantity. The great error lies in supposing that even the truths of what is called *pure* algebra, are abstract or general truths. And this error is so egregious that I am confounded at the universality with which it has been received. Mathematical axioms are *not* axioms of general truth. What is true of *relation*—of form and quantity—is often grossly false in regard to morals, for example. In this latter science it is very usually *untrue* that the aggregated parts are equal to the whole. In chemistry also the axiom fails. In the consideration of motive it fails; for two motives, each of a given value, have not, necessarily, a value when united, equal to the sum of their values apart. There are numerous other mathematical truths which are only truths within the limits of *relation*. But the mathematician argues, from his *finite truths*, through habit, as if they were of an absolutely general applicability—as the world indeed imagines them to be. Bryant, in his very learned 'Mythology,' mentions an analogous source of error, when he says that 'although the Pagan fables are not believed, yet we forget ourselves continually, and make inferences from them as existing realities.'<sup>19</sup> With the algebraists,<sup>2</sup> however, who are Pagans themselves, the 'Pagan fables' *are* believed, and the inferences are made, not so much through lapse of memory, as through an unaccountable addling of the brains. In short, I never yet encountered the mere mathematician who could be trusted out of equal roots, or one who did not clandestinely hold it as a point of his faith that  $x^2 + px$  was absolutely and unconditionally equal to  $q$ . Say to one of these gentlemen, by way of experiment, if you please, that you believe occasions may occur where  $x^2 + px$  is *not* al-

together equal to  $q$ , and, having made him understand what you mean, get out of his reach as speedily as convenient, for, beyond doubt, he will endeavor to knock you down.

"I mean to say," continued Dupin, while I merely laughed at his last observations, "that if the Minister had been no more than a mathematician, the Prefect would have been under no necessity of giving me this check.<sup>2a</sup> I knew him, however, as both mathematician and poet, and my measures were adapted to his capacity, with reference to the circumstances by which he was surrounded. I knew him as a courtier, too, and as a bold *intriguer*. Such a man, I considered, could not fail to be aware of the ordinary policial modes of action. He could not have failed to anticipate—and events have proved that he *did* not fail to anticipate—the waylayings to which he was subjected. He must have foreseen, I reflected, the secret investigations of his premises. His frequent absences from home at night, which were hailed by the Prefect as certain aids to his success, I regarded only as *ruses*, to afford opportunity for thorough search to the police, and thus the sooner to impress them with the conviction to which G——, in fact, did finally arrive—the conviction that the letter was not upon the premises. I felt, also, that the whole train of thought, which I was at some pains in detailing to you just now, concerning the invariable principle of policial action in searches for articles concealed—I felt that this whole train of thought would necessarily pass through the mind of the Minister. It would imperatively lead him to despise all the ordinary *nooks* of concealment. *He* could not, I reflected, be so weak as not to see that the most intricate and remote recess of his hotel would be as open as his commonest closets to the eyes, to the probes, to the gimlets, and to the microscopes of the Prefect. I saw, in fine, that he would be driven, as a matter of course, to *simplicity*, if not deliberately induced to it as a matter of choice. You will remember, perhaps, how desperately the Prefect laughed when I suggested, upon our first interview, that it was just possible this mystery troubled him so much on account of its being so *very* self-evident."

"Yes," said I, "I remember his merriment well. I really thought he would have fallen into convulsions."

"The material world," continued Dupin, "abounds with very strict analogies to the immaterial; and thus some color of truth has been given

<sup>2</sup>algebraist, (A)

<sup>2a</sup>After this Had he been no more than a poet, I think it probable that he would have foiled us all. (A)

to the rhetorical dogma, that metaphor, or simile, may be made to strengthen an argument, as well as to embellish a description. The principle of the *vis inertiae*,<sup>20</sup> for example,<sup>bb</sup> seems to be identical in physics and metaphysics. It is not more true in the former, that a large body is with more difficulty set in motion than a smaller one, and that its subsequent *momentum*<sup>cc</sup> is commensurate with this difficulty, than it is, in the latter, that intellects of the vaster capacity, while more forcible, more constant, and more eventful in their movements than those of inferior grade, are yet the less readily moved, and more embarrassed and full of hesitation in the first few steps of their progress. Again: have you ever noticed which of the street signs, over the shop-doors, are the most attractive of attention?"

"I have never given the matter a thought," I said.

"There is a game of puzzles," he resumed, "which is played upon a map. One party playing requires another to find a given word—the name of town, river, state or empire—any word, in short, upon the motley and perplexed surface of the chart. A novice in the game generally seeks to embarrass his opponents by giving them the most minutely lettered names; but the adept selects such words as stretch, in large characters, from one end of the chart to the other. These, like the over-largely lettered signs and placards of the street, escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious; and here the physical oversight is precisely analogous with the moral inapprehension by which the intellect suffers to pass unnoticed those considerations which are too obtrusively and too palpably self-evident. But this is a point, it appears, somewhat above or beneath the understanding of the Prefect. He never once thought it probable, or possible, that the Minister had deposited the letter immediately beneath the nose of the whole world, by way of best preventing any portion of that world from perceiving it."<sup>21</sup>

"But the more I reflected upon the daring, dashing, and discriminating ingenuity of D——; upon the fact that the document must always have been *at hand*, if he intended to use it to good purpose; and upon the decisive evidence, obtained by the Prefect, that it was not hidden within the limits of that dignitary's ordinary search—the more satisfied I became that, to conceal this letter, the Minister had resorted to the comprehensive and sagacious expedient of not attempting to conceal it at all.

<sup>bb</sup>example, with the amount of *momentum* proportionate with it and consequent upon it, (A)

<sup>cc</sup>*impetus* (A)

"Full of these ideas, I prepared myself with a pair of green spectacles,<sup>22</sup> and called one fine morning, quite by accident, at the Ministerial hotel. I found D—— at home, yawning, lounging, and dawdling, as usual, and pretending to be in the last extremity of *ennui*. He is, perhaps, the most really energetic human being now alive—but that is only when nobody sees him.

"To be even with him, I complained of my weak eyes, and lamented the necessity of the spectacles, under cover of which I cautiously and thoroughly surveyed the<sup>dd</sup> apartment, while seemingly intent only upon the conversation of my host.

"I paid especial attention to a large writing-table near which he sat, and upon which lay confusedly, some miscellaneous letters and other papers, with one or two musical instruments and a few books. Here, however, after a long and very deliberate scrutiny, I saw nothing to excite particular suspicion.

"At length my eyes, in going the circuit of the room, fell upon a trumpery fillagree card-rack of pasteboard, that hung dangling by a dirty blue ribbon<sup>ee</sup> from a little brass knob just beneath the middle of the mantel-piece. In this rack, which had three or four compartments, were five or six visiting cards and a solitary letter. This last was much soiled and crumpled. It was torn nearly in two, across the middle—as if a design, in the first instance, to tear it entirely up as worthless, had been altered, or stayed, in the second. It had a large black seal, bearing the D—— cipher *very* conspicuously, and was addressed, in a diminutive female hand, to D——, the minister, himself. It was thrust carelessly, and even, as it seemed, contemptuously, into one of the upper<sup>ff</sup> divisions of the rack.

"No sooner had I glanced at this letter, than I concluded it to be that of which I was in search. To be sure, it was, to all appearance radically different from the one of which the Prefect had read us so minute a description. Here the seal was large and black, with the D—— cipher; there it was small and red, with the ducal arms of the S—— family. Here, the address, to the Minister, was diminutive and feminine; there the superscription, to a certain royal personage, was markedly bold and decided; the size alone formed a point of correspondence. But, then, the *radicalness* of these differences, which was excessive; the dirt; the soiled

<sup>dd</sup>the whole (A, B, D)

<sup>ee</sup>riband, (A)

<sup>ff</sup>uppermost (A, B, D)

and torn condition of the paper, so inconsistent with the *true* methodical habits of D——, and so suggestive of a design to delude the beholder into an idea of the worthlessness of the document; these things, together with the hyperobtrusive situation of this document, full in the view of every visiter, and thus exactly in accordance with the conclusions to which I have previously arrived; these things, I say, were strongly corroborative of suspicion, in one who came with the intention to suspect.

"I protracted my visit as long as possible, and, while I maintained a most animated discussion with the Minister, on<sup>88</sup> a topic which I knew well had never failed to interest and excite him, I kept my attention really riveted upon the letter. In this examination, I committed to memory its external appearance and arrangement in the rack; and also fell, at length, upon a discovery which set at rest whatever trivial doubt I might have entertained. In scrutinizing the edges of the paper, I observed them to be more *chafed* than seemed necessary. They presented the *broken* appearance which is manifested when a stiff paper, having been once folded and pressed with a folder, is refolded in a reversed direction, in the same creases or edges which had formed the original fold. This discovery was sufficient. It was clear to me that the letter had been turned, as a glove, inside out, re-directed, and re-sealed.<sup>23</sup> I bade the Minister good morning, and took my departure at once, leaving a gold snuff-box upon the table.

"The next morning I called for the snuff-box, when we resumed, quite eagerly, the conversation of the preceding day. While thus engaged, however, a loud report, as if of a pistol, was heard immediately beneath the windows of the hotel, and was succeeded by a series of fearful screams, and the shoutings of a<sup>hh</sup> mob. D—— rushed to a casement, threw it open, and looked out. In the meantime, I stepped to the card-rack, took the letter, put it in my pocket, and replaced it by a *fac-simile*<sup>ii</sup> (so far as regards externals)<sup>ii</sup> which I had carefully prepared at my lodgings;<sup>jj</sup> imitating the D—— cipher, very readily, by means of a seal formed of bread.

"The disturbance in the street had been occasioned by the frantic behavior of a man with a musket. He had fired it among a crowd of women and children. It proved, however, to have been without ball, and the fellow was suffered to go his way as a lunatic or a drunkard. When he had gone, D—— came from the window, whither I had followed him

<sup>88</sup>upon (A, B, D)

" . . . "Omitted (A)

<sup>hh</sup>a terrified (A, B, D)

<sup>jj</sup>lodgings./lodgings (A, B, D)

immediately upon securing the object in view. Soon afterwards I bade him farewell. The pretended lunatic was a man in my own pay."

"But what purpose had you," I asked, "in replacing the letter by a *fac-simile*? Would it not have been better, at the first visit, to have seized it openly, and departed?"

"D——," replied Dupin, "is a desperate man, and a man of nerve. His hotel, too, is not without attendants devoted to his interests. Had I made the wild attempt you suggest, I might<sup>kk</sup> never have left the Ministerial presence alive. The good people of Paris might<sup>ll</sup> have heard of me no more. But I had an object apart from these considerations. You know my political prepossessions. In this matter, I act as a partisan of the lady concerned. For eighteen months the Minister has had her in his power. She has now him in hers;<sup>mm</sup> since, being unaware that the letter is not in his possession, he will proceed with his exactions as if it was. Thus will he inevitably commit himself, at once, to his political destruction. His downfall, too, will not be more precipitate than awkward. It is all very well to talk about the *facilis descensus Averni*;<sup>24</sup> but in all kinds of climbing, as Catalani<sup>nn</sup> said of singing, it is far more easy to get up than to come down.<sup>25</sup> In the present instance I have no sympathy—at least no pity—for him who descends. He is that *monstrum horrendum*,<sup>26</sup> an unprincipled man of genius. I confess, however, that I should like very well to know the precise character of his thoughts, when, being defied by her whom the Prefect terms 'a certain personage,' he is reduced to opening the letter which I left for him in the card-rack."

"How? did you put any thing particular in it?"

"Why—it did not seem altogether right to leave the interior blank—that would have been insulting. D——, <sup>oo</sup>at Vienna once, did me an evil turn, which I told him, quite good-humoredly, that I should remember. So, as I knew he would feel some curiosity in regard to the identity of the person who had outwitted him, I thought it a pity not to give him a clue. He is well acquainted with my MS., and I just copied into the middle of the blank sheet the words—

—UnPP dessein si funeste,  
S'il n'est digne d'Atrée, est digne de Thyeste.

They are to be found in Crébillon's 'Atrée.'"<sup>27</sup>

<sup>kk</sup>should (A)

<sup>mm</sup>hers./hers (A, B, D)

<sup>nn</sup>To be sure, D (A)

<sup>ll</sup>would (A)

<sup>nn</sup>Catalini (A) *misprint*

<sup>oo</sup>Un/"" Un (B, D)

## NOTES

*Motto:* The Latin quotation ascribed to Seneca has not been located. Poe used it first in the 1843 version of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," near the end of the tale, but he omitted it in later texts. It means "Nothing is more hateful to wisdom than too much cunning." Compare Dupin's comment: "The Parisian police, so much extolled for *acumen*, are cunning but no more."

1. A meerscham pipe is also mentioned in "The Light-House."

2. Dupin lived up three flights of stairs, on what we call the fourth floor. The name of the street is imaginary, as are a number of the street names in Poe's other Dupin stories.

3. The chief of police in Paris from 1831 to 1836 was Henri-Joseph Gisquet, who died in February 1866.

4. Compare *Politian* 2.3-4, "I shall die, Castiglione, I shall die . . . of laughing!"

5. Hôtel means mansion or town residence; the word is capitalized later when used in connection with the owner's name.

6. Compare getting rid of the servants in "The Cask of Amontillado."

7. See *Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.7-8, "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet / Are of imagination all compact."

8. The method of search described may come from some account of Napoleon's detective Vidocq.

9. In a letter of August 28, 1849, Poe instructed Mrs. Clemm how to excuse the loss of a drawing of Elmira Shelton: "Just copy the following words in your letter: I . . . cannot find it anywhere. I took down all the books and shook them one by one."

10. The great British surgeon John Abernethy (1764-1831) was very gruff, but Dupin's story is told about another surgeon, Sir Isaac Pennington (1745-1817), at p. 31 of *Nuts to Crack* (Philadelphia, 1835), a jest book Poe reviewed in the *Southern Literary Messenger* [hereafter cited as *SLM*], December 1835.

11. Procrustean bed—rigorous, ruthless, and arbitrary limits—derived from Procrustes, a legendary Attic robber, slain by Theseus, who fitted his victims to a bed by stretching the short and cutting the feet off the tall.

12. The system of mind reading used by the schoolboy has long been attributed to Tommaso Campanella. An account of how he uncovered his inquisitor's thoughts appears in the *Voyage to the Moon* of Cyrano de Bergerac (1619-55), a work referred to in Poe's "Hans Phaall." [S. L. Varnado, in *Poe Newsletter*, October 1968, quotes a description by Edmund Burke of Campanella's system.] Horace Binney Wallace, in *Stanley* (1838), a book Poe drew on frequently, said (2:242):

It was remarked by the ingenious Campanella that when he wished to discover the leading characteristics of any one whom he saw, he arranged his features into a

similitude with theirs and then observed what emotions rose within his heart to *play up*, as it were, to that expression of countenance; in the same manner, if we dispose our interests, and wishes, which may be called the features of feeling, into a conformity with those of others, we shall find that their thoughts and counsels start naturally up in our mind.

"The Duc de L'Omelette" contains references to its hero's use of physiognomy.

13. Poe's spelling (Rochefoucault) for François de la Rochefoucauld (1630-80) is found in the first edition of his maxims listed in the British Museum Catalogue as carrying the author's name on the title page: *Reflexiones ou sentences et maximes morales de Monsieur de la Rochefoucault* . . . (Amsterdam, 1705); in Isaac D'Israeli's *Curiosities of Literature*, so frequently used by Poe; and in *The Duke de la Rochefoucault's Maxims and Moral Reflections* (New York: G. and C. Carvill, 1835), which was apparently based on an "improved edition" (with the same spelling) issued in Edinburgh in 1796. "La Bougive," which I have emended to La Bruyère, is undoubtedly a printer's error, from a misreading of Poe's manuscript. Poe spelled the name correctly in crediting the motto for "The Man of the Crowd" and in his review of Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* (*SLM*, March 1836), where he also mentioned Rochefoucault. Machiavelli was mentioned in Satanic company in "Bon-Bon," along with Rochefoucault and Seneca in the introduction to "Pinakidia" (*SLM*, August 1836, reworked in "Marginalia," no. 46, *Democratic Review*, December 1844, 581); with Campanella was represented on the bookshelves of the House of Usher (*Burton's Magazine*, September 1839); and with Rochefoucault was mentioned in a review of *The Canons of Good Breeding* (*Burton's*, November 1839).

14. In "Lionizing" we read that "Sir Positive Paradox . . . observed that all fools were philosophers, and that all philosophers were fools."

15. *Non distributio medii*—the fallacy of the undistributed middle—is ignoring the fact that if all A's are B's, all B's may not necessarily be A's.

16. Poe quotes from the French cynic Sébastien-Roch Nicolas, called Chamfort (1740-94), *Maximes et pensées*, 2:42: "It is safe to wager that every idea that is public property, every accepted convention, is a bit of stupidity, for it has suited the majority." Poe had already used the French quotation in reviewing J. P. Robertson's *Solomon Seesaw* in *Burton's*, September 1839, *Writings of Charles Sprague in Graham's*, May 1841, and Longfellow's *Ballads and Other Poems in Graham's*, March 1842; he used it again later in "Marginalia," no. 250 (*SLM*, June 1849, 338).

17. In classical Latin *ambitus* means seeking office, *religio* is superstition, and *homines honesti* is Cicero's term for men of his party. Poe also referred to *religio* in the first version of "Metzengerstein" and in "Marginalia," no. 176 (*Graham's*, November 1846, 246).

18. J. J. Cohane, in his book list, April 1859 (item 86, catalogue 30), pointed out that Poe's source for Dupin's argument in the following paragraph is Horace Binney Wallace's novel *Stanley* (cited in no. 12 above), 1:206-8:

As a means . . . of cultivating the intellect . . . I consider mathematics as a study of little value as compared with moral logic. . . . The axioms of mathematics are not axioms of general truth; they are derived from the consideration of form and quantity, and it does not follow that what is true of form and quantity is true of moral principles or of human motives. . . . In morals, things are considered and compared by their categories or qualities, whereof each thing has many, according to the view and purpose in reference to which the thing is looked at; what is affirmed of a thing in contemplation of one category is not true of it in respect of another, nor true in respect of that category in reference to all considerations. . . . Thus, the position, that two things being equal to a third are equal to one another, may be true universally if we define "equal" with absolute strictness, but, in use, will constantly lead to the logical fallacy of an undistributed middle term; and if you will examine the logic of a mathematician you will find the error of a non-distributed medii very often committed. Another mathematical axiom which is not true in the scope of general reason is, that all the parts taken together are equal to the whole. This is not always true of physical science, and is generally false in morals. It is not true in chymical combination, and the instinct of a chymist's mind would be to deny the axiom; it is not necessarily true that if two motives separately have given values, these motives united will have a value equal to their sum. . . . I might name to you many other principles of mathematical science which are not true beyond the boundaries of that science. In truth, mathematics is a composite science . . . and not a fundamental exhibition of reason; it is *logic applied to the sciences of form and quantity*. . . . There is danger that the mathematician will mistake the axioms of his science for the principles of reason, and will apply universally what is true only of a particular system.

19. The remark of Jacob Bryant comes from *A New System of Ancient Mythology*, 3d ed. (1807), 2:173. Poe referred to it in "Pinakidia," no. 70 (*SLM*, August 1836, 577), and used it again in *Eureka*.

20. *Vis inertiae* is the force of inertia.

21. Compare: "Just as the moderately-sized shop-signs are better adapted to their object than those which are Brobdignagian, so, in at least three cases out of five, is a fact or a reason overlooked solely on account of being excessively obvious. It is almost impossible to see a thing that is immediately beneath one's nose" ("Does the Drama of the Day Deserve Support?" in *Evening Mirror*, January 9, and *Weekly Mirror*, January 18, 1845).

22. Green spectacles are mentioned also in "The Folio Club," "Bon-Bon," and "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt."

23. The letter was on an old-fashioned four-page sheet, with text on the first and address on the last page, and so could be turned inside out. The minister erred in using his own seal.

24. *Facilis descensus Averno*—"The descent to Hades is easy"—comes from Vergil *Aeneid* 6.126. Poe used the Latin words earlier in a criticism of Miss Sedgwick's *Tales and Sketches* in *SLM*, January 1836.

25. Where the remark of Angelica Catalani (1779–1849), Italian opera star and teacher, is recorded is not known. Poe used her name punningly in "A Decided Loss."

26. "A terrifying monster" is from the *Aeneid* 3.658 and is also quoted in "The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether."

27. The quotation, "So baleful a plan, if unworthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes," comes from *Atrée et Thyeste* (1707), 5.4.13–15, by Prosper-Jolyot de Crébillon (1674–1762). Poe had used it previously in a review of Thomas Campbell's *Life of Petrarch* in *Graham's Magazine*, September 1841, and earlier had quoted Crébillon's *Xerxes* in the motto to "Epimanes" and referred to the play in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." A brief comment on Crébillon is quoted in "Pinakidia," no. 129 (*SLM*, August 1836, 580) and repeated in "Marginalia," no. 24 (*Democratic Review*, November 1844, 488).