The Purloined Poe

Lacan, Derrida
& Psychoanalytic
Reading

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Contents

	Preface	vii
ONE	Poe and Lacan	1
1	*Thomas Ollive Mabbott,* Text of "The Purloined Letter," with Notes	3
2	*Jacques Lacan,* Seminar on "The Purloined Letter," *translated by Jeffrey Mehlman*	28
3	Lacan's Seminar on "The Purloined Letter": Overview	55
4	Lacan's Seminar on "The Purloined Letter": Map of the Text	77
5	Lacan's Seminar on "The Purloined Letter": Notes to the Text	83
TWO	On Psychoanalytic Reading	99
6	*Marie Bonaparte,* Selections from *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-analytic Interpretation*	101

7 *Shoshana Felman,* On Reading Poetry: Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytic Approaches 133

THREE Derrida and Responses 157

8 The Challenge of Deconstruction 159

9 *Jacques Derrida,* The Purveyor of Truth, *translated by Alan Bass* 173

10 *Barbara Johnson,* The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida 213

11 *Irene Harvey,* Structures of Exemplarity in Poe, Freud, Lacan, and Derrida 252

12 *Jane Gallop,* The American other 268

FOUR Other Readings 283

13 *Ross Chambers,* Narratorial Authority and "The Purloined Letter" 285

14 *Norman N. Holland,* Re-covering "The Purloined Letter": Reading as a Personal Transaction 307

15 *Liahna Klenman Babener,* The Shadow's Shadow: The Motif of the Double in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" 323

16 *François Peraldi,* A Note on Time in "The Purloined Letter" 335

17 *John Muller,* Negation in "The Purloined Letter": Hegel, Poe, and Lacan 343

References 369

Contributors 383

Index 385

Preface

When asked what scenes from the historical past he would like to witness on film, Vladimir Nabokov reportedly wished he could see the marriage ceremony in which Edgar Allan Poe was wedded to his thirteen-year-old cousin (Hall 1981, 275). In such a scene Nabokov would have been the unseen observer of Poe and his young bride, and in recounting it Nabokov becomes an observer observed in turn (by our own imaginary vision, at least), without being obviously aware of the fact. Such a series of hypothetical scenes tells us something about Nabokov and ourselves, no doubt. But does it tell us anything about psychoanalysis and literary criticism?

The thesis of this book is that it does. At least the double fantasy suggests a striking analogue with Poe's short story "The Purloined Letter" (about an observer being observed without observing that she is being watched in turn), which has evoked a major ongoing debate in contemporary letters. For in 1956 the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan made public an interpretation of the Poe story that not only revealed a radically fresh conception of psychoanalysis but also challenged literary theorists. If Lacan is generally counted among the major influences on poststructuralist literary criticism, it is primarily because of this one essay, which he presented for reasons of purely psychoanalytic in-

terest. Its far-reaching claims about language and truth, however, provoked a vigorous response from the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. His critical essay spawned other essays, and the debate was on.

This book has as its purpose, then, to make available essential moments of this debate and dialogue. After reprinting Poe's story, we present a translation of Lacan's essay, the most difficult piece in the book and therefore the one essay for which we provide textual commentary. Next comes a discussion of traditional and contemporary approaches to "psychoanalyzing" texts, followed by Derrida's extended criticism of Lacan's essay. Their conflict and debate, in turn, are discussed and mediated by subsequent chapters. In addition, we include several alternative readings of the same material. The previously published essays have been altered only to remove redundant repetition of the plot of Poe's story. All in all, the book assembles a good part of the existing contemporary scholarship on "The Purloined Letter" and thereby affords a structured exercise in the elaboration of textual interpretation.

But while learning something about Edgar Allan Poe and Jacques Lacan and how some authors read them, readers will also find in this book, we think, a special experience of language. By "special experience of language" we mean "an experience we undergo with language" in Heidegger's sense (1971, 57), where such experience "is something else again than to gather information about language" (58). Such an experience is not an object of study but one in which we are the objects of certain effects:

> To undergo an experience with something—be it a thing, a person, or a god—means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us. When we talk of "undergoing" an experience, we mean specifically that the experience is not of our own making; to undergo here means that we endure it, suffer it, receive it as it strikes us and submit to it. It is this something itself that comes about, comes to pass, happens. (Heidegger 1971, 57)

In these texts we experience the dynamics of an exchange that has assumed a shape and movement of its own to such an extent that we can perhaps describe the experience as being set in motion by language itself. That is to say, it is language itself that yields and takes back, that covers, uncovers, and recovers itself in and through these texts, in a manner consonant with Heidegger's emphasis that "such withholding is in the very nature of language" (1971, 81) and with Lacan's musings about "the poet's superiority in the art of concealment" (see below, chap. 2).

The anchor text for this display of language is, then, the short story written by Edgar Allan Poe in 1844 titled, in apparent simplicity, "The Purloined Letter." It is the third piece in the Dupin series, following "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) and "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842). These stories are generally regarded as inaugurating the genre of detective fiction (Most and Stowe 1983), and the figure of Dupin suggested numerous features of Arthur Conan Doyle's portrayal of Sherlock Holmes (Symons 1981, 223). Dupin's method of "analysis" (and Holmes's subsequent "science of deduction and analysis") has been compared to Peirce's "abduction" as a semiotic method as well as to Freud's psychoanalytic approach as a conjectural science (Eco and Sebeok 1983). Poe himself described "The Purloined Letter" as "perhaps the best of my tales of ratiocination" (see Mabbott's notes to Poe's story in this book, chap. 1).

Edgar Allan Poe was born January 19, 1809, in Boston and died October 7, 1849, in Baltimore, where he was buried. Although to a sizable degree the historical traditions about Poe's life have been controverted, a narrative of poverty and pathos appears to be established.[1] Both his parents were actors. A year after his birth his father disappeared; before he was three years old his mother, Elizabeth Arnold, died of tuberculosis, after acting in New York City, Charleston, and Richmond. An older brother was raised by grandparents. When his mother died Poe was taken in by the Allans, acquaintances of his mother in Richmond, who were childless (and whose friends made a home for Poe's younger sister). The Allans took Poe to Scotland and England, where he attended school from age six to eleven, receiving a classical education that continued in Richmond. When he was seventeen he attended the University of Virginia for eleven months, but his gambling losses led Mr. Allan to stop tuition payments. In desperation, Poe then joined the United States Army, where he served for almost two years before Mr. Allan enabled him to enter the United States Military Academy at West Point, though he was dismissed after eight months for absenteeism. Throughout this period (from age eighteen), he published poetry in Boston, Baltimore, and New York City while struggling with poverty and contending with Mr. Allan over finances. He won a fifty-dollar prize for a short story published in Baltimore in 1833. In 1835 he became an editor at the *Southern Literary Messenger* in Richmond. Here he developed a name as a severe critic, and his reviews and stories led to a marked subscription boost. But a year and a half later, despite warnings, he was fired from the *Messenger* because of alcoholism, whereupon he went to New York City to be

coeditor of another journal. In the meantime he had married his thirteen-year-old cousin Virginia, whose mother managed the household details.

In 1838 Poe published *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym,* a major inspiration for *Moby Dick.* He followed with his tales of horror and his stories about detection. In 1845, while he was an editor of the *New York Mirror,* "The Raven" was published, bringing Poe instant national fame. He continued to struggle for money, however, and in 1846 he and his family moved to Fordham in the Bronx, New York City, where he wrote literary gossip sketches that prompted libel suits. In 1847 his wife died of tuberculosis, and he became notably depressed. He continued to write and to drink, and he died in a Baltimore hospital in 1849.

After his death, Poe was nearly forgotten in America. His collected works were subject to strange and conflicting editorships, and his character was vilified, partly a result of his own fabrications. But his writings, especially his views on aesthetics and composition, quickly became influential in France, largely because Baudelaire, whose spirit revived when he read Poe in 1852, found a close kinship with him, translated his works, and wrote long critical introductions from 1852 to 1865. This work, in turn, influenced Mallarmé and played a key role in the development of the Symbolist movement in French poetry.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the classically educated Parisian Jacques Lacan read Poe. Born in 1901, Lacan completed his training in neurology and psychiatry in 1932, then undertook his psychoanalytic formation. During the thirties he also associated with surrealist artists and writers (for whom Poe's work was special; see Balakian 1971), attended the famous lectures on Hegel given by Alexandre Kojève (Miller 1984), studied Freud, and wrote about paranoia, the family, and the origin of the ego. By 1953 Lacan was in dispute with the International Psychoanalytic Association over his training of psychoanalysts and was expelled (Turkle 1978). Many of his colleagues joined him in establishing a new psychoanalytic center in Paris, for teaching and training. He began to give seminars whose theme extended through the year and whose audience soon included the philosophical and literary elite of Paris. These seminars still remain largely unpublished and untranslated, although some have appeared (Lacan 1973, 1975a,b, 1978b, 1981, 1986). Controversy persisted up to and beyond Lacan's death in 1981; additional biographical accounts are available elsewhere (Clément 1983; Schneiderman 1983).

Malcom Bowie tells us: "Lacan reads Freud. This is the simplest and

most important thing about him" (1979, 116). But Lacan reads Freud (in German) in a manner shaped by the structural linguistics of Saussure and Jakobson, who afford a framework whereby Lacan can assert that "the unconscious is structured in the most radical way like a language" (Lacan 1977, 159). Lévi-Strauss, in turn, provided a structuralist framework in which the most general laws of mind as well as of social systems are essentially linguistic (Muller and Richardson 1982, 6–9). From the philosophy of Heidegger he obtains what he calls "a propaedeutic reference" (Lacan 1978a, 18) to the relationship between language and being, and he specifically cites Heidegger's notion of truth as the process of unconcealment (1975a, 216; 1966a, 166, 528; and see Lacan's essay below, chap. 2, 37). Lacan also draws extensively on the history of philosophy, especially Plato and Augustine for the problematic of desire and Descartes, Pascal, Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard for calling into question substantivist conceptualizations of the subject. He uses Buddhist notions (see, e.g., 1966a, 309) as well as concepts from set theory and topology (e.g., 1966a, 321). But above all, Lacan's perspective is shaped by his own practice of psychoanalysis, for he was always and primarily a psychoanalyst, writing for and teaching other psychoanalysts (Felman 1982). Nevertheless, Bowie writes (1979, 151): "Lacan is widely influential outside psychoanalysis. One of the main reasons for this is that his writing proposes itself consciously as a critique of all discourses and all ideologies." But to position oneself so that ideology and disguise, seduction and self-assurance are made to appear as what they are—isn't this to position oneself as analyst?

Lacan's position, then, is always that of analyst, not literary critic. It is this that leads him to discern the "parallels" that constitute the heart of his interpretation. But the discovery of parallels is infectious, and others find them between Lacan and Hegel, Lacan and Derrida, and so forth. This play of parallels should not surprise us, of course, for as Jakobson (1980, 106) maintained toward the end of his life, "a number of types of literary prose are constructed according to a strict principle of parallelism, but here too one can apply *mutatis mutandis* the remark of Hopkins that the scholar will be amazed to discover the presence of an underlying and latent parallelism even in the relatively free composition of works of prose."

Perhaps readers too will be amazed over the seemingly endless parallels to be discovered in these texts, not to mention the intricate language in which they are expressed. But for any given author, the scope of investigation cannot be endless; it requires delimitation or framing. The

notion of setting a frame around a text recurs, especially in the later chapters, and most pointedly in Derrida's critique of Lacan. At this moment we can simply notice that deciding how much to enclose in a frame will affect what parallels are allowed to appear.

The first section of this book (including Poe's story and Lacan's essay) offers its own set of frames, meant to assist readers in working through Lacan's text. These frames include the following: (1) An overview of the Lacan essay that also considers the three untranslated additional pieces he wrote as introduction to or commentary on his own essay ("Présentation de la suite," "Introduction," "Parenthèse des parenthèses"; Lacan 1966a, 41–61). The overview is offered not as a substitute for or paraphrase of Lacan's text, but rather as an effort to contextualize Lacan's discussion of the purloined letter and the intersubjective structure it traverses. (2) An outline or map of the argument that attempts to show the thematic movement of Lacan's text. (3) A set of notes that provide additional information about Lacan's allusions and offer explications when he is obscure. Although obviously not without bias, this manner of approaching Lacan's text has been found to be useful elsewhere (Muller and Richardson 1982; Marcus 1984), and we present it here as no more than a guide to the reading of the text itself, before the other commentators have their say and in advance of the waves of controversy Lacan's essay has provoked. As with Lacan's other texts, we have found it useful to read the material aloud, several times (perhaps alternating with a reading of the overview, the outline, and the notes), when possible with others in seminar fashion. When reading Lacan, one can use whatever help is available.

The second section of the book, "On Psychoanalytic Reading," presents two approaches to the psychoanalytic reading of texts. The classically interpretive approach, often called "applied psychoanalysis," is illustrated by Marie Bonaparte's book *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-analytic Interpretation,* translated by John Rodker from her 1933 work *Edgar Poe: Etude psychanalytique.* Her analysis of Poe's tales has been called "a compelling fantasy, rather like a strange poem in its own right" (Wright 1984, 44). An alternative approach to psychoanalytic reading, taking Lacan into account, is provided by Shoshana Felman.

Marie Bonaparte (1882–1962) had a long-term, crucial, and often dramatic impact on the history of psychoanalysis in France and elsewhere

(for an account of her life and work, and especially her relationship to Freud and the early years of psychoanalysis, see Bertin 1982). She was a descendant of Napoleon and married a Greek prince; after her father's death she pursued analysis with Freud, beginning in 1920 and continuing intermittently for several years. The two became friends, and she used her fortune to help support Freud's publishing house, to begin the first French psychoanalytic society, journal, and training institute, to assist Freud and hundreds of others in escaping from the Nazis, and to purchase and preserve Freud's letters to Wilhelm Fliess. She translated Freud into French and wrote extensively. Her essays on female sexuality, which appeared in 1951 in French and in 1953 in English, were reissued in a French paperback in 1977.

The first selection reprinted here is from the concluding chapters of *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe,* about which Freud wrote in a letter to her: "It seems to me that it is the best part of this good book and the best thing you have ever written. These are not only applications of psychoanalysis but truly enrichments of it" (quoted in Bertin 1982, 184). The second selection, from the same book, deals specifically with "The Purloined Letter" and the role of castration. Bonaparte's analysis is taken up by Derrida, who will charge Lacan with having abused it. Shoshana Felman also examines Bonaparte's approach in order to contrast it with Lacan's new way of conducting psychoanalytic reading.

The third section of the book presents an orientation to Derrida to prepare the reader for Derrida's extensive critique of Lacan's Seminar. In his critique Derrida argues that Lacan has ignored the story's literary context and idealizes the notion of the letter as signifier. Derrida's critique is then examined in a now-classic paper by Barbara Johnson, and Johnson's argument is in turn critically assessed by Irene Harvey. Jane Gallop then offers her own reading of Lacan and Derrida.

In the fourth section we present alternative ways to read Poe's story. Ross Chambers shows us how speakers maintain authority over listeners, Norman Holland argues for a transactional perspective between reader and text, and Liahna Babener examines how the motif of the double runs through the story. François Peraldi opens up the temporal dimension of the tale and its underlying myth of vengeance. John Muller suggests that Lacan's analysis has Hegelian roots, with the notion and practice of negation pervading the Poe story and structuring its effects. In the face of all of this scrutiny, Poe's story maintains its integrity and continues to hold our interest.

Those to whom the editors of this book owe a debt of gratitude are almost beyond number. They count among them, in the first place, members of the staff of the Austen Riggs Center, Stockbridge, Mass., and graduate students of both the University of Massachusetts (Amherst) and Boston College, to whom its subject matter was initially presented. They include, too, the many colleagues of several disciplines who by reaction, comment, and criticism both formally and informally helped clarify for the editors their own intentions. To all these, who must remain nameless here, the editors can only express their sincere thanks. But there are two in particular without whose help the book could never have appeared. The editors wish to express their gratitude in a special way, then, to Daniel P. Schwartz, M.D., medical director of the Austen Riggs Center, for his continued encouragement and generous support of the project from its inception, and Mrs. Elizabeth Thomson, also at the Austen Riggs Center, for the meticulous care and unfailing graciousness with which she typed the manuscript and helped in the chore of proofreading.

Note

1. These details have been drawn from Symons (1981), Mabbott (1978), Bonaparte (1933), and *Encyclopedia Britannica,* 15th edition.

ONE Poe and Lacan