

polemic in tone, offering Lacan a chance to respond to his critics. Since it was not retained in subsequent editions of the *Ecrits*, we have not given it formal treatment here. Reference to it will be made by commentators.

6. See "Psychanalyse et cybernétique, ou de la nature du langage," in *Le séminaire, II* (1954–55), *Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse* (1978b, 339–54). Lacan speaks of this lecture as the "dialectical point of everything that we instigated (*amorcé*) by the work of the year" (362).

4 Lacan's Seminar on "The Purloined Letter": Map of the Text

- I. "The Purloined Letter" and the structure of repetition.*
 - A. Freudian repetition is based on the insistence of the letter.
 1. This is correlative to the subject's ex-centric structure,
 - a) which, in turn, reveals a correlation between the imaginary and the symbolic registers.
 2. Imaginary features are subordinate to the symbolic register,
 - a) especially in those structures that determine the subject,
 - b) such as foreclosure, repression, and denial.
 - c) But we must not be misled by abstractions.
 3. The truth of Freud's thought is demonstrated in a story showing how the subject is determined by the course of a signifier.
 - a) This truth makes fiction possible.
 - B. Poe's story is structured as a narration.
 1. Without this narration the drama would be unintelligible to an observer,

* The major headings accompanied by roman numerals (I–VII) correspond to the sections marked by the unnumbered but distinct breaks in the French text.

- a) for the narration casts light on the actors' perspectives.
- 2. Two scenes are narrated.
 - a) The first may be called the primal scene,
 - b) while the second is its repetition.
- 3. In the first scene the Queen, in the King's presence, is robbed of a compromising letter by the Minister,
 - a) who deftly replaces it with a substitute,
 - b) in full view of the silent Queen and without the King's knowledge.
- 4. In the second scene, after an unsuccessful police search, Dupin retrieves the stolen letter
 - a) and leaves a substitute,
 - b) without the Minister's knowledge.
- C. The two scenes share a common intersubjective structure of action.
 - 1. Three terms are operative in the decisive action,
 - a) corresponding to three logical moments
 - b) and assigning the shifting subjects to three places,
 - c) based on three glances.
 - 2. Such structured action warrants our invoking Freud's notion of repetition, even though more than one subject is involved.
 - a) As a discourse the unconscious is always intersubjective.
 - b) The displacement of the subjects is a function of the place occupied by the letter.
- II. "The Purloined Letter" as mystery story.
 - A. It would be misleading to read Poe's story as a simple police mystery.
 - 1. The conventional aspects of the detective story do not keep us in suspense,
 - a) for the criminal details are known from the start,
 - b) and the genre itself is not yet well established.
 - 2. Nor is it a morality fable.
 - B. Perhaps the mystery concerns Dupin.
 - 1. We sense a discordance between his remarks and his behavior.
 - 2. Perhaps we enjoy the tricks played on everyone, including ourselves.
 - 3. But the joke reveals the fictive structure of truth.
 - C. We are led to see the two scenes as complementary dramas.
 - 1. The first is narrated as a play without words,

- a) while in the second our interest is held by the narrative's discourse,
- b) whose features indicate the drama is sustained in the symbolic order.
- 2. The first scene, filtered through multiple narrators, gives the impression of exactness
 - a) and illustrates the limitations of simplistic notions of communication theory.
- 3. But the retransmission of the first scene is in the order of language,
 - a) unlike the signaling of bees,
 - b) which is a function in the imaginary order,
 - c) as is group identification with a common object of hatred.
- D. The role of narration in the second scene brings about a transition from the field of exactitude to the register of truth.
 - 1. This register is at the basis of intersubjectivity,
 - a) where the subject can lay hold of only the very subjectivity constituting an Other.
 - 2. The effect of Freud's joke about lying is repeated by Dupin's exposition of his method,
 - a) which tricks us partly because we hear it from a disciple
 - b) and because the expository display itself serves to hide the truth from us,
 - c) echoing Heidegger's notion of the hiddenness of truth.
 - 3. The narration, however, does provide us with some clues to the truth,
 - a) in stating that what is simple is most obscure,
 - b) in raising a hint about the superiority of the poet in the matter of concealment,
 - c) and in the simplistic notion of spatial concealment held by the police.
- E. The relations between place and letter are best described as odd.
 - 1. In a sense the letter has the property of nowhere-ness.
 - 2. Although the signifier is material, it remains what it is even when cut into pieces.
 - 3. It is never conjoined with a partitive adjective.
 - 4. As symbol of an absence, it is and is not wherever it may be.
 - 5. The truly hidden is what is missing from its place,
 - a) and such placing is a function of the symbolic order.

- F. The police, even while examining the torn letter, could not receive the message on its reverse.
1. The letter did not fit the description they had of it,
 - a) and thus for them the letter had only one side.
 2. However, its message has already reached its destination,
 - a) since the torn letter represents it as well as the original did.
 3. The signifier cannot be reduced to its function of communicating a message,
 - a) otherwise love letters would not be returned,
 - b) and spoken words would not be associated with transference.
- III. The letter's possession.
- A. A stolen letter seems to imply an owner.
 1. We know that letters are returned,
 - a) implying the sender has a claim on them,
 - b) and that perhaps the addressee was never the true destined receiver.
 2. Poe's story reveals neither the letter's content nor its sender.
 - B. For the Queen, the letter symbolizes a pact.
 1. It puts into question her honorable relation to the King,
 - a) for it situates her in another chain of signifiers.
 2. Whoever holds the letter is likewise affected by it
 - a) and is subject to the judgment of the King.
 - C. The word "purloin" implies a diversion or misplacement.
 1. This suggests the signifier has a proper course,
 - a) one marked by displacement,
 - b) as in thinking machines that operate by symbolic alternation.
- IV. The Freudian notion of repetition is confirmed in Poe's story.
- A. We must, intersubjectively, follow the grid of the symbolic order,
 1. even modeling our being on particular moments in which we are crossed by the signifying chain.
 - B. This path of displacement of the signifier determines who we are,
 1. even more than native, social, or psychological factors.
- V. In possession of the diverted letter, the minister is put in the Queen's place.
- A. He too conceals the letter by leaving it exposed.
 1. For he too is lured into a dual relation,
 - a) in which he believes that while seeing he is unseen.

2. He thus loses his former perspective,
 - a) as the third in a symbolic situation.
- B. As the one who hides the letter, he even takes on the Queen's womanly and shadowy characteristics.
1. The letter is a sign of the woman,
 - a) for she puts her worth in it,
 - b) founding her being outside the law,
 - c) but in her origins the law holds her in position as a signifier,
 - d) even as a fetish.
 2. By maintaining immobility in its shadow,
 - a) she feigns mastery through inactivity.
 3. The Minister's inactivity is likewise a consequence of the letter,
 - a) whose power lies in its non-use,
 - b) an effect of the prolonged diversions of a pure signifier.
 4. The Minister's power thus comes not from the letter but from the role it gives him
 - a) in a narcissistic, dual, imaginary relation to the Queen.
 - b) But, separated from the letter, the Queen has assumed the King's slot.
 5. The Minister, so transformed, even repeats the Queen's actions,
 - a) which are deciphered by Dupin.
- VI. Dupin, in turn, is affected by the letter's possession.
- A. Two episodes reveal that he too shifts from the symbolic to the imaginary perspective,
 1. while we analysts now occupy the third position.
 - B. He trades the letter for money,
 1. thus destroying its significance,
 2. returning it to the place of blindness,
 3. and reinforcing the status of the police.
 - C. His message to the Minister is an act of revenge,
 1. making his exploit inglorious,
 2. for he too is caught in a dual, imaginary relation.
- VII. The Minister, like the gambler, questions the meaning of the die as signifier without signification.
- A. Dupin, like the place of the woman he now occupies, resists such a question,
 1. for the signifier reveals death's presence,
 2. marks our destiny,

3. and structures our desire by articulating and thus fragmenting it.
- B. Because our message returns to us in inverted form,
 1. a letter always reaches its destination.

5 *Lacan's Seminar on "The Purloined Letter": Notes to the Text*

The first of each pair of page numbers below refers to the English translation of Lacan's seminar by Mehlman (Lacan 1972b) as it is reprinted in this book (chap. 2), and the second refers to the French version in *Ecrits* (Lacan 1966a). The letters designate the paragraph, beginning from the top of each page. For other references to *Ecrits*, the first page number refers to the English translation by Alan Sheridan (Lacan 1977) and the second to the French original (1966a).

28/11 The epigraph is from the "Witches' Kitchen" scene of Part One of Goethe's *Faust* (lines 2458–60), which Kaufmann translates:

And if we score hits
And everything fits,
It's thoughts that we feel.

(Goethe 1963, 245)

Why does Lacan begin with this quotation? He does not tell us. We can wonder, however, about the correlation in Freud and Lacan between "es" and the unconscious and take these lines to suggest that our views and behavior are governed by unconscious processes. (The source of the