

The Purloined Poe

Lacan, Derrida
& Psychoanalytic
Reading

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long period of time the choices of a subject, would win beyond any normal proportion at the game of even and odd.”

12. We felt obliged to demonstrate the procedure to an audience with a letter from the period concerning M. de Chateaubriand and his search for a secretary. We were amused to find that M. de Chateaubriand completed the first version of his recently restored memoirs in the very month of November 1841 in which the purloined letter appeared in *Chambers' Journal*. Might M. de Chateaubriand's devotion to the power he decries and the honor which that devotion bespeaks in him (*the gift* had not yet been invented), place him in the category to which we will later see the Minister assigned: among men of genius with or without principles?

13. Poe is the author of an essay with this title.

14. And even to the cook herself.

15. Virgil's line reads: *facilis descensus Averno*.

16. We recall the witty couplet attributed before his fall to the most recent in date to have rallied Candide's meeting in Venice: "Il n'est plus aujourd'hui que cinq rois sur la terre, / Les quatre rois des cartes et le roi d'Angleterre." (There are only five kings left on earth: / the four kings of cards and the king of England.)

17. This proposal was openly presented by a noble lord speaking to the Upper Chamber in which his dignity earned him a place.

18. We note the fundamental opposition Aristotle makes between the two terms recalled here in the conceptual analysis of chance he gives in his *Physics*. Many discussions would be illuminated by a knowledge of it.

3 Lacan's Seminar on "The Purloined Letter": Overview

Lacan chose his "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'" to introduce the collection of his *Ecrits* (1966a), whose essays otherwise appear in chronological order. The essay was written out in its present form in the summer of 1956, but its content had been presented a year earlier (April 26, 1955) as part of his weekly seminar (1954–55) that bore the general title "The Ego in the Theory of Freud and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis" (1978b). In fact, the whole seminar was a year-long commentary on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1955a [1920]).

In this work Freud addresses the problem of the "repetition automatism,"¹ that is, the tendency of many patients to mechanically repeat unpleasant experiences (e.g., dreams that repeat war traumata) in disregard of the so-called pleasure principle. His solution, as we know, was to propose the hypothesis of a force in the human psyche more fundamental than (hence, "beyond") the pleasure principle—the so-called death instinct. For his part, Lacan maintains (in the "Introduction" to his "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'") that the examination of the problem of "repetition" in 1920 was actually the renewal of an old question—one about the nature of memory as it emerged in the "Project for a Scientific Psychology" (1954b [1895]). There, Lacan insists, Freud conceives of his system *pu* (predecessor of what would later be called the

unconscious) as caught up in the effort to find an irretrievably lost object (1966a, 45). This movement takes the form not of a reminiscence of that object but of some kind of a repetition (unconscious, to be sure) of the losing of it. The repetition, however, is a "symbolic" one (since it is only through the symbol that presence in absence is attained), and the "order of the symbol can no longer be conceived as constituted by man but as constituting him" (1966a, 46).

Just how the "order of the symbol" "constitutes" a human being is the issue that engages Lacan's entire enterprise. It is elaborated in the Seminar from which the present essay is taken and finds expression in the entire collection of *Ecrits*, to which it serves as an introduction. It is not our intention to repeat an exposition that is offered elsewhere.² We must be content merely to summarize in lapidary form the essentials of Lacan's position. Freud's discovery in the experience of the "talking cure" was an insight into the way language works. Hence, the unconscious that he postulated to account for the cure was "structured like a language" (Lacan 1977, 234/594),³ even though Freud, whose discovery antedated but anticipated the work of Saussure and the structural linguists, was unable to articulate it as such and was constrained to conceive it in terms of nineteenth-century science. Lacan accepted from Saussure the distinction between language (as structure) and speech (as act), the distinction in a linguistic sign between the signifier (speech sound) and signified (mental image), and the arbitrary nature of the relation between the two. Moreover, he insisted on this arbitrariness to such an extent that, for him, individual signifiers refer not to individual signifieds but rather to other signifiers (a function of the diacritical nature of the signifying system) under which the signified "slides" (1977, 154/503).

From Saussure's followers (e.g., Roman Jakobson), Lacan accepts the principle that signifiers relate to each other along either an axis of "combination" or an axis of "selection," the former making possible what rhetoricians call "metonymy," the latter what they call "metaphor." Moreover, Lacan accepts (in his own way) Jakobson's suggestion that it is the axis of combination that makes possible what Freud calls "displacement" and the axis of selection that makes possible "condensation" in the unconscious process of "dreamwork." It is in such fashion that the "unconscious is structured like a language." Jakobson had a marked influence on Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss 1978), who in turn recognized the utility of structural linguistics as a paradigm for a kind of periodic table for all social relationships and suggested to Lacan (Lacan 1977, 13/285) the usefulness of the same paradigm for discovering "universal laws which

regulate the unconscious activities of the mind" (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 58–59).

How laws such as these permeate the sedimentation of language that surrounds an infant when it comes into the world and thereby constitute what Lévi-Strauss (and Lacan after him) calls the "symbolic order"; how this order constitutes an "ex-centric" center, that is, a "center" excentric to the "conscious" center of the subject that would therefore be an *unconscious* subject (or "subject of the unconscious"); how the infant is introduced into this "excentric place" (28/11),⁴ and how the symbolic order thus conceived is even "constitutive" (29/12) of the subject—all this Lacan presupposes in this essay as familiar to his readers. What he proposes here is to illustrate the whole business by means of a literary example in which we may see "in a story the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier" (29/12).

As for the story itself, it is straightforward enough, and Lacan offers his own synopsis of it 30–31/12–14) that we can accept as sufficient for our purposes.

The main thrust of Lacan's interpretation of this story focuses on two issues: the anomalous nature of the letter, which serves as the "true subject" of the story; and the pattern of intersubjective relationships that remain constant in the tale, despite the interchanging terms of the relationships, the interchange itself generating the principal interest of the tale.

THE LETTER

One is struck, indeed, by how little we know about the nature of the letter, either about its sender or about its contents: "love letter or conspiratorial letter, letter of betrayal or letter of mission, letter of summons or letter of distress, we are assured of but one thing: the Queen must not bring it to the knowledge of her lord and master" (42/27). And why? Because this letter of its very nature is the "symbol of a pact," and even if the Queen refuses the pact the very existence of the letter "situates her in a symbolic chain foreign to the one which constitutes her [fealty to the King]" (42/28) and in that way compromises her. As the letter passes from the Queen to the Minister to Dupin to the Prefect back to the Queen, the content remains irrelevant, and the shifting parameters of power for the subjects concerned derive from the different places where the letter is diverted along this "symbolic circuit" (49/37).

If we transpose all this into Saussurian terms of the distinction between signifier and signified, it becomes clear that the "stolen" letter functions as a signifier whose signified (i.e., content) is irrelevant to the proceedings. This is how we understand Lacan's designation of it as a "pure signifier" (32/16), that is, completely independent of its signified, serving, by its displacement, as a movable pivot around which revolves a shifting set of human relations. It functions not only independent of its content, therefore, but also independent of the subjects through whose hands it passes.

To whom, then, does the letter belong: To the sender? To the addressee? Lacan raises the question without answering it as such but rather addresses another form of it: What is the proper "place" of the letter? Here he focuses on the nature of the letter as a signifier, but in doing so he plays on the ambiguity in the notion of "letter" itself, which may be taken as a typographical character as well as an epistle. As a typographical character, understood in the most material sense, it is essentially indivisible, incapable of "partition" of any kind (39/24). The English translator reminds us that in this typographical sense "the letter is a unit of signification without any meaning in itself. In this it resembles the 'memory trace,' which for Freud is never the image of an event, but a term that takes on meaning only through its differential opposition to other traces" (Lacan 1972b, 38). This recalls, of course, Saussure's remark to the effect that "in language there are only differences" (1966, 120; cited by Mehlman [Lacan 1972b, 54n.]), that is, between signifiers that are constituted as such precisely by this differentiation. Moreover, the signifier is for Lacan "by nature symbol only of an absence." We are able to follow his shift to the consideration of the letter as signifier in the sense of epistle when he adds: "which is why we cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other objects, it must be *or* not be in a particular place but that unlike them it will be *and* not be where it is, wherever it goes" (39/24).

For the "place" of the signifier is determined by the symbolic system within which it is constantly dis-placed. It is only in terms of a symbolic order, for example, that one may speak of the signifier as "symbol of an absence" the way a slip of paper—or even an empty space—may symbolize the absence of a book on a library shelf. Conversely, "what is hidden is never but what is missing from its place" like a book misplaced on another shelf (40/25). In Lacan's reading of the Poe tale, the fateful letter is not stolen so much as dis-placed, that is, "purloined" in the sense of "pro longed" or "diverted from its path" along the circuits of the

symbolic order. That is why it is best described as a "letter in sufferance" (43/29). According to Lacan's conception, these circuits function automatically according to the same laws of binary alternation as govern computers: "For we have learned to conceive of the signifier as sustaining itself only in a displacement comparable to that found in electric news strips or in the rotating memories of our machines-that-think-like-men, this because of the alternating operation which is its principle, requiring it to leave its place, even though it returns to it by a circular path" (43/29).

In summary, then, the letter in Poe's tale operates as a signifier whose signified is irrelevant; it is not subject to divisibility; it can have and lose its place only in the symbolic order; and its displacement-and-return has much in common with binary circuits.

INTERSUBJECTIVITY

Given the letter as shifting pivot around which a pattern of human relationships rotates, let us now consider that pattern more in detail. As Lacan reads the story, the essentials of the pattern consist in an interplay between three subjective positions: one subject sees nothing, hence is "blind" to the situation in which he finds himself; a second subject "sees" that the first subject sees nothing but "deludes himself as to the secrecy" of what he hides, that is, is unaware of being "seen" in turn; a third subject sees that the first two subjects leave "what should be hidden exposed to whomever would seize it" and capitalizes on this fact (32/14). As the story proceeds, different members of the cast of characters occupy these different positions in what Lacan describes as two successive "scenes." The story ends with still another constellation of relationships that might be called (though Lacan does not explicitly do so) a third "scene."

Scene 1

In the first, "primal scene," the "blind" personage is the King, the unaware seer is the Queen, and the perspicacious "robber" is the Minister

1. The role of the "blind" is played by the King, who, as such, signifies the "order of the Law" (50/38) that is challenged by the sheer existence of the letter. And no matter whose hands the letter falls into

(even the Queen's), nothing concerning its existence "can return to good order without the person whose prerogative it infringes upon having to pronounce judgment upon it" (42/28). Such are the demands of the (symbolic) order of the Law, even though the King himself, as individual subject, remains blind to it all (50/38).

2. In the role of the "seer" in this first scene we find the Queen, who is compromised by the very existence of the letter. Possession of the letter cannot be legitimized by acknowledging its existence before the Law (i.e., the King), yet to have this possession respected, she "can invoke but her right to privacy, whose privilege is based on the honor that possession violates" (42/28). That is why she is helpless to prevent violation of that right by the Minister, who sees her predicament and takes advantage of her helplessness.

3. The role of perspicacious profiteer in the first scene is played by the Minister, whose retention of the letter gives him political power as long as he does not "use" it as a means to attain an end beyond the sheer retention of it as a threat. The threat here is a function not of the letter as such but of the role it constitutes for the Minister (46/33), not simply as a robber but the kind of robber he is, "capable of anything" (46/33). Be that as it may, the use of the letter by the Minister "for the ends of power can only be potential, since it cannot become actual without vanishing in the process" (46/32).

Scene 2

In the second "scene," the role of the "blind" subject is played by the Queen, the role of unaware "seer" by the Minister, and the role of profiteer ("robber") by Dupin.

1. The "blind" personage here has become the Prefect of Police who now undertakes the Queen's cause and thereby stands for the Queen. It is important for Lacan's argument that he be "unable to see," hence the insistence that the Prefect's methods of search explored a kind of "space" that indeed encompassed the letter as "real" but failed to discern it as the letter in question, because as *signifier* the letter belonged not to the order of sensible reality but to the order of the symbolic (39-40/24-25).

2. The role of the complacent "seer" now is played by the Minister. But what does he see? Himself as not being seen. For in resorting to the Queen's ruse of "hiding" the letter by leaving it in the open, the Minister "realizes that the police's search is his own defense . . . {but} . . . fails

to recognize that outside of that search he is no longer defended" (44/31). In other words, just as in scene 1 the Queen's defense against the King does not protect her from the "lynx eye" of the Minister, so in scene 2 the Minister's defense against the police does not protect him from being "seen" by Dupin. Thus he is caught up in the typically imaginary situation "which he himself was so well able to see [in scene 1], and in which he is now seen seeing himself not being seen [by Dupin]" (44/31).

3. The role of astute "robber" now is played by Dupin, comprising as it does two separate phases that may be considered as one—the moment of discovery of the fateful letter hanging from the mantelpiece and the moment of substitution the following day, prepared for by the construction of a facsimile with its carefully chosen inscription and by the collaboration of an accomplice.

Scene 3

In the third "scene," with which the story closes, the pattern remains the same, but there are some changes in the cast: the role of the "blind" is now played by the Minister, the role of the self-absorbed "seer" by Dupin, and the role of the one who "sees" "what should be hidden exposed" and takes advantage of it (as the "robber," so to speak) by the (psycho)analyst/Lacan.

1. Without knowing it, and until in one way or another he becomes aware of the substitution, the Minister now assumes the mask of the "blind" personage unable to "see" the situation of fact, that is, that the facsimile in his possession is perfectly innocuous. Under what conditions will he come to "see"? Dupin predicts a humiliating scene with the Queen that will precipitate his "political destruction," but Lacan suggests that his gambler's instincts may save him yet: "If he is truly the gambler we are told he is, he will consult his cards a final time before laying them down and, upon reading his hand, will leave the table in time to avoid disgrace" (52/41).

2. But now Dupin himself assumes the role of the complacent "seer," who himself is seen for what he is, not by himself but by Lacan. For what characterizes this second position is the "typically imaginary" situation of being captured by one's own controlling self-image to the disregard of the symbolic situation of which one is a part. Lacan notes two aspects of this capture of Dupin by the imaginary. In the first place, his preoccupation with reward compromises the detachment that we expect to charac-

terize his intentions (49/37). In the second place, the explosion of anger that leads him to cite the spiteful lines from Crébillon's *Atrée* in the substituted facsimile indicates precisely that he does *not* withdraw from the symbolic circuit but rather thereby becomes "in fact, fully participant in the intersubjective triad, and, as such, in the median position previously occupied by the Queen and Minister" (50/37).

3. But in thus assuming the second position, Dupin yields to another his place as the far-seeing "robber" who perceives the full import of the symbolic situation, namely to the (psycho)analyst (Lacan himself), who thus sees Dupin as failing to see himself as being seen. It is the analyst's (Lacan's) function to discern for us the symbolic structure of the entire tale and to reveal its import for psychoanalysis.

"THE PURLOINED LETTER" AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

It is clear that Lacan's interest in this tale serves as a parable for his conception of psychoanalysis, according to which "the unconscious is the discourse of the Other" (32/16). More specifically, he illustrates how "it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject by demonstrating in [the Poe] story the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier" (29/12). In this story the signifier is obviously the letter, and the "subject" in question is the triadic pattern of intersubjective relationships the story deals with.

Thus—and here the thesis of the essay rejoins the theme of the larger Seminar of which it is a part—it is the "insistence of the signifying chain" (Lacan's emphasis, 28/11) through the "intersubjective module" (32/15), whose pivot is the "pure signifier" of the "purloined letter" that accounts for the automatism of repetition (32/16). Hence the force of the analogy of the three ostriches, "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" (32/15); for, like the ostriches, the three subjects, "more docile than sheep, model their very being on the moment of the signifying chain which traverses them" (43/30). It is the traversing of the subjects by the signifying chain that constitutes them precisely as the kind of subjects they are, and Lacan proclaims this principle explicitly in all its radicalness:

If what Freud discovered and rediscovers with a perpetually increasing sense of shock has a meaning, it is that the displacement of the signifier

determines the subjects in their acts, in their destiny, in their refusals, in their blindnesses, in their end and in their fate, their innate gifts and social acquisitions notwithstanding, without regard for character or sex, and that, willingly or not, everything that might be considered the stuff of psychology, kit and caboodle, will follow the path of the signifier. (43-44/30)

Lacan wonders, indeed, whether it is not the sense that everyone in the story is being "duped"—the French reads *joué* ("played," i.e., determined in his action by a signifying chain beyond his power to control)—that all but reduces the proceedings to a vaudeville show and makes the story amusing (33/17). Be that as it may, we get here a clearer sense of why Lacan says that "the unconscious means that man is inhabited by the signifier." We understand, too, how he can say that if the Minister (for example) forgets the letter, "the letter, no more than the neurotic's unconscious, does not forget him" (47/34), for it "transforms" him, unbeknown to himself, into the "image" of the Queen, placing him as it does in the position of the seer unaware of himself being seen. This transformation may be thought of in terms of the "return of the repressed" (47/34), that is, the perduring dynamic of the module.

With this much clear as a fundamental thesis, Lacan suggests other points of comparison between the story and the psychoanalytic process:

1. In the first place, there appears to be a certain correlation between the position of the "blind" personage and the real, between the position of the self-absorbed "seer" and the imaginary, and between the position of the perspicacious "robber" and the symbolic. But the term "real" here is decidedly ambiguous, for the specifically Lacanian sense (as the "impossible" to symbolize or imagize) yields in this text to a more normal usage signifying a naively empiricist objectivism that is oblivious of the role of symbolic structures in the organization of "reality." Hence the "realist's imbecility" (40/26), say, of the police. As for the imaginary quality of the second position, it is to be understood in terms of the narcissism (and its ruses) implied in the subject's "seeing" but failing to see that he is seen.

What correlates the third position with the symbolic is the fact that it discerns the role of structure in the situation and acts accordingly. The paradox is that, in the Poe story as told, the "acting accordingly" of the third position tends to catch the subject up in the dynamics of repetition that drag him into the second position, and so forth, without any conscious intention on his part. Thus, because the power that derives to the Minister from the holding of the letter depends on the non-use of that power, he is forced willy nilly into the passivity of the second position.

Accordingly, "in playing the part of the one who hides, he is obliged to don the role of the Queen" (44/31). Result: "a man man enough to defy to the point of scorn a lady's fearsome ire undergoes to the point of metamorphosis the curse of the sign he has dispossessed her of" (45/31). Hence he fails to see the symbolic situation that he was once so able to see and in which "he is now seen seeing himself as not being seen" (44/31). Rather than his possessing the letter, the letter possesses him.

In similar fashion Dupin, instead of using the monetary exchange as a means (by reason of its "neutralizing" power) of "withdrawal from the symbolic circuit" (49/37), himself enters into that very circuit by the vindictive message enclosed in his substituted letter. Thus he is dragged, as if by undertow, into the second position of the triad (50/37–38). The mechanism of the module operates inexorably. When Lacan speculates that the Minister, prudent gambler that he is, may indeed "leave the table in order to avoid disgrace," the translator observes: "Thus nothing shall [have] happen[ed]—the final turn in Lacan's theater of lack" (Lacan 1972b, 72), and the module remains intact. It is this transcending power of the signifying chain, dominating the intersubjective interchange, that we take to be the thrust of Lacan's closing remark: "What the 'purloined letter,' nay, the 'letter in sufferance,' means is that a letter always arrives at its destination" (53/41).

If there is inexorability here, then what is the function of psychoanalysis? Presumably to help the subject discern this dynamic and thus attain the third position in the triad. To be sure, the task is not achieved without doing violence to the self-imaging integrity of the subject's ego, whose usual state consists in being "captivated by a dual relationship" (44/30) and engrossed in "specular mirage[s]" (47/34). This violence may even be thought of as a kind of rape (48/36). At any rate, the subject's reconciliation with the inevitabilities that permeate him is described by Lacan elsewhere in the 1954–55 seminar: "The game is already played, the dice are already cast. . . with this exception, that we may take them in hand again and cast them once more. . . Don't you find something ridiculous and laughable in the fact that the dice are [already] cast?" (Lacan 1978b, 256).

2. A second correlation with Lacan's conception of psychoanalysis is suggested by his highly sensuous imagery, for it recalls his frequent allusion to the problem of femininity in the latter part of this essay. Not only is the second position in the triad the initial position of the Queen, but there appears to be something specifically feminine about it. Thus

"in playing the part of the one who hides, [the Minister] is obliged to don the role of the Queen, and even the attributes of femininity [*la femme*] and shadow, so propitious to the act of concealing" (44/31). The sign that the Minister steals from the Queen "is indeed that of woman [*la femme*] insofar as she invests her very being therein, founding it outside the law, which subsumes her nevertheless, originally, in a position of signifier, nay, of fetish" (45/31). Again:

It is significant that the letter which the Minister, in point of fact, addresses to himself is a letter from a woman: as though this were a phase he had to pass through out of a natural affinity of the signifier. Thus the aura of apathy, verging at times on an affectation of effeminacy; the display of an ennui bordering on disgust in his conversation; the mood the author of the philosophy of furniture can elicit from virtually impalpable details (like that of the musical instrument on the table), everything seems intended for a character, all of whose utterances have revealed the most virile traits, to exude the oddest *odor di femina* when he appears. (48/35)

Furthermore, Dupin, when drawn into the second position of the triad in the denouement of the story, experiences a rage against the Minister that is "of manifestly feminine nature" (51/39–40). And finally, "it is known that ladies detest calling principles into question, for their charms owe much to the mystery of the signifier" (52/40).

All of these texts, taken in sum, add up, it seems, to an enigmatic statement about the nature of femininity and imply a specific theory about the role of the phallus as a signifier in the sexual differentiation of the subject. For example, Mehlman notes with regard to the correlation of woman and fetish: "The fetish, as replacement for the missing maternal phallus, at once masks and reveals the scandal of sexual difference. As such it is the analytic object *par excellence*" (Lacan 1972b, 62). At issue here, of course, is not simply the phallus but the imaginary loss of it, that is, castration—whether the absence of penis is actual (as in the female) or potential (as in the male)—with all that this implies for Lacan in terms of the infant's separation from its mother and the ineluctable finitude to which it testifies. How Lacan conceived the function of castration in the constitution of the subject through primary repression as well as in its sexualization is thematized elsewhere, for example, in "The Signification of the Phallus" (Lacan 1977, 281–91/685–95). The question raised by the present text is. What precisely is being said here, where the phallus is

never mentioned? Though the matter remains unexplicated by Lacan, it becomes a central issue for several of the commentators (e.g., Derrida et al.).

3. There are other issues the author raises in passing that call for examination in a much broader scope than this essay provides. One of these is the important question about the nature of truth in psychoanalysis. Clearly it is to be found on a different level of experience than that of "exactitude," with all this implies about the reduction of the real to an object of investigation controllable by the techniques of science and technology (35/20; 39-40/25). Rather, at this stage of Lacan's thought, truth apparently is to be thought of in terms of re-velation, as this term emerges out of Heidegger's analysis of the original Greek notion of truth as *a-letheia*: "When we are open to hearing the way in which Martin Heidegger discloses to us in the word *aletheia* the play of truth, we rediscover a secret to which truth has always initiated her lovers, and through which they learn that it is in hiding that she offers herself to them *most truly*" (37/21; Lacan's emphasis).

The self-hiding of truth, however, raises a complex set of problems concerning the negativity ingredient to truth as such. For example, elsewhere Lacan remarks: "the man who in the act of speaking breaks the bread of truth with his counterpart also shares the lie" (1966a, 379); and "the discourse of error, its articulation in acts, could bear witness to the truth against evidence itself" (1977, 121/409), and so on. A careful consideration of this negativity that is essential to truth as such for Lacan should precede the evaluation of any critique made of his treatment of the "meaning" of truth by the commentators. The matter has been discussed more fully elsewhere (Richardson 1983b, 149-52).

4. Still another theme that Lacan alludes to tangentially and that warrants further reflection is the role of death in psychoanalysis. For example, Lacan remarks in passing, "You realize, of course, that our intention is not . . . to confuse letter with spirit . . . and that we readily admit that one kills whereas the other quickens, insofar as the signifier—you perhaps begin to understand—materializes the agency of death" (38/24). A still more figurative (though more enigmatic) allusion comes later when the Minister, phantasied as gambler, is presumed to address the die he is about to cast: "What are you, figure of the die I turn over in your encounter (*tyché*) with my fortune? Nothing, if not that presence of death which makes of human life a reprieve obtained from morning to morning in the name of meanings whose sign is your crook"

(51/39). At the base of these allusions, we believe, is the fundamental notion that death for Lacan is, as it was for Heidegger, the ultimate sign of limit, experienced profoundly at the moment of symbolic castration when the subject submits to the law of the signifier in primary repression. It is this that constitutes the "division" of the subject, which will become so central a theme for subsequent writings in the *Ecrits* (1966a, 10).

There are other themes to single out, of course, whether they are indicated obliquely in passing or echoed by allusion, but let this much suffice to indicate the general orientation of Lacan's essay, together with the density and richness that characterize it. The heart of the matter, we repeat, is simply the primacy of the signifier over the subject. Lacan emphasizes it once more as he brings the essay to an end:

So runs the signifier's answer, above and beyond all significations: "You think you act when I stir you at the mercy of the bonds through which I knot your desires. Thus do they grow in force and multiply in objects, bringing you back to the fragmentation of your shattered childhood. So be it: such will be your feast until the return of the stone guest I shall be for you since you call me forth. (52/40)

RETROSPECTIVE PROSPECT: LACAN'S COMMENTARY ON HIS SEMINAR

The French text (1966) appends to the original essay a series of dense propaedeutic essays, somewhat repetitious of each other, that have not been translated into English. The first, entitled "Presentation of the following," appeared in the first edition of the *Ecrits* (1966) but apparently was written earlier. It is polemic in tone, directed at unnamed adversaries, and serves as preface to the second, which bears the formal title "Introduction." The latter is succeeded by the third essay, entitled "Parenthesis of Parentheses," which redevelops the principal theses of the "Introduction" as the latter is being readied for publication.⁵

Enigmatic as these essays are, their purpose at least is clear. Much later, Lacan will tell us explicitly: "Mathematical formalism is our aim, our ideal. Why? Because it alone is *matheme*, i.e., capable of being

transmitted integrally" (Lacan 1975b, 108), but already in these texts we can see that ideal struggling for articulation. Given that the theme of the entire Seminar is that the automatism of repetition is accounted for by the primacy of the signifier over the subject, Lacan tries to transpose that thesis into formal language by showing how this automatism (he now calls it "memoration") is not to be understood, in a properly Freudian conception, as a function of "memory" "insofar as that would be the property of a living being," but rather as the result of the "ordered chains of a formal language." Hence "the program that is traced out for us [here] is to know how a formal language determines the subject" (1966, 42). It is the function of the "Introduction" that follows to suggest how the "syntax" of such a language might be conceived.

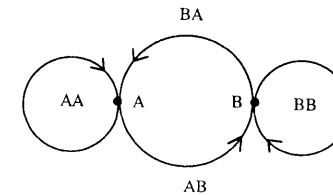
Lacan's "Introduction," whose original function was to introduce his Seminar in volume 2 of *La Psychanalyse* (1956), begins by repeating themes that are familiar to us now: that *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, with its address to the problem of the automatism of repetition and recourse to the hypothesis of a "death instinct," was but the updating of an old problematic that first found expression in Freud's *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1954b [1895]) concerning the nature of memory. There the system *psi*, predecessor of the unconscious, "could only be satisfied by finding again the object that had been radically lost" (1966a, 45; Lacan's emphasis), hence is caught up in a process of "repetition" from the very beginning that extends beyond the processes of life, and in that sense may be called the "death instinct" (46).

The term "repetition" invites comparison with Kierkegaard's use of the same word in a specifically "modern" sense (as opposed to the Greek use of "recollection") to refer to the interior transformation of human existence in which consciousness, by implication, plays a part. But Freud, as opposed to Kierkegaard, refuses to identify the necessity characteristic of repetition with consciousness in the human agent. "The repetition being symbolic repetition, Freud maintains that the order of the symbol can no longer be conceived as constituted by man but as constituting him" (46). It is into this order that the child is introduced in the first experience of the phonemes, as in the *Fort-Da* phenomenon "at point zero of desire" (46), and becomes determined in both synchronic and diachronic terms (47).

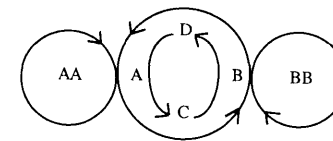
To give some sense of how this determination functions, Lacan suggests that we let plus (+) represent presence and minus (-) represent absence, and then arrange a random series of them, for example: + + +

- + + - - + -. Now Lacan argues that such a series, despite the "chance" character of its composition, manifests a strict symbolic pattern. For example, if we designate by the numeral 1 a series of three identical signs (+ + + or - - -), by the numeral 3 a series of three alternating signs (+ - + or - + -), and by the numeral 2 a series of two similar signs followed or preceded by a different sign (+ + -, - - +, - + +, or + - -), then the relationships between these different series can be plotted on a graph to show the basic symbolic pattern that governs them.

But first let us recall a word about graphs. Any graph is basically a set of points and couplings of points related to each other either by lines or (to indicate direction) arrows. The most comprehensive graph is that between two points (e.g., A and B), where the possible relationships are between A and B (AB), B and A (BA), A and itself (AA), B and itself (BB) (fig. 1).

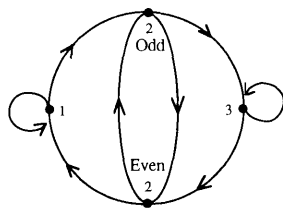


Let us suppose, however, that we complicate the graph by adding two more points of reference, C and D (fig. 2).



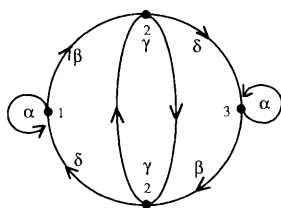
Then, in addition to the relationships we already have we shall have a relationship between C and D, between D and C—plus, of course, between A and C, and so on. Accordingly, we would be able to follow a path between A-C-D-A-AA, or A-C-B-D-A, and so on, but not A-C-D-B or A D-C-A. Hence, as the graph becomes more complicated, certain constraints are added.

With this much as preparation, let us come back to the graph (fig. 3) Lacan proposed to show the relationship between the three series of pluses and minuses (18)



We notice that series 1 can be followed by series 2-odd, and this in turn can be followed either by series 3 or by series 2-even. The latter can be followed by series 1 or series 2-odd, but not by series 3 and so on. Note that the built-in constraints constitute a kind of "memory" as they also constitute a "law." If the different relationships in the graph may be thought of as "words," then the constraints ("memory," "law") may be regarded as "syntax."

Such then is Lacan's fundamental paradigm. He quickly lifts it to a new level of complexity (48-52) that invites comparison with the probability theories of Poincaré and Markov (51). It cannot be our purpose to follow the argument in detail, but we can grasp the general sense of the move if, for example, we make the following equivalences. Let passage from 1 to 1, 1 to 3, 3 to 1, and 3 to 3 be represented by alpha; passage from 1 to 2 and 3 to 2 be represented by beta; passage from 2 to 2 be represented by gamma; return from 2 to 1 and from 2 to 3 be represented by delta. The result will be the graph shown in figure 4.

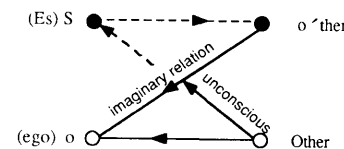


You will notice that after the repetition of a great number of *alpha*'s, if we had a *beta* before it, there can only emerge a *delta*. There you have a primitive symbolic organization. . . . In some fashion, the series of *alpha* remembers that it cannot express anything but a *delta*, if a *beta*, no matter how distant, was produced before the series of *alpha*'s. . . . From the beginning (*origine*) and independently of all attachment to any supposedly real bond of causality whatever, the symbol is already at play and engenders of itself its necessities, its structures, its organizations. (Lacan 1978b, 228)

Some of these necessities, structures, and organizations are spelled out in the present text.

More important for us than the details of the analysis is to underline the purpose of this whole exercise. The point is that what determines the Freudian subject for Lacan is of a "symbolic" nature (rather than "real"—we shall return to this distinction below) and that the symbolic order (with all its "laws") is autonomous. It is only according to such a conception that we can account for the theory and practice of free association as Freud conceives it, not according to the conventional forms of philosophical, psychological, or experimental "associationism" (Lacan 1966a, 52). Moreover, it is the conservation of the "exigencies of the symbolic chain" that permits us to situate and explain the "indestructible persistence" of unconscious desire (52). And it is surely to the autonomy of the symbolic order that Freud makes recourse when, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1955a [1920]), he attempts to explain the automatism of repetition by postulating some dimension of the human phenomenon that is "pre vital" and "transhistorical" (52).

It is essential to understand, however, that the symbolic order is not the creation of human consciousness, as might be inferred if one's purview were limited to the purely imaginary interaction between an ego and its counterpart. Rather, we must think of a human being as seized (*pris*) "in his [very] being" by the symbolic order and as entering into it actively in the guise of subject only by passing through the "radical detile" of speech, such as we see happening in the *Fort-Da* experience. This formulation suggests a schematization (fig. 5) that is the most fundamental of all Lacan's schemata (scheme L, 53).



In an initial reading of this diagram that represents for Lacan the psychoanalytic situation:

S designates the subject, and the parenthesized homophonic *Es* (*Id*, It, *ca*)—the French retains the German spelling—suggests that the subject here is the subject of the unconscious;

o designates the other of the subject in the sense of its own alienated image in a mirror reflection,

o' designates the other of the subject in the sense of an imaged

counterpart (in the psychoanalytic situation such an other would be the analyst experienced as other ego, and the solid line connecting o and o' would indicate an essentially imaginary relationship);

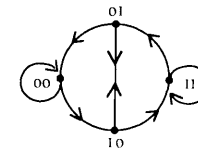
O : designates the Other as symbolic order, whose place the analyst holds.

Although Lacan does not allude here to the frequently cited text of Freud, *Wo es war soll ich werden* ("Where It was I must come to be," e.g., Lacan 1977, 171), the schema offers a convenient way to illustrate it: Whereas the subject has always been "spoken" by the unconscious, the task of the analysand, with the help of the analyst holding the place of the Other, is first to discover itself as a subject, that is, to distinguish itself from its own ego caught up in imaginary intercourse with other egos, and then to discover within itself the difference between being subject of the "enunciated" and subject of the "enunciation." It is in guise of the latter that the subject functions as subject of the unconscious and has finally come to be "where It was."

Lacan refers to such an exchange as a "dialectic of intersubjectivity" (1966a, 53), but is it really that? Hardly. What takes place is less a reciprocal exchange between two subjects than the attunement of one subject (the analysand) to the discourse of the Other coursing through it, with the help of another subject (the analyst). It is understandable, then, why Lacan soon completely drops the term "intersubjectivity" from his vocabulary. It is understandable, too, why he speaks disparagingly of a practice of psychoanalysis that remains caught on the level of the purely imaginary, such as one that overidealizes the paragon of "so-called genital love," or one that exaggerates the function of "object relations" in the process. Both neglect the fact that the Freudian unconscious is essentially the "discourse of the Other." In any case, it is the primacy of the Other over all subjectivity that accounts for the "veritable gymnastics" of intersubjective relationships on which the Seminar dwells (54).

The third installment of this postfactum propaedeutic to the Seminar receives the title "Parenthesis of Parentheses" with reference to the fact that the basic paradigm for the symbolic chain already raised to a second degree of sophistication in the Introduction is now transposed into a different key, a sequence of o 's and 1 's, scanned by parentheses and parentheses within parentheses (behind this is an argument made more fully elsewhere).⁶ The language of o 's and 1 's is the binary language of absence/presence proper to combinatorial analysis, and as Lacan sees it, this was initially made possible through the development of calculus by Pascal. Whereas modern science in the classical sense had always been

concerned with attempting to give a place in the symbolic order (with "exactitude") to the real—that is, to what is always found "at the same place"—the calculus of possibilities made it possible to think that symbolic "place" for itself both as presence and as absence. "Instead of the science of what is found at the same place, there is thus substituted the science of the combination of places as such" (Lacan 1978b, 345). The search for the laws that govern this combination has culminated in the science of cybernetics. The apogee of such a science would be the hypothesis (and the contemporary explosion of computer science would seem to confirm it) that "anything can be written in o and 1 " (1978b, 346). Thus, by way of example, we can see (fig. 6) how the fundamental paradigm of the Introduction can be written (56 n. 2).



Be that as it may, it is essential to Lacan's argument that "the chain of possible combinations . . . can be studied as such, as an order that subsists with its own rigor, independently of all subjectivity" (1978b, 350). As such it is the foundation of any theory of games, laws of chance, and science of strategy. It is this sense that we understand Lacan to have in mind when he speaks of the symbolic order as the "absolute Other" (58).

Given this cybernetic subtext, the thrust of the argument remains the same as heretofore: that the symbolic order determines the subject according to laws that govern a finite number of possibilities, even for what appear to be matters of "chance." Here the emphasis is on the significance of Poe's account in the original story of the youngster's success with the game of "even and odd." The point is to distinguish clearly a purely dyadic (essentially imaginary) intersubjectivity between child and adversary from "veritable subjectivity" (57), which implies the third dimension of the "absolute Other" (58). Lacan points out that the identification of the child (i.e., "player") with his adversary through mimicry and projection of internal attitudes is essentially "imaginary," though pertaining to the "symbolic" to the extent that it is identification with the reasoning process of the adversary. If the adversary is simple and his reasoning naive, it is fairly easy for the player to outguess him by assuming a kind of analogy with himself. But what if the adversary is as sophisticated as the player himself? If the game remains on the level of

reciprocal identification, the outcome will be the result of oscillating guesswork between them (1978b, 213–14). The intersubjectivity here remains dyadic. But if both players resort to “reason,” then a third dimension is introduced: the function of the symbolic. For recourse is made to some sort of operating principle (Lacan calls it “law”) that guides the choices involved. Then the task of one player will be to conceal that “law” from his opponent by whatever ruse he can, the task of the other to discover it. Once the true pattern of choice, no matter how complex, of one player is discovered, the other is bound to win. For example, Lacan relates how a colleague, experimenting with this game, resorted to a pattern of choice based upon the transposition into conventional terms of letters from a verse of Mallarmé (see Lacan 1978b, 224). “But if the game had lasted the length of a whole poem, and if, miraculously, the adversary had been able to recognize it [for what it was], he [i.e., the adversary] would have won every time [*à tout coup*]” (59).

If, then, there is such a thing as the Freudian unconscious—at least as we are given to understand it, say, in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Freud 1960b [1901]), where nothing happens by pure “chance”—then it must be conceived of as being a “law” of that kind. That is why it is not altogether unthinkable that a modern calculator, “by disengaging the phrase that modulates the long-term choices of a subject without his knowing it (*à son insu et à long terme*) might come to win the game of ‘even and odd’ beyond all customary proportions” (Lacan 1966a, 59). There is a paradox in this, however, for we would refuse to qualify such a mechanism as a “thought machine” (*machine-à-penser*), not because it lacks human consciousness, but because it does not “think” any more than the ordinary human does. “We don’t think either at the moment that we perform an operation. We follow exactly the same mechanisms as the machines” (1978b, 350), that is, the pattern of the signifying system as such (*appels du signifiant*) (1966a, 59–60). This is what we take to be the absolute Other.

Note that “thought/think” here are used in a more restricted sense than Lacan uses them elsewhere to refer to “signifying mechanisms” only (e.g., 1977, 165–66/517). Note, too, that in passing from the example of the “law” in a poem of Mallarmé to the notion of “law” as the unconscious of Freud, Lacan has moved from a level of intersubjectivity to one of transsubjectivity, the dimension of the “absolute Other.” This will have certain consequences, of course, for the manner of conceiving the nature of the subject that is determined by this law, but that is not the issue

here. In any case, if analysts find such a conception of the unconscious disturbing, that can only be because they fail to realize that it is precisely such a notion of unconscious determination—or overdetermination—that accounts for so-called free association (1966a, 60).

But such determination—and Lacan insists on it—is not “real” but “symbolic.” We take him to mean that the determination in question does not function on the level where science gives symbolic structure to the real, hence on the level of observable, scientifically calculable “reality,” in such a way as to jeopardize the laws of chance as science or mathematics discerns them (see 1978b, 340–45). Rather, it functions on the level of the “symbolic,” the “chain of possible combinations,” antecedent to any human observability and independent of all subjectivity, making the laws of chance possible. At any rate, this absolute Other, by determining the subject as a signifying system, dominates it. This, for Lacan, is the “bottom line.”

It was to illustrate this domination that Lacan chose to analyze the Poe story that contains the account of the game of “even and odd.” Since the anecdote makes clear that more is involved in the child’s expertise than a simple matter of chance, Lacan finds in Poe a kindred spirit, who gave evidence by his account that he anticipated the laws of combinatorial analysis and strategy. It was because his auditors found the exposition of the Poe text helpful that Lacan, in response to their request, decided to publish it separately (1966a, 61).

NOTES

1. Lacan prefers this translation to “repetition compulsion” for *Wiederholungszwang*. His reasons will appear shortly.

2. See Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (1977); Muller and Richardson (1982).

3. In this mode of citation, the first page number refers to the English translation (here, of *Écrits: A Selection* [Lacan 1977]), the second to the French original (Lacan 1966a).

4. In these citations with no date, the first page number refers to the English translation by Mehlman (chap. 2) of Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” the second to the French original (Lacan 1966a).

5. Three years later (1969), a two-volume paperback edition of selections from the *Écrits* appeared in the “Points” collection of Seuil and included (7–12) an untitled foreword addressed to some unnamed other. It repeats certain major themes of the Seminar with some interesting new formulations, but it is largely

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.