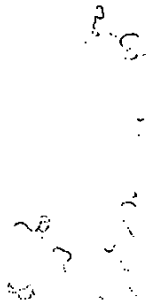


XVI

The Purloined Letter



The captivating paper you heard yesterday presented you with what we would call the play of the image and the symbol.¹ That not everything in this relation can be expressed in genetic terms is in fact what emerges from Mme Dolto's work, and that is precisely why she is *at one* with our teaching.

There are thousands of ways of becoming interested as therapists in the aetiology of schizophrenia. To be sure, there is doubtless a medical dimension here, that of diagnosis, of prognosis, but by adapting her vantage point, she throws vivid and profound light on the characteristic phenomenon of this stage of individual development, and no praise is too high for the genius and honesty of her experience. We can't make our categories work everywhere, but nonetheless they enable us to operate a wholesale reshaping of nosography, such as Perrier has started on.

O. MANNONI: *What bothers me is that you assimilate drawing, the graphic, to the imaginary. Now, it seems to me that a drawing is already an obscure elaboration of the imaginary.*

I talked about the imaginary, I didn't say that it was a drawing, which is already a symbol.

O. MANNONI: *But not quite, which is what intrigues me.*

Of course, it will intrigue you so long as we haven't taken a drawing as the object, nor begun to raise the question as to what it is together. But it isn't our object this year.

My comments last time were aimed at giving you a clear sense of the relation of the subject to the symbolic function. We will take further steps in that direction today.

¹ On 26 April 1955, Françoise Dolto gave a paper to a Scientific Session of the Société Française de Psychanalyse, entitled 'A clinical case of the recovery of language'.

1

The symbol's emergence into the real begins with a wager. The very notion of cause, when viewed as being capable of bringing with it a mediation between the chain of symbols and the real, is established on the basis of an original wager – will it be this or not? It's not for nothing that the notion of probability takes up a place at the very heart of the development of the physical sciences, as the most recent discussions in epistemology show us; nor is it for nothing that probability theory is reviving a set of problems which, throughout the history of thought, for centuries, have alternately been highlighted and occulted.

The wager lies at the heart of any radical question bearing on symbolic thought. Everything comes back to *to be or not to be*,² to the choice between what will or won't come out, to the primordial couple of *plus* or *minus*. But presence as absence connotes possible absence or presence. As soon as the subject himself comes to be, he owes it to a certain non-being on which he raises his being. And if he isn't, if he isn't something, he obviously bears witness to some kind of absence, but he will always remain purveyor of this absence, I mean that he will bear the burden of its proof for lack of being capable of proving the presence.

That's what's important about this chain of *pluses* and *minuses*, aligned here on a bit of paper, drawn from diverse experimental set-ups. The examination of the results we've gathered has concrete value, in showing certain deviations in the curve of gains and losses.

As we saw last time, playing amounts to pursuing in a subject an alleged regularity which escapes observation, but which must be translated into the results by something of a deviation in the probability curve. That is in fact what the facts tend to show, indicating that just by the simple fact of dialogue, even the most blind, no pure game of chance exists, instead there is already the articulation of one word with another. This word is included in the fact that even when the subject plays by himself, his play only has any meaning if he says in advance what he thinks will come out. You can play heads or tails by yourself. But from the point of view of speech, you aren't playing by yourself – there is already the articulation of three signs, comprising a win or a loss, and this articulation prefigures the very meaning of the result. In other words, if there is no question, there is no game, if there is no structure there is no question. The question is constituted, organised, by the structure.

By itself, the play of the symbol represents and organises, independently of the peculiarities of its human support, this something which is called a subject. The human subject doesn't foment this game, he takes his place in it, and plays the role of the little *pluses* and *minuses* in it. He is himself an element in this chain

² English in the original.

which, as soon as it is unwound, organises itself in accordance with laws. Hence the subject is always on several levels, caught up in crisscrossing networks.

Anything from the real can always come out. But once the symbolic chain is constituted, as soon as you introduce a certain significant unity, in the form of unities of succession, what comes out can no longer be just anything.

Let us agree to group the *pluses* and the *minuses* which may come up into threes, and to call the sequences 1, 2, or 3, according to which type they belong.

(1)	(2)	(3)
+ + +	+ + -	+ - +
- - -	- - +	- + -
	- + +	
	+ - -	

This transformation alone gives rise to extremely precise laws. The 1s, the 2s, and the 3s cannot succeed each other in just any order. A 1 will never be able to follow a 3, a 1 will never come after any odd-numbered sequence of 2s. But after an even number of 2s, a 1 is possible. An indefinite number of 2s is always possible between a 1 and a 3.

Starting with this, you can constitute other significant unities, representing the intervals between two of these groups.

Passing from 1 to 2	→ β
Passing from 2 to 2	→ γ
Passing from 1 to 1	} → α
Passing from 1 to 3	
Shift back from 2 to 1	} → δ
Shift back from 2 to 3	

You can verify that after the repetition of a great number of *α*s, if there'd been a *β* before, only a *δ* could follow. So this is a primitive symbolic organisation which already enables one to go beyond the metaphors I used the other day in speaking of memory internal to the symbol. In some way, the series of *α*s remembers that it cannot express anything but a *δ*, if a *β*, however far away it might have been, occurred before the series of *α*s.

You see the possibilities of demonstration and theorematisation which can be derived from the simple use of these symbolic series. From the start, and independently of any attachment to some supposedly causal bond, the symbol already plays, and produces by itself, its necessities, its structures, its organisations. That is indeed what occurs in our discipline, in so far as it consists in getting to the bottom of the significance of the symbolic order for the world of the human subject.

Within this perspective, what is immediately clear is what I have called the inmixing of subjects. I will illustrate it for you, since chance has offered it to us, with the story of *The Purloined Letter*, from which we took the example of the game of even and odd.



2

This example is introduced by the spokesman of the tale's meaning, and it is supposed to give an elementary image of the intersubjective relation, founded upon the following – as a function of the other's supposed capacities for trickery, for dissimulation, for strategy, capacities to be found in a dual reflective relation, the subject assumes the thought of this other. This depends upon the idea that there is a way of distinguishing the understanding of the idiot from that of the intelligent man.

I have stressed how fragile this point of view is, even how completely alien it is to what is at issue, for the simple reason that the intelligent thing to do, in this case, is to play the idiot. However, Poe is a prodigiously alert man, and all you have to do is read the whole of the text to see the extent to which the symbolic structure of the story far surpasses the scope of this reasoning, so attractive for a moment, but excessively weak, and whose sole function here is as a booby trap.

I would like those who have read *The Purloined Letter* since I mentioned it to raise their hands – not even half the room!

Even so, I think you know that it's a story about a letter stolen in sensational and exemplary circumstances, which is narrated by a hapless prefect of police, who plays the role, classic in this kind of mythology, of someone who has to find what is being sought after, but who cannot but end up losing the thread. In short, this prefect asks a certain Dupin to get him out of this tangle. Dupin, for his part, represents the character, more mythical still, who understands everything. But the story goes well beyond the register of comedy tied to the fundamental images which make up the genre of police detection.

The august figure whose outline is to be discerned in the background of the story seems to be none other than a royal personage. The scene is set in France, under the restored monarchy. So the authority is certainly not invested with the sacred aspect which can keep at a distance the hands of the bold as they make an attempt on it.

A minister, himself a man of high rank, of great social facility, who is in the confidence of the royal couple, since he is to be found discussing affairs of State in the private quarters of the King and the Queen, notices the discomforture of the latter, who is trying to dissimulate from her august partner the presence on the table of nothing less than a letter, whose superscription and meaning the minister immediately remarks. A secret correspondence is at stake. If the letter is there, thrown indifferently on the table, it is precisely so that the King won't

notice it. The Queen is banking on his inattention, maybe even his blindness.

The minister, for his part, keeping his eyes skinned, realises what is going on, and plays a little game, which consists in first diverting the company, then in taking from his pocket a letter which happens to be on him, and which vaguely resembles the object – from now on we can call it the object of litigation. After having waved it around, he casually places it on the table next to the first letter. Then, profiting from the inattention of the main character, all he has to do is gently take the letter, and put it in his pocket without the Queen, who hasn't missed a single detail of this entire scene, being able to do anything but resign herself to watching the disappearance under her very eyes of this compromising document.

I'll skip the rest. At all costs, the Queen wants to recover this instrument of pressure, if not of blackmail. She calls in the police. The police, whose destiny it is to find nothing, find nothing. And it is Dupin who solves the problem, and discovers the letter, in the minister's apartment, in the most obvious place, within reach, scarcely disguised at all. To be sure, it would seem that it shouldn't have escaped the notice of the police, since it was included within the orbit of their microscopic examination.

In order to lay his hands on it, Dupin gets someone to fire a shot outside. While the minister goes to the window to see what is happening, Dupin goes to the letter, and quickly substitutes another for it, containing the following verses:

. . . *un dessein si funeste,*

*S'il n'est digne d'Atrée, est digne de Thyeste.*³

These lines are taken from Crébillon the elder's *Atrée et Thyeste*, and have a far greater significance than just being an excuse for our re-reading the whole of this rather curious tragedy.

This episode is quite odd, if one includes in it the note of cruelty with which the character who seems the most detached, impartial, the Dupin of the tale, rubs his hands and gloats over the thought of the drama which he is bound to have triggered. At this point, it isn't only Dupin speaking, but the storyteller, the mirage of the author. We will see what this mirage signifies.

The drama will come to a climax as follows – the minister, when challenged to show his strength, because from then on he'll be resisted, one day will pull out the letter. *Show me* – he'll be told – *Here it is* – he will answer. And he'll be covered in ridicule, if not caught up in tragedy.

So that is how the tale unfolds.

There are two great scenes – not in the sense in which we say primal scene – the scene of the letter purloined and the scene of the letter recovered, and then some accessory scenes. The scene in which the letter is recovered is duplicated,

³ ' . . . so infamous a scheme/ If not worthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes'. – Act V, Scene V.

since, having discovered where it is, Dupin doesn't take it straightaway – he has to set the trap, prepare his little cabal, and also the substitute-letter. There is also the imaginary scene at the end, in which we see the enigmatic character of the story meeting his end, this ambitious character, so singularly etched out, of whom one wonders what his ambition actually is. Is he simply a gambler? He gambles with a challenge, his aim – and that is what would make him an ambitious man – seems to be to show how far he can go. Where he goes is of no importance to him. The aim of his ambition is dissipated by the essential fact of its exercise.

Who are the characters? We could count them on our fingers. There are the real characters – the King, the Queen, the minister, Dupin, the prefect of police and the *agent provocateur* who shoots in the street. There are also those who do not appear on stage and make back-stage noises. These are the *dramatis personae*, in general one has a list of them at the beginning of a play.

Isn't there another way of doing it?

The characters in question can be defined differently. They can be defined beginning with the subject, more precisely beginning with the relation determined by the aspiration of the real subject through the necessity of the symbolic linking process.

Let us begin with the first scene. There are four characters – the King, the Queen, the minister, and the fourth, who is it?

M. GUÉNINCHAULT: *The letter*.

Yes, of course, the letter and not the person who sends it. Although his name is given towards the end of the novel, he has only a fictional importance, whereas the letter is indeed a character. It is so much a character that we are completely entitled to identify it with the key-schema we came upon, at the end of the dream of Irma's injection, in the formula for trimethylamine.

The letter is here synonymous with the original, radical, subject. What we find here is the symbol being displaced in its pure state, which one cannot come into contact with without being immediately caught in its play. Thus, the tale of *The Purloined Letter* signifies that there's nothing in destiny, or causality, which can be defined as a function of existence. One can say that, when the characters get a hold of this letter, something gets a hold of them and carries them along and this something clearly has dominion over their individual idiosyncracies. Whoever they might be, at this stage of the symbolic transformation of the letter, they will be defined solely by their position in relation to this radical subject, by their position in one of the CH₃s. This position isn't fixed. In so far as they have entered into the necessity, into the movement peculiar to the letter, they each become, in the course of successive scenes, functionally different in relation to the essential reality which it constitutes. In other words, to take this story up again in its exemplary form, for each of them

the letter is his unconscious. It is his unconscious with all of its consequences, that is to say that at each point in the symbolic circuit, each of them becomes someone else.

That is what I am going to try to show you.

3

Every human drama, every theatrical drama in particular, is founded on the existence of established bonds, ties, pacts. Human beings already have commitments which tie them together, commitments which have determined their places, names, their essences. Then along comes another discourse, other commitments, other speech. It is quite certain that there'll be some places where they'll have to come to blows. All treaties aren't signed simultaneously. Some are contradictory. If you go to war, it is so as to know which treaty will be binding. Thank God, there are many occasions on which one doesn't go to war, and treaties continue to hold good, the slipper continues to circulate amongst people, in several directions all at once, and sometimes the object of a game of hunt-the-slipper encounters that of another game of hunt-the-slipper. Subdivision, reconversion, substitution take place. Whoever is engaged in playing hunt-the-slipper in one circle has to hide the fact that he is also playing in another.

It's not for nothing that we see royalty appearing here. They become symbolic of the fundamental character of the commitment entered into in the beginning. Respect for the pact which unites a man and a woman has a value essential to the whole of society, and this value has always been embodied to the greatest extent in the persons of the royal couple, who are playing. This couple is the symbol of the major pact, which reconciles the male element and the female element, and it traditionally plays a mediating role between everything we don't know, the cosmos, and the social order. Quite rightly, there's nothing more scandalous and reprehensible than something which threatens it.

To be sure, in the present state of interhuman relations, tradition has been pushed into the background, or at least it is veiled. You remember the saying of King Farouk, according to which there are now only five kings left in the world, the four kings in a deck of cards and the King of England.

What, after all, is a letter? How can a letter be purloined [*volée*]?⁴ To whom does it belong? To whoever sent it or to whoever it is addressed? If you say that it belongs to whoever sent it, what makes a letter a gift? Why does one send a letter? And if you think that it belongs to the recipient, how is it that, under

⁴ In what follows, there is an extended pun on the two meanings of *voler* – to fly, and to steal, to purloin. Cf. 'to lift'.

certain circumstances, you return your letters to the person who, for a period in your life, bombarded you with them?

When one considers one of those proverbs attributed to the wisdom of nations – the wisdom of which is thus denominated by antiphrase – one is sure to light upon a stupidity. *Verba volant, scripta manent*. Has it occurred to you that a letter is precisely speech which flies [*vole*]? If a stolen [*volée*] letter is possible, it is because a letter is a fly-sheet [*feuille volante*]. It is *scripta* which *volant*, whereas speech, alas, remains. It remains even when no one remembers it any more. Just as, after five hundred thousand signs in the series of *pluses* and *minuses*, the appearance of α , β , γ , δ will still be determined by the same laws.

Speech remains.⁵ You can't help the play of symbols, and that is why you must be very careful what you say. But the letter, for its part, that goes away. It wanders all by itself. I have often insisted, so that M. Guiraud might understand, that there could be two kilos of language on the table. There is no need for there to be that much – a very small sheet of vellum is just as much a language [*langage*] being here. It is here, and it exists only as language, it is the fly-sheet. But it is also something else, which has a particular function, absolutely incapable of being assimilated to any other human object.

So the characters play their parts. There is a character who trembles, the Queen. Her function consists in not trembling beyond a certain limit. Were she to tremble just a touch more, if the reflection of the lake which she represents – because she is the only one who is truly fully aware of the scene – were further troubled, she would no longer be the Queen, she would be completely ridiculous, and we wouldn't be able to bear Dupin's final cruelty. But she stays mum. There's a character who doesn't see anything, the King. There is the minister. There is the letter.

This letter, this speech addressed to the Queen by someone, the duc de S., to whom is it truly addressed? As soon as it is speech, it may have several functions. It has the function of a certain pact, of a certain trust. It doesn't matter whether it is about the duke's love or about a plot against the security of the State, or even about a banality. There it is, disguised in a kind of presence-absence. There it is, but it isn't there, it only has its own value in relation to everything it threatens, to everything it violates, to everything it flouts, to everything it places in danger or in suspense.

This letter, which doesn't have the same meaning everywhere, is a truth which is not to be divulged. As soon as it gets into the pocket of the minister, it is no longer what it was before, whatever it was that it had been. It is no longer a love letter, a letter of trust, the announcement of an event, it is evidence, on this occasion a court exhibit. If we imagine that this poor King, seized by some great enthusiasm which would make of him a king of greater grace, one of those

⁵ It should be borne in mind that Lacan is referring to specific occasions of speaking, as well as to the function of speech in general, which the translation of both '*les paroles*' and '*une parole*' by 'speech' might lead one to overlook.

kings who isn't easy-going, who isn't capable of letting something go past, and is capable of sending his worthy spouse in front of the judges, as was seen at certain moments in English history – it's always England – we realise that the identity of the recipient of a letter is as problematic as the question of knowing to whom it belongs. In any case, from the moment it falls into the hands of the minister, it has in itself become something else.

The minister then does something very peculiar. You'll say that it is in the nature of things. But why should we, us analysts, be satisfied with the crude appearances of motivations?

I wanted to take a letter of the period out of my pocket to show you how they were folded, and naturally I've forgotten it at home. At that time, letters were very pretty. They were folded more or less like this – and one put a seal or a sealing wafer on it.

The minister wants the letter to go unnoticed, by means of his cunning trick, so he folds it the other way, and crumples it. By refolding it, it is quite possible to make a small surface, blank and flat, appear, on which one can place another superscription and another seal, black instead of red. In place of the slanted writing of the noble lord, there's the feminine writing which addresses the letter to the minister himself. And it is in this guise that the letter lies in the card-rack where the lynx eye of Dupin will not miss it, because he has, as have we, meditated on what a letter is.

This transformation is not sufficiently well explained, for us analysts, by the fact that the minister wants it not to be recognised. He didn't transform it in any old way. This letter, whose nature we do not know, he has in some way addressed it to himself with its new and false appearance, it is even specified by whom – by a woman of his own standing, who has a diminutive feminine hand – and he has it sent to him with his own seal.

Now this is a curious relation to oneself. The letter undergoes a sudden feminisation, and at the same time it enters into a narcissistic relation – since it is now addressed in this sophisticated feminine hand, and bears his own seal. It's a sort of love-letter he's sent himself. This is very obscure, indefinable, I don't want to force anything, and in truth if I mention this transformation, it is because it is correlative of something else far more important, concerning the subjective behaviour of the minister himself.

Let us pause over this drama, let us see what knits it together.

What makes the fact that the letter is in the possession of the minister so painful that everything stems from the Queen's absolutely imperative need to recover it?

As the narrator, who is also a witness, one of the intelligent interlocutors, observes, this affair gains its significance solely if the Queen knows that the document is in the hands of the minister. She knows, while the King knows nothing.

Let us suppose that the minister then behaves with intolerable cheek. He

knows he is powerful, he behaves as such. And the Queen – we are obliged to think that she has a voice in these affairs – intervenes on his behalf. The desires one attributes to the powerful minister are satisfied, so and so is nominated to such and such a position, he acquires some specified person as a colleague, he is permitted to form majorities in the monarchical Parliament, which is quite clearly all too constitutional. But there's nothing to indicate that the minister has ever said anything, ever asked anything of the Queen. On the contrary, he has the letter and he remains silent.

He remains silent, while he is the holder of a letter which threatens the foundation of the pact. He holds the threat of a profound, unrecognised, repressed disorder, and he remains silent. His attitude might be one which we would qualify as being highly moral. He might have made representations to the Queen. He would then, of course, be hypocritical, but he could pose as the defender of the honour of his master, as the vigilant guardian of order. And perhaps the intrigue established with the duc de S. is dangerous to the policies which he takes to be the good ones. But he does nothing of the sort.

He is presented to us as an essentially romantic character, and he is somewhat reminiscent of M. de Chateaubriand, whom we would not recall as being a very noble character, had he not been Christian. Indeed, if we read the true meaning of his *Mémoires*, doesn't he declare himself tied to the monarchy by his solemn pledge, only to tell us, in the most clearcut fashion, that, having said that, he thinks they are filth? In such a way that he can seem to cut the figure of this *monstrum horrendum* we are told about in order to justify Dupin's final outburst. As the reading of Chateaubriand demonstrates, there is a way of defending principles which turns out to be the best way of destroying them.

Why are we told that the minister is such a monster, a man devoid of principles? When you look more closely, it means that he gives no sense of something of the order of compensation or of some sort of sanction to what he has in his power. He makes nothing of the knowledge he has as to the truth about the pact. He doesn't reproach the Queen, he doesn't urge her to return to the order of things, by placing himself in the position of a confessor or director of conscience, no more than he will say tit for tat to her. He suspends the power conferred on him by the letter in indeterminacy, he gives it no symbolic meaning, all he plays on is the fact that this mirage, this reciprocal fascination is established between himself and the Queen, which is what I told you about earlier on, in speaking of the narcissistic relation. The dual relation between master and slave, founded in the last resort on the indeterminate threat of death, but on this occasion on the fears of the Queen.

These fears of the Queen, if you look at them closely, are quite out of proportion. For, as is noted in the tale, this letter may well be a terrible weapon, but all that is needed for it to be destroyed is for it to be put to use. It is a double-edged sword. We don't know what would ensue from the disclosure of the letter

to the retributive justice, not only of a King, but of an entire council, of the entire organisation involved in such a scandal.

In the end, the intolerable nature of the pressure constituted by the letter is due to the fact that the minister has the same attitude as the Queen in relation to the letter – he doesn't speak of it. And he doesn't speak of it because he can no more speak of it than she can. And simply from the fact that he cannot speak of it, he finds himself in the course of the second scene in the same position as the Queen, and he won't be able to do anything other than let himself be dispossessed of it. This is not due to the ingenuity of Dupin, but to the structure of things.

The purloined letter has become a hidden letter. Why don't the policemen find it? They don't find it because they do not know what a letter is. They don't know that because they are the police. Every legitimate power always rests, as does any kind of power, on the symbol. And the police, like all powers, also rest on the symbol. In troubled times, as you have found out, you would let yourselves be arrested like sheep if some guy had said *Police* to you and shown you a card, otherwise you would have started beating him up as soon as he laid a hand on you. Except there's a small difference between the police and power, namely that the police have been persuaded that their efficacy rests on force – not so as to put trust in them, but on the contrary to curb their functions. And thanks to the fact that the police think that they are able to exercise their functions through force, they are as powerless as one could wish.

When one teaches them something different, as has been done for some time in some parts of the world, we know what it leads to. One obtains universal adherence to what we will simply call doctrine. One can put anyone in more or less any position in relation to the system of symbols, and one thus extracts all the confessions in the world, you can make anyone endorse any element of the symbolic chain, at the whim of the symbol's naked power when a certain personal meditation is missing.

Believing in force, and by the same token in the real, the police search for the letter. As they say – *We looked everywhere*. And they didn't find, because what was at stake was a letter and a letter is precisely nowhere.

That isn't a witticism. Think about it – why don't they find it? It is there. They have seen it. What did they see? A letter. They may even have opened it. But they didn't recognise it. Why? They had a description of it – *It has a red seal and a certain address*. Now, it has another seal and it doesn't have that address. You will tell me – *What about the text?* Well, that's it, they weren't given the text. For, one or the other must be true, either the text has some importance or it doesn't. If it has some importance, and even if no one besides the King could understand it, there is nonetheless some point in not yelling it from the roof tops.

You do see, then, that only in the dimension of truth can something be

hidden. In the real, the very idea of a hidden place is insane – however deep into the bowels of the earth someone may go bearing something, it isn't hidden there, since if he went there, so can you. Only what belongs to the order of truth can be hidden. It is truth which is hidden, not the letter. For the policemen, the truth doesn't matter, for them there is only reality, and that is why they do not find anything.

In contrast, besides his remarks about the game of even and odd, Dupin makes linguistic, mathematical, religious observations, he constantly speculates about the symbol, even going so far as to speak of the non-sense of mathematics – for which I apologise to the mathematicians present here. Why don't you try, he says, to say one day to a mathematician that $x^2 + px$ maybe isn't exactly equal to q – and he'll immediately flatten you. But that's not true, since I often share my suspicions on this subject with Riguet, and nothing like that ever happened to me. On the contrary, our friend encourages me to pursue these speculations. In the end, it is because Dupin has thought a little about the symbol and about truth that he will see what there is to be seen.

In the scene which is described to us, Dupin finds himself treated to an odd display. The minister reveals a splendid indolence – which doesn't fool the astute man, who knows that beneath it there's an extreme vigilance, the terrible daring of the romantic character capable of anything, for whom the term *sang-froid* seems to have been invented, take a look at Stendhal. So there he is, lounging, bored, dreaming – *In a decadent epoch nothing is sufficient to occupy the mind of a great thinker. What is to be done when everything is going to the dogs?* That's the theme. While this is going on, Dupin, with green glasses on, looks everywhere and tries to make us believe that it is his genius which enables him to see the letter. But that's not true.

In the same way as the Queen had in fact indicated the letter to the minister, so it is the minister who surrenders his secret to Dupin. Isn't there some echo between the letter with a feminine superscription and this languishing Paris? Dupin literally reads what has become of the letter in the enervated attitude of this character of whom nobody knows what he wants, besides pushing as far as possible the gratuitous exercise of his activity as gambler. He defies the world just as he defied the royal couple with the abduction of the letter. What does this mean? – save that in order to be in the same position vis-à-vis the letter as the Queen was, in an essentially feminine position, the minister falls prey to the same trick as she did.

You will tell me that there aren't three characters plus the letter, as before. The letter is indeed there, there are two characters, but where is the King? Well, it is obviously the police. If the minister feels so at ease, that's because the police forms part of his security, as the King formed part of the Queen's security. An ambiguous protection – it is the protection which he owes

her in the sense in which a husband owes aid and protection to his wife, it is also the protection which she owes to his blindness. But all it took was a little, a small change of equilibrium, for the letter to be lifted through the chink. And that's what happens to the minister.

It is a mistake on his part to think that, since the police who've been searching his town-house for months haven't found it, he has no cause for worry. This doesn't prove anything, no more than the presence of the King incapable of seeing the letter was an efficacious protection for the Queen. What's his mistake? It is having forgotten that if the police haven't found the letter, it isn't that the letter can't be found, but rather that the police were looking for something else. The ostrich feels secure because its head is buried in the sand – he's the perfected ostrich, who would think itself safe because another ostrich [*autre autruche*] – *other-ich* [*autrui-che*] – has its head buried in the sand.⁶ And it leaves its behind to be plucked by a third, who takes possession of its feathers and makes a panache of them.

The minister is in what had been the Queen's position, the police are in that of the King, of this degenerate King who believes only in the real, and who sees nothing. The step-wise displacement of the characters is perfect. And simply because he interposed himself in the rest of the discourse, and came into possession of this little nothing of a letter, sufficient to wreak havoc, this most cunning of foxes, this most ambitious of climbers, this intriguer's intriguer, this dilettante's dilettante, doesn't see that his secret will be pinched from under his nose.

It doesn't take much, just something sufficiently reminiscent of the police, to draw his attention away. In fact, if the incident in the street attracts his attention, it is because he knows himself to be under surveillance from the police – *How come something is going on in front of my house when there are three cops standing at each corner?* Not only has he become feminised through his possession of the letter, but the letter, whose relation to the unconscious I have told you of, even makes him forget the essential. You know the story of the man found on a desert island where he's sought refuge so as to forget – *To forget what? – I've forgotten.* Well then, he has also forgotten that, just the fact of being under surveillance from the police doesn't at all mean that nobody will be able to get the better of you.

The next step is rather odd. How does Dupin behave? Not that there is a long interval between the prefect of police's two visits. As soon as he has the letter, Dupin doesn't breathe a word of it to anyone either. In short, having this letter – this really is the signification of the wandering truth – shuts your trap. And indeed to whom would he have been able to talk about it? He must have been quite encumbered by it.

⁶ The puns here are on '*autre*' (other) and '*autruche*' (ostrich) and '*autrui*' (others).

Thank God the prefect of police always returns to the scene of the crime, so the prefect comes round and asks him some questions. The other tells him some absolutely priceless story about free consultations. Someone is trying to sponge information about a prescription from an English doctor – *What would you have directed him to take? – Why, take advice.* That's how Dupin tells the prefect of police that a fee wouldn't be that unwelcome. The good man immediately pays up, and the other says to him – *It's in the drawer there.*

Does this mean that this Dupin, who up until then was an admirable, almost excessively lucid character, has all of a sudden become a small time wheeler and dealer? I don't hesitate to see in this action the re-purchasing of what one could call the bad *mana* attached to the letter. And indeed, from the moment he receives his fee, he has pulled out of the game. It isn't only because he has handed the letter over to another, but because his motives are clear to everyone – he got his money, it's no longer of any concern to him. The sacred value of remuneration of the fee kind is clearly indicated by the context of the medical story.

I don't mean to insist on it, but you might gently point out to me that we, who spend our time being the bearers of all the purloined letters of the patient, also get paid somewhat dearly. Think about this with some care – were we not to be paid, we would get involved in the drama of Atreus and Thyestes, the drama in which all the subjects who come to confide their truth in us are involved. They tell us their damned [*sacré*] stories, and because of that we are not at all within the domain of the sacred and of sacrifice. Everyone knows that money doesn't just buy things, but that the prices which, in our culture, are calculated at rock-bottom, have the function of neutralising something infinitely more dangerous than paying in money, namely owing somebody something.

That is what it is all about. Anyone who has this letter enters into the zone of shadow caused by the fact that it is addressed to whom? if not to whom it may concern – the King. And it will reach him in the end, but not quite the way Dupin tells it in his little imaginary story, in which the minister, following some snub from the Queen, is stupid enough to let the story out. It really does reach the King, a King who still doesn't know anything. But the character of the King has changed in the meanwhile. Having shifted one notch along, and become the Queen, it is now the minister who is the King. In the third stage, he has taken the place of the King, and he has the letter.

It is obviously no longer the letter which passed from Dupin to the prefect of police – and from there into the dark cabinet, for you can't tell us that the odyssey of the letter has come to an end – it is a new form of the letter, which Dupin gave him, far more the instrument of fate than Poe leads us to understand, a provocative form which endows the short story with its cutting and cruel edge, ripe for consumption by *midinettes*. When the minister opens the paper, it is these lines which will forcibly strike him.

. . . un dessein si funeste,

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

And, in this way, if he ever has to open this letter, he would be obliged to submit to the consequences of his own actions, like Thyestes to eat his own children. And that, after all, is what we have to deal with every day, each time the line of symbols reaches its terminal point – these are our actions come to search us out. All of a sudden we find ourselves having to pay in full. It is a matter, as they say, of *accounting* for your crimes – which moreover means, that if you know how to account for them, you won't be punished. If he really is mad enough to get out the letter, and especially not to check a bit in advance that it is indeed this letter which is there, all the minister will be capable of doing is to follow the order of the day which I ironically threw out in Zurich, in answer to Leclair – *Eat your Dasein!* That is Thyestes's dish *par excellence*.

The minister would really have had to push the paradox of the gambler to its limit of madness for him to take out the letter. He really would have to be a man without any principles whatsoever, without even this, the last principle, the one which for the most part remains to us, which is simply the shadow of stupidity. If he falls prey to passion, he will find the Queen generous, worthy of respect and love – it's completely ridiculous, but it will save him. If he falls prey to pure and simple hatred, he will try to strike his blow in an efficient manner. It is really only if his *Dasein* has become completely detached from any inscription in any kind of order, including that of intimacy, that of his desk, his table, it is really only if that is the case that he will have to drink the bitter cup to the dregs.

We could write all of this with small *alphas, betas, gammas*. Everything which could serve to define the characters as real – qualities, temperament, heredity, nobility – has nothing to do with the story. At every moment each of them, even their sexual attitude, is defined by the fact that a letter always reaches its destination.

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