
Seminar on “The Purloined Letter”

*Und wenn es uns glückt,
Und wenn es sich schickt,
So sind es Gedanken.*

My research has led me to the realization that repetition automatism (*Wiederholungszwang*) has its basis in what I have called the *insistence* of the signifying chain. I have isolated this notion as a correlate of the *ex-sistence* (that is, of the eccentric place) in which we must necessarily locate the subject of the unconscious, if we are to take Freud’s discovery seriously. As we know, it is in the experience inaugurated by psychoanalysis that we can grasp by what oblique imaginary means the *symbolic* takes hold in even the deepest recesses of the human organism.

The teaching of this seminar is designed to maintain that imaginary effects, far from representing the core of analytic experience, give us nothing of any consistency unless they are related to the symbolic chain that binds and orients them.

I am, of course, aware of the importance of imaginary impregnations (*Prägung*) in the partializations of the symbolic alternative that give the signifying chain its appearance. Nevertheless, I posit that it is the law specific to this chain which governs the psychoanalytic effects that are determinant for the subject—effects such as foreclosure (*Verwerfung*), repression (*Verdrängung*), and negation (*Verneinung*) itself—and I add with the appropriate emphasis that these effects follow the displacement (*Entstellung*) of the signifier so faithfully that imaginary factors, despite their inertia, figure only as shadows and reflections therein.

But this emphasis would be lavished in vain if it merely served, in your

view, to abstract a general form from phenomena whose particularity in analytic experience would remain the core thing to you and whose original composite nature could be broken down only through artifice.

This is why I have decided to illustrate for you today a truth which may be drawn from the moment in Freud’s thought we have been studying—namely, that it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject—by demonstrating in a story the major determination the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier.

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It is this truth, let us note, that makes the very existence of fiction possible. Thus a fable is as appropriate as any other story for shedding light on it—provided we are willing to put the fable’s coherence to the test. With this proviso, a fable even has the advantage of manifesting symbolic necessity all more purely in that we might be inclined to believe it is governed by the arbitrary.

This is why, without looking any further, I have taken my example from the very story in which we find the dialectic of the game of “even or odd,” from which we very recently gleaned something of importance. It is probably no accident that this story proved propitious for the continuation of a line of research which had already relied upon it.

As you know, I am referring to the tale Baudelaire translated into French as “La lettre volée.” In it we must immediately distinguish between a drama and its narration as well as the conditions of that narration.

We quickly perceive, moreover, what makes these components necessary and realize that their composer could not have created them unintentionally.

For the narration effectively doubles the drama with a commentary without which no *mise-en-scène* would be possible. Let us say that the action would remain, strictly speaking, invisible to the audience—aside from the fact that the dialogue would be expressly and by dramatic necessity devoid of whatever meaning it might have for a listener. In other words, nothing of the drama could appear, either in the framing of the images or the sampling of the sounds, without the oblique light shed, so to speak, on each scene by the narration from the point of view that one of the actors had while playing his role in it.

There are two such scenes, the first of which I shall immediately designate as the primal scene, and by no means inattentively, since the second may be considered its repetition in the sense of the latter term that I have been articulating in this very seminar.

The primal scene is thus performed, we are told, in the royal boudoir, such that we suspect that the “personage of most exalted station,” also referred to as the “illustrious personage,” who is alone there when she receives a letter, is the Queen. This sense is confirmed by the awkward situation she is put in “by the entrance of the other exalted personage,” of whom we have already

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been told prior to this account that, were he to come to know of the letter in question, it would jeopardize for the lady nothing less than her “honor and peace.” Any doubt that he is in fact the King is promptly dissipated in the course of the scene which begins with the entrance of Minister D—. For at that moment the Queen can do no better than to take advantage of the King’s inattentiveness by leaving the letter on the table turned face down, “address uppermost.” This does not, however, escape the Minister’s lynx eye, nor does he fail to notice the Queen’s distress and thus to fathom her secret. From then on everything proceeds like clockwork. After dealing with the business of the day with his customary speed and intelligence, the Minister draws from his pocket a letter similar in appearance to the one before his eyes and, after pretending to read it, places it next to the other. A bit more conversation to pull the wool over the royal eyes, whereupon he picks up the embarrassing letter without flinching and decamps, while the Queen, on whom none of his maneuver has been lost, remains unable to intervene for fear of attracting the attention of her royal spouse, who is standing at her elbow at that very moment.

An ideal spectator might have noticed nothing of this operation in which no one batted an eye, and whose *quotient* is that the Minister has filched from the Queen her letter and, even more important, that the Queen knows that he now has it, and by no means innocently.

A *remainder* that no analyst will neglect, trained as he is to remember everything having to do with the signifier even if he does not always know what to do with it: the letter, left on hand by the Minister, which the Queen is now free to crumple up.

14 Second scene: in the Minister’s office at the Ministerial hotel. We know from the account the Prefect of Police has given Dupin, whose genius for solving enigmas Poe mentions here for the second time, that the police have searched the hotel and its surroundings from top to bottom for the last three months, returning there as often as the Minister’s regular absences at night allow them to. In vain, however, although anyone can deduce from the situation that the Minister keeps the letter within easy reach.

Dupin calls on the Minister. The latter greets him with a show of nonchalance, affecting in his conversation romantic ennui. Meanwhile Dupin, who is not taken in by this feigning, inspects the premises, his eyes protected by green spectacles. When his gaze alights upon a very chafed letter—which seems to have been abandoned in a compartment of a wretched, eye-catching, trumpery card-rack of pasteboard, hanging right smack in the middle of the mantelpiece—he already knows that he has found what he was looking for.

His conviction is reinforced by the very details which seem designed to contradict the description he has been given of the stolen letter, with the exception of the size, which fits.

Whereupon he has but to take his leave, after having “forgotten” his snuff-box on the table, in order to return the following day to reclaim it—armed with a facsimile of the letter in its present state. When an incident out in the street, prepared for the right moment, draws the Minister to the window, Dupin seizes the opportunity to snatch, in his turn, the letter while replacing it with an imitation [*semblant*], and need but maintain the appearances of a normal exit thereafter.

Here too all has transpired, if not without any sound, at least without any din. The quotient of the operation is that the Minister no longer has the letter, but he knows nothing of it and is far from suspecting that it is Dupin who ravished it from him. Moreover, what he is left with here is far from insignificant for what follows. I shall return later to what led Dupin to jot something down on his factitious letter. In any case, when the Minister tries to make use of it, he will be able to read the following words, whose source, Dupin tells us, is Crébillon’s *Atrée*, written so that he may recognize Dupin’s hand:

*Un dessein si funeste
S’il n’est digne d’Atrée, est digne de Thyeste.*

Need I emphasize the resemblance between these two actions? Yes, for the similarity I have in mind is not made up of the simple union of traits chosen only in order to prepare [*appareiller*] their difference. And it would not suffice to retain the traits of resemblance at the expense of the others for any truth whatsoever to result therefrom. It is, rather, the intersubjectivity by which the two actions are motivated that I wish to highlight, as well as the three terms with which that intersubjectivity structures them.

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These terms derive their privileged status from the fact that they correspond both to the three logical moments through which decision is precipitated and to the three places which this decision assigns to the subjects that it separates out.

This decision is reached in the moment of a glance [*regard*].¹ For the maneuvers that follow, however stealthily that moment is prolonged in them, add nothing to it, no more than their deferral of the opportunity in the second scene disrupts the unity of that moment.

This glance presupposes two others, which it assembles to provide a view of the opening left in their fallacious complementarity, anticipating there the

plunder afforded by that uncovering. Thus three moments, ordering three glances, sustained by three subjects, incarnated in each case by different people.

The first is based on a glance that sees nothing: the King and then the police.

The second is based on a glance which sees that the first sees nothing and deceives itself into thereby believing to be covered what it hides: the Queen and then the Minister.

The third is based on a glance which sees that the first two glances leave what must be hidden uncovered to whomever would seize it: the Minister and finally Dupin.

In order to get you to grasp in its unity the intersubjective complex thus described, I would willingly seek patronage for it in the technique legendarily attributed to the ostrich [*autruche*] when it seeks shelter from danger. For this technique might finally be qualified as political, distributed as it is here among three partners, the second believing himself invisible because the first has his head stuck in the sand, all the while letting the third calmly pluck his rear. We need but enrich its proverbial denomination by a letter, producing *la politique de l'autruche*, for this technique in itself to finally take on a new everlasting meaning.

Having thus established the intersubjective module of the action that repeats, we must now indicate in it a *repetition automatism* in the sense that interests us in Freud's work.

16 The fact that we have here a plurality of subjects can, of course, in no way constitute an objection to those who are long accustomed to the perspectives summarized by my formulation: *the unconscious is the Other's discourse*. I will not remind you now what the notion of the *inmixing of subjects*, recently introduced in my reanalysis of the dream of Irma's injection, adds here.

What interests me today is the way in which the subjects, owing to their displacement, relay each other in the course of the intersubjective repetition.

We shall see that their displacement is determined by the place that a pure signifier—the purloined letter—comes to occupy in their trio. This is what will confirm for us that it is repetition automatism.

It does not, however, seem superfluous, before pursuing this line of inquiry, to ask whether the aim of the tale and the interest we take in it—inasmuch as they coincide—do not lie elsewhere.

Can we consider the fact that the tale is told to us as a mystery story to be a simple “rationalization,” as we say in our crude jargon?

In truth, we would be justified in considering this to be highly dubious, noting as we do that everything about a crime or offense that creates such a mystery—its nature and motives, instruments and execution, the procedure

used to discover its author, and the means employed to convict him for it—is carefully eliminated here at the beginning of each episode.

Indeed, the act of deceit is as clearly known from the outset as the plotting of the culprit and its effects on his victim. The problem, as it is exposed to us, is limited to the search for the deceitfully acquired object, for the purposes of restitution; and it seems quite intentional that the solution is already known when it is explained to us. Is that how we are kept in suspense? However much credit we may give the conventions of a genre for arousing a specific interest in the reader, we should not forget that the "Dupin tale"—this being the second to come out—is a prototype, and that since it receives its genre only from the first, it is a little too early for the author to play on a convention.

It would, however, be equally excessive to reduce the whole thing to a fable whose moral would be that, in order to shelter from inquisitive eyes correspondence whose secrecy is sometimes necessary to conjugal peace, it suffices to leave the letters lying around on one's table, even if one turns them signifying face down. For that would be a lure which, personally, I would never recommend anyone try, lest he be disappointed at having trusted in it.

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Is there then no other mystery here than incompetence resulting in failure on the part of the Prefect of Police? Is there not a certain discordance on Dupin's part, which we are loath to admit, between the assuredly penetrating remarks (which are not, however, always absolutely relevant when generalized) with which he introduces us to his method and the way in which he in fact intervenes?

Were we to pursue a bit further our sense that we are being hoodwinked, we might soon begin to wonder whether—from the inaugural scene, which only the rank of the protagonists saves from degenerating into vaudeville, to the descent into ridicule that seems to await the Minister at the story's conclusion—it is not, indeed, the fact that everyone is duped which gives us such pleasure here.

I would be all the more inclined to think so in that, along with my readers, I would find anew here the definition I once gave, somewhere in passing, of the modern hero, "represented by ridiculous feats in situations of confusion."²

But are we ourselves not taken with the imposing bearing of the amateur detective, prototype of a new kind of braggart, as yet safe from the insipidity of our contemporary superman*?

That was a joke, yet it makes us note, by way of contrast, so perfect a verisimilitude in this tale that it may be said that truth here reveals its fictional ordering.

For this is certainly the pathway along which the reasons for this verisimilitude lead us. Entering first into its procedure, we perceive, in effect, a new

18 drama that I would call complementary to the first, since the first was what is termed a silent drama whereas the interest of the second plays on the properties of discourse.³

Indeed, while it is obvious that each of the two scenes of the real drama is narrated in the course of a different dialogue, one must be provided with certain notions brought out in my teaching to realize that this is not done simply to make the exposition more pleasing, but that the dialogues themselves, in the opposite use they make of the virtues of speech, take on a tension that makes them into a different drama, one which my terminology will distinguish from the first as sustaining itself in the symbolic order.

The first dialogue—between the Prefect of Police and Dupin—is played out as if it were between a deaf man and one who hears. That is, it represents the veritable complexity of what is ordinarily simplified, with the most confused of results, in the notion of communication.

This example demonstrates how communication can give the impression, at which theorists too often stop, of conveying in its transmission but one meaning, as though the highly significant commentary into which he who hears integrates it could be considered neutralized because it is unperceived by he who does not hear.

The fact remains that if we only retain the dialogue's meaning as a report, its verisimilitude appears to depend on a guarantee of accuracy. But the report then turns out to be more fruitful than it seems, provided we demonstrate its procedure, as we shall see by confining our attention to the recounting of the first scene.

For the double and even triple subjective filter through which that scene comes to us—a narration by Dupin's close friend (whom I will refer to henceforth as the story's general narrator) of the account by which the Prefect reveals to Dupin the version the Queen gave him of it—is not merely the consequence of a fortuitous arrangement.

19 If, indeed, the extremity to which the original narrator is reduced precludes her altering any of the events, we would be wrong to believe that the Prefect is authorized to lend her his voice here only owing to the lack of imagination for which he holds, as it were, the patent.

The fact that the message is retransmitted in this way assures us of something that is absolutely not self-evident: that the message truly belongs to the dimension of language.

Those who are here are familiar with my remarks on the subject, specifically those illustrated by the counterexample of the supposed language of bees, in which a linguist⁴ can see nothing more than a signaling of the location of

objects—in other words, an imaginary function that is simply more differentiated than the others.

Let me emphasize here that such a form of communication is not absent in man, however evanescent the natural pregivenness [*donné naturel*] of objects may be for him due to the disintegration they undergo through his use of symbols.

Something equivalent may, in effect, be grasped in the communion established between two people in their hatred directed at a common object, with the proviso that this can never occur except in the case of one single object, an object defined by the characteristics of (the) being that each of the two refuses to accept.

But such communication is not transmittable in symbolic form. It can only be sustained in relation to this object. This is why it can bring together an indefinite number of subjects in a common “ideal”; the communication of one subject with another within the group thus constituted will nonetheless remain irreducibly mediated by an ineffable relation.

This excursion is not merely a reminder here of principles distantly addressed to those who tax me with neglecting nonverbal communication; in determining the scope of what discourse repeats, it prepares the question of what symptoms repeat.

Thus the indirect relating [of the first scene] clarifies the dimension of language, and the general narrator, by redoubling it, “hypothetically” adds nothing to it. But this is not at all true of his role in the second dialogue.

For the latter is opposed to the first like the poles in language that I have distinguished elsewhere and that are opposed to each other like word to speech.

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Which is to say that we shift here from the field of accuracy to the register of truth. Now this register—I dare think I need not go back over this—is situated somewhere else altogether: at the very foundation of intersubjectivity. It is situated where the subject can grasp nothing but the very subjectivity that constitutes an Other as an absolute. I shall confine my attention, in order to indicate its place here, to evoking the dialogue which seems to me to warrant its attribution as a Jewish joke due to the nakedness with which the relation between the signifier and speech appears in the entreaty which brings it to a head: “Why are you lying to me?” one character exclaims exasperatedly, “Yes, why are you lying to me by saying you’re going to Cracow in order to make me believe you’re going to Lemberg, when in reality you *are* going to Cracow?”

A similar question might be raised in our minds by the torrent of aporias, eristic enigmas, paradoxes, and even quips presented to us as an introduction to Dupin’s method if the fact that they were confided to us by a would-be dis-

ciple did not add some virtue to them, owing to the act of delegation. Such is the unmistakable prestige of legacies: the witness' faithfulness is the wool pulled over the eyes of those who might criticize his testimony.

What could be more convincing, moreover, than the gesture of turning one's cards face up on the table? It is so convincing that we are momentarily persuaded that the prestidigitator has in fact demonstrated, as he promised he would, how his trick was performed, whereas he has only performed it anew in a purer form; this moment makes us appreciate the supremacy of the signifier in the subject.

This is how Dupin operates when he starts with the story of the child prodigy who takes in all his classmates at the game of even or odd with his trick of identifying with his opponent, concerning which I have shown that he cannot reach the first level of its mental elaboration—namely, the notion of intersubjective alternation—without immediately being tripped up by the stop of its recurrence.⁵

21 This does not stop us from being treated—in order to dazzle us—to the names of La Rochefoucauld, La Bruyère, Machiavelli, and Campanella, whose reputations now seem trivial compared to the child's prowess.

And then to Chamfort, whose maxim that “the odds are that every idea embraced by the public, every accepted convention, is foolish, since it suits the greatest number” will indubitably satisfy all those who think they escape its law, that is, precisely, the greatest number. The fact that Dupin taxes the French with dishonesty when they apply the word “analysis” to algebra has little chance of threatening our pride when, moreover, the freeing of that term for other ends implies nothing that should stop a psychoanalyst from considering himself in a position to assert his rights to it. And off he goes making philological remarks which should positively delight lovers of Latin; when he recalls without deigning to say any more about it that “‘*ambitus*’ [doesn't imply] ‘ambition,’ ‘*religio*’ ‘religion,’ ‘*homines honesti*’ a set of *honorable* men,” who among you would not take pleasure in remembering . . . what these words mean to assiduous readers of Cicero and Lucretius? No doubt Poe is having a good time . . .

But a suspicion dawns on us: isn't this display of erudition designed to make us hear the magic words of our drama?⁶ Isn't the prestidigitator repeating his trick before our eyes, without deluding us into thinking that he is divulging his secret to us this time, but taking his gamble even further by really shedding light on it for us without us seeing a thing? That would be the height of the illusionist's art: to have one of his fictional beings *truly fool us*.

And isn't it such effects which justify our harmless way of referring to many imaginary heroes as real personages?

Thus, when we are open to hearing the way in which Martin Heidegger uncovers for us in the word *alethes* the play of truth, we merely rediscover a secret to which truth has always initiated her lovers, and through which they have learned that it is in hiding that she offers herself to them *most truly*.

Thus, even if Dupin’s comments did not defy us so blatantly to lend credence to them [*y fier*], we would still have to make this attempt against the opposite temptation.

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Let us thus detect his track [*dépistons sa foulée*] where it throws us off track [*dépiste*].⁷ And first of all in the criticism by which he explains the Prefect’s lack of success. We already saw it surface in those furtive gibes the Prefect, in the first conversation with Dupin, paid no mind, finding in them only a pretext for hilarity. The fact that it is, as Dupin insinuates, because a problem is too simple, indeed too self-evident, that it may appear obscure, will never have any more impact on him than a somewhat vigorous rub of the ribcage.

Everything is done to make us believe he is an imbecile. This is powerfully articulated in the claim that he and his henchmen will never conceive of anything beyond what an ordinary rascal might imagine for hiding an object—that is, precisely the all-too-well-known series of extraordinary hiding places, running the gamut from hidden desk drawers to removable tabletops, from the unstitched upholstery of chairs to their hollowed-out legs, and from the back side of the quicksilvering of mirrors to the thickness of book bindings.

This gives way to making fun of the Prefect’s error when he deduces that because the Minister is a poet, he is only one remove from a fool, an error, it is argued, that simply consists, although this is hardly negligible, in a *non distributio medii*, since it is far from following from the fact that all fools are poets.

Yes indeed. But we ourselves are left to err regarding what constitutes the poet’s superiority in the art of concealment—even if he turns out to be a mathematician to boot—since we suddenly lose whatever momentum we had when we are dragged into a thicket of unprovoked arguments directed against the reasoning of mathematicians, who have never, to my knowledge, showed such devotion to their formulas as to identify them with reasoning reason. At least, let me bear witness to the fact that, unlike what seems to be Poe’s experience, I occasionally hazard such serious mischief (virtual blasphemy, according to Poe) before my friend Riguet—whose presence here guarantees you that my incursions into combinatorial analysis do not lead us astray—as to question whether perhaps “ $x^2 + px$ is *not* altogether equal to q ,” without ever (here I refute Poe) having to fend off any unexpected attack.

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Isn’t so much intelligence being expended then simply to divert our attention from what had been indicated earlier as given, namely, that the police have looked *everywhere*? We were to understand this—regarding the field in which

the police, not without reason, assumed the letter must be found—in the sense of an exhaustion of space, which is no doubt theoretical but which we are expected to take literally if the story is to have its piquancy. The division of the entire surface into numbered “compartments,” which was the principle governing the operation, is presented to us as so accurate that “the fiftieth part of a line,” it is said, could not escape the probing of the investigators. Are we not then within our rights to ask how it happened that the letter was not found *anywhere*, or rather to observe that nothing we are told about a higher-caliber conception of concealment ultimately explains how the letter managed to escape detection, since the field exhaustively combed did in fact contain it, as Dupin’s discovery eventually proved?

Must the letter then, of all objects, have been endowed with the property of “nullibiety,” to use a term which the well-known *Roget’s Thesaurus* picks up from the semiological utopia of Bishop Wilkins?⁸

It is evident (“a little *too* self-evident”)⁹ that the letter has, in effect, relations with location [*le lieu*] for which no French word has the entire import of the English adjective “odd.” *Bizarre*, by which Baudelaire regularly translates it into French, is only approximate. Let us say that these relations are *singuliers* (singular), for they are the very same ones that the signifier maintains with location.

24 You realize that my intention is not to turn them into “subtle” relations, that my aim is not to confuse letter with spirit [*esprit*], even when we receive the former by pneumatic dispatch, and that I readily admit that one kills if the other gives life, insofar as the signifier—you are perhaps beginning to catch my drift—materializes the instance of death. But whereas it is first of all the materiality of the signifier that I have emphasized, that materiality is *singular* in many ways, the first of which is not to allow of partition. Cut a letter into small pieces, and it remains the letter that it is—and this in a completely different sense than *Gestalttheorie* can account for with the latent vitalism in its notion of the whole.¹⁰

Language hands down its sentence to those who know how to hear it: through the use of the article employed as a partitive particle. Indeed, it is here that spirit—if spirit be living signification—seems, no less singularly, to allow for quantification more than the letter does. To begin with, through the very signification that allows us to say, “this discourse full of meaning” [*plein de signification*], just as it allows us to recognize *some* intentionality [*de l’intention*] in an act, to deplore that there is no longer *any* love [*plus d’amour*], to store up hatred [*de la haine*] and expend devotion [*du dévouement*], and to note that so much infatuation [*tant d’infatuation*] can be reconciled with the fact

that there will always be plenty *of ass* [de la *cuisse*] to go around and brawling among men [du *rififi chez les hommes*].

But as for the letter itself, whether we take it in the sense of a typographical element, of an epistle, or of what constitutes a man of letters, we commonly say that what people say must be understood *à la lettre* (to the letter or literally), that *a letter* is being held for you at the post office, or even that you are well versed in *letters*—never that there is (some amount of) *letter* [de la *lettre*] anywhere, whatever the context, even to designate late mail.

For the signifier is a unique unit of being which, by its very nature, is the symbol of but an absence. This is why we cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other objects, it must be *or* not be somewhere but rather that, unlike them, it will be *and* will not be where it is wherever it goes.

Let us, in fact, look more closely at what happens to the police. We are spared none of the details concerning the procedures used in searching the space subjected to their investigation: from the division of that space into volumes from which the slightest bulk cannot escape detection, to needles probing soft cushions, and, given that they cannot simply sound the hard wood [for cavities], to an examination with a microscope to detect gimlet-dust from any holes drilled in it, and even the slightest gaping in the joints [of the furniture]. As their network tightens to the point that, not satisfied with shaking the pages of books, the police take to counting them, don't we see space itself shed its leaves like the letter?

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But the seekers have such an immutable notion of reality [*réel*] that they fail to notice that their search tends to transform it into its object—a trait by which they might be able to distinguish that object from all others.

This would no doubt be too much to ask them, not because of their lack of insight but rather because of ours. For their imbecility is of neither the individual nor the corporate variety; its source is subjective. It is the imbecility of the realist who does not pause to observe that nothing, however deep into the bowels of the world a hand may shove it, will ever be hidden there, since another hand can retrieve it, and that what is hidden is never but what is *not in its place* [manque à sa place], as a call slip says of a volume mislaid in a library. And even if the book were on an adjacent shelf or in the next slot, it would be hidden there, however visible it may seem there. For it can *literally* [*à la lettre*] be said that something is not in its place only of what can change places—that is, of the symbolic. For the real, whatever upheaval we subject it to, is always and in every case in its place; it carries its place stuck to the sole of its shoe, there being nothing that can exile it from it.

Now, to return to our policemen, how could they have grasped the letter

when they took it from the place where it was hidden? What were they turning over with their fingers but something that *did not fit* the description they had been given of it? “A letter, a litter”: in Joyce’s circle, they played on the homophony of the two words in English.¹¹ The seeming scrap of waste paper [déch^{et}] the police were handling at that moment did not reveal its other nature by being only half torn in two. A different cipher on a seal [cach^{et}] of another color and the distinctive mark [cach^{et}] of a different handwriting in the superscription served as the most inviolable of hiding places [cach^{ettes}] here. And if they stopped at the reverse side of the letter, on which, as we know, the recipient’s address was written at that time, it was because the letter had for them no other side but this reverse side.

What might they have detected on the basis of its obverse? Its message, as it is often said, an answer pleasing to our amateur cybernetic streak? . . . But does it not occur to us that this message has already reached its addressee and has even been left behind along with the insignificant scrap of paper, which now represents it no less well than the original note?

If we could say that a letter has fulfilled its destiny after having served its function, the ceremony of returning letters would be a less commonly accepted way to bring to a close the extinguishing of the fires of Cupid’s festivities. The signifier is not functional. And the mobilization of the elegant society, whose frolics we are following, would have no meaning if the letter limited itself to having but one. Announcing that meaning to a squad of cops would hardly be an adequate means of keeping it secret.

We could even admit that the letter has an entirely different (if not a more consuming) meaning to the Queen than the one it offers up to the Minister’s ken. The sequence of events would not be appreciably affected, not even if the letter were strictly incomprehensible to a reader not in the know.

For the letter is certainly not incomprehensible to everybody, since, as the Prefect emphatically assures us, eliciting everyone’s mockery, “the disclosure of the document to a third person, who shall be nameless” (his name leaping to mind like a pig’s tail twixt the teeth of Father Ubu) “would bring in question the honor of a personage of most exalted station”—indeed, the illustrious personage’s very “honor and peace [would be] so jeopardized.”

Hence it would be dangerous to let circulate not only the meaning but also the text of the message, and it would be all the more dangerous the more harmless it might appear to be, since the risks of an unwitting indiscretion by one of the letter’s trustees would thus be increased.

Nothing then can save the police’s position, and nothing would be changed by making them more “cultured.” *Scripta manent*: in vain would they learn from a deluxe-edition humanism the proverbial lesson which the words *verba*

volant conclude. Would that it were the case that writings remain, as is true, rather, of spoken words [*paroles*]: for the indelible debt of those words at least enriches our acts with its transfers.

Writings scatter to the four winds the blank checks of a mad charge of the cavalry. And were there no loose sheets, there would be no purloined letters.

But what of it? For there to be purloined letters, we wonder, to whom does a letter belong? I stressed a moment ago the oddity implicit in returning a letter to the person who had formerly let ardently fly its pledge. And we generally deem unworthy the method of such premature publications, as the one by which the Knight of Eon put several of his correspondents in a rather pitiful position.

Might a letter to which the sender retains certain rights then not belong altogether to the person to whom it is addressed? Or might it be that the latter was never the true addressee?

What will enlighten us is what may at first obscure the matter—namely, the fact that the story tells us virtually nothing about the sender or about the contents of the letter. We are merely informed that the Minister immediately recognized the hand that wrote the Queen's address on it and it is only incidentally mentioned, in a discussion of the camouflaging of the letter by the Minister, that the original cipher is that of the Duke of S—. As for the letter's import, we know only the dangers it would bring with it were it to fall into the hands of a certain third party, and that its possession has allowed the Minister to wield, "for political purposes, to a very dangerous extent," the power it assures him over the person concerned. But this tells us nothing about the message it carries.

Love letter or conspiratorial letter, informant's letter or directive, demanding letter or letter of distress, we can rest assured of but one thing: the Queen cannot let her lord and master know of it.

Now these terms, far from allowing for the disparaging tone they have in bourgeois comedy, take on an eminent meaning since they designate her sovereign, to whom she is bound by pledge of loyalty, and doubly so, since her role as spouse does not relieve her of her duties as a subject, but rather elevates her to the role of guardian of the power that royalty by law incarnates, which is called legitimacy.

Thus, whatever action the Queen has decided to take regarding the letter, the fact remains that this letter is the symbol of a pact and that, even if its addressee does not assume responsibility for this pact, the existence of the letter situates her in a symbolic chain foreign to the one which constitutes her loyalty. Its incompatibility with her loyalty is proven by the fact that posses-

sion of the letter is impossible to bring forward publicly as legitimate, and that in order to have this possession respected, the Queen can only invoke her right to privacy, whose privilege is based on the very honor that this possession violates.

For she who incarnates the graceful figure of sovereignty cannot welcome even a private communication without power being concerned, and she cannot lay claim to secrecy in relation to the sovereign without her actions becoming clandestine.

Hence, the responsibility of the letter's author takes a back seat to that of its holder: for the offense to majesty is compounded by *high treason*.

I say the "holder" and not the "owner." For it becomes clear thus that the addressee's ownership of the letter is no less questionable than that of anyone else into whose hands it may fall, since nothing concerning the existence of the letter can fall back into place without the person whose prerogatives it infringes on having pronounced judgment on it.

29 However, none of this implies that, even though the letter's secrecy is indefensible, it would in any way be honorable to denounce that secret. *Honesti homines*, decent people, cannot get off the hook so easily. There is more than one *religio*, and sacred ties shall not cease to pull us in opposite directions any time soon. As for *ambitus*, a detour, as we see, is not always inspired by ambition. For although I am taking a detour here, I have not stolen [*volé*] it—that's the word for it—since, to be quite frank, I have adopted the title Baudelaire gave the story only in order to stress, not the signifier's "conventional" nature, as it is incorrectly put, but rather its priority over the signified. Despite his devotion, Baudelaire nevertheless betrayed Poe by translating his title "The Purloined Letter" as "La lettre volée" (the stolen letter), the English title containing a word rare enough for us to find it easier to define its etymology than its usage.

To *purloin*, says the Oxford English Dictionary, is an Anglo-French word—that is, it is composed of the prefix *pur-*, found in *purpose*, *purchase*, and *purport*, and of the Old French word *loing*, *loinger*, *longé*. We recognize in the first element the Latin *pro-*, as opposed to *ante*, insofar as it presupposes a back in front of which it stands, possibly to guarantee it or even to stand in as its guarantor (whereas *ante* goes forth to meet what comes to meet it). As for the second, the Old French word *loigner* is a verb that attributes place *au loing* (or *longé*), which does not mean *au loin* (far off), but *au long de* (alongside). To purloin is thus *mettre de côté* (to set aside) or, to resort to a colloquialism which plays off the two meanings, *mettre à gauche* (to put to the left side [literally] and to tuck away).

Our detour is thus validated by the very object which leads us into it: for

we are quite simply dealing with a *letter* which has been *detoured*, one whose trajectory has been *prolonged* (this is literally the English word in the title), or, to resort to the language of the post office, a letter *en souffrance* (awaiting delivery or unclaimed).

Here then, the letter's singularity, reduced to its simplest expression, is "simple and odd," as we are told on the very first page of the story; and the letter is, as the title indicates, the *true subject* of the tale. Since it can be made to take a detour, it must have a trajectory *which is proper to it*—a feature in which its impact as a signifier is apparent here. For we have learned to conceive of the signifier as sustaining itself only in a displacement comparable to that found in electronic news strips or in the rotating memories of our machines-that-think-like-men,¹² this because of the alternating operation at its core that requires it to leave its place, if only to return to it by a circular path.

This is what happens in repetition automatism. What Freud teaches us in the text I have been commenting on is that the subject follows the channels of the symbolic. But what is illustrated here is more gripping still: It is not only the subject, but the subjects, caught in their intersubjectivity, who line up—in other words, they are our ostriches, to whom we thus return here, and who, more docile than sheep, model their very being on the moment of the signifying chain that runs through them.

30

If what Freud discovered, and rediscovers ever more abruptly, has a meaning, it is that the signifier's displacement determines subjects' acts, destiny, refusals, blindnesses, success, and fate, regardless of their innate gifts and instruction, and irregardless of their character or sex; and that everything pertaining to the psychological pre-given follows willy-nilly the signifier's train, like weapons and baggage.

Here we are, in fact, once again at the crossroads at which we had left our drama and its round with the question of the way in which the subjects relay each other in it. My apologue is designed to show that it is the letter and its detour which governs their entrances and roles. While the letter may be *en souffrance*, they are the ones who shall suffer from it. By passing beneath its shadow, they become its reflection. By coming into the letter's possession—an admirably ambiguous bit of language—its meaning possesses them.

This is what is demonstrated to us by the hero of the drama that is recounted to us here, when the very situation his daring triumphantly crafted the first time around repeats itself. If he now succumbs to it, it is because he has shifted to the second position in the triad where he was initially in the third position and was simultaneously the thief—this by virtue of the object of his theft.

31 For if, now as before, the point is to protect the letter from inquisitive eyes, he cannot help but employ the same technique he himself already foiled: that of leaving it out in the open. And we may legitimately doubt that he thus knows what he is doing when we see him suddenly captivated by a dyadic relationship, in which we find all the features of a mimetic lure or of an animal playing dead, and caught in the trap of the typically imaginary situation of seeing that he is not seen, leading him to misconstrue the real situation in which he is seen not seeing. And what does he fail to see? The very symbolic situation which he himself was so able to see, and in which he is now seen seeing himself not being seen.

The Minister acts like a man who realizes that the police's search is his own defense, since we are told he deliberately gives the police total access to his hotel by his absences; he nevertheless overlooks the fact that he has no defense against anything beyond that form of search.

This is the very *autruicherie*—if I may be allowed to multiply my monster by layering—he himself crafted, but it cannot be by some imbecility that he now comes to be its dupe.

For in playing the game of the one who hides, he is obliged to don the role of the Queen, including even the attributes of woman and shadow, so propitious for the act of concealment.

I do not mean to reduce the veteran couple of Yin and Yang to the primal opposition of dark and light. For its precise handling involves what is blinding in a flash of light, no less than the shimmering that shadows exploit in order not to release their prey.

Here the sign and being, marvelously disjoint, reveal which wins out when they are opposed. A man who is man enough to brave, and even scorn, a woman's dreaded ire suffers the curse of the sign of which he has dispossessed her so greatly as to undergo metamorphosis.

For this sign is clearly that of woman, because she brings out her very being therein by founding it outside the law, which ever contains her—due to the effect of origins—in a position as signifier, nay, as fetish. In order to be worthy of the power of this sign she need but remain immobile in its shadow, managing thereby, moreover, like the Queen, to simulate mastery of nonaction that the Minister's "lynx eye" alone was able to see through.

The man is now thus in this ravished sign's possession, and this possession is harmful in that it can be maintained only thanks to the very honor it defies, and it is accursed for inciting him who maintains it to punishment or crime, both of which breach his vassalage to the Law.

There must be a very odd *noli me tangere* in this sign for its possession to,

like the Socratic stingray, make its man so numb that he falls into what unequivocally appears in his case to be a state of inaction.

32

For in remarking, as the narrator does already in the first meeting, that the letter’s power departs when used, we perceive that this remark concerns only its use for ends of power—and simultaneously that the Minister will be forced to use it in this way.

For him to be unable to rid himself of it, the Minister must not know what else to do with the letter. For this use places him in so total a dependence on the letter as such, that in the long run this use no longer concerns the letter at all.

I mean that, for this use to truly concern the letter, the Minister—who, after all, would be authorized to do so by his service to the King, his master—could present respectful reproaches to the Queen, even if he had to ensure their desired effects by appropriate guarantees; or he could initiate a suit against the author of the letter (the fact that its author remains on the sidelines reveals the extent to which guilt and blame are not at stake here, but rather the sign of contradiction and scandal constituted by the letter, in the sense in which the Gospel says that the sign must come regardless of the misfortune of he who serves as its bearer); or he could even submit the letter as an exhibit in a case to the “third personage” who is qualified to decide whether he will institute a *Chambre Ardente* for the Queen or bring disgrace upon the Minister.

We will not know why the Minister does not use the letter in any of these ways, and it is fitting that we do not, since the effect of this non-use alone concerns us; all we need to know is that the manner in which the letter was acquired would pose no obstacle to any of them.

For it is clear that while the Minister will be forced to make use of the letter in a non-significant way, its use for ends of power can only be potential, since it cannot become actual [*passer à l’acte*] without immediately vanishing. Hence the letter exists as a means of power only through the final summons of the pure signifier—either by prolonging its detour, making it reach he whom it may concern through an extra transit (that is, through another betrayal whose repercussions the letter’s gravity makes it difficult to prevent), or by destroying the letter, which would be the only sure way, as Dupin proffers at the outset, to be done with what is destined by nature to signify the canceling out [*annulation*] of what it signifies.

33

The ascendancy which the Minister derives from the situation is thus not drawn from the letter but, whether he knows it or not, from the personage it constitutes for him. The Prefect’s remarks thus present him as someone “who dares all things,” which is commented upon significantly: “those unbecoming as well as those becoming a man,” words whose thrust escapes Baudelaire

when he translates: “ce qui est indigne d’un homme aussi bien que ce qui est digne de lui” (those unbecoming a man as well as those becoming him). For in its original form, the appraisal is far more appropriate to what concerns a woman.

This allows us to see the imaginary import of the personage, that is, the narcissistic relationship in which the Minister is engaged, this time certainly without knowing it. It is also indicated right on the second page of the English text by one of the narrator’s remarks, whose form is worth savoring: the Minister’s ascendancy, we are told, “would depend upon the robber’s knowledge of the loser’s knowledge of the robber.” Words whose importance the author underscores by having Dupin repeat them word for word right after the Prefect’s account of the scene of the theft of the letter, when the conversation resumes. Here again we might say that Baudelaire is imprecise in his language in having one ask and the other confirm in the following terms: “Le voleur sait-il? . . .” (Does the robber know?), then: “Le voleur sait . . .” (The robber knows). What? “que la personne volée connaît son voleur” (that the loser knows her robber).

For what matters to the robber is not only that the said person know who robbed her, but that she know what kind of robber she is dealing with; the fact is that she believes him capable of anything, which should be understood as follows: she confers upon him a position that no one can really assume, because it is imaginary, that of absolute master.

In truth, it is a position of absolute weakness, but not for the person we lead to believe in it. The proof is not merely that the Queen takes the audacious step of calling upon the police. For the police merely conform to their displacement to the next slot in the array constituted by the initial triad, accepting the very blindness that is required to occupy that place: “No more sagacious agent could, I suppose,” Dupin notes ironically, “be desired, or even imagined.” No, if the Queen has taken this step, it is less because she has been “driven to despair,” as we are told, than because she takes on the burden [*charge*] of an impatience that should rather be attributed to a specular mirage.

34

For the Minister has a hard time confining himself to the inaction which is presently his lot. The Minister, in point of fact, is “not *altogether* a fool.” This remark is made by the Prefect, whose every word is golden: it is true that the gold of his words flows only for Dupin and does not stop flowing until it reaches the fifty thousand francs’ worth it will cost him by the metal standard of the day, though not without leaving him a tidy profit. The Minister then is not *altogether* a fool in his foolish stagnation, and this is why he must behave according to the mode of neurosis. Like the man who withdrew to an island to forget—to forget what? he forgot—so the Minister, by not making use of the

letter, comes to forget it. This is expressed by the persistence of his conduct. But the letter, no more than the neurotic's unconscious, does not forget him. It forgets him so little that it transforms him more and more in the image of her who offered it up to his discovery, and that he now will surrender it, following her example, to a similar discovery.

The features of this transformation are noted, and in a form characteristic enough in their apparent gratuitousness that they might legitimately be compared to the return of the repressed.

Thus we first learn that the Minister in turn has *turned* the letter *over*, not, of course, as in the Queen's hasty gesture, but more assiduously, as one turns a garment inside out. This is, in effect, how he must proceed, according to the methods of the day for folding and sealing a letter, in order to free the virgin space in which to write a new address.¹³

This address becomes his own. Whether it be in his handwriting or another's, it appears in a diminutive female script, and, the seal changing from the red of passion to the black of its mirrors, he stamps his own cipher upon it. The oddity of a letter marked with the cipher of its addressee is all the more worth noting as an invention because, although it is powerfully articulated in the text, it is not even mentioned thereafter by Dupin in the discussion he devotes to his identification of the letter.

35

Whether this omission is intentional or involuntary, it is surprising in the organization of a creation whose meticulous rigor is evident. But in either case it is significant that the letter which the Minister addresses to himself, ultimately, is a letter from a woman: as though this were a phase he had to go through owing to one of the signifier's natural affinities.

And everything—from the aura of nonchalance, that goes as far as an affectation of listlessness, to the display of an ennui verging on disgust in his conversation, to the ambiance that the author of the "Philosophy of Furniture"¹⁴ knows how to elicit from virtually impalpable details (like that of the musical instrument on the table)—seems to conspire to make a personage, whose every remark has surrounded him with the most virile of traits, exude the oddest *odor di femina* when he appears.

Dupin does not fail to emphasize that this is indeed an artifice, describing behind the spurious appearance the vigilance of a beast of prey ready to spring. But how could we find a more beautiful image of the fact that this is the very effect of the unconscious, in the precise sense in which I teach that the unconscious is the fact that man is inhabited by the signifier, than the one Poe himself forges to help us understand Dupin's feat? For, to do so, Poe refers to those toponymic inscriptions which a map, in order not to be silent, superimposes on its outline, and which may become the object of "a game of puzzles" in

which one has to find the name chosen by another player. He then notes that the name most likely to foil a novice will be one which the eye often overlooks, but which provides, in large letters spaced out widely across the field of the map, the name of an entire country . . .

36 Just so does the purloined letter, like an immense female body, sprawl across the space of the Minister's office when Dupin enters it. But just so does he already expect to find it there, having only to undress that huge body, with his eyes veiled by green spectacles.

This is why, without any need (nor any opportunity either, for obvious reasons) to listen in at Professor Freud's door, he goes straight to the spot where lies and lodges what that body is designed to hide, in some lovely middle toward which one's gaze slips, nay, to the very place seducers call Sant'Angelo's Castle in their innocent illusion of being able to control the City from the castle. Lo! Between the jambs of the fireplace, there is the object already in reach of the hand the ravisher has but to extend . . . Whether he seizes it above the mantelpiece, as Baudelaire translates it, or beneath it, as in the original text, is a question that may be abandoned without harm to inferences emanating from the kitchen.¹⁵

Now if the effectiveness of symbols stopped there, would it mean that the symbolic debt is extinguished there too? If we could believe so, we would be advised of the contrary by two episodes which we must be all the more careful not to dismiss as accessory in that they seem, at first blush, to be at odds with the rest of the work.

First of all, there is the business of Dupin's remuneration, which, far from being one last game, has been present from the outset in the rather offhanded question Dupin asks the Prefect about the amount of the reward promised him, and whose enormousness the Prefect, however reticent he may be about citing the exact figure, does not dream of hiding from him, even returning to the subject later in mentioning its having been doubled.

The fact that Dupin was previously presented to us as a virtual pauper taking refuge in ethereal pursuits ought rather to lead us to reflect on the deal he cuts for delivery of the letter, promptly assured as it is by the checkbook he produces. I do not regard it as negligible that the direct hint* by which he broaches the matter is a "story attributed to the personage, as famous as he was eccentric," Baudelaire tells us, of an English doctor named Abernethy; this doctor replied to a rich miser, who was hoping to sponge a free medical
37 opinion off him, not to take medicine, but rather to take advice.

Are we not, in fact, justified in feeling implicated when Dupin is perhaps about to withdraw from the letter's symbolic circuit—we who make ourselves

the emissaries of all the purloined letters which, at least for a while, remain *en souffrance* with us in the transference? And is it not the responsibility their transference entails that we neutralize by equating it with the signifier that most thoroughly annihilates every signification—namely, money?

But that’s not all here. The profit Dupin so blithely extracts from this feat, assuming its purpose is to allow him to withdraw his ante from the game before it is too late, merely renders all the more paradoxical, even shocking, the rebuke and underhanded blow he suddenly permits himself to deal the Minister, whose insolent prestige would, after all, seem to have been sufficiently deflated by the trick Dupin has just played on him.

I have already quoted the atrocious lines Dupin claims he could not stop himself from dedicating, in his counterfeit letter, to the moment at which the Minister, flying off the handle at the Queen’s inevitable acts of defiance, will think of bringing her down and will fling himself into the abyss—*facilis descensus Averni*,¹⁶ he says, waxing sententious—adding that the Minister will not fail to recognize his handwriting. Leaving behind a merciless opprobrium, at the cost of no peril to himself, would seem to be a triumph without glory over a figure who is not without merit, and the resentment Dupin invokes, stemming from “an evil turn” done him in Vienna (at the Congress?), merely adds an extra touch of darkness to it.

Let us consider this explosion of feeling more closely, however, and more specifically the moment at which it occurs in an act whose success depends on so cool a head.

It comes just after the moment at which it may be said that Dupin already holds the letter as securely as if he had seized it, the decisive act of identifying the letter having been accomplished, even though he is not yet in a position to rid himself of it.

He is thus clearly a participant in the intersubjective triad and, as such, finds himself in the median position previously occupied by the Queen and the Minister. In showing himself to be superior here, will he simultaneously reveal to us the author’s intentions?

38

While he has succeeded in putting the letter back on its proper course, it has yet to be made to reach its address. And that address is the place previously occupied by the King, since it is there that it must fall back into the order based on the Law.

As we have seen, neither the King nor the police who replaced Him in that position were capable of reading the letter because that *place entailed blindness*.

Rex et augur—the legendary archaism of the words seems to resound only to make us realize how derisive it is to call upon a man to live up to them. And history’s figures have hardly encouraged us to do so for some time now. It is

not natural for man to bear the weight of the highest of signifiers all alone. And the place he comes to occupy when he dons it may be equally apt to become the symbol of the most enormous imbecility.¹⁷

Let us say that the King here is invested—thanks to the amphibology natural to the sacred—with the imbecility that is based precisely on the Subject.

This is what will give meaning to the personages who succeed him in his place. Not that the police can be regarded as constitutionally illiterate, and we are aware of the role played by pikes planted around the university in the birth of the State. But the police who exercise their functions here are plainly marked by liberal forms, that is, by forms imposed on them by masters who are not very interested in enduring their indiscreet tendencies. This is why words are not minced, at times, regarding what is expected of them: “*Sutor ne ultra crepidam*, just take care of your crooks. We’ll even give you the scientific means with which to do so. That will help you not to think of truths you’d be better off leaving in the dark.”¹⁸

39 We know that the relief that results from such sensible principles shall have lasted but a morning’s time in history, and that everywhere the march of destiny is already bringing back, after a just aspiration to the reign of freedom, an interest in those who trouble it with their crimes, an interest that occasionally goes so far as to forge its own evidence. It may even be observed that this practice, which has always been accepted as long as it was engaged in only for the benefit of the greatest number, is in fact authenticated through public confessions of its forgeries by the very people who might well object to it: the most recent manifestation of the preeminence of the signifier over the subject.

The fact remains that police files have always been treated with a certain reserve, a reserve which goes well beyond the circle of historians, for some odd reason.

Dupin’s intended delivery of the letter to the Prefect of Police will diminish the magnitude of this evanescent credit. What now remains of the signifier when, having already been relieved of its message for the Queen, its text is invalidated as soon as it leaves the Minister’s hands?

The only thing left for it to do is to answer this very question: what remains of a signifier when it no longer has any signification? This is the very question asked of it by the person Dupin now finds in the place marked by blindness.

For this is clearly the question that has led the Minister there, assuming he is the gambler we are told he is, as his act suffices to indicate. For the gambler’s passion is no other than the question asked of the signifier, which is figured by the *automaton* of chance.

“What are you, figure of the dice I roll in your chance encounter (*tyche*)¹⁹

with my fortune? Nothing, if not the presence of death that makes human life into a reprieve obtained from morning to morning in the name of significations of which your sign is the shepherd’s crook. Thus did Scheherazade for a thousand and one nights, and thus have I done for eighteen months, experiencing the ascendancy of this sign at the cost of a dizzying series of loaded tosses in the game of even or odd.”

This is why Dupin, *from the place where he is [il est]*, cannot help but feel rage of a manifestly feminine nature at he who questions in this manner. The high-caliber image, in which the poet’s inventiveness and the mathematician’s rigor were married to the impassivity of the dandy and the elegance of the cheat, suddenly becomes, for the very person who gave us a taste of it, the true *monstrum horrendum*, to borrow his own words, “an unprincipled man of genius.”

40

It is here that the origin of the horror shows itself, and he who experiences it has no need to declare himself, most unexpectedly at that, “a partisan of the lady” in order to reveal it to us: ladies, as we know, detest it when principles are called into question, for their charms owe much to the mystery of the signifier.

This is why Dupin will at last turn toward us the dumbfounding [*médusante*] face of this signifier of which no one but the Queen has been able to read anything but the other face. The commonplace practice of supplying a quotation is fitting for the oracle that this face bears in its grimace, as is the fact that it is borrowed from tragedy:

*Un destin si funeste,
S’il n’est digne d’Atrée, est digne de Thyeste.*

Such is the signifier’s answer, beyond all significations: “You believe you are taking action when I am the one making you stir at the bidding of the bonds with which I weave your desires. Thus do the latter grow in strength and multiply in objects, bringing you back to the fragmentation of your rent childhood. That will be your feast until the return of the stone guest whom I shall be for you since you call me forth.”

To return to a more temperate tone, let us say—as goes the joke with which some of you who followed me to the Congress in Zurich last year and I rendered homage to the local password—that the signifier’s answer to whomever questions it is: “Eat your Dasein.”

Is that then what awaits the Minister at his appointment with fate? Dupin assures us that it is, but we have also learned not to be overly credulous of his diversions.

The audacious creature is, of course, reduced here to the state of imbecilic

41 blindness in which man finds himself in relation to the wall-like letters that dictate his destiny. But, in summoning him to confront them, what effect can we expect the sole provocations of the Queen to have on a man like him? Love or hatred. The one is blind and will make him lay down his arms. The other is lucid, but will awaken his suspicions. But provided he is truly the gambler we are told he is, he will consult his cards one final time before laying them on the table and, upon seeing his hand, will leave the table in time to avoid disgrace.

Is that all, and must we believe we have deciphered Dupin's true strategy beyond the imaginary tricks with which he was obliged to deceive us? Yes, no doubt, for if "any point requiring reflection," as Dupin states at the start, is examined "to better purpose in the dark," we may now easily read its solution in broad daylight. It was already contained in and easy to bring out of the title of our tale, according to the very formulation of intersubjective communication that I have long since offered up to your discernment, in which the sender, as I tell you, receives from the receiver his own message in an inverted form. This is why what the "purloined letter," nay, the "letter *en souffrance*," means is that a letter always arrives at its destination.

Guitrancourt and San Casciano, mid-May to mid-August 1956

Presentation of the Suite

To anyone wanting to get a feel for my seminar from this text, I hardly ever recommended it without advising him that this text had to serve to introduce him to the introduction that preceded it and that will follow it here.

This introduction was designed for others who were leaving, having gotten a feel for my seminar.

This advice usually was not followed, a taste for obstacles being the ornament of persevering in being.

I am only concerning myself here with the reader's economy [of effort] to return to the topic of whom my discourse is addressed to and to indicate what can no longer be denied: my writings have their place within an adventure which is that of the psychoanalyst, assuming psychoanalysis goes so far as to call him into question.

42 The detours of this adventure, and even its accidents, have led me to a teaching position.

Whence an intimate reference which, by first looking over this introduction, will be grasped in the reminder of exercises done as a group.

For the preceding text merely refines on the grace of one of those exercises.

One would thus make poor use of the introduction that follows were one to consider it difficult: That would be to transfer to the object that it presents what is related only to its aim, insofar as that aim is training.

The four pages that are a conundrum here for certain people were thus not intended to be confusing. I have reworked them slightly to remove any pretext one might come up with for ignoring what they say.

Which is that the remembering [*mémoration*] at stake in the unconscious—and I mean the Freudian unconscious—is not related to the register that is assumed to be that of memory, insofar as memory is taken to be a property of a living being.

To sharpen our focus on what this negative reference involves, I say that what has been imagined in order to account for this effect of living matter is not rendered any more acceptable to me by the resignation it suggests.

Whereas it is quite obvious that, in doing without this subjection, we can find in the ordered chains of a formal language the entire appearance of remembering, and quite especially of the kind required by Freud’s discovery.

I will therefore go so far as to say that the burden of proof rests, rather, with those who argue that the constitutive order of the symbolic does not suffice to explain everything here.

For the time being, the links of this order are the only ones that can be *suspected to suffice* to account for Freud’s notion of the indestructibility of what his unconscious preserves.

(I refer the reader to Freud’s text on the *Wunderblock* which, on this point and many others as well, goes far beyond the trivial meaning attributed to it by inattentive readers.)

The program traced out for us is hence to figure out how a formal language determines the subject.

But the interest of such a program is not simple, since it assumes that a subject will not fulfill it except by contributing something of his own to it.

A psychoanalyst can but indicate his interest in it, which is precisely as great as the obstacle he finds in it.

Those who share this interest agree and even the others would admit it, if they were appropriately questioned: we have here an aspect of subjective conversion that gave rise to a dramatic reaction in my companions, and the imputation of “intellectualization” expressed by others, with which they would like to thwart me, clearly shows what it protects when seen in this light.

Probably no one made a more praiseworthy effort in these pages than someone close to me who, in the end, saw fit only to denounce in them the hypostasis that troubled his Kantianism.

But the Kantian brush itself needs its alkali.

It is helpful here to introduce my objector, and even others who were less relevant, because of what they do each time—in explaining to themselves their everyday subject, their patient, as they say, or even explaining themselves to him—they employ magical thinking.

Let them enter through that door themselves; it is, in effect, the same step the first objector made to take from me the chalice of the hypostasis, whereas he had just filled the cup with his own hand.

For, with my α s, β s, γ s, and δ s, I do not claim to extract from the real more than I have presupposed in its given—in other words, nothing here—but simply to demonstrate that they already bring with them a syntax by simply turning this real into chance [*hasard*].

Regarding which I propose that the effects of repetition that Freud calls “automatism” come from nowhere else.

But, people object, my α s, β s, γ s, and δ s *are not* without a subject remembering them. This is precisely what I am calling into question here: what is repeated is a product, not of nothing from the real (which people believe they have to presuppose in it), but precisely of *what was not* [*ce qui n'était pas*].

Note that it then becomes less astonishing that what is repeated insists so much in order to get itself noticed.

The least of my “patients” in analysis attests to this, and in words that confirm all the better my doctrine since they are the same words that led me to it—as those whom I train know, having often heard my very terms anticipated in the hot-off-the-presses text of an analytic session.

Now, what I want to achieve is that the patient [*malade*] be heard in the proper manner at the moment at which he speaks. For it would be strange for one to listen only for the idea of what leads him astray at the moment at which he is simply prey to truth.

44 This is helpful in taking the psychologist’s assurance down a notch—in other words, the pedantry that invented the “level of aspiration,” for example, expressly, no doubt, to indicate his own therein as an unsurpassable upper limit.

It must not be thought that the philosopher with fine university credentials is the blackboard [*planche*] that can accommodate this *divertissement*.

It is here that, by echoing old School debates, my discussion discovers the intellectual’s debt, but it is also a question of the infatuation that must be removed.

Caught in the act of unduly imputing to me a transgression of the Kant-

ian critique, the subject, who was well-meaning in mentioning my text, is not Father Ubu and does not persist.

But he has little taste for adventure left. He wants to sit down. It is a corporal antinomy to the analyst's profession. How can one remain seated when one has placed oneself in the situation of no longer having to answer a subject's question in any way than by lying him down first? It is obvious that remaining standing is no less uncomfortable.

This is why the question of the transmission of psychoanalytic experience begins here, when the didactic aim is implied in it, negotiating a knowledge.

The impact of a market structure is not null in the field of truth, but it is scabrous there.

Introduction

The class of my seminar that I have written up to present here was given on April 26, 1955. It represents a moment in the commentary that I devoted to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* for the whole of that academic year.

It is well known that many people who authorize themselves the title of psychoanalyst do not hesitate to reject this text by Freud as superfluous and even risky speculation, and we can gauge—on the basis of the antinomy *par excellence* constituted by the notion of the "death instinct" with which it concludes—to what extent it can be unthinkable, if you will allow me the term, to most of them.

It is nevertheless difficult to consider this text—which serves as a prelude to the new topography represented by the terms "ego," "id," and "superego," which have become as prevalent in the work of theorists as in the popular mind—to be an excursion, much less a faux pas, in Freudian doctrine.

This simple apprehension is confirmed when we fathom the motivations that link the abovementioned speculation with the theoretical revision of which it turns out to be constitutive.

When we do so, we are left with no doubt but that the current use of these terms is bastardized and even ass-backwards; this can be clearly seen in the fact that the theorist and the man on the street use them identically. Which is, no doubt, what justifies the remark made by certain epigones to the effect that they find in these terms the means by which to bring the experience of psychoanalysis back into the fold of what they call general psychology.

Let me simply provide a few markers along our path.

Repetition automatism (*Wiederholungszwang*)—although the notion is

presented in the book in question here as designed to respond to certain paradoxes in clinical work, like the dreams found in traumatic neurosis and the negative therapeutic reaction—cannot be conceived of as an add-on to the doctrinal edifice, even if it is viewed as a crowning addition.

For it is his inaugural discovery that Freud reaffirms in it: namely, the conception of memory implied by his “unconscious.” The new facts provide him with an occasion to restructure that conception in a more rigorous manner by giving it a generalized form, but also to reopen his problematic to combat the decline, which one could sense already at that time, seen in the fact that people were taking its effects as a simple pre-given.

What is revamped here was already articulated in the “Project,”²⁰ in which Freud’s divination traced the avenues his research would force him to go down: the Ψ system, a predecessor of the unconscious, manifests its originality therein, in that it is unable to satisfy itself except by *refinding an object that has been fundamentally lost*.

46

This is how Freud situates himself right from the outset in the opposition Kierkegaard taught us about, regarding whether the notion of existence is founded upon reminiscence or repetition. If Kierkegaard admirably discerns in that opposition the difference between Antiquity’s conception of man and the modern conception of man, it appears that Freud makes the latter take its decisive step by ravishing the necessity included in this repetition from the human agent identified with consciousness. Since this repetition is symbolic repetition, it turns out that the symbol’s order can no longer be conceived of there as constituted by man but must rather be conceived of as constituting him.

This is why I felt obliged to give my audience practice in the notion of remembering implied by Freud’s work: I did this due to the all-too-well-founded consideration that by leaving it implicit, the very basics of analysis remain fuzzy.

It is because Freud does not compromise regarding the original quality of his experience that we see him constrained to evoke therein an element that governs it from beyond life—an element he calls the death instinct.

The indication that Freud gives here to those who call themselves his followers can only scandalize people in whom the sleep of reason is sustained by the monsters it produces, to borrow Goya’s pithy formulation.

For, in order to remain at his usual level of rigor, Freud only delivers his notion to us accompanied by an example that dazzlingly exposes the fundamental formalization which this notion designates.

This game, in which the child practices making an object (which is, moreover, indifferent by its very nature) disappear from his sight, only to bring it back, and then obliterate it anew, while he modulates this alternation with dis-

tinctive syllables—this game, as I was saying, manifests in its radical traits the determination that the human animal receives from the symbolic order.

Man literally devotes his time to deploying the structural alternative in which presence and absence each find their jumping-off point [*prennent . . . leur appel*]. It is at the moment of their essential conjunction and, so to speak, at the zero point of desire that the human object comes under the sway of the grip which, canceling out its natural property, submits it henceforth to the symbol’s conditions.

In fact, we have here nothing more than an illuminating insight into the entrance of the individual into an order whose mass supports him and welcomes him in the form of language, and superimposes determination by the signifier onto determination by the signified in both diachrony and synchrony.

47

One can grasp in its very emergence the overdetermination that is the only kind of overdetermination at stake in Freud’s apperception of the symbolic function.

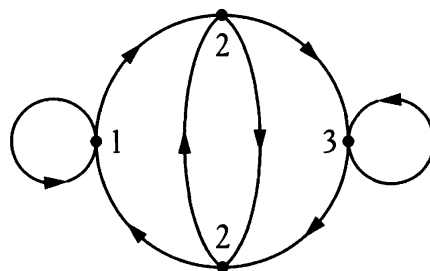
Simply connoting with (+) and (–) a series playing on the sole fundamental alternative of presence and absence allows us to demonstrate how the strictest symbolic determinations accommodate a succession of [coin] tosses whose reality is strictly distributed “by chance” [*au hasard*].

Indeed, it suffices to symbolize, in the diachrony of such a series, groups of three which conclude with each toss²¹ by defining them synchronically—for example, through the symmetry of constancy (+ + + and – – –), noted as 1, or of alternation (+ – + and – + –), noted as 3, the notation 2 being reserved for the dissymmetry revealed by the odd [*impair*]²² in the form of a group of two similar signs either preceded or followed by the opposite sign (+ – –, – + +, + + –, and – – –)—for possibilities and impossibilities of succession to appear in the new series constituted by these notations that the following network summarizes. This network at the same time manifests the concentric symmetry implicit in the triad—which is, let it be noted, the very structure of concern in the question continually raised anew²³ by anthropologists whether the dualism found in symbolic organizations is of a fundamental or apparent character.

Here is the network:

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I-3 NETWORK



In the series of the symbols 1, 2, and 3, one can observe, for example, that for as long as a uniform succession of 2s, which began after a 1, lasts, the series *will remember* the even or odd rank of each of these 2s, since this rank is responsible for the fact that this sequence can only be broken by a 1 after an even number of 2s or by a 3 after an odd number of 2s.

Thus, right from the primordial symbol's first composition with itself—and I will indicate that I have not proposed this composition as I have arbitrarily—a structure, as transparent as it may still remain to its givens, brings out the essential link between memory and law.

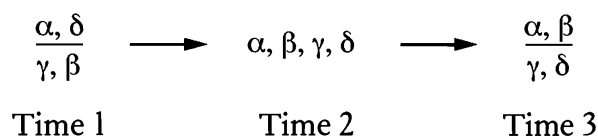
But we will see simultaneously how the symbolic determination becomes more opaque, at the same time as the nature of the signifier is revealed, simply by recombining the elements of our syntax, in skipping a term in order to apply a quadratic relation to this binary.

Let us thus posit that if the binary, 1 and 3, in the group (1 2 3), for example, joins with their symbols a symmetry to a symmetry (1—1, 3—3, 1—3, or 3—1), it shall be noted α . A dissymmetry joined to a dissymmetry (2—2 alone) shall be noted γ . But, unlike our first symbolization, the crossed conjunctions will have two signs, β and δ , at their disposal, β noting the conjunction of symmetry with dissymmetry (1—2 and 3—2), and δ noting the conjunction of dissymmetry with symmetry (2—1 and 2—3).

49 Note that, although this convention restores a strict equality of combinatorial chances among four symbols, α , β , γ , and δ (as opposed to the combinatorial ambiguity that equated the chance of the symbol 2 with the chances of the two other symbols [1 and 3] in the preceding convention), the new syntax, in governing the succession of α s, β s, γ s, and δ s, determines absolutely dissymmetrical distribution possibilities between α and γ , on the one hand, and β and δ , on the other.

Indeed, recognizing that any one of these terms can immediately follow any of the others, and can also be found at Time 4 starting with any one of them [at Time 1], it turns out, on the other hand, that Time 3—in other words, the constitutive time of the binary—is subject to a law of exclusion which is such that, starting with an α or a δ [at Time 1], one can only obtain an α or a β [at Time 3], and that starting with a γ or a β [at Time 1], one can only obtain a γ or δ [at Time 3]. This can be written in the following form:

A Δ DISTRIBUTION



The symbols that are compatible from Time 1 to Time 3 line up here with each other in the different horizontal tiers that divide them in the distribution, whereas any one of them can be selected at Time 2.

The fact that the link that has appeared here is nothing less than the simplest formalization of exchange is what confirms for us its anthropological interest. I will merely indicate at this level its constitutive value for a primordial subjectivity, the notion of which I will situate later.

Given its orientation, this link is in fact reciprocal; in other words, it is not reversible but it is retroactive. Thus by determining which term is to appear at Time 4, the one at Time 2 will not be indifferent.

It can be demonstrated that by setting the first and fourth terms of a series, there will always be a letter whose possibility will be excluded from the two intermediary terms, and that there are two other letters, one of which will always be excluded from the first of these intermediary terms, the other from the second. These letters are distributed in Tables Ω and O below.²⁴

50

TABLE Ω

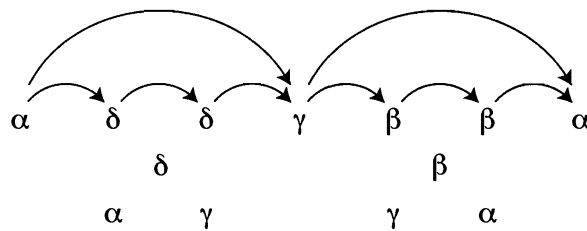
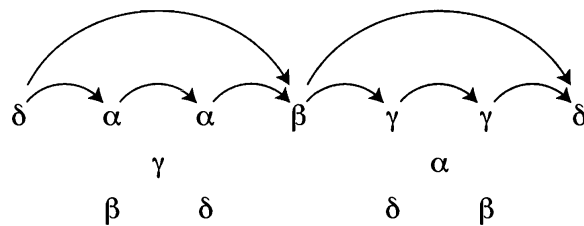


TABLE O



In these tables, the first line allows us to situate between the two tables the combination sought out from Time 1 to Time 4, the letter in the second line being the letter that this combination excludes from the two times in their interval [Times 2 and 3]; the two letters in the third line are, from left to right, those which are excluded from Time 2 and Time 3, respectively.

This could illustrate a rudimentary subjective trajectory, by showing that it is grounded in the actuality which has the future anterior in its present. The fact that, in the interval of this past that it is already insofar as it projects, a

hole opens up that is constituted by a certain *caput mortuum* of the signifier (which is set here at three-quarters of the possible combinations in which it must situate itself),²⁵ suffices to make it depend on absence, obliging it to repeat its contour.

At the outset, subjectivity has no relation to the real, but rather to a syntax which is engendered by the signifying mark there.

The construction of the network of α s, β s, γ s, and δ s has the property (or insufficiency) of suggesting how the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic form in three tiers, although only the symbolic can intrinsically play there as representing the first two strata.

51 It is by meditating as it were naively on the small number of steps required for syntax to triumph that it is worthwhile taking the time to explore the chain ordered here along the same lines as the chain that interested Poincaré and Markov.

Thus we notice that if, in our chain, one can encounter two β s that follow each other without the interposition of a δ , it is always either directly ($\beta\beta$) or after the interposition of an indeterminate number of $\alpha\gamma$ couples (for example, $\beta\alpha\gamma\alpha \dots \gamma\beta$), but that after the second β , no new β can appear in the chain before the appearance of a δ . Nevertheless, the above-defined succession of two β s cannot recur without a second δ being added to the first in a link [*liaison*] equivalent (apart from a reversal of the $\alpha\gamma$ couple into $\gamma\alpha$) to the link imposed on the two β s—namely, without the interposition of a β .

The immediate consequence of which is the dissymmetry that I announced earlier in probability of appearance for the different symbols of the chain.

Whereas the α s and γ s can, in fact, through a felicitous random [*du hasard*] series, each repeat separately so as to overrun the entire chain, it is impossible for β and δ , even with the most favorable luck, to increase their percentage if not in strictly equal proportions (within one term), which limits to 50% the maximum possible frequency of each of them.

The probability of the combination represented by the β s and the δ s being equivalent to that presupposed by the α s and the γ s—and the real outcome of the tosses being, moreover, left strictly to chance—we see separate out from the real a symbolic determination which, as faithful as it may be in recording any partiality of the real, merely produces all the more clearly the disparities that it brings with it.

This disparity can also be seen by simply considering the structural contrast between Tables Ω and O , that is, the direct or crossed way in which the grouping (and order) of the exclusions is subordinated by reproducing it in the order of the extremes, depending on the table to which the latter belongs.

This is why, in the series of four letters, the two intermediary and extreme

couples can be identical if the latter is written in the order provided in Table O (such as $\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha$, $\alpha\alpha\beta\beta$, $\beta\beta\gamma\gamma$, $\beta\beta\delta\delta$, $\gamma\gamma\gamma\gamma$, $\gamma\gamma\delta\delta$, $\delta\delta\alpha\alpha$, and $\delta\delta\beta\beta$, which are possible); they cannot be identical if the latter are written in the order of Table Ω ($\beta\beta\beta\beta$, $\beta\beta\alpha\alpha$, $\gamma\gamma\beta\beta$, $\gamma\gamma\alpha\alpha$, $\delta\delta\delta\delta$, $\delta\delta\gamma\gamma$, $\alpha\alpha\delta\delta$, and $\alpha\alpha\gamma\gamma$, which are impossible).

Remarks whose recreational character must not lead us astray.

52

For there is no other link [*lien*] than that of this symbolic determination in which the signifying overdetermination, the notion of which Freud brings us, can be situated, and which was never able to be conceived of as a *real* overdetermination by a mind like his—everything contradicting the idea that he abandoned himself to this conceptual aberration in which philosophers and physicians find it all too easy to calm their religious excitations.

This position regarding the autonomy of the symbolic is the only position that allows us to clarify the theory and practice of free association in psychoanalysis. For relating its mainspring to symbolic determination and to its laws is altogether different from relating it to the scholastic presuppositions of an imaginary inertia that prop it up in associationism, whether philosophical or pseudophilosophical, before claiming to be experimental. Having abandoned its examination, psychoanalysts find here yet another jumping-off point for the psychologizing confusion into which they constantly fall, some of them deliberately.

In fact, only examples of preservation (whose suspension is indefinite) based on the exigencies of the symbolic chain, such as the examples that I have just provided, allow us to conceptualize where the indestructible persistence of unconscious desire is situated, that persistence, however paradoxical it may seem in Freud’s doctrine, nevertheless being one of the features of it that is the most strongly asserted by Freud.

This characteristic is, in any case, incommensurate with certain effects recognized in authentically experimental psychology and which, regardless of the delays or time lags to which they are subject, eventually weaken and die out like every vital response.

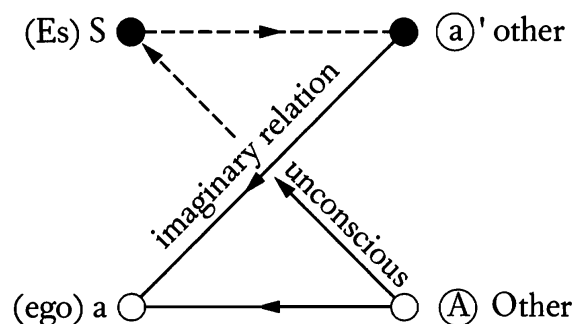
This is precisely the question to which Freud returns once again in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in order to indicate that the *insistence* which I take to be the essential characteristic of the phenomena of *repetition automatism*, seems to him to be explainable only by something prevital and transbiological. This conclusion may be surprising, but it is Freud’s, speaking about what he was the first to have spoken about. And one must be deaf not to hear it. Coming from his pen, as it does, it will not be thought to involve recourse to spiritualism: for it is the structure of determination that is in question here. The matter that it displaces in its effects extends far beyond the matter of cerebral

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organization, to the vicissitudes of which certain among them are entrusted, but others remain no less active and structured as symbolic even though they are materialized differently.

Thus, if man comes to think about the symbolic order, it is because he is first caught in it in his being. The illusion that he has formed this order through his consciousness stems from the fact that it is through the pathway of a specific gap in his imaginary relationship with his semblable that he has been able to enter into this order as a subject. But he has only been able to make this entrance by passing through the radical defile of speech, a genetic moment of which we have seen in a child's game, but which, in its complete form, is reproduced each time the subject addresses the Other as absolute, that is, as the Other who can annul him himself, just as he can act accordingly with the Other, that is, by making himself into an object in order to deceive the Other. This dialectic of intersubjectivity, the necessary usage of which I have demonstrated in the course of the past three years of my seminar at Saint Anne Hospital, from the theory of transference to the structure of paranoia, readily finds support in the following schema:

L SCHEMA



This schema is by now familiar to my students. The two middle terms here [*a* and *a'*] represent the couple involved in reciprocal imaginary objectification that I have brought out in “The Mirror Stage.”

54 The specular relationship with the other—by which I at first wanted, in fact, to return the theory of narcissism, so crucial to Freud's work, to its dominant position in the function of the ego—can only reduce to its effective subordination the whole fantasmaticization brought to light by analytic experience by interposing itself, as the schema expresses it, between this shy of [*en-deça*] the Subject and this beyond [*au-delà*] of the Other, where speech in effect inserts it, insofar as the existences that are grounded in speech are entirely at the mercy of its faith [*foi*].

It is by having confused these two couples that the legatees of a praxis and

a teaching that as decisively settled the question as Freud’s did regarding the fundamentally narcissistic nature of all being in love (*Verliebtheit*) were able to so utterly deify the chimera of so-called genital love as to attribute to it the virtue of “oblativity,” a notion that gave rise to so many therapeutic mistakes.

But by simply eliminating any and all reference to the symbolic poles of intersubjectivity in order to reduce analytic treatment to a utopian rectification of the imaginary couple, we have now arrived at a form of practice in which, under the banner of “object relations,” what any man of good faith can only react to with a feeling of abjection is consummated.

This is what justifies the true gymnastics of the intersubjective register constituted by some of the exercises over which my seminar may have seemed to tarry.

The similarity between the relationship among the terms of the L schema and the relationship that unites the four times distinguished above (in the oriented series in which we see the first finished form of a symbolic chain) cannot fail to strike one as soon as one considers the connection between them.

Parenthesis of Parentheses (Added in 1966)

I will express here my perplexity at the fact that none of the people who took it upon themselves to decipher the ordering to which my chain lent itself, thought of writing in the form of parentheses the structure thereof that I had nevertheless clearly enunciated.

A parenthesis enclosing one or several other parentheses—that is, $(())$ or $(() () \dots ())$ —is equivalent to the above-analyzed distribution of β s and δ s, in which it is easy to see that the redoubled parenthesis is fundamental.

I will call the latter “quotes.”

I intend to use this redoubled parenthesis to cover the structure of the subject (that is, the S in my L schema), insofar as it implies a redoubling, or rather the sort of division that involves a lining [*doublure*] function.

55

I have already placed in this lining the direct or inverse alternation of $\alpha\gamma\alpha\gamma \dots$ pairs, on the condition that the number of signs be even or zero.

Between the inside parentheses, an alternation of $\gamma\alpha\gamma\alpha \dots \gamma$ signs, the number of signs being zero or odd.

On the other hand, inside the parentheses, as many γ s as one would like, starting with zero.

Outside of the quotes we find, on the contrary, any series of α s, which includes none, one, or several parentheses stuffed with $\alpha\gamma\alpha\gamma \dots \alpha$ signs, the number of signs being zero or odd.

If we replace the α s and the γ s by 1s and 0s, we can write the so-called L chain in a form that seems to me to be more “telling” [*parlante*].

L Chain: (10 ... (00 ... 0) 0101 ... 0 (00 ... 0) ... 01) 11111 ... (1010 ... 1) 111 ... etc.

“Telling” in the sense that a reading of it will be facilitated at the cost of a supplementary convention which accords it with the L schema.

This convention is to give the 0s between parentheses the value of moments of silence, a value of scansion being left to the 0s in the alternations, a convention justified by the fact that they are not homogeneous, as we shall see below.

What is inside the quotes can then represent the structure of the S (Es) in my L schema, symbolizing the subject supposedly completed by the Freudian *Es*, the subject of the psychoanalytic session, for example. The *Es* then appears there in the form given to it by Freud, insofar as he distinguishes it from the unconscious—namely, as logically disjoint and subjectively silent (the silence of the drives).

It is then the alternation of the 01s that represents the imaginary grill (aa') of the L schema.

It remains for me to define the privilege of the alternation characteristic of the between-two of the quotes (01 pairs)—that is, obviously, of the status of a and a' in themselves.²⁶

56 What is outside of the quotes will represent the field of the Other (A in the L schema). Repetition dominates there in the form of the 1, the unary trait, representing (as a complement to the preceding convention) the times marked by the symbolic as such.

The subject S receives his message in an inverted form from there as well (interpretation).

Isolated from this chain, the parenthesis including (10 ... 01) represents the ego of the psychological *cogito*—that is, of the false *cogito*—which can just as well prop up perversion pure and simple.²⁷

The only remainder required by this attempt is the formalism of a certain remembering [*mémoration*] related to the symbolic chain, whose law one could easily formulate with respect to the L chain.

(This law is essentially defined by the relay constituted, in the alternation of 0s and 1s, by the surmounting [*franchissement*] of one or several parenthetical signs and of which signs.)

What must be kept in mind here is the rapidity with which a formalization is obtained that is suggestive both of a remembering that is primordial in the subject and of a structuration in which it is notable that

stable disparities can be distinguished therein (indeed, the same dissymmetrical structure persists if, for example, we reverse all the quotes).²⁸

This is but an exercise, but it fulfills my intent to inscribe therein the sort of contour where what I have called the signifier’s *caput mortuum* takes on its causal aspect.

This effect is as manifest when grasped here as in the fiction of “The Purloined Letter.”

The essence of the latter is that the letter was able to have its effects on the inside—on the tale’s actors, including the narrator—just as much as on the outside—on us, its readers, and also on its author—without anyone ever having had to worry about what it meant. This is the usual fate of everything that is written.

57

But at present we are only at the point of erecting an arch on which a bridge will be built in years to come.²⁹

This is why, in order to demonstrate to my audience what distinguishes true intersubjectivity from the dyadic relationship implied by the notion of “projection,” I had already used the reasoning approvingly recounted by Poe himself in the story that will be the subject of the present seminar, as the reasoning that guided a supposedly prodigal child in helping him win more often than he should have otherwise in the game of even or odd.

In following this reasoning—which is childish, that’s the word for it, but which still manages to seduce certain people in other locales—we must grasp the point at which the lure therein appears.

58

Here the subject is the one who is questioned: he has to guess whether the number of objects that his opponent hides in his hand is even or odd.

After a round won or lost by me, the boy essentially tells us, I know that if my opponent is a simpleton, “his amount of cunning” will not exceed the change from even to odd, but if he is “a simpleton a degree above the first,” it will cross his mind that I will think of that myself and hence that it makes sense for him to play even again.

The child thus relied upon the objectification of the higher or lower number of his opponent’s cerebral folds in order to achieve his success. A point of view whose link with imaginary identification is immediately indicated by the fact that it is through an internal imitation of his opponent’s attitudes and mimicry that he claims to arrive at the proper assessment of his object.

But what then of the next level, when my opponent, having recognized that I am intelligent enough to follow him in this move, will manifest his own intelligence in realizing that it is by acting like an idiot that he has his best chance

of deceiving me? There is no other valid time of the reasoning in this moment, precisely because it can but repeat thereafter in an indefinite oscillation.

And apart from the case of pure imbecility, in which the reasoning seemed to be objectively grounded, the child cannot but think that his opponent will arrive at the obstacle of this third time since he granted him the second, by which he himself is considered by his opponent to be a subject who objectifies him, for *it is true that he may be this subject*; hence we see him caught with him in the impasse implied by every purely dyadic intersubjectivity, which is that of having no recourse against an absolute Other.

Let us note in passing the vanishing role played by intelligence in the constitution of the second time in which the dialectic detaches itself from the contingencies of the pre-given; let us note, too, that I need but impute intelligence to my opponent for its function to be useless since, from that point on, it collapses back into these contingencies.

59 I will not say, however, that the path of imaginary identification with the opponent at the instant of each of these rounds is a path that is sealed off in advance; I will say that it excludes the properly symbolic process which appears as soon as this identification occurs, not with the opponent, but with his reasoning as articulated by this identification (this difference is, moreover, enunciated in Poe's text). The fact proves, moreover, that such a purely imaginary identification generally fails.

Hence each player, if he reasons, can only resort to something beyond the dyadic relationship—in other words, to some law which presides over the succession of the rounds of the game.

This is so true that if I am the one who selects the number to be guessed—that is, if I am the active subject—I will at each instant attempt to convince my opponent that there is a law which presides over a certain regularity in my selection, in order to pull the ground of his understanding out from under him as often as possible by breaking that law.

The more this approach manages to free itself from real regularities that are sketched out *in spite of myself*, the more successful it will effectively be, which is why someone who participated in one of the trials of this game that I did not hesitate to turn into in-class exercises, admitted that, at a moment at which he had the feeling, whether justified or not, of being too often found out, he freed himself from it by basing himself on the conventionally transposed succession of letters in a verse by Mallarmé for the series of rounds that he thereafter proposed to his opponent.

But had the game lasted as long as the entire poem and if, by some miracle, the opponent had been able to recognize it, the latter would then have won every round.

This is what allowed me to say that if the unconscious exists, in Freud’s sense of the term—I mean if we understand the implications of the lesson that he draws from the experiences of the psychopathology of everyday life, for example—it is not unthinkable that a modern calculating machine, by detecting the sentence that, unbeknown to him and in the long term, modulates a subject’s choices, could manage to win beyond any usual proportions in the game of even and odd.

This is a pure paradox, no doubt, but in it is expressed the fact that it is not because it lacks the supposed virtue of human consciousness that we refuse to call the machine to which we would attribute such fabulous performances a “thinking machine,” but simply because it would think no more than the ordinary man does, without that making him any less prey to the summonses [*appels*] of the signifier.

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Thus the possibility suggested here was of interest insofar as it conveyed to me the effect of distress and even anxiety that certain participants felt and were willing to share with me.

A reaction about which one can wax ironic, coming as it does from analysts whose entire technique relies upon the unconscious determination that is granted in that technique to so-called free association, and who can find clearly spelled out in the text by Freud that I just mentioned that a number is never chosen at random.

But it is a legitimate reaction if one considers that nothing has taught them to leave behind everyday opinion by distinguishing what it neglects: namely, the nature of Freudian overdetermination—in other words, the nature of symbolic determination such as I promote it here.

If this overdetermination had to be considered real—as my example suggested to them, because, like everyone else, they confused the machine’s calculations with its mechanism³⁰—then, indeed, their anxiety would be justified, for in a gesture more sinister than that of touching the ax, I would be the one who brings it down on “the laws of chance.” Being good determinists, those who found this gesture so moving rightly felt that if we changed these laws, there would no longer be any conceivable law at all.

But these laws are precisely those of symbolic determination. For it is clear that they predate any real observation of randomness [*hasard*], as is clear from the fact that we judge whether an object is apt or not to be used to obtain a series (always symbolic, in this case) of random throws according to its obedience to these laws—for example, whether or not a coin, or this object admirably known as a “die” [*dé*], qualifies for this function.

Once this practical training was over, I had to illustrate in a concrete manner the dominance that I assert the signifier has over the subject. If it is a truth,

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then it can be found everywhere, and we should be able to start with anything within range of our tap and make it flow like wine in Auerbach's tavern.

This is why I took the very tale from which I had extracted the dubious reasoning about the game of even or odd, without seeing anything more in that tale at first. I found something useful in it that my notion of symbolic determination would have already prohibited me from considering to be simply accidental [*hasard*], even if it had not turned out, in the course of my examination, that Poe—as a fine precursor of research into combinatorial strategy which is in the process of revamping the order of the sciences—had been guided in his fiction by the same aim [*dessein*] as mine. At least I can say that what I brought out in my exposé of it touched my audience enough for it to be at their request that I am publishing a version of it here.

In reworking it in accordance with the requirements of writing [*l'écrit*], which are different from those of speech, I could not help but present the further development I have provided since that time of certain notions it introduced.

This is why the emphasis, with which I have increasingly promoted the notion of signifier in the symbol, occurred retroactively here. To obscure its traits through a sort of historical feint would have seemed, I believe, artificial to my students. I can only hope that the fact that I spared myself this task will not disappoint their memory of it.

Notes

1. The necessary reference here may be found in my essay, "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty," in *Écrits* 1966, 197–213.

2. See "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," in *Écrits* 1966, 244.

3. To completely understand what follows one must reread the short and readily available text of "The Purloined Letter."

4. See Émile Benveniste, "Communication animale et langage humain," *Diogène* I, and my Rome Report ["The Function and Field of Speech and Language"], *Écrits* 1966, 297. [In English, see Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. M. Meek (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971), 49–54.]

5. See *Écrits* 1966, 58.

6. [Added in 1968:] I had at first added a note on the meaning these three [Latin] words would provide by way of commentary on this

story, if the structure did not suffice, although it aspires to do so.

I am eliminating that indication, which was overly imperfect, because in rereading my text for this reprinting someone has confirmed to me that, after the era of those who are selling me out (even today, December 9, 1968), another era is coming in which people read my work to explicate it further.

The latter shall take place elsewhere than on this page.

7. I would like to pose again to Benveniste the question of the antithetical meaning of certain words, whether primal or not, after the masterful correction he made to the erroneous path Freud took in studying the question on philological ground (see *La Psychanalyse* I [1956]: 5–16). For I think that the question remains unanswered once the instance of the signifier has been rigorously formulated. Bloch and Von Wartburg date back to 1875

the first appearance of the signification of the verb *dépister* as I used it the second time in this sentence. [In English, see Émile Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, 65–75. See also Freud's article "The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words," *SE XI*, 155–61.]

8. The very utopia to which Jorge Luis Borges, in his work which harmonizes so well with the phylum of my subject matter, has accorded an importance which others reduce to its proper proportions. See *Les Temps Modernes* 113–14 (June–July 1955): 2135–36 and 118 (October 1955): 574–75.

9. Poe's emphasis.

10. This is so true that philosophers, in those hackneyed examples with which they argue on the basis of the one and the many, will not put to the same purposes a simple sheet of white paper ripped down the middle and a broken circle, or even a shattered vase, not to mention a cut worm.

11. See *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of "Work in Progress"* (Paris: Shakespeare & Co., 12 rue de l'Odéon, 1929).

12. See *Écrits* 1966, 59.

13. I felt obliged at this point to demonstrate the procedure to the audience using a letter from that period which concerned Chateaubriand and his search for a secretary. I was amused to find that Chateaubriand had completed the first version of his memoirs (recently published in its original form) in the very month of November 1841 in which "The Purloined Letter" appeared in *Chambers' Journal*. Will Chateaubriand's devotion to the power he decries, and the honor which that devotion does 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?

14. Poe is the author of an essay by this title.

15. [Added in 1966:] And even from the cook herself.

16. Virgil's line reads: *facilis descensus Averno*. ["The descent to Hades is easy"; see Virgil's *Aeneid*, book 6, line 126.]

17. Let us recall the witty distich attributed before his fall to the most recent person to

have rejoined 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 today: / The four kings of cards and the King of England.)

18. This statement was openly made by a noble Lord speaking to the Upper House in which his dignity earned him a seat.

19. I am referring to the fundamental opposition Aristotle makes between these two terms [*automaton* and *tyche*] in the conceptual analysis of chance he provides in his *Physics*. Many discussions would be clarified if it were not overlooked.

20. I am referring here to the *Entwurf einer Psychologie* ["Project for a Scientific Psychology"] written in 1895 which, unlike the famous letters to Fliess (with which it was included [in *The Origins of Psychoanalysis*] since it was addressed to him), was not censored by its editors. Certain mistakes found in the German edition, owing to the misreading of the handwritten manuscript, even indicate how little attention was paid to its meaning. It is clear in this passage that I am merely punctuating a position that was developed in my seminar.

21. [Added in 1966:] For greater clarity, let me illustrate this notation using the following random [*hasard*] series:

+ + + - + + - - + -
1 2 3 2 2 2 2 3 etc.

22. This dissymmetry is truly the one that unites the usages of the English word that, as far as I know, has no equivalent in any other language: "odd." The French usage of the word "*impair*" to designate an aberration of conduct shows us something of a sketch thereof; but the word "*disparate*" itself proves inadequate here.

23. See the revitalizing reprising of it by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his article "Les organisations dualistes existent-elles?" in *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en Volkenkunde*, Deel 112, 2 (Gravenhage, 1956), 99–128. This article can be found in French in a collection of works by Claude Lévi-Strauss published as *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris: Plon, 1958). [In English,

see “Do Dual Organizations Exist?” in *Structural Anthropology*, trans. C. Jacobson and B. G. Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963).]

24. These two letters correspond to the dextrogyrate and levogyrate nature of a figuration that situates the excluded terms in quadrants.

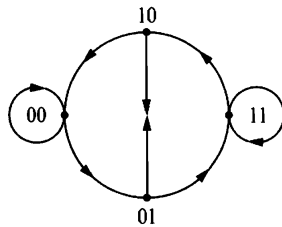
25. [Added in 1966:] If one does not take into account the order of the letters, this *caput mortuum* is only 7/16.

26. This is why I have since introduced a more appropriate topology.

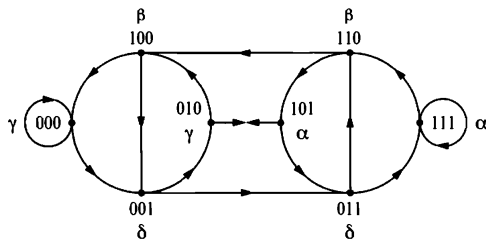
27. See the Abbot of Choisy, whose famous memoirs can be translated as: *I think, when I am the one who dresses like a woman.*

28. Let me add here the network of the α s, β s, γ s, and δ s, which is constituted by a transformation of the 1–3 Network. As all mathematicians know, it is obtained by transforming the segments of the first network into the cuts of the second and by marking the oriented paths joining these cuts. It is as follows (I am placing it next to the first for greater clarity):

1–3 NETWORK



$\alpha, \beta, \gamma, \delta$ NETWORK



Here I propose the convention upon which

the letters are based:

- 1.1 = α
- 0.0 = γ
- 1.0 = β
- 0.1 = δ

(One can see here why I said that there are two types of 0 in my L chain, for there are those 0s that correspond to $\gamma = 000$ and those 0s that correspond to $\gamma = 010$.)

29. [Added in 1966:] The text written in 1955 resumes here. The introduction of a structural approach to the field in psychoanalytic theory through such exercises was, in fact, followed by important developments in my teaching. Concepts related to subjectivization progressed hand-in-hand with a reference to the *analysis situs* in which I claim to materialize the subjective process.

30. It was in order to dispel this illusion that I closed that year’s seminar with a lecture on “Psychoanalysis and Cybernetics” [Seminar II, chapter 23], which disappointed many because I barely spoke in it of anything other than binary numeration, the arithmetic triangle, and even of the simple gate, defined by the fact that it must be open or closed—in short, because it seemed that I had not gone very far beyond the Pascalian stage of the question.