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The Return of a Letter in Reverse Form: Lacan, Derrida, and Johnson's Critical Writings on Poe's *The Purloined Letter*

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ABSTRACT

Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Purloined Letter* revolves around a stolen letter and the brilliant detective Dupin's method of retrieving it by understanding his adversary's psychology. It raises an intriguing question: Why does a letter always return to its sender? In this essay, I will explore the nature of the letter/ signifier's return, drawing on Lacan, Derrida, and Barbara Johnson's critical writings on this renowned short story. This study will demonstrate that, despite their different theoretical contexts, these analyses mirror the very story they examine, raising questions about the legitimate role of the critic and the problematic nature of meta-language.

KEYWORDS

Edgar Allan Poe, *The Purloined Letter*, Lacan, Derrida, Barbara Johnson, meta-language, signifier

It was clear to me that the letter had been turned, as a glove, inside out, re-directed, and re-sealed.
–Edgar Allan Poe, *The Purloined Letter*

Introduction

As one of the most renowned and intriguing detective stories, Edgar Allan Poe's short story *The Purloined Letter*, first published in 1844, features the astute detective C. Auguste Dupin. Known for his extraordinary analytical skills, Dupin is tasked with recovering a stolen letter of significant importance, cleverly hidden by the culprit, which contains compromising material about a high-ranking royal. Despite extensive efforts by the police, the letter remains elusive. Dupin deduces that the letter is not hidden in an elaborate location but rather in an obvious spot, overlooked because of its simplicity. The narrative unfolds as Dupin outwits the thief by comprehending his psychological tendencies and retrieving the letter from its deceptively simple hiding place. By accomplishing this, Dupin exposes the limitations of conventional investigative methods and underscores his intellectual superiority.

This mystery surrounding the letter raises a deeper question: Does a letter always arrive at its destination? This essay explores the nature of the letter/signifier's return through the critical lenses of Lacan, Derrida, and Barbara Johnson. By examining their diverse theoretical perspectives, this study reveals that their analyses reflect the very story they critique, raising important questions about the critic's role and the challenging nature of meta-language. The essay highlights the intricate dance between concealment and revelation, signifier and meaning, as depicted in Poe's tale.

Lacan's Reading

Jacques Lacan offers a compelling perspective, arguing that the letter functions as an ever-shifting signifier, its meaning not tied to its content—since, notably, we never learn what is inside it. Lacan concludes his seminar with the statement, "a letter always arrives at its destination," a crucial distinction from "a letter is always delivered to its destination." This subtle difference shifts the focus from the passive object to the letter's active role. The letter does not merely reach its destination; it "arrives," choosing where it goes. The letter possesses the person who holds it, "reads" the reader, and makes them feel as though they are the true addressee, the rightful owner. In this sense, it becomes apparent that we do not so much speak language as language speaks through us.[1]

The letter in Poe's *The Purloined Letter* functions like a boomerang, always returning to its

[1] Denise Riley argues that language is inherently impersonal. Rather than mastering language, we are often subject to it, with language speaking through us more frequently than we speak it. As Riley explores the powerful effects of language, it begins to appear as though language itself operates as an external force, beyond our conscious control. She refers to this phenomenon as an "outward unconscious," which complicates the boundary between the internal and the external, what she terms "extimacy." See Riley's *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect*.

point of origin. By the end of the story, after a series of displacements, the letter literally returns to its rightful addressee. It is initially written by an unknown sender to the Queen, stolen by the Minister, retrieved by Dupin, and handed over to the Prefect. The narrative suggests that, in the end, the letter returns to the Queen's hand. Yet, Lacan's interpretation of sender, receiver, and the letter's destination goes beyond the literal content of the story. As Lacan puts it, "… the sender… receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form" (53). This suggests that "a letter always arrives at its destination" not because the destination is a fixed endpoint, but because the sender is the destination.

Why does a letter always return to its sender, and why in reverse form? If the letter has agency, why does it turn itself inside out on its return? *The Purloined Letter* is a story designed to be without a definitive end, a literary work with a fascinating afterlife. The letter continually circulates among the characters, never fully claimed by any one of them. One reason for its elusive status is that it always leaves traces of its next location. In other words, the robber's knowledge is constantly made available to the character who has lost the letter. The Minister steals it in plain view of the Queen, prompting her to ask the Prefect to recover it. The ending even hints that, had the story continued, the Minister could reclaim the letter, since Dupin leaves behind a clue—his own handwritten note—that allows the Minister to recognize his adversary. In this way, the letter contains an element that sends it on its way, diverting it from its original path.

As Lacan puts it, "…the signifier is a unit in its very uniqueness, being by nature a symbol only of an absence. Which is why we cannot say of *The Purloined Letter* that, like other objects, it must be or not be in a particular place; rather, unlike them, it will be and not be where it is, wherever it goes" (39). *The Purloined Letter*, then, is not merely an object but a letter whose course is always prolonged—a letter in sufferance (43). Lacan argues that the displacement of the signifier shapes the subjects' actions, their destinies, their refusals, their blindness, and their fate—along with their innate gifts and social acquisitions.

In the story, the letter is turned inside out, resealed, copied, camouflaged, hidden, and replaced with a facsimile multiple times. Yet, despite these alterations and diversions, nothing can prevent the letter from reaching its eventual destination. A signifier always arrives at its unconscious destination simply because, from the outset, it belongs to the discourse of the big Other. As Slavoj Žižek points out, Lacan "lays bare the very mechanism of teleological illusion… [the letter's] true addressee is not the empirical other who may or may not receive it, but the big Other, the symbolic order itself, which receives it the moment the letter is put into circulation" (10).

Žižek further draws on the Hegelian figure of the "Beautiful Soul,"[2] explaining that the subject/sender receives from the addressee his own message in its true form, i.e., the true meaning of his moans and groans. In other words, the letter that the subject puts into circulation "arrives at its destination," which, from the very beginning, is the sender himself. The letter reaches its destination when the subject is finally compelled to confront the true consequences of his actions (13). The message is emitted by the big Other, not by a conscious, speaking subject. As a result, one always says more than intended because language is not simply a tool freely chosen by the speaker. Instead, part of language itself exists independently of the speaker's expressive intentions. In *Žižek's words,*

> The big Other pulls the strings; the subject doesn't speak, the subject "is spoken" by the symbolic structure. In short, this big Other is the name for the social substance, for all that on account of which the subject never fully dominates the effects of his acts, that is on account of which the final outcome of his activity is always something else with regard to what he aimed at or anticipated. (216)

The subject cannot fully control the effects of their speech. The residues that emerge from the process of signification inevitably return. As Žižek notes, "this surplus of what is effectively said over the intended meaning articulates the repressed content—in it, 'the repressed returns'" (14). What is repressed is revealed on the reverse side of the message, and thus, the letter returns in its reverse form.[3]

Lacan's interpretation highlights the repetitive automatism inherent in the signifying chain and the eventual re-appropriation of the message. Dupin recovers *The Purloined Letter* by repeating the Minister's own trick—he purloins *The Purloined Letter*. In other words, he must undo a crime by committing the same crime himself. This repetition compulsion is what Johnson describes as "an act of untying the knot in the structure through the repetition of the act of tying it" (498). From the Minister's perspective, he ultimately receives the letter in its reverse form, which, in a sense, he has sent himself. By blackmailing the Queen, the Minister sets in motion an event that reshapes the entire power structure, making him the unwitting architect of his own fate.

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[2] Hegel's the "Beautiful Soul" is a figure who pretends to speak a pure metalanguage, under the mask of an innocent victim, to conceal the wicked way its own moans and groans "*partake actively* in the corruption it denounces" (*Žižek*, 12, italics original).

[3] Žižek argues that an object like the purloined letter "gives material existence to the lack in the Other, to the constitutive inconsistency of the symbolic order" (18). He also describes the subject's separation from the *big Other* in the following way: "Separation occurs when the subject becomes aware of how the *big Other* is in itself inconsistent, purely virtual, 'barred,' deprived of the thing—and fantasy is an attempt to fill this lack of the Other, not of the subject (i.e., to (re)constitute the consistency of the *big Other*)" (216). In this light, Lacan, Derrida, Johnson, and perhaps even ourselves, may be attempting to fill the lack of the *big Other*—to capture the true meaning of the letter or to decipher the words it contains.

Lacan, Derrida, and Johnson's Readings

This sense of repetition continues to unsettle Lacan's Seminar (1957), Derrida's "The Purveyor of Truth" (1975), and Johnson's "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida" (1978), where each theorist grapples with the enigmatic nature of *The Purloined Letter*. It seems that any attempt to analyze the story inevitably follows the logic of *The Purloined Letter* itself—transforming "one-upmanship into inevitable one-downmanship" (Johnson, 465). For John T. Irwin, the three-part chain of readings from Lacan to Derrida to Johnson mirrors the rivalry between the Minister and Dupin in their competition for the letter (1172). Irwin argues that while each interpreter uncovers the blind spot of the previous analysis, none is innocent in their own act of interpretation. Their writings inevitably undermine their own arguments, raising questions about the legitimate use of meta-language. To navigate the complex and labyrinthine passages of these three thinkers, Irwin focuses on their respective positions concerning the numerical structure of the story.

In Lacan's interpretation, the central plot of *The Purloined Letter* consists of "two" key scenes: the first in the royal boudoir, and the second in the Minister's office. Each scene is defined by three distinct glances, each associated with one of the three subjects involved:

> The first is glance that sees nothing: the King and the police.
>
> The second, a glance which sees that the first sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides: the Queen, then the Minister.
>
> The third sees that the first two glances leave what should be hidden exposed to whoever would seize it: the Minister, and finally Dupin. (32)

In the first scene, the King fails to see the letter that the Queen has hidden in plain view on a table. The Queen, noticing that the King does not see the letter, mistakenly believes she has successfully concealed it, with its address clearly visible. However, this oversight gives the Minister the opportunity to seize the letter right before the Queen's eyes, knowing that she cannot risk drawing the King's attention to it.

In the second scene, at the Minister's residence, the letter—now turned inside out and readdressed in a feminine hand—appears once again in plain sight, this time on the mantelpiece. The police, like the blind King, are close to the letter but fail to see it. The Minister, in turn, misinterprets the police's futile search as an indication that the letter is still hidden, repeating the Queen's earlier mistake. Dupin, representing the third gaze, is the only one to recognize that the letter is hidden in plain sight, effortlessly seizing it while the others fail to notice. According to Irwin, the Minister's shift from the position of the third glance to the second "exhibits the special vulnerability to self-delusion, to a blind spot, which the possession of the letter conveys" (1171). This triangular structure of scenes brings to mind a Chinese proverb: "Tang Lang Bu Chan

Huang Que Zai Hou," which translates to: while a mantis stalks a cicada, confident of its imminent capture, it is completely unaware of the oriole waiting behind. In Poe's story, the Queen in the first scene and the Minister in the second occupy the same position as the mantis. Their overconfidence and certainty of success blind them to the presence of the opponent, exposing their weakness.

Just as the Minister once wronged Dupin, prompting him to seek revenge, Irwin suggests that Derrida, in "The Purveyor of Truth," uses the same tactic to settle scores with Lacan.[4] Derrida's strategy is to turn Lacan's own argument against itself, echoing the dynamic in *The Purloined Letter*, where Dupin uses the same trick to get even with the Minister.[5] Derrida contends that Lacan's interpretation of the triangular structure of the two scenes in Poe's text represents "narrated scenes within the framing artifice of the story" (Irwin, 1172). However, Derrida argues that the story itself consists of two distinct scenes of narration—the first being the Prefect's visit to Dupin, during which he recounts the events in the royal boudoir, and the second occurring after the Prefect's second visit, when Dupin explains how he managed to seize the letter at the Minister's residence. Thus, if *The Purloined Letter* can be reduced to a number, it should be "four," not three. Derrida accuses Lacan of simplifying the four-sided structure of narration into the three-sided structure of the narrated scenes, asserting that "by missing the position of the narrator, his engagement in the content of what he seems to recount, one omits everything in the scene of writing that overflows the two triangles" (Derrida, 198).

In his analysis, Lacan has already played with the numbers one, two, and three. As Irwin notes, "The tale is composed of two scenes, the second of which, by repeating the triangular structure of the first, creates a sameness or oneness between the two" (1173). In an attempt to outdo Lacan, Derrida introduces the next number: four. However, whether Derrida arrives at this quadrangular structure by adding one to three, or by doubling two, is a problematic issue. This ambiguity serves as the entry point for Johnson to address the debate between Lacan and Derrida. As Johnson notes, Derrida thinks the triangular structure fails to recognize the uncanny effect of doubling in *The Purloined Letter* (which includes the detective's doubling the criminal's thoughts in order to outwit him as well as the Minister's divided self being both a poet and a mathematician).[6] However, this doubling is more associated with four than two,

[4] Johnson notes that Derrida references Lacan in relation to the latter's multiple "acts of aggression" directed at him since 1965.

[5] In Irwin's words, "In his essay Derrida sets out to repeat the encounter between Dupin and the Minister with himself in the role of Dupin and Lacan in the role of the Minister" (1172).

[6] The doubling and the inherent dividing are two main themes in Derrida's analysis. In his own words, "As soon as the narrator makes Dupin return his letters, and not only to the Queen…the letter divides itself… a letter does *not always* arrive at its destination, and from the moment that this possibility belongs to its structure one can say that it never truly arrives, that when it does arrive its capacity not to arrive torments it with an internal drifting" (201, italics original).

> for what we refer to as doubling is almost always splitting and doubling... the figure of the double externally duplicates an internal division in the protagonist's self ... so that doubling tends to be as structure of four halves problematically balanced across the inner/outer limit of the self rather than a structure of two separate, opposing wholes. (Irwin, 1173)

Derrida argues that the psychoanalytic model of triangularity falsely assumes the possibility of dialectical mediation and harmonious normalization. However, as Johnson points out, in the Oedipal triangle, there is no privileged position that stands above or outside the unsettling effects of doubling—no objective vantage point from which to mediate the subjective interaction between the other two positions. The synthetic mediation of desire, therefore, is precisely what the destabilizing, uncanny effect of doubling continually undermines.

> In Johnson's analysis, Lacan and Derrida are engaged in a game of even and odd, a strategy that Dupin himself uses as an illustration of how one doubles the thought of an opponent to outwit him. Irwin further explains,
>
> Derrida opts for a quadrangular structure, that is, he plays the even number four, in order to evoke the uncanniness, the oddness of doubling; while Lacan opts for a triangular structure by playing the odd number three, in order to enforce the regularizing or normalizing effect of the dialectical triad. In this game of even and odd, Derrida and Lacan end up as reciprocal opposites, as specular doubles of one another: Derrida asserts the oddness of evenness, while Lacan affirms the evenness of oddness. (1174)

In a sense, Johnson illustrates how, through the debate between Lacan and Derrida over the same literary text, each of them receives the message in its reverse form—because the very mechanism of seizing the letter involves a reversal into the opposite.

But what of Johnson's own position on *The Purloined Letter*? Johnson does not choose to play the next number, five, as she already positions Lacan and Derrida as the two players in the game of even and odd. To take a stance on the numerical structure would mean playing the game of one-upmanship with a specular double, and as she notes, being one-up inevitably leads to being one-down. This repetition mirrors the entire drama of *The Purloined Letter*. Johnson is self-aware that her analysis is framed within a frame, bound by the structure of the story itself. As she puts it, "Everyone who has held the letter—or even beheld it—including the narrator, has ended up having the letter addressed to him as its destination. The reader is comprehended by the letter: there is no place from which he can stand back and observe it" (502).

In this sense, she recognizes that she is not immune to the repetitive act of analysis to which Dupin subjects the Minister, or which Derrida directs at Lacan. However, Johnson seeks to explore whether there is a way to interpret *The Purloined Letter* without simply repeating the mechanism of the story. How can one generate an analysis free from the blind spots or flaws that

the next interpreter might exploit to turn the argument against us?

Of course, Johnson's essay is not invulnerable to the logic of *The Purloined Letter*. In Irwin's words,

> In situating her essay as the third in a series of three critical readings, Johnson places herself in that third position which, in the structure governing the wandering of *The Purloined Letter*, is the position of maximum insight, but also the position in which the observer is subject to mistaking his insight concerning the subjective interaction of the other two glances for an objective viewpoint above such interaction. (1176)

However, Johnson begins and ends her essay by acknowledging the problematic nature of her act of analysis. On the very first page, she states: "In the resulting asymmetrical, abyssal structure, no analysis—including this one—can intervene without transforming and repeating other elements in the sequence, which is thus not a stable sequence…" (457). Her conclusion is similarly ambiguous as she reflects on her own methodological position in the final section of her essay: "My own theoretical 'frame of reference' is precisely, to a very large extent, the writings of Lacan and Derrida. The frame is thus framed again by part of its content; the sender again receives his own message backwards from the receiver" (505).

Johnson's self-reflexive analysis may appear to be at odds with itself, yet she highlights this tension before anyone else can point it out. Her ambiguity lies in the fact that, on one hand, she explicitly refuses to participate in the numbers game that Lacan and Derrida engage in against one another. On the other hand, in order to make this blind spot apparent, she must place her own analysis alongside the two earlier critical essays. In this way, Johnson demonstrates that, while she may not be able to stop the return of the message to herself in reverse form, she is able to show the dynamic of the self-reflexive act in analyzing the act of analysis. When the form of her writing demands a conclusion, she writes:

> For if the letter is precisely that which dictates the rhetorical indetermination of any theoretical discourse about it, then the oscillation between unequivocal statements of undecidability and ambiguous assertion of decidability is precisely one of the letter's inevitable effects…'Undecidability' can no more be used as a last word than 'destination.' …The 'undeterminable' is not opposed to the determinable; 'dissemination' is not opposed to repetition. If we would be sure of the difference between the determinable and the undeterminable, the undeterminable would be comprehended within the determinable. What is undecidable is precisely whether a thing is decidable or not. (504)

If "what is undecidable is precisely whether a thing is decidable or not," how should we interpret the final statement in Johnson's essay? How can we validate a conclusive remark like this? In this passage, Johnson delivers a conclusion without offering a definitive one: the final word is

that there is no final word. This self-reflexive statement performs a kind of logical reversal, embodying its own message while simultaneously negating it. It folds back upon itself, revealing the inherent contradiction in the very act of closure. By doing so, Johnson occupies a position that simultaneously embraces both its assertion and its negation, leaving no firm ground on which the conclusion can be definitively challenged or undone.

Conclusion

By examining Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* through the theoretical frameworks of Lacan, Derrida, and Barbara Johnson, this essay has illuminated how their analyses not only reflect the complexities inherent in Poe's narrative but also interrogate and challenge the foundational concepts of critical interpretation and meta-language. Lacan's psychoanalytic approach unveils the intricate interplay between the letter as a signifier and the unconscious desires it represents. Derrida's deconstructive reading exposes the inherent instability of meaning and the impossibility of a fixed interpretation, highlighting the fluidity and contingency of language. Johnson's self-reflexive critique bridges these perspectives, emphasizing the recursive nature of critical analysis and its entanglement with the very structures it seeks to dissect. This study underscores the timeless relevance of Poe's work, demonstrating its enduring impact on literary theory and criticism. Poe's narrative, therefore, serves as a testament to the enduring power of literature to provoke critical thought and inspire ongoing scholarly discourse.

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