

Re-reading *The Purloined Letter*

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1 Introduction

The work of Edgar Poe has served as a touchstone for shifts in psychoanalytic criticism throughout the twentieth century. There is a vast array of critical interpretations that have developed around his work, it might seem that Poe has become all things to all critics. In particular, the critical body that clusters around the story *The Purloined Letter* forms a dossier of debates within psychoanalytic literary interpretation. L.R. Williams (1995:38) asserts that it is hardly surprising that Poe should have become a special object of psychoanalytic interest as his stories and poems pivot around such concerns as: mental aberration, decay or the indefinities of sexual identity, the exquisite impossibility of fixed knowledge in a world in which truth is an endlessly circulating, maddeningly unfixed ideal or image, never to be pinned down or guaranteed. Debate around *The Purloined Letter* has been prolific. The average reader might consider *The Purloined Letter* to be just an intriguing detective short story. However, the story has profound psychological implications which lift it above a mere detective story; otherwise psychologists would not have spent so much time analyzing it.

Jacques Derrida based his extremely vehement critique of Jacques Lacan's 'phallogocentrism' on the latter's mercilessly minute analytical commentary of Poe's *The Purloined Letter*. Lacan thought so highly of this commentary that he placed it first in the collection of essays published under the title *Ecrits*, the rest of which appear in chronological order. As with certain commentaries in philosophy, Lacan's essay became more famous than the story on which it comments. *The Purloined Letter* is far from the best of Poe's *Extraordinary Tales*, but Lacan turns it into a striking

myth: truth, woman, and castration are all clearly revealed to be lurking in the text.

This paper analyzes the debates surrounding *The Purloined Letter* with special focus on Lacan's reading of *The Purloined Letter*, Derrida's deconstruction and Slavoj Žižek's defense of Lacan. I will also discuss Lacan's return to Freud and examine the implications that this has for feminist criticisms of psychoanalysis. The discussion takes place in the following stages: firstly, I discuss Lacan's reading of *The Purloined Letter*. There are two scenes in particular that Lacan likes to compare. The first scene begins with the Queen receiving a personal letter that could compromise her integrity should the King see it. The Queen leaves the letter face down on the table and the King does not notice it when he comes into the room. The Minister does see the letter and takes it. The Queen is aware that the Minister has the letter. In the second scene Dupin steals the letter from the Minister. The Minister does not realize until later that Dupin stole the letter. Lacan in his Seminar emphasizes the repetitiveness of these two scenes. Lacan said that both the Minister and Dupin saw the letter at a glance. They noticed a letter that should be hidden is exposed. Other important issues that Lacan focuses on are: displacement, the circulation of the lost object, the letter as signifier, the position of the letter in the Symbolic Order, the theory of the gaze, castration as a factor of ultimate truth, and the idea that a letter always arrives at its destination.

Lacan feels that through Edgar Poe made the story seem to be mystery, in fact, according to J.P. Muller and W.J. Richardson (1988:33), it is anything but a mystery. Lacan believes that it cannot be a mystery because everything which constitutes a mystery—motives, execution, how to find and convict the culprit, are all told to the reader at the beginning of the story. Poe uses his characters and fictive creations to delude the reader. He shows us this not only in the way the story is written but also in the relationship between the characters, the Prefect and Dupin. In the story, of particular interest to Lacan and his theory of language is the fact that Poe makes Dupin use coded language and plays on words in order to make the Prefect look stupid. Poe also allows the Prefect to use cryptic language when informing Dupin and the narrator about the missing letter. Secondly, I look at Derrida's deconstruction of Lacan's reading of *The Purloined Letter*. In fact, one of the most important challenges to Lacan's reading of literature has come from

Derrida, whose own debt to psychoanalysis is profound. In a 1975 essay on Lacan's Poe Seminar called *Le facteur de la Verite* (The Postman/Factor of Truth), Derrida critiques Lacan's seminar on *The Purloined Letter* the following reasons: Lacan's failure to make reference to the author (Poe) in his literary analysis, his exclusion of the narrator from intersubjective triads, his overlooking the formal structure of the text, his emphasizing and looking at the text in isolation without mentioning the Dupin trilogy; his postulation of castration as a factor of ultimate truth—here his objection is not to castration itself but rather to its promotion as 'transcendental signifier' and Lacan's assertion that a letter always arrives at its destination. Thirdly, I examine Žižek's defense of Lacan. Žižek pays special attention to Lacan's thesis that 'a letter always arrives at its destination'. He attempts to give credibility to this by drawing on the triad of the Symbolic, Real and Imaginary.

Lacan's Reading of *The Purloined Letter*

One of Lacan's most well-known excursions into literary criticism is his seminar on Poe's *The Purloined Letter* in which he focuses on the conjunction and the interdependence of the concepts of castration, the phallus, sexual difference, signification and the symbolic. As a classic piece of Lacanian criticism, it has attracted much interest. Before attempting a critique of Lacan's reading of *The Purloined Letter* I will give a brief synopsis of the text.

The story concerns the quest to retrieve a letter received by and then stolen from the Queen, the potentially compromising contents of which are veiled. The King enters her boudoir; in order to conceal the letter from him, the Queen places it on a table to make it appear innocent. The duplicitious Minister D- enters and perceiving the letter's importance, substitutes another for it, purloining the original and attaining political power over the Queen by virtue of his possession, a power based on 'the robber's knowledge of the loser's knowledge of the robber' (Poe, *Selected Writings* 1984:371). This is the story's 'primal scene'. The Queen must retrieve the letter in order to be released from this compromising position, and so the Prefect of Police is called in. In secret, his officers microscopically scour the Minister's apartment, and when they fail to locate the letter, the detective Dupin is

engaged. Reading the method of appropriation as a key to the method of concealment, Dupin surmises that the best way of hiding the object is to place it on show. Dupin states:

do you not see the Prefect has taken it for granted that all men proceed to conceal a letter ... in some out-of-way hole or corner ... such researcher's nooks for concealment are adapted only for ordinary occasions (Poe, *Selected Writings* 1984:374).

Dupin looks elsewhere—not in a hiding place, but in the open room and at what lies right in front of him. He visits the Minister, and spies the letter hanging visibility from a rack on the mantelpiece. Repeating the Minister's initial act of appropriation, Dupin substitutes another in its place, and is able to return the original to the Queen—a scene which repeats the first 'primal scene', but, with a key difference, for the second time round, a solution is reached, not a problem created.

Lacan's seminar on *The Purloined Letter* formed part of a series he presented in 1955 on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* entitled *The Ego in The Theory of Freud and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis. Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, published just after the First World War, according to Williams (1995:55), is best known as Freud's primary articulation of the theory of the death drive—a complex of ideas attempting to explain certain puzzling psychic phenomena which didn't 'fit into' Freud's earlier accounts of desire and mental regulation. Freud was also faced with the phenomenon known as 'repetition compulsion', and in its role as a response to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Lacan's essay on *The Purloined Letter* forms an extended meditation upon 'repetition compulsion'. For Freud, according to Williams (1995:55f), pain and the possibility of pleasure in pain, was crucial to 'repetition compulsion'. One of the factors which led him to the formulation of the death drive was the phenomenon whereby those who had experienced extreme trauma continued to relive the trauma, with no apparent resolution, in fantasy, long after the original moment had passed. For Lacan, according to Williams (1995:56), the question of repetition is focused on loss than on pain and *The Purloined Letter*, with its repeated losses of a circulating object (first by the Queen, and then by the Minister), becomes in Lacan's reading a crucial literary articulation of this compulsion. At the

heart of Poe's 'original' is a repetition: it is a narrative within a narrative, as the story is itself told (repeated) by the 'I' narrator who hears and repeats the tale of the filched letter, which is retrieved through the same pattern of the original filching. The original repetition is then critically repeated. Thus, at the heart of the story itself lies both an absence and a pattern of repetition, which is then mimicked in subsequent readings which try to find the text out. Williams (1995:56) believes that Poe is himself already *The Purloined Poe* culturally retrieved through the same strategies suggested by his own text. The story's second scene—which repeats the story's 'primal scene' but with a difference—is also the key to how Lacan understands the text as allegory. Williams (1995:56f) views this as repetition with understanding: the narrative repeats as psychoanalysis does, reworking and unknotting anxieties of psychic pre-history. Thus, it is only with the second scene that the whole story emerges as an allegory of the psychoanalytic situation, with Dupin acting as analyst in 'restoring' the Queen to herself. Of this, Shoshana Felman (1980:147) writes:

In what sense, then, does the second scene in Poe's tale, while repeating the first scene, nonetheless differ from it? In the sense, precisely, that the second scene, through the repetition, allows for an understanding, for an analysis of the first. This analysis through repetition is to become, in Lacan's ingenious reading, no less than an allegory of psychoanalysis. The intervention of Dupin, who restores the letter to the Queen, is thus compared, in Lacan's interpretation, to the intervention of the analyst, who rids the patient of the symptom.

Williams (1995:57) stresses two points of difference, both of which are highlighted by Felman in her reading of Lacan's essay. First, the way in which Lacan handles Poe's narrative repetition-with-difference is important to our understanding of identity in his work. Felman (1980:148) says:

... for Lacan, any possible insight into the reality of the unconscious is contingent upon a perception of repetition, not as a confirmation of identity, but as the insistence of the indelibility of a difference.

If Dupin is in effect the Queen's 'analyst' (or the 'analyst' of her dilemma), as with any other act of analysis for Lacan, this is not necessarily because of any knowledge he has of the letter or the actors in the primal scene. Dupin as analyst doesn't 'cure' the situation because he has a certain knowledge, but because of the position he occupies in the chain of repetition. Felman (1980:147) states:

By virtue of his occupying the third position—that is, the *locus* of the unconscious of the subject as a place of substitution of letter for letter (of signifier for signifier)—the analyst, through transference, allows at once for a repetition of the trauma, and for a symbolic substitution, and thus affects the drama's denouement.

It is not then what the analyst knows which facilitates the analysis, but his position as activator of a repetition of the original problem—his occupancy of a position which facilitates transference. Marie Bonaparte's (1949:102) technique was the opposite of this, based on 'cracking the code of authorial desire'. She also urges that analysis should not be the work of the author, who must ideally remain ignorant of and somehow separate from the processes and images buried in his text for fear of censoring their guilty, libidinal parts:

Of all the devices employed by the dreamwork, that of the *displacement of psychic intensities* ... is the most freely used in the elaboration of works of arts, doubtless because such displacement is generally dictated by the moral censor, which is more active in our waking thoughts than in sleep. The conceiving and writing of literary works are conscious activities, and the less the author guesses of the hidden themes in his works, the likelier are they to be truly creative (in Muller & Richardson 1988:645).

Williams (1995:58) feels that analytic mastery, which keeps the writer from direct access to parts of himself and ensures that access takes place via the analyst, is thus necessitated by the analysand's (here, the author's presumed desire to self-censor, were he to 'know' the truth about himself). Lacan reads the situation differently, however, and not through the

direct application of masterful ‘codes’. A suspicion of mastery and knowledge is, then, crucial to how we understand Lacan and how Lacan suggests ways of understanding the text—even, or perhaps especially, difficult texts. Dupin then approaches the problem of how to find the letter as Lacanian analysis addresses a difficult analytic situation, and we as Lacanian readers should approach an obscure or ‘ungiving’ text not through the prior knowledge and the desire to master, conquer, or solve the mystery through whatever form of power, but by entering into the mystery’s own codes and strategies, opening it up from within and using the tools it provides.

It is the loss within the story, and the circulation of the lost object as its loss is replayed, which is fundamental to Lacan’s reading of Poe through *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—the movement and circulation, rather than content and truth are the key terms. Thus, Lacan’s project is to rework Freudian phases of human development from infancy onwards, emphasizing the interconnection of the subject’s entry into language and the development of gender identification. Lacanian psychoanalysis is consequently sometimes known as ‘structural psychoanalysis’, and its critical focus is not authorial symptoms breaking through on the page, or the behaviour of characters, but the circulation of signs in the text.

Williams (1995:59) points out that Lacan’s importance for literary criticism is not simply that he offers a superannuated theory of gender and subjectivity but that he brings a theory of language to his reading of key Freudian concepts of sexuality and the psyche. Reworking the basic Freudian models of Oedipal development and castration anxiety, he maps out differences within the routes through which girls and boys enter language (the Symbolic order). It is this different linguistic relationship which at the same time underpins the child’s uneasy entry into sexual difference. The child moves into the Symbolic Order from the essentially narcissistic space (the Imaginary), characterized by the inability to see the world as Other. In the Imaginary, into which the child enters through the mirror stage, everything is an image of the child’s own self. Sameness rather than difference means that here the child’s experience is characterized by the illusion of unity—its own, and its own with the world. In moving forward into the Symbolic Order, the child has to confront Otherness in a number of forms (lack, castration, desire) as he recognizes his difference from a world

(and a linguistic order) which he has not created, and which imposes on him the laws of the social order—he is, then, subject to a system he cannot control, and so his developing subjectivity comes into being through an experience of power (of the Other in its various forms) and lack (of control, of his own narcissistic self-unity which the social order does not recognize). Lacan (1977:05) writes in his famous essay *The Mirror Stage* that the end of this moment ushers the child into the socially- governed system of the Symbolic:

This moment in which the mirror-stage comes to an end inaugurates, by the identification with the *imago* of the counterpart and the drama of primordial jealousy ..., the dialectic that will henceforth link the I to socially elaborated situations.

It is here, when the ‘I’ is linked to socially elaborated situations that desire which is predicated on lack becomes possible, and also here that entry into language begins uneasily to take place, at the same time as an equally difficult move towards gender identification. This, then, is the beginning of subjectivity, since it is only through language as a system of difference that subjective identity can be stated, thought, articulated—it is also the moment at which the unconscious is born, since here repression takes place. Sexual difference and language are thus both effects of entry into the Symbolic Order. Entry into language is differently negotiated by girls and boys. However, girls do not view the mother, castration, or the threat of the father in the same way, in Freud’s final model (from the early 1930’s essays on femininity onwards), or in Lacan’s work. They do not feel the loss of the mother’s body as boys do, and so the work of Symbolic substitution (and consequently their entry into the Symbolic) does not, for Lacan, come as easily. As Ragland-Sullivan (1992:421) puts it:

Language itself serves as the signified that tells the particular story of the knotting (or not) of the three orders (Imaginary, Symbolic, Real) in an individual’s life in terms of acquisition of gender as an identity.

How, then, is this manifested in Lacan's reading of Poe? First, in his emphasis on the function of the letter itself. At the core of the story is not just the letter but an absence of its content, as the details of the letter—what it actually says—are evaded through paraphrase. This is characteristically Poe—even his gothic tales tend to circulate around an absent centre or object, something either never revealed or revealed as a cipher. It is this emphasis on process rather than revelation or substance which is Lacan's focus. We hear nothing of the purloined letter's content: it is passed around, at each turn demonstrating something of the relationship between people, and in this sense it acts as the means by which relationships are established. Muller and Richardson (1988:57f) describe the process:

As the letter passes from the Queen to the Minister to Dupin to the Prefect back to the Queen, the content remains irrelevant, and the shifting parameters of power for the subjects concerned [is] derived from the different places where the letter is diverted along this 'symbolic circuit' The 'place' of the signifier is determined by the symbolic system within which it is constantly displaced.

For Lacan, this makes the letter itself a 'pure signifier' because it has been completely estranged from its signified: what the letter means is entirely irrelevant to the way in which it is passed around in the story. The story plays out a pattern:

... in which the subjects relate to each other in their displacement of the intersubjective repetition. We shall see that their displacement is determined by the place which a pure signifier—*The Purloined Letter*—comes to occupy in their trio. (Lacan in *The Purloined Poe* 1988:32).

The act of repetition is then divorced from the meaning or content of what is repeated. For Lacan, the letter functions in this story not because of what it says in terms of its content (which we never know), but because of its position between people, its role in producing certain interpersonal effects and subjective responses: the Queen's embarrassment and fear, the Minister's power through possession of it, Dupin's act of retrieval

understood as a moment of revenge carried out through the very same strategy which was used to take it in the first place—even the King’s ignorance of the letter’s very existence. All of these moves focus on the letter, a letter which forces responses without ever revealing itself. Each character finds him- or herself already in a relationship of action and reaction with a sign which has no essential presence—it is never ‘filled out’.

The letter was able to produce its effects within the story: on the actors in the tale, including the narrator, as well as outside the story: on us, the readers and also on its author, without anyone’s ever bothering to worry about what it meant (Johnson 1980:115).

It is because we never know its content or its origin, that its function, as it circulates between people, can be revealed all the more starkly. Each subject in this story is changed by the effects of the letter-as-signifier, an instance in miniature of how the subject does not create and control, but is constituted by and through the Symbolic Order. The subject is, then, constructed through a crucial developmental relationship to the sign as an image of lack. According to Williams (1995:63), for Lacan the combination of absence and movement which characterize the letter make it the exemplary signifier: it is both there and not there in the sense that it lacks an identifiably meaningful content. It behaves in the story as signs do in psychic life, since its ‘heart’ is always absent. According to Lacan:

the signifier is a unit in its very uniqueness being by nature symbol only of an absence. We cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other subjects, it must be or not be in a particular place but that unlike them it will be and not be where it is, wherever it goes (Lacan in *The Purloined Poe* 1988:41).

There is also, then, a story centrally concerned with things out of place but never wholly lost, with the significantly misplaced but apparently insignificant detail.

It seems that Lacan did not look to this story out of interest in *The Purloined Letter qua* letter, nor to guess at the letter’s content. Rather the actual letter was a signifier, moving from place to place, leaving an impact

of real effects in its wake. Ragland-Sullivan and Bracher (1991:09) believe that Poe's story fascinates Lacan most probably because it is empty of content, laying bare the path of signifying effects that catalyze the desire to narrate as itself a defense against desire. Neither Lacan, Poe, nor Dupin seek to know what is in the letter.

The letter offers a focus for an allegory of gazes—a story concerning the 'right way of seeing', for only those who know how to look for it will find it, only a specific interpretative strategy will reveal the object (even though its content remains veiled). The police, failing to find the letter, are 'realists', operating on reality with a common-sense stupidity which can only see selectively. Muller and Richardson (1988:40) state:

Theirs is the realist's imbecility, which does not pause to observe that nothing, however deep in the bowels of the earth a hand may seek to ensconce it, will never be hidden there, since another hand can always retrieve it, and that what is hidden is never but what is missing from its place, as the call slip puts it when speaking of a volume lost in a library. And even if the book may be on an adjacent shelf or in the next slot, it would be hidden there, however visibly it may appear.

To Dupin, as to the psychoanalyst, nothing in the unconscious, or the library or the text is ever lost or finally hidden. Psychoanalysis, like detective work, thus becomes a question of developing the right way of seeing, of casting off the imbecility of the realist. How did Dupin guess the hiding place straight away? An accurate assumption, he tells us, that the clever Minister would be sure to avoid all the most obscure places of concealment (which were bound to be searched by the conscientious police), and would place the letter in a prominent, open position. The average intellect, Dupin argues 'suffers to pass unnoticed those considerations which are too obtrusively and too palpably self-evident' (Lacan in *The Purloined Poe* 1988:20). According to Ruth Van Herik (1985:50) by Lacanian extension, the 'proper place' of the letter, obvious only to Dupin (who stands in for the analyst), is the place of castration represented by the woman's body. Lacan (1985:50) describes the 'spot' in these terms:

And that is why without needing any more than being able to listen in at the door of Professor Freud, he will go straight to the spot in which lies and lives what that body is designed to hide Look! Between the cheeks of the fireplace, there's the object already in reach of a hand the ravisher has but to extend.

Van Herik (1985:50) contends that what is so obvious it cannot be seen must also be named. The phallus, unspecified, is thus replaced on the woman's body through the seductive play of phallographic signification. What is lost, the phallus/letter, is returned to circulation, back to the Queen, the woman's body, from which it has been castrated. As empty signifier, the phallus, like the letter, is something to which meaning is ascribed by everyone but from which it is also missing.

According to Muller and Richardson (1988:48), Lacan states that when Dupin enters the room wearing green sunglasses, spread out before him is an immense female body, waiting to be undressed. Lacan avers that Dupin did not need to listen at Professor Freud's door to know where to look for the object this body is made to conceal. It is there, between the legs of the fireplace, within reach, waiting to be ravished. But Dupin restrains himself, recognizing that if the Minister knows that the letter has been ravished and that the ravisher is under his control, Dupin will not leave the house alive. Thus, Dupin prepares an act that fictionally will be the ravishing of a female body, one where the subject of the body will not know immediately that the body has been ravished or by whom. Stuart Schneiderman (1991:15) asserts that Dupin knew that he could not take possession of this signifier, of an inscribed signifier, a localized signifier, without leaving in its place a facsimile, a substitute, an object, a worthless piece of paper whose destiny will be to be rolled up into a ball and tossed out with the trash. However, Dupin did not believe that his facsimile was worthless; but Lacan emphasized the unlikelihood of this substitute producing the effect Dupin expected. There, of course, Dupin did suffer a lapse of judgement due, as Schneiderman (1991:153) said, to the fact that those who take possession of the letter are possessed by it. Dupin repeated the scene in which the Minister purloined the letter in the first place, because, when the Minister substituted a worthless piece of paper for the precious letter, Muller and Richardson (1988:40) state that Lacan writes that

a remainder whose importance no analyst will fail to recognize. Schneiderman (1991:153) states that there are now two letters of which only one is a signifier and which are thus certainly not doubles. The second letter, the facsimile, is the object 'a' and its connection with the original letter as barred signifier constitutes the structure of a phantasy. Schneiderman (1991:153) believes that Lacan's fiction was generated out of the phantasy he read in the text.

Catherine Clement (1983:190f) states that Poe emphasizes certain details that could not fail to arouse Lacan's interest: the Minister is a poet, a madman, and a mathematician, and an author of a book on differential and integral calculus. The fantastic combination of attributes drew Lacan's attention to questions of inspiration, madness and the matheme. Clement (1983:190) believes that Lacan analyses *The Purloined Letter* from the Minister's point of view, fascinated by the man behind the Minister—a thief—and by his relationship to the woman. She is not just any woman, she is the Queen. This changes the nature of the story: she becomes a possession. By absconding with the Queen's letter, the Minister takes possession of the sign of the woman and is himself possessed by it: it is 'in his possession'. We see him hide the letter by adopting a stratagem similar to a trick an animal might use to escape from a predator. Lacan sees this as a device used by the ostrich—an animal that hides its head in the sand, believing that it would not be seen because it can't see anything. The Minister's dependency is absolute: he is in possession of the letter, but he does nothing with it beyond hiding it by placing it in an obvious location. The Minister, according to Clement (1983:191) becomes a woman. He gives off the most obvious 'odor di femmina'. He turns the envelope inside out as one turns the skin of a rabbit and writes—or has someone else write his own address in place of the Queen's. So we have a Minister who writes a woman's letter to himself—whatever the real contents of the stolen letter may be. *The Purloined Letter*, like an immense female body, is displayed in the Minister's office when Dupin enters. Dupin already expects to find the letter here, but through eyes shaded by green glasses he now has to only undress this immense female body. The Minister has been castrated by Dupin, who occupies a place analogous to that of the psychoanalyst. From a neutral position he observes the strategies of one who thinks that he is not being observed but who is in fact, like the ostrich, standing with his behind in the

air. The Minister thus receives a message of his own, the theft of the letter, but in an inverted form: the theft of the letter by Dupin, who lets the Minister know that he has stolen the letter back by writing two verses from Crebillon on the page that he substitutes in the letter in the envelope. A model of all communication: the transmitter receives his own message back in inverted form from the receiver.

But, what is the relationship of this semiotic analysis with the questions of desire and subjectivity which have been crucial to the forms of psychoanalysis? For Lacan, in Muller and Richardson (1988:40) desire itself is predicated on absence, the development of subjectivity takes place in terms dictated by the sign. *The Purloined Letter* thus demonstrates according to Muller and Richardson (1988:29) how crucially subjectivity and the Symbolic are linked for Lacan:

It is the Symbolic Order which is constitutive for the subject—by demonstrating in the story the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of the signifier.

It is not only the subject which is thus orientated; it is skewing which, for Lacan ‘makes the very existence of fiction possible’ (Lacan in *The Purloined Poe* 1988:29).

This pattern of repetition which takes place both inside and outside the story is, then, like the processes of the psychoanalytic situation itself, with the text as focus, rather than the author or character’s psychic state. According to Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy (1982:101f) one approaches texts, whether literary or analytic, by following the path of the signifier. Benvenuto and Kennedy (1982:102) go on to state:

The Poe essay is a reasonably clear illustration of Lacan’s notion of the Symbolic Order in that he uncovered what he considered to be similarities between the story and the psychoanalytic situation, for example concerning the kind of knowledge needed to discover the patient’s truth. In analysis a ‘letter’ can be found, put aside, diverted or hidden by the patient. The basic analytic task, in Lacan’s view, was to find this letter, or at least find out where it is going, and to do this entails an understanding of the Symbolic Order.

The letter then acts as the key decentring element in the text, in that it insists on being heard and affecting everyone in its proximity, even if they cannot decode its meaning into a consciously realized truth. In this sense it exemplifies what Lacan calls ‘the insistence of the signifying chain’, and chain of unconscious thoughts which Freud identified as the controlling psychological element.

Another issue which runs through Lacan’s text is the question of the gaze, which is central to his theorization of the development of the subject and, in turn, crucial to the important work on subjectivity and the image which took its cue from Lacan. Since *The Purloined Letter* for Lacan hinges on a dynamic of mis-seeing; it also offers an allegory of how the gaze operates in psychic life. Lacan’s seminal essay of 1949 *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I*, focuses upon the moment upon which the infant (aged between six and eighteen months) first identifies with a whole *gestalt* image of itself as separate from the world, a unity which is self-sufficient and contained. No longer, from this moment onwards, undifferentiated from the mother’s body or the sensual world around him, the child recognizes himself through identification of and with a self-image—a reflection in the mirror, or through identification with another body like its own. This startling spectacle of the infant in front of the mirror is described by Lacan (1977:1f):

Unable as yet to walk, or even to stand up, and held tightly as he is by some support, human or artificial ... he nevertheless overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstructions of his support and, fixing his attitude in a slightly leaning-forward position, in order to hold it in his gaze, brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image.

This is a transformative experience, signaling for the child entry into the Imaginary; the child imagines itself as whole through identification with the image it sees. Lacan (1977:1f) continues ‘we have only to understand the middle stage as an identification, namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image’.

The Imaginary is then opened up not only by the narcissism of the child at this moment before lack intrudes, but by an essentially visual experience—whether the child goes through this by actually looking in the

mirror or not, still the moment is psychologically a visualization of the self as a whole. How do these questions of looking and identity manifest themselves in the seminar on *The Purloined Letter*?

Lacan sees a strong dynamic of power exchanged between the seeing and the blindness operating in Poe's story. Concealment of the lost, guilty object is ensured not by making the thing itself invisible (hiding the letter in a secret draw, or under the floorboards) but by understanding that 'concealment' can be ensured on quite different conditions: the story is 'about an observer being observed without observing that she is being watched in turn' (Muller & Richardson *The Purloined Poe*, pvii). Both acts of purloining the letter rely upon an understanding that the subject is blind in certain situations, even though he or she can technically see—what Freud (1896:181) was to call in *Studies of Hysteria* 'that blindness of the seeing eye'. For Williams (1995:73) what Lacan refers to as the story's 'primal scene'—its establishing moment—is like all primal scenes in classic psychoanalysis, predicated upon a dynamic of seeing and of unseeing—another key visual experience in the formation of the subject, which finds its way into Lacan's theory of gender alongside the mirror phase. From this scene of the story, the letter passes on the first stage of its journey. The Queen places on display, as if to conceal it, the guilty object which threatens the law, the position of the King. The three characters here—King, Queen and Minister—cannot be decoded as the father/mother/child of the Freudian triptych, for Lacan the visual power and anxieties of the primal scene are nevertheless present. But more than this, the story is a web of exchanged glances. People see each other's actions, and see that they are being seen, the primary element in Lacan's theory of the gaze, which is always rooted in what is at stake in being observed 'we are beings who are always looked at, in the spectacle of the world', writes Lacan (1981:75). The relation of the subject with the domain of vision is to be a screen, receiving the Other's gaze but lacking its plenitude, not the reverse. For Lacan, then, the subject does not possess the gaze, but is primarily constituted by it. This supremely paranoid concept is an important element of the child's growing experience of the world as Other, in its entry in the Symbolic. Indeed, this is already a component of the child's experience of its *gestalt* image in the mirror phase, for although this was primarily a narcissistic experience (in which the child saw an image of itself in the mirror), it is also the first moment at which the

child relates to himself as if his image were that of another. This moment is the beginning of difference, which is to be fully confronted as the Other which the child confronts upon entering the Symbolic. Thus, in reading *The Purloined Letter*, Lacan identifies a dynamic of glances which are more important for the way they act out a drama of being seen than of seeing—the power one might have only has meaning in terms of being seen to have that power by the other's glances. The letter, with its absent content, has no identity of its own, save the role it plays in being passed around. Nevertheless, the letter lends its possessor a certain power, and this is its role as an object of desire as it passes between people: 'The ascendancy which the Minister derives from the situation is thus not a function of the letter, but, whether he knows it or not, of the role it constitutes for him' (Lacan in *The Purloined Poe* 1988:46). There is blindness in this story, but there are also at least two forms of seeing. The letter has power because it is seen to be possessed by some characters (whose visual positions change). Lacan's emphasis on repetition thus takes a visual turn, as he focuses 'three moments, structuring three glances, borne by three subjects incarnated each time by different characters' (Lacan in *The Purloined Poe* 1988:46). Here, there is visual exchange and recognition at each twist of the tale. Along with the power which the letter gives to its possessor, the power of the glance is also passed around—from Queen to Minister, from Minister to Dupin. The gaze, and a subject position founded in it, is thus something liable to shift as the subject's relationship to the others in its network also changes, but it is always set up in terms of the difficult gaze of the other rather than the potent look of the self. Psychoanalytic visual theory has found a very specific life in the analysis of the circulation of power in a literary text. Here, then, Williams (1995:73) points out Lacan's old theories of the gaze which negotiate the visual dynamic represented in *The Purloined Letter* itself, a move closer to applied psychoanalysis than one might initially have thought Lacan would be engaging in—although he does, of course, resist a specific analysis of author-through-text: 'Where the Freudian method is ultimately biographical' writes E. Ann Kaplan (1990:32) 'Lacan's is textual'.

In this seminar, Lacan also points to Poe's treatment of the boy who always wins at odds-and-evens in the story: the boy explains that he is able to do so because he imitates (Lacan calls it 'egomimie') the facial expression of the other player, and, once his face has so patterned itself, he allows his

mind to find the mental state that corresponds to the physiognomic set. According to Juliet Flower and Mac Cannell (1986:31), Lacan's response to such an explanation is to demystify it:

We are, then, Lacan says, in the realm of symbolic signification: that of the 'plus-moins' and the 'moins-plus', not in the realm of the real, where in a random series 'at each throw, you have as many chances of winning or losing as on the previous throw'. The coins tossed in the game are re-marked with a signifier of their value not as coins, but as 'odd' or 'even'.... And in this region of the symbol, it is two that is the odd number. Johnson points out that what Lacan is trying to think through here is not the eternal (Oedipal) triangle, not the number One, but the number two. But she does not offer us the reason why. On the one hand, Lacan re-emphasizes the purely imaginary character of the binary, dual relation once the symbolic holds sway. But on the other, he evokes the idea that the two might be thought outside the confines of the symbolic.

Flower and Cannell (1985:32) observed that Barbara Johnson misses one trick in Lacan's seminar on *The Purloined Letter*, where we find the meaning of the 'two' Lacan is trying to rescue for the first time. Because Johnson is not attending to the importance of the form of the social tie in Lacan, she overlooks the major question Lacan's text leads up to, asking of the hegemony of the signifier, a hegemony which he himself so amply illustrates: the question of the heterosexual relation. In the Poe story, this is the King and the Queen's relation. To get to that relation we need to return to Lacan. He has distinguished in the seminar between two registers. The first register is that of 'exactitude' of measurement, of accuracy. This register appears in the *Compte Rendu* of the affair given by the Prefect of the Police. His narrative depends, contend Flower and Cannell (1986:18), on its exactitude being 'guaranteed' by his neutrality. He is merely a messenger, a means of 'linguistic transmission'. The other register is that of 'truth', the narrative register which invests Dupin with all manner of ambiguities, aporias and enigmas. Here 'truth' is given a gender: it is a 'woman'. (I will explore this further when discussing Derrida's critique of Lacan). There is, however, another woman in *The Purloined Letter*: the Queen. She appears

anything but ‘faithful’ and ‘true’. She is also, as Queen, in a social position or role that is, clearly symbolic—in the ‘merely symbolic’ sense of the term—since she exercises, obviously, no ultimate power. She fears the King, and as such is literally subject to him, to his power. Flower and Cannell (1986:32) write:

Son seigneur et maitre—her Lord and Master. Not light words for Lacan, who analyzed the discourse of mastery as one of the four discourses, the four forms of the social tie. The Queen is really subject neither to the signifier as such nor to the neutral code (the way things are) but to the specific institution of marriage in which her husband is her ‘Lord and Master’.

As such, she has to play the game of the signifier, and bow down to it because the Queen is subject to the moral order, an order in which a very concrete other—the King—has all the prestige, power and authority to make her keep her place. According to Flower and Cannell (1986:32), like Johnson, we all easily overlook the social tie. Possibly Lacan wanted to demonstrate how willing we are to overlook it, to keep it offstage in our involvement with the signifier. But Lacan also wanted us to remember how disconnected we are.

Lacan concludes his seminar on *The Purloined Letter* with the remark that ‘a letter always arrive at its destination’. This lends credence to Lacan’s belief that the letter operates as a signifier whose signified is irrelevant and it can have and lose its place only in the Symbolic Order. I will discuss this in detail when evaluating Žižek’s defense of Lacan.

3 Derrida’s Critique of Lacan’s Reading of *The Purloined Letter*

However accomplished his writing, Derrida’s criticism of Lacan has a predictable ring. Schneiderman (1991:154) states that to refute Lacan, Derrida falls back on the points Lacan has always been criticized for: the failure to give sufficient weight to the imaginary, to the ego, to narcissism, to the horrors of corporeal fragmentation. In a sense one may rightly say that Lacan could have given more weight to these areas, though one should in the

interest of fairness note that Lacan did devote considerable theoretical effort to them. The point is that Lacan asserted the primacy of the symbolic over the imaginary, and Derrida sees the imaginary as swallowing the symbolic. Thus, we find Derrida accusing Lacan of everything his psychoanalytic adversaries have criticized him for: the overevaluation of the Oedipus complex, the overestimation of the phallus, overintellectualizing, being too interested in philosophy, failing to take into account the pre-oedipal fears of corporeal fragmentation, failing to give place and importance to the ego; there is even a sense that Lacan is being accused of giving insufficient place to affects. What is Derrida's scriptural strategy and to what is he opposed? That is not a very difficult question to answer. Certainly *Le Facteur de la Verite* is an overwritten and overwrought text that reads like an indictment. It constantly repeats the same charges, piling up evidence of tendencies that appear to be deserving of condemnation. The tone is moral and the text is animated almost throughout by a seemingly indubitably correct moral passion. Ultimately, that is the secret appeal of deconstruction. Regarding deconstruction, Žižek (1992:25) postulates the following:

Since this recourse to common sense takes place more often than one might suspect, *systematically* even, within the 'deconstruction', one is tempted to put forward the thesis that the very fundamental gesture of 'deconstruction' is in a radical sense *commonsensical*. There is namely an unmistakable ring of common sense in the 'deconstructionist' insistence upon the impossibility of establishing a clear cut difference between empirical and transcendental, outside and inside, representation and presence, writing and voice; in its compulsive demonstration of how the outside always already smears over the inside, of how writing is constitutive of voice, etc. etc.—as if 'deconstructionism' is ultimately wrapping up commonsensical insights into an intricate jargon.

Žižek considers it to be one of the reasons that it is so successful in the USA which he views as the land of common sense.

Underpinning Derrida's critique of Lacan's essay on Poe is a much wider discussion about the relationship between deconstruction and psychoanalysis, a complex issue which rests upon Derrida's reading of

Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis through a critique of logocentrism. Johnson (1980:119) asserts that as well as Derrida accusing Lacan of a general laxity in his deployment of philosophical sources, Derrida was concerned to identify and deconstruct the key metaphysical patterns mapped out by classic Oedipal triangulation. The model family structure which traces the child's developing Oedipality is three-cornered, with the father intervening as the 'third term' to disrupt (in the child's eyes) the relationship of the mother and the child. But, according to Williams (1995:75) the triad might be read in other ways too: through his subsequent anxiety, the child sees himself as the intervening factor between father and mother (hence the father's role as threat), whilst it is the mother who represents the love-object for both father and child. In each pattern, a third person intervenes in the dyad of unity, introducing rivalry to the pattern. On one level this triangulation might seem to present a topographical critique of binary structures—the 'either', or the dynamic upon which the logocentrism which Derrida deconstructs rests. The Oedipal structure is an interrelationship with three corners (or moments) not two. How then do we understand Derrida's charge made in his essay *The Purveyor of Truth* that Lacan is operating with an implicit Hegelian brief, that psychoanalysis itself is founded upon a family structure which is itself at root logocentric? R.A. Champagne (1995:84) states that for Derrida the third term of the Oedipal triangle does not act to deconstruct the relationship between the other two positions (which would mean that the father's intervention unravelled the network of family relationships in which he is implicated). Rather, the Freudian and the Lacanian third term is incorporated in an Hegelian moment of synthesis, or *Aufhebung*. Of this Johnson (1980:122) writes:

The problem with psychoanalytic triangularity, in Derrida's eyes, is not that it contains the wrong number of terms, but that it presupposes the possibility of a successful dialectical mediation and harmonious normalization, or *Aufhebung*, of desire.

The third term—the intervention of the father, threatening the mother-child dyad—offers not a breaking open but a continuation and consolidation of the family structure. The father comes in a spirit of disruption (disrupting a taboo desire), but acts out a moment of mediation between the two terms,

moving the family form, unchanged, into the future and the next moment (for Hegel, the moment of synthesis or resolution of a dialectic forms the first 'thetic' moment of the next dialectical phase).

Johnson (1980:122) states that the child's desire thus acts as a totalizing moment of incorporation rather than a sign of difference. At the moment at which he learns of the substitution involved in signification, he consolidates a family structure articulated by Lacan—in Johnson's (1980:122) words: 'within the bounds of the type of 'logocentrism' that has been the focus of Derrida's entire deconstructive enterprise'. The question is: what does all this have to do with *The Purloined Letter*? There are two ways of answering this which have particular pertinence here. One of Johnson's arguments is that Derrida reads the first pattern of triangulation which Lacan identifies in the Poe story (its primal scene, involving the King, the Queen and the Minister) as both a straight translation of Freudian Oedipality and as only dialectically connected to the second triad, the resolving repetition (involving the Queen, the Minister and Dupin). The triangle, Johnson (1980:119f) writes:

becomes the magical, Oedipal figure that explains the functioning of human desire. The child's original imaginary dual unity with the mother is subverted by the law of the father as that which prohibits incest under threat of castration. The child has 'simply' to 'assume castration' as the necessity of substitution in the object of his desire (the object of desire becoming the locus of substitution and the focus of repetition), after which the child's desire becomes 'normalized'. Derrida's criticism of the 'triangles' or 'triads' in Lacan's reading of Poe is based on the assumption that Lacan's use of triangularity stems from this psychoanalytic myth.

For Johnson (1980:125) Derrida fails to see the repetition in Lacan's reading. These triads do not add up to one grand Oedipal narrative, but need to be read as interconnected but different moments. Lacan's final model is here quadrangular—the shape of the triangles placed together, with one a repetition (with a difference) of the other—but, Johnson (1980:125) argues, it is Derrida who is blind to this. Derrida, in short does not see the difference.

Derrida criticizes Lacan for failing to account for the literariness of the Poe story—its narrative devices (and way in which it frames itself), the context of other Poe's stories—in order to read the story as a purely analytic narrative. One of Johnson's concerns is to bring both of these possibilities together—a narrative read for its analytic interest but precisely as fictive or poetic writing. The letter for Lacan, is important not because of its content but because of its movement—its content is absent. Derrida, however, turns the absence into another kind of truth. Derrida believes that Lacan in reading *The Purloined Letter* as an allegory of the signifier, has made the signifier the story's truth. With this moment of consolidation, the text loses its indeterminate textuality, despite Lacan's emphasis on the mobility of elements within the story. But more important than this for Derrida, is Lacan's lack of interest in the multiple literary references which frame, and are contained by, the text, the sense in which it is obsessed with the written word and transgresses the limits of the story itself, as it refers and spills beyond itself. Champagne (1995:13) states that for Derrida, Lacan's text is an inter-text—not entirely his own work. In the midst of several different critiques of psychobiographical 'decoding', comes a strange re-emergence of Marie Bonaparte's strategies; she ironically becomes one of the crucial inter-textual reference points between these texts:

The very Oedipal reading that Derrida attributes to Lacan is itself, according to Derrida, a purloined letter—purloined by Lacan from Marie Bonaparte's psychobiographical study of the life and works of Edgar Allan Poe (Johnson 1980:134).

Thus, it appears that in the apparently endless chain of inter-textuality, all texts are purloined versions of each other.

Concerning Lacan's reading of *The Purloined Letter*, I previously outlined Flower and Cannell's discussion on the 'two registers': exactitude of measurement, and the register of 'truth', the narrative register which invests Dupin with all manner of ambiguities, aporias and enigmas. This register is indeed, as Derrida complains, that of the 'truth' of the signifier, the truth of the phallus, the one by which Lacan writes 'we measure the supremacy of the signifier in the subject' (Flower & Cannell 1986:20). It is where we are blinded.

Derrida criticizes Lacan for failing to make reference to Poe, the author in his literary analysis of the story. He compares Lacan's analysis to that of Marie Bonaparte's psychobiography. I believe that it is an unfair criticism, as referencing the author himself is not essential to a sound literary analysis.

Derrida (1987:421) agrees with Lacan that the story is that of a letter, of the theft and displacement of a signifier. But what he finds problematic is that Lacan treats only the content of the story. Derrida (1987:421) states:

But what the Seminar treats is only the content of the story, what is justifiably called its history, what is recounted in the account, the internal and narrated face of the narration. Not the narration itself.

Derrida (1987:428) accuses Lacan of misleading the reader into thinking that he will take into account the narration and the curious place of the narrator. What Lacan does, according to Derrida is to 'allow the narrator to dictate an effect of neutralizing exclusion (the narration as commentary) that transforms the entire Seminar into an analysis fascinated by a content' (Derrida 1987:426). Derrida (1987:428) states that in Lacan's Seminar there is a first moment when it seems that the position of the narrator and the narrating operation are going to intervene in the deciphering of 'Poe's message'. Derrida goes on to inform us that Lacan fails to deliver in this regard and reduces the narration to mere 'commentary'. Furthermore, he accuses Lacan of failing to discuss the specific status of the narrator's discourse and refraining from questioning the narrator's interventions and his psychoanalytic position in the rest of the Seminar. He considers it a weakness in Lacan's Seminar that he excludes the narrator from what he calls 'intersubjective triads', the triads which constitute that which is inside the recounted story. He believes that Lacan deliberately excludes the narrator from the real drama—the two triangular scenes. Derrida states that Lacan by referring to the narrator as the 'general narrator' gives him a neutral, homogenous status. This is facilitated by Lacan who states that the narrator 'adds nothing' (Lacan in *The Purloined Poe*, 1988:48). Derrida (1987:429) responds scathingly to this statement by stating:

As if one has to add something to a relation in order to intervene in a scene. Especially in a scene of narration. And as if his questions and remarks and exclamations—these are the forms of the so-called general narrator’s interventions in what Lacan demarcates as the ‘first dialogue’—added nothing. Further, even before this ‘first dialogue’ gets underway, the ‘general narrator’ says things to which we have to turn later. Finally, the narrator who is onstage in what he places onstage is in turn placed onstage in a text more ample than the so-called general narration. A supplementary reason not to consider him as a neutral place of passage.

Derrida sees the text as overflowing and he finds it delimiting that Lacan pays no attention to this, but, rather isolates the two narrated triangular scenes, the two ‘real dramas’, neutralizing the fourth character who is the general narrator.

Derrida (1987:432) believes that Lacan’s analysis contains a formal limit. He goes on to state that Lacan completely overlooks the formal structure of the text, ‘at the very moment when, and perhaps, in the extent to which, its ‘truth’, its exemplary message, allegedly is “deciphered”’. He sees this as evidence of power formalism. Formalism is practised when one is not interested in the subject-author which in certain theoretical situations is constituted as progress. But Derrida (1987:432) is emphatic that Lacan’s formalism is illogical because on the pretext of excluding the author, he does not take into account the ‘scription-fiction’ and the ‘scriptor-fictor’, or simply put the narrating narration of the narrator. Lacan is also accused by Derrida of cutting the narrated figure from a fourth side in order to see only triangles because of his over-evaluation of the Oedipus complex. Derrida (1987:436) sees the exclusion of the fourth as having adverse implications in the precipitation toward the truth.

Derrida (1987:436-437) finds it objectionable that Lacan insists upon showing that there is a single proper itinerary of the letter which returns to a determinable place that is always the same and that is its own; and that its meaning (what is written in the note in circulation) is indifferent or unknown for our purposes, the meaning of the letter and the sense of its itinerary are necessary, unique, and determinable in truth, that is, as truth.

Derrida (1987:444) draws attention to the one element of commonality between Bonaparte and Lacan, in that for both of them the castration of the woman is the final sense, what *The Purloined Letter* means. At the same time Derrida states that Bonaparte does what Lacan does not: she relates *The Purloined Letter* to other texts by Poe. Derrida believes that this operation is an internal necessity. According to Derrida (1987:439) *The Purloined Letter* belongs to a trilogy along with *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and *The Mystery of Marie Roget*. The Seminar does not mention anything about the Dupin trilogy. Derrida (1987:446) notes that it is obvious when reading the Seminar that Lacan has read Bonaparte, but, he fails to name her. Derrida remarks scathingly that Lacan is always so scrupulous about debts and priorities, yet, he fails to acknowledge an explanation which orientates his entire interpretation.

Derrida (1987:446) finds it unacceptable that Lacan, who is a psychoanalyst, should state that the question of whether Dupin seizes the letter above the mantelpiece, as in Baudelaire's translation, or beneath it as in the original text 'may be abandoned without harm to the inferences of cooking'. Derrida finds it incredible that Lacan should consider this to be without harm. Lacan is also accused by Derrida of failing to pick on significant details like the 'brass knob' of the fireplace which symbolizes the clitoris. Derrida (1987:448) states that Bonaparte is never tempted to grant Dupin the position of analyst, not even in order to watch over him with another kind of mastery. By implication he lashes out at Lacan whom he sees as wanting to assume the role of master.

Derrida (1987:453) sees Dupin as occupying a 'median position'. He contends that from the outset Dupin acts with his sights set on the letter, on possessing it in order to return it to its rightful owner (neither the King, nor the Queen, but the Law which binds them). In his Seminar Lacan used the image of ostriches, and Derrida purloins this image to ridicule Lacan by saying that there are only ostriches, no-one can avoid being plucked, and the more one is the master, the more one presents one's rear, which would be the person who identifies with Dupin.

For Lacan, as analysed by Derrida, castration is the sign of the simultaneous presence and absence of the phallus: the object of desire is always a substitute for something that was never present (the mother's phallus). This is expressed in Lacanian terms as a phallus always both

‘veiled’ and ‘unveiled’. Derrida cites from a well-known passage in Lacan’s *The Signification of the Phallus* which states that the phallus:

can play its role only when veiled, that is to say, as itself a sign of the latency with which any signifiable is struck, when it is raised to the function of signifier. The phallus is the signifier of this *Aufhebung* itself, which it inaugurates by its disappearance. That is why the demon of shame arises at the very moment when, in the ancient mysteries, the phallus is unveiled (Lacan in *Ecrits* 1977:480).

Yet, Derrida complains, this veiling and unveiling is set up as the structure of the lack. In this way it restores to the phallus, as well as to castration, a fixed and central place which is freed from all substitution, thus undermining the attack on the metaphysics of presence to which Derrida’s deconstructive enterprise is dedicated.

Derrida (1987:463) believes Lacan subordinates the letter writing, and the text. Derrida (1987:469) postulates that when Lacan recalls the passion for unveiling which has one object: the truth and recalls that the analyst ‘above all remains the master of the truth’ it is always in order to link the truth to the power of speech. He explains that even if communication communicates nothing, the discourse represents the existence of communication; even if it denies the evidence, it affirms that speech constitutes truth; even if it is intended to deceive, the discourse speculates on faith in testimony.

4 Žižek’s Defense of Lacan

Lacan postulated at the end of *The Purloined Letter* that the letter always arrives at its destination. Derrida refuted this claim, asserting why could it not—sometimes at least also fail to reach it? Žižek (1992:9f) examines the statements offered by both the theorists and states that if the Lacanian theory insists categorically that a letter does always arrive at its destination, it is not because of an unshakable belief in teleology, in the power of the message to reach its preordained goal: Lacan’s exposition of the way a letter arrives at its destination, ‘lays bare the very mechanism of teleological illusion’. This

simply means that the very reproach ‘a letter can miss its own destination’. Žižek (1992:10) accuses Derrida of misreading the Lacanian thesis, reducing it to the traditional teleological circular movement; that is, to what is precisely called in question and subverted by Lacan. Žižek (1992:10) gives credence to his views by pointing to the case where the letter does have an addressee, for example, a message in a bottle thrown into the sea from an island after a ship wreck. This case displays how a letter reaches its true destination the moment it is delivered (thrown into the water). This may be difficult to fathom but Žižek (1992:10) explains it: ‘Its true addressee is namely not the empirical Other which may receive it or not, but the big Other, the Symbolic Order itself, which receives it the moment the letter is put into circulation, that is the moment the sender ‘externalizes’ his message, delivers it to the Other, the moment the Other takes cognizance of the letter and thus relieves the sender of responsibility for it. Lacan (1981:315-319) notes in this regard that what is crucial here is the difference between the letter’s symbolic circuit and its itinerary in what is called ‘reality’: a letter always arrives at its destination on the symbolic level, whereas in reality, it can of course fail to reach it. Žižek (1992:10) believes that Lacan’s thesis that a letter always arrives at its destination could be ordered by means of reference to the triad: Imaginary, Symbolic and Real.

According to Žižek (1992:9), regarding the Imaginary (mis) recognition, the idea that a letter always arrives at its destination points to the logic of recognition/misrecognition, the logic by means of which one (mis) recognizes oneself as the addressee of ideological interpellation. The illusion that constitutes ideological order is paraphrased by Johnson (1988:248): ‘a letter always arrives at its destination since its destination is wherever it arrives’. This view does not rule out the element of fate where an illusion is produced by kind of ‘short circuit’ between a place in the symbolic network and the contingent element which occupies it. Thus, whoever finds himself at a place becomes the addressee since the addressee is not defined by his positive qualities but by the very contingent fact of finding himself at this place. Regarding fate, Žižek (1992:11) states:

Fate in psychoanalysis always asserts itself through contingent encounters giving rise to the question: ‘What if I missed that remark? What if I had taken another route and avoided that scene’?

Such questioning is, of course, deceitful since ‘a letter always arrives at its destination’. It waits for its moment with patience—if not this then another contingent little bit of reality will sooner or later find itself at its place that awaits it and fires off the trauma.

This is in fact what Lacan called the ‘arbitrariness of the signifier’. Žižek (1992:12) emphasizes that the reason why a letter always reaches its addressee is because one becomes its addressee when one is reached. Žižek (1992:13) tries to nullify Derrida’s thesis that the letter can also miss its addressee by stating that:

It makes sense only insofar as I presuppose that I can be its addressee before the letter reaches me—in other words it presupposes the traditional teleological trajectory with a preordained goal ... the Derridean proposition that a letter can also go astray and miss its destination discloses a typical obsessional apprehension of what would happen if So, far from implying any kind of teleological circle ‘a letter always arrives at its destination’ exposes the very mechanism which brings about the amazement of ‘Why me? Why was I chosen?’ and thus sets in motion the search for a hidden fate that regulates my path.

On a symbolic level ‘a letter always arrives at its destination’ condenses an entire chain of propositions, according to Žižek (1992:12), who echoes the Lacanian viewpoint: ‘the sender always receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form’, ‘the repressed always returns’, ‘we cannot escape the symbolic debt, it always has to be settled’, which are all ultimately variations on the same premise that ‘there is no metalanguage’. According to Žižek (1992:13) when the subject/sender receives from the addressee his own message in its true form, that is, the letter that the subject put into circulation, ‘a letter always arrives at its destination’ which was from the very beginning the sender himself: ‘a letter always arrives at its destination’ when the subject is finally forced to assume the consequences of his activity. Lacan (1992:13) believed that the true meaning of the subject’s words or deeds—their reason—is disclosed by their actual consequences so that the subject cannot deny responsibility for his actions. Lacan (1992:13)

defines 'hero' as the subject like Oedipus, who accepts the consequences of his act. The reverse of the subject's message is its repressed, thus, we can see the idea of the impossibility of metalanguage is linked to the return of the repressed. Žižek (1992:14) asks the question: What could the Derridean notion that a letter can also miss its destination mean? He responds:

That the repressed can also not return and yet by claiming this, we entangle ourselves in a naïve substantialist notion of the unconscious as a positive entity ontologically preceding its 'returns' that is; symptoms *qua* compromise formation, a notion competently called in question by Derrida himself. Here, we cannot but repeat after Lacan: there is no repression previous to the return of the repressed: the repressed content does not precede its return in symptoms, there is no way to conceal it in its purity undistorted by 'compromises' that characterize the formation of the symptoms.

'A letter always arrives at its destination' implies that one can never escape one's fate and Žižek (1992:16) defines this in psychoanalytic terms as 'the symbolic debt has to be paid'. The letter which arrives at its destination is also a letter of request for outstanding debts; what propels the letter on its symbolic circuit is always some outstanding debt. Žižek (1992:16) declares that this dimension of fate is at work in the very formal structure of Poe's *The Purloined Letter*: there is something distinctly 'faithful' in the way the self-experience of the main characters in Poe's story is determined by the simple 'mechanical' shift of their positions within the intersubjective triad of the three glances (the first which sees nothing; the second which sees that the first sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides; the third which sees that the first two glances leave what should be hidden exposed to whomever would seize it). In the way, for example, the Minister's fate is sealed not because of his personal miscalculation or oversight but because the simple shift of his position from the third to the second glance in the repetition of the initial triad causes his structural blindness. Žižek (1992:16) sees this as the mechanism of imaginary (mis) recognition: the participants in the play automatically perceive their fate as something that pertains to the letter as such in its immediate materiality (this letter is damned, whoever comes into possession of it is brought to ruin!)—

what they misrecognized is that the curse is not in the letter as such but in the intersubjective network organized around it.

Žižek (1992:20) examines the concept of the Real and again agrees with Lacan that 'a letter always arrives at its destination'. This in effect means that 'we will all die'. It is the only letter that nobody can evade: the letter which has each of us as its infallible addressee is death. It is important to note that the Real is also associated with life. Lacan (1992:22) points out that the very notion of life is alien to the symbolic order. The name of this life substance that proves a traumatic shock for the symbolic universe is enjoyment. Žižek (1992:22) sees the ultimate variation on the theme of 'a letter always arrives at its destination' as 'you can never get rid of the stain of enjoyment'—the very gesture of renouncing enjoyment, produces a surplus enjoyment that Lacan (1992:22) calls 'object small a'.

In his concluding remarks on *The Purloined Letter*, Žižek (1992:22) states that its story stays within the confines of the 'structuralist' problematic of a senseless, 'mechanical' symbol order regulating the subject's innermost self-experience. Žižek (1992:22) contends that if one looks at the last years of Lacan's teaching, the letter which circulates among the subjects in Poe's story, determining their position in the intersubjective network, is no longer the materialized agency of the signifier but rather an object in the strict sense of materialized enjoyment—the stain, the uncanny exists that the subjects snatch away from each other, forgetful of how its very possession will mark them with a passive 'feminine' stance that bears witness to the confrontation with the object—the cause of desire.

I would suggest that Žižek's attempt at defending Lacan's seminar lacks substance. He fails to defend Lacan against the numerous charges made by Derrida. Žižek's entire defense is centered on one of Derrida's objections against which he piles up his counter-argument.

5 Conclusion

I have attempted in my essay to show the complex readings which have formed around *The Purloined Letter*, with special reference to Lacan, Derrida and Žižek. It is imperative to note Freud's influence on Lacan's reading of *The Purloined Letter*. However, it is also evident that Lacan neglects to mention *The Uncanny*, and Derrida considers it to be one of the

weaknesses in Lacan's Seminar. We have seen that Derrida tears into Lacan's writing by arguing that Lacan commits the ultimate sin against literature: he works from the plot rather than Poe's language. Lacan succeeds, according to Derrida, in finding yet another way to cut off the chain of meaning on which a literary work subsists: he isolates the story from two other stories about Detective Dupin. Furthermore, Lacan isolates the mythic triangle of characters in Poe's story from the narrator. By bursting these frames, Derrida hopes to open up all those Lacian triangles. Lacan, in other words, imposes a frame on the story as triumphantly as a blackmailer frames the innocent victim. He is one more player in the game, trumping the previous one to assert his own mastery—much like each person in turn in *The Purloined Letter*. For Lacan, context is everything. It creates desire, and so each person, as in Poe, the letter bears profound significance: 'a letter always arrives at its destination'. Derrida plays on that memorable line. In language, literature, or psychology, meaning can never be closed off or translated once and for all, not even into other words: a letter never ever reaches its destination. Derrida (1987:495) states:

Two out of three times, the author of the Seminar will have forced *dessein* [design] into *destin* [destiny], perhaps, thereby, bringing a meaning to its destination: *expressly, no doubt, for in any case nothing permits one to exclude a design* [dessein] somewhere.

Žižek provides a defense of Lacan's analysis of *The Purloined Letter* and accuses Derrida of misreading Lacan. Žižek uses the triad of the Imaginary, Symbolic and Real as the bedrock in his defense of Lacan. Regarding the Imaginary (mis)recognition Žižek, sees the letter arriving at its destination because its destination is wherever it arrives. He/she becomes the addressee by the very contingent fact of finding himself/herself at this place. On the Symbolic level the subject/sender receives from the addressee his own message in inverted form; that is, the letter that the subject put into circulation arrives at its destination, which was from the beginning the sender himself. On the level of the Real the letter always arrives at its destination and this in effect means that we will all die—death is the addressee.

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