

The Paradox of Self-Inclusion in “The Purloined Letter”

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Abstract:

“The Purloined Letter” – the third and last contribution to the form of analytic detective fiction that Edgar Allan Poe invented himself – is often referred to by critics as the best of the series mainly because of the lack of sensationalism and of an entirely intellectual plot. The goal of this paper is to explore and examine the paradox of self-inclusion in the tale, namely the numerical / geometrical structure of the narrative that was extensively debated upon in numerous studies such as Jacques Lacan’s *Seminar of “The Purloined Letter”* (1957), Jacques Derrida’s *The Purveyor of Truth* (1975) and Barbara Johnson’s *The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida* (1978). Moreover the narrative frame is analyzed taking into consideration John T. Irwin’s approach in *The Mystery to a Solution. Poe, Borges and the Analytic Detective Story* that sees the symbol of the letter turned inside out as a representation of the temporal self-inclusion reminding of the Möbius Strip.

Keywords: self-inclusion, analytic fiction, Möbius Strip, numerical / geometrical structure

Triangular Versus Quadrangular Readings of the Structure of “The Purloined Letter”

Considered by many critics (and even by the author himself¹) as the best of all of Poe’s stories due to the absence of the sensational and of an entirely intellectual plot, “The Purloined Letter”² is the third and last contribution to the form he had himself invented.³ According to Lacan, “The Purloined Letter” is divided into two scenes, the primal scene – that happens in the royal boudoir – and its repetition – the one taking place in the Minister’s office. Like the future readings of Jacques Derrida⁴ and Barbara Johnson,⁵ Lacan enlarges upon the numerical /

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geometrical structure of the story. The triangular structure of each of these scenes is further divided by Lacan into three logical moments:

Thus three moments, structuring three glances, borne by three subjects, incarnated each time by different characters. The first is a 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 whomever would seize it: the Minister, and finally Dupin. In order to grasp in its unity the intersubjective complex thus described, we would willingly seek a model in the technique legendarily attributed to the ostrich attempting to shield itself from danger; for that technique might ultimately be qualified as political, divided as it here is among three partners: the second believing itself invisible because the first has its head stuck in the ground, and all the while letting the third calmly pluck its rear. (Lacan 44)

The only person that is present in both scenes is the Minister that shifts from his initial position of third glance to the position of second glance in the scene where Dupin manages to purloin the letter; this is exactly the vulnerability of self-delusion the possessor of the letter gains in the repetitive scene due to the blind spot he finds himself in.

On the other hand, Derrida trying to set scores with Lacan for earlier “acts of aggression,” attacks the “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’”⁶ and its triangular structure of scenes. Derrida admits that the story consists of two scenes but not the two identified by Lacan. His innovative approach points to *the two scenes of narration* (the first visit of the prefect when he exposes the facts of the theft from the royal boudoir and the second visit when Dupin recounts the way he managed to find and steal the letter back) as the main events of the story as opposed to *the two narrated scenes* (the one from the Queen’s chamber and the one from the Minister’s office) told by Dupin and the prefect; this makes Dupin’s unnamed companion the main narrator.

Derrida believes then that, in his wish to read the story as an allegory of psychoanalysis, Lacan has reduced “the scene of action” from a four-sided one to a triangular by ignoring the presence of the narrator of “The Purloined Letter”:

Once distinguished from the author and thereafter from the scriptor, the narrator is not merely the formal condition of the narration which could be symmetrically contrasted with the content, such as the narrating and the narrated, for example. He intercedes in a specific way, at once “too self-evident” and invisible in a triangle which thus touches another triangle at one of its points. It intercedes in two “intersubjective” triangles. All of which singularly complicates the “intersubjective” structure, this time within the framed, twice framed, scenes, with the represented content. Not taking this complication into account is no fault of “formalist” literary criticism, but rather the operation of a psychoanalyst-semanticist. The narrator does not fade away [*s’effacer*] as a “general narrator” or rather, in making himself fade away into homogeneous generality, he moves forward as a uniquely singular character in the narrated narration, in the framed. He constitutes an instance, a position with which the triangle, through the intermediary of Dupin (who himself represents all the positions in turn), maintains an *extremely determinate and cathected* relationship. The violence of the Seminar’s framing, the cutting off of the narrated figure from a fourth side to leave merely triangles evades a certain perhaps Oedipal, difficulty which makes itself felt in the scene of writing. (Derrida 54)

Derrida sees the triangular configuration as a derivation of the Oedipal triangle that attempts at absorbing the uncanny effect of the doubling, present, in his opinion, throughout the tale. Since doubling of the criminal mind is the most common method of detective investigation, the analytic detective story uses this technique to anticipate the moves and be one step in front of the adversary. J. T. Irwin explains the numerical association of the doubling:

[T]he number associated with doubling is usually four rather than two, for what we refer to as doubling is almost always splitting and doubling. Which is to say, the figure of the double externally duplicates an internal division in the protagonist’s self (but with the master / slave polarity of that division characteristically reversed), so that doubling tends to be a structure of four halves problematically balanced across the inner / outer limit of the self rather than a structure of two separate, opposing wholes (Irwin 5).

In order to decipher the mystery involving the location of the letter Dupin must double the thoughts of his opponent: both as poet and mathematician. This mental operation that Dupin explains by recounting the story of the schoolboy that always won at the game of even and odd helps him get inside the Minister's head and think just like him when he seized the letter. The position that Dupin places himself now makes the Minister play the role of the queen from the original event.

The Game of Even and Odd

In her study, Barbara Johnson identifies in Lacan's triangular and Derrida's quadrangular readings of the structure of "The Purloined Letter" the game of even and odd where the two critics end up as reciprocal opposites of one another; or, as Irwin concludes it, "Derrida asserts the oddness of evenness, while Lacan affirms the evenness of oddness" (Irwin 6).

If it at first seemed possible to say that Derrida was opposing the unsystematizable to the systematized, "chance" to psychoanalytical "determinism," or the "undecidable" to the "destination," the positions of these oppositions seem now to be reversed: Lacan's apparently unequivocal ending says only its own dissemination, while "dissemination" has erected itself into a kind of "last word." But these oppositions are themselves misreadings of the dynamic functioning of what is at stake here. 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 assertions of decidability is precisely one of the letter's inevitable effects. (...) The "undeterminable" is not opposed to the determinable; "dissemination" is not opposed to repetition. If we could 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 (Johnson 504).

"What is undecidable is precisely whether a thing is decidable or not" is a self-including statement consisting of an aporia between grammar and rhetoric; according to Paul de Man,

“The same grammatical pattern engenders two meanings that are mutually exclusive: the literal meaning asks for the concept (difference) whose existence is denied by the figurative meaning” (Paul de Man 29).

In analysing the symmetry and its effects present in Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” Lacan’s “Seminar” and Derrida’s reading of the tale, Johnson states that

it is the act of analysis which seems to occupy the center of the discursive stage, and the act of analysis of the act of analysis which in some way disrupts that centrality. 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, but which nevertheless produces certain regular effects (Johnson 457).

The process of making a statement that includes itself – “no analysis, including this one” – present throughout “The Purloined Letter” is nothing more than the act of taking a position self-consciously doubled back upon itself; the paradox of self-inclusion, of absolute self-consciousness is the effect of thought about thought that takes form at the edge of the *vortex* of Poe’s analytic narrative.

By choosing a number, Lacan and Derrida enter the game of even and odd, “the game of being one up on a specular, antithetical double” (Irwin 6) that means repeating infinitely the structure of “The Purloined Letter.” By reading Derrida’s “The Purveyor of Truth,” Johnson herself – even if she apparently refuses to take a numerical position on the structure of the tale – starts playing the game that consists in doubling the thought process of the opponent so that to outwit him with his own weapons; but sooner or later the same method will be used by the next player “in order to leave the preceding interpreter one down” (Irwin 7).

Dupin’s method of detection is based on two logical premises that will eventually lead to the solution of the mystery: the psychological identification with the opponent and acknowledging the fact that the obvious might be hidden in plain sight, exemplifying it by an analogy to game strategy. Dupin duplicates the Minister’s way of reasoning and predicts his tactics (in the same manner the thief had anticipated the moves of the police):

Such a man, I considered, could not fail to be aware of the ordinary political modes of action. He could not have failed to anticipate – and events have proved that he did not fail to anticipate – the waylayings to which he was subjected. He must have foreseen, I reflected, the secret investigations of his premises. His frequent absences from home at night, which were hailed by the Prefect as certain aids to his success, I regarded only as *ruses*, to afford opportunity for thorough search to the police, and thus sooner to impress them with the conviction to which G-- --, in fact, did finally arrive – the conviction that the letter was not upon the premises. I felt, also, that the whole train of thought, which I was at some pains in detailing to you just now, concerning the invariable principle of political action in searches for articles concealed – I felt that this whole train of thought would necessarily pass through the mind of the Minister. It would imperatively lead him to despise all the ordinary *nooks* of concealment. *He* could not, I reflected, be so weak as not to see that the most intricate and remote recess of his hotel would be as open as his commonest closets to the eyes, to the probes, to the gimlets, and to the microscopes of the Prefect. I saw, in fine, that he would be driven, as a matter of course, to *simplicity*, if not deliberately induced to it as a matter of choice (Poe 105-106).

Self-inclusion or mirror image

Even the central symbol of the tale – the purloined letter – that is the same as the title betrays the textual self-inclusion that Poe intended to create giving the symbolic object the same qualities of the text itself. This aspect of the letter is evident by its most unique quality, the fact that it is always hidden in plain sight – in the royal boudoir it is concealed on the table, with its address on the surface and the content unexposed and in the minister’s office it hangs in a card rack above the mantelpiece turned inside out like a glove (the reversal of container and contained): “The object called the purloined letter, described and thus contained in the story called “The Purloined Letter,” is a self-included linguistic representation of the text’s own representational status, in effect a symbol of the conditions of linguistic representationally” (Irwin 22).

Self-inclusion or the mirror image, in Lacanian terms, is seen as either an opposition (right versus left) or as something identical, identifying the adversary with a version of the alter ego. This kind of relation, be it in contrast or identical, is classified by Lacan as “imaginary,” a realm where mirroring juxtaposes intersubjective structures but also a realm where the imaginary must be disrupted so that the symbolic may emerge.

The difference between a thing and its self-included representation should be in detail and/or size or otherwise it will not be distinguishable as in Lewis Carroll’s *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*⁷ that describes a natural size map of a country:

“We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of *a mile to the mile!*” (...) “It has never been spread out, yet,” said Mein Herr: “the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well” (Carroll 556-557).

Josiah Royce in *The World and the Individual*⁸ imagines an exact map of England build on one part of England’s surface:

A map of England, contained within England, is to represent, down to the minutest detail, every contour and marking, natural or artificial, that occurs upon the surface of England... For the map, in order to be complete, according to the rule given, will have to contain as a part of itself, a representation of its own contour and contents. In order that this representation should be constructed, the representation itself will have to contain once more, as a part of itself, a representation of its own contour and contents; and this representation, in order to be exact will have once more to contain an image of itself; and so on without limit (Royce 46).

Borges concludes that the outer / inner relationship between container and contained is only a reversal that infinitely repeats itself. This endless reversal, reminding of the Möbius strip, transforms into a more complex process in the case of temporal self-inclusion. If the theatre play performed in *Hamlet* would be identical with the main line of events, then Shakespeare’s work would never end but come to a block in act III, scene II when the play within a play begins.

The Poesque version of the loop in the Möbius strip indicates that thought cannot be physically contained by writing unless it is hidden *on* the written surface and not *inside* it:

The symbolic can be encountered only as a tear in the fabric of the imaginary, a revealing interruption. The paths to the symbolic are thus *in* the imaginary. The symbolic can be reached only by not trying to avoid the imaginary, by knowingly being *in* the imaginary. Likewise, mastery of the illusions that psychoanalysis calls transference can be attained only by falling prey to those illusions, by losing one's position of objectivity, control, or mastery in relation to them. (Gallop 60).

Conclusion

Another way of imagining containment of a literary work is by placing the self-containing gesture at the end and thus circularizing the temporal line of the narrative. The difference then between the work and its self-including repetition consists in the separate times of reading that cannot be the same no matter how precisely the text is repeated. Borges proposes such a work in "The Garden of Forking Paths:" "I kept asking myself how a book be finite. I could not imagine any other than a cyclic volume, circular. A volume whose last page would be the same as the first and so have the possibility of continuing indefinitely" (Borges 97). In this case the temporal movement from reading towards rereading is seen as an entrance into the work from surface to depth, from outer to inner, as a process of penetration of an earlier reading that becomes an outer one to a later reading and so on.

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¹ Poe states in a letter to J. R. Lowell from July 2, 1844 that "The Purloined Letter" is "perhaps the best of my tales of ratiocination."

² 1844.

³ The other two are "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Mystery of Marie Røget."

⁴ "The Purveyor of Truth," 1975.

⁵ "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida," 1978.

⁶ 1957.

⁷ 1893.

⁸ 1899.