

Joyce and Poe
Between Skilly and Carubdish:
Pretexts and Aftertexts for "The Purloined Letter"

by

Michael Murphy

my shemblable! My freer! I call you my halfbrother because you in your soberer otiumic moments remind me deeply of my natural saywhen brothel in feed, hop and jollity ...

--As you sing it, it's a study. That letter selfpenned to one's other, that neverperfect everplanned?

--This nonday diary, this allnights newseryreel.

Finnegans Wake 489: 28-35

*Pièce de Shakespeare, don't you know. It's so French.
The French point of view. Hamlet ou*

Ulysses

In a much-noted squabble, two Frenchmen, Jaques Lacan and Jaques Derrida, disagreed over the possession of a letter purloined from America. This attention to one of Poe's detective stories should have renewed and sharpened comment on it, but seems to have focused the spotlight on the French quarrel instead. In fact, a whole book, **The Purloined Poe**, has been devoted to the gallic war and its American front, in all, about 400 pages of commentary on an 18-page story.¹

One of the outstanding features of the Lacan and Derrida contributions is the "style" of the protagonists. Lacan published his seminars as "Ecrits" inscribed in a "parole" that his present editors rightly characterize as "dense" and "enigmatic" (67). Derrida, rebuking Lacan and others for privileging the spoken word, writes a prose to which the same adjectives could apply. Indeed, many readers might understandably conclude that, in Derridean terms, both of them had read and been read by that other Poe story, "Mystification", for they seem to have quietly improved on the method of writing outlined in it. Most of *us* are a bit like Hermann in that story, ashamed to admit that we

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John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, edd **The Purloined Poe** (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U. Press, 1988). Unless otherwise stated, page references in my text are to this book which conveniently brings together the text of Poe's story with Mabbott's notes, translations of Lacan's Seminar and Derrida's response to it, Barbara Johnson's commentary on the Lacan-Derrida bout, a generous extract from Marie Bonaparte's study of Poe, and other essays and apparatus. This article is a kind of belated review of the book.

Mabbott's notes to Poe's story occupy 4 pages ; the notes and other apparatus for Lacan's Seminar 44 pages.

cannot find the key to the code of this rather arcane language. We stand in need of a cryptographer like Poe himself to unlock the coded phrases.

Such help seems for a moment to be at hand in the work of Barbara Johnson, an American scholar of French who defined, conciliated, and tried to decipher Lacan's triangular arguments and Derrida's trinitarian syntax (213-251), but who did not, fortunately, draw any triangles, a weakness that has afflicted several Lacanian commentators: Felman and Muller in **The Purloined Poe** book, and even more noticeably John Irwin, the lengthy title of whose 1986 essay suggests the anxiety of influences that we all contend with now, and that some of us emulate: "Mysteries We Reread, Mysteries of Rereading: Poe, Borges and the Analytic Detective Story; Also Lacan, Derrida and Johnson".²

Subject, however, to the inescapability of repeating much of the critical text she reads, a fate which comes to her as it must to all wo/men, Professor Johnson turns into the interested "narrator" justifying the superior thinking of one of her subjects over the other whose failures she chronicles for us. She inserts and omits, as her subjects did, and I must, but still under the influence of the text, she tends to follow in English the French recipe (to change if not mix my metaphors). Hence, she serves a meal of

² **MLN** 101 (1986), 1168-1215. If Patrick Samway is right, Lacan is also responsible for the triangle-drawing in Walker Percy's novel **Lancelot**. See "Another Case of the Purloined Letter," **New Orleans Review** 16 (1989), 37-44. Another influence of Lacan's paper, especially noticeable in Irwin's article, is the chase after etymologies. Lacan's excursion is an attempt to claim for France at least two thirds of the title of "The Purloined Letter." But to "purloin" means in English to "steal", not anything else, whatever it meant in the distant past. Giving us the French roots of American words may be as satisfying to some sensibilities as never advertent to the fact that the roots of all French vines are American; but it has nothing to do with the present or recent meaning of the word, hence of the tale. Any more than "letter", which is also a word purloined from the French a long time ago. English can claim only "The", an article on whose French equivalent Lacan was quite voluble (39).

American French Freud prose polysaturated with verbal riches that tend to clog the arteries of communication to the faint of heart, that is, most of us.³

One is provoked to — something: to dietary intervention, perhaps to critical thought, even to creative thinking.

The F----- Letter

*Buck Mulligan flaunted his slip and panama.
—Monsieur Moore, he said, lecturer on French
letters to the youth of Ireland.*

Ulysses

"The Purloined Letter" is not an ingenious detective story, as plodding police minds have thought, but a psychosexual drama, French style. Marie Bonaparte's psychobiography of Poe started something that will not go away. "Dupin," she said, "restores the woman her symbolic letter or missing penis" (130-1), and she informed us that the picture of the Minister's room, with fireplace and pasteboard rack attached to a little brass knob provided "almost an anatomical chart," complete with this "female penis".

Lacan, primarily a psychologist who has achieved some standing in French letters, takes up this notion (without due acknowledgement, says Derrida). But impregnable police minds (and some others) find this fancy difficult to conceive. A symbolic penis in front

³ I have purloined "French Freud," from the editors of the issue of **The Yale Review** 48 (1973) in which Professor Johnson's article first appeared with a number of others.

of a symbolic fireplace should, powered by such symbolics, be able to go into the fireplace to be consumed, reduced to ashes, to "die" in the Elizabethan sense, only to rise again phoenix-like another day or night. But Lacan never seems to visualize the scene in that active way, nor as a pen vigorously inscribing the "*re*'furloined notepaper", as Joyce, in Poe's wake, calls it.⁴ In Lacan's theory the phallus simply *hangs* in front of the minister's fireplace, its lassitude accounted for, presumably, by the fact that it is female.

Why then is the Minister so determined to hold on to the letter/phallus? Is he like the lasses in the updated old limerick

*The girls who frequent picture palaces
Don't take much to psychoanalysis
For though Lacan and Freud
Would be very annoyed
They cling to their old-fashioned phallacies*

Well, he is like those girls, according to Lacan, if I read him correctly. He says that the possession of the letter feminizes its possessor. Evidence? When the dull Prefect of police says that D---- dares do all that may become a man and more, "the appraisal is far more appropriate to what might concern a woman." (p. 46). Proof of feminization? The Minister, says Lacan, affects "romantic ennui" on the morning when Dupin visits him; indeed, "everything seems intended for a character all of whose utterances have

⁴ **Finnegans Wake** 419:29. Some years ago John Paul Riquelme drew attention to the possible connections between **Finnegans Wake** and *The Purloined Letter* in his book **Teller and Tale in Joyce's Fiction** (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1983). While he was using the comparison with Poe to elucidate Joyce, my object is the reverse, but I gladly borrow for my epigraphs some of his apt citations from **FW**. More recently Laurent Milesi has also seen and developed the Joyce-Poe connection and even has a section of his very Lacanian essay on the "refurloined notepaper". See "The Poetics of the Purloined Letter in *Finnegans Wake*: Narrative Foresight and Critical Afterthought" in **A Collideorscape of Joyce** ed. Ruth Frehner and Ursula Zeller (Lilliput: Dublin, 1998).

revealed the most virile traits to exude the oddest *odor di femina*". (p.48. Lacan's phrase not Poe's). The English translation of the whole sentence may or may not do justice to the French original, but in Poe's tale the Minister makes no utterances at all.⁵

In a 1987 reading of Conrad's "Secret Sharer" Professor Johnson and a feminist colleague explained with striking frankness the sexual significance of different kind of equipment in that story.⁶ So, a little unfairly perhaps, one constantly expects her in this earlier article on "The Purloined Letter" to give the explanation that stands out so obviously in her own citation from Lacan: "the phallus cannot play its role except veiled" (p. 224) — the explanation that the purloined letter is not just a letter but a French letter. She does not do so, I think, because French scholars and scholars of French have difficulty acknowledging la/tex(t) placed "beneath the nose of the whole world" by the ingenious Poe. A deliciously indelicate American joke.

But let us suppose, agree or concede that our commentators are at least half right: the fireplace in the minister's room is feminine. If that is so, then the nondescript pasteboard suspended from a mantelpiece between two pillars is a male something hanging limply in front of the fireplace, its work done for now, its battered French letter still attached, the letter which has been purloined by the Minister who regularly wields the power that it gives him. Hence, therefore, its rather frayed appearance, and his genuine fatigue when Dupin "casually" goes to visit him one morning. It is not an *odor di femina* that he gives off, unless we read that odd phrase as containing an objective genitive, as Stephen Dedalus might say; that is, unless we take it to mean that he has the air of a

⁵ Lacan's intimations that the letter is feminizing its possessor seems to be partially taken back in the following sentence: "Dupin does not fail to stress that this [affectation of ennui] is an artifice." Then at the beginning of the next paragraph: "Just so does the purloined letter, like an immense female body, stretch out across the minister's office when Dupin enters" (p.48).

⁶ Barbara Johnson and Marjorie Garber, "The Secret Sharing: Reading Conrad Psychoanalytically." **College English** 49 (1987), 628-640.

man who has spent the night with a woman. In that case his lounging and yawning are not altogether affected "ennui", but are at least partly the symptoms of genuine exhaustion after a night spent working as a facteur delivering the French letter, which (Lacan tells us) must always arrive at its destination. But even if it is addressed to royalty, it does not have to stay in the royal mail. It is a kind of "letter in sufferance" regularly returned to the facteur and kept at the office of the Minister of Posts, awaiting its next opportunity / challenge / summons to emerge.⁷

Part 2

—Pooh! Buck Mulligan said. We have grown out of Wilde and paradoxes. It's quite simple. He proves by algebra that Hamlet's grandson is Shakespeare's grandfather.

Ulysses

Let us work out the **true** explanation — with variants, since it is prudent to leave room for a little slippage. Strong readers may, of course, prefer variants of their own devising.

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⁷ Surprisingly, all our commentators have omitted this explanation. Yet Johnson accuses Derrida of omitting bits of Lacan's explanation, as he had accused Lacan of omitting important parts of the story, and especially of having purloined a letter of the Princess Marie herself, who makes her own significant omissions from her letter about the story. Truly the intertextual presence of absence.

⁸ A slight variation on the Bonaparte reading, for example: the legs of the fireplace are male, the fire is out for the reason already given, and the board and its letter hang limply before

The Poe story is, as the French have always known, about the sexual politics at court in which the Minister is a bold player, as Dupin says. The Prefect's version of the purloining, whatever its origin, is just inaccurate enough to hide motives, and accurate enough to reveal something like the actual situation.⁹

The situation is this: the Queen, also a bold player, has offered her favors from time to time to different men bold enough to take up her challenge which she signified in the case of the minister by placing on her table in a provocative way a letter from another lover, addressed with a bold masculine hand, and closed with a seal, a bull, small but ducal. The lady expects her men to be competitive, eager, decisive. The Duke's letter, c/overtly displayed by the Queen in full sight of the King, was just as firmly answered by the bold "intrigant". She dared D---- in the presence of the King to throw down Mars's gauntlet and pick up Venus's glove, the royal letter patent, and turn it into a letter potent that would give him the power to make love to a Queen, who looked on at the rivalry for her "hand" that she had deliberately induced.¹⁰ He accepted the invitation by taking her letter, for he dares do all that may become a man, and more.¹¹

it just where they would if the Minister had just returned from playing facteur and had hung up (or down) his mailbag.

⁹ Lacan typically seems to question and then not to question what we hear about the original "purloining" filtered through three narrators (see p. 34-35). I don't think anyone else bothers to question the accuracy of the Prefect's narrative.

¹⁰ For the connection between gauntlets, gloves and French letters see Joseph Wallfield, **Comments on Etymology XIII**, nos. 5-6 (1983), 3-10, and Michael Murphy, "More on Quaint and Quondam Words in Chaucer and Shakespeare" **American Speech** 61 (1986), 342.

¹¹ A variation — with variants — on the significance of the opening scene: the Minister, being impotent or because of social position or whatever, cannot have the Queen, but is jealous of the Duke who has sent the letter to the Queen with a bold signature, a symbol of his virile intent. So the Minister steals what he himself cannot use, hence the feminine address that he puts upon it in place of the bold masculine signature there before. The duke and he have different *ecritures*. He can only *outs*cribe the letter with a false address. The duke can fill it and probably has filled it with his *ins*cription as well. This is the *differance*. In any case, the Queen must have the letter back if she is to have a sex life.

—*But could you, decent Lettrechaun, read
the strangewrote anaglyptics of those shemletters
patent for Her Christian's Em[ajesty]?*

Finnegans Wake

That was 18 months ago; now the Queen wants a change. She has had a duke, and a poet-intellectual-statesman. Now she wants something different. Perhaps a policeman, all animal and unencumbered with too much "ingenium", and the Prefect fits the bill if we are to believe our narrator, Dupin's nameless insignificant Other. But to get to "know" the Queen the Prefect has to take up the challenge to get the letter of introduction for himself {from the minister; it's her standard tactic with prospective lovers}.

The Minister too is tired of the affair and wants out. His morning ennui when Dupin visits, is not only the result of physical exhaustion from his night's amorous activity, it is also a sign of his boredom with the affair; he only keeps the French letter on sufferance at this point. In fact, *odio di femina* is the phrase that Lacan needs to describe what the Minister exudes. But you cannot express such sentiments to a Queen, especially if you are not a duke, so you will speed your dismissal by helping your replacement -- discreetly, and not too obviously. Knowing which way the Queen is looking, you are more than happy to let the letter go to the man of her choice, and have a little fun to boot. You ensure that the Prefect will go after it by leaking a version of how you got the letter, and letting it be known in the right quarter that you keep it in a safe but accessible spot.

The Prefect takes the bait. And for some time now he has been spending his nights in D---'s darkened house, stripping every inch, pushing a needle into places in dark rooms, or

inspecting mossy cracks in a dark yard, but he remains totally frustrated. Meanwhile, the minister exhausts himself in a different way fulfilling his obligations to royalty in his nightly ministrations.

Also meanwhile, the police waylay the minister in the street twice. Dupin would have us believe that these muggings were simply one of "the ordinary political modes of action." How common it must have been for ministers of the crown to be waylaid in the streets of Paris with the Prefect of police overseeing the operation! — in the dark.¹² Although D---- has the letter on him, they do not find it because he has it **on** him, — the one obvious place where policemen would not look. This also implies that he was waylaid on the way *to* the Queen, not on the way back.

The Minister knows that, not finding the letter, the Prefect will (finally!) go to that officer's old nemesis Dupin for assistance, however unwillingly, and Dupin will, of course, agree to help, for Dupin and the Minister are also old antagonists, and he owes the Minister a bad turn — at least one, especially for that business in Vienna. D---- has always been the schoolboy with all the marbles, sexual and intellectual. So Dupin is anxious to do him royally, since he cannot re(g)ally. Dupin, an earlier Holmes, is ineffective with or uninterested in women; he satisfies himself with pipes and his companion and the rare volumes they share in a queer, ushering house with an odd address whose Christological or Dantesque possibilities have not been much dwelt upon. (What, e.g., is "au troisieme" in terms of Dantean Circles?).

¹² It is also at night that the insatiable Prefect conducts his search of D----'s house **and** the two neighboring houses (conveniently uninhabited?) **and** their yards, for months on end without fatigue and without anyone noticing!

*Unwed, unfancied, ware of wiles, they fingerponder
nightly each his variorum edition of **The Turning of the
Screw.***

Ulysses

folded with cunning, sealed with crime
Finnegans Wake

Now comes the part the Minister will enjoy most: the great detective will come to the Minister's house and play a "clever" game. He will, no doubt, have his dark glasses on, and will be able to scan the room "surreptitiously", all the time talking on some favorite topic which he thinks can never fail to interest or excite everyone — probably the incompetence of the Paris police and his own cleverness. D---- will probably not be able to stifle a yawn, what between his night's exertions or exactions, and Dupin's voluble and predictable pretensions. But he will play along and allow Dupin to purloin the letter and relieve him of his royal burden. What's succuba to him or he to succuba that he should weep for her?

Voila! A jangling triangle becomes a perfect circle with everybody happy. A creative statesman, D---- ! Dupin's quotation from Crebillon will turn back on himself, and provide the Minister with a wry smile. Poor Dupin! Duped again, and he does not even know it.

The Prefect may not be perfect, but he has enough information and ingenuity to seduce Dupin into helping him for money and spite, as the Minister suspected he would. The Ace detective will help him get the French letter and thus trump the Knave of Hearts to help, oh, the deuce of Clubs, say, to win the Queen of All Suits who can be won only by

a man with a full house, two of a kind or one pair, **and** the French letter. This Queen is more prudent than the one in the play quoted at the end, whose lover, like a true Greek, did not believe in help from Trojans, and paid for his neglect. By contrast, she and the minister, properly equipped, never make a *son* through the whole story.

Under the impression that he is doing the minister a clever ill turn and himself a clever good one, Dupin sells the re-purloined French letter to the Police Chief, who, unlike Dupin himself, can use it. Notice that he *sells* it to the Prefect. He does not "restore it to the Queen", as many commentators put it. There is a *differance*. In spite of his "political prepossessions" which make him, he says, a "partisan of the lady concerned" he has not gone directly to the Queen. He collects his fee from the Prefect whose reward from the Queen would not be in a form that Dupin has much use for.

*--Greek! Hand it to me! Shaun replied. I am letter
potent to play the sem backwards like Oscan wild "*

Finnegans Wake

Now Dupin has given the Prefect the one tool he lacks: the phallic thimble. The Queen has even offered to double his reward / sentence. (Three years instead of D----'s 18 months?). Is it any surprise that the Prefect is momentarily unmanned at the thought; he remains "speechless and motionless", unable to make a *son*, but as soon as he recovers his manhood, his pen is in his hand, he writes a check to the procurer for the handsome sum of 50,000 franks, and with the magic item in his possession the police chief rushes through the door with libidinous haste.

Whether or not Marie Bonaparte remarked it, it is indeed noticeable that the Prefect is always presented as coming or going through a doorway, or reclining in a soft chair smoking a pipe, or, of course, poking upholstery with a needle.

As the Prefect leaves, Dupin savors the satisfaction of imagining what will happen when the Minister tries to approach the Queen without his armor: "his downfall will not be more precipitate than awkward" — impotence sudden and embarrassing. His marbles taken away by Dupin, potent at last !

Alas, poor Dupin.

—I should like to know, he said, which brother you I understand you to suggest there was misconduct with one of the brothers But perhaps I am anticipating?

—In asking you to remember those two noble kinsmen, Stephen answered, I feel I am asking too much perhaps. A brother is as easily forgotten as an umbrella.

Ulysses

he had a pair of greenish goggles which he very slowly hooked over his nose and both ears.

—Are you bad in the eyes?

—Why, answered the seafarer, I uses goggles reading.

Ulysses

The imperfect Prefect also guessed that Dupin would overreach himself, thus diverting the displaced Minister's ire in another direction, onto the overingenious and insolent Dupin himself. A good guess, but partially wrong, of course, for D---- will not be angry; he will be amused and relieved. The Prefect guessed for the same reason that he knew Dupin would help him in the first place; the Prefect knows something the narrator does not know: that Dupin and the Minister are brothers and sibling rivals. Not

"brothers", as Professor Johnson suggests, but, as Lianha Babener argues (323-344), real brothers like the two in the play cited at the end of the story.¹³

Both their names begin with D, both of them have written verse (Dupin confesses, probably accurately, to having "been guilty of certain doggerel"). But Dupin denigrates mathematics because it is a field in which his sibling rival has won some fame. The fraternal relationship is the reason that Dupin thinks he knows how the Minister thinks. *Mon semblable, mon frere*. It is how he is able to drop in on him "by accident", how he "knows" what topic of conversation has never failed to interest him, and how he can look around the room at every detail while conducting the conversation — an old idiosyncrasy from a childhood game they used to play: "Find the Hidden Object", a game which D---- had almost always let him win. Dupin is still "concealing" his search under green glasses!

D---- was always better at games than his brother: guess the number of marbles, find the latent / patent letter A on the map of F R A N C E. Dupin would always insist on being too Fancy, and so, not too Remarkably, he Always lost, though sometimes his brother let him appear to win, or he would have had No Chance of real Entertainment. The minister was "well acquainted with my MS"; he would recognize Dupin's hand, not just his handwriting, anywhere! The fraternal relationship accounts also for the choice of quotation to be put in the fake French letter. It has to do with revenge between brothers over a different MS, another royal woman. Dupin's illusions again!¹⁴

¹³ In addition to Babener's article in Muller and Richardson, see J.C. Milner, **Detections Fictives** (Seuil: Paris, 1985), 11 ff. who has a longer list of reasons for considering Dupin and D---- as brothers.

¹⁴ In other places MS for Poe means "manuscript" as in "MS Found in a Bottle." But clearly he also foresaw its most recent meaning.

In fact D---- has outclassed his brother in a variety of ways. That is why he is a Minister and Dupin is a hermit. D---- has energetically retrieved his fortunes, he has become a minister of the Crown, he has written poetry and a mathematical treatise, he has loved a queen. No wonder Dupin is jealous. So in this script which Dupin is dictating and directing, not a single word is permitted to D----; we are allowed to see him only in dumb show, but he steals the performance anyway. For when Dupin has to respond to his brother rather than patronize the Prefect or the narrator, he cannot speak any original lines, only a quotation from another play about a famous ancient feud between brothers which he thinks parallels his own; and when it comes to getting even, Dupin, having no *jouissance*, cannot fill a French letter with anything of his own. He shoots blanks like his surrogate with the gun who produces only a noise in the street. It is not worthy of the potent Minister but is the best that Dupin can do.

*—You are a delusion, said roundly John Eglinton to Stephen.
You have brought us all this way to show us a French triangle.
Do you believe your own theory?*

Ulysses

Part 3

Names, Initials and Other Letters

Lacaderrijohn

*Names! What's in a name?
Ulysses*

Well, what IS in a name? The narrator doesn't get one. He has had all his letters purloined or something. He is simply Dupin's cipher, and should probably be referred to as 0 (zero), or 0----, or maybe 0ther. The royal personages don't get names either, but presumably for a different reason. As for the great detective himself, C. Auguste Dupin, the C must stand for Caesar, but our modest hero or his shadow hides it under an initial. It is for us to acknowledge that Dupin is the emperor of PIs.

*—He's traipsing all round Paris with a letter someone
sent him with U.p. up in it ...*

Ulysses

Initial letters alone serve for names of two people in the story: D---- and G-----. Baudelaire suggested that G----- stood for Gisquet. D---- can perhaps be explained and filled in also, for, though we are given the minister's name only as an initial, we could ingeniously guess what the police chief knows because it is his job to know such things: that D---- is the detective's brother. Similarly we can guess why D---- is given only an initial, not a full name: Dupin is effectively writing or dictating this text. D---- has really made a name for himself: D---- has gone up in the intellectual world, up in the world of politics, up in the royal favor. So detective C. Auguste Dupin or his obliging Other, purloins part of his name, that part which indicates Minister D(up in)'s versatility, his vitality, his virility. Hence, in this narrative only detective D has a name, and an august one at that. What's in a name if yours is the only one? Does not that make a *differance*?

The Final Letter

The Prefect thinks that all fools are poets and all poets fools, says Dupin.

"But is this really the poet?" I asked. "He is a mathematician and no poet."

"You are mistaken. I know him well. He is both. As poet and mathematician he would reason well; as mere mathematician he could not have reasoned at all."

Since it was not unknown, I believe, for Frenchmen to pronounce Poe's name as they would pronounce our word "poet", one should try reading this passage that way.

E.A.P's little joke on himself with another purloined letter? ¹⁵

Still Other Purloinable Letters

A.E.I.O.U.

Ulysses

The story is full of possibilities for purloining letters, as we have just seen and as Lacan demonstrates when he invents a little game by turning Crebillon's "dessein" into "dasein" and "destin" (p. 206). He also brings on an ostrich and adds letters to make his own strange animal (p. 32 & n.). It is a game one is tempted to play with the vowels in the game-inventor's own name, especially tempting in view of the subject matter of the Courbet painting Lacan owned and in view of the fact that he kept it veiled behind a screen designed by someone else. The hidden painting, called "L'Origine du Monde", unveiled a few years ago at an exhibition in the Brooklyn Museum in New York shows the lower part of a woman's recumbent body, legs widely spread, with le con, heavily valanced, as the center of attention, the perfect illustration of LaCan's theory of the central gap, the "objet petit a" as the goal of desire. No doubt Lacan felt that a man with his name and interests was the perfect owner of such a work, which should, however, be kept veiled from casual others. He knew that, when it was put on public display, as he guessed it would be, he could gaze, even from the beyond, through the screen at our

¹⁵ "it is possible that the sound of his name tended to make it a byword and to make him an occupational hero in France: Poë, poète, poésie." Harry Levin, **The Power of Blackness** (Ohio UP, 1958, p. 103)

petty anxiety, our shame — that invidious aspect of the gaze — as we are caught, *voyants* or *voyeurs*, looking at something private or forbidden, con/fronted with this new creation myth emptied of God the Father and Adam, — the original absent phallus, for which phallogocentristical males have substituted original sin caused by a woman.¹⁶

I am unable to say whether the painting hung above the fireplace. At any rate, a very lacanic joke.

Though he does not do so, Lacan might with some justification claim that his erotic pictorial play with the *petit a*'s of his name was only a late example of the anxious influence of Poe's own play with the same letter. For if Derrida is right, both Lacan and we have already been read by Poe and "The Purloined Letter." Consider Dupin's seal. What is it made from? De pain, for heaven's sake! Or is it du pain? French bread, anyway.¹⁷ A subtle use of a purloined *petit a* as a hint to Dupin's dull brother, just in case he does not recognize the MS: "Use your loaf". But that is what D---- has been doing all along; a French loaf, of course.

Lacan might also have claimed, though again he does not, that this *a* play is the result of the compelling gaze of someone earlier than himself and more important (if that were possible): the noticeably absent Hawthorne, whose nameless narrator purloined a *grand A* from the custom house and made it into a famous sign just a short time after Poe's death.¹⁸

¹⁶ The picture is reproduced in Sarah Faunce, **Courbet Reconsidered** (Brooklyn: Brooklyn Museum and New Haven: Yale U.P., 1988), plate 66.

¹⁷ A detail already noted by Claude Richard in an "Interview" in **Iowa Review** 12 (1981), and by Servanne Woodward in "Lacan and Derrida on *The Purloined Letter*. **Comparative Literature Studies** 26 (1989), 42.

¹⁸ Professor Johnson's further play with the purloined letter "a" in note 16 of her essay omits Hawthorne's use.

We too can purloin a letter and, whether or not we have been pre-read by Lacan, we can turn our *paideia* into literary *paidia*, as recommended by Derrida and practised by Lacan, and thus get a little more from our story. Or we can use a touch of metathesis: the Prefect, for example, becomes Perfect, as we have shown. Barbara Johnson contributes to our *paidia* with her "round robin" and her reproduction of the quip that if the purloined letter is the mother's phallus "instead of a whodunit we get a whodonut, a story with a hole in it." What do you call a Poe story like this one with *lots* of holes in it? A "who-do-net"? This would lead us to the lexicographical *paidia* of her ancestor, Dr. *Sam* Johnson. One famous entry in his famous dictionary shows that he had pre-read both the American and the Frenchmen: "*Net, Network*: anything reticulated or decussated at equal distances with interstices between the intersections" — a reasonably accurate way of describing Poe's plot which provides Lacanians with almost limitless possibilities for loci of desire. Dr. Barbara Johnson's Lacanian blindspot does not permit her to remind us that the w/hole narration comes from Dunot St in Paris although it fits her quip category perfectly. Those of us blessed with full sight can see also the *regard* with which Conan Doyle beheld his predecessor: he gave his detective a brother, and had Holmes live in Baker St, at an even more noticeably odd numbered address, with a male other who wrote "A Scandal in Bohemia", a cracked mirror image of its precursor.

visible

Ineluctable modality of the

Ulysses

Professor Johnson draws our attention at some length to the interesting fact that we see the purloined letter only in a paraphrase read by the Prefect of police from his memorandum book (216-17) from which he gives a minute description of the "internal

and external appearance" of the letter. Now, one can describe the external appearance of a letter. For example: good-quality paper, cream colored, 3 x 5, addressed in a bold masculine hand, small red seal with the arms of the Dukes of S-----, (though we get no such description from the narrator). But what is the *internal* appearance of the same letter? Does the appearance show something other than the usual kind of writing in French, in ink, going from left to right and top to bottom? Does it have just a single quotation in the middle of the paper to which Dupin's is a response? If so, what is it and what could it signify? Are the letters of the words arranged in an odd shape, perhaps? A round robin as vaginal symbol, for instance, as Professor Johnson does not quite suggest? Or a Lacanian triangle, a stylized mons veneris?

Surely Poe's reticence constitutes one of the most open invitations ever issued by any author since Sterne for readers to produce their own answer to the question: What *is* in the letter? I know of two answers. The first is given by Shaun the Post in **Finnegans Wake**, a work that has no problem rewriting its predecessors, whether or not it has been prered by them:

*It is a pinch of scribble, not worth a bottle of cabbis. Overdrawn!
Puffedly offal tosh! Besides its auctionable, all about crime and libel!
The fuellest filth ever fired since Charley Lacan's*

This is suggestive and flavorful especially with the purloined "a", but I prefer the second answer: the letter contains nothing, because it is a French letter. It contains nothing, that is, until the possessor supplies the contents, as with a glove, to which Poe specifically compares it: "it had been turned as a glove, inside out". This is something you *can* do with a *guanto di Parigi*, a French letter, a *capote anglaise*, but not with a modern postal envelope or a 19th-century letter of the kind described and displayed by Jean-Claude Milner in **Detections Fictives**. (See note 13).

— *One time I could read a book in the dark, manner of speaking.*

Ulysses

Let us end our *paid(e)ia* with the first joke of the many that Poe plays on all of us readers of his tale: in the course of the story we find out that the police chief is quite good at doing things in the dark, but, at the very beginning he performs a feat far beyond anything in Dupin's repertoire (or Derrida's or Lacan's): the Prefect reads the description of the wanted letter from his memorandum book **in the dark**, a darkness to which the narrative has drawn our attention very pointedly three times in the first page or two. Yet his extraordinary sleight of hand or eye has not been deemed worthy of comment by the doyens of French letters. Why not? Because, as we have said, they *will* not see what kind of missive Poe is talking about. Those, like us, who *do* see, know that even in the dark the Prefect of Paris police can describe the inside and outside of a French letter without the aid of any memorandum book.

Q.E.D.

falskin

Finnegans Wake

has any sort of ornery josser, flatchested fortyish, faintly flatulent and given to ratiocination by syncopation in the elucidation of complications, of his greatest Fung Yang dynasdescendanced, only another the son of, in fact, ever looked sufficiently longly at a quite everydaylooking stamped addressed envelope? Admittedly it's an outer husk: its face, in all its featureful perfection of imperfection, is its fortune: it exhibits only the civil or military clothing of whatever passion-pallid nudity of plaguepurple nakedness may happen to tuck itself under its flap. Yet to concentrate solely on the literal sense or even the psychological content of any document to the sore neglect of the enveloping facts themselves circumstantiating it is just as hurtful to sound sense (and let it be added to the truest taste) as were some fellow in the act of perhaps getting an intro from another fellow turning out to be a friend in need of his, say, to a lady of the latter's acquaintance, engaged in performing the elaborative antecistral ceremony of upstheres, straightaway to run off and vision her plump and plain in her natural altogether ..."

Finnegans Wake.**END**

Joyce References

Finnegans Wake references by page and line number are to the standard Viking Penguin edition:

1. Title: "Skilly and Carubdish" : 229: 14

2. p. 4 "re'furloined notepaper" 419:29

3. p. 6: "But could you ...Lettrechaun 419: 16-19

The fuller version in the original is: "But could you, of course, decent Lettrechaun, we knew (to change your name of not your nation) while still in the barrell, read the strangewrote anaglyptics of those shemletters patent for His Christian's Em?"

4. p. 8: "folded with cunning ..." 94: 8

5. p. 9: "Greek. Hand it to me 419: 20-24

Fuller version: — Greek! Hand it to me! Shaun replied, plosively pointing to the cinnamon quistoquill behind his acoustrolobe. I'm as afterdusk nobly Roman as pope and water could christen me. Look at that for a riding pin! I am, thing Sing Larynx, letter potent to play the sem backwards like Oscan wild ...

6. p. 16 "It is a pinch of scribble ..." 419: 31-35

In the original after "crime and libel" comes: "Nothing beyond clerical horrors *et omnibus* to be entered for the foreign as second-class matter. The fuellest filth ever fired since Charley Lucan's." I have, of curse, purloined a letter.

7. p. 17 "falskin" 621:25

8. p. 17 " has any" 109: 3-20

The **Ulysses** references are to chapter and line number in the one-volume Gabler edition, New York, Random House, 1986.

1. My p. 1: "Piece de Shakespeare ... " is from Chapter 9, "Scylla and Charybdis", lines 123-24.

2. ,, p. 3: "Buck panama" 9: 1101-2

3. ,, p. 6: "Pooh, Buck M said ... 1: 554-6.

4. p. 8: "Unwed" 9: 1062-3 (Adapted)

In the original, "Turning of the Screw" is "Taming of the Shrew."

5. p.10: "I should ... anticipating?" 9: 962-964.

The ellipses in the quotation are in the original.

p.10: "In asking ... umbrella" 9: 973-975.

The original reads: "—In asking you to remember those two noble kinsmen nuncle Richie and nuncle Edmund, Stephen answered, I feel I am asking too much perhaps. A brother is as easily forgotten as an umbrella."

p. 10: "He had a pair...reading" 16: 1672 - 1678

The original reads: "The sailor lugged out from a case he had a pair of greenish goggles which he very slowly hooked over his nose and both ears.

—Are you bad in the eyes? the sympathetic personage like the townclerk queried.

—Why, added the seafarer with the tartan beard, who seemingly was a bit of a literary cove in his own small way, staring out of seagreen portholes as you might well describe them as, I uses goggles reading."

6. p.12 "You are a delusion" 9: 1064-6

7. p.12: "Lacaderrijohn Names! ..." 9: 900-1

In the original "Lacaderrijohn" (Lacan, Derrida, Johnson) is "Mageeglinjohn" (John Eglinton Magee).

8. p.12: "He's traipsing... " 12: 257-8

The original has "Dublin" instead of "Paris".

9. p.13 "A.E.I.O.U." 9: 213

10. p.15: "Ineluctable" 3: 1

11. p.17: "One time I could read ... 16: 1679

I have tried to ensure that the epigraphs in the essay are as accurate and relevant as the epigraph that heads Poe's original story. The epigraph references are listed in detail above, p. 00

{ For Joyce references see next page }

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I had written and several time rewritten this paper before coming across Jean-Michel Rabate's book **Joyce Upon the Void** which I found delightfully suggestive.

"According to Lacan the letter draws out the edge of the hole in knowledge {Lituraterre, p5) - a hole which can only be filled by 'jussance'. The best description of this is in Lacan's review of Delay's book on Gide (La Jeunesse de Gide) which comments on a particular episode in Gide's life" [where he left his wife for a man and she burned his love letters to her, his best writing as he thought.] "Lituraterre" is an essay published in the journal LITTERATURE , no 3 (1971), pp 3-10. The review "La jeunesse de Gide is in ECRITS (1966), 739-64, esp p. 761 on the burnt letters. (Rabate p. 46)

He tells us that Joyce had a promise from the owner of a Paris theater, a man with the unbelievable name of Lugne-Poe to put on his play "Exiles" but he was beaten out by another playwright with the equally unbelievable name of Fernand Crommelynck who had written a play with much the same theme, except that it was a lively farce which still survives called "Le Cocu Magnifique." (See Budgen (1989), p. 349-50) and letters for 1920 from July onwards)(Rabate p 36-38)

In **FW** Joyce "juxtaposes an allusion to Poe's name ('the Poe's Toffee's directory [FW 534] which transforms him into the Dublin Post Office Directory) with an allusion to Sherlock Holmes [534.31] Sherlock Holmes has turned into Lorcan Sherlock, former Lord Mayor of Dublin" [But is one of these references to Lugne Poe?] Rabate p 70

Rabate has the interesting claim: "The narrator of '*The Philosophy of Composition*' is none other than Dupin; the same type of detection must apply to in the case of The Raven and of The Purloined Letter (as Shaun exemplifies this, Joyce is quite aware of the similarity: ` As far as that goes I associate myself with your remark just now from theodicy re'furloined notepaper and quite agree in your prescriptions for indeed I am , pay Gay, in juxtaposition to say it is not a nice production' " (FW 419, 29-32) p. 75