

# THE ANALYSIS OF LACAN'S "SEMINAR ON THE PURLOINED LETTER"

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## INTRODUCTION

In her essay, "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida", Barbara Johnson writes: "A literary text that both analyzes itself and shows that it actually has neither a self nor any neutral metalanguage with which to do the analyzing calls out irresistibly for analysis" (110). And when such call is responded by some critics, eminent though they are, paradoxically, their readings sometimes themselves equally demand for analysis. therefore, the concern of the present study centers on the analysis of Lacan's "Seminar on The Purloined Letter" which is itself an analysis initiating the revival of Freudian Psychology in the light of a theory of language.

## A LACANIAN PERSPECTIVE OF REPETITION

The fundamental psychoanalytic concern of Lacan's interpretation of Poe's tale is repetition. He views this repetition as the characteristic not only of a human behavioral phenomenon but also of a fictional narrative account : in Poe's story also there is narrative within narrative, as the story is itself repeated by the narrator "I" who hears and tells the tale of the purloined letter, which is retrieved through the same pattern of the original purloining. He, therefore, confines himself to a series of interconnected recurrences in the story and replays these moves in his theoretical analysis. His reading of Poe is an extended form of meditation upon Freud's concept of "repetition compulsion" and its role as a response to "beyond the pleasure principle."

Freud considered pain, and the possibility of pleasure in pain crucial to repetition compulsion, but the question of repetition in Poe's tale, for Lacan, is centered more on loss than on pain. And the repeated dispossessions of a circulating object becomes in his analysis a crucial literary articulation of this compulsion. The second scene of the story, which is by no means an accident but the repetition of the "primal scene", is also a key to how Lacan understands the text. It is only with this scene that the whole story emerges as an allegory of the psychoanalytic situation, with Dupin acting as analyst. He restores the Queen to herself by finding and returning the letter. His act, for Lacan, is analogous to the analytic move which exorcizes the patient's symptom by reworking on the earlier momentary traces.

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\* All page references to "The Purloined Letter" within parentheses refer to *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by Harvey Allen (New York: Modern Library, 1938), pp. 208-22.

The repetition of the loss of circulating object within the story is fundamental to Lacan's reading of Poe's tale through beyond the pleasure principle. However, more than this, his reading demonstrates a reworking on Freudian phases of human development from infancy onward in the light of the structural linguistics developed by Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson. In this regard, Malcom Bowie, in the preface to *The Purloined Poe*, puts forward his idea in this way :

Lacan reads Freud. This is the simplest and most important thing about him. But Lacan reads Freud (in German) in a manner shaped by the structural linguistics of Saussure and Jakobson, who afforded a framework whereby Lacan can assert that "the unconscious is structured in the most radical way like a language". (x-a)

The basic issue which runs through Lacan's seminarial study of Poe is the function of the "gaze", which is central to his theorization of the development of the subject. He defines the term in his *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* as such :

In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded to it-that is what we call the gaze. (73)

What draws Lacan's initial attention in Poe's tale is the phenomenon of a dynamic of miss-seeing. Such a miss-seeing also offers an instance of how the gaze operates in psychic life.

### **THE MIRROR STAGE**

Lacan works on this particular issue by focusing upon the moment of the child's Mirror-Stage. At this stage, the child, being undifferentiated from the mother's body, makes an imaginary identification of self-image with the reflective image of the mirror. Whereas before the child experienced itself as a shapeless mass, it now gains a sense of wholeness, an ideal completeness, and this all without effort, Lacan narrates this startling performance of the child in front of the mirror thus :

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. (1-2)

This gratifying experience of a mirror image is a metaphorical parallel of an unbroken union between inner and outer, a perfect control that assures immediate satisfaction of desire, and signals the child's entry into the Imaginary. The Imaginary is then brought into being not only by the narcissism of the child, but also by its essentially visual experience before the mirror. Although such experience of the child does not herald the birth of the subject, it nevertheless lays a foundation for the genesis of the subject.

In what way, then, Lacan manifests the function of the gaze and identity in his reading of Poe ? It is by means of a dynamic display of the exchange between seeing and blindness. Concealment of the letter is ensured not by making it invisible by means of hiding in a secret drawer or a place, but by assuming that it can escape gaze. This is what makes Poe's story, for Lacan, in his own words, a story "of a woman who knows that she is being looked at, on condition that one does not show her that one knows that she knows". (75) Both acts of purloining the letter take place under the consideration that the subject is blind in certain circumstances, even though he or she is capable enough to see physically.

The "primal scene" of the story, for Lacan, serves as a mirror phase and is a key to visual experience in the formation of the subject. From this scene, the letter passes on the first stage of its itinerary. The three participants of this scene—the King, the Queen, and the Minister—though they have not been decoded as father/mother/son like in Freudian system, they still provide the scene with powerful vision and anxieties. However, more than this, the scene, for Lacan, is a network of exchanged glances. Characters see each other's actions, and see that they are being seen. This is the basic concept of Lacan's gaze theory which he says "describes us, and which in the first instance makes us beings who are looked at, but without showing this". (75)

In Poe's story Lacan identifies dynamic of glances which are important for being seen than of seeing. The focus of this game is a letter with absent-content. It has no identity of its own, nevertheless it provides its possessor with certain power, and, therefore, it becomes an object of desire as it passes between the characters. Blindness pervades throughout the story, but there is at least one form of seeing : the letter has power, one character sees it being possessed by another. Lacan's emphasis on repetition thus takes a visual turn, as he focusses "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 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. (303)

At each turn of the event, there are visual exchange and identification. The power of glance also passes around along with the power which the letter renders to its possessor—from Queen to Minister, and from Minister to Dupin.

Thus, at the Mirror Stage, according to Lacan, the gaze, and a subject position formed in it, is something liable to displace as the subject's relationship to others changes, but this displacement occurs in terms of the gaze of the other rather than the subject's own.

### **THE SYMBOLIC ORDER STAGE**

Subsequently, in order to grasp the inter-subjective complex, Lacan revives Freudian concept of sexuality and psyche with a theory of language. Working on the basic Freudian model of Oedipal development and Castration anxiety, he builds a road along which a child enters language (the Symbolic Order) from a narcissistic space (the Imaginary) where the child is characterized as incapable of differentiating the world as other.

The Symbolic Order sustains the child's uneasy entry into sexual difference and insists his confrontation with otherness in a number of forms : lack, castration, desire etc. It makes the child recognize his difference from a world which he has not created, and which imposes on him the laws of social order. He, then, becomes a subject to a system he cannot control, his subjectivity comes into existence through an experience of power and lack.

It is at Symbolic Stage that the subject gets associated with social situations, because it is only through language as a system of differences that subjective identity is possible. It is also the moment at which the unconscious is born, since here repression takes place. At this stage the child also learns of its separation from the mother and begins to develop a relationship with the adult cultural order. His identification with the cultural "Law of the Father" and ability to substitute one thing for another, facilitate him an entry into a linguistic order within which words are also only substitutes, insignificant in themselves, and achieve meaning only in their relationship with other words as part of a whole signifying system. Thus, for Lacan, full entry into language depends on perception of loss (of the mother). In her Reading Lacan, Jane Gallop puts the fact in this way :

Lacan's theory of sexual identification is precisely a theory of inadequacy, a theory of castration ... But castration for Lacan is not only sexual; more important, it is also linguistic : we are inevitably bereft of any masterful understanding of language, and can only signify ourselves in a symbolic system that we do not command, that, rather, commands us. For women, Lacan's message that everyone, regardless of his or her organs, is castrated represents not a loss but gain. (20)

Lacan manifests that by emphasizing on the function of the letter itself. For him, the crux of the story is not just the loss of the letter but the absence of its content. The letter, in his words can be a "love letter or conspiratorial letter, letter of betrayal or letter

of mission, letter of summons or letter of distress, ..." (310). But as it passes from the Queen to the Minister to Dupin to the prefect back to the Queen, at each turn it produces certain interpersonal effects and subjective responses between them. In this sense it acts as a means by which relationships are established. That is why, it becomes, for Lacan, a signifier. What it means is completely irrelevant to the way in which it passes around in the story. It plays out a pattern "in which the subjects relay each other in their displacement during the intersubjective" (Lacan 304). Each subject in the story is affected by the letter-as-signifier but it is beyond his or her control. This is an instance of how the subject does not create and control, but is constituted by the Symbolic Order, by an affinity with the sign as an image of lack.

### **ABSENCE AND DISPLACEMENT**

The combination of absence and displacement which delineate the character of the letter also make it the exemplary signifier. It is both present and absent. It is present in the sense that it has physical existence, anybody can see it, and at the same time it is absent because it consists in, but unidentifiable, content, nobody knows of it. It plays a role in the story as signs do in Psychic life, since its essence is always missing. In Lacan's own words :

*the signifier is a unit in its very uniqueness, being by nature symbol only of an absence. Which is why we cannot say of the purloined letter that, like other objects, it must be or not be in a particular place but that unlike them it will be and not be where it is, wherever it goes (308)*

For Lacan, "The Purloined Letter" is thus a story particularly associated with an object missing from its place but never completely lost, significantly governing the characters "entires and roles" but itself never govenered. It is in this respect that the story also demonstrates, for him, a close association between subjectivity and the symbolic. Therefore, in the beginning of his seminar, he says :

*We have decided to illustrate for you today the truth which may be drawn from that moment in Freud's thought under study-namely, that it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject-by demonstrating in a stroy ["The Purloined Letter"] the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier. (301)*

In this way by finding a correlation between the pattern of repetition, both external and internal, and the process of psychoanalytic situation, Lacan makes a semiotic analysis of Poe's story keeping it as a locus, rather than Poe's or his character's psychic state.

Lacan's seminar on "The Purloined Letter" is no doubt his unique determination of reassessing the Freudian legacy in the light of linguistic. As such, it becomes an important innovative contrivance in the annals of psychoanalytic criticism. However, in

*spite of all this, it cannot be resisted in voicing some objections against his implicit presuppositions and procedures.*

Poe's tale, for Lacan, illustrates the displacement of the subjects determined by a signifier-the purloined letter-and which itself confirms its status as "repetition automatism". Its journey affects all the characters and manipulates them, as Lacan says, "in their acts, in their destiny, in their refusals, in their blindness, in their end and in their fate" (312). But what plays the significant role behind the displacement of the signifier, the attempts to expound nowhere in his seminar. In Lacanian system "phallus" is the privileged signifier which coordinates the integration of all other signifiers into their respective signifieds. Phallus is indeed dominant in the Symbolic domain. It is phallus, not the signifier, that gives the subject its position. In the Symbolic Order, instinctive needs are shaped by discourse through which the subject expresses its demand for satisfaction. The molding of needs by discourses, however, gives not satisfaction, rather creates desire, which runs on in a chain of signifiers. Therefore, a subject who is itself standing at the axis of signifier, as a split-being, never becomes able to give its position a full presence in its relationship with the signifier. And hence, Lacan's indifference to the significance of phallus in his seminar creates undeniably a lack.

Lacan, on the one hand, asserts the content of the letter inevitably missing but, on the other, confines himself, leaving all apart, so keenly to the very missing that at the end it becomes itself the meaning of the letter. The missing insists him to take the letter as a signifier, but in spite of his carefulness to present the letter as an illustration of the functioning of a signifier, he makes this signifier the nitty-gritty of the story. As a result, signifier becomes identical to signified.

The letter-as-signifier, according to Lacan, consists in the characteristic of indivisibility. In his own words :

But if it is first of all on the materiality of the signifier that we have insisted, that materiality is odd (singuliere) in many ways, the first of which is not to admit partition. Cut a letter in small pieces and it remains the letter ... (308)

Here Lacan's conformation of the indivisibility of signifier is odd in the sense because he overlooks the fact that like the union of atomic nuclei to form a heavier nucleus, clusters of signifiers unite to constitute a basic signifier, and when needed, this signifier can diffuse into the fused components. If a letter is cut into small pieces, it remains not simply the letter but also becomes litter, wastepaper, rubbish, trash, junk, scrap, and so on, and only when all the pieces are integrated promptly, it restores its status. Thus signifier comprises both the quality of fusion and fission, and is, therefore, equally integrative and differentiative. However, Lacan's concept becomes

comprehensible if the letter is identified as phallus whose integrity is essential for the edification of the entire psychoanalytic system. But Lacan ignores it in his analysis.

### **CONCLUSION**

What Lacan affirms in the beginning of the seminar precisely contradicts with what he asserts at the end. In the beginning, he says "we have decided to illustrate for you today the truth, ... namely, that it is the symbolic order which is constitutive for the subject by demonstrating in a story the decisive orientation which the subject receives from the itinerary of a signifier" (301). But at the end he states, "Thus it is that what the 'purloined letter', nay, the 'letter in sufferance' means is that a letter always arrives at its destination" (318). Here Lacan is certainly not talking about the efficiency of the postal service. If it is not as such, he then must be affirming the possibility of the final allocation of the message. And since Lacan's seminar does not illustrate the truth of castration and the transcendental identity of the phallus as the lack that constitutes the itinerary of a signifier, this final sentence affirms the absolute meaning which structuralists always endeavor to achieve.

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