Matthew Lamb

On the Fictional Specificity of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter”; or, Reading in ‘the Outer Darkness of Language’ with Luiz Costa Lima (Part One)

ABSTRACT

Part one of this essay re-examines the debate between Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida over Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, “The Purloined Letter.” Taking its cue from Michelle Boulous Walker’s article on Poe and Habermas, the first part of this essay argues that these previous readings have proceeded by bypassing the very object they claim to be interpreting: the fictional specificity of “The Purloined Letter.” This clears the ground for a closer look at the fictionality of the story, in part two.

BIOGRAPHY

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ON THE FICTIONAL SPECIFICITY OF EDGAR ALLAN POE’S “THE PURLOINED LETTER”; OR, READING IN ‘THE OUTER DARKNESS OF LANGUAGE’ WITH LUÍZ COSTA LIMA (PART ONE)

Do we need yet another reading of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter”? This essay is decisive in its response: yes and no. Yes, because previous readings – such as those by Lacan and Derrida, as well as more conventional psychoanalytic readings – have proceeded by bypassing the very object they claim to be interpreting: the fictional specificity of “The Purloined Letter.” No, because attending to such fictional specificity means highlighting those aspects of fiction which resist the imposition of an externally imposed interpretative framework.

This leaves me in what Samuel Beckett would call an unenviable situation. As a preparatory step, I have started (in part one of this essay) with an intuition gleaned from the work of Michelle Boulous Walker; and then (in part two) I have followed, more doggedly, at the heels of Luíz Costa Lima. But before this, we must reacquaint ourselves with Lacan and Derrida’s reading of Poe’s short story.

I.
In 1971, Derrida initiated his critique of Lacan, first in an interview, and then in a lecture given six months later. This lecture focused on Lacan’s reading of Poe’s “The Purloined Letter”; it was first published (as the article, “Le Facteur de La Vérité”) in 1975, and then in 1980, appended to Derrida’s book, The Post Card (La Carte postale: de Socrate à Freud et au-delà). But why did Derrida choose to focus, in particular, on Lacan’s “Seminar on The Purloined Letter”? Lacan’s paper was included in Écrits (1966), although the actual seminar was delivered in 1955, as just one of many weekly seminars that Lacan ran over several years; it was written in its present form in 1956, and first published in 1957. The papers published in Écrits are all printed in chronological order; all except the paper on Poe’s story. It is placed first, and in the preface to the volume Lacan explains that this is to provide an ‘easy entryway’ into his ‘style’ of discourse and analysis.

At this, Derrida claims that by taking his seminar on Poe out of its chronology and placing it at the front of his Écrits Lacan is giving it a ‘determining strategic place’ in his structural project. In other words, Lacan has reoriented his entire work around the questions raised in this seminar: the question of the relation between truth and fiction. Derrida’s second claim is that by approaching this question with explicit reference to psychoanalysis, and in terms of Lacan’s proposed return to Freud, what Lacan is asserting is that psychoanalysis is in possession of the truth; that, in connection with his initial claim, it is psychoanalysis that resolves the debate between truth and fiction. A final claim, on which Derrida begins his criticisms of the first two claims, rests on a question of Freud’s theory of dream interpretation, the Oedipus complex as articulated in Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex. This dream represents the semantic core – or the latent meaning – of each and every dream. Everything in a dream (or in a literary work), which does not accord to this semantic core is referred to by Freud as secondary revision – associated to the manifest content – and is therefore regarded as superfluous.

There are two overlapping stories taking place within “The Purloined Letter.” The first takes place within Dupin’s apartment and narrated by Dupin’s unnamed friend; and the second is told within the telling of the first story, initially by the visiting Prefect (the introduction of the case of the purloined letter), and then by Dupin (in his dénouement to the recovery of the letter); this second story is reported by the narrator as part of the first story. For Derrida, Lacan’s focus on only the second story in “The Purloined Letter,” and his dismissal of the first – including, most importantly, the style and form of the narrative itself, in which the second story is reported – indicates his use of the division between the semantic core and its secondary revision. Derrida’s criticism here is not that Lacan has used Freud’s method, but rather that what he has relegated to the role of secondary revision – the narrative itself, and in particular the language of the narrative, what the narrative tells us about language – is the very aspect that Lacan proposes to be examining. In other words, Lacan has somehow bypassed the very question he is attempting to answer: the relation between truth and fiction. And so, according to Derrida, by not resolving this question – by not correctly using psychoanalysis to approach the debate between truth and fiction – Lacan has failed to show psychoanalysis to be in possession of the truth.

II.
Before examining Derrida’s claims more closely, a more immediate question raises itself: is this what is happening in Lacan’s seminar? It is interesting to note that Derrida’s criticism of Lacan’s seminar takes into account only the version published in Écrits in 1966, and in subsequent editions of Lacan’s work, and not the text of the seminar itself. Of course, Derrida would not have had access to a transcript of the actual seminar, and even had he attended it, his memory of it would have been shaped by the edited and published version available since 1957. However, in 1978 – two years before Derrida decided to republish his criticism of Lacan in The Post Card – the transcripts of all the seminars that Lacan had given in 1954-1955 were released (The Seminar of...
Jacques Lacan, Book 2). Amongst these was a seminar titled “The Purloined Letter” (April 27 1955). This did not cause Derrida to alter his reading, however; two years later he republished it in The Post Card.

What is initially interesting about this is that between the transcript of the spoken seminar and its written counterpart a dramatic degree of revision has taken place. Moreover, it is of further interest that Lacan actually made first mention of Poe’s story, not in this seminar, but in the preceding seminar, titled ‘Odd or even? Beyond intersubjectivity’ (March 30 1955). And again, his comments spill over into the seminar following, titled ‘Some questions for the teacher’ (May 11 1955).

What is significant about this revision is not simply what Lacan subtracted from the seminar, but also what he added to it. For example, in the Écrits version Lacan states: ‘There are two scenes, the first of which we shall straightaway designate the primal scene, and by no means inadvertently, since the second may be considered its repetition in the very sense we are considering today.’ At this Derrida states: ‘“There are two scenes . . .” . . . There follows the analysis of the two triangles, the content of the ‘tale’, the object of the analytic deciphering.’ This begins Derrida’s criticism of Lacan that bypasses the significant material; as Derrida continues: ‘There is a problem of framing, of bordering and delimitation, whose analysis must be very finely detailed if it wishes to ascertain the effects of fiction. Without ever saying a word about it, Lacan excludes the textual fiction from within which he has extracted the so-called general narration.’

But does Lacan do so ‘without ever saying a word about it’? The associated passage in the transcript of the seminar is very telling in this respect. Here Lacan states: ‘There are two great scenes – not in the sense in which we say primal scene – the scene of the letter purloined and the scene of the letter recovered, and then some accessory scenes.’ There is a twofold significance to this passage, in relation to its revision in Écrits. First, Lacan is here saying that the first scene is not identified in the sense of the primal scene; but in the revised version he says that this first scene shall ‘straightaway’ be designated as the primal scene. Second, Lacan does acknowledge that there are other scenes besides the two he’s extracted (so, contra Derrida, Lacan does ‘say a word about it’). But somewhere in the act of revision – of committing his seminar to writing – Lacan has removed reference to these other ‘accessory’ scenes.

Why? A possible explanation may be found in the Écrits version of the seminar, where Lacan states: ‘A remainder that no analyst will neglect, trained as he is to retain whatever is significant, without always knowing what to do with it: the letter, abandoned by the Minister, and which the Queen’s hand is now free to roll into a ball.’ This passage is not found in the transcript of the seminar and so must have been added afterward. This is an interesting admission on Lacan’s behalf because it demonstrates, not that Lacan has simply ‘excluded’ these aspects from his analysis, but that although initially acknowledging them, and being able to make his interpretation without them, he is ‘free to roll [them] into a ball’ and discard them. That this is what Lacan did between the actual seminar and its written version indicates that, if anything, the Écrits version marks the semantic core of his interpretation, while the transcript of the seminar, plus the other two seminars which came on either side of it, marks the secondary revision – the ‘overflow’ of the Écrits version – which he needed to wade through in order to reach his conclusions. This is supported by the fact that in the interim between the two versions Lacan was able to reconsider the first of the ‘two great scenes’ and identify it finally as the primal scene.

III.

This does not move toward validating or invalidating Lacan’s conclusions, however. But what this does do is create an opening that enables us to reconsider Derrida’s criticisms. For in focusing his criticism directly onto the semantic core of Lacan’s seminar – the Écrits version – Derrida himself bypasses the same process of secondary revision that he admonishes Lacan for ignoring. My point here is not only that Derrida has inadvertently relegated to the role of secondary revision, and thereby ignored in Lacan’s work, the very aspect he criticises Lacan for having ignored in Poe’s story; but that Derrida himself uses the division between semantic core and secondary revision to approach Poe’s story. But this time – and this is the distinction between Lacan and Derrida’s rendering of “The Purloined Letter”– Derrida is going to include in his interpretation that which Lacan saw as significant (unbeknownst to Derrida), but did not know how to use: the ‘remainder.’ As Derrida states: ‘One must take into account the remainder, that which can fall, and one must do so not only in the narrated content of the writing (the signifier, the written, the letter), but in the operation of writing.’

Ultimately for Derrida, it is this misuse of the ‘remainder’ that threatens to invalidate Lacan’s conclusion. But what is interesting here is that, in Derrida therefore using the ‘remainder’ to re-interpret Poe’s story, he is not simply arguing that Lacan has failed to show psychoanalysis to be in possession of the truth, but rather he is arguing that Lacan has not correctly used psychoanalysis to approach the debate between truth and fiction. What
Derrida is therefore arguing is that Lacan has failed in his proposed quest to return to Freud. By criticising Lacan in this way, by himself using that which Lacan failed to make use of (the ‘remainder’), Derrida is not so much invalidating Lacan’s overall project (which Lacan has used Poe’s story as an ‘entryway’ into), but rather, Derrida is correcting it, and continuing with it in his own work. In other words, Derrida is not criticising Lacan for being psychoanalytic, but with not being psychoanalytic enough; that is, with not correctly using psychoanalysis. And it is this task that Derrida has set for himself in reading “The Purloined Letter”: to really return to Freud.

This is supported by Derrida himself in the opening pages of “The Purveyor of Truth,” when he recalls Freud’s use of the Oedipal structure in reference to both Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex:

Examining the history of repression between Oedipus Rex and Hamlet, demolishing all the differences between (1) the ‘Oedipus complex’, (2) the legend, and (3) Sophocles’ tragedy, Freud established a rule: everything in a text that does not constitute the semantic core of the two ‘typical’ dreams he has just defined (incest with mother and murder of father), everything that is foreign to the absolute nudity of this oneiric content, belongs to the ‘secondary revision of the material’. . . . The formal (textual, in the usual sense) differences that come, as if from the outside, to affect the semantic structure, here the ‘Oedipus complex’, thus constitute secondary revisions.

That Derrida himself deploys this rule, in conjunction with the significance of the ‘remainder,’ in order to approach the semantic core of Poe’s story, as well as using this to criticise Lacan’s failed ‘framing’ of the story, is also admitted by Derrida: ‘By framing in this violent way, by cutting the narrated figure itself from a fourth side in order to see only triangles, one evades perhaps a certain complication, perhaps of the Oedipal structure, which is announced in the scene of writing.’ It is therefore to engage with this ‘Oedipal structure’ – the truth of psychoanalysis – in relation to Poe’s story, that Derrida proposes to do.

At this it may become clear that Derrida has adopted for himself the second and third claims that he had initially set out to level against Lacan: that psychoanalysis is able to be used to resolve the debate between truth and fiction, a resolution found in one’s adherence to the Oedipus complex, the semantic core of both truth and fiction; and the dismissal of everything that does not accord with this semantic core – the secondary revision – in which Derrida includes Lacan himself as superfluous. But it is the first claim that ultimately demonstrates this bent in Derrida’s work towards really returning to Freud, and his ultimate dependence on him.

IV.

Derrida’s main criticism of Lacan’s reduction of Poe’s story to two sets of triangular frames (thereby ignoring everything which this excludes) is not just that Lacan ignores along with this the significant ‘remainder,’ but that what he focuses on – that which is solely included within his triangles – is the speech of the characters. For Derrida, focusing on speech, and ignoring the vicissitudes of the writing in which these spoken dialogues are embedded, is indicative of what he calls phonocentrism, itself an index of the broader charge of logocentrism. But what is significant in Derrida’s criticism of Lacan, in his positioning and repositioning of Lacan’s arguments, leading them directly to this charge of phonocentrism, is that Derrida does not examine at this point what these terms mean within his paper on Lacan and “The Purloined Letter”. After all, this paper was presented in the 1970s, and Derrida’s work is already widely known. Instead, Derrida directs his readers to a certain chapter in another of his works: significantly, the first chapter of his first major work. As Derrida states in his criticism of Lacan, upon identifying Lacan’s focus on speech:

Things would be quite otherwise if one were attentive to the writing within the voice, that is, before the letter. . . . Sheltered from this threat, but also from the disseminating power that in Of Grammatology I proposed to call Writing Before the Letter (the title of the first part): the privilege of ‘full speech’ is examined there. The agency of the Lacanian letter is the releve of writing in the system of speech.

In other words, what Derrida has done here is exactly what he criticises Lacan for having done with his “Seminar on The Purloined Letter” in Ecrits: Derrida has taken his paper, ‘Le Facteur de La Vérité’, out of its chronology and placed it in front of his first work, Of Grammatology, thereby giving it a ‘determining strategic place’ in his deconstructural project. In other words, Derrida has reoriented his entire work around (1) a piece of literary criticism (Poe’s story), (2) a criticism, and a correction, of Lacan’s work and (3) an attempt to really return to Freud, thereby bringing (the truth of) psychoanalysis to the forefront of his deconstructural project. Indeed, in Of Grammatology, in presenting the ‘breakthrough’ to be found in his own work, Derrida states: ‘Outside of linguistics, it is psychoanalytic research that this breakthrough seems at present to have the greatest likelihood of being expanded’; and, it seems, deconstruction is this expanded psychoanalytic method.
And so the debate between Derrida and Lacan hinges on the role of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature. I have already mentioned Lacan’s 1955 seminars, including the three on “The Purloined Letter”. Significantly, the subject of the two seminars directly preceding these three seminars, and which may be read as providing a preparatory frame in which to read the subsequent analysis of Poe’s story, is on the topic of Freud’s interpretation of Irma’s Injection (March 9 & 16, 1955). “The initial dream, the dream of dreams, the inaugurally deciphered dream,” as Lacan calls it, ‘is for Freud that of Irma’s injection.’

But what Lacan does with this ‘inaugurally deciphered dream’ is to criticise Freud’s treatment of it; more specifically, he criticises the fact that Freud did not bring its analysis to its completion, and yet he was still somehow able to feel justified in discovering its latent meaning. As Lacan states:

But the question in my view is rather more like this – how is it that Freud, who later on will develop the function of unconscious desire, is here content, for the first step in his demonstration, to present a dream which is entirely explained by the satisfaction of a desire which one cannot but call preconscious, and even entirely conscious.

What Lacan does with this is shift the focus from Freud’s dream as a dream to his dream as a text. What Lacan is arguing here is that what Freud actually interpreted was, as he himself admits, simply the ‘text of the dream’, rather than the dream itself; but by ignoring the consequences of this, or so Lacan argues, Freud is missing the fundamental role played by language in the act of interpretation. ‘You must start from the text,’ Lacan states, start by treating it, as Freud does and as he recommends, as Holy Writ. The author, the scribe, is only a pen-pusher, and he comes second. . . . Similarly, when it comes to our patients, please give more attention to the text than to the psychology of the author – the entire orientation of my teaching is that.

In other words, Freud himself mistakenly placed his own personal psychology – no doubt an unavoidable danger in undergoing self-analysis – ahead of the true object of analysis: the text, and the unconscious underpinnings of this which must, by necessity, be therefore linguistic in nature.

The significance of this – as a preparatory discussion preceding his discussion of “The Purloined Letter” – is that it effectively exchanges the central role of the interpretation of dreams in Freud’s classical psychoanalysis with the interpretation of texts in Lacan’s version. “The Purloined Letter” therefore stands in relation to Lacan’s work as Irma’s Injection stands in relation to Freud’s work. But as Freud began with his book on the interpretation of dreams, rather than come to it at a later stage in his career, he did not need to take it out of the context of its chronology and artificially place it at the forefront of his work, as both Lacan and Derrida felt they had to with their interpretations of Poe’s story.

So a consistent line from Freud to Lacan to Derrida can be found, without the contradictions that Derrida attempts to locate therein. For the three claims that Derrida levels against Lacan, when seen in the light of this exchange of dream for text, become, when measured against Freud, less a criticism and more a concise exegesis of the psychoanalytic method: Freud does give his interpretation of Irma’s Injection a ‘determining strategic place’ in psychoanalysis, thus orienting his work around the question of the relation between truth and dreams; he does attempt to resolve this debate by arguing that psychoanalysis is in possession of the truth, and therefore can be used to successfully interpret dreams; and finally, he does do so by associating the Oedipus complex to the semantic core – or latent dream thoughts – and the remainder to the secondary revision – or that which produces the manifest dream content.

V.

Both Derrida’s criticism of Lacan, and his own interpretation of “The Purloined Letter,” rest on the opposition between speech and writing. What this amounts to in his reading of Poe’s story is simply the opposition between the formal aspects of the entire narrative itself – the piece of writing called “The Purloined Letter” – and Lacan’s focus on only one portion of the content of the narrative – which includes the ‘speech’ of the characters telling the story of the purloined letter. As he states:

This story is certainly that of a letter, of the theft and displacement of a signifier. 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. The ‘Seminar’s’ interest in the agency of the signifier in its letter seizes upon this legacy to the extent that it constitutes, precisely, on the first approach, the exemplary content, the meaning, the written of Poe’s fiction, as opposed to its writing, its signifier, and its narrating form. The displacement of the signifier, therefore, is analyzed as signified, as the recounted object of a short story.
Once more, Derrida is not dismissing all of Lacan’s theoretical work; he is simply correcting it, and continuing with it as a part of his own theoretical project. Lacan argues that the letter in the story acts in such a way that it can illustrate how the objet petit a – a pure ‘signifier’, without a ‘signified’ – constitutes the subject. In response, Derrida argues that in taking the letter in the content of the story as a representation of this lack, what Lacan is actually doing is relying on a ‘signified’ to illustrate his theory, he is making the ‘signified’ of the letter into the idea of a pure ‘signifier’. So by Derrida turning his own focus onto the more formal aspects of the narration, onto the writing itself as writing, he is attempting to show just how the ‘story is certainly that of a letter, of the theft and displacement of a signifier.’ But there are two main problems with Derrida’s criticism and interpretation here, both hinging on the attack he levels against Lacan regarding the reduction of the story to the content of the two triangular frames.

The first problem involves the two points on which Derrida feels he can use to demonstrate that the whole story is ‘an affair of writing’; as he states:

I. Everything begins ‘in’ a library: in books, writings, references. Therefore nothing begins. Only a drifting disorientation from which one does not emerge.

II. Additionally, an explicit reference is made in the direction of the two other narratives onto which ‘this one’ is grafted. The ‘analogy’ between the three accounts is the milieu of The Purloined Letter.

The first point refers to the opening section of the story itself which finds Dupin and the narrator in Dupin’s ‘little back library, or book-closet.’ Granted, this section of the story is beyond the triangular frames that Lacan eventually focuses on; but the point that Derrida misses is that what he is himself focusing on here is itself a matter of content – the fact that the two characters are sitting in a library, surrounded by books – in order to support his case that one should focus solely on the formal aspects of the narrative. In other words, Derrida, just as he has accused Lacan, is using a convenient coincidence of ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ to create an easily understandable chain of ‘signs’ that denotes the scene: a library, in which two characters sit in conversation. And Derrida then interprets this scene, without a trace of irony, in support of his own theory of a pure ‘signifier’.

The second point follows from the first. What Derrida is referring to here is the fact that “The Purloined Letter” is the final story in a loose trilogy of tales following the adventures of Dupin; the other two being “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Roget”. The explicit reference Derrida points to in “The Purloined Letter”, to support this claim, is also at the beginning of the story, while the two characters are in the library, when the narrator harkens back to the events of the previous two stories: ‘For myself, however, I was mentally discussing certain topics which had formed matter for conversation between us at an earlier period of the evening; I mean the affair of the Rue Morgue, and the mystery attending the murder of Marie Roget.’ From this, Derrida refers back to the opening section of “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” which recounts the first meeting of the narrator and Dupin, in an ‘obscure library’, where they were both ‘in search of the same very rare and remarkable volume.

The purpose of this transgressing of the narrative frame of “The Purloined Letter” is supposed to demonstrate Lacan’s error in not only ignoring the entire narrative of this story, by cutting triangles out of its surface, but in also ignoring the various other narratives onto which this one is ‘grafted.’ Ultimately this is supposed to support Derrida’s focusing on the writing as writing; but yet again, it can be seen that Derrida is simply focusing on the content of each story, as content only. The first meeting in the library is simply a recounted event, and it is the event that Derrida focuses on, not the recounting of it; likewise, it is the narrator’s recounting of an earlier conversation regarding the events of the previous two stories that Derrida takes as the point of reference between them; and even here, by focusing on the event itself, rather than on the recounting of it – as he claims he is doing – he also misses the significant point that the event that the narrator is referring to is not directly the events of the other two stories, but of a conversation of the events: ‘I was mentally discussing certain topics which had formed matter for conversation between us at an earlier period of the evening.’ In other words, Derrida is not only taking a ‘signified’ as support for his view that it is writing and the pure signifier that is at stake in “The Purloined Letter”; he is also relying on a ‘signified’ that turns on an event of speech.

VI.
I have examined the various arguments and strategies that Derrida and Lacan undertook in order to arrive at their respective interpretations of “The Purloined Letter.” But this is not the main purpose of my paper. This has simply been a necessary, albeit circuitous, preparation for my own argument. What should be immediately noticeable in the preceding discussion, however, is that in order to question the relationship between truth and
fiction, both Derrida and Lacan have ignored almost completely the status of fiction. Their respective analyses have focused solely on the aspect of truth, and in particular on the truth of psychoanalysis. This leaves unanswered my initial questions: why interpret a work of literary fiction, and why put this interpretation of literary fiction as the ‘easy entryway,’ as the ‘determining strategic place,’ in what is otherwise a project of philosophy?

To prepare the ground for my response to this, I want to begin by looking more closely at the surface of Poe’s short story. I am not concerned with interpreting its hidden depths, with dressing it up in philosophical garb, but rather like the child in the Emperor’s New Clothes, to stick for the time being with the obvious. In this, I am initially following an intuition that Michelle Boulous Walker traces in her paper, “A Short Story about Reason,” where Jürgen Habermas’ paper, “Philosophy as Stand-in and Interpreter,” and another Edgar Allan Poe story, “The Fall of the House of the Usher,” are brought together. Here, rather than using Habermas to interpret Poe, Boulous Walker turns this usual practice on its head and instead uses Poe to read Habermas; not in order to interpret Habermas’ philosophy anew, or to attribute an alternative meaning to it, but rather to use the literary fiction to question the underlying practices of philosophy. Philosophers, Boulous Walker argues, ‘share a common inability to diagnose a silence that lies at the center of the philosophical process. It is toward this silence, this unvoiced disquiet that troubles the very philosophy that attempts nonetheless to conceal it, that my own story eventually gestures.’

In adopting this method to the current purpose, there is more immediately at stake. Habermas’ philosophy is not itself explicitly predicated upon an interpretation of Poe’s “The Fall of the House of the Usher”; while in regards to Lacan and Derrida’s philosophy in relation to “The Purloined Letter,” it is. There is a certain silence at the heart of “The Purloined Letter,” and this issues from the letter itself. It is to this silence that Derrida and Lacan’s interpretations are initially directed, in order to diagnose it, the better to conceal it behind the philosophy they will erect in its place.

So my first question is this: does “The Purloined Letter” actually fit the interpretative framework that Derrida and Lacan impose upon it? Both men hinge their interpretations upon following the course of the letter in the story; both men see the letter as being empty of content, but then they proceed by interpreting this emptiness as being indicative of some pure ‘signifier’ structuring the movements of all the characters. My response to this first question, however, is: no, the story does not fit the proposed frameworks. And where it breaks down is exactly on the point of the letter itself; because, as I will attempt to show, 1) the contents of the stolen letter are known within the context of the story; 2) they are not, however, known to the reader; 3) it is the difference between these two perspectives wherein the potential for the fictionality of the story is actualised; and 4) it is by eliding this difference, by weaving some philosophical thread into their reading, that our two tailors, Derrida and Lacan, bypass any discussion on the status of fiction as it relates to truth.

In the story, when the Prefect first tells Dupin and the narrator of the stolen letter he describes it as ‘a document of the last importance,’ that it is ‘from the nature of the document’ that may give ‘its holder a certain power in a certain quarter where such power is immensely valuable’; that is, it ‘would bring in question the honor of a personage of most exalted a station.’ Already, one may feel safe in assuming that it is not the letter’s form alone that has endowed it with this significance; but rather, its contents. The Prefect goes on to describe the scene of its theft, and in doing, the Queen’s actions are stated clearly: ‘During its perusal she was suddenly interrupted.’ So, we may assume, the Queen had enough knowledge of the letter’s contents, after her ‘perusal,’ to know that she did now want her husband, the King, to know of it. ‘The address, however, was uppermost, and, it contents thus unexposed, the letter escaped notice.’ But here the Minister ‘recognizes the handwriting of the address, observes the confusion of the [Queen], and fathoms her secret.’ The ‘secret’, of course, is not necessarily the exact content of the letter. What the Minister notices, however, is that whatever this content may be, the Queen does not want the King to know it. Even so, at this early stage, the impetus for this first scene is clearly not, as Lacan would have it, the letter as a pure ‘signifier’, as it is the Queen’s knowledge of the contents of the letter – what in semiological terms would be the ‘signified’ of the letter – that makes her hide it from the King, and subsequently makes the Minister curious enough to steal it.

Later, when Dupin asks the Prefect for an ‘accurate description of the letter,’ the Prefect produces ‘a memorandum-book’ and ‘proceeds to read aloud a minute account of the internal, and especially of the external appearance of the missing document.’ Would it be safe to presume that what is meant here by the ‘internal…appearance’ of the letter is the text, and subsequently the content, of the letter that is being referred to? Later, when Dupin retrieves the letter from the Minister and hands it over to the Prefect, the Prefect is said to have ‘grasped it in a perfect agony of joy, opened it with a trembling hand, cast a rapid glance at its contents, and then, scrambling to the door, rushed at length unceremoniously from the room and from the house.'
think that it is safe to assume that here, by checking the ‘contents’ of the letter, the Prefect is verifying what previously he referred to as the ‘internal…appearance’ of the letter: to ensure that it is indeed the stolen letter in question.

It is therefore safe to assume that there is explicit evidence in the text of the story to claim that not only did the Queen know of the contents of letter, but that the Prefect did also; and from this one could then assume that, implicitly at least, the contents were at some time revealed to the Minister, and even to Dupin. Whatever one assumes, one could certainly not be safe in presuming – along with Lacan and Derrida – that, just because we as readers of the story lack explicit knowledge of the letter, that the characters within the story must also share this ignorance.

A skeptical reader may raise doubts on our assumption that the contents are known to the characters in context of the story. This leads us to the essential point of the story: that the contents of the letter are only secondary to the power or influence given to the person who possesses the letter. This is clearly stated at the beginning of the Prefect’s story, when he says that it is known that the item is still in the Minister’s possession:

“How is this known?” asked Dupin.
“It is clearly inferred,” replied the Prefect, “from the nature of the document, and from the non-appearance of certain results which would at once arise from it passing out of the robber’s possession; - that is to say, from his employing it as he must design in the end to employ it.”
“Be a little more explicit,” I said.
“Well, I may venture so far as to say that the paper gives its holder a certain power in a certain quarter where such power is immensely valuable.”

This point is reinforced on the following page:

“It is clear,” said I, “as you observe, that the letter is still in possession of the minister; since it is this possession, and not any employment of the letter, which bestows the power. With the employment the power departs.”

Perhaps we could paraphrase this by suggesting that the ‘employment of the letter’ by those critics who proceed by trying to fathom the actual content of the letter – rather than trust in its imaginary import – and who succeed only in imposing some externally derived interpretative framework or philosophy, acts only to minimise the power of the fictionality of the story. This is done, first, by diverting the reader away from the effects of the letter within the context of the story, onto the (supposed lack of) contents of the letter; then by fulfilling the expectations of the reader, by substituting it with a philosophy of a ‘pure signifier.’

‘With the employment the power departs.’

VI.
This is only a preparatory step in my own argument, however. What is important now (and which will constitute part two of my essay) is to examine the importance of the possession of the letter within the context of the story. This will lead us to a discussion of the ideas of Luiz Costa Lima, and to a re-evaluation of Lacan and Derrida’s reading of Poe.

REFERENCES
