
"The Purloined Letter": A Theory of Perception

Author(s): Sergio L. P. Bellei

Source: *Poe Studies (1971-1985)*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (December 1976), pp. 40-42

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45296815>

Accessed: 15-09-2022 18:00 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Poe Studies (1971-1985)*

"The Purloined Letter": A Theory of Perception

Sergio L. P. Bellei

University of Arizona

Critical approaches to "The Purloined Letter" have, of late, called attention to qualities other than the skillful handling of the method of deduction in detective stories. Jacques Lacan's reading of the tale, for example, implies a theory of perception insofar as the letter is seen as a type of floating signifier to which significances are applied by the different perceiving intellects of the characters as the letter moves from hand to hand.¹ For David Halliburton, Dupin is an investigator endowed with a strong imaginative element and capable of a hermeneutic approach through which he identifies himself with the consciousness that created the "text" to be deciphered, discovers the connection between the original intention and the achievement, adds the missing links, and solves the mystery.² In such approaches to Poe's tale, the letter is not only the object to be found by an ingenious detective but also, on the symbolic level, an object capable of acquiring meaning, a "text" to be deciphered, and "The Purloined Letter" is not only a tale of detection but also a comment on the nature of the relationship between mind and reality. The analysis of the process by which the letter acquires meaning is instructive insofar as it reveals Poe's awareness of the distinction between what may be called structures of presentation and structures of representation as well as his awareness that these structures invite correspondingly different modes of approach.

The relationship between mind and reality implied in "The Purloined Letter" involves a theory of perception which has its roots in the works of Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge. The concept of imagination developed by Coleridge in the *Biographia Literaria*, viewed against the background of eighteenth-century aesthetics, implies a redefinition of the relationship between words and things, subject and object of perception. Whereas poets in the age of Pope tended to view words and things as separate entities, the imagination being a recording device and poetry a kind of word-painting of the objective world, the Romantics tended to view the distinction between language and reality as artificial, the function of imagination being precisely to break down this distinction by means of the metaphoric process which transforms words into living things. Imagination unifies in the mind the diversity of the world, and "the poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity."³ The unification of objects by the imagination ultimately implies not the representation of these objects, but their actual creation in terms of presentation. In this structure of presentation, no distance exists between words and things, subject and object, reality and the mind. Such a structured world is, in fact, the world of idealism and organicism in which the mind is, in the words of Edward Davidson, "an extension and still a part of . . . the world," as opposed to the world of rationalism and mechanism in which the "mind is capable of sensing and reflecting on the world apart from reality."⁴

Whereas the world of presentation, viewed as related to either its creator or its perceiver, always implies the identification or mutual absorption of subject and object, the world of representation implies their separation. The creator of a world of presentation organically integrates the diversity of objects into a pattern by means of his communion with, or his vision of, the unity of these objects in his imagination. He is essentially the poet who, by looking at things with the inward eye, identifies himself with them, and in their apparent diversity sees their essential unity. He creates a world of inherent, self-contained organicity in which the discovery of meaning depends on the contemplation of analogical, not logical fitness. The perceiver of that world must necessarily identify himself with it in a process of involvement in order to apprehend its analogical complexity. In this process of creative participation, he is ultimately able to re-enact the vision, although at the cost of the immersion of his own self in the interpretive process. The apprehension of meaning in a world of representation, on the other hand, implies distance between subject and object and is essentially logical. Unlike the perceiver of a world of presentation, the perceiver here keeps his integrity as subject since representation means, in the words of Heidegger, "letting a thing stand opposite to oneself as an object."⁵ For instance, Coleridge's ability to identify himself with the Shakespearean poetic world of presentation is probably the main reason for his superiority to Dr. Johnson as a critic. Johnson, by keeping himself removed from the text, could rely on aesthetic principles peculiar to his age and argue that the blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear* was "an act too horrid to be endured in dramattick exhibition, and such as must always compel the mind to relieve its distress in incredulity."⁶ Coleridge, on the other hand, by identifying himself with the context of the play, could see the scene as "necessary to harmonize their [Goneril's and Regan's] cruelty to their father."⁷

If, in dealing with modes of presentation, no distance from the object of perception exists for either creator or perceiver, the former, however, still differs from the latter in his godly function of ordering his material into a vision. Whereas he creates, the perceiver reenacts, and though both are endowed with imagination—"the living power and prime agent of all human perception"; "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I Am"⁸—only the poet has the power of the secondary imagination, the ability to destroy the world and rebuild it by means of words which ultimately develop a reality from within themselves, which they impose on the "real" world.

The concept of presentation is germane to the present approach to "The Purloined Letter" insofar as the letter exists only in the context of modes of presentation or, more specifically, in symbolic contexts which require from those who approach them a specific procedure, the procedure of creative participation by means of which the meaning of symbolic structures is revealed. The Prefect's initial account of the theft in the royal boudoir evinces the situation of the letter in a context which makes it both visible and invisible in its relation to the range of vision of the possible spectators and their ability or inability to perceive the intricate net of possible relationships in a given pattern.

The variations of the range of vision in the boudoir scene are presented in a crescendo as we are shown the perceptive ability of the king (the "nameless" third party involved), of the queen (the "personage of most exalted station"), and the Minister. The king's good eyesight and poor insight are evinced in his initial game of "even and odd" with the queen who, perceiving that the king's range of vision would be capable of seeing the letter in her hands but not on the table, wins the game. Her own insight, however, fails in dealing with the wider context which includes the "lynx eye" of the Minister who, in turn, has the upper hand at the game. The Minister, in fact, "immediately perceives the paper, recognizes the handwriting of the address, observes the confusion of the personage addressed, and fathoms her secret."⁹ The Minister's lynx eye, indeed, perceives the increased complexity of the game and uses this superior perception for his own purposes.

The game of "odd and even" as described by Dupin implies a theory of perception in which there must be the identification of subject and object, of the reasoner's intellect with his opponent's in a symbolic context so that every separate element may be unified in an all-encompassing pattern. The opponent in this case is, of course, transformed into a component of the symbolic pattern since he no longer exists in his integrity but only as an extension of the reasoner's mind in terms of a measurement of his astuteness. The queen identifies herself with the object in context and achieves a unity of design which would be successful for her particular purposes had not the ingenuity of the Minister envisaged a wider context which, as Lacan's analysis of the tale reveals, redefines the letter in terms of meaning: the meaning of the letter for the queen could be phrased as "treason to be kept secret," but the Minister, by fathoming her secret, reinterprets it as "secret treason as a source of power."

On the symbolic level, the queen and the Minister must find, therefore, a mode of approach to a structure of presentation in which the organicity of the "picture" to be analyzed implies the involvement and the creative participation of the subject in its organization. Whereas the king, if he sees the letter at all, sees it in isolation, as an object upon the table, the Minister and the queen see the letter in a context; and the context illuminates its meaning.

The procedure by means of which a sense emerges from the contextual interaction of elements to be appropriated¹⁰ by the subject implies an initial surrender rather than an assertion of subjectivity and corresponds to the hermeneutic approach in which the intentionality always implicit in a text must be understood before an explication takes place. "For Dupin as for Poe," as Halliburton points out, "every language-using being—a man on the street, an author, a character, or God Himself—is endowed with intentionality" (p. 242). In order to discover this intentionality, the interpreter must identify himself with the text in the passive attitude of one who listens to, presently echoes, the reverberations of its horizon. In such an approach the text is never an object to be seen from a distance, as it would be in a context of pure representation, but rather the subject capable of acting upon the passivity of a reader from whom an explication will eventually emerge.

The process of explication, implied rather than stated

in the boudoir scene, is fully developed in the section of the tale more directly concerned with the Prefect, Dupin, and the Minister. As Lacan points out, the actions in which these three characters are involved—paraphrase, in terms of their different perspectives, the previous scene, insofar as the Prefect, like the king, sees nothing, the Minister sees a partial context and presently becomes part of a larger context which is apprehended by Dupin only. The spatial dimension common to the three characters is the hotel in which the Minister lives and in which the Prefect, looking for the letter, took his time and searched everywhere. The Minister plays the game of odd and even with the Prefect and succeeds, but he ignores Dupin's superior skill in the contextual game. When Dupin visits the Minister's premises, his eyes make "a circuit of the room" which takes in objects as well as the Minister and what he stands for; the detective discovers the letter at once and recovers it in a second visit.

The Prefect's angle of vision is at fault in that he uses the approach characteristic of a structure of representation to solve the mystery of a symbolic structure of presentation. His search aims at finding an isolated object in a circumscribed space where it must necessarily be, and his procedure is direct and purely logical, an ingenious effort which aims at the exhaustion of space:

and when we had absolutely completed every particle of the furniture in this way, then we examined the house itself. We divided its entire surface into compartments, which we numbered, so that none might be missed; then scrutinized each individual square inch throughout the premises, including the two houses immediately adjoining, with the microscope, as before. (VI, 35-36)

The Prefect's approach is that required by structures of representation. He must search every object in the limited space he has before his eyes in order to separate the letter from the context of its hiding place. Once separated, the letter will be as visible as any other object, and it will, as it were, be magnified by means of his concentration on it out of context. But the object so magnified (the Prefect appropriately uses a microscope) must first be an object separable from its context by the observer's discovery procedure.

The Prefect is the subjective interpreter of an enigma who, instead of obeying the rules offered thereby, follows his own rules, attempting to impose them on the problem from the outside, from the distance of his a priori conceptions and prejudices. He cannot find the letter because the letter can be found only by its own rules: it exists not in the Prefect's space and time but in a space and time of its own, that is, in an organic, self-sufficient context to which the searcher must imaginatively submit. The Prefect, as Dupin notes in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," has a way "*de nier ce qui est, et d'expliquer ce qui n'est pas*" (IV, 192). "*Ce qui est*" is the organicity of the structure of presentation which the ingenious Prefect denies, the organicity of the "odd." The Prefect is, indeed, forever removed from the world of the "odd" since, as the narrator observes, he had a "fashion of calling every thing 'odd' that was beyond his comprehension, and thus lived amid an absolute legion of 'oddities'" (VI, 29). The Prefect's understanding is limited to what is out of context, to what exists only within the range of his limited ingenuity. His methodical reasoning is not at fault in itself. As Dupin tells the narrator, referring to

the search of the premises by the police, "The measures adopted were not only the best of their kind, but carried out to absolute perfection. Had the letter been deposited within the range of their search, these fellows would, beyond a question, have found it" (VI, 39-40).

Dupin, on the other hand, recognizes the relational nature of the object. His approach to a contextual reality involves an initial identification with the object in the act of appropriation and a further logical explication based on the truth revealed by the object and not, as in the case of the Prefect, on the truth of a priori propositions taken to be universally valid. In his first visit to the Minister, Dupin's eyes, "going the circuit of the room," have the esemplastic power of the Coleridgean imagination: they unify the world of objects into a significant pattern. He sees the letter not in isolation, but in its complex relationship with the poet and mathematician who, in hiding it, leaves his mark on the letter and is marked by it as well. The letter, in fact, has been refolded and addressed to the Minister himself in a feminine handwriting. As Dupin points out, the letter is now, "to all appearance, radically different from the one of which the Prefect had read us so minute a description" (VI, 49). The letter in context is, in other words, radically different from the letter in isolation.

Because the letter has been disguised by the Minister or, more precisely, by the context created by the Minister and of which he is a part, Dupin's approach must involve the identification of object and subject; it must also be an indirect, in contrast to the Prefect's direct, approach to the object. A contextual, organic reality cannot be seen by a straight look. Dupin's view of the truth must be mediated by the context, since the lack of this mediation blinds the Prefect and the king. In "Murders in the Rue Morgue," Dupin himself explains the convenience of the oblique view in the contemplation of certain objects:

To look at a star by glances—to view it in a side-long way, by turning toward it the exterior portions of the *retina* (more susceptible of feeble impressions of light than the interior), is to behold the star distinctly—is to have the best appreciation of its lustre—a lustre which grows dim just in proportion as we turn our vision *fully* upon it. A greater number of rays actually fall upon the eye in the latter case, but, in the former, there is the more refined capacity for comprehension. By undue profundity we perplex and enfeeble thought; and it is possible to make even Venus herself vanish from the firmament by a scrutiny too sustained, too concentrated, or too direct. (IV, 166)

Concentration on the object rather than integration with the context by means of the indirect look blinds the Prefect as much as it blinds the narrator of "The Sphinx," who sees his own imaginary monster instead of the real insect that, as his host reveals to him, exists only in the context of a window-sash that he had failed to take into account.

Finally, the fact that comprehension, and therefore explanation, depends on the oblique angle of vision bridges the gap between imagination and analysis by making them complementary steps in the interpretive process rather than radically contrasting attitudes; as the narrator of "Murders in the Rue Morgue" explains it,

Between ingenuity and the analytic ability there exists a difference far greater, indeed, than that between the fancy and the imagination, but of a character very strictly analogous. It will

be found, in fact, that the ingenious are always fanciful, and the *truly* imaginative never otherwise than analytic. (IV, 149-150)

The mechanical ability of fancy and ingenuity can only note the mere aggregation of things, not their relationship (obviously the Prefect's exhaustion of space is ingenious but not imaginative or analytic in these terms). Dupin's analyses rely on the power of imagination insofar as they imply the perception not only of isolated objects but also of the unity of these objects into an overall pattern. Thus while analysis is the means by which the unity of vision can be explained, a unified vision of the whole is itself a necessary precondition for analysis.

In conclusion, it might be recalled that Dupin's imagination and analytic power lead the narrator of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" to play with the idea of the "Bi-Part Soul" and imagine "a double Dupin—the creative and the resolvent" (IV, 152). As we have seen, Dupin is creative in the very act of analyzing his enigmas, or contextual worlds, in that he reconstructs these enigmas in a procedure analogous to the reading of a text. This constructive procedure, which has its origin in a surrender to the source of meaning, ultimately allows Dupin to assert himself as creator, for, in his hermeneutic reading of a structure of presentation, he appropriates a meaning which is his creation in that he reenacts its contextual reality. If Lacan argued in these terms, he might add that this "meaning" is also Dupin's creator, in the sense that the detective has to be absorbed by the structure of presentation so that it might eventually be known: in the process of discovery, Dupin's own existence acquires a new significance.

NOTES

¹Jacques Lacan, "Le Séminaire sur 'La Lettre Volée'" in *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), pp. 19-75. An English translation of Lacan's essay appeared in *French Freud: Structural Studies in Psycho-analysis*, *Yale French Studies*, no. 48 (1972), 38-72.

²David Halliburton, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Phenomenological View* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 237-245.

³Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (New York: Macmillan, 1926) p. 197.

⁴Edward H. Davidson, *Poe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), p. 53.

⁵Martin Heidegger, "On the Essence of Truth," in *Existence and Being*, trans. R. F. Holl and Alan Crick (Chicago: Gateway, 1965), p. 300.

⁶J. Frank Kermodé, ed., *Four Centuries of Shakespearian Criticism* (New York: Avon, 1965), p. 491.

⁷Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Shakespearian Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1960), p. 59.

⁸Coleridge, *Biographia*, p. 190.

⁹*The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison (1902; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1965), VI, 31. All further citations to Poe's tales are to this edition. Lacan discusses the game of odd and even in this story at length.

¹⁰I use the concept of "appropriation" as defined by Paul Ricoeur, that is, as "the process of making one's own (*eigen*) that was other, foreign (*fremd*)."¹¹ Ricoeur is using the concept as the equivalent of "Aneignung" to suggest the possibility of transcending the duality subject-object. See "Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics," *New Literary History*, 6 (1974), 107.