Who Wrote the Purloined Letter?

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ABSTRACT: In "Who Wrote the Purloined Letter?" Russell Reising engages the history of Poe criticism of "The Purloined Letter." Drawing on leads from such scholars as Daniel Hoffman, leads ignored by later critics, including nearly every essay in the well-known book *The Purloined Poe*, Reising situates the role of Poe's amateur detective, C. Auguste Dupin, in the context of other Poe narrators, especially those driven by a thirst for revenge following either a real or an imagined slight. This essay focuses on questions not asked by earlier critics and follows that inquiry to a detailed theory of the story's *real* mystery—that is, who was it that wrote the titular letter stolen by Minister D in the first place?

> There is such a thing as being too profound. Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the more important knowledge, I do believe that she is invariably superficial.
>
> —C. Auguste Dupin, in Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841)

Of course Edgar Allan Poe wrote "The Purloined Letter," but I want to investigate and expose the villain who actually wrote the notorious letter, the clues and moments around which the entire story seems to orbit and to which relatively few critics pay attention. If, as Richard Hull has noted, "The Purloined Letter" is "the most theorized of detective stories" (a claim substantiated, at least in part, by the dazzling 1988 collection of essays in *The Purloined Poe*),[1] why is it that more critics haven't cared about the original contents or writer of the purloined letter? The irreducible fact of "The Purloined Letter," and one under-recognized by that story's most brilliant readers, is that, by recovering the stolen letter from the Minister D and returning it, via Prefect G, to the Queen, C. Auguste Dupin protects, sanctions, enables, and profits from the Queen's illicit behavior (most critics agree to refer to the "royal personage" in question as "the Queen"). Paradoxically, the so-called "evil"

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Minister D, by initially absconding with the letter and threatening to expose the Queen's infidelity, actually restores the likelihood of fidelity to the royal household and, by extension, stability to the realm.

So, who wrote this letter, and what does it say about the story's, and perhaps Poe's, notions of good and evil? To return to our epigraph, drawn from another of Poe's detective tales: Dupin alerts us several times to the likelihood that the truth is hidden in plain sight, calling into question the critical effort often expended on fathoming the lush textual wonders of "The Purloined Letter." Perhaps Dupin doth protest too much, and the enthusiasm with which he presses his point is actually his undoing. In this essay, I will re-open, so to speak, the case of the purloined letter. By picking up on some tantalizing insights advanced in earlier studies and by aggressively contextualizing "The Purloined Letter" within the Poe corpus, I hope to enrich our understanding of the density of Poe's work and of its enduringly enigmatic position in literary criticism.

Few characters in the American literary canon have spilled over into American popular culture as frequently as Poe's famous detective. Moreover, critics typically agree that Dupin occupies a highly privileged position in Poe's detective trilogy. Early on in the twentieth century's lionization of Poe, Princess Marie Bonaparte articulates the default vision of Dupin, asserting that "Dupin, the infallible ratiocinator, is Poe in person, the world decipherer of cryptograms and puzzles."[2] Expressing the critical status quo in the American 1960s, Leslie Fiedler argues, "Half artist, half scientist, Poe's C. Auguste Dupin imposes upon a world of irrational horror the semblance of order, proves over and over that the most grotesque nightmare . . . can be understood, given acumen and a talent for analysis."[3] In the 1980s, David Reynolds forwards a like perspective: "In direct opposition to the popular stereotype of the sympathetic criminal, Poe establishes the detective as a force for both high intellect and high morality. . . . In creating the brainy detective, Poe has gained victory over the popular Subversive imagination."[4] Similarly, Shoshana Felman in the same decade summarizes Jacques Lacan's valorization of (and identification with) Dupin by comparing Poe's detective to a successful psychoanalyst.[5] And in Slavoj Žižek's view, "the very presence of the detective guarantees in advance the transformation of the lawless sequence into a lawful sequence; in other words, the reestablishment of 'normality.'"[6] As we will see, detective Dupin might well reestablish normality, but that normality is far from lawful. Moreover, Dupin remains so deeply involved with the letter as to render Žižek's claim untenable, although I will make recourse to Žižek's brilliant *Looking Awry* later in this essay.

Let me also cite just two of many non-literary examples of this valorization of Dupin. John Douglas, who is the coauthor of *Mindhunter,* the FBI agent

frequently credited with "inventing" psychological profiling for the Bureau, and the model for Agent Starling's boss in *The Silence of the Lambs*, speculates that Dupin is "history's first behavioral profiler" and that "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" "may also represent the first use of a proactive technique by the profiler to flush out an unknown subject and vindicate an innocent man imprisoned for the killings." "Like the men and women in my unit a hundred and fifty years later," Douglas asserts, "Poe understood the value of profiling when forensic evidence alone isn't enough to solve a particularly brutal and seemingly motiveless crime."[7] For Douglas, Dupin is clearly one of the "good guys." And such a reputation has made its way into composition studies. The Ramapo College website draws on this version of Dupin in the online version of its composition text "Doing Literary Research," authored by Monika Giacoppe. In a discussion of transitions that answer questions raised in previous paragraphs, Giacoppe's text offers the following passages:

> Poe's first detective story is filled with terrible **violence**. However, it is not as unsettling as some of his terror stories that contain far less violence. **How can that be?**
>
> **Poe can still allow for closure in this violent story**. Regardless of his Gothic trappings, in his detective fiction, Poe sought order, and Dupin is the embodiment of that order.[8]

While embodying order doesn't necessarily equate with goodness, Giacoppe's remark comports with the general praise heaped upon Dupin by many critics. In other words, from literary criticism to biography to psychoanalytic theory to popular culture to law enforcement to composition studies, the preponderance of commentary regards Dupin's exemplary status as altogether obvious. But perhaps we need to abide by one of the truisms of "The Purloined Letter" and realize that Dupin's virtue might be, in his own words, "a little *too* plain, . . . a little *too* self-evident" (*PT*, 681), and that another truth of the matter might be hidden in plain sight.

While a number of critics do zero in on the vengeful nature of Dupin and the great joy he takes in positioning Minister D for a fatal fall, they tend to do so in the context of Dupin as hero, albeit a potentially flawed one. Lianha Klenman Babener offers the best extended counterview to the otherwise glowing endorsements we have observed. Focusing on the "dark side" of Dupin and the ways in which his contentious relationship with Minister D echoes other examples of adversarial doubling in Poe's tales, Babener cautions that "Dupin cannot be regarded simplistically as a moral agent whose able solution of the crime represents a triumph for the cause of virtue," and she notes that Dupin's

method of recovering the letter duplicates the ingenious and pernicious actions originally employed by Minister D. Similarly, in his discussion of the Dupin trilogy, David Van Leer notes that "in the first two [tales], all misdeeds go unpunished, whereas in the third Dupin's response to the villainous but hardly illegal theft of a letter is merely to repeat the original crime in a morally ambiguous way."[9] Both Babener and Van Leer accept the notion that the Minister D is evil, a point I contest, but their readings bring the shadowy side of Dupin's character to light.

Before we proceed to reexamine Poe's virtuous detective, however, let us first examine one of the story's anomalies: the absence of details about the sender and the contents of the letter itself. In another instance of general agreement, literary and psychoanalytic opinion on "The Purloined Letter" discounts these matters as of limited worth or interest. Indeed, this assumption rivals in its consistency the perception of Dupin as the heroic voice of reason and restorer of order. For example, in his classic *The Power of Blackness*, Harry Levin notices that at the end of Poe's text "questions remain, which *M. Dupin is much too discreet to raise*: what was written in that letter? by whom to whom? and how did its temporary disappearance affect the writer and the recipient?"—but Levin leaves these questions unpursued. In his later Foucauldian reading, Richard Hull makes a similar point in passing: "Dupin doesn't want to know about the Queen's conduct. Instead of using the letter as a panoptic instrument for investigating her, he restores it to her in order to cover and protect her privacy."[10] From Levin's and Hull's observations through the articles gathered in *The Purloined Poe*, critics have treated this issue in comparable fashion. In his now famous "seminar," Jacques Lacan himself remarks twice on the lacunae at the center of "The Purloined Letter": "We shall find illumination in what at first seems to obscure matters: the fact that the tale leaves us in virtually total ignorance of the sender, no less than of the contents, of the letter." And, only slightly later: "Love letter or conspiratorial letter, letter of betrayal or letter of mission, letter of summons or letter of distress, we are assured of but one thing: the Queen must not bring it to the knowledge of her lord and master."[11] In most of the critical tradition, to borrow language from the editors of *The Purloined Poe,* "the content remains irrelevant"[12]—irrelevant or simply unknowable.

And yet, how can this be? Upon the purloined letter, and all pertinent details surrounding it, hinge the Queen's reputation, her marriage to the King, the succession to the throne, Prefect G's professional honor and viability, and Dupin's monetary reward (he is, after all, very poor). Indeed, in this "mystery" story, every other salient detail of the theft, the police investigation, and Dupin's eventual closing of the case receives exhaustive, nearly gratuitous, narrative

attention. I contend that the signal achievement of Poe's short story and of his famous protagonist lies precisely in creating one of American literature's most elaborate smoke screens—a tactic intended to deflect our attention from the fact that C. Auguste Dupin is one of Poe's consummate villains, certainly his most successful, in that he has largely avoided detection for over 150 years. But let us return to our examination of Dupin for possible solutions to this conundrum.

Quite remarkably, deducing that Dupin himself wrote the incriminating letter is a matter of straightforward close reading. Daniel Hoffman advanced this interpretation in 1972, the same year in which Babener elaborated on the intimate relationship between Dupin and Minister D.[13] And yet, since then many of the story's greatest readers, including those collected in *The Purloined Poe*, have either overlooked or disregarded the evidence of Dupin's authorship. Of course, in light of Poe's propensity for hoaxing this might not be altogether unexpected; as Robert Tally, among many others, observes: "Poe's writing is itself perverse. . . . Even in those tales that were not designed to be hoaxes, like 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' or 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue,' Poe delighted in 'putting one over' on gullible readers."[14]

Nonetheless, we should recall what Peter Rabinowitz terms a "rule of notice"—what trained literary critics all know, that reiteration of important details is one of the hallmarks of literary art.[15] We notice, for example, that Hawthorne structures *The Scarlet Letter* around three scaffold scenes. We also notice, in "Ethan Brand," that the word "fragments" appears in the first sentence, recurs in the very middle, and stands as the last word of the story, suggesting that his tale is about fragmentation. This is precisely what happens in "The Purloined Letter." In the story's earliest paragraphs, we are told that Minister D knows to steal the letter because, as the Prefect relates, he "recognises the handwriting of the address, observes the confusion of the personage addressed, and fathoms her secret" (*PT*, 682). Note: it is not the address itself, nor anything else about the letter per se, but specifically the handwriting of the sender. Of course, D recognizing somebody's handwriting calls attention to itself; he obviously knows who sent the letter because he is familiar with the handwriting. And in the story's final sentence, Dupin explains to the narrator that he had no need to sign the letter he left to fool Minister D after retrieving the original purloined letter:

> He is well acquainted with my MS., and I just copied into the middle of the blank sheet the words—
> —Un dessein si funeste,
> S'il n'est digne d'Atrée, est digne de Thyeste.
> They are to be found in Crébillon's "Atrée." (*PT*, 698)

Of course Atreus and Thyestes were brothers, and the quote opens up any number of alternative readings of revenge schemes. However, the actual content of this quote is nearly beside the point: Dupin stresses that Minister D will know who has outdone him because he will recognize the handwriting itself. Indeed, this recognition, repeated only twice in the entire narrative and essentially framing the rest of the action, indicates that both letters have been written by the same person, C. Auguste Dupin.[16]

So, far from being a champion of truth, far from residing in a higher moral and psychological realm, far from remaining aloof from the sexual intrigue and monetary rewards of the case, Dupin perpetrates the original violation of the royal family. He recovers the only evidence that could incriminate him and profits immensely for his trouble—winning prestige with the Parisian police and narrator; 50,000 francs; and the freedom to renew his affair with the Queen and wait for Minister D to attempt to thwart him once again. In writing the letter to D, Dupin completes the narrative's elaborate scheme of doubling. In fact, he has now produced both letters. Given this doubling and our certainty that the Minister did not write the letter to the Queen, Dupin's not having written both letters would constitute the narrative's only imbalance.

But, again, how can this be? How can the very person hailed throughout Poe criticism, with a few noteworthy exceptions, as a paragon of both high morality and breathtaking genius be Poe's best-realized criminal, the one who got away? What is Dupin really like? To be blunt, and perhaps a little ungenerous: Dupin is a vindictive sociopath and a liar, a profile not at all clear in the first two stories of the trilogy. In explaining his revenge against Minister D, Dupin declares: "I have no sympathy—at least no pity—for him who descends. He is the monstrum horrendum, an unprincipled man of genius" (*PT*, 697). And yet we know from the earliest pages of the detective trilogy that Dupin himself has descended precipitously. When the narrator of the three tales first meets Dupin, he notes: "This young gentleman was of an excellent—indeed of an illustrious family, but, by a variety of untoward events, had been reduced to such poverty that the energy of his character succumbed beneath it, and he ceased to bestir himself in the world, or to care for the retrieval of his fortunes" (*PT*, 400). Moreover, while Dupin declares in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" that his "ultimate object is only the truth," we can argue that he aims, not to find truth or justice in an abstract sense, but to repay both the accused, Le Bon, who "once rendered [him] a service" for which he is "not ungrateful" (*PT*, 420, 412), and Minister D, who, according to Dupin, "at Vienna once, did [him] an evil turn" (*PT*, 698). In other words, Dupin is primarily concerned, like the God of the Old Testament, in rewarding those who have sided with him and exacting revenge on those who have crossed him. Of course, throughout

all three of the Dupin tales, Poe's detective takes great pleasure in outstripping Prefect G and the pedantic methods of the Parisian police force.

Even Dupin's consistent and thorough contempt for Prefect G's methodical search for the letter in Minister D's apartments, one of the lynchpins of our appreciation of Dupin's methods throughout the trilogy, requires a second look. While investigating the murders in the Rue Morgue, the narrator observes, Dupin examines "the whole neighborhood, as well as the house, with a minuteness of attention" for which the narrator can see "no possible object" (*PT*, 413). In "The Mystery of Marie Roget," Dupin advocates similarly intricate search methods. As the narrator of that tale remarks, while he, at Dupin's direction, undertakes a "scrupulous examination of the affair of the affidavits," Dupin "occupie[s] himself, with what seem[s] . . . a minuteness altogether objectless, in a scrutiny of the various newspaper files" (*PT*, 535). And only a little later, Dupin expounds on his own strategy for attaining the truth in terms that closely resemble the exhaustively recounted practices of Prefect G and his police minions:

> Let us sift to the bottom this affair of the first elopement. Let us know the full history of "the officer," with his present circumstances, and his whereabouts at the precise period of the murder. Let us carefully compare with each other the various communications sent to the evening paper, in which the object was to inculpate *a gang*. This done, let us compare these communications, both as regards style and MS., with those sent to the morning paper, at a previous period, and insisting so vehemently upon the guilt of Mennais. And, all this done, let us again compare these various communications with the known MSS. of the officer. Let us endeavor to ascertain, by repeated questionings of Madame Deluc and her boys, as well as of the omnibus-driver, Valence, something more of the personal appearance and bearing of the "man of dark complexion." . . . With a proper caution and perseverance we shall infallibly trace this boat. (*PT*, 551)

Indeed, one of Dupin's greatest feats in "The Purloined Letter" lies in his complete discrediting and withering mockery of the very methods he has employed so successfully in his previous two cases—without the Prefect or the narrator, or Poe critics, noticing the discrepancy. His success in "The Purloined Letter" depends on obscuring the truth and belittling those who would pursue it as rigorously as he has already shown himself capable of doing. Dupin knows he is safe as long as nobody else discovers the extent to which his own narrative functions as a diversion. Prefect G observes that Minister D recognizes

the handwriting on the letter to the Queen, but, since Dupin discloses to the narrator that Minister D knows his handwriting only *after* Prefect G leaves, neither narrator nor Prefect understands or pursues the implications. Dupin, then, adopts an array of ingenious subterfuges in order to deflect all other future scrutiny of the case. In fact, almost every salient element of the investigations is narrated twice, but Dupin actually triangulates this doubling, as he clarifies crucial aspects of the Prefect's method and the facts of the case only for the narrator and only when Prefect G isn't on hand to put two and two together.

Moreover, Dupin resorts to other means of deflecting attention from himself during the Prefect's original visit. Without any sense of Dupin's cleverness, as usual, the narrator explains, "We had been sitting in the dark, and Dupin now arose for the purpose of lighting a lamp, but sat down again, without doing so, upon G.'s saying that he had called to consult us, or rather to ask the opinion of my friend, about some official business which had occasioned a great deal of trouble." And he adds, "'If it is any point requiring reflection,' observed Dupin, as he forbore to enkindle the wick, 'we shall examine it to better purpose in the dark'" (*PT*, 680). Dupin's request that they stay in the dark while Prefect G recounts the original theft affords Dupin an environment conducive to concealing any surprise or guilt he may reveal during G's discourse. Why else refuse to light the lamp only after Prefect G explains he is there to consult about troublesome business, which Dupin, most certainly, suspects will be the case of the letter he already knows to be stolen? Throughout the Dupin trilogy, Poe's detective may operate unseen, but he nowhere else claims that darkness is essential to his method.

As Ross Chambers points out, Dupin flummoxes the Prefect, in part, with literal smokescreens from his pipe, "but when it comes to his dialogue with his friend, all notations of smoke production disappear from the text, because that function has now been taken over by his discourse itself." Chambers articulates what several critics have noted—that Dupin's theoretical asides appear impenetrable because they take "the apparent form of a series of brilliant divagations on unrelated topics," of "propositions that range from the preposterous through the paradoxical to the enigmatic but that are presented with total assurance, as if not open to discussion." Further, "the friend's [narrator's] role" is only to be "the foil of Dupin's brilliance, which he is there to appreciate and enjoy but not to *see through* (and it is in this latter sense that he is a companion figure to the Prefect)."[17] To return to Žižek: In his essay on Hitchcock's *The Birds*, Žižek has the audacity to inform us that the only way to get at the film's core meaning is to ignore completely all the birds in the film, to pretend they don't exist.[18] Then and only then does the psychodrama of a mother fearful of losing her son to a beautiful woman expose itself, revealing a film surprisingly like Hitchcock's

earlier *Psycho*. Žižek's insights are apropos. If we eliminate all of Dupin's baffling digressions and asides, we see him for what he is, merely another of Poe's psychopathic revenge seekers, albeit one who settles for humiliating his adversary rather than chopping or walling him up.

If we examine Dupin within the context of the entire Poe corpus, we discover a character not just riddled with contradictions and prevarications but more deeply disturbing, perhaps Poe's best-realized sociopath. In one important sense, characters obsessed with revenge in Poe's corpus are, almost by definition, self-satisfied and sadistic—and those who can wait patiently, plotting their revenge for long periods of time, figure as especially devious. Montresor, for example, claims that he has borne "the thousand injuries of noble Fortunato" until an unspecified "insult" pushes him into his murderous frenzy (*PT*, 848). The "evil" William Wilson endures his "good" namesake for many years, during which his dark designs are thwarted again and again. Like Montresor, Dupin waits a long time to take revenge on Minister D and, also like Montresor, then feels compelled to make himself known to his adversary. Like the two William Wilsons, Dupin and the "evil" Minister D act out a moral struggle between conventional moral values and rampant, illicit sexual opportunism and wickedness. Whereas Dupin claims D did him an evil turn in Vienna, William Wilson's double foils his attempt in Rome at an adulterous liaison with the "beautiful wife" of Neapolitan royalty, the Duke Di Broglio (*PT*, 355). In other words, both Dupin and Wilson succeed in winning the affections of important women willing to betray their royal husbands' trust, and both the "evil" Minister D and the "good" William Wilson thwart their intentions. As Melville's Ishmael might say, "surely all this is not without meaning."[19]

That Dupin and Minister D are doubles, perhaps even brothers, has been exhaustively studied, in greatest depth by Babener. However, in most cases critics accept Dupin as the exemplary character and label Minister D as the evil other. However, Dupin also mentions on several occasions tidbits of knowledge that suggest more complexity in their relationship. Dupin's familiarity extends to D's personal concerns and routine domestic habits. For example, he maintains "a most animated discussion with the minister, on a topic" he knows has "never failed to interest and excite him" (*PT*, 696). Dupin and D, it is obvious, have spent much time together and are familiar with each other along a broad spectrum of interests and identities. However, nothing quite equals Dupin's deeply bizarre remark that the Minister D "is, perhaps, the most really energetic human being now alive—but that is only when nobody sees him" (*PT*, 695). Nor does the narrator express even the slightest curiosity about what Dupin might mean. We as readers, however, may be immediately arrested by the very comments that pass unnoticed by Dupin's partisan friend and narrator.

The trick of "The Purloined Letter" is to obfuscate all moral identities and to thematize that very obfuscation into a story in which the most obvious is that which is most easily missed or ignored. Every other Poe story featuring intimate, brother-like or double relationships is told from the point of view of the sinister half, posing as virtuous or misunderstood. Montresor, the "other" William Wilson, and Dupin all fit into the same category; they are dangerous men struggling against their chosen victims. Poe's central transformation of his narrative technique in "The Purloined Letter" and throughout the Dupin trilogy is to shift the point of view away from the consciousness of the protagonist to that of the narrator—who is a partisan of Dupin, who stands in awe of his friend, and who is barely capable of understanding anything Dupin says. At one remove from the more incriminating perspective of tales such as "William Wilson," "The Cask of Amontillado," and "The Black Cat," a sycophantic acolyte here mediates the story and nearly neutralizes the baleful cast of Dupin's mind.

Dupin can, in fact, be read as a Montresor free of the guilt that results in the latter's confession fifty years after he murders Fortunato. Consider the similarities. We know that both Montresor and Dupin come from illustrious families but are now both on the skids. As Montresor confesses to Fortunato: "You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed. For me it is no matter" (*PT*, 850). Similarly, the "Purloined Letter" narrator notes that he observed, when first meeting Dupin, that "this young gentleman was of an excellent—indeed of an illustrious family, but . . . had been reduced to such poverty that the energy of his character succumbed beneath it" (*PT*, 400). Both narratives also suggest that these two characters are of unsound mind.[20] Montresor's hyperbolic announcement that Fortunato has inflicted on him a "thousand injuries" finds no support in the narrative; even in his final moments of life and sobriety, Fortunato remains completely unaware of what Montresor is doing and why (*PT*, 848). Just so, Minister D is completely calm when Dupin comes twice to visit him, suspecting nothing; perhaps the so-called "evil turn" for which Dupin holds the Minister accountable is as imaginary as the thousand injuries and final insult of the noble Fortunato.

In his final turn of the screw, Dupin fulfills the criteria for the perfect crime as Montresor describes it in "The Cask of Amontillado": "I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong" (*PT*, 848). Minister D will almost certainly be humiliated and discredited because of a wrong that he, like Fortunato, may not even remember; Dupin will be rewarded rather than punished; and D will likely know that it is Dupin who torments him. So, unlike

Montresor, who does not escape retribution, and unlike William Wilson, who in the words of his dying other has "utterly . . . murdered [him]self," C. Auguste Dupin evades detection, receives a significant fortune of 50,000 francs, exacts revenge on Minister D, fools and triumphs over the Prefect (again), dazzles the narrator to the point of incomprehension (again), and most likely gets to renew his affair with the royal personage from whom his love letter was originally purloined (*PT*, 357). Not bad for a day's work.[21]

Dupin himself not only casts doubt on his own character and veracity a number of times but also betrays a deeply sinister and reckless sensibility. First of all, he, along with the Prefect, essentially facilitates the Queen's affair by recovering the letter that could have exposed her. Second, by hiring a gunman to shoot "among a crowd of women and children" to create chaos in the streets while he peruses Minister D's apartment, Dupin seriously endangers innocents who, as we know from studies of crowd behavior, could have been injured or even trampled to death in the ensuing frenzy (*PT*, 697). Finally, his account of the investigation exposes two incriminating textual anomalies. While recounting to the narrator how he recovered the letter, Dupin makes a point of juxtaposing his description of events with Prefect G's original account of the first theft of the letter. The letter he saw

> was, to all appearances, radically different from the one of which the Prefect had read us so minute a description. Here the seal was large and black, with the D—— cipher; there it was small and red, with the ducal arms of the S—— family. Here, the address, to the Minister, was diminutive and feminine; there the superscription, to a certain royal personage, was markedly bold and decided; the size alone formed a point of correspondence. (*PT*, 696)

However, in his care to duplicate the Prefect's original description, Dupin presents a description that differs notably. Nowhere in the original account does Prefect G mention anything about the "ducal arms of the S—— family." In fact, when describing how Minister D fathomed the writer of the letter, he only mentions that Minister D "recognize[d] the handwriting of the address," a completely irrelevant detail if the "ducal arms of the S—— family" were present. Nor does the Prefect mention that the address was "markedly bold and decided." Nothing can account for these two discrepancies other than Dupin's rhetorical deflection of his own involvement in the original scene of the Queen reading a letter. His mention of the "ducal arms of the S—— family" is quite clearly a red herring, designed to keep the narrator, and the reader, off his track. Here, in other words, Dupin departs from the Prefect's account to conceal the

true nature of the envelope's address. Such a strategy is highlighted in one of Poe's own authorial tactics by Robert Tally. After exposing inconsistencies in Poe's published versions of "MS. Found in a Bottle," Tally observes:

> Whether it is merely an oversight by Poe or a final ruse designed to lampoon the pretensions of scientific exactitude once more, we can see that his date is incorrect; the tale was first published in 1833. But the note also seems to suggest that, once again, the knowledge imparted in the tale is to be doubted, and the authority of the manuscript's narrator and now of Poe himself, apparently, is undermined.[22]

In the tale's antepenultimate paragraph, while Dupin is summing up his involvement in the case to his narrator friend, he asserts: "In this matter, I act as a partisan of the lady concerned. For eighteen months the Minister has had her in his power" (*PT*, 697). While neither Poe nor the narrator establishes a precise time frame for "The Purloined Letter," the narrative does sets some vague parameters, all of which cast serious doubt on Dupin's remark. Early on, the Prefect concludes his initial description of Minister D's theft by noting that "the power thus attained [by Minister D] has, for *some months past*, been wielded, for political purposes, to a very dangerous extent" (*PT*, 683; emphasis added). The narrator does define the time between Prefect G's two visits when he states, "In *about a month afterward* he paid us another visit, and found us occupied very nearly as before" (emphasis added). In other words, nowhere does anybody mention the eighteen months Dupin seems aware of. How can he possibly know or arrive at this figure, and why would he offer a conflicting description of the letter to the narrator only after the Prefect has left? In terms of textual evidence, Peter Rabinowitz reminds us of one of the hallmarks of "close reading," regardless of the theory it underwrites. According to one of Rabinowitz's "rules of rupture," for example, "the blatantly irrelevant tends to be noticed": "Any time a detail is mentioned when there seems to be no apparent reason for it, the surface of the text is ruptured; most of the time, such ruptures are appropriately treated as signals to pay attention."[23] As in actual police investigations, in sophisticated crime fiction, and even in the most formulaic television police dramas, one popular form of interrogation involves the detective subtly disclosing some particular detail of the crime or crime scene that has been withheld from all news accounts. Any suspect who knows such a detail is, thus, automatically exposed. The Prefect never mentioned the "ducal arms of the S—— family," and Dupin has not been told the timeline, nor do the time periods mentioned by Prefect G add up to anything like eighteen months. As even the reasoning of television shows like *Law and Order* or *Murder, She*

Wrote would have it, only someone deeply involved with the crime could have such precise knowledge.

Of course, Dupin's mockery of the exhaustive investigative rigor of the Prefect and his police force can be seen as Poe's own strategy to throw the readers off the track of Dupin's culpability. As Tally comments:

> Poe, like his fictional alter ego C. Auguste Dupin, is always analyzing the situation, always calculating, always reading others while seeking his own best advantage. The reader, perhaps pleasurably enthralled by the tale, is nevertheless also the victim of Poe's machinations. We readers are like so many Fortunatos to his Montresor; we may think that we are being guided through the catacombs, and that we are helpfully accompanying the author in our shared quest for the prized meaning or effect, but in reality, Poe (like Montresor in "The Cask of Amontillado") has contrived all of this in an elaborate plot, and we are bound to be the victims of a practical joke.[24]

In addition to pursuing the case motivated largely by personal interest, in this case revenge, Dupin returns us to the fact that he engaged himself in the investigation of the murders in the Rue Morgue, not out of a sense justice, but because the man accused had, as he puts it, "once rendered me a service for which I am not ungrateful" (*PT*, 412). Babener notes Dupin's "submerged but abiding rivalry with the Prefect" as one of the former's "morally dubious" behaviors.[25] Of course, it is the harm the Minister supposedly did to Dupin in Vienna that propels his revenge.

So Poe's tale might render us, his readers, as so many doubles of his obtuse narrator. Clearly entranced by, if not enamored, of Dupin ("I was astonished, too, at the vast extent of his reading; and, above all, I felt my soul enkindled within me by the wild fervor, and the vivid freshness of his imagination" [*PT*, 400]), the narrator functions as straight man for his enigmatic and ingenious roommate, and, in so doing, mirrors back at us our own analytical limitations. Throughout the Dupin trilogy, the narrator can barely hide his fascination with Dupin's mental workings and, as Chambers has demonstrated, actually plays a role similar to Prefect G as the foil for Dupin's more clever elaborations.

Chambers's association of Poe's narrator with the absurdly portrayed Prefect probably doesn't trouble us; however, if we consider that the passive, sycophantic narrator may also embody the dominant critical and theoretical positions taken by the profession from the heyday of New Criticism to contemporary new historicism and poststructuralism, especially including the neo-Lacanian brilliance of Slavoj Žižek, we might begin to feel a bit tighter around

the collar, shorter of breath. Indeed, much of the critical tradition's failure to read "The Purloined Letter" with a keen eye to such textual details as I have examined serves to illustrate the extent of our own blindnesses. Jeffrey Mehlman points to this possibility in "Poe Pourri": "One begins wondering . . . to what extent the French in idealizing Poe, have not quite simply fallen for Poe's deluded idealization of Gallic genius. More specifically and worse yet . . . in taking Lacan's text seriously . . . might we not *at best* be lapsing into Poe's delusion?"[26] In other words, these remarks uncover a certain degree of "partisanship," a key word from within "The Purloined Letter," characterizing, perhaps even driving, much of the scholarly analysis of Poe's tale. Mehlman suggests a variety of Americanophilia in Lacan when he places him "in a long tradition of French men who have celebrated Poe's genius": "Poe idealized French genius (in the person of Dupin, hero of 'The Purloined Letter'). The French love the American writer because he gives them a flattering image of themselves."[27]

Is it possible that criticism's continuing tendency to repress this crucial issue reflects the residue of New Critical debates about the "intentional fallacy"? Is the so-called "author function" so universally problematized that the "death of the author" actually permeates critical treatments of a story in which the author of the purloined letter can be seen as of no consequence? Might the gravitational pull of these various attempts to free literary analysis from the bonds of authorial intention actually have blinded us to the plainest dimensions of a literary text that has generated an entire sub-industry in literary criticism? Perhaps literary critics see too much of ourselves mirrored in the clever Dupin, who, like us, spends his time unravelling conundrums as complex and vexing as Pound's *Cantos*, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, or Wallace's *Infinite Jest*—and are, as a result, loathe to focus too critically on one of "our own"? Might not the critical enterprise relating to "The Purloined Letter" embody an attempted revenge by literary critics and humanities scholars in general on the mathematicians, pedants, and legalistic minds (Minister D, the narrator, and the Prefect) against which we have for so long had to defend ourselves in our own quests for respect and, increasingly in today's world of shrinking budgets, funding? Perhaps we, as guardians of "letters" and as intellectuals who, like Dupin, valorize the life of the mind, eschew gaudy shows of material status, and, as far as many of our students can tell, produce nearly magical revelations of "hidden meanings," too readily see our own positions in Dupin, especially his intellectual superiority over such representatives of the politico-juridical establishment as Prefect G and Minister D. What our readings of "The Purloined Letter" have not acknowledged, however, is the complicity of our very posturings with the powers that be. Dupin is probably Minister D's brother, after all, and he is pursuing that most banal bourgeois libidinal goal, an

adulterous affair with a rich woman—and perhaps also, in Freudian terms, the most childish goal of duping the father to possess the mother. Be that as it may, I contend that the insouciance with which we have avoided the authorship of the purloined letter points to one of the great mysteries of American literary scholarship.

Some of the story's most interesting critics do, in fact, engage in a tug of war with the tale, vying for a supremacy of cleverness. Norman Holland suggests as much when he imagines himself in a titanic struggle with Poe and with other critics:

> At that intellectual level, where I am still a graduate student, I can find in this story a flyting: one poet throws lines of poetry at another to win the magic letter and the exalted woman, muse, white goddess, or even the wronged mother. I can read a primitive barbaric magic into the elegant, artistic battle of wits between Dupin and D———, or, for that matter, between Lacan and Derrida (with Holland challenging the winner).[28]

More recently, John Irwin has noted a similar triangular struggle: "as with Derrida's reading of Lacan, the wit of [Barbara] Johnson's reading of Derrida lies in the way that she doubles Derrida's own insights back upon themselves to make them problematic"—thus the battle of wits narrated in the story is reenacted by the critics.[29] In his review essay, Donald Pease exposes the incestuous, self-serving nature of this whole "Purloined Poe" industry:

> The itinerary Derrida follows if not quite complete is at least quite familiar—at least, within the context of *his* previous work, it seems familiar. After returning us in good conscience to Poe's text as the space Lacan has clearly abandoned in favor of his symbolic, Derrida in his turn abandons Poe's discrete text in favor of a realm he designates as "écriture avant la lettre," a writing before (and after) purloined or any other letters. While this realm in which all signifiers at once defer meaning as well as differ from all other signifiers may include all writing, it has, as a result of Derrida's specific intervention in literature, been demarcated as a context become familiar enough in the domain of literary and philosophical investigation to need a Derrida's signature.[30]

There's something eminently immodest in all this assumption among some of the story's finest commentators that they can write themselves into the narrative, not content with revealing the tale's intricacies, but insistent on

foregrounding their own ingenuity. Like so many Prefect Gs, many theorists remain as duped by Dupin as the hapless Parisian Prefect. Some readings, in fact, dispense with addressing Poe's narrative at all and, like Jonathan Elmer's *Reading at the Social Limit*, engage the Lacan, Derrida, and Johnson exchanges over Poe's story more or less exclusively.[31]

Is it possible that the nature of "The Purloined Letter" is something like the essence of the Poe corpus? Questioning Poe's narrators is, of course, de rigueur, but because the Dupin tales are narrated by a third person, we often miss major (and perhaps crucial) layers of significance of the kind that claim our attention in his first-person tales. As readers of the Dupin tales, we can be caught believing both a devious Dupin and an obtuse narrator, both of whose levels of credibility a cursory review of the rest of Poe would discredit. Poe's tale stages its own hoax on the reader, similar to Dupin's hoax on the narrator, the Prefect, and the Minister, by actually advertising the fact that the most obvious solution to the "map game" is still unsolved. If Poe's story converts the reader into the detective, then what is the mystery other than who wrote the letter to begin with and why the Queen wants it back so badly and why Dupin puts himself to such trouble, facing, at his own admission, possible death, to recover it? For Dupin to "recover" the letter for the exalted personage in the narrative is also for him to re-cover his own complicity in the narrative action, while also recovering the satisfaction of his relationship with the exalted lady. So, while we readers are ensnared in Poe's delightful trap, Dupin and the Queen are free to resume their affair, and Poe himself remains anything but hidden.

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Notes

[1] See Richard Hull, "'The Purloined Letter': Poe's Detective Story vs. Panoptic Foucauldian Theory," *Style* 24, no. 2 (1990): 212; and *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988).

[2] Marie Bonaparte, "Poe and the Function of Literature," in *Art and Psychoanalysis*, ed. William Phillips (New York: Criterion Books, 1957), 70.

[3] Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Stein and Day, 1960), 497.

[4] David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1989), 248.

[5] Shoshana Felman, "On Reading Poetry: Reflections on the Limits and Possibilities of Psychoanalytic Approaches," in *Purloined Poe,* ed. Muller and Richardson, 147.

[6] Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 58.

[7] John E. Douglas and Mark Olshaker, *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI's Elite Serial Crime Unit* (New York: Pocket Books, 1996), 19–20. Douglas even suggests that Dupin's method of staying in a closed room with the curtains drawn tight resembles the working environment of his offices at Quantico.

[8] Monika Giacoppe, "Organizational Strategies for Writing Better Paragraphs," http://www.ramapo.edu/major-literature/resources/. All boldface type is in the original. Many thanks to my colleague Tony Edgington for helping me track down this citation and to his colleague Kurt Bouman for locating it.

[9] Lianha Klenman Babener, "The Shadow's Shadow: The Motif of the Double in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Purloined Letter,'" in *Purloined Poe*, ed. Muller and Richardson, 328; David Van Leer, "Detecting Truth: The World of the Dupin Tales," in *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales*, ed. Kenneth Silverman (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 66.

[10] Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1958), 141–42, emphasis added; Hull, "Poe's Detective Story," 207.

[11] Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter," trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, in "French Freud: Structural Studies in Psychoanalysis," special issue, *Yale French Studies* 48 (1972): 57.

[12] John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, "Lacan's Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter': Overview," in *Purloined Poe*, ed. Muller and Richardson, 57.

[13] Daniel Hoffman, *Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe* (New York: Doubleday, 1972). See esp. pages 132–36.

[14] Robert T. Tally Jr., *Poe and the Subversion of American Literature: Satire, Fantasy, Critique* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 84.

[15] Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988), 47–64.

[16] In his study, Hoffman comes to the same conclusion, albeit from the angle of deduction rather than textual evidence. Hoffman asks, "How else could Dupin's revenge be so perfect were not the author of the facsimile letter also the author of the letter first purloined?" See *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*, 131.

[17] Ross Chambers, "Narratorial Authority and 'The Purloined Letter,'" in *Purloined Poe*, ed. Muller and Richardson, 294.

[18] Žižek, *Looking Awry*, 104–6.

[19] Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale,* ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, vol. 6 of *The Writings of Herman Melville* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and the Newberry Library, 1988), 4.

[20] Dupin shares with a host of Poe's most dangerous characters what the narrator calls his "disease." For example, the narrator in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" asserts, "What I have described in the Frenchman was merely the result of an excited, or perhaps of a diseased, intelligence" (*PT*, 144–45). Merely diseased, indeed. The narrator of "The Black Cat" refers to his alcoholism as a disease—"My disease grew upon me—for what disease is like Alcohol!" (*PT,* 851); the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart," denying madness, insists that "disease ha[s] sharpened [his] senses—not destroyed—not

dulled them" (*PT,* 792); and William Wilson attributes the low voice of his antagonistic other to some "disease" (*PT,* 433).

[21] Another intertextual moment sheds further light on the actual nature of the supposedly wicked Minister D. In "The Cask of Amontillado," Montresor assures himself of the privacy necessary to his murderous plan by ordering his attendants to remain at home while he is out for the night. "These orders," he notes, "were sufficient . . . to insure their immediate disappearance, one and all, as soon as my back was turned" (*PT*, 849). Those who serve Minister D, by contrast, are ready to defend him with their lives. Dupin observes: "His hotel . . . is not without attendants devoted to his interests. Had I made the wild attempt you suggest, I might never have left the Ministerial presence alive. The good people of Paris might have heard of me no more" (*PT*, 697). A tantalizing remark, given that neither the good people of Paris nor any of Poe's readers ever hear of Dupin again after the success of his greatest scheme in "The Purloined Letter."

[22] Tally, *Poe and the Subversion of American Literature*, 64.

[23] Rabinowitz, *Before Reading*, 66.

[24] Tally, *Poe and the Subversion of American Literature*, 101.

[25] Babener, "Shadow's Shadow," 329.

[26] Jeffrey Mehlman, "Poe Pourri: Lacan's Purloined Letter," *Semiotext(e)* 1, no. 3 (1975): 52.

[27] Mehlman, "Poe Pourri," 52. Jane Gallop's discussion of this notion is particularly engaging. See Gallop, "The American Other," in *Purloined Poe*, ed. Muller and Richardson, 268–82, particularly 277.

[28] Norman N. Holland, "Re-covering 'The Purloined Letter': Reading as a Personal Transaction," in *Purloined Poe*, ed. Muller and Richardson, 321.

[29] John T. Irwin, "Mysteries We Reread, Mysteries of Rereading: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story; Also Lacan, Derrida, and Johnson," *MLN* 101 (1986): 1174.

[30] Donald Pease, "Marginal Politics and the Purloined Letter: A Review Essay," *Poe Studies* 16, no. 1 (1983): 21.

[31] Jonathan Elmer, *Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, and Edgar Allan Poe* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995), esp. 192–98.