

Read critically, Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'The Purloined Letter' (1844) reveals some of the tricks that we play with our minds in the name of truth and with the means of art.

THE PURLOINED PRINCIPLE
jean-marie clarke

*If reality is not what is,
then I don't know what is.*

One summer day, as a child, I was with my best friend, Bill, in an antique store in rural Maine. As it happened, this store had a large guestbook lying open on a standing desk. The page was so tantalisingly blank that I could not resist leaving my mark, and so I solemnly proceeded to write in my most flowery script the name *Edgar Allan Poe*. There is always something dramatic about writing something intended for the public eye, even if it is only one's name: the page is a stage. This dramatic tension and the discrepancy between seeing a famous name instead of mine caused Bill – and me – to burst into the kind of laughter that still warms the heart after all these years.

Now, there is little to laugh about in the well-known *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* imagined by Edgar Allan Poe, and even less in the facts of his short and troubled life. Poe was a full-blooded poet, a master of suspense, but as heavy-handed in his administration of horror as in his efforts at humour. This did not keep him from being a pretty good trickster, however, and his greatest prank on posterity was a story called – the title itself should put us on our guard – 'The Purloined Letter' (1844).

This compact tale is considered one of Poe's best stories, a masterpiece of *ratiocination*, and as such one of the earliest representatives of a literary genre that constitutes – after textbooks and cookbooks – the bread and butter of the modern book trade: the detective or mystery story. Not only that, but it has become one of the central metaphors of a civilisation – ours – that has become all the more addicted to *mystification* as it confidently promises to provide its antidote: elucidation (remember, *apocalypse* is the Greek word for 'revelation'). Only today, I came across the following blurb in a German newspaper:

Stefan Klein is a biophysicist who switched from scientific research to writing because he wanted to 'share [his] enthusiasm for a reality that was more exciting than any mystery story could ever be.'

Die Zeit, December 2009

The point of 'The Purloined Letter' hinges on a pun between *overlooking* and *over-looking*. As the title so pedantically announces, the story is about a stolen letter, but before we get wind of the plot, before we even know what to look for, E. A. Poe releases a smokescreen to divert our attention from his sleight of hand – game of substitutions – that is the prime literary gesture of the story. For one thing, how many readers know what 'purloined' means? Poe, an inveterate gambler, nonchalantly dropped his joker on the table in the form of a prefatory quotation in Latin supposedly written by the famous man of letters, Seneca: 'Nothing is more hateful to wisdom than too much cunning.'¹ Here is the first paragraph in its entirety:

At Paris, just after dark one gusty evening in the autumn of 18—, I was enjoying the twofold luxury of meditation and meerschaum, in company with my friend C. Auguste Dupin, in his little back library, or book-closet, *au troisième, No. 33, Rue Dunôt*, Faubourg St. Germain. For one hour at least we had maintained a profound silence; while each, to any casual observer, might have seemed intently and exclusively occupied with the curling eddies of smoke that oppressed the atmosphere of the chamber. For myself, however, I was mentally discussing certain topics which had formed matter of 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. I looked upon it, therefore, as something of a coincidence, when the door of our apartment was thrown open and admitted our old acquaintance, Monsieur G—, the Prefect of the Parisian police.

Poe seems to be playing with an open deck, nothing up his sleeve, even making us privy to the cogitations of the narrator, who mentions in passing the names of Poe's two other convoluted – but much less convincing – tales of ratiocination, all of which feature that detective *avant la lettre*, C. Auguste Dupin. Note the initial letter of the first name here, because the other protagonists are all referred to by initials or single letters: the narrator 'I' and Monsieur 'G'. While laying it on a bit thick, as far as the dropping of place and street names is concerned, Poe makes a mystery of who is who in his tale. This game of hide-and-seek with the reader continues with the appearance of the second main protagonist and designated letter-thief, Minister D—. It acquires a further regressive dimension when the royal personages, actual and potential victims of the theft of the letter, remain 'nameless'. Similarly, the contents of the letter will remain unread throughout the story.

Otherwise everything is highly transparent: the incriminating letter lies in plain sight and is stolen blatantly: by the mere substitution of one letter for another. The thief is known, as are the probable whereabouts of the letter. Yet the Parisian police proves incapable of finding it after having probed in every nook and cranny several times. This is why G— has recourse to the cunning of C. Auguste Dupin, who, without knowing all the facts of the case yet, presumes on the second page: 'Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault.' *Overlooking by dint of over-looking*. Before we know it, by the sixth page – less than halfway through the story – he has found the letter and cashed in on the fifty-thousand-franc reward. In the rest of the pages, Dupin gives the narrator a leisurely and detailed account of the ratiocination that led to his finding the letter.

To make a short story even shorter, the letter had been kept hidden in plain sight all along. In line with the switcheroo logic, our detective simply makes a facsimile of the real letter and creates a diversion to substitute it for the original.

There would be a lot to say about the method allegedly used by Dupin to solve the case: it involves, among other things, the principle of *identification*, of identifying himself with the mind of Minister D—, who happens to have made a name for himself as a poet. Dupin speaks:

There is a game of puzzles . . . which is played upon a map. One party playing requires another to find a given word – the name of a town, river, state or empire – any word, in short, upon the motley and perplexed surface of the chart. A novice in the game generally seeks to embarrass his opponents by giving them the most minutely lettered names, but the adept selects words such as stretch, in large characters, from one end of the chart

to the other. These, like the over-largely lettered signs and placards of the streets escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious . . .

That should explain it, should it not? Well, no, because if you read note 23 in Thomas Ollive Mabbott's annotated edition of the story you will find this curious observation (*italics mine*): 'The Minister *erred* in using his own seal.'² What? Double-take back to the passage in which Dupin describes the letter espied in a card-rack in the minister's parlour:

It had a large black seal, bearing the D— cipher *very* conspicuously [*Poe's italics*], and was addressed, in a diminutive female hand, to D—, the minister himself. It was thrust carelessly, and even, it seemed, contemptuously, into one of the upper divisions of the rack.

In case the reader didn't get it the first time around, Poe repeats this detail in the very next paragraph:

To be sure, it 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, and with the ducal arms of the S— family. Here, the address, to the Minister, was diminutive and feminine . . .

How could I, and most other readers, have overlooked this detail? The letter, left in plain sight but camouflaged beyond recognition, was addressed to the minister and had *his own seal* on it – the sender and receiver are one! This seal did not bear a coat-of-arms, but D—'s 'cipher', or initial. Now this cipher – not to mention the 'diminutive female hand' – must have been very conspicuous indeed if Dupin could make them out from a distance on a black seal while wearing green 'spectacles'. At any rate, that particular detail should definitively have clinched it, yet Poe, who has been letting Dupin ratiocinate for pages on end, lets this paradoxical detail slide without comment and goes on painstakingly describing further evidence of manipulation, making further bids for our attention.

This apparent nonchalance on Poe's part might be excused if the whole point of the exercise were not precisely to pay attention and stay on one's guard. Poe seems to have gotten away with it for over a century, until the editor of the *Complete Works* (1978), Thomas Ollive Mabbott, felt obliged to draw the reader's attention to this 'error', not realising that he had identified with Poe and his 'oversight' in doing so. Indeed, how can a fictional character make a mistake that does not belong to the story, as it were? And who wants to admit trying to dupe someone or having been duped? It is Dupin, and not Poe, who insists on taking credit for cracking the case by reversing the original sleight of hand (i.e., 'purloining'), substituting the letter with a facsimile that he fabricated overnight. Dupin cannot resist pulling another fast one by 'writing in the middle of the blank sheet' a tell-tale line of his own, or rather, a quotation from the French eighteenth-century writer Prosper-Jolyot de Crébillon: 'So baleful a plan, if unworthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes.'³ Touché! In doing so, he (Poe, this time) appealed to poetic licence and raised the literary niveau of his story by placing it within the parentheses of quotations from the work of recognised men of *letters*, Seneca and Crébillon.⁴

Now, back to the middle, Dupin, who shares the same initial with Minister D—, artfully forges the coveted but much abused letter, imitating the minister's cipher ' . . . very readily, by means of a seal formed of bread.'

That he was able to duplicate the monogram so easily argues for my assumption that this cipher probably consisted only of the initial 'D', and not elaborately intertwined initials that would have been impossible to decipher under the conditions described above, much less reproduce on a mere piece of bread. The letter's the thing. Or is it the red herring of 'purloining'? He could simply have called the story, *The Stolen Letter*, and played on the term 'stollen bread', but Poe was not so subtle, and we are in France, not Germany. Add a letter to Dupin and you get 'Dupain', or *du pain*, which is French for 'some bread'. It is plain enough that Dupin, and Poe, were both in it for the dough, but what in Heaven's name is the name of the game, and, above all, who is *duping* whom?

Could Poe, as both writer and first reader – sender and receiver – have fallen into his own *mise en abîme* or was he the kind of card sharp who cheated at solitaire?⁵ Did he, by giving the whole show away from the start, outwit himself in the end? That is the question, and it would be tempting to answer it in the affirmative, but this would be forgetting that Poe, gambler and arch-trickster, was also an adept of the art and science of cryptography, which is defined as 'the practice and study of hiding information' (*Wikipedia*).⁶ And what are the tools of cryptography? Well, codes and *ciphers* of course. And what is a cipher? Among a number of very interesting definitions – including 'zero', 'numeral', 'monogram', and 'non-entity – it is a noun and verb that means, respectively, 'the key to a cryptographic system' and 'to put in secret writing; encode' (*American Heritage Dictionary*). Fortunately, there is a technical difference in cryptography between codes and ciphers, namely that 'Ciphers, on the other hand, work at a lower level: the level of individual letters, small groups of letters, or, in modern schemes, individual bits' (*Wikipedia*). It all seems to fit.

The question now is, what information could Poe possibly have wanted to hide in his *ciphertext*? The short answer may simply be that he was hiding the fact that he was hiding . . . and so on down the line, in a play of infinite regress, with the emphasis on *play*. The long answer would involve the knowledge and attention that Poe brought to bear on language, writing, and the workings of the human mind, rational and irrational, whereby the workings of his own mind seem to have been given the freest of rein. This may be why 'The Purloined Letter' became a fetish among deconstructivist thinkers of the last half of the twentieth century, with the psychoanalyst and arch-punster Jacques Lacan at the head of the procession.⁷ By a stroke of luck, the ambiguous semantics of the word 'letter' in English are not lost in being translated into French – give or take a substitution of the last two letters.⁸

Before I start going too far afield and fetching even further by speculating on French letters and theory, let me quote Poe himself in a letter to his friend the poet Philipp Pendleton Cooke:

You are right about the hair-splitting of my French friend: – that is all done for effect. These tales of ratiocination owe most of their popularity to being something in a new key. I do not mean to say that they are not ingenious – but people think them more ingenious than they are – on account of their method and air of method. (9 August 1846)⁹

I will ignore the word 'key' and say that this ingenuous statement should discourage me from letting Edgar Allan Poe continue to make a fool out of me for trying to read more into this story than he ever intended or even cared about. So that's it! Effect was the name of his game; sensation the end, and ratiocination, or the mental motions of it, the means. That would certainly account for Dupin's long-winded explanations about his smoke-filled 'method and air of method' and what could be taken for carelessness in that thing with the letter sent to and by D—, with the seal and all. But, there, Poe's repetition of the cipher business – three times on the third *étage* of 33, rue Dunôt – did

not remain without side-effects: one of which was to make us overlook it completely, and another to make a Poe expert accuse a fictional character of having made a mistake. It is strange to see a writer saying, in effect, this is only a story, a figment of my imagination, when the potential for fooling the reader subtly pulls fiction into fact. Poe wrote immediately after the above:

In the 'Murders in the Rue Morgue', for instance, where is the ingenuity of unravelling a web which you yourself (the author) have woven for the express purpose of unravelling? The reader is made to confound the ingenuity of the supposititious Dupin with that of the writer of the story.

This time I will ignore the word 'web' and say that, in this admission, Poe was being true to himself by spilling the beans and scooping them back up in the same gesture. *Supposititious*? Talk about confounding! In this amazing sentence we have a cosmic alignment that features the reader, a fictional character, and the writer, which may seem like a straightforward-enough a phenomenon, as when the Sun, Moon, and Earth form a straight line. The problem is that when this happens we have a total eclipse in which the disk of the Moon is confounded with that of the Sun, which disappears except for the bright haze of its corona. Is this what Poe had in mind? Playing the sun to Dupin's moon and crowning him with the blaze of his radiant ingenuity?

That would prove me right in supposing that Poe was hiding something: namely himself. But there is another possibility, and that is that the hiding of something in plain sight is analogous with the non-recognition of what is, or who exactly is who or what, and to what degree? Remember, the word 'cipher' can also mean a 'non-entity'. What can you expect from a writer who lived his entire life one letter short of being able to call himself 'Mr. Poet'.¹⁰

NOTES

¹ In a letter to P. P. Cooke dated 16 April 1846, Poe wrote: ‘When your book comes out, I fancy that it will make a stir in England – and enable you to do well in letters,’ adding, ‘pecuniarily well. You will yet have Fame & get it easily. Money follows at its heels, as a matter of course.’

² *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by Thomas Ollive Mabbott, 3 vols (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969–78), III (1978), p. 986n23. This text can also be found online at <<http://eapoe.org/works/mabbott/tom3t011.htm>> (accessed 21 July 2016).

³ In Mabbott’s translation. Instead of ‘plan’, ‘such designs’ would have been closer to the French and the leitmotif of pattern recognition.

⁴ We’ll ignore that the source of the Seneca quotation has never been located and that Crébillon has fallen into oblivion.

⁵ After reading the story ‘Diddling’, published by Poe in 1843, there can no longer be any doubt in the reader’s mind that Poe might have been capable of anything. To *diddle* means to ‘cheat’, to ‘con’, to ‘deceive’, and so forth.

⁶ Here, I am suggesting that Poe perversely, and therefore consciously, resorted to some kind of metaphorical encrypting in this story. The motivation for this would have been just as much his fondness for games and enigmas as the innate perversity that he attributes to his fellow human in the 1845 tale ‘The Imp of the Perverse’. He expounds at length on an irrational, gratuitous motive that pushes people to do precisely what their reason, common sense, and even instincts would usually condemn. He calls this unprincipled principle ‘perversity’, and illustrates it with the first-person narrative of a murderer on death row. However, according to the killer-narrator, the perversity lay not in committing the murder, which was done for reasons of gain, but in the irresistible urge that gradually took hold of him to confess his crime – which he finally does. How perverse can you get?

⁷ John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (eds.), *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

⁸ By an even greater stroke of luck, the story was promptly translated by no less a poet than Charles Baudelaire (1855), even if the latter missed the point of Poe’s use of the stuffy word *purloined* and translated the title blandly as ‘La lettre volée’, which was bettered two years later by a certain William L. Hughes (1857) as ‘La lettre dérobée’ (*dérober*, a cognate of ‘to rob’), although ‘La lettre subtilisée’ would have been more subtle.

⁹ Cooke had written to him on 4 August of that year: ‘I think your French friend, for the most part, fine in his deductions from over-laid & unnoticed small facts, but sometimes too minute & hair-splitting.’

¹⁰ I thought this one out by myself, but Poe of course beat me to it. In an article titled ‘Enigmatical and Conundrum-ical’, he wrote: ‘Why ought the author of the “Grotesque and Arabesque” to be a good writer of verses? Because he’s a poet to a t. Add t to Poe makes it Poet.’ Edgar Allan Poe, ‘Enigmatical and Conundrum-ical’, in *Alexander’s Weekly Messenger*, 18 December 1839, p. 4, cols 1–2. First attributed to Poe in 1943 by Clarence S. Brigham.