Introductory Note

Jacques Lacan

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Seminar on "The Purloined Letter".

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If "psychoanalytic criticism" is an effort to bring analytic categories to bear in the solution of critical problems, Lacan's text is certainly not an example of that discipline. One has the feeling that, on the contrary, in the confrontation between analysis and literature, the former's role for Lacan is not to solve but to open up a new kind of textual problem. The Poe text then is in many ways a pretext, an exemplary occasion for Lacan to complicate the question of Beyond the Pleasure Principle. It is indeed a "purloined letter."

The crux of the problem is in the ambiguity of the term letter in Lacan's analysis. It may mean either typographical character or epistle. Why?

a) As typographical character, the letter is a unit of signification without any meaning in itself. In this it resembles the "memory trace," which for Freud is never the image of an event, but a term which takes on meaning only through its differential opposition to other traces. It is a particular arrangement of "frayings" (cf. page 73 below). The striking image of this situation in the tale is that we never know the contents of the crucial letter. Here then is psychoanalysis indifferent to deep meanings, concerned more with a latent organization of the manifest than a latent meaning beneath it. In its refusal to accord any "positive" status to linguistic phenomena, this might be viewed as Lacan's Saussurean side (see text note 24).

b) As epistle, the letter allows Lacan to play on the intersubjective relations which expropriate the individual. ("To whom does a letter belong?") It is Lévi-Strauss (and Mauss) who are no doubt at the source of this effort to think of the Oedipus complex in terms of a structure of exchange crucial to the "fixation" of unconscious "memory traces."

These losses—of the plenitude of meaning and the security of (self-)possession—are thus the principal modes of the Lacanian askesis in this parable of analysis. To which we may add a third: that of metalanguage. By which we mean: 1) that the Prefect is already repeating the "events" he recounts at the moment he pretends to view them objectively; 2) even Dupin (as analyst) is trapped in the fantasmatric circuit (repetitive structure, mobile scenario...) at the moment of his rage against the Minister. The difference between the Prefect (trapped in the transference) and Dupin (counteracting the countertransference) is that the latter is intermittently aware of his loss.

In translating the text, we found that a large measure of its difficulty was a function of Lacan's idiosyncratic use of prepositions. As result, the reader has to play with various possibilities of subordination in a number of sentences

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in order to determine the “proper” one(s). For better or worse, in English we have (necessarily) chosen to normalize the use of prepositions. We have thus occasionally been obliged to chart a course through Lacan’s labyrinth rather than reproduce that labyrinth whole. There has no doubt been a concomitant loss (in syntactical richness) and gain (in clarity).

The notes we have added to the text (signed —Ed) are, on the whole, explanations of allusions or clarifications of particularly oblique points.

This text was originally written in 1956 and—along with an introductory postface—is the opening text of the Ecrits.

—J. M.

Und wenn es uns glückt,
Und wenn es sich schickt,
So sind es Gedanken.

Our inquiry has led us to the point of recognizing that the repetition automatism (Wiederholungszwang) finds its basis in what we have called the insistence of the signifying chain. ¹ We have elaborated that notion itself as a correlate of the ex-sistence (or: eccentric place) in which we must necessarily locate the subject of the unconscious if we are to take Freud’s discovery seriously. ² As is known, it is in the realm of experience inaugurated by psychoanalysis that we may grasp along what imaginary lines the human organism, in the most intimate recesses of its being, manifests its capture in a symbolic dimension. ³

The lesson of this seminar is intended to maintain that these imaginary incidences, far from representing the essence of our experience, reveal only what in it remains inconsistent unless they are related to the symbolic chain which binds and orient them.

¹ The translation of repetition automatism—rather than compulsion—is indicative of Lacan’s speculative effort to reinterpret Freudian “overdetermination” in terms of the laws of probability. (Chance is automaton, a “cause not revealed to human thought,” in Aristotle’s Physics.) Whence the importance assumed by the Minister’s passion for gambling later in Lacan’s analysis. Cf. Ecrits, pp. 41-61).—Ed.

² Cf. Heidegger, Vom Wesen der Wahrheit. Freedom, in this essay, is perceived as an “exposure.” Dasen ex-sists, stands out “into the disclosure of what is.” It is Dasein’s “ex-sistent insistance” which preserves the disclosure of beings.—Ed.

³ For the meanings Lacan attributes to the terms imaginary and symbolic, see entries from the Vocabulaire de la Psychanalyse (Laplanche and Pontalis) reproduced below.—Ed.