

# Five Papers in Search of a Letter: An Introduction

Ivan Rabinowitz

The five papers on Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, Lacan, Lacan's *Seminar on The Purloined Letter*, and Derrida's response to Lacan's Seminar demonstrate that there is 'not a single subject but a void the lack out of which the subject is constituted' (Derrida, 1975:58). Yet, just as the acquisition of language inscribes the processual human subject in a prior symbolic order, so the topics to be debated and discussed insert themselves into a pre-existent order of discourse: Poe, Lacan on Poe, Derrida on Lacan on Poe, Barbara Johnson on Poe, Lacan, and Derrida. In their heterogeneity, and in their desire to reinterpret Poe's story within a reinvented context of speculation and debate, the contributions articulate, define, and suggest the diverse possibilities of an order of reading.

Ernest Pereira, for example, shifts the emphasis of his exposition of *The Purloined Letter* from 'approach' to 'reading', and offers a 'reading' which is primarily 'traditional' in its emphasis on the essential autonomy of the text and the presence of 'an identifiable and coherent "meaning" which through analysis can be discovered in or extracted from the text'. In arguing for the existence of meaning, he deploys two differing but complementary modes of enquiry: a preliminary act of 'recognition' in which the category of *knowing* is equated with the process of securing an impression of the work itself as that which exist independently and apart from the critic's perceptions, and a subsequent act of 'description', in which there is an attempt to identify and account for the significant features of the text. Because he emphasizes the documentary stability and autonomy of the text, his reading focuses on the skill and ingenuity of Poe's story and the complexities of its plot. His 'Multi-Dimensional Approach' bears testimony to the expository power of New Criticism and serves to remind us of the difficult choice facing the contemporary critic: to read self-reflexively, consciously placing one's reading within the hermeneutic circle inscribed by different theories of reading, or, while acknowledging that all criticism makes implicit assertions about one's theoretical position, to read 'non-theoretically', *as if* there were a clear separation between 'the business of criticism' and 'theories of criticism'.

In his provocative disquisition on logocentricism and scepticism, Rory Ryan sets out to close the institutional divide between 'theory' and 'criticism' and to widen the conceptual gap between Derrida and Lacan. For Ryan, and for Derrida, the figurality of language overwhelms the anthropomorphic, apodictic gestures which Lacan privileges in his psycho-allegorical reading of Poe. Following Derrida, Ryan sets out to expose the fissures and refractive distortions in the apparently 'clean window' through which signifiers open onto reality, implying that the difference between the two French letters – Lacan's *Seminar* and Derrida's *Purveyor* – rewrites the history of the post-structuralist preoccupation with the text *absconditus* and reflects the trajec-

tory of the post-Hegelian critique of identity, subject, and truth. In establishing his principles and procedures, Ryan claims the right to 'stage' his discussion as a self-reflexive discourse, setting at naught the supposed priority of Poe's text as a guide to the interior coherence of the subject. Consequently, his critique is located both behind and within Lacan's reading and Derrida's response; his goal is not to produce an appropriation of Derridean discontent, but to create a new object: a supplementary 'intertext', a remainder of the debate, imbued with the essence of the contingent responses but not wholly commensurate with them. In contrast to Ina Gräbe's structural reading, which addresses itself to the system of rules governing an understanding of the meaning of *The Purloined Letter*, Ryan's paper finds in the triadic 'response to a response to a response' a conceptual basis for a detour towards the plenitude of conjecture.

It is wholly apparent from Gräbe's analysis that there are close affinities between 'traditional' and 'structuralist' criticism. These affinities, well-known to students of Macherey, return us full-circle to the problem of meaning in literature. As Gräbe notes, any attempt to valorize the 'finite truths' supposedly present in the structure of a work runs the risk of inviting 'an attack similar to the one Dupin launched at the mathematicians'. Any attempt to 'use' the received models of narrative structure – to apply theoretical 'knowledge' in an investigation of the literary 'object' – leads to further questions about the legitimacy of focusing, apparently exclusively, on an a-historical and ethically neutral grammar of signification, and to even more vexing questions about the means by which structuralist accounts move from the demonstrable 'innocence' of models to the moral imperatives of being. Despite its 'objective' thrust, Gräbe's analysis is situated within a constellation of theoretical discourse; as such, it is embedded in a complex system of valorization which makes powerful, if implicit, assertions about the nature of knowledge and the constitution of the human subject. Although the procedure by which actantial roles are identified and events ordered seems to offer little scope for an investigation of the human subject, the ensuing structural reading of *The Purloined Letter* presents a dialogic transaction which offers a fruitful context for imaginative response. There is a sense in which the experience of perceiving 'pattern' and 'repetition' corresponds, in Lacanian terms, to the way in which language creates consciousness.

Ultimately, perhaps, these approaches repeat and reconstitute questions that have provoked an entire literature of debate, since they focus attention on the assumptions involved in literary criticism and reflection, and remind us that our understanding of literature carries with it an implicit appeal to a body of knowledge which is itself part of our literary heritage. To adherents and practitioners of Anglo-American New Criticism, for example, the literary aporias inherent in the debate between Derrida and Lacan, Lacan and Poe are readily resolvable; it is an article of faith that the literary work is a morally active heterocosm which enacts the harmonious resolution of ethical, even social, dilemmas. For such critics, there is therefore no need to postulate an unbridgeable divide between 'moral' (or psychoanalytic) and 'aesthetic' (or structuralist) concerns. For others, those for whom discourse is a manifesta-

tion of the will to power, and for whom the very fluidity of discourse renders it susceptible to processes of control and constriction, the divide between ethics and aesthetics is a site of collusion, opening out onto a topography of subjection and the repression of knowledge. For such critics, *The Purloined Letter* and its multiple responses offers a rhetoric of duplicity which duplicates, in its turns and counterturns, the ideological construction of the human subject and the self-proliferating indeterminacy of the sign. Moreover, if, as Barbara Johnson suggests, 'what Derrida is in fact arguing against is . . . not Lacan's text but Lacan's power – or rather, "Lacan" as the apparent cause of certain effects of power in French discourse today' (Johnson, 1978: 477), the burden of the debate rests on issues which transcend questions of approach and the nature of literary meaning. Besides investing the debate with an entertaining sense of the 'personal', Derrida's stabbing allusions to Lacan's 'grand truths' ('les grandes vérités') propel the reader into the realm of Kristevan abjection, the 'vortex of summons and repulsion' (Kristeva, 1982:1) within which Derrida attempts to jettison Lacan, to expose the fallacy of reason, and to banish the psychoanalytic project to a 'place where meaning collapses' (Kristeva, 1982:2):

. . . from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master  
 . . . it beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out. (Kristeva, 1982:2)

From this vantage point, Derrida's response – his crying out – re-enacts the drama of his refusal to be trapped by an axiomatic logic which, in its desire for completion, claims a transcendence which is itself dependent upon a prior system of predication. In challenging Lacan's desire to find a 'message' in *The Purloined Letter*, 'a message which must be deciphered on the basis of the lessons of Freud' (Derrida, 1975:47), Derrida is not merely splitting ontological hairs or expressing a wilful and indulgent scepticism; his adversative position has its source in a need to question the hegemony of reason and the easy appropriation of 'truth':

The 'truth which may be drawn from that moment in Freud's thought under study', the truth around which the most decorative and most pedagogical literary illustration will be organized, is not, as we will see, just any truth. It is truth itself, the truth of truth . . . . The question is thus to ground fiction in truth to guarantee it within truth and to do so without stressing . . . this resistance, always reserved, of literary fiction to the general law of psychoanalytic knowledge. Lacan never poses the different question of what distinguishes different literary fictions. Even if all fiction were founded on a truth or made possible by a truth, the question may remain pertinent to the type of fiction from which something like literature, in this case 'The Purloined Letter', arises, and to the effects literature might have on the very thing which seems to render it possible . . . the subject of the Seminar is merely the content of this history, precisely its story, what is related in the account, the internal and narrated side of the narration. Not the narration itself. Lacan's interest in the instance of the signifier in its letter seizes this instance insofar as it constitutes primarily the exemplary content and the meaning of Poe's fiction, i.e., what is written therein as opposed to the writing itself, the signifier and the narrating form. Hence the displacement of the signifier is analyzed as a

signified, and as the recounted object in a short story. (Derrida, 1975:46–48)

In Derrida's detailed critique of Lacan, the notion of 'truth', like the letter sought by the Queen, the Prefect, and Dupin, has no revealed or determinate content, no predictable direction, and no 'proper' meaning. Instead, 'truth' – or the fiction of 'truth' as perceived by Lacan's readers, *sans* Derrida – is construed as a signifier of power and as the illusory and elusive object of desire.

Derrida's response to Lacan, then, articulates a reading which challenges the agency of predication seemingly established by the 'on' of Lacan's *Seminar on The Purloined Letter*. In this context, it is helped to realize that Derrida does not respond exclusively to Lacan, and that Lacan's Seminar is not merely *on The Purloined Letter*. Rather, their readings allegorize, subvert, and extend the vocabularies of inscription and description *provided* by Poe's narrative, enacting and duplicating the displacement of the letter in the seductive figurations of their own discourse. On one level, then, they re-situate *The Purloined Letter* as a complex fable of identity, an allegory of the theorist's desire to overcome the imperatives of interpretation in a fresh assimilation of the metaphoric possibilities of language. Similarly, each of the five articles in this issue adds its own rhetoric of figuration to this appropriation of Poe's narrative, and each article succumbs in different ways to the complex relation between reader and text.

When Derrida takes Lacan and the entire psychoanalytic project to task for failing to see the pit below the descending pendulum of institutionalized 'reason', he is not only defending – and unmasking – his preoccupation with the shifting trajectory of the signified, but expressing his embarrassment at having caught Freud and Lacan in an unbecoming posture which reveals the habit of 'treating the very subject matter of . . . discourse as a marvellous paradigm . . . happily available for instructive discourse' (Derrida, 1975:35–36). For Derrida, there is nothing paradigmatic in the relation between the reader and the text, since all discourse is situated, already 'staged', within the conceptual structures of what we seek and what we find. Although Derrida concedes that the *Seminar* represents a discernible advance in the history of psychoanalysis, in that Lacan takes steps to secure a 'break from naive semanticism and naive psycho-biographism' (Derrida, 1975:45), he castigates the purveyors of 'truth' for their failure to challenge the status of the text and for the reductive blindness of their insights:

. . . Poe's text is summoned up as an example. It is an example for the sake of 'illustrating' through a dialectical process a law and a truth which form the prose-object of the Seminar. Literary writing occupies an illustrative position, which means making a general law legible through example, making clear the meaning of a law or a truth, manifesting them in a signal or exemplary way. The text is in the service of truth, and, what is more, this truth can be taught . . . This is, of course, the most classical way of doing things. (Derrida, 1975:45–46)

Derrida's critique of Lacan and the topography of psychoanalysis bears on

the larger question of 'success' in the 'classical way of doing things' in literary studies, an issue which is discernible in each of the five contributions. In approaching Poe's short story from different angles, and in refocussing attention on Derrida and Lacan, the contributors are concerned, both directly and indirectly, with the problem of establishing criteria for 'success', or legitimacy, in critical discourse. It is not surprising, therefore, that each contribution yields a different conception of reading and the reading process. Because Ryan reads Derrida's response to Lacan transgressively and self-reflexively, without anchoring his observations in a master-narrative, his reading leads inevitably to an attempt to escape the signifying chain and to elude the entrapment of discourse structures; because Gräbe seeks an interpretation from within the work and from within Genette's structural narratological model, her reading produces a literary object which constitutes itself in the complex patterning of a narrative message; because Pereira chooses to preserve a strict fidelity to the harmonious interiority of the work, his reading carries with it his own delight in the recognition of 'what is there'; because de Jong explores the 'primarily repressed content' of the work, her feminist reading-through-Lacan emphasizes the dialectic of displacement and ontological codification in relation to the orders of language; and because C.S. de Beer approaches the *Seminar* in close rapport with Lacan's rhetoric of desire, his contribution offers an essentially optimistic account of the implications of a psychoanalytic reading strategy.

In his exposition of Lacan, De Beer emphasizes the need to read within the semiological economy postulated by desire and the regime of the Other. Unlike the agonistic critiques offered by Derrida and Ryan, his commentary on Lacan's reading of *The Purloined letter* demonstrates that the *Seminar* is 'drastically subversive of [the] traditional model of the reading activity', in that it 'emphasizes the fundamental importance of difference, the predominant position of the floating signifier' and 'the role of fictivity and the mythical with regard to truth'. Since Lacan's fable of possession and absence invites the reader to find himself in the text, while application presupposes an exteriority with respect to the object of application, De Beer's discussion resists the traditional obligation to *apply* psychoanalytic strategies of reading. For De Beer, the task of Lacanian reading is to show us that criticism is 'born not out of reason but of desire'.

As Marianne de Jong argues in her feminist reading of 'The Political Letter', 'desire is a prerequisite to that form of perfect discursive communication where the very validification of speech as truth can be put to question'. It is in this sense that the responses presented in the following pages constitute an exploration of the interiority of discourse: instead of presuming to investigate the nature of the literary object, each paper offers a reading which reveals the interests, insights, and inflections – the 'habits of mind' – of five contributors in search of the 'truth' of critical discourse. What the papers have in common is that, in varying degrees, they are all conscious of the need to reinvent the relationship between 'truth' and 'literature'.

## References

- Derrida, J. 1975. The Purveyor of Truth. *Yale French Studies*, 52:31–113.
- Johnson, B. 1978. The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida. *Yale French Studies*, 55/56:457–505.
- Kristeva, J. 1982. *Powers of Horror*. New York: Columbia University Press.