

The Purloined Letter: An attempt at a multi-dimensional approach

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When I was approached to contribute a paper to this special issue on Poe, I was told that what was needed was a discussion of Poe's story along 'traditional' lines – that is, as we in the Department of English would normally approach it in any critical assessment. My informant went on to explain that the planned special issue was in a sense a 'spill-over' of a symposium on Jacques Lacan held at Unisa in 1985, and as *The Purloined Letter* had become something of a *cause célèbre* by virtue of the critical debate it had occasioned between Lacan and Jacques Derrida, it seemed a good idea to make it the focus of a separate collection of essays. I must say all this was news to me: I had read some of Poe's work but not *The Purloined Letter*, and although after reading it I could see it as providing a happy hunting-ground for the psychoanalytic and other critical theorists, I found I was not much the wiser concerning the nature of the issues it provoked, after reading Lacan's seminar on the story – and even less enlightened after reading Derrida's commentary on Lacan. For me to participate, I felt, would only prove the truth of the adage that 'fools rush in where angels fear to tread'; however, I was assured that the Lacan-Derrida theories would be dealt with by the experts, and that I was needed simply to discuss *The Purloined Letter* from a 'traditional', 'practical' or 'New Critical' point of view. In the nicest possible way I was, I now realize, in fact being asked to rush in

I should also explain the somewhat portentous title chosen for my talk. On reading *The Purloined Letter* I realized it invited a variety of critical responses, so when I was asked for a title, the best I could offer was something along the lines of a 'multi-dimensional' or 'pluralist' approach. At least, I thought, it left my options open. Perhaps the short answer to the question 'How would you approach *The Purloined Letter*?' is, that I would not 'approach' it at all – I would *read* it. Flippant as it seems, this may not be an altogether irrelevant reply.

I am aware that in terms of the critical debate it has given rise to, *The Purloined Letter* itself is no more than a catalyst: the issues no longer concern anything Poe wrote (or did not write); they concern modern literary theory and the differences of approach which characterize Structuralism, Post-Structuralism, Deconstructive Criticism, and all the other -isms of 20th-century critical theory. I shall leave discussion of these differences and their possible bearing on the subject to others, and confine myself to the business of criticism rather than theories of criticism. We may even find that just as *The Purloined Letter*, by its very nature, has evoked a range of different ideological responses, by the same token a range of different – rather than mutually exclusive – approaches are entirely appropriate in discussing it.

I have referred to what could be called the 'traditional' approach by virtue of the fact that it is still basically the prevailing critical method in English Departments – here as well as in the US and UK. This approach, as I think all of us know, can roughly be equated, on the one hand, with the Richards-Leavis emphasis on 'practical criticism' and on the other, with the 'New Criticism' propagated by Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate and others of the American school. The critical assumptions underlying this 'traditionalist' approach, namely, the autonomy of the text; the existence of an identifiable and coherent 'meaning' which through analysis can be discovered in or extracted from the text; and the belief that such a 'meaning' has some sort of intrinsic value, is life-enhancing or at any rate worth having – these assumptions have, we also know, long been under attack. I am not going to enter into debate on the validity of these assumptions, nor can I pretend to offer a rigorous 'New Critical' analysis of Poe's story. In ensconcing myself behind the terms 'multi-dimensional' or 'pluralist' I am saying (a) that I do not hold any one approach to be ideologically superior to or necessarily more effective than any other; (b) that as literary criticism implies the existence of an object to be criticized, I assume that there *is* a text in this class – in the present instance, *The Purloined Letter*; and (c) that the kind of critical approach or method I adopt will largely be determined by the kind of text I am dealing with. Having said that, I should like now to trace the stages of my own critical encounter with *The Purloined Letter*. In the course of this 'replay', I shall try to identify some of the approaches and perceptions which I feel are relevant to or invited by a reading of Poe's story.

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No reader encounters a text without some preconceptions and expectations. Although I knew nothing about Poe and little about his work – except that he was the author of 'The Raven' which croaked 'Nevermore' and a selection of 'Tales of Mystery and Imagination', some of which I had years before read and enjoyed – what I was told about the critical debate centering on *The Purloined Letter*, probably made my reading of it a more conscious experience than it would otherwise have been. In stating that my approach would be dictated by the text, I also had in mind the kind of expectation we bring to a particular text – and this is determined largely by the circumstances of the encounter, and by what we know or imagine the text to be. Not to labour the point: I knew I was embarking on a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, I expected to find it entertaining as well as intriguing, and – like many another reader – I was not disappointed. My ignorance of Poe had extended to the stories he – appropriately, as we shall see – called 'tales of ratiocination' and which are now generally recognised as forerunners of the 'detective story'. This then was also my first acquaintance with Poe as writer of detective fiction and creator of Auguste Dupin.

My discussion of *The Purloined Letter* falls into two sections, corresponding roughly with what could be termed the initial encounter or first reading (though it may include one or more rereadings), and a more careful, consciously critical, subsequent reading (which may also involve more than one

process). I need hardly add that at this stage I would use whatever external material or sources of reference seem to be indicated.

The initial reading is largely anticipatory, undertaken for the pleasure of *knowing* (or finding out). I shall not elaborate on this first reading, but in referring briefly to some of my initial impressions as well as aspects of the story which could – and did – hold my attention, I may also refresh readers' memories as far as the main features of Poe's tale are concerned. The title itself strikes one as slightly unusual but, if hastily glossed as 'The Stolen Letter', suggests some sort of crime, and possible intrigue, is involved. Certainly the opening paragraph, which sets the scene in Paris but at the same time draws one into the cosy intimacy of Auguste Dupin's 'little back library' in the Faubourg St Germain, is promising enough; it also contains a pointed reference to two previous murder cases, and concludes with the sudden, and strangely coincidental, entry of the Prefect of the Parisian police. In the ensuing dialogue, character as well as story or plot unfold, with the first-person narrator 'drawing-out' as well as commenting on the Prefect, leaving Dupin to identify the policeman's problem even before it has been articulated: 'Perhaps the mystery is a little *too* plain . . . A little too self-evident', he says, to the vast amusement of the Prefect. The nature of the 'crime' the latter has to recount presents some unusual features: for instance, knowledge of the theft of the incriminating letter and the identity of the thief has been, necessarily, confined to the robber and his victim, though the Prefect, under oath of secrecy, has been called in. It is a story of intrigue and blackmail involving personages so exalted that names are not divulged, though the thief is known to be 'Minister D-', nor are the contents of the letter ever revealed. Secret but exhaustive searches of the Minister's residence as the almost certain repository for the letter, have been fruitless, and this has brought the Prefect to Dupin. At the narrator's insistence, the Prefect describes in detail the methods the police have used to ensure that no crevice, no hiding-place, however ingeniously contrived, could have escaped them. Dupin, on the other hand, asks only for a careful description of the purloined letter and envelope, before advising the Prefect, rather unhelpfully, to make yet a further search. In the course of this discussion a portrait emerges of the Minister as something of a poet, a highly intelligent, daring and thoroughly unscrupulous character who is using possession of the letter for purposes of political blackmail. The Prefect, on the other hand, is from the beginning shown to be an excellent policeman but limited in perception, unimaginative, and an easy butt for humour. It is a pretty puzzle we – as well as the Prefect, the narrator and Dupin – have been set: the power of the letter depends on two factors: first, Minister D's *possession* of it and his ability to produce it if necessary – though once actually used its power would be destroyed, as would the victim and, possibly, the blackmailer himself; and secondly, the fact that the victim knows who – and what sort of man – the robber is, though she cannot make public her loss or her knowledge, or take any of the usual steps to obtain redress.

When, a month later, the Prefect returns he is desperate, and says he will give 50,000 francs for the recovery of the letter (he himself, of course, being

assured of at least as substantial a reward). Dupin, unexpectedly, holds him to that offer: to the stupefaction of the narrator as well as the Prefect, he then unlocks a desk and, on receipt of the latter's cheque, hands over the purloined letter. The Prefect, in a frenzy of excitement, makes off with his booty and Dupin can now, at his leisure, satisfy the narrator's curiosity, not only as to where he found the letter and how he secured it, but by what processes of reasoning, of observation and deduction, he divined its hiding-place. It is a lengthy exposition, and Dupin thoroughly enjoys himself as he expounds some of his pet theories about human nature, illustrating his argument with references to guessing-games and popular misconceptions. I cannot go into all of that here; suffice to say that Dupin bases his deductions on his original premise, that the answer eluded the Prefect because it was 'a little *too* plain . . . *too* self-evident', and on his knowledge of the Minister as well as the Prefect. In short, as an imaginative, shrewd and intelligent man, the Minister knew the Prefect's search would be minute and methodical: no hiding-place, however well-contrived, could escape detection. On the other hand, with its envelope turned inside out, somewhat soiled, crumpled and otherwise disguised as an almost forgotten epistle addressed to the Minister, the purloined letter could be carelessly thrust into a card-rack hanging openly from the mantelpiece – where in fact, it has remained *unnoticed and thus concealed*. The pieces of the puzzle are, one by one, held up to the narrator (and to the reader) before being deftly slipped into place. The ruse Dupin employs to secure the purloined letter is both neat and appropriate, for like the Minister earlier, he substitutes another letter, similar in appearance, for the original. But Dupin's account takes an interesting turn at the close, when he switches rôles from detective to judge and prosecutor of the blackmailer. As he points out, the Minister will continue his activities, unaware that the letter in his card-rack is not the one he stole: his victim can thus lead him on to the brink of sure destruction, before defying him to produce the letter. And Dupin, to return an 'evil turn' once done to him by the Minister, has made sure that when the latter does open the letter, he will not only recognize Dupin's hand, but realize how complete and terrible has been his revenge.

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What I have read and responded to is a short story, a detective story, skilfully narrated, with an ingenious plot and an interesting set of characters being played-off against one another – the whole leavened with anecdotes and theories ranging from the amusing and whimsical to the profound and commonsensical. As literary critic, I would now go on to re-read and closely examine the text in order to see what makes it 'tick', i.e. what makes me respond to it in the way I do. Here a number of factors come into play, and unless during this second stage I conclude that I was altogether wrong in my initial assessment of the nature of the text and, therefore, that my response to it was totally inappropriate, this more detailed examination, during which a variety of critical approaches may suggest themselves, can only serve to reinforce, extend, deepen and in other ways increase my understanding (and appreciation) of the story and the skills that have gone into it. I am going to

have to cut across various aspects of the text and point in passing to some (by no means all) of the critical issues it raises:

(i) The title, for a start, is an intriguing one, as I have already suggested. My paraphrasing of it as 'The Stolen Letter' is not only inaccurate, but has been used by Wilkie Collins for a story which was itself 'purloined' from Poe. The word is of interest because Poe persists in using it throughout his tale: the letter is not stolen, it has been 'purloined' from the royal apartments. It has been suggested that the French origin of the word may have prompted Poe to adopt it as appropriate to the locale of his story; one might also note that it originally meant 'to put far away'; 'to remove' or 'make away with': in a sense, the Minister was *diverting* it from its proper course (i.e. from sender to intended receiver). The meaning of 'to steal' is a later English development; interestingly enough, the Shorter Oxford also gives an additional qualification: 'to steal, especially under circumstances which involve a breach of trust'.

(ii) Closely related to this idea of the letter being 'purloined', is a concept strongly emphasized in the story: namely, that of 'possession'. As the narrator puts it: 'It is clear . . . that the letter is still in possession of the minister, since it is this possession, and not any employment of the letter, which bestows the power. With the employment the power departs'. I have already pointed to the essential corollary to this, namely 'the robber's knowledge of the loser's knowledge of the robber'. The kind of leverage *possession* of the letter gives to the Minister, depends not only upon the victim knowing that he has it, but on his knowing that she knows he has it. This situation is neatly reversed at the close, when Dupin in turn 'purloins' the letter and leaves a facsimile: the Minister will not only continue to act on the assumption that he still has power of possession, but will not even be aware of his loss or of who has robbed him, until his former victim defies him and he opens the letter. Bear in mind that what the letter actually contains is no longer, and for all we know may never have been, an issue: the fact that 'A' sent it to 'B', that this knowledge had to be concealed at all costs from 'C', and that 'D' (appropriately identified as 'Minister D-'), without knowing what it contained, but divining its significance and thus its value to him, has carried it off before the helpless eyes of 'B' – it is this that bestows on him, as we have seen, the 'power of possession'.

(iii) The kind of repetition or ironic patterning illustrated in the initial 'purloining' and the concluding 'substitution' is reflected not only in the complexities of the plot, but in numerous other ways, and of course provides that 'shock of recognition', which for the reader is one of the great strengths and attractions of Poe's story. I have already referred to the way in which the ultimate solution of the problem hinges on the truth of Dupin's initial, paradoxical remark about the 'mystery' being '*too* self-evident' to be recognized. A few other parallels can be briefly noticed. The story itself is prefaced with a motto: 'Nil sapientiae odiosius acumine nimio' and is attributed to Seneca. I am told that it means 'Nothing is more disagreeable to wisdom than too much cunning', and that no source for this has in fact been found in Seneca. Whether Poe made up the quotation in order to gull the reader with a

piece of sententious learning, or whether he used it in all innocence under the impression that it came from Seneca, the motto itself is of interest. Does it refer to Dupin (as the 'wise' man) whose recognition of the Minister's astuteness (or 'too much cunning') culminates in his condemnation of him as 'that *monstrum horrendum*, an unprincipled man of genius'? The story abounds in classical quotations, epigrams and other literary allusions, and the initial motto finds an echo also in the closing words of the story – a quote from a play by the 18th-century French playwright Crébillon, which is itself – interestingly – based on a play by Seneca. It is this quotation that Dupin has copied onto the blank sheet of the substitute letter, for the Minister's benefit, and it reads, in translation, 'A design so deadly, even if not worthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes'. Thyestes according to legend had seduced the wife of King Atreus and in revenge, Atreus murdered Thyestes's sons and had them served up to their father, at dinner. One does not have to look to Freud to see the 'purloining' of the letter as a form of seduction (or rape) as well as a breach of trust, and in executing terrible vengeance on the Minister, Dupin is pointing out that though it may seem unworthy of him, Dupin, the method he has used is entirely appropriate to that '*monstrum horrendum*', the unscrupulous blackmailer.

There are also significant pairings and contrastings of character or opinion, in the course of the narrative. The narrator, for instance, presents himself to us as a man who has a mean opinion of the Prefect and, having eliminated certain alternative solutions, concludes, quite decisively, that the letter must be somewhere in the Minister's dwelling. He then takes it upon himself to question the Prefect about the search he has conducted, and in great detail the latter explains the methods the police have used to ensure that no square inch of the building or its contents could have escaped their scrutiny. When he has exhausted his own ingenuity on this topic, the narrator has to conclude, quite as definitely as before, that the letter is *not* on the premises – only this time he attributes the previous erroneous assumption to the Prefect! The irony of this little by-play lies in the fact that the narrator, for all his pretensions to superiority (he is, after all, the intimate and associate of Auguste Dupin) falls into exactly the same trap as the Prefect does, but with less excuse. He assumes that because the most minute and thorough search has not brought the letter to light, it cannot be there. When Dupin produces his bombshell, the purloined letter, the narrator is scarcely less 'astounded' than the Prefect, though he of course describes the latter as 'absolutely thunderstruck'. From then on, it is Dupin who holds the stage, with the narrator very much the subordinate and listener – reduced, almost, to a cipher. The interplay of personalities and the reversal of rôles is an aspect of the story which perhaps merits further attention. One notes, also, that 'Minister D', perhaps the most fully realized of the personalities involved, never appears on the scene: all we know about him and his actions comes to us via the Prefect and Dupin.

This kind of ironic play extends even to Dupin, who can be quite as dogmatic in his opinions and prejudices, as those whom he castigates. The Prefect, of course, is an obvious target: he admits that the Minister must be a

more astute man than he is, yet he fails to make the same deduction that Dupin does, namely that the 'more astute' Minister would surely have foreseen that his house would be secretly searched and that no hiding-place would remain undetected by the police. He in fact gives them every opportunity for doing this, so that they can satisfy themselves that the letter is *not* on the premises! Similarly, the Prefect knows that the Minister is also a poet, and for this reason regards him, rather illogically, as being something of a fool. Again it is Dupin who exposes the Prefect's reasoning as entirely fallacious: 'All fools are poets; this the Prefect *feels*; and he is merely guilty of a *non distributio medio* [or 'the undistributed middle'] in thence inferring that all poets are fools'. Dupin waxes almost lyrical on this point, then goes to great lengths to demolish what he regards as a popular but pernicious superstition, namely, that a mathematician (for the Minister is also noted in this field) is necessarily a reasoner, *par excellence*, and that the truths of mathematics are also applicable as abstract or general and moral truths. It is the combination of the poet and the mathematician that in Dupin's view makes the Minister so formidable a foe and enables him to outwit the Prefect by his bold and imaginative ploy. In turn, of course, Dupin – who also admits with false modesty to 'have been guilty of certain doggerel' verses himself, and whose ratiocinative powers are self-evident – can claim that by outwitting a man like the Minister, he must possess a *very* superior order of mind!

(iv) Word-play and verbal ingenuity characterize many of the exchanges. I have already pointed to the use of paradox and irony: an early example is Dupin's remark that 'If [the Prefect's problem concerns] any point requiring reflection, we shall examine it to better purpose in the dark'. (This, by the way, is not an isolated comment: the Minister's house is searched at night, but the Prefect fails to 'examine it to better purpose' for all that; on the other hand, Dupin dons dark glasses when he visits the Minister by day, in order the better to scrutinize his apartment without appearing to be doing so – and spots the 'hidden' letter!) The irony of a subsequent back-handed compliment paid to the Prefect may be lost on the recipient, but is made clear to the reader by associating it with a cloud of tobacco smoke: 'no more sagacious agent could, I suppose, be desired, or even imagined'. Later, in slyly recounting to the Prefect the anecdote of a Doctor Abernethy, who when sponged upon by a miser for free medical advice, turned the tables by telling him *he should seek medical advice*, Dupin is again described as puffing industriously at his pipe as he sets about applying the moral of the story to the Prefect.

This brings me to another noteworthy feature of Poe's story (and one which may be tied in with his known propensity for fictionalized reportage), namely, the frequency with which Dupin has recourse to anecdotes – some of dubious authenticity – and guessing-games in order to substantiate his theories. By recounting the story about Abernethy – which happens to be true but concerned a doctor named Pennington – Dupin cleverly provokes the Prefect into committing himself to the 50,000 franc reward for the letter: though the incident is no more than a piece of fun, its underlying intent is serious. (Is not this also a form of extortion? Certainly it seems a rather tasteless display of

commercialism as well as mistrust, on Dupin's part; on the other hand, it is clear that he is not at all well off, and that the Prefect will gain far more than Dupin does, by the deal.) Dupin's exposition of the guessing-game is perhaps more revealing, for here what seems to the outsider to point either to an extraordinary run of luck or to some sort of extrasensory gift, is perfectly explicable in rational terms. The principle involved, namely, that of adapting one's tactics according to the degree of intelligence evinced by one's opponent, is, as Dupin reminds the narrator, exactly the method followed by the Minister, in assessing the limitations of *his* opponent, the Prefect, and the ploy adopted by the Minister, of preventing the Prefect from detecting the letter by depositing it immediately beneath his nose, is illustrated by referring to yet another game. Here one player chooses a name printed on a map, and challenges the others to find it: it is not the most minutely printed or obscurely situated name that escapes detection, but one scrawled in large letters across mountains, rivers, and valleys. In these examples we may detect the presence of *homo ludens* – 'man as player' or 'playing man' – as well as a bid for power. The Minister seeks power through intrigue, blackmail, and outwitting the police; Dupin, in revealing the so-called 'secrets' or techniques which give the skilled player an ascendancy over others; and finally there is Poe himself, the grand artificer who consciously creates the effects by which his characters' ploys, pretences and delusions are exposed to ironic view, but who is also shrewdly manipulating – and perhaps gulling – us, his readers.

(v) It is therefore tempting, and sometimes illuminating, to relate the man to his work: certainly Poe's love of word-play and hoaxes, his assumptions of learning (by way of classical and other literary allusions), and the ambiguities and ironies which undercut so much of the surface meaning of his work, point to his volatile, genial but darkly complex personality. That Dupin should have his eccentricities is part of his attraction; but for a man who prides himself on his powers of reasoning and deduction, the passion and vindictiveness shown in his final denunciation of and revenge upon the Minister, is strangely out of keeping; perhaps even more revealing is the deliberate allusion to the ghastly way in which Atreus avenged himself upon Thyestes. Here perhaps is a hint of that fascination with the hidden side of human nature, with man's propensity for evil, and the attraction exerted upon him by the unnatural and supernatural, that characterizes so many of Poe's tales. His first volume of stories, we might recall, was titled 'Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque' and placed Poe firmly in the 'gothic' tradition.

Delight in mystification is another trait often remarked in Poe. In *The Purloined Letter* he gives an aura of authenticity to the events he recounts, by carefully omitting dates and the names by which the 'personages of most exalted station in France' might be identified. The Prefect is a model of diplomatic discretion, as the narrator sarcastically comments, when he explains, for instance, that 'the paper gives its holder a certain power in a certain quarter where such power is immensely valuable'. Yet, a few lines further, the Prefect gives the game away when he says 'The document in question – a letter, to be frank – had been received by the personage robbed

while alone in the royal boudoir. During its perusal she was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of the other exalted personage from whom especially it was her wish to conceal it.' One wonders who is having his leg pulled here – the Prefect, or the reader? Yet – and here one comes to another of those carefully calculated effects which make this such a closely-knit and satisfying story – the next sentence reads: 'After a hurried and vain attempt to thrust [the letter] in a drawer, she was forced to place it, open as it was, upon the table. The address, however, was uppermost, and the contents thus unexposed, the letter escaped notice'. Here, in a nutshell, Poe has not only anticipated, but given the Prefect's auditors (and us) a clue to, the solution of the 'mystery'; there is a further irony in the fact that the Prefect, in relating the event, is perfectly unconscious of its possible bearing on his own fruitless search for the letter! Like the problem – philosophical and psychological, as well as legal and semantic – which is posed by the concept 'possession', the term 'concealed' is another of those cruxes to which the story draws attention. The letter after all, is 'there', 'concealed' but not 'hidden'.

Here too, however, there is another side to the trick of lending spurious 'authenticity' to what is of course fiction and not fact. It may be part of Poe's strategy to sow the seeds of doubt in the reader's mind as to the relationship between the two. I have referred to his use of anecdotes obliquely based on historical fact; the *Annotated Tales of Edgar Allan Poe* (Peithman, 1981), offers numerous other instances. The Prefect, to take one example, is introduced as 'Monsieur G-'; the *Annotated Poe* tells us that Henri-Joseph Gisquet was chief of police in Paris from 1831 to 1836. There is something questionable about this fairly transparent, if apparently coincidental, link. One must remember that Poe's tale was published in 1844 and that it soon became popular in France: those who read it then would have been struck by the parallel and – in view of the portrait of the Prefect – would have wondered, as we now do, at the possible intention of the author. A classic example of a deliberate attempt by Poe to employ fiction as a means of interpreting (and thus controlling) fact, is his earlier Auguste Dupin story, *The Mystery of Marie Rogêt*. Here Poe took the details of an unsolved New York murder which took place in 1838 and, working on the available data, produced his thinly fictionalized account, set in Paris. Dupin's 'solution' of that crime is thus also Poe's, and gives him the dubious distinction of writing the first detective story in which an attempt is made to solve an actual crime. The *Annotated Poe*, to which I am indebted for this information, also informs us that Poe's solution did not account for all the facts in the case, which has never been satisfactorily resolved.

To sum up will be impossible: having led the reader into the labyrinth of Poe's infinitely complex tale; I am tempted to leave him or her there, holding not one thread, but several dozen, and all leading down different passages. I have barely touched upon *The Purloined Letter* as a successful short story and as, pre-eminently, a model for the detective stories of Conan Doyle and a host of followers; I have said very little about the narrative strategies employed by Poe – his use of the first-person narrator, for instance, and the way he

structures his story. It is worth noting, for instance, that less than half the story is taken up with the propounding of the problem and the build-up to a climax – Dupin's dramatic production of the purloined letter: yet there is no slackening of interest in the dénouement as Dupin launches into an explanation of the reasoning he applied and the means he used to solve the problem. There is in fact a sudden heightening of tension towards the close, in the encounter between Dupin and the Minister, and the twist at the end is as startling as it is diabolically clever. And on that disturbing note I must stop: it is not my approach but Poe's story, which can claim to be truly multi-dimensional.

Note

Peithman, Stephen. 1981. *Annotated Tales of Edgar Allan Poe*. New York.