

GIVE ME A "D" : THE PURLOINED LETTER

Under this somewhat obnoxious title lurks one of Edgar Allan Poe's best-crafted tales of ratiocination and one of the first detective stories ever written (1845). Long have I reflected on this intricately spun tale because its main theme seems to be the relationship between attention and intelligence, and because it contains a tiny flaw that makes it a perfect masterpiece. It could even be called be a perfect crime if the flaw were not so inconspicuous: no body, no crime. Significantly, the whole thing revolves around a letter and an elaborate pun. *If you haven't read the story yet, and if you don't want me to spoil it for you, I suggest you read it before going on to the following.*

Most readers think—or are led to think—that the point of Poe's story involves a play on the word overlooking, that bane of all searchers and researchers: looking so hard that you miss what is right in front of your nose. However, I was less impressed by C. Auguste Dupin's deductive skills and less dismayed by the Parisian police's investigatory methods when Dupin revealed that the incriminating letter, although left displayed in plain sight, had been heavily tampered with to escape detection. Most intriguing of all was the fact that, in order to camouflage the letter, the Minister—the initial purloiner and would-be blackmailer of the Queen—had it addressed (in a female hand) to himself and then stamped it with his own wax seal. I quote, with Poe's italics: "It had a large black seal, bearing the D— cipher *very* conspicuously."

Oddly enough, this conclusive detail was neither what tipped Dupin off, nor what confirmed his suspicion of having found the stolen letter. In the next paragraph he mentions it again, among other details, but not as a tell-tale discrepancy. Now I would never have noticed this detail myself had the compiler of the edition I was reading (T.O. Mabbott) not drawn my attention to it in a footnote that reads: "The Minister erred in

using his own seal." Although Mabbott caught the mistake, he did not realize its import. There seems to be a flaw in the story.

It raises the question of how a fictional character can make so glaring a mistake without this dead giveaway playing a part in the story; especially in a story in which everything is so painstakingly explained and with such unabashed displays of cerebration. Could it be that Poe outsmarted himself, that he got carried away with his own brio, and that he was guilty of some overlooking of his own? Does the practice of one-upmanship in the art of literary alertness or attention lead to an infinite regress of blind spots in which one can't see the letters for the words?

Except for Dupin, self-styled detective *avant la lettre*, all the other characters in the story are referred to only by an initial, i.e. a letter: Minister D—, Monsieur G—, the S— family. The first-person narrator remains anonymous, but the story is for the most part a dialogue between the narrator and Dupin, who also speaks in the first person.

The tale is prefaced by an appeal to literary authority in the form of a Latin quotation attributed to Seneca: "*Nothing is more odious to wisdom than too much cunning.*" And the story ends with a literary quotation from the 18th-century author Crébillon (in French): "*So baleful a plan, if unworthy of Atreus, is worthy of Thyestes.*" This allusive quote is intended to reveal Dupin's identity to the Minister in the letter subsequently substituted by the former for the letter subtly palmed by the latter in his initial substitution of the incriminating letter. Dupin had even imitated "the D— cipher, very readily, by means of a seal formed of bread" (in French "avec du pain") Nothing is where it is supposed to be, especially letters of which the sender and receiver are identical. In coinciding with himself on paper the Minister is clearly out of place. All identities are in flux: we are in the realm of literature or, to use a shorter word for it, art.

The principle applied by Dupin to solve the mystery is supposedly based on Tommaso Campanella's mind-reading system, the key to which is "identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent"; a

form of substitution that novelists and actors are still using to flesh out their characters. Correctly choosing to identify with the Minister's *poetic*, and not just his mathematical ability is what put Dupin on the right track. The imaginative, creative individual does not opt for the obvious course of action—looking for the perfect hiding place—but keeps his opponent busy guessing about details, while leaving the object of his search in full view. Dupin illustrates his rationale with the examples of a game that involves finding place names on a map and "over-largely lettered signs and placards of the street [that] escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious." If we can't say the same for graffiti (see entry 54), is it because of its apparent gratuitousness?

The point I am trying to make is that this story, which claims several times to deal with a "self-evident" mystery, is a series of variations on the theme of letters, in every sense of the word: a letter of the alphabet (initial), a written letter, and "Letters" as a synecdoche for literature. In other words, this tale is a smoke-filled meditation on the fate of the *homme de lettres*, the poet, who is one step above the fool, according to the Prefect of Police, one notch above the mathematician, according to Dupin, and not above duplicity and delusions, according to Poe. In a letter to a friend in 1849, Poe wrote: "Literature is the most noble of professions. In fact, it is about the only one fit for a man." Two generations later, Marcel Proust came to the realization that "the true life, life finally discovered and elucidated, and therefore the only life that is truly lived is literature." Art is self-evidently life—for the artist.

Of course, the compromising contents of the letter written to the Queen of France are never revealed to the reader: the romance or intrigue it contained remain as unknown as if the letter had never been opened, the story never written—or read (and our time been used for other things besides killing it). One letter suffices to identify or incriminate a person and set the wheels of Destiny in motion; two letters will keep us guessing, and three letters make a name. The author, who

lived his entire life only one letter short of being called Mr. Poet, redeemed his vocation by writing a self-effacing self-portrait.

Poe leaves many clues. His super-alter-ego Dupin, describing his discovery of the letter says: "But, then, the *radicalness* of these differences, which was excessive; the dirt, the soiled and torn condition of the paper, so inconsistent with the *true* methodical habits of D—, and so suggestive of a design to delude the beholder into an idea of the worthlessness of the document." Who is trying to delude whom about what? Whodunwhat? The discrepancy alone between the condition of the letter and D—'s habits is enough to make it suspect. Finally, in glossing over the detail of the black seal so readily to be faked with some bread, Dupin underplays precisely what he and the Minister have in common: the initial letter "D." Just when Poe identifies the most with Dupin's clarity of mind and vision, he loses sight of his own, as we do of ours. This imperceptible discontinuity, like the blind spot in the eye where the optic nerve exits the retina, is inevitable because it is one of the conditions, if not the condition for art. What we see is indissociably linked to what we do not see. The doors of perception, even when they are cleansed, are in the way, for—like consciousness—they are transparent.

To quote Poe's meditative detective again (emphasis mine): "I protracted my visit as long as possible, and, while I maintained a most animated discussion with the Minister, on a topic which I knew well had never failed to interest and excite him, I kept my attention riveted upon the letter."

PS: Of course I consulted with Poe experts to see what the status of the detail of the Minister's black seal was, but, whether already noticed or finally brought to their attention, it did not seem to be a topic of concern. At worst it was an ineffable curiosity, at best, further proof of Poe's quirky genius. The Deconstructivist literature that thrived on Lacan's 1955 Seminar also gave it short shrift. As with the "R" in the navel, the maddening thing is the impossibility of proving that it is there. This makes it a perfect symbol for (self) consciousness.