Mysteries We Reread, Mysteries of Rereading: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story; Also Lacan, Derrida, and Johnson*

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I

Let me start with a simple-minded question: How does one write analytic detective fiction as high art when the genre's basic structure, its central narrative mechanism, seems to discourage the unlimited rereading associated with serious writing? That is, if the point of an analytic detective story is the deductive solution of a mystery, how does the writer keep the achievement of that solution from exhausting the reader's interest in the story? How does he write a work that can be reread by people other than those with poor memories? I use the term "analytic detective fiction" here to distinguish the genre invented by Poe in the Dupin tales of the 1840s from stories whose main character is a detective but whose main concern is not analysis but adventure, stories whose true genre is less detective fiction than quest romance, as one of the masters of the adventure mode, Raymond Chandler, implicitly acknowledged when he gave the name Mallory to an early prototype of his detective Philip Marlowe. For Chandler, the private investigator simply represents a plausible form of modern knight-errant.

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In his essay "The Simple Art of Murder," he says that a detective story is the detective's "adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure."[1] The emphasis in Chandler's remarks, as in his fiction, is on the detective's character and his adventures, with the revelation of a hidden truth simply serving as a device to illuminate the former and motivate the latter. But in the pure analytic detective story the matter is otherwise. As a character, Dupin is as thin as the paper he's printed on. As for his adventures, they amount to little more than reading newspaper accounts of the crime and talking with the Prefect of police and the narrator in the privacy of his apartment. What gives the analytic detective genre its special appeal is that quality which the Goncourt brothers noted on first reading Poe. In an 1856 journal entry they described Poe's stories as "a new literary world" bearing "signs of the literature of the twentieth century—love giving place to deductions . . . the interest of the story moved from the heart to the head . . . from the drama to the solution."[2] Precisely because it is a genre that grows out of an interest in deductions and solutions rather than in love and drama, the analytic detective story shows little interest in character, managing at best to produce caricatures—those monsters of idiosyncrasy from Holmes to Poirot. In its purest form it puts all its eggs in the basket of plot, and a specialized kind of plot at that. The problem is that this basket seems to be one that can be emptied in a single reading.

Related to this difficulty is another. If the writer does his work properly, if he succeeds in building up a sense of the mysterious, of some dark secret or intricately knotted problem, then he has to face the fact that there simply exists no hidden truth or guilty knowledge whose revelation will not seem anticlimactic compared to an antecedent sense of mystery and the infinite speculative possibilities it permits. Borges, one of the contemporary masters of the analytic detective story, acknowledges this difficulty in his tale "Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth." He says that one of his characters, "steeped in detective stories, thought that the solution of a mystery is always less impressive than the mystery itself."[3] But if in the analytic detective story the solution is always in some sense an anticlimax that in dissipating the mystery exhausts the story's interest for us, an interest in speculative reasoning which the mystery empowers, then how does one write this kind of story as a serious, that is, rereadable, literary form? How

does one both present the analytic solution of a mystery and at the same time conserve the sense of the mysterious on which analysis thrives?

Given the predictable economy of a critical essay, I think the reader is safe in assuming that if I didn't consider Poe's Dupin stories to be, on the one hand, archetypes of analytic detective fiction, and on the other, serious literary works that demand and repay rereading, there would be no reason for my evoking at this length the apparent incompatibility of these modes and thus the writer's problem in reconciling them. All of which brings me to the task of uncrumpling that much crumpled thing "The Purloined Letter" to consider the way that this problem of a mystery with a repeatable solution, a solution that conserves (because it endlessly refigures) the sense of the mysterious, lies at the very origin of the analytic detective story.

II

My approach to "The Purloined Letter" will be along what has recently become a well-worn path. I want to look briefly at three readings of the story that form a cumulative series of interpretations, each successive reading commenting both on the story and on the previous reading(s) in the series. They are Jacques Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter' " (1957), Jacques Derrida's "The Purveyor of Truth" (1975), and Barbara Johnson's "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida" (1978). Each of these essays presents a lengthy, complex argument in which "The Purloined Letter" is treated as a pretext, which is to say, read as a parable of the act of analysis. However, I am not so much interested here in following the convolutions of their individual arguments as in isolating a thread that runs through all three, a clue to conduct us through labyrinthine passages. And that thread is the position that each essay takes on what we might call the numerical/geometrical structure of the story.

Let us begin with Lacan. He says that the story consists of "two scenes, the first of which we shall straightway designate the primal scene, and by no means inadvertently, since the second may be considered its repetition."[4] The first or primal scene takes place in "the royal *boudoir*" (p. 41), the second scene in "the Minister's office" (p. 42). And according to Lacan, each of these scenes has a triangular structure: each is composed of "three logical moments"

(p. 43) "structuring three glances, borne by three subjects, incarnated each time by different characters":

> The first is a glance that sees nothing: the King and the police.
>
> The second, a glance which sees that the first sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides: the Queen, then the Minister.
>
> The third sees that the first two glances leave what should be hidden exposed to whoever would seize it: the Minister, and finally Dupin.
>
> (p. 44)

Thus in the royal boudoir, the King does not see the incriminating letter which the Queen in her haste has hidden in the open, leaving it with its address uppermost in plain sight on a table. And the Queen, seeing that the King doesn't see the letter, mistakes his blindness for the letter's concealment, thus leaving herself vulnerable to the Minister who sees both the King's glance and the Queen's and realizes that the letter can be seized before the Queen's very eyes precisely because she dare not do anything to attract the King's attention to it. Similarly in the second scene, at the Minister's residence, the letter, having been turned inside out and readdressed in a female hand, is once again hidden in plain sight in a card rack on the mantelpiece. And this time the police, who have searched the Minister's quarters repeatedly without noticing the letter, represent that first glance which sees nothing; while the Minister, who mistakes the blindness of the police for the concealment of the letter, represents the second glance, and Dupin represents the third glance that sees what the first two miss, i.e., that the letter hidden in the open is his for the taking. The figure who participates in both these triangular scenes is the Minister, and his shifting from the position of the third glance in the initial scene to that of the second glance in its repetition exhibits the special vulnerability to self-delusion, to a blind spot, which the possession of the letter conveys.

Consider, now, Derrida's critique of this reading, keeping in mind that in his essay "The Purveyor of Truth" Derrida is motivated less by an interest in Poe or "The Purloined Letter" than by a desire to score points off Lacan. As Johnson points out, Derrida, in a lengthy footnote to his book *Positions*, sketches the argument that will become "The Purveyor of Truth" and cites in this context Lacan's multiple "*acts of aggression*" against him since the publication of *De la grammatologie* in *Critique* in 1965.[5] Obviously, Derrida takes the case of "The Purloined Letter" for one of the same

reasons that Dupin did—the Minister once did Dupin "an evil turn" (Poe, 3: 993) at Vienna, and Dupin sees the affair of the letter as an opportunity to get even. The wit of Derrida's essay lies in the way that it uses Lacan's reading of "The Purloined Letter" against itself, for if Lacan believes that with his interpretation of the story he has, as it were, gained possession of Poe's "Purloined Letter," has made its meaning his own, then Derrida will show him that the possession of that letter, as Lacan himself pointed out, brings with it a blind spot. In his essay Derrida sets out to repeat the encounter between Dupin and the Minister with himself in the role of Dupin and Lacan in the role of the Minister.

Derrida attacks Lacan's reading of the story on a variety of points, but the one that concerns us has to do with Lacan's notion of the triangular structure of each of the two scenes in the tale. Derrida agrees that the story consists of two scenes, but not the two on which Lacan focusses. He points out that the scene in the royal boudoir and the subsequent scene at the Minister's residence are two narrated scenes within the framing artifice of the story, but that the story itself consists of two scenes of narration—the first scene being the Prefect's initial visit to Dupin during which the Prefect recounts the events in the royal boudoir, and the second scene being the Prefect's subsequent visit during which Dupin recounts the events at the Minister's residence. While the narrators of the two *narrated scenes* in the royal boudoir and at the Minister's residence are respectively the Prefect and Dupin, the narrator of the two *scenes of narration* at Dupin's lodgings is Dupin's unnamed companion. Thus, according to Derrida, Lacan reduces the four-sided structure of the scene of narration—what Derrida calls "the scene of writing"—to the three-sided structure of the narrated scene "by overlooking the narrator's position, the narrator's involvement in the content of what he seems to be recounting."[6] In ignoring the presence of the narrator of "The Purloined Letter," Lacan cuts "a fourth side" out of the narrated figure "to leave merely triangles" (p. 54). And he does this, says Derrida, precisely because as a psychoanalyst, Lacan projects upon Poe's story the structure of the Oedipal triangle in his desire to read "The Purloined Letter" as an allegory of psychoanalysis or "*an allegory of the signifier*" (Johnson, p. 115).

Now since in his critique of Lacan's interpretation of "The Purloined Letter" Derrida aims to get even with Lacan by being one up on him, and since Lacan in his reading of the numerical struc-

ture of the tale has already played the numbers one, two, and three (the tale is composed of two scenes, the second of which, by repeating the triangular structure of the first, creates a sameness or oneness between the two), then being one up on Lacan means playing the next open number (four); and that is what Derrida does in arguing that the structure of the scenes is not triangular but quadrangular. However, whether Derrida arrives at this quadrangular structure by adding one to three or by doubling two is a problematic point, a point on which Johnson focusses in her critique of Lacan's and Derrida's readings of the tale's numerical structure.

As Johnson notes, Derrida objects to the triangular structure which Lacan sees in the repeated scenes because this structure, derived from the Oedipal triangle, represents in Derrida's opinion a characteristic psychoanalytic attempt to dismiss or absorb the uncanny effects of doubling, a doubling which Derrida maintains is everywhere present in the tale. Doubling tends, of course, to be a standard element of the analytic detective story, in that the usual method of apprehending the criminal involves the detective's doubling the criminal's thought processes so as to anticipate his next move and end up one jump ahead of him. And, of course, the number associated with doubling is usually four rather than two, for what we refer to as doubling is almost always splitting and doubling. Which is to say, the figure of the double externally duplicates an internal division in the protagonist's self (but with the master/slave polarity of that division characteristically reversed), so that doubling tends to be a structure of four halves problematically balanced across the inner/outer limit of the self rather than a structure of two separate, opposing wholes. Thus in the first Dupin story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," the narrator says that while observing Dupin in the exercise of his "peculiar analytic ability," he entertained "the fancy of a double Dupin—the creative and the resolvent" in accordance with "the old philosophy of the Bi-Part Soul" (2: 533). And in "The Purloined Letter" the Minister, as both poet and mathematician, is represented as having this same dual intellectual power. In matching wits with the Minister, Dupin first doubles the Minister's thought processes—a mental operation that Dupin illustrates by telling the story of the schoolboy who always won at the game of even and odd—and he then replays, that is, temporally doubles, the scene in which the Minister originally seized the letter, but with himself now in the

Minister's role, thus shifting the Minister into the role played by the Queen in the original event and evoking the destabilizing reversal-into-the-opposite inherent in doubling.

As Johnson notes, Derrida thinks that "the problem with psychoanalytical triangularity . . . is not that it contains the wrong number of terms, but that it presupposes the possibility of a successful dialectical mediation and harmonious normalization, or *Aufhebung,* of desire. The three terms in the Oedipal triad enter into an opposition whose resolution resembles the synthetic moment of a Hegelian dialectic" (p. 122). But that synthetic moment, that successful dialectical mediation of desire, is precisely what the uncanny destabilizing effect of doubling constantly subverts, for in the Oedipal triangle each of the three positions functions as one pole of a mutually constitutive opposition with one of the other positions and thus each position is subject to being reversed into its opposite. There exists in the Oedipal triangle, then, no privileged position that is above or outside the uncanny effects of doubling, no exempt, objective position from which to mediate or regularize the subjective interaction of the other two positions.

As with Derrida's reading of Lacan, the wit of Johnson's reading of Derrida lies in the way that she doubles Derrida's own insights back upon themselves to make them problematic. Thus in dealing with Derrida's attempt to be one up on Lacan by playing the number four to Lacan's three, Johnson assimilates their opposed readings of the numerical structure of the tale to the game of even and odd, the game which Dupin proposed as an illustration of the way that one doubles the thought processes of an opponent in order to be one jump ahead of him. Derrida opts for a quadrangular structure, that is, he plays the even number four, in order to evoke the uncanniness, the oddness of doubling; while Lacan opts for a triangular structure by playing the odd number three, in order to enforce the regularizing or normalizing effect of the dialectical triad. In this game of even and odd, Derrida and Lacan end up as reciprocal opposites, as specular doubles of one another: Derrida asserts the oddness of evenness, while Lacan affirms the evenness of oddness. Given the destabilizing reversal-into-the-opposite inherent in doubling, Johnson sees the opposition between Derrida's and Lacan's interpretations as an "oscillation" between the former's "unequivocal statements of undecidability" and the latter's "ambiguous assertions of decidability" (p. 146).

As to Johnson's own position on "The Purloined Letter," her

reading of Lacan and Derrida is meant to free her from having to take a position on the numerical structure of the tale, or more exactly, to free her from having to take a *numerical* position on that structure. She does not intend, for example, to play the next open number (five); for since she has reduced Lacan's and Derrida's readings of the numerical structure of the story to the specular game of even and odd, there exist only two numerical positions that one can take on that structure—even or odd—and these, Johnson contends, have already been played by Derrida and Lacan without any clear conclusion. Johnson's strategy is to call into question the whole concern with numbers. At one point she asks, "But can what is at stake here really be reduced to a mere numbers game?", and a bit later she answers, "Clearly, in these questions, the very notion of a number becomes problematic, and the argument on the basis of numbers can no longer be read literally" (p. 121). As Johnson sees it, taking a position on the numerical structure of the tale means, for Lacan and Derrida, taking a numerical position, choosing a number, but that means playing the game of even and odd, the game of trying to be one up on a specular, antithetical double. And playing that game means endlessly repeating the structure of "The Purloined Letter" in which being one up inevitably leads to being one down. For if the structure created by the repeated scenes in the tale involves doubling the thought processes of one's opponent in order to use his own methods against him—as Dupin does with the Minister, as Derrida does with Lacan, and as Johnson does with Derrida—then the very method by which one outwits one's opponent, by which one comes out one up on him, is the same method that will be employed against oneself by the next player in the game, the next interpreter in the series, in order to leave the preceding interpreter one down.

Is it possible, then, to interpret "The Purloined Letter" without duplicating in the interpretive act that reversal-into-the-opposite inherent in the mechanism of seizing the letter as that mechanism is described in the tale? Is it possible to generate an insight without a blind spot in it, a flaw that allows the insight subsequently to be turned against itself? Clearly, the desire for such an invulnerable insight is at work in Johnson's essay and accounts for the at times disconcerting level of self-consciousness which she tries to maintain regarding her own methodological stance, her own critical assumptions. For Johnson the refusal to take a numerical position on

the structure of the tale, i.e., to play the next open number, is an effort to avoid the game of trying to be one up by adding the number one to the opponent's numerical position, as Derrida does in playing the number four to Lacan's three; for that game will simply turn into an oscillation between even and odd running to infinity. But is it possible for Johnson to avoid becoming involved in this numbers game simply by refusing to choose a specific number with which to characterize the geometrical/numerical structure of the tale? Doesn't the very form of her essay—as a critique of Derrida's critique of Lacan's reading of "The Purloined Letter"—involve her in the numbers game? In situating her essay as the third in a series of three critical readings, Johnson places herself in that third position which, in the structure governing the wandering of the purloined letter, is the position of maximum insight, but also the position in which the observer is subject to mistaking his insight concerning the subjective interaction of the other two glances for an objective viewpoint above such interaction. And indeed, how are we to describe the relationship between Johnson's interpretation and those of Lacan and Derrida? Are they linked in a triangular structure in which Lacan and Derrida face off as antithetical doubles, while Johnson, by refusing to become involved in the game of even and odd, occupies a position of "successful dialectical mediation" above them, a Hegelian synthesis of their positions? Or are they involved in a quadrangular structure in which Lacan and Derrida are reciprocal halves of one pole of a mutually constitutive opposition (i.e., the pole of trying to be one up on a specular double), while Johnson occupies the other pole of this opposition by doubling back Lacan's and Derrida's methods against them in order to avoid this game of one up? Indeed, Johnson's final comment on her own methodology invokes the image of Derrida's quadrangular frame: ". . . my own theoretical 'frame of reference' is precisely, to a very large extent, the writings of Lacan and Derrida. The frame is thus framed again by part of its content; the sender again receives his own message backward from the receiver" (p. 146).

Johnson's essay is at odds with itself, as she is the first to acknowledge. Indeed, it is precisely her strategy to present the opposed aspects of her essay—such as its explicit refusal, on the one hand, to take a numerical position on the structure of the tale, coupled with its implicit assumption, on the other hand, of a numerical position in representing its own relationship to the two

earlier critical essays, a numerical position that reinscribes the question of a triangular versus a quadrangular structure present in the tale—precisely her strategy to present these opposed aspects of her essay as an aporia, as a trope of undecidability not unlike the one which Paul de Man describes in the passage Johnson uses as the epigraph to her book *The Critical Difference,* the book whose final chapter is her essay on Derrida and Lacan. In that epigraph de Man evokes the aporia between grammar and rhetoric by citing as an example the case in which Edith Bunker asks her husband Archie if he wants his bowling shoes laced over or laced under—to which the irascible Archie replies, "What's the difference?" In terms of grammar Archie's reply asks for the difference between two alternatives, but in terms of rhetoric his reply means "Whatever the difference is, it's not important enough to make a difference to me." De Man remarks, "The same grammatical pattern engenders two meanings that are mutually exclusive: the literal meaning asks for the concept (difference) whose existence is denied by the figurative meaning" (Johnson, p. v). It is in this same vein that Johnson at the end of her essay, after having described the opposition between Derrida's and Lacan's positions as "the oscillation between unequivocal statements of undecidability and ambiguous assertions of decidability," concludes, " 'Undecidability' can no more be used as the last word than 'destination'. . . . The 'undeterminable' is not opposed to the determinable; 'dissemination' is not opposed to repetition. If we could be sure of the difference between the determinable and the undeterminable, the undeterminable would be comprehended within the determinable. What is undecidable is whether a thing is decidable or not" (p. 146).

Now what are we to make of these words? By which I mean not just what do these words say grammatically but what do they convey rhetorically, for what purpose are they being said in this context. I think the key lies in Johnson's statement that " 'Undecidability' can no more be used as a last word than 'destination.' " At the point she says this, Johnson is nearing her own destination, the end of her essay, and is faced with the formal requirement of saying a last word and thus with the question of whether a last word can be said in the oft-renewed critical discussion of "The Purloined Letter." Having to say a last word, she says in effect, "The last word is that there is no last word." This type of statement which says one thing grammatically and means its opposite rhetor-

ically occurs again and again in her essay. As we noted, it is the strategy at work when Johnson refuses to take a numerical position on the structure of the tale at the same time that she implicitly assumes a numerical position in relation to the two earlier critical readings which her own essay retrospectively groups into a series along with itself. It is at work again when she turns Derrida's insights on doubling back upon themselves to tell Derrida that it is impossible to be one up on his specular double Lacan, for though what she says on a grammatical level is that it is impossible to be one up in such an encounter, the rhetorical effect of her statement is to leave her one up on her specular double Derrida. And this strategy is at work once again when she decisively concludes, "What is undecidable is whether a thing is decidable or not."

These instances of an aporia between grammar and rhetoric occur in statements that are in one way or another self-reflexive, statements that are themselves included in the class of things to which they refer. A simple example of such a self-including statement would be the sentence "All statements containing seven words are false." Precisely because the sentence is itself a statement made up of seven words, we are faced with a paradox: if this statement is true, it is false, and if it is false, it is true. Similarly, in an aporia between grammar and rhetoric we are faced, as de Man notes, with a single grammatical pattern that engenders two mutually exclusive meanings. By very reason of the fact that they include themselves in the class of things to which they refer, these statements double back upon themselves and exhibit that uncanny reversal-into-the-opposite inherent in doubling. One thinks in this connection of Russell's paradox. Distinguishing between two kinds of classes (those which do not include themselves as members and those which do), Russell calls the first class "normal" and the second "non-normal" and he then doubles back upon itself this distinction between nonself-including and self-including classes by asking whether *the class of all normal classes* is a normal or a non-normal class. By definition *the class of all normal classes* includes within itself all normal classes. Consequently, if it is itself a normal class, it must be included in itself. But self-inclusion is the distinguishing characteristic of a non-normal class. *The class of all "normal classes"* is, then, a concept whose form and content are at odds: the concept involves, on the one hand, a formal notion of *class* as absolutely inclusive, which is to say, as ultimately self-inclusive, that is contradicted, on the other hand, by the content, by the specific

definition of the *"classes"* which the former is to include completely within itself. As a result the class of all normal classes is normal only if it is non-normal, and non-normal only if it is normal. Part of the infinite fascination of paradoxes of self-inclusion is, of course, that they seem to reflect in the facing mirrors of language and logic the mysterious nature of self-consciousness as that which seeks to include wholly within itself an exact representation of that which by its very essence cannot wholly include itself.

At the very start of her essay Johnson sets the tone for all the self-including statements that are to follow when she remarks that in Poe's tale, Lacan's reading, and Derrida's critique, "it is the *act of analysis* which seems to occupy the center of the discursive stage, and the *act of analysis of the act of analysis* which in some way disrupts that centrality. In the resulting asymmetrical, abyssal structure, no analysis—including this one—can intervene without transforming and repeating other elements in the sequence, which is thus not a stable sequence, but which nevertheless produces certain regular effects" (p. 110). The key phrase, of course, is "no analysis—including this one." It has about it the brisk American quality of Mark Twain's "No general statement is worth a damn—including this one"—a general statement worth a damn only if general statements aren't worth a damn. The very fact that Johnson makes an analytic statement that includes itself, which is to say, an analysis of her own analysis, in the sentence immediately following her statement that it is the act of analysis of the act of analysis that skews analysis in Poe, Lacan, and Derrida is her way of announcing her strategy at the start. It is not that Johnson will do anything different in her essay from what Lacan and Derrida have done in theirs. Indeed, it is not clear that she thinks that anything different can be done at this point inasmuch as Lacan and Derrida have already replayed the structure of the tale in a critical register by acting out the game of even and odd in their opposing positions. What will be different in her version is that these positions will be repeated with a complete awareness of their implications, a total critical self-consciousness that aims to create an insight without a blind spot; for what is at issue here is not so much whether one's critical argument is logically true or false, or one's reading of the tale perceptive or dull, but whether one's interpretive stance is methodologically self-aware or methodologically naive. In its translation from fiction to criticism, the project of analyzing the act of analysis becomes in effect the program of being

infinitely self-conscious about self-consciousness. Or put another way, if the structure that we find in "The Purloined Letter" involves doubling an opponent's thought processes in order to turn his own methods against him, then the only defense against having the same strategy repeated against oneself by the next player is to produce an insight or take a position that is already self-consciously doubled back upon itself, as is the case with the type of self-including statement that says one thing grammatically but conveys its opposite rhetorically. For a position that knowingly includes itself and its opposite seems to leave no ground on which it can be undermined.

III

The commitment to an increasingly self-conscious analytic posture that animates this cumulative series of interpretations produces at last a kind of intellectual vertigo, a not uncharacteristic side-effect of thought about thought—the rational animal turning in circles to catch itself by a tale it doesn't have. And certainly no one enjoyed creating this vertiginous effect more than did Poe, an effect that he imaged as dizziness at the edge of a vortex or on the brink of a precipice. That the giddy, self-dissolving effect of thought about thought—what Johnson calls the "asymmetrical, abyssal structure" of analyzing the act of analysis—forms the continuing theme of the Dupin stories is announced in the opening sentence of the first tale, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." The story begins with the narrator's lengthy prefatory remarks on the nature of the analytical power, remarks that conclude by presenting the detective story as a "commentary upon the propositions just advanced" (2: 531). But those prefatory remarks start with this curious proposition: "The mental features discoursed of as the analytical are, in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis" (2: 527). Now inasmuch as this statement initiates the narrator's own brief analysis of the analytical power, it is self-reflexive: as an analytic statement about the non-susceptibility of analysis to being analyzed, the statement is included in the class of things to which it refers, but what the statement says in effect is that analytic statements cannot wholly include themselves. In analyzing the act of analysis, self-conscious thought doubles back upon itself to discover that it cannot absolutely coincide with itself. This insight about the nature of thought is, of course, at least as old in our tradition as the philosophies of Zeno and Parmenides and as new

as Gödel's proof and Borges's (and Carroll's and Royce's) map of natural size. It is the paradoxical insight that if one considers the act of thinking and the content of thought as two distinguishable things—as it seems one must in dealing with self-consciousness, with thought that is able to represent itself to itself, able to take itself as its own object—, then the attempt to analyze the act of analysis, to include wholly the act of thinking within the context of thought, will be a progression of the order n + 1 to infinity. Which is to say that there will always be one more step needed in order to make the act of thinking coincide with the content of thought.

Since the self-including gesture of analyzing the act of analysis involves a doubling back in which self-consciousness, attempting to be absolutely even with itself, finds that it is originally and essentially at odds with itself, it is not surprising that Dupin, in illustrating the way that one doubles the thought processes of an opponent, gives as an example "the game of 'even and odd' " (3: 984). In this game "one player holds in his hand a number" of marbles "and demands of another whether that number is even or odd. If the guess is right, the guesser wins one; if wrong, he loses one" (3: 984). Dupin then tells the story of an eight-year-old boy who was so good at this guessing game that he won all the marbles at his school. The boy's "mode of reasoning" involved "an identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent" (3: 984), and this doubling of the opponent's thought processes was achieved by a physical doubling of his appearance. The boy explained to Dupin: "I fashion the expression of my face, as accurately as possible, in accordance with the expression" of the opponent "and then wait to see what thoughts or sentiments arise in my mind or heart, as if to match or correspond with the expression" (3: 984-85). The narrator comments that "the identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent, depends, . . . upon the accuracy with which the opponent's intellect is admeasured" (3: 985); and Dupin, agreeing with this observation, adds that "the Prefect and his cohort fail so frequently, first, by default of this identification, and, secondly, by ill-admeasurement, or rather through non-admeasurement, of the intellect with which they are engaged. They consider only their *own* ideas of ingenuity; and, in searching for anything hidden, advert only to the modes in which *they* would have hidden it . . . but when the cunning of the individual felon is diverse in character from their own, the felon foils them, of course. This always happens when it is above their own,

and very usually when it is below. They have no variation of principle in their investigations" (3: 985).

Now what is going on here? Dupin cannot be the close reasoner that he is reputed to be and not realize that what he has just said undermines his use of the game of even and odd as an illustration of the way one doubles the thought processes of an opponent in order to be one up on him. First of all, if "the identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent, depends, . . . upon the accuracy with which the opponent's intellect is admeasured," then it cannot be that the Prefect and his men fail, "first, by default of this identification, and, secondly, by ill-admeasurement, or . . . non-admeasurement," for if the identification follows from admeasurement, the Prefect's first failure would have to be in admeasuring the opponent's intellect. And if the reason that the Prefect and his men fail so frequently in this admeasurement is that "they consider only their *own* ideas of ingenuity," that they are unable to imagine or conceive of the workings of a mind "diverse in character from their own" (always the case when the level of the mind is above their own and usually the case when it is below), then is there anything that occurs in the rest of Poe's tale that would lead us to believe this observation of Dupin's about the reason for the Prefect's failure? Which is to say, if the Prefect and his men can only catch felons whose minds are similar to their own and if what they need in this case is the ability to imagine the workings of a mind radically different from their own, then does Dupin's method of outwitting the Minister provide us with any evidence that this ability to imagine a mind radically different from one's own really exists? In fact, isn't all of the tale's emphasis on the resemblance between Dupin and the Minister, on their possessing the same dual creative/resolvent power, part of a plot line in which Dupin outwits the Minister only because their minds are so much alike? Isn't it precisely because the Minister has hidden the letter at his residence in the same way that the Queen hid it in the royal boudoir—by turning it over and leaving it out in the open—that Dupin already knows where to look for the letter when he visits the Minister? And doesn't Dupin recover the letter by replaying the same scenario by which the Minister originally stole it?

Isn't all this simply a device to make us realize that it is impossible to imagine or conceive of a mind whose workings are radically different from one's own? We don't have any direct access to another's thoughts. Our ideas of the workings of another person's

mind may be derived from what that person says or does or tells us he is thinking, but our ideas of another's mind are still *our* ideas, a projection that we make of another mind's otherness to one's own based on the only immediate experience that one's mind has of psychic otherness, the self's original otherness to itself, that difference that constitutes personal identity. In his story "Morella" (1835) Poe quotes Locke's definition of personal identity as "the sameness of a rational being" (2: 226). But one immediately thinks, "Sameness as opposed to what?" For in differential terms, it makes no sense to speak of the rational being's continuing sameness with itself unless there is also a sense in which the rational being is continually different from itself. In "Morella" Poe says, "Since by person we understand an intelligent essence having reason, and since there is a consciousness which always accompanies thinking, it is this consciousness which makes every one to be that which he calls 'himself'—thereby distinguishing him from other beings that think, and giving him his personal identity" (2: 226). It is this difference of thought from itself—which Poe evokes here as the difference between thinking and "a consciousness which always accompanies thinking"—that enables the rational being to recognize its sameness with itself and thus recognize its difference from others, distinguish itself "from other beings that think." It is precisely because the self's thought of another mind's otherness to it reflects the otherness of thought to itself that the effort to imagine the thought processes of an opponent produces a specular, antithetical double of the self, the self's own projection of psychic difference. And consequently, for all that "The Purloined Letter" purports to be about the way in which one effects "an identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent," it is in fact about that psychic difference which permits thought to be identified with itself, that difference which constitutes self-identity but which prevents thought from ever absolutely coinciding with itself, indeed, which constitutes self-identity precisely *because* it prevents thought from being absolutely even with itself. And it is this difference, this condition of self-conscious thought's being originally and essentially at odds with itself, that Poe evokes at the very start of the Dupin stories when he says that the "mental features discoursed of as the analytical are, in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis."

As is often the case in his fiction, Poe, using the picture language of radicals, emblematizes this latent meaning on the level of etymology, a level to which he explicitly directs our attention in "The

Purloined Letter" when he has Dupin, in arguing against those who equate analysis with algebra, remark, "If a term is of any importance—if words derive any value from applicability—then 'analysis' conveys 'algebra' about as much as, in Latin, '*ambitus*' implies 'ambition,' '*religio*,' 'religion,' or '*homines honesti*,' a set of *honorable* men" (3: 987). Since in each of these examples an English word has a meaning different from that of its Latin root, the inference seems clear: in "The Purloined Letter" "if a term is of any importance," we should submit that term to philological analysis to see if the root from which it derives has different or additional meanings compared to its English form, meanings that might alter, reverse, or deepen the significance of the passages in which these words appear.

Let me apply this principle suggested by Dupin's remark to two interlocking pairs of words in the tale. On his first visit, the Prefect introduces the affair of the letter like this: "The fact is, the business is *very* simple indeed, and I make no doubt that we can manage it sufficiently well ourselves; but then I thought Dupin would like to hear the details of it, because it is so excessively *odd*." To which Dupin replies, "Simple and odd" (3: 975). Dupin's emphatic repetition of the words is meant to fix them in our minds so that later when he describes the game of even and odd, we hear the echo and link the pairs. And to make sure that we don't miss the connection, Dupin, immediately after mentioning the game of even and odd, says, "This game is simple" (3: 984).

Simple, even, odd—what are their roots? The word "simple" comes from the Latin *simplex*, meaning "single," "unmixed," "uncompounded."[7] The word "even" derives from the Anglo-Saxon *efne*, meaning "flat," "level," and ultimately from the Indo-European base **im-nos-*, meaning "what is the same," and containing the adverbial base **im-*, meaning "just like" (p. 503). The word "odd" derives from the Old Norse *oddi*, meaning a "point of land, triangle, hence (from the third angle) odd number" (p. 1017). Three words and at the root of each a number—simple, single, *one;* even, things just alike, *two;* odd, a triangular point of land, *three*. And these three words are grouped into two pairs—simple/odd, even/odd—that contain, as it were, four syntactic places between them which the three words fill by having one of the words repeated. The doubling of the word "odd" links the two pairs; it gives them their element of sameness, evoking that condition of being at odds with itself, that difference with itself, which constitutes the sameness of a rational being (a condition of being at odds

with itself that is most clearly perceived when thought tries to be absolutely even with itself). The three words—both through their meanings and through the way that they are paired and linked—are an emblem of the numerical structure that governs the tale, which is to say, of the numerical steps or geometrical patterns that self-consciousness goes through in trying to analyze itself.

Dupin says that the game of even and odd is simple, and throughout the Dupin stories Poe associates simplicity with the highest, purest form of ratiocination. It is in this vein that Dupin suggests to the Prefect on his first visit that "the very simplicity" of the affair of the letter constitutes its oddness: "Perhaps the mystery is a little *too* plain . . . A little *too* self-evident" (3: 975). And later Dupin says that the Minister, in hiding the letter, "would be driven, as a matter of course, to *simplicity,* if not deliberately induced to it as a matter of choice" (3: 989). As in that "game of puzzles . . . played upon a map" (3: 989), the Minister would choose a hiding place that would "escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious," relying on the fact that "the intellect suffers to pass unnoticed those considerations which are too obtrusively and too palpably self-evident" (3: 990). But what is that simple thing whose very simplicity makes it so odd, that thing which is so mysterious because so obvious, hiding out in the open "immediately beneath the nose of the whole world" (3: 990)? What but self-consciousness, that condition of being at odds with itself that constitutes the sameness, the singleness, the simplicity of a rational being?

By definition a number is odd if when the number is divided by two, there is a remainder of one. And by that definition the first odd number is three. In that simple game of even and odd in which self-consciousness analyzes itself, the question inevitably arises as to whether, when the mind's desire to be absolutely even with itself is divided into the mind's essential condition of being at odds with itself, the one that is always left over is the same as the number one that precedes two, that is, the same as that mythic, original, undivided unity prior to all paring/pairing. Or put another way, when the mind tries to make the act of thinking coincide absolutely with the content of thought only to find that there is always one more step needed to achieve this coincidence, is the infinite progression that results simply the mirror image, the antithetical double, of a Zenonian infinite regression which, by dividing a quantity in half, then dividing the half in half, then dividing the quarter in half and so on to infinity, seeks a lower limit,

a part that cannot be halved again, a thing so small that, being indivisible, it represents an undivided unity, an original one? Poe is too good both as philosopher and philologist not to know that the simple thing that is self-consciousness could never be as simple as that. Indeed, if the mind were ever able to make the act of thinking and the content of thought coincide absolutely so that there was no difference between them, then self-consciousness, that self-identity constituted by thought's difference from itself, would simply go out like a light. Such an undifferentiated one would be indistinguishable from zero. Though the root of the word "simple," the Latin *simplex,* means "single," "unmixed," "uncompounded," the roots of the word *simplex*—the Latin words *semel,* meaning "once," "a single time," and *plico,* meaning "to fold, fold together"[8]—make it clear that to be unmixed or uncompounded does not mean to be undifferentiated. For in the picture language of these radicals we can see that a thing which is single-fold is something—like a sheet of paper, a letter—that in being folded a single time is doubled back upon itself. That the image of self-consciousness as a *simple* fold doubling an inscribed surface back on itself was in Poe's mind when he plotted the folding/refolding of the purloined letter can be inferred from an 1845 poem on folding money called "Epigram For Wall Street" attributed to him:

> I'll tell you a plan for gaining wealth,
> Better than banking, trade or leases—
> Take a bank note and fold it up,
> And then you will find your money in *creases!*
> This wonderful plan, without danger or loss,
> Keeps your cash in your hands, where nothing can trouble it;
> And every time that you fold it across,
> 'Tis as plain as the light of the day that you *double* it!
>
> (1: 378)

The infinite progression implicit in the analysis of the act of analysis is evoked at the end of "The Purloined Letter" with the revelation of Dupin's revenge on the Minister, for this attempt by a mastermind to get even with his specular double clearly serves as a figure of the analytic mind's attempt at mastery, its attempt to be absolutely even with itself. Knowing that the Minister "would feel some curiosity in regard to the identity of the person who had outwitted him" (3: 993), Dupin leaves him a clue by substituting for the purloined letter one containing a quotation from Cré-

billon's *Atrée* copied out in Dupin's own handwriting, a hand with which the Minister "is well acquainted" (3: 993). In signing his deed, Dupin marks it as revenge, which is to say, he insures that the Minister will interpret his actions not simply as the paid intervention of a gifted amateur sleuth or a duel of wits between two of the cleverest men in Paris, but as a repayment for the evil turn which the Minister did Dupin at Vienna. For I take it that the satisfaction of revenge requires—except in those cases where it is carried out on a substitute—a moment of revelation in which the object of revenge learns by whom, and for what, he is being paid back, a point that Poe underlines by having Dupin choose his quotation-signature from just such a revelatory moment in an eighteenth-century revenger's tragedy. And yet from what we know of the Minister it is inconceivable that once he learned of Dupin's revenge he would let the matter rest there—and equally inconceivable that his double would not know this. For though it might seem that with Dupin's revenge the score between them is even at one apiece (one bad turn at Vienna repaid by one bad turn at Paris), if the Minister allows Dupin's trick to go unanswered, then Dupin will have had the last turn; and as proverbial wisdom assures us, the last word or the last laugh is not just one word or one laugh like any other. The power to say the last word or have the last laugh, the power to bring a series of reciprocal actions to an end, like the power to originate, involves the notion of a one that is simultaneously more than one. Consequently, we are left with the paradoxical situation in which Dupin's outwitting of the Minister will constitute an evening of the score between them at one apiece only if the Minister *does not* allow Dupin's trick to end the series, does not allow it to be that one last turn which in its finality is always more than one. It is not so much that one bad turn deserves another as that one bad turn demands another if it is to be experienced as simply one turn. All of which emphasizes the mutually constitutive contradictoriness of seeking *to get even* with a specular double *by being one up on him.*

In using the affair of the letter to even an old score, Dupin gives up his "objective," fourth position as an apparently disinterested observer of the triangular structure of King, Queen, and Minister described by the Prefect in order to insert himself for personal reasons into the third position of an analogous triangle in which the police and the Minister occupy respectively the first and second positions. Similarly, in describing this triangular structure

in which Dupin shifts the Minister from the third to the second position, Lacan would himself appear to occupy an "objective," fourth position as a disinterested observer outside the triangle. Yet to a supposedly more objective observer of Lacan's position such as Derrida, Lacan's description is not disinterested at all, but simply a psychoanalyst's imposition of the structure of the Oedipal triangle on a double story, an imposition that, though it seems to be made from an objective fourth position outside the triangle, has the effect of inserting Lacan into the third position of a triangle in which the psychoanalyst's "objective" unmasking of the personal motive that lies behind Dupin's "disinterested" involvement in the affair of the letter shifts Dupin into the second position and his double the Minister into the first. Or so says Derrida from a fourth position outside Lacan's triangle, a fourth position that will itself be shifted in turn. This mechanism by which the shifting from the third to the second position within the triangle is extended (as a supposedly more objective point of view is assumed from which to observe the subjective triangle), and thus becomes the shifting from a fourth position outside the triangle to the third position within it, evokes the infinite regression that, in this quest for absolute self-consciousness, accompanies infinite progression as its shadow image. For while the progressive series moves in one direction in its flight from subjective involvement, in its termless search for an absolutely objective point of view from which to examine the self, it only exists *as a series* because of the regressive movement of consciousness, because of the retrospective gaze that keeps all the earlier terms of the series in view so that they are perceived as related, as serial in character. Thus the mental step that one takes in order to separate the self from itself, to distinguish absolutely the observer from the observed, is always a backward step, a step in the opposite direction from the one in which we are looking.

IV

In the sardonic name of simplicity let me add one more, final (or else one, more final) element to this discussion. So far we have looked at three analytic readings of "The Purloined Letter" by Lacan, Derrida, and Johnson and then gone back to consider Poe's own self-conscious thematizing within the story of the numerical/geometrical structure enacted in its interpretation. I would now like to look at a literary reading of Poe's tale that antedates the earliest of the three analyses we have considered by some fifteen

years: the reading that Borges gives of "The Purloined Letter" when he rewrites its numerical/geometrical structure in his own detective story "Death and the Compass" (1942). In the story's opening paragraph Borges explicitly links the tale to Poe's Dupin stories, remarking that his detective Erik Lönnrot "thought of himself as a pure logician, a kind of Auguste Dupin" (p. 65). "Death and the Compass" concerns a series of murders. All the obvious clues suggest that the number in the series will be three, but all the less than obvious clues—the kind that police inspector Treviranus would miss, but Erik Lönnrot wouldn't—suggest that the number of murders will be four. We learn at the end of the story that the series of crimes has been planned by Lönnrot's archenemy, the criminal Red Scharlach, who, seeking to lure Lönnrot unawares to his own destruction, has counted on the fact that the detective would solve the arcane clues which Inspector Treviranus missed and that Lönnrot's intellectual pride would blind him, would make him think that because he was one jump ahead of the police, he was one jump ahead of the criminal as well. In effect Borges reworks the triangular structure from "The Purloined Letter." He has Scharlach create a situation in which Lönnrot's apparent solution to the crimes constitutes that second glance whose observation of blindness in the first glance (Treviranus's apparent misreading of the clues) becomes itself a blind spot in the observer by convincing him that he sees everything. In the meantime Scharlach occupies the position of the third glance (hidden at the fourth point of the compass), seeing the blindness of the first glance, the blind spot in the second, and the fact that the object he seeks—Lönnrot's life—is his for the taking.

Lönnrot and Scharlach are, of course, doubles of one another, as their names indicate. In a note to the English translation of the tale Borges says, "The end syllable of Lönnrot means red in German, and Red Scharlach is also translatable, in German, as Red Scarlet" (p. 269). Elsewhere Borges tells us that Lönnrot is Swedish, but neglects to add that in Swedish the word *lönn* is a prefix meaning "secret," "hidden," or "illicit." Thus Lönnrot, *the secret red,* pursues and is pursued by his double, Red Scharlach (Red Scarlet), *the doubly red.* Scharlach's motive is revenge. In their final confrontation, Scharlach reminds Lönnrot that three years earlier the detective had arrested Scharlach's brother in a gambling dive and that in the ensuing shootout Scharlach had escaped, as he says, with "a cop's bullet in my guts" (p. 75). In hiding, delirious with fever for nine days and nights, "I swore," says Schar-

lach, "by the god who looks with two faces and by all the gods of fever and of mirrors that I would weave a maze around the man who sent my brother to prison" (p. 76). I take it that this elaborate revenge on "a kind of Auguste Dupin" for the arrest of a brother is an allusion to the fact that in "The Purloined Letter" the Minister D _____ has a brother with whom he is sometimes confused because they "both have attained reputation in letters" (3: 986). Since Dupin gets even with the Minister, are we to see Scharlach's revenge on Lönnrot as an attempt to even the score for that earlier revenge on a brother criminal?

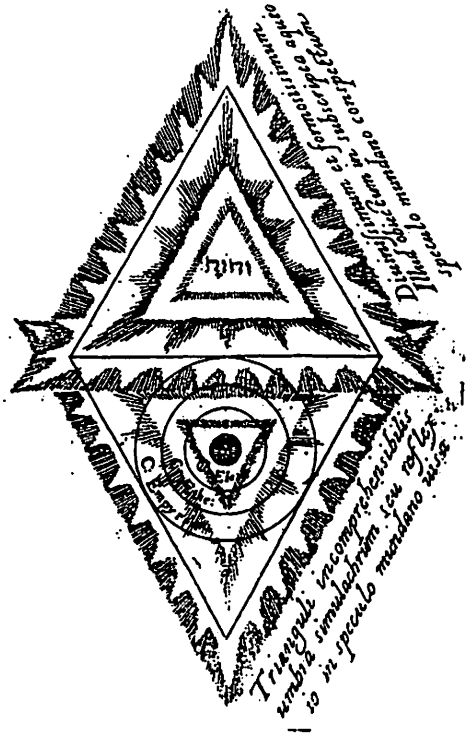
The maze that Scharlach weaves around the detective begins with the murder of Rabbi Marcel Yarmolinsky on the third of December at a hotel in the north of the city. Yarmolinsky is a Talmudic scholar, and among his effects the police find "a treatise . . . on the Tetragrammaton" (p. 67) and a sheet of paper in his typewriter bearing the words "*The first letter of the Name has been uttered*" (p. 67). The second murder occurs on the night of January third in the west of the city. The victim, Daniel Simon Azevedo, is found lying on the doorstep of a paint store beneath "the shop's conventional red and yellow diamond shapes" (pp. 68-69). Chalked across the diamond shapes are the words "*The second letter of the Name has been uttered*" (p. 69). The third murder occurs on the night of February third in the east of the city. The victim, whose name is either Gryphius or Ginzberg, telephones Treviranus offering to give him information about the murders of Yarmolinsky and Azevedo, but the call is interrupted by the arrival of two men who forcibly remove Gryphius-Ginzberg from the sailor's tavern where he has been staying. It is Carnival time and the two men are wearing harlequin "costumes of red, green, and yellow lozenges" (p. 70). Tracing the interrupted phone call, Treviranus arrives at the tavern to find scrawled on a market slate in front "*The last letter of the Name has been uttered*" and in Gryphius-Ginzberg's room "a star-shaped spatter of blood" and "a 1739 edition of Leusden's *Philologus Hebraeo-Graecus*" with the following passage underlined: "the Jewish day begins at sundown and ends the following sundown" (p. 71). On the night of March first Treviranus receives a sealed envelope containing "a letter signed by one 'Baruch Spinoza' " (p. 72) and a map of the city. The letter writer predicts that on the third of March there will not be a fourth murder because the locations of the three previous crimes in the north, west, and east form "the perfect sides of an equilateral and mystical triangle" (p. 72), as demonstrated by a triangle drawn in red ink on the map.

Appropriately, the letter predicting that only three men will be killed is sent to Treviranus, the first two syllables of whose name recall the Latin words for "three" and "man"—*tres, vir.* The Inspector's name probably alludes as well to the *tresviri capitales,* a group of three magistrates who "exercised general control over the city police" in republican Rome. According to the Eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* "Caesar increased their number to four, but Augustus reverted to three. In imperial times most of their functions passed into the hands of the *praefectus vigilum*"[9]—an etymological-historical link between Borges's Treviranus and Poe's Prefect. Not to mention the fact (which Borges must have noticed) that the emperor who restored the number of the *tresviri capitales* from four to the original three also gave his name to the detective C. (César) Auguste Dupin. In "An Autobiographical Essay" (1970), Borges reports that he used part of the proceeds from a literary prize he received in 1929 to acquire "a secondhand set of the Eleventh Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*" (p. 233), by no means an insignificant detail in the life of a writer obsessed with the image of the encyclopaedia, a writer who says that some of his earliest memories are of "the steel engravings in *Chambers's Encyclopaedia* and in the *Britannica*" in his father's library (p. 209). It is worth noting that in the Eleventh Edition of the *Britannica* the entry for *tresviri* occurs on the page facing the entry for Gottfried Reinhold Treviranus (1776-1837), a German naturalist. Not unpredictably, Inspector Treviranus's first words in the story point to the numerical image that lies at the Latin root of his name: " 'We needn't lose any time here looking for three-legged cats,' Treviranus said, brandishing an imperious cigar. 'Everyone knows the Tetrarch of Galilee owns the world's finest sapphires. Somebody out to steal them probably found his way in here by mistake. Yarmolinsky woke up and the thief was forced to kill him" (p. 66). The only historical Tetrarch of Galilee, as the entry for *tetrarch* in the *Britannica* informs us, was Herod Antipas—the Herod of the gospels—whose reign (4 B.C.-39 A.D.) began under the emperorship of Augustus Caesar (hence Treviranus's "imperious cigar") and bracketed the life of Christ. At the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C., his realm was divided among his three sons: half went to Archelaus, with the title ethnarch; a quarter to Philip, with the title tetrarch; and a quarter to Herod Antipas, with the same title. As with Treviranus's initial image of a four-legged animal with only three legs, his reference to the Tetrarch of Galilee—with its historical resonance of a quadripartite realm di-

vided among three people by doubling the portion of one of them —evokes the numerical structure that governs the tale. That Borges intends the historical allusion (and intends for us not to miss it) seems clear from an exchange between Lönnrot and the editor of a Yiddish newspaper at the scene of Yarmolinsky's murder: " 'Maybe this crime belongs to the history of Jewish superstitions,' Lönnrot grumbled. 'Like Christianity,' the editor from the *Judische Zeitung* made bold to add" (p. 67). Need I add that the entry for *tetrarch* in the Eleventh Edition of the *Britannica* occurs on the page facing the entry for *Tetragrammaton.*

Treviranus sends the map with the red triangle and the letter suggesting that the number of murders will be three, to Lönnrot who now has, he believes, the final clue needed to capture the murderer. Since the letters in the Tetragrammaton are four rather than three, and since the Jewish day begins at sundown so that the three murders were committed not on the third but the fourth day of each month, and since in both the second and third murders a diamond shape is prominently displayed, Lönnrot concludes that the series of murders is not threefold but fourfold and that the shape which the locations of the crimes describe on the map is not a triangle but a diamond. Using a pair of dividers and a compass, Lönnrot pinpoints the location of the planned fourth murder in the south of the city, "the deserted villa Triste-le-Roy" (p. 73); and he arrives there well in advance, so he thinks, of the murderer to catch him in the act. But, of course, at the villa of Triste-le-Roy—a building of intricate doublings, a kind of House of Usher designed by Zeno the Eleatic—Scharlach is already lying in wait and easily captures Lönnrot. Completing his triumph, Scharlach explains the maze to his prisoner. "The first term of the series came to me by pure chance," says Scharlach. He and some of his associates—among them Daniel Azevedo, the second victim—had planned to commit a jewel robbery at the hotel where Rabbi Yarmolinsky was staying. Double-crossing his friends, Azevedo tried to commit the robbery a day early, got into Yarmolinsky's room by mistake, and killed the rabbi when he tried to ring for help. From the newspaper accounts of the crime, Scharlach learned that Lönnrot was seeking the key to Yarmolinsky's death in the rabbi's writings, and so he planned the series of murders to encourage Lönnrot's belief that Yarmolinsky had been sacrificed by a group of Hasidic Jews in search of the secret and unutterable Name of God, a ruse to keep Lönnrot looking in the wrong direction while being led to his own destruction. Appropriately, the second victim was the double-

crosser Azevedo, while the third murder was simply a ruse with Scharlach himself doubling as the victim Gryphius-Ginzberg. Borges gives us a clue to the type of cabalistic design on which Scharlach's labyrinth is based when he tells us that among the books written by Yarmolinsky and found in his room at the time of his death there was "a *Study of the Philosophy of Robert Fludd*" (p. 67), the seventeenth-century English physician and Christian cabalist whose work on geomancy ("a method of divination by means of marking the earth with a pointed stick" [Poe, 2: 420]) Poe had included a century earlier in his catalogue of Roderick Usher's favorite reading (Poe, 2: 409). In Fludd's major work, *Utriusque cosmi majoris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia* (1617-19), we find the following diagram illustrating the mirror-image relationship between God and the universe:[10]



At the center of the upper triangle (whose angles represent the three persons of the Trinity) is the Tetragrammaton, and along

one side a Latin legend reading "That most divine and beautiful counterpart visible below in the flowing image of the universe" (p. 83). In the lower triangle are "the three regions of the universe—empyreal, ethereal, and elemental" which correspond to "the triangular form of the trinitarian deity," and along one side of this is the Latin legend: "A shadow, likeness, or reflection of the insubstantial triangle visible in the image of the universe," the lower triangle being "a projection of an idea" in the divine mind and thus a mirror image of the deity (pp. 83-84). Surrounding both triangles is a flamelike effulgence suggesting at once the radiant nature of this Platonic projection or emanation, the symbolic character of the deity as fire or pure light (i.e., as mind), and the traditional imagistic association (going back at least to the Egyptians) of the triangle with the tip of a flame (pyramid and obelisk being stone flames above a grave) and thus with eternal life. Since Scharlach knows from the newspaper accounts that Lönnrot began his investigation of the murders by reading Yarmolinsky's works on cabalism, and since one of these is a study of Robert Fludd's mystical philosophy, it seems likely that the type of schema shown above was the model for Scharlach's labyrinth and that it is this cabalistic design which Lönnrot believes he is tracing on the landscape when in his initial surprise at finding Scharlach waiting at the fourth point of the compass he asks, "Scharlach, are you after the Secret Name?" (p. 75).

Realizing that he has been outwitted and that he is about to be killed, Lönnrot tries to have the last word by finding a flaw in Scharlach's maze. Using a favorite ploy of mathematicians and logicians—that Scharlach's plan, though successful, violates the principle of economy of means—Lönnrot says, "In your maze there are three lines too many. . . . I know of a Greek maze that is a single straight line. Along this line so many thinkers have lost their way that a mere detective may very well lose his way. Scharlach, when in another incarnation you hunt me down, stage (or commit) a murder at A, then a second murder at B, eight miles from A, then a third murder at C, four miles from A and B, halfway between the two. Lay in wait for me then at D, two miles from A and C, again halfway between them. Kill me at D, the way you are going to kill me here at Triste-le-Roy" (p. 78). In his note to the tale, Borges identifies "the straight-line labyrinth at the story's end" as a figure taken from "Zeno the Eleatic" (p. 269). This closing image of infinite regression as the endless subdivision

of a line inverts, of course, the figure of infinite progression evoked in the tale by the movement from a triangular to a quadrangular maze, which is to say, the figure of infinite progression as the endless addition of sides to a polygon—the figure that symbolizes the attempt to integrate the process of thinking into the content of thought as the attempt to incorporate an "objective" point of view outside a structure (e.g., the fourth point from which one views a triangle) into a more inclusive, more self-conscious formulation by making that viewpoint another angle of the structure (e.g., the progression from triangle to quadrangle). As we noted earlier, in the mind's quest to comprehend itself totally, to be absolutely even or at one with itself, infinite progression and infinite regression represent reciprocal paths to the idealized ground of the self, to its original, essential unity—infinite progression pursuing an absolute unity figured as totality, infinite regression pursuing an absolute simplicity figured as indivisibility. Part of the numerical mystery of individual self-consciousness is that though it is only one thing in a world of many things, for its individual possessor it is one thing that is everything. And this absoluteness of individual self-consciousness for its possessor not only underlies the absolute means employed in quest of the self's origin (i.e., infinite progression/regression) but also projects itself naturally into the quest for a universal origin figured as a personified Absolute Consciousness, that Infinite Being whose consciousness is the one thing that is everything for every thing. Translated into a religious context, infinite regression and infinite progression, as reciprocal modes of seeking an ultimate origin conceived as either a lower or an upper limit of consciousness, suggest the *via negativa* and the *via positiva* of mystical theology. In the *via negativa* one seeks an unmediated encounter with the divine origin by subtracting attributes from, by denying affirmative predicates to, the idea of God until one finally achieves a personal experience of the transcategorial nature of Being. Of this method Borges remarks, "To be one thing is inexorably not to be all the other things. The confused intuition of that truth has induced men to imagine that not being is more than being something and that, somehow, not to be is to be everything."[11] In the *via positiva* one takes the opposite path, constantly adding affirmative predicates to the concept of God until that concept becomes an absolute totality; though what one experiences in this path is once again the transcategorial nature of Being. In his essay "From Someone to Nobody" in which

he sketches the historical oscillations of the concept of the Judaeo-Christian God, Borges describes the reciprocal character of these two methods as "magnification to nothingness" (*OI*, p. 147).

Given Borges's interest in the way that the classical pursuit of a microcosmic and a macrocosmic limit becomes the religious quest for the origin and end of all things, it is not surprising that as Lönnrot gets caught up in the quest for the sacred and unutterable Name of God, the meeting at the fourth point of the compass (a proleptic figure of infinite progression) comes to seem like a face-to-face encounter with the one, infinite, divine origin of all things. And inasmuch as Lönnrot will die at that fourth point, it does turn out to be the place where he will meet his maker (his mental double). Agreeing to Lönnrot's request that he trap him in a straight-line labyrinth in their next incarnation, Scharlach takes a step back and shoots the detective with his own gun—shoots him in the head, one would guess, the right spot to drop a pure logician. In his note to the tale, Borges says, "The killer and the slain, whose minds work in the same way, may be the same man. Lönnrot is not an unbelievable fool walking into his own death trap but, in a symbolic way, a man committing suicide" (p. 269). What with the presence of the color red in the names of slayer and slain and their talk of repeating their duel in another incarnation, one is reminded of Emerson's poem "Brahma" (which Borges cites in his 1947 essay on Whitman):

> If the red slayer think he slays,
> Or if the slain think he is slain,
> They know not well the subtle ways
> I keep, and pass, and turn again.
>
> Far or forgot to me is near;
> Shadow and sunlight are the same;
> The vanished gods to me appear;
> And one to me are shame and fame.[12]

One question, however, still remains to be settled. Does Borges, in rewriting the numerical/geometrical structure of "The Purloined Letter" in "Death and the Compass," see that structure as threefold and triangular (as does Lacan) or fourfold and quadrangular (as does Derrida)? Certainly Scharlach's labyrinth seems to be fourfold and diamond-shaped. But inasmuch as the murder of Gryphius-Ginzberg was a ruse in which the criminal doubled as the victim, there were really only three crimes, and these three—the

murders of Yarmolinsky in the north, Azevedo in the west, and Lönnrot in the south—form a triangle on the map. And if the labyrinth is really threefold and triangular, then all the obvious, all the simple clues indicating that there would only be three crimes are the correct ones. But if the correct number is three, then what becomes of the name that is being uttered letter by letter? If it is not the four-letter name of God that Borges means to evoke, then is it the three-letter name of Poe, the creator, the origin, of the detective genre?

Before deciding, however, that the structure is threefold and triangular, we should recall that there finally turn out to be three crimes only because one of the doubles correctly interprets all the arcane clues and presents himself at the fourth point at the expected moment. Is the numerical structure that Borges rewrites from "The Purloined Letter," then, that of the two interlocking pairs of words (simple/odd, even/odd), a structure in which three things are made to fill four spaces by doubling one of them—and all as part of the mind's quest for an original undivided one, for a mythic absolute simplicity? Inasmuch as Lönnrot's search for God's "Secret Name" (p. 75) at the fourth point of the quadrangle symbolizes this quest for an original undivided one, it is significant that the Tetragrammaton, "God's unspeakable name" (p. 68), has the same structure in all its various spellings (JHVH, IHVH, IHWH, YHVH, YHWH) as that of the two interlocking pairs of words in "The Purloined Letter," which is to say that three different letters are made to fill the four spaces of the name by doubling one of them (H). It is also worth noting that in the case of both the sacred name and the interlocking pairs of words the repeated letter or word occupies the second and fourth spaces—the numbers characteristically associated with doubling. (One might also note, given the quadrangular aspect of Scharlach's maze, that two is the only number for which doubling and squaring are the same operation.)

Borges's rewriting of the numerical/geometrical structure of "The Purloined Letter" in "Death and the Compass" assumes an even greater significance when we realize that it was part of a larger project in which he set out to double Poe's three Dupin stories a century later with three detective stories of his own. But with this difference: where Poe's detective solves the mystery and outwits the culprit, Borges's detectives or pursuers are outwitted by the people they pursue, are trapped in a labyrinth fashioned

from the pursuer's ability to follow a trail until he arrives in the chosen spot at the expected moment. (We should note, however, that in these stories Borges consistently undercuts the notion that the culprit's triumph, his being one up on his opponent, ultimately makes any real difference. "And one to me are shame and fame" might almost be the motto of these encounters.) The first Dupin story, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," was published in 1841; Borges's first detective story, "The Garden of the Forking Paths," was published exactly one hundred years later in 1941. As the historian of the detective genre Howard Haycraft notes, there were "several events which marked the Centennial of the Detective Story in 1941": one was the first issue of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine,* another was the publication of Haycraft's own magisterial *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story.*[13] And yet another, it seems certain, was the publication of Borges's first detective story, which, he recalls, "won a second prize in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*" (*Aleph,* p. 273). The second Dupin story, "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," first appeared in 1842-43 in serial form; while Borges's second detective story, "Death and the Compass," was first published in 1942. This story was also submitted to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* but, as Borges ruefully notes, "was flatly rejected" (p. 273). The third Dupin story, "The Purloined Letter," was published in 1844, but Borges's third story, "Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth," was not published until 1951. In his note to the story Borges accounts for this break in the pattern, commenting that after his "first two exercises of 1941 and 1942" his third effort "became a cross between a permissible detective story and a caricature of one. The more I worked on it, the more hopeless the plot seemed and the stronger my need to parody" (p. 274). It is as if in reaching the third term of this series Borges realized that his effort to double Poe's three analytic detective stories—perhaps with the idea of going one up on the inventor of the genre—had gone awry and that he was himself trapped in the triangular/quadrangular labyrinth that Poe had constructed in "The Purloined Letter." Certain it is that in Borges's final detective story the allusions to "The Purloined Letter" are numerous, culminating in an explicit reference. In the tale, two friends, Dunraven and Unwin, try to decipher the mystery of Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari's death in his own labyrinth. At one point Unwin says, "Don't go on multiplying the mysteries. . . . They should be kept simple. Bear in mind Poe's pur-

loined letter, bear in mind Zangwill's locked room." To which Dunraven replies, "Or made complex. . . . Bear in mind the universe" (p. 116). I assume that the name "Dunraven" is an allusion to the author of "The Raven," as the name "Unwin" is to the unwinnable game of trying to be one up on a double, assumptions supported by the fact that Dunraven is a poet and Unwin a mathematician. These occupations recall as well the discussion of the dual character of the Minister D_____ in "The Purloined Letter." Thinking that they have confused the Minister with his brother who has also "attained reputation in letters," the narrator identifies D_____ as "a mathematician, and no poet." To which Dupin replies, "You are mistaken; I know him well; he is both. As poet *and* mathematician, he would reason well; as mere mathematician, he could not have reasoned at all, and thus would have been at the mercy of the Prefect" (3: 986). As we noted earlier, the Minister's dual character as poet and mathematician mirrors that "double Dupin" whose reciprocal powers ("the creative and the resolvent") reminded the narrator in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" of "the old philosophy of the Bi-Part Soul" (2: 533). Borges echoes this reciprocal relationship between the creative and the resolvent when he has the poet Dunraven suggest a mathematical solution to the mystery of the labyrinth and the mathematician Unwin counter with a poetic one. Dunraven asks whether, in trying to solve the mystery, Unwin has considered "the theory of series" or "a fourth dimension of space," and Unwin replies, "No . . . I thought about the labyrinth of Crete. The labyrinth whose center was a man with the head of a bull" (p. 123). Borges adds that Dunraven, "steeped in detective stories, thought that the solution of a mystery is always less impressive than the mystery itself. Mystery has something of the supernatural about it, and even of the divine; its solution, however, is always tainted by sleight of hand" (p. 123).

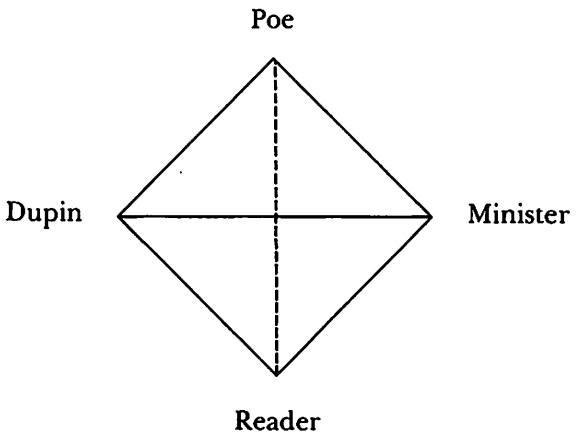
Since the minimum number needed to constitute a series is three (even if there are only two items in a series, the idea of their serial relationship is already a third thing), Dunraven's question about whether the solution might involve "the theory of series" or "a fourth dimension of space" suggests in effect that the key to the mystery turns upon choosing between the numbers three and four. And this implied oscillation between three and four, combined with the image of the labyrinth, returns us to the triangular/quadrangular maze of "Death and the Compass" and to its origin

in the numerical/geometrical structure of "The Purloined Letter" —in much the same way that Borges's remark about the solution always being less impressive than the mystery itself returns us to the simple-minded question that began this inquiry. For by now it should be clear that that question was, in the spirit of the genre, framed so as to contain a clue, in reverse, to its answer. Which is to say, the question about how one writes the analytic detective story as a rereadable form was, like Scharlach's maze, a device to focus attention in one direction which leading us in the opposite, leading us to the point where that simple-minded question about the unlimited repeatability of a form becomes an endlessly repeatable because constantly reformulated question about the simplicity of mind, a question always about to be answered because it requires only one more step to complete the analysis. Poe's genius in the invention of the genre was precisely to understand that the analytic solution of a mystery always leaves us at the end with the mystery of an analytic solution, the mystery of that solving power that catches a partial glimpse of itself in the achievement of a deductive conclusion but that, maddeningly enough, cannot gain a complete view of itself no matter how often it repeats the analytic moment, cannot totally comprehend itself simply because in doubling back to effect an absolute coincidence of the self with itself it finds that it is based on an original non-coincidence. This paradox of a (non) self-including self—that if the process of thinking and the content of thought ever absolutely coincided, they would vanish in a condition of no-difference, taking with them the differential entity that is the self—lies at the heart of the detective genre which Poe invented. And within the dynamics of the text, this ultimate condition of no-difference (the imaginatively projected goal of the self's attempt to be absolutely even with itself) makes its presence felt in that ceaseless oscillation of differential poles associated with specular doubling, that continual reversal of a signifying term into its opposite which, in its fluctuating equation of opposing terms, produces a differentiation that seems to make no difference.

V

What tends to be overlooked in readings of "The Purloined Letter" that treat it as a pretext for examining the analytic act in a specific discipline such as psychoanalysis, or that make it the more or less naive starting point for an agon of ever-increasing methodological self-awareness, is just how self-conscious Poe was about the

interpretive effect produced by a literary text ("The Purloined Letter") that includes within itself a symbolic text (the purloined letter) whose attributes are clearly those of the literary text itself—"The Purloined Letter" presenting the purloined letter which represents in turn "The Purloined Letter" in an endless oscillation of container and contained, of outer and inner (like that projected by the turning of the letter *inside out within* the story). Indeed, what tends to be ignored in such readings is how self-consciously Poe thematized in the story itself the reader's interpretive interaction with the story and then proceeded to make the discovery of that thematization a further form of interaction with the reader, a subtler game of hide-and-seek, of clues and solutions. Thus, for example, the solution to the mystery of the purloined letter (the mystery of its concealment in the Minister's house so that the Prefect cannot find it) is that the Minister has turned the letter inside out and hidden it in the open; but that trick of reversing the missing object and leaving it in plain view is also the solution to Poe's concealment, within the text of "The Purloined Letter," of the solution to the purloined letter's concealment in the Minister's residence. On his first visit to Dupin the Prefect presents us with the mystery of the purloined letter, which is to say, the manner of its theft and the fact of its continued non-appearance despite his repeated searches. But that standard scene in the analytic detective story (the presentation of the mystery) is in effect turned inside out by Poe, for in describing how the Minister took the letter, Poe simultaneously shows us the secret of the letter's subsequent concealment, indeed, hides it in plain view, by giving us the detail of the Queen's turning the letter over and leaving it in the open on a table to conceal it from the King. Similarly, in Dupin's open presentation of the game of even and odd as a figure of the attempt to be one up on a specular double, Poe again hides in plain sight that other, subtler game of simple/odd, even/odd—the game figuring the reader's battle of wits with the author as a specular encounter in which the reader plays or tries to avoid playing the game of even and odd with Poe through the author's opposing masks of detective and criminal. Poe hides *this* game in plain sight by having Dupin pointedly note that the game of even and odd "is simple," a verbal gesture that directs us back to his earlier emphatic repetition of the Prefect's claim that the mystery of the letter was "simple and odd." If one were to represent in a geometric figure the opposing players in this game of simple/odd, even/odd, the basic form of the figure would look like this:



It is only through the battle of wits between Dupin and the Minister D_____, through their fictive encounter in the story, that the reader can engage in a battle of wits with Poe, can try to outwit the author for the interpretive possession of "The Purloined Letter, (much as Dupin outwits the Minister for the physical possession of the purloined letter). Because the reader cannot directly confront his adversary Poe (the man who concealed the purloined letter within "The Purloined Letter," as he concealed "The Purloined Letter" within the purloined letter), he has to confront him indirectly through his opposing masks in a triangular structure of reader, Dupin, Minister. And in a similar manner Poe can only confront the reader indirectly through these same masks in a triangular structure of author, Dupin, Minister. Poe and the reader square off, then, as specular doubles, each meaning to outwit a self-projected image of the other, within a quadrangular figure composed of two triangles whose vertices point in opposite directions (Poe and the reader) but whose bases are a single line linking the opposing positions of Dupin and the Minister.

In this structure the reader is obviously at a disadvantage, for in having to match wits with Poe through the game of even and odd played by Poe's adversarial masks he is in effect playing Poe's game. Yet the wish to avoid this game played through surrogates, in favor of a direct confrontation with the author, also seems to leave the reader playing Poe's game. For if, within that quadrangular figure representing the indirect confrontation of author and reader through the direct one of criminal and detective, we were to try to bring together the positions of Poe and the reader for a

direct confrontation (like that between the specular doubles Lönnrot and Scharlach at the fourth point of the compass), if we were to try to make the upper and lower vertices representing the opposing positions of author and reader coincide, then we would see that this figure is formed by a mirror-fold. To visualize this, imagine the quadrangular figure as a flat surface like a sheet of paper that can be folded and unfolded along the horizontal line forming the base of the two triangles: folded, the figure is a triangular shape composed of two identical triangles hinged at their base, with one doubled back on top of the other so that their vertices coincide; unfolded, the quadrangle which we have described. Not surprisingly, it is a form of this same operation—the geometric projection of a triangle (whose vertex points downward) from the base of a triangle (whose vertex points upward)—that Lönnrot uses in "Death and the Compass" to discover the location of the fourth point in Scharlach's maze, the point at which the doubles will confront each other face to face. Using a pair of dividers, Lönnrot measures the length of one side of the equilateral triangle inscribed in red ink on the city map sent to Treviranus. Maintaining this same length, he swings an arc downward from each end of the triangle's base line, and where the arcs intersect he discovers the villa Triste-le-Roy. It is as if the red triangle on the map were flipped downward, were unfolded one hundred and eighty degrees, to produce a double, an inverted mirror-image, of itself. Appropriately enough, this quadrangular maze (composed of two identical triangles joined at their bases by a mirror-fold and with their vertices facing Janus-like in opposite directions) was conceived by Scharlach during that period of delirious convalescence at Triste-le-Roy when he "swore by the god who looks with two faces and by all the gods of fever and of mirrors" that he would "weave a maze around the man" who sent his brother to prison (p. 76). And it is also appropriate that when Lönnrot arrives at the villa one of the first things he sees is the statue of a "two-faced Hermes" which casts "a monstrous shadow" (p. 74)—the single mirror-fold of doubling that produces the two-faced Hermes (the god of mirrors) being doubled again by its shadow image to produce the fourfold.

Like Scharlach's diamond-shaped maze (which is indebted to it), the quadrangular figure representing the indirect confrontation of author and reader through the direct one of criminal and detective in "The Purloined Letter" involves a mirror-fold that

doubles identical triangular shapes back upon themselves, and as such it serves as a geometric representation, an emblem, of self-identity. Which is to say, the figure represents the differential unity, the sameness-in-difference, of specular self-consciousness as a simplicity, a single fold, that in doubling an entity back upon itself calls it into existence as a self-conscious unit by introducing into it a difference with itself. But this *difference with itself* is by no means a *division within itself,* for as distinguished from the material (i.e., divisible) body, the ground of self-consciousness (mind, spirit, soul) is understood within the tradition in which Poe operates to be indivisible, to be a simple substance. And we can see from this figure, which is three-sided when folded back upon itself but four-sided when unfolded, why the oscillation between the numbers three and four (between the first odd number and the even number associated with doubling) lies at the heart of the game of simple/odd, even/odd, that game in which three words derived from numbers (simple [one], even [two], odd [three]) are made to fill four spaces by doubling one of them (odd). For of course what this game of numerically rooted words evokes is the doubling of a four-sided figure back upon itself to produce the coincidence, the evenness, of two three-sided figures, two identical shapes created as it were by the simplicity of a mirror-fold—the oscillation between three and four symbolizing the folded and unfolded states of this geometric representation of self-consciousness.

Having thematized in the geometrical structure of the game of simple/odd, even/odd, the indirect confrontation of author and reader through the direct one of criminal and detective, Poe makes the discovery of this thematization a further form of interaction with the reader by planting in the text clues to that oscillation between three and four that evokes the mirror-fold of the quadrangular figure. I will cite but two of the several instances of this in the tale. In the very first sentence of "The Purloined Letter" the narrator gives us the complete street address of Dupin's residence in Paris, a level of specificity that in the economy of a Poe story usually signals the encryption of significant information, particularly where numbers are concerned. The address is "*au troisième, No. 33, Rue Dunôt, Faubourg St. Germain*" (3: 974). Now we already know from the first Dupin story that the house is located in the Faubourg St. Germain, an authentic section of Paris. The street name, however, is Poe's own invention and is perhaps an appellation that, in echoing the sound of an elided "don't know," is

meant to suggest, like Samuel Butler's Erewhon, the non-existent character of the place it names. More significantly (for reasons that will be apparent in our second example), the name of the street begins with the letter D. The crucial information, however, which Poe provides in this address is that Dupin lives "*au troisième*" at "*No. 33.*" No annotated edition of the tale ever fails to point out that the French "*au troisième*" (le troisième étage), the third floor, is what Americans call the fourth floor. Dupin resides, then, in a numerically ambiguous spot—on a floor that in France is called the third but in America the fourth. And it is only appropriate that this third/fourth floor should be located in a building whose street number is 33, for in the folding back upon itself of that quadrangular figure symbolizing specular self-consciousness, the doubled figure that results is three-sided, a doubling of a triangular shape that is paralleled in the game of simple/odd, even/odd by that distribution of three words in four spaces achieved through the doubling of the word "odd," the word whose root is the Old Norse *oddi,* a triangle.

That Borges understood the clue hidden in the detail of Dupin's residing "*au troisième*" at "*No. 33*" can be seen from a detail in "Death and the Compass." The murder of Rabbi Yarmolinsky, the first in the series, takes place at the Hôtel du Nord in the rabbi's "room on floor R, across from the suite occupied . . . by the Tetrarch of Galilee" (p. 66). Now since the name of the hotel is French, one assumes that the designation of its floors follows the French custom and that the R of "floor R" is the first letter of rez-de-chaussée (much as in this country the letter M in a building directory stands for mezzanine or B for basement). The first murder occurs, then, on a floor which the French call the ground floor and Americans call the first floor, a difference in the naming/numbering of the first term in a series that gives rise (and in this case is certainly meant to allude) to the numerical ambiguity of Dupin's residence "*au troisième.*" It is only appropriate, of course, that Yarmolinsky's murder on floor R (the first floor) should *initiate* a series of events that ultimately brings Lönnrot, who thinks of himself as "a kind of Auguste Dupin" (p. 65), to that fourth point of the compass where the third murder will occur as the two doubles who "may be the same man" confront one another. And appropriate as well that the first murder in this series was the chance result of the jewel thief Azevedo's mistaking Yarmolinsky's room for "the suite occupied . . . by the Tetrarch of

Galilee," for as we noted earlier the title Tetrarch of Galilee derives from the historical division of a realm into four parts in order to distribute it among three persons, two of whom each received a quarter while the third received a half.

The second instance that I would cite of Poe's planting a clue in a text to this three/four oscillation figuring the mirror-fold of specular self-consciousness is the naming of Dupin's rival, the Minister D_____. In a tale entitled "The Purloined Letter" any manipulation of a letter, such as the substitution of an initial for a name, should attract our attention. Since Dupin and the Minister are antithetical doubles, it is only fitting that the Minister's name begins with the same letter as Dupin's, and more fitting still that the Minister's initial is also the first letter of the word "double." There is, however, even more at work in Poe's choice of this letter. If we were to examine the letter's roots (as we did those of the words "simple," "even," and "odd"), we would find that the shape of our capital D derives from the shape of the capital *delta* (Δ) in Greek, which is to say, from a triangle. In the Greek alphabet, *delta* is the fourth letter, as D is in ours; but in Greek *delta* (Δ) also serves as a sign for both the cardinal and ordinal forms of the number four.[14] The initial of the Minister's name derives, then, from a triangular-shaped Greek letter that stands for the number four, the same initial as that of his double who lives on the third/fourth floor at No. *33* Rue *D*unôt. We should also note in this connection that *delta* is the root of the Greek word *deltos, "a writing-tablet,* from the letter Δ (the old shape of tablets)" (*Lexicon,* p. 178), the letter D thus being a doubly appropriate designation for the purloiner and the recoverer of the letter (themselves characters composed of letters) in this drama of inscribed surfaces.

That Borges spotted the clue concealed in the Minister's initial can be judged from Lönnrot's parting flourish in "Death and the Compass." Trapped in Scharlach's quadrangular labyrinth, Lönnrot makes one last attempt to best his enemy intellectually by proposing a simpler, a more economical labyrinth composed of "a single straight line" (p. 78). But Lönnrot's ploy is a trick, his labyrinth's vaunted economy more apparent than real. For what is at issue here is not the number of lines in a geometric figure but the number of steps in a mental operation. And just as there are four steps in Scharlach's labyrinth designated by the four points of the compass, so there are four steps in Lönnrot's labyrinth designated by the first four letters of the alphabet. In Scharlach's maze the doubles confront each other at the fourth point of the compass in

the south; in Lönnrot's proposed maze they are to meet at the fourth letter of the alphabet. Lönnrot says, "Lay in wait for me then at D, two miles from A and C, again halfway between them." Lönnrot's suggestion that their specular duel will be replayed again in a future existence is simply Borges's implicit acknowledgement that this meeting of doubles at the letter D (Δ, four) has already been played in a previous incarnation.

VI

That Borges deciphered the game of simple/odd, even/odd in "The Purloined Letter" and then reencrypted it in "Death and the Compass" seems beyond doubt. What still remains to be noted in closing the circle of this essay is the distinct possibility that it was Borges's tale which originally directed Lacan's attention to the numerical/geometrical dimension of the story and thus suggested "The Purloined Letter" as an ideal text for an analysis of psychoanalysis that would project the structure of the Oedipal triangle onto the reciprocity of blindness and insight in the psychoanalytic encounter. The evidence of this influence is circumstantial, but certainly no psychoanalyst should object to that. One of the first promoters of Borges's work in France was Roger Caillois, the noted critic and sociologist whose writings influenced Lacan. In his biography of Borges, Monegal notes that Borges's friend Victoria Ocampo had invited Caillois to lecture in Argentina on the eve of the Second World War and that Caillois remained there for the duration. With Ocampo's help, he started a magazine in Buenos Aires called *Lettres Françaises,* and in its October 1944 issue he published French translations of two Borges stories, "The Babylon Lottery" and "The Library of Babel." The relationship between Caillois and Borges, not an entirely friendly one, turned in part upon their mutual interest in the detective genre. Monegal notes that Borges wrote "a rather catty article in *Sur* (April 1942) reviewing one of Caillois' pamphlets, on the detective novel. Against Caillois' statement that the detective story was born when Joseph Fouché created a well-trained police force in Paris, Borges observes that a literary genre invariably begins with a literary text and points out that the text in question is one of Edgar Allan Poe's stories. An exchange of notes ensued, and the relationship between Borges and Caillois cooled considerably. That did not affect Caillois' admiration for Borges's writing. He continued to promote Borges unflinchingly."[15] In 1951 Caillois published in Paris a

translation (by P. Verdevoye and Nestor Ibarra) of Borges's *Ficciones,* the collection that contains both "The Garden of the Forking Paths" and "Death and the Compass" (Monegal, p. 420). There was, then, a translation of "Death and the Compass" widely available in France under the aegis of Caillois some five years before the publication of Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'. " And given Caillois' interest in the detective story and his ongoing promotion of one of the genre's most distinguished modern practitioners, and given the influence of Caillois' writings on Lacan and the psychoanalyst's natural interest in analytic detection, it seems hard to believe that Lacan had not read "Death and the Compass" sometime in the early 1950s. Such a knowledge of the story on Lacan's part would at least go a long way toward explaining the extremely odd reference which he makes to Borges in a footnote to the "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter'. "

In presenting the purloined letter as a model of the Lacanian floating signifier, Lacan points out the letter's property (as the signifier of an absence) of simultaneously being and not being present in a particular place, adding that "between *letter* and *place* exist relations for which no French word has quite the extension of the English adjective: *odd*" (p. 53). He asks, "Must a letter then, of all objects, be endowed with the property of *nullibeity:* to use a term which the thesaurus known as *Roget* picks up from the semiotic utopia of Bishop Wilkins?" (p. 53). To which question he appends this curious note: "The very one to which Jorge Luis Borges, in works which harmonize so well with the phylum of our subject [dans son oeuvre si harmonique au phylum de notre propos], has accorded an importance which others have reduced to its proper proportions. Cf. *Les Temps modernes,* June-July 1955, pp. 2135-36 and Oct. 1955, pp. 574-75" (p. 53). The citation of the June-July issue of *Les Temps modernes* refers us to the opening pages of a French translation of Borges's "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" (one of a group of six short essays by Borges in that issue), while the citation of the October issue refers us to a letter to the editor from an M. Pobers commenting on Borges's essay. In "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins" (1941), Borges describes the universal language proposed by the seventeenth-century Englishman Wilkins, Bishop of Chester and first secretary of the Royal Society, in his book *An Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language* (1668). Borges notes that in this language

"each word defines itself": "Wilkins divided the universe into forty categories or classes, which were then subdivisible into differences, subdivisible in turn into species. To each class he assigned a monosyllable of two letters; to each difference, a consonant; to each species, a vowel. For example, *de* means an element; *deb*, the first of the elements, fire; *deba*, a portion of the element of fire, a flame" (*OI*, p. 102). In his letter to the editor commenting on Borges's essay, M. Pobers points out that this philosophical language, which replaces arbitrary words and expressions with a system of letters and syllables each having a particular sense, was not original with Wilkins. It had been invented by another Oxford scholar, George Dalgarno, and Wilkins's work simply completed and perfected the project presented in Dalgarno's 1661 treatise *Ars Signorum vulgo character universalis et Lingua Philosophica.*

Now it is always nice to learn new things simply for their own sake, and yet one cannot help but wonder what it is exactly that Lacan's footnote to Borges is meant to note. There is, according to Lacan, this special property possessed by a signifier (the present sign of an absence) of simultaneously being and not being present in a particular place, an odd relationship between letter and place; and to evoke this property he has found the perfect word "nullibeity" (the condition of being nowhere existent), a word which Roget's *Thesaurus* tells him was first used in a work by John Wilkins. And oh by the way, says Lacan, this is the same John Wilkins whose universal analytic language Borges has discussed in an essay that "harmonizes so well with the phylum of our subject." Is the point of this footnote, then, simply to note a mere coincidence, this footnote which Lacan has appended to an essay he considered important enough to place at the start of the *Écrits*? Or is it meant to acknowledge (though it does not say so) some debt of influence to, or sense of priority of, Borges as regards a knowledge of Wilkins's work? Perhaps, for example, Lacan, in discovering from Roget's *Thesaurus* that the word "nullibeity" had originated with Wilkins, recognized who Wilkins was because he had read Borges's essay. Such a debt would have been minor, easy enough to acknowledge, and yet in the last analysis no less trivial a matter than the noting of a coincidence. So why did Lacan go to the trouble of including this footnote? Though the property which the word "nullibeity" designates is important for Lacan's notion of the signifier, the word itself is not that important; he has described

this property of the signifier often and with other words as good. Still less important and less obvious is the word's connection with Wilkins, and least important and least obvious of all is Wilkins's connection with Borges—both of which Lacan goes to the trouble of pointing out to the reader. Clearly, there is something odd about this footnote, an uncanny feeling that the author has gone out of his way to emphasize a point at once gratuitous and trivial, the kind of uncanny feeling that is usually the aura of an unconscious mechanism, of a repression and a return. For while it is not at all clear that Borges's essay on Wilkins "harmonizes so well" with the subject of Lacan's "Seminar" that it was worth calling attention to that essay in a footnote, it is quite clear that another work of Borges's harmonizes only too well with the subject of Lacan's "Seminar," and it is that work, the detective story "Death and the Compass," of which, I would suggest, the essay on Wilkins reminds Lacan at crucial moments. We can see just such a moment in the passage quoted above in which Borges illustrates Wilkins's analytic language by constructing the word for flame, *deba.* He starts with the two-letter root *de,* an element; then in the second step adds the consonant *b* to specify the element fire; and in the third step adds the vowel *a* to specify a portion of that element, a flame—a three-step process to produce a four-letter word that cannot help but remind us of the way that the successive murders in "Death and the Compass" each add, as part of a supposed cabalistic rite, another letter to the spelling of a four-letter name composed of three different letters, the Tetragrammaton. The resemblance between essay and story in this regard seems even more striking when Borges remarks that in "the words of John Wilkins's analytical language . . . every letter is meaningful, as the letters of the Holy Scriptures were meaningful for the cabalists," the analytical language being "a universal key and a secret encyclopedia (*OI,* p. 103). One recalls the cabalistic texts that Lönnrot read in trying to solve the mystery of the murders: a work on "the magic and the terror of the Tetragrammaton, which is God's unspeakable name," another on "the doctrine that God has a secret name in which (as in the crystal sphere that the Persians attribute to Alexander of Macedonia) His ninth attribute, Eternity, may be found—that is to say, the immediate knowledge of everything under the sun that will be, that is, and that was. Tradition lists ninety-nine names of God; Hebrew scholars explain that imperfect cipher by *a mystic fear of even numbers;* the Hasidim argue that the missing term stands for

a hundredth name—the Absolute Name" (p. 68, italics mine). This Absolute Name, which is "the immediate knowledge" of everything that is, was, or will be, is in effect "a universal key and a secret encyclopedia"; it is the apotheosis of that linguistic totality of representation which Wilkins sought in his analytical language, and as such it confronts us with the paradox of self-inclusion on the cosmic level. For the Absolute Name, like "the crystal sphere that the Persians attribute to Alexander" or that other crystal sphere that Borges named the Aleph, is a faithful representation of everything in the universe, but it is also one of the things contained in that universe. Consequently, any Aleph-like object, as a representation of all the things in that universe of which it is itself one minute part, must contain within its compass a faithful representation of itself, and that representation must contain within itself another, and so on, Aleph within Aleph, in an infinite progression of representations that is also an infinite regression as each successive representation is reduced in size to maintain the proportional relationship between the original representation and the universe. This ultimate vanishing of signification in the infinite as one pursues an absolute coincidence between the cosmos and its self-contained image probably accounts for the cabalists' "mystic fear of even numbers," the fear that the secret Absolute Name of God, that hundredth name representing a symbolic apotheosis of evenness, invokes the condition of zero difference, the condition where ubiquity and nullibeity are the same.

Given the several resemblances between "Death and the Compass" and "The Analytical Language of John Wilkins," one can see that Lacan's reference to the Wilkins essay may indeed represent the return of a repressed content, which is to say, the surfacing of Lacan's sense of how much his own reading of "The Purloined Letter" either owed directly to, or was anticipated by, Borges's reading/rewriting of the Poe story in "Death and the Compass." And certainly if Lacan had any misgivings, any anxiety about the originality of his reading, such misgivings could not help but have been increased and given focus by M. Pobers' "letter" to the editor pointing out that the analytical language which Borges attributed to Wilkins did not originate with him but was the invention of another man. Might another Pobers write a letter pointing out that Lacan's reading of "The Purloined Letter" did not originate with him, a letter arguing that Lacan's reading had either been influenced, or at the very least anticipated, by Borges's reading/

rewriting, so that Lacan's reading, like the purloined letter itself, was out of place, not the first but the second instance of this particular interpretation of the tale? If this originality anxiety existed for Lacan, then his footnote to Borges would be the trace of an inner division, the visible mark of his inability, on the one hand, *to acknowledge consciously* a debt of influence to, or the simple priority of, Borges in a matter so central to his interpretation of Poe's tale, and of his equal inability, on the other hand, *not to acknowledge unconsciously* his sense of this debt or priority. Or perhaps it is less a matter of Lacan's unwillingness to acknowledge Borges as a precursor than of his reluctance as a psychoanalyst, which is to say, as a scientist, a writer of non-fiction prose, to acknowledge an interpretive influence or priority originating in a work of fiction, since such an acknowledgement would seem to undermine the privileged, "scientific" status of Lacan's reading of Poe by suggesting the imaginative (not to say, fictive) component of psychoanalytic interpretation. If this were the case, then the footnote could be an unconscious compromise that lets Lacan acknowledge Borges not by citing one of his stories but by referencing one of his analytic essays, a non-fiction work whose veiled resemblance to "Death and the Compass" allows it to serve as a screen figure for the tale. In either case—originality anxiety or the privileging of psychoanalytic discourse—the result would be the same: the oddly gratuitous footnote pointing out a trivial coincidence.

That the structures of specular self-consciousness elaborated in Borges's "Death and the Compass" and in Lacan's "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter' " involve essentially the same geometric configuration—a figure formed by the mirror-doubling of a triangle—can be seen quite clearly in a diagram that Lacan included as part of a commentary on the "Seminar" in his *Écrits*. Discussing "the dialectic of intersubjectivity"[16] presented in the "Seminar," Lacan identifies its central mechanism as that reciprocal imaginary objectification of self and Other found in the Lacanian mirror stage. According to Lacan, the mirror stage in human development occurs between the sixth and the eighteenth months when the child, lacking motor control of his body, "anticipates on the imaginary level the future acquisition and mastery of his bodily integrity." This "imaginary integration . . . brought about through identification with the image of a similar being . . . as a total form . . . is illustrated and realized in the concrete experience in which the child perceives his own image in a mirror."[17] To illustrate the

specular nature of "the dialectic of intersubjectivity" in the "Seminar," Lacan uses the following diagram:

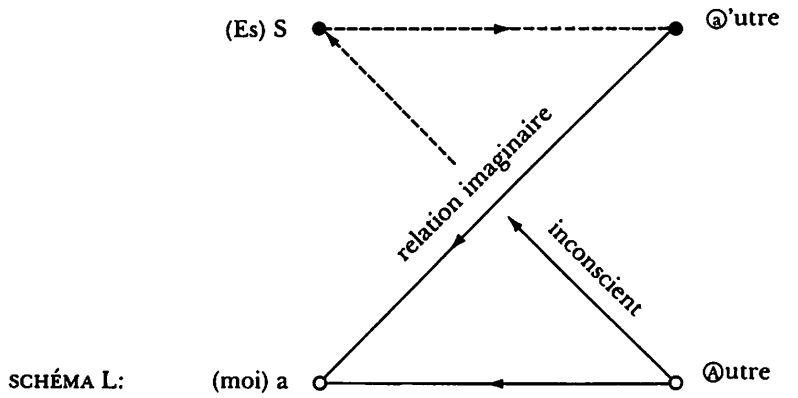
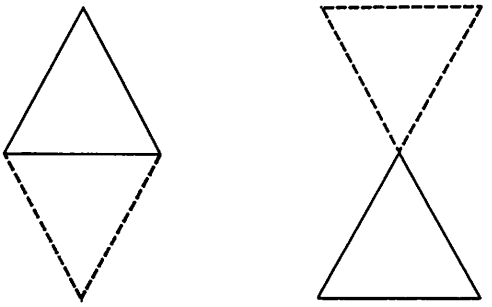


SCHÉMA L:

(*Écrits*, 1:66)

This figure representing the mirror-doubling of two triangles is the reciprocal of the geometric shape that Borges uses in "Death and the Compass" to figure the face-to-face meeting of the two men "whose minds work in the same way" and who "may be the same man." The difference is that Borges represents the mirror-doubling of a triangular structure as the projection downward of a second triangle from the base of the first, while Lacan represents this same mirror-doubling inherent in "the dialectic of intersubjectivity" as the projection upward of a second triangle from the vertex of the first:



VII

Since the self-including structure of "The Purloined Letter" has the effect of drawing into its progressive/regressive vortex any interpretation of it, I am resigned to my part in the casual comedy, ready to feign astonishment should some future interpreter point out that just as Lacan and Derrida in reading the tale replayed the game of even and odd in the critical register, so I have in reading the tale replayed Lönnrot's geometrical response to Scharlach's quadrangular maze. Which is to say that in writing an essay about Poe's "Purloined Letter" and the readings of it by Lacan, Derrida, and Johnson (i.e., in observing the quadrangular hermeneutic figure formed by the literary text and a cumulative series of three interpretations), I have in effect added one more side to that hermeneutic figure, a fifth side adumbrating an infinite progression of interpretations, while at the same time I have, like Lönnrot with his regressive straight-line labyrinth, introduced between points A and B in the hermeneutic figure, i.e., between Poe's tale and Lacan's reading, another story/interpretation, Borges's "Death and the Compass," that adumbrates an infinite regression of influence/priority in the interpretive tradition of the analytic detective genre. In pursuing this regression, one could, for example, introduce between "Death and the Compass" and "The Purloined Letter" Israel Zangwill's *The Big Bow Mystery* (1892); and between Borges and Zangwill, H. G. Wells's "The Plattner Story" (1897); and between Zangwill and Poe, Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* (1872), and so on endlessly. But that is another task for a different work. For the present I stand ready, should someone unmask my replaying of Lönnrot's maneuver, to slap my forehead with the palm of my hand (like Clarence Day on reading in his morning paper that there had been another wreck on the New Haven) and exclaim, "Oh gad!"

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NOTES

1 Raymond Chandler, "The Simple Art of Murder," in *Detective Fiction: Crime and Compromise*, eds. Dick Allen and David Chacko (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), p. 398.

2 Edgar Allan Poe, *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969-78), 2: 521n. All subsequent quotations from Poe are taken from this edition.

3 Jorge Luis Borges, "Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth," in *The Aleph and Other Stories, 1933-1969*, trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978), p. 123. All subsequent quotations from Borges's fiction are taken from this edition.

4 Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter', " trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, *Yale French Studies*, 48 (1972), p. 41. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent quotations from the "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter' " are taken from this edition.

5 Barbara Johnson, "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida," in *The Critical Difference* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 118. All subsequent quotations from Johnson are taken from this edition.

6 Jacques Derrida, "The Purveyor of Truth," trans. W. Domingo, J. Hulbert, M. Ron, and M.-R. Logan, *Yale French Studies*, 52 (1975), p. 100. All subsequent quotations from Derrida are taken from this edition.

7 *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, College Edition (Cleveland and New York: World Publishing Co., 1964), p. 1359, "simple." The etymologies of "even" and "odd" are also taken from this edition.

8 D. P. Simpson, *Cassell's Latin Dictionary* (New York: Macmillan, 1978), p. 556, "simplex."

9 *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Eleventh Edition, 29 vols. (New York: The Encyclopaedia Britannica Co., 1911), 27: 254.

10 S. K. Heninger, Jr., *The Cosmographical Glass: Renaissance Diagrams of the Universe* (San Marino, California: The Huntington Library, 1977), p. 83, fig. 52b. All subsequent quotations referring to Fludd's diagram are cited from Heninger. This diagram was brought to my attention by my student James Boylan.

11 Jorge Luis Borges, "From Someone to Nobody," in *Other Inquisitions, 1937-1952*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), p. 148. All subsequent quotations from Borges's essays are taken from this edition, designated *OI* in the text.

12 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. E. W. Emerson, 12 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903-04), 9: 195. See also Borges, *Other Inquisitions*, p. 69.

13 Howard Haycraft, *Murder For Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1984), p. xxi.

14 *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 171.

15 Emir Rodriguez Monegal, *Jorge Luis Borges: A Literary Biography* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978), p. 382. All subsequent quotations from Monegal are taken from this edition.

16 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, 2 vols. (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1966), 1: 66.

17 Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, "Mirror Stage (Stade du miroir)," trans. Peter Kussell and Jeffrey Mehlman, *Yale French Studies*, 48 (1972), p. 192.