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Richard Hull

"The Purloined Letter": Poe's Detective Story vs. Panoptic Foucauldian Theory

An important group of literary critics has derived from Michel Foucault's late work, especially *Discipline and Punish*, the idea that literary narrative polices thought and behavior. Though these critics claim that detective stories are the best examples of this policing, Poe's detective story, "The Purloined Letter," is a clear counterexample.

Foucault argued that "disciplinary methods," developed since the seventeenth century, have made writing, and especially narrative description, a means of controlling and dominating:

> The child, the patient, the prisoner, were to become, with increasing ease from the eighteenth century . . . the object of individual descriptions and biographical accounts. This turning of real lives into writing is no longer a procedure of heroization; it functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection. (*Discipline and Punish* 191-92)

Since description and biographical accounts of characters are the stuff of literary narrative, it was inevitable that someone would see such narrative as part of this "method of domination." An important group of literary theorists (I will call them panoptic Foucauldians) have done just that.

Foucault uses Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon prison as a metaphor for an intrusive social surveillance: "Bentham's *Panopticon* is the architectural figure of . . . a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting" people (200, 199):

> All that is needed . . . is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. . . . [O]ne can observe from the tower . . . the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. . . . Each individual . . . is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication. (*Discipline and Punish* 200)

Panoptic Foucauldians press Foucault's architectural figure into the service of interpreting literary narratives. A narrator is this supervisor, the unseen seer. Description of characters and their circumstances objectifies and dominates. As William Spanos points out, "What Foucault does not say but what his argument implicitly suggests is that the panoptic model is also applicable to

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literary texts" (205). Recognizing that Foucault was reluctant to apply his disciplinary theory to literature, D. A. Miller still calls "Foucauldian" his own discovery that the narrative techniques of Victorian novels are working "the modes of 'social control' that Foucault called discipline." Bentham's supervisor becomes a narrative "ideal of unseen but all-seeing surveillance," an ideal that serves "a regime of the norm, in which normalizing perceptions, prescriptions, and sanctions are diffused in discourses and practices throughout the social fabric" (viii).

For panoptic Foucauldians such as Miller and Mark Seltzer, narration is the police. They interpret not merely the criminal justice system, which appears as the *content* of many narratives, but *narrative technique itself*, as an important component of intrusive normalizing disciplinary power. Thus Miller turns "from the discipline narrated in the novel to the discipline inherent in the novel's technique of narration" (52). In its minute detailing of character and circumstance, narrative extends the normalizing power of surveillance to every aspect of life. It is in this sense that Miller can maintain that "representational techniques" systematically "participate in a general economy of policing power" (2). And Seltzer can find "a 'criminal continuity' between the techniques of representation . . . and the technologies of power" (13-14).[1]

To my knowledge, Foucault never proposed a theory of the detective story, and yet for both Miller and Seltzer, the detective story is crucial. In panoptic Foucauldian interpretation of literary technique, all narrative becomes a detective-like invasion of privacy.[2] Miller says panoptic narrative techniques find their "most programmatic embodiment in detective fiction" (28), since "the police *supervision* that it embodies . . . marks an explicit bringing-under-surveillance of the entire world of the narrative" (33). For Seltzer, detective fiction, which becomes "indistinguishable from a fantasy of surveillance" (34), is merely the most obvious form of "omniscient narration" that grants the narrative voice an unlimited authority over . . . a world thoroughly known and thoroughly mastered by the panoptic 'eye' of the narration" (54-55).

For panoptic Foucauldians, there is precious little social or artistic room for narrative artists to resist. Writers who try to avoid this policing function are bound to fail, because the formula of representation as surveillance of private lives, rather than the will or consciousness of the writer, is determinant. Thus, though Seltzer recognizes Henry James's "attempt to imagine an alternative to the facts of power" (105), he thinks such "attempts to devise strategies of resistance" (135-36) are doomed, since writers are coerced into police work by "the normalizing power of form" (89). He sees writers' attempts "to disown the policing that they exercise" as a " 'cover' for a more discreet and comprehensive policy of supervision" (56). Seltzer ridicules James's notion that "an intrinsic and subversive literary difference may provide . . . an alternative to power" (132). Miller makes the similar point that whenever narration cen-

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sures police power, "it has already reinvested it, in *the very practice of . . . representation*" (20; Miller's emphasis).

But Poe's "The Purloined Letter" is a detective story that escapes the so-called inevitability of the panoptic surveillance formula, thus undercutting the reliance of panoptic narrative theory on the detective genre. Panoptic theorists tend to overreach when they claim that *all* narrative must snoop, that narrative artists are powerless in the face of pervasive power, and are complicit with reprehensible violations of privacy, no matter how they may try to resist. In fact, Poe's detective might have been conceived precisely as a challenge to this panoptic viewpoint. For Dupin does not conduct surveillance. He prevents detection and thus works against discipline. Instead of invading the Queen's privacy, he protects it and covers up her crime. Poe's Prefect of Police is a panoptic detective, but he fails because he lacks Dupin's poetic understanding.

Poe's detective story suggests a need for a more inclusive Foucauldian theory of narration that would attend to the early Foucault of counter-discourse. In applying Foucault's late work, panoptic Foucauldians overlook possibilities indicated in his earlier work. To construct a Foucauldian narrative theory that will make room for a detective story like "The Purloined Letter," which is different from the detective stories envisaged by panoptic theory, we must read this early Foucault, and not just the late Foucault of panoptic discipline. Like Poe's story, the Foucault of counter-discourse offers hope that the growth of panoptic discipline is not "ineluctable."[3] This early Foucault would have been interested in the counter-discursive tactics of "The Purloined Letter," which expose the weak sides of panoptic surveillance, and suggest a need to narrow the range of panoptic Foucauldian theory. Poe consciously writes counter-discourse, and escapes the Panopticon, even as he founds the detective-story genre.

Uta Liebmann Schaub usefully comments on this aspect of the early Foucault:

> In his 1963 "Preface to Transgression," [he] had announced the "new language of thought." . . . References to a new language as the substance of a new way of thinking are ubiquitous in Foucault's early work. . . . Foucault sees this language as only beginning to emerge, first of all in literature and poetry, but also in criticism. . . . The discourse that thinks of itself as "true" is characterized and structured by the prescriptive demands of dialectics, representation, coherence, and continuity; the new language will be nondialectical, nondescriptive, incoherent, and discontinuous. (313)

"The Purloined Letter" is the kind of literature (literature about poetry) that Foucault looked to as a source of new language and thought. The descriptive representation that panoptic theorists expect of narrative is the old language Foucault expected to be replaced. Foucault works to develop a new language that is "not descriptive, nor is it representational" (Schaub 311). "The Purloined Letter" is an early instance of such new language in that it does not describe characters or represent the most important circumstances. Foucault's

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new language undercuts the solutions to detective stories in that it "wishes to subvert the single-minded confidence in the possibility of proofs" (Schaub 311).

A Foucauldianism that interprets narrative technique as inexorable domination misses the Foucault that thought literary language might subvert description and representation, the Foucault of counter-discourse. For Foucault it was only the classicism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that neglected the "ancient solidity of language as a thing inscribed in the fabric of the world" (*The Order of Things* 43):

> Throughout the nineteenth century, and right up to our own day—from Hölderlin to Mallarmé and on to Antoine Artaud—literature achieved autonomous existence, and separated itself from all other language with a deep scission, only by forming a sort of "counter-discourse", and by finding its way back from the representative or signifying function of language to this raw being that had been forgotten since the sixteenth century.
>
> It is possible to believe that one has attained the very essence of literature when one is no longer interrogating it at the level of what it says but only in its significant form: in doing so, one is limiting one's view of language to its Classical status.
>
> (*The Order of Things* 43-44)

A panoptic Foucauldianism that assumes all narrative takes the form of representation can be faulted for limiting its view to language's Classical situation. In so doing it overlooks the counter-discourse Foucault finds in literature beginning in the nineteenth century. Poe's "The Purloined Letter" is an almost theoretical polemic in favor of the kind of poetic counter-discourse Foucault found in the sixteenth century and in the nineteenth-century poetic underground.

Panoptic theory explains the alternative Dupin provides to police techniques as merely dispersing police surveillance. Miller, for instance, tells us that in one of the

> typical displacements of detective fiction . . . the function of detection passes . . . from a professional to an amateur one (from Inspector G—— to Dupin in the Poe stories). . . . The move to discard the *role of the detective* is at the same time a move to disperse the *function* of detection. . . . [But] what needs to come out somehow does, and the work of detection advances. (41-43)

Dupin recovers the letter for the police, and he is thus, in Miller's terms, the "disciplinary supplement" of the police: "Discipline is . . . thereby rendered more effective . . . inobtrusively supplying the place of the police in places where the police cannot be" (16).

But Dupin does not *go* where the police cannot. He *understands* what the police cannot. Instead of providing cover for police work, he covers up a crime by eschewing description and representation. The work of detection does not advance.

Miller points out that Balzac's "police agents are privy to what goes on behind the 'scènes de la vie privée,' and they thus resemble the novelist whose

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activity is also conceived as a penetration of social surfaces" (23). But unlike Dickens or Arthur Conan Doyle, who were driven by the urge to pull off walls and roofs in order to observe and report on private lives,[4] Poe is not curious to know the Queen's private doings, and thus her life remains beyond our purview. And because Poe does not expose private life, his narrative technique differs from that of Balzac, whose "omniscient narration assumes a fully panoptic view of the world it places under surveillance" (Miller 23). Poe's Prefect is associated with Balzac's narrative technique, but it is Dupin's protection of the Queen's privacy that determines Poe's narrative.

Refusing to behave according to the panoptic model, Dupin is not interested in the kind of knowledge that preoccupies the Prefect. In this contrast between alternative means of observation, "The Purloined Letter" sets up a competition between forms of narrative and the kinds of knowledge they support. It is not panoptic narrative that wins this competition, but a more ancient way of seeing and telling. In Foucault's *The Order of Things*, an earlier interpretation of signs on the basis of chains of association and resemblance gives way to the *mathesis* of the Cartesian seventeenth century, the imposition of a perceptual grid that makes some things visible by excluding consideration of others. *The Order of Things*, after all, teaches that what is visible to one *episteme*, or perceptual grid, is invisible to another. In Poe, on the contrary, the mathesis of the police loses out to Dupin's interpretation by means of resemblance. "The Purloined Letter" is about there being something to be seen that is invisible to panoptic supervision.

Dupin compares his defeat of the Minister "to various schoolboy games, the winning of which . . . depends upon 'an identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent' " (123). In their assertion that all narrative, or even all detective stories work according to formula, panoptic Foucauldians make the mistake Dupin ascribes to the police: "non measurement of the intellect with which they are engaged" (217-18):

> In detective fiction, the relation between seeing and policing is taken for granted; literally, the range of the detective's vision is the range of his power. That power operates by placing the entire world of the text under scrutiny and under surveillance and invokes the possibility of an absolute supervision, in which everything may be comprehended and "policed."
> (Seltzer 51)

"The Purloined Letter" shows this supervision failing; there is something it cannot comprehend and police. For though panoptic intrusion brings the Minister's apartment into the range of vision of the police, they fail to see what's in front of them. They are not the men to see the letter, because they have the wrong kind of intelligence.

In panoptic Foucauldian theory, successful viewing depends on the disciplinary "perceptual grid" (Miller 138). But the very perceptual grid, by which the police in "The Purloined Letter" expect to see, blinds them.[5] The Prefect

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explains how they blocked out the house to be searched: "We divided its entire surface into compartments, which we numbered, so that none might be missed; then we scrutinized each individual square inch throughout the premises, including the two houses immediately adjoining" (213). Their confidence in their perceptual grid is misplaced, however. Dupin sees because he looks outside it.

In both Bentham's panopticon prison and the panoptic narrative theory based on it, the point is "to see without being seen; and indeed, seeing without being seen becomes the measure of power" (Seltzer 41). Bender ties such unseen seeing to the convention "that both author and beholder are absent from a representation" (201). For panoptic narrative theory, the most disturbing aspect of Jacques Lacan's famous "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" one of the founding documents of 60's structuralism, must be its showing that there is no unseen seer: "We see him . . . trapped in the typically imaginary situation of seeing that he is not seen, misconstrue the real situation in which he is seen not seeing" (61). If the unseen viewer essential to the panopticon is actually seen without seeing,[6] the notion of the panopticon as basis of all narration can be criticized as "the realist's imbecility" (Lacan 55).

In what Lacan calls the second scene of "The Purloined Letter," "the role of the unaware 'seer' [is played] by the Minister and the role of the profiteer ('robber') by Dupin." In the third scene, "the role of the self-absorbed 'seer' [is played] by Dupin, and the role of the one who 'sees' 'what should be hidden exposed' and takes advantage of it (as the 'robber,' so to speak) by the (psycho)analyst/Lacan" (Muller and Richardson 60-61).[7] "The letter 'transforms' the Minister," "unbeknown to himself, into the 'image' of the Queen, placing him as it does in the position of the seer unaware of himself being seen" (Muller and Richardson 63). Panoptic theory that relies on the unseen seer seems to have overlooked the possibility that narrative might focus on that seer's lack of awareness, his "naively empiricist objectivism that is oblivious of the role of symbolic structures in the organization of 'reality'" (Muller and Richardson 63).

Though panoptic Foucauldians have discovered that certain narrative techniques may be in complicity with invasive police technologies, they fail to recognize the problem inherent in Bentham's unseen seer. Thus Lacan's showing that such seers delude themselves seriously weakens panoptic theory. In positioning itself outside the narrative practice described, as merely the application of a non-literary theory to literature, panoptic theory adopts the stance of Bentham's supervisor. It comes to literary narrative as a metalanguage to language, making of "description a means of control and a method of domination," and functioning as "a procedure of objectification." Like Bentham's prisoner, who "is seen, but does not see," panoptic theory makes narrative into "the object of information."

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Thus panoptic theory is peculiarly unsuited to deal with the lack of detection Lacan pounces upon. Since in panoptic theory, the detective story must reveal the facts, narration becomes a slave to the detective story formula on the assumption that detective stories are themselves slaves to it, and must end in knowledge (the solution). But "The Purloined Letter" shows that not all detective stories follow the formula. Geoffrey Hartman's distinction between low detective fiction, which panders to our lust for knowing, and sophisticated art, which gives us "a story with a hole in it" (204), indicates the limitation of the ending as revelation which panoptic theory insists on. Many readers have noticed that even though we do find out the purloined letter's location, we find out nothing about its sender or contents. The ending is not the revelation but the coverup of the sender's identity and purpose, and of the queen's involvement in that purpose:

> Although Dupin is an astute detective, "The Purloined Letter" is not a satisfactory detective story. . . . We know from the very start the identity of the culprit. . . . But we know little about the rest of the circumstances. We will never find out what the letter contained; we can only assume the significance of its origination and the nature of its destination. In fact, we know precious little about any of the participants in this event. (Grossvogel 95)

This is to say that "The Purloined Letter" is not satisfactory because it does not end in epistemic catharsis.[8]

Why doesn't Poe expose the Queen? Henry James wrote that when a novelist loved his character, "his prompting was not to expose her; it could only be, on the contrary . . . to cover her up and protect her." Seltzer's panoptic response is that

> This exposure is nevertheless inevitable: it inheres in the "inner expansive force" of the form itself, in the "organic" rule of composition that is ultimately "the very law of the game." . . . The organic "logic" of composition itself at last gives the character away. (89)

But Poe's tale works on a logic that does not give the lady away. As Grossvogel puts it, "Poe's mystery is of a different order" (96).

Leo Bersani agrees with Foucault, that "all the discourses about personality or the psyche . . . are crucial disciplinary instruments in the modern exercise of power," but he thinks there may be a narrative technique "for avoiding complicity in power schemes." That technique is identical to Poe's way of presenting the woman Dupin serves: "the projection or implication of an 'unarticulated, nonanalyzable worth' " (Bersani 11),[9] or refusal to characterize. Dupin doesn't want to know about the Queen's conduct. Instead of using the letter as a panoptic instrument for investigating her, he restores it to her in order to cover and protect her privacy.[10] Her behavior is not disciplined, examined, or even named, but covered up in a plot that brackets private life, refusing what Seltzer calls narrative's "intrusive voyeurism" (30).

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Brooks' hermeneutics of plot supports the panoptic Foucauldian insistence on revelation, since it suggests that a story is not complete unless it leads to knowledge (27). Wayne Booth also said as much:

> We always want to find out the facts of the case, whether the simple material circumstances, as in most mystery stories, or psychological or philosophical truths which explain the external circumstances. . . . We know that the book is completed when we once see the complete picture. (125-26)

However, the plot of knowledge is neither the essence of narration nor the only possible plot.[11] "The Purloined Letter" would be one of Todorov's "narratives of zero transformation," in which an effort to transform ignorance into knowledge fails" (232-33), except that Dupin *succeeds* in preventing that transformation. "The Purloined Letter" doesn't resolve itself in the epistemic way, because Poe is interested in something besides knowledge. Grossvogel points out that

> Poe himself distinguished between the mysterious quality of his other stories and the spurious mystery (the mystery that contains its own solution) that the surface of his detective fiction evidences: in an 1846 letter to Philip Pendleton Cook, he asked "Where is the ingenuity of unravelling a web which you yourself [the author] have woven for the express purpose of unravelling?" Poe's awareness of a tautology—the mystery created in order to be uncreated—confirms the suspicion of an Edgar Allan Poe who was relatively indifferent to the temporal riddle that might yield to ingenuity. (97)

In effect Poe opposes story as knowledge, and in this he is like Foucault, who in his 1971 study of his own Nietzschean roots, discovers three geneologic uses of history by which "historical sense" may "free itself" from its "metaphysical and anthropological model." The third of these uses "constructs a counter-memory" that is "directed against truth, and opposes history as knowledge" ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 160). Similarly working against the metaphysical and anthropological model of story, Poe constructs a narrative that counters the panoptic exposure that would be knowledge.

This construction of counter-story in opposition to knowledge disallows the narrative description or reduction of a life to writing envisaged by panoptic Foucauldians. Foucault's criticism of historical consciousness might be applied to the consciousness of the panoptic supervisor:

> Historical consciousness is neutral, devoid of passions, and committed solely to truth. But if it examines itself . . . it finds that all these forms and transformations are aspects of the will to knowledge: instinct, passion, the inquisitor's devotion, cruel subtlety, and malice. . . . The historical analysis of this rancorous will to knowledge reveals that all knowledge rests upon injustice (that there is no right, not even in the act of knowing, to truth or a foundation for truth) and that the instinct for knowledge is malicious. . . . [I]ts development is not tied to the constitution and affirmation of a free subject; rather, it creates a progressive enslavement to its instinctive violence. ("Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" 162-63)

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Panoptic theory points to narrative representation as a vehicle for this progressive enslavement. But writers like Poe show how narrative can, in Foucault's term, "sacrifice" (162) the will to knowledge. Thus in "The Purloined Letter" observation does not lead to the close of uncertainties or the arrest of independence. It does not reinforce normalcy. Neither Dupin nor the story he stars in serves to discipline and punish at least the Queen's crime. The punishment dished out to the Minister is not for stealing the letter, but for some unnamed personal insult to Dupin. Poe shifts from the plot of epistemic closure to an ancient plot form that ended not with knowledge, but with repetition. Dupin's coverup of the Queen's illicit relationship and his sticking it to the Minister yields not knowledge but revenge.

As Bender points out, "The essence of the Panopticon lies, as with Smith's impartial spectator, in its construction of an impersonal beholder" (228). But Poe is at pains to demonstrate that Dupin is not impartial. In what Lacan calls an "explosion of feeling," this detective reveals "the rancor . . . stemming from an evil turn done him at Vienna" (68). For Dupin the point of the plot is not the recovery of the letter, but the repetition and reversal of this evil turn. In shifting from the plot that moves toward knowledge to the one that moves toward revenge, Poe offers an alternative to the narrative standard identified by panoptic Foucauldians.

In the formula detective story envisaged by panoptic theory, plots open with crimes the perpetrators of which are unknown, and end in knowledge (solutions to the crimes). In the archaic revenge story, by contrast, plots also open with crimes, but perpetrators are known, and the plots end with vengeance which repeats the crimes. In the final lines of "The Purloined Letter," in the letter he substitutes for the one he's stealing, Dupin quotes from Crebillon's *Atrée*. As Hoffman puts it:

> The great detective has conceived his revenge in the spirit of Thyestes, who fed the House of Atreus a meal of their own murdered sons. Whatever the "evil turn" . . . which Dupin "good-humoredly" promised never to forget, this is the fantasy of horror which wound the springs of the master-detective's ratiocination. . . . Poe had prefaced "The Cask of Amontillado" with an apothegm of Montresor's about revenge: "I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redressor. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong." . . . [T]he secret letter—which Dupin leaves . . . meets all these conditions for a perfect revenge. (133-34)

But Hoffman underestimates the repetitive nature of revenge. Lacan's tracing of the repetition complex in "The Purloined Letter" gives us reason to doubt that Dupin's revenge escapes retribution. We do not know that Dupin is protected.

My reading of "The Purloined Letter" combines elements of three older theories. In the first, Todorov and Brooks emphasize that detective stories are stories of *repetition*. The detective repeats the crime, but only in his investi-

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gative and narrative reconstruction of it. In the second, Geoffrey Hartman emphasizes the *violence* basic to detective fiction, "the blood deed from which all consequences flow."[12] The third, Lacan's "investigation of the repetition compulsion" (Grossvogel 102), emphasizes the *shifting roles* characters assume. Thus Lacan emphasizes that Dupin takes his revenge only when he is "in the median position [previously] occupied by the Queen and the Minister" (69).

Dupin's *repetition*, which is not investigative and narrative, but actual repetition of the evil turn, fits his detective story into the revenge story. Like Atreus's feeding the adulterer his own children, it is *violence*. Dupin's *shift of roles*, from the one done the evil turn to the doer of the turn, repeats the traditional revenge plot in which people first play the role of offended, then of revenger and then of victim, as revenge leads to revenge. Whoever holds the letter is in position to do an evil turn, but oblivious of the fact that the evil turn he does sets himself up for the next.

Grossvogel points out that the Dupin stories are commonly considered the father of the detective story, but he considers "The Purloined Letter" inattentive to the demands of its "progeny" (93). I would rather suggest that it is a detective story strong enough to resist formula. It's not a defective but an originary detective story, still bloody from its birth in revenge.[13] The Crebillon quote refers to a world without police and thus a world before detective fiction. "The Purloined Letter" can't end with the solution to the crime, because we know from the beginning who stole the letter. But archaic revenge stories routinely begin with such knowledge. In revenge stories such as the *Oresteia* and *Njal's Saga*, the offended parties always know who committed the offense.

How then is an anti-panoptic writer to escape the panoptic form? Poe rejects the termination proper to panoptic detective fiction, preferring the older one proper to revenge fiction. He cunningly shifts attention from the modern formula demand for epistemic catharsis to an archaic demand for repetition that may be more basic. Thus a detective story can challenge a theory that relies on detective stories.

"The Purloined Letter" is a good text for questioning the metalinguistic claim that artists can't avoid doing surveillance, because it is a discourse on *poetry's superiority over surveillance*. One of the leading practitioners of "poststructuralist" psychoanalysis[14] is Shoshana Felman, who points out that "it is their *poetic* reasoning" that positions both the Minister and Dupin "to outsmart the police" (150). She finds that Marie Bonaparte's standard Freudian reading of Poe is in error: "like the Prefect . . . she simplistically *equates* the poetic with the psychotic, and so, blinded by what she takes to be the poetic *incompetence*, fails to see or understand the specificity of poetic *competence*" (151). Perhaps panoptic theory falls into the same error. Is it not so dazzled by the power of surveillance that it fails to see or understand narrative artists' specific power of concealment?

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Foucault gives us a reason for the Prefect's associating poets with madmen that is more apropos: labeling a poet mad no longer has anything to do with "the old Platonic theme of inspired madness. It is the mark of a new experience of language and things" (*The Order of Things* 49). Calling poets "madmen" discredits not only the poets, but the entire suppressed *episteme*, which in Foucault's archeology leads an underground life in nineteenth-century, poetic counter-discourse. Poe's narrator tells Dupin that his opinions "have been contradicted by the voice of the world" (219). For Foucault such a poet is like the madman in that he is "at the fringes of a knowledge that separates beings, signs, and similitudes, and as though to limit its power" (49). Discrediting poets as madmen is a gambit in a war between kinds of knowledge. In presenting Dupin's answer to that gambit, Poe at least temporarily outdoes the Panopticon.

Thus "The Purloined Letter" is one narrative that escapes from the surveillance panoptic Foucauldians find inevitable. If one of the original detective stories demonstrates that a poet can conceal something the police can't find—Dupin says the "remote source" of the Prefect's "defeat lies in the supposition that the Minister is a fool, because he has acquired renown as a poet" (218-19)—then theories of narration as inexorably controlled by a panoptic detective-story formula must crumble. Poe is like Heidegger in opposing a poetics of concealment to the kind of limited revealing yielded by the Prefect's perceptual grid. Heidegger says man's highest dignity depends upon such concealment. The perceptual grid of that detection which merely sniffs out facts (Heidegger calls it "Enframing")

> banishes man into that kind of revealing which is an ordering. Where this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing. Above all, Enframing conceals that revealing which [works] in the sense of *poiesis*. (*QCT* 27)

As Felman and Heidegger suggest, poets are more competent than panoptic theory likes to admit. Reducing narrative poetics to the technology Heidegger calls Enframing, panoptic theory sets itself up as an unseen seer, and like the Prefect who grids the Minister's room, blinds itself. Poe, on the contrary, rejects any denigration of poetic competence. He not only shares the Heideggerian and Foucauldian suspicion of all-seeing surveillance, but contrives an effective poetic resistance.

Notes

[1] Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology* covers the literary technology that Foucauldian critics trace to detective fiction, and that they think writers are incompetent to resist. "Enframing," he says, "threatens to sweep man away into ordering as the supposed single way of revealing, and so thrusts man into the danger of the surrender of his free essence" (*QCT* 32).

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[2] Cf. Peter Brooks, who cites Todorov: "The detective story . . . lay[s] bare the structure of any narrative. . . . The detective . . . represents the very process of narrative representation" (244-45). In "Living On: Border Lines," Derrida says, "All organized narration is 'a matter for the police,' even before its genre (mystery novel, cop story) has been determined" (104-05).

[3]

> There is an unremitting and unstoppable expansion of power favoring the administrators, managers, and technocrats of what [Foucault] calls disciplinary society. Power, he writes in his last phase, is everywhere. It is overcoming, co-opting, infinitely detailed, and ineluctable in the growth of its domination. (Said 150)

[4] Dickens and Conan Doyle seem to have gone out of their way to make themselves examples of Foucauldian theory. Seltzer cites Dickens, who in *Dombey and Son* wishes for "a good spirit who would take the housetops off . . . and show a Christian people what dark shapes issue from amidst their homes," and Doyle who dreams of even greater intrusion: "If we could . . . hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on" (33).

[5] Poe is not the only writer to indicate that panoptics will fail when the supervisors don't have the right kind of intelligence. Strether says of the Woollett surveyors in Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, a novel Seltzer's study of Jamesian narrative does not treat, that "Their observation would fail; it would be beyond them; they simply wouldn't understand" (212).

[6] While some think Poe founded the detective story, others look as far back as *Oedipus*. In that whodunit, the detective falls into this same structure: when he thinks he sees, he's blind.

[7] The story's point that there is no coign of vantage from which a seer can see everything continues to be made: Lacan has been exposed as a blind seer by Derrida, and Derrida by Barbara Johnson, making "The Purloined Letter" the most theorized of detective stories.

[8] Hartman says, "Sophisticated art is closer to being an antimystery rather than a mystery. It limits, even while expressing, this passion for ocular proof" ("Literature High and Low" 204). "The Purloined Letter" would thus be antimystery. William Spanos, who wants to "take a hammer" to "the sign of the detective" (47), proposes a program in which "the most immediate task . . . is that of undermining the detectivelike expectations of the positivistic mind" (25). He favors "the anti-detective story . . . the formal purpose of which is to evoke the impulse to 'detect' . . . in order to violently frustrate this impulse by refusing to solve the crime" (25). Poe's sophisticated purpose seems to be to sidestep rather than to frustrate the impulse to detect.

[9] Bersani's instance is Milly in James's *The Wings of the Dove*.

[10] Cf. Heidegger's advice that we "rid ourselves of the calculative frame of mind" in favor of what he calls the "face-to-face with one another" in which one is like a "guardian watching over the other, over the other as its veil" (*OWL* 104).

[11] Though plots of knowledge might be common, other kinds are possible. Brooks himself speaks of "premisses" in Flaubert, "which preclude turning fascination into knowledge" (187). Alan Singer's understanding of modernist and post-modernist fiction includes a "suspension of epistemological closure, which renders the fiction of this century increasingly incompatible with the conventional expectations of readers" (25). Todorov summarizes the six kinds of plot analyzed by Shklovsky, pointing out that in half of them, "ignorance or error are replaced by correct knowledge" (232). In Todorov's

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own classification of plots there are six simple and six complex groups of "Narrative Transformations." In the second group, *Transformations of Knowledge*, the action is a gain in consciousness, and can be described by verbs such as *observe*, *learn*, *guess*, *know*, *ignore* (228). Only half of Shklovsky's cases and only one of Todorov's twelve groups are plots of knowledge.

[12] "The blood deed from which all consequences flow . . . is the real point of reference. I wish to suggest that some such 'heart of darkness' scene, some such *pathos*, is the relentless center or focus of detective fiction" (203-04).

[13] Poe was writing before the detective genre had jelled. As Lacan reminds us, "We should not forget that 'the Dupin tale,' ["The Purloined Letter"] is the second to appear, is a prototype, and that even if the genre were established in the first, it is still a little early for the author to play on a convention" (45).

[14]

> In the traditional view of psychoanalysis, the analyst, equipped with specialized knowledge, a scientific metalanguage, listens to the patient, interprets his or her symptoms, and produces the answer. The analyst would be outside of and above what he is studying: his language is of a different order, a metalanguage. But poststructuralist psychoanalytic reading stresses the importance of transference and countertransference (Culler 173)

That is, it is impossible for the analyst to remain unaffected by the person analyzed. There is no unseen seer.

[15] Grossvogel emphasizes "a central affinity" between Poe and Dupin "once he has made his character represent the Poet" (97-98).

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