The Gift (Book) That Keeps on Giving: Poe's "The Purloined Letter," Rereading, Reprinting, and Detective Fiction

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On 27 November 1844, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* included the following advertisement:

> Just published by Carey & Hart, and for sale by all booksellers. *The Gift* for 1845, with illustrations . . . and originally bound in calf extra . . . . We had reason, last year, to bestow high commendation on one of this class of American publications, and are glad to be [. . .] repeating it on the present volume. *The Gift* is still . . . so well printed, charmingly illustrated, as handsomely bound and as ably written as ever. This last is, after all, the feature which most attracts our regard . . . But [. . .] the story of "The Purloined Letter," by Edgar A. Poe, we must regard [. . .] of literary merit.[1]

Lodged among real estate news, an auditor's notice, and items about auctions, an upcoming zoological exhibition, concerts, and sales of furniture and clothes, along with pricelists of mutton, chocolate, and oyster pie, this advertisement for Poe's tale participates in a moment when dailies' "rectilinear columns of undifferentiated print" were constituting readers "variously as voters, advertisers, victims, and cheats, but always as consumers, spectators, and readers."[2] In this way, the commercial announcements that can seem, to an ideology of literature's aura, both crude and incongruent are actually consistent with *The Gift*'s commercial agenda to attract—by being "so well printed," "charmingly illustrated," and "handsomely bound"—readers *as* buyers.[3] Calling for a critical methodology that demonstrates the theoretical claim that texts have no meaning for readers separate from the material contexts in which they are read, Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier suggest we consider "the 'world of the text' as a world of objects, forms and rituals whose conventions and devices bear meaning but also constrain its construction," because "no text exists outside of the physical support that offers it for reading (or hearing) or outside of the circumstance in which it is read (or heard)." "Authors," they provokingly argue, "do not write books: they write texts that become written

objects . . . . All these objects are handled, in various ways, by flesh and blood readers whose reading habits vary with time, place and milieu."[4]

The November 1844 advertisement in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* appeared early in the publication and reception history of "The Purloined Letter," which had also been "noticed" in the September 1844 issue of *Democratic Review* and reviewed on the first page of the 4 October 1844 *New York Tribune*. That the prospective circulation of "The Purloined Letter"—"just published" and now "for sale by booksellers"—occasioned its early public mention foregrounds the reciprocal relation between literature and the reading practices of literary annuals in a culture of reprinting. As Meredith McGill claims in her influential *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853*, "the hallmark of the antebellum literary marketplace was its decentralization." According to McGill, "in the multiplicity of their formats and points of origin, and in the staggering temporality of their production, reprinted texts call attention to the repeated acts of articulation by which culture and its audiences are constituted."[5]

A historically and geographically specific genre that existed in the brief and explosive span of McGill's study, the gift book offers a singular site for exploring the complex inextricability of textual content from material context. Building on technological determinist arguments about form's relation to content,[6] McGill's research on reprinting crucially expands "form" to include the social, and not strictly technical, processes of transmission. As McGill explains, "one cannot simply return the text to its context; one would have to read it in the context of the radical decontextualization that marked the gift book medium as a whole."[7]

With plot developments that turn on the relationship between form and content, Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Purloined Letter" can be said to dramatize the very interplay between decontextualization and context central to the gift-book economy. Indeed, the story's obsessive negotiation of form/content and context/decontextualization opens a provocative vantage point from which to consider its canonical status both in the genre of detective fiction and in a certain tradition of psychoanalytically oriented literary criticism. This is to say, rather than being coincidental, the continuity of the story's internal preoccupations with the interpretive legacy it has generated reveals the extent to which questions of content and context are, as a result of the story's particular material/historical genealogy, always already at the center of "The Purloined Letter."

While predominant approaches to book history trace concrete histories of textual transmission, this paper focuses instead on a more speculative project that grounds a historicist methodology in the multiplicity of a reader's

potential responses. Such a specialized scholarly exercise intends neither to account for all the text's possible readings nor to substitute for testimonies of readers' experiences. Rather, the process of using the particular conditions of a story's transmission and circulation to imagine a variety of readers' responses aims to shift away from interpretive monopolizing that produces single or singly allegorical readings—critical tendencies that both book history, and the brand of close reading it works against, can be said to share.[8]

Searching for contingent rather than determinate meaning by examining the ways in which context rewrites a text, this paper reads Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter" in three distinct publication settings. I begin by looking at the earliest edition in *The Gift: A Christmas, New Year, and Birthday Present, 1845* (1844), then the first compilation of the story alongside Poe's other works in *Tales* (1845), and finally the unauthorized and abridged version reprinted in *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* (1844) that immediately spiraled into a new history of circulating reprintings.[9] Although with the exception of the unauthorized edition few changes were made between reprintings, a close analysis of the shifting relationship between context and the story's content reveals that, not only do different iterations produce the potential for radically different meanings, but the particular interpretive variety these readings engender radically reorients the archetypal status of "The Purloined Letter" in the detective-fiction genre.

The final section of this essay considers the consequences of reprinting "The Purloined Letter" for discourses of detection and, through the connection between Dupin and psychoanalysis, for conceptualizations and practices of literary criticism. I argue for the equivalence of the letter's status in the story and the story's status as a literary object in circulation as a means of demonstrating that, if Dupin's detection depends on the letter's ontological consistency, then critical readings that destabilize assumptions of the letter's consistency (as the same letter) throughout the story necessarily also unsettle habits of reading, and detecting, that exclude the difference to meaning materialism makes.

The Gift Book

In addition to book history's intervention in a critical heritage that ignores historicity except as "digressive bibliography"[10] and that seeks, as a result, to restore texts to networks of their material conditions,[11] I imagine what *The Gift* does *with* and *to* the tale it features and *what*, in *The Gift*, this tale of giving and taking is all about. The equivalence between the "letter" of

"The Purloined Letter" and the reading practices it generates and confounds *continues* the equivalence already established by the conditions in which the gift-book format is *not* incidental to a tale of intercepted exchange. In his bibliography of gift books and literary annuals, Ralph Thompson chronicles the "golden age of periodicals" by tracing the confluence of an increase in literacy, steam power, the printing press, and improving economic conditions. From the almanac, which had previously been the standard yearly publication and included weather forecasts and calendars for "matter-of-fact usage," Thompson observes, "with the introduction of pictures, stories, and poems, there developed the ornamental gift book of the nineteenth century." With their attention to illustrations rather than information, and decoration rather than use, gift books, often called "ladies' books," "appealed to the eye and the heart rather than to the mind."[12] As reflected in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* advertisement, gift books were "ordinarily of leather, stamped or embossed—occasionally of paper, silk or velvet"—and, in the spirit of their function as affective tokens, they were typically inscribed with the donor's name. McGill observes that "gift books were one of the first mass-produced luxury commodities,"[13] and Stephen Nissenbaum, in his work on the evolution of Christmas, tracks the parallel development of gift books and the Christmas "present," going so far as to say that the gift book singlehandedly sutured the Christmas season to ideas of luxury and commerce.

Significantly, gift books also functioned as a "pivot between economic and affective systems of exchange." Drawing on Thompson's and Frederick Faxon's work tracking gift books as one of the few things considered appropriate for men to give to women, McGill suggests that, "as they pass from purchaser to receiver, suitor to woman sought, gift books also need to be transformed from mass-produced commodities into another kind of currency, 'tokens of affection' that will be rewarded by a return of the same," and that "one site for this transformation is the engraved presentation plate that scripts a relation between purchaser and receiver even as it allows for the personalization of the gift."[14] In contrast to the magazines and periodicals by which they would eventually be replaced, gift books drew the pleasure and power they could give from the capacity to symbolize, in inscriptions and through accruals of time and memory, an archive of changing hands. Although the content of gift books was very often reprinted from one edition to the next, even sometimes without erasing traces of previous years, the general imperviousness of readers/consumers to this repetition highlights the extent to which textual content was secondary to the experience of object cathexis and play central to the scene of gift book giving.

The copy of *The Gift* I use in my analysis replicates the structure of its genre by including, on the pages preceding the official and original title page, the following inscription:

The Bancroft Library
The Library of the University of California
Gift of Professor George R. Stewart[15]

Reenacting the conventions of gift-book exchange through a page of inscription following the university library's institutional seal, the gift book becomes a gift received by each new reader. Although the reproduction of this historical context does not quite reanimate the conditions of *The Gift*'s debut, it may be worth trying to occupy, even if only for the duration of this paper's argument, the position of reader qua receiver. After several blank pages, marked only by their creases and stains, the book opens with an illustration of a woman titled "Agnes"; the cover page, which includes another, smaller portrait of a lady and only the words "The Gift"; and then immediately following, the title page, which displays the full name of the gift book and the name and city of its publishers, "Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1845." After two consecutive tables of content, one for the stories and poems and another for the illustrations titled "List of Plates," the gift book is organized from the beginning and until Poe's tale in the following pattern: plate, cover, title, poem, story, poem, story, poem, poem, plate, "The Purloined Letter," poem. As can be seen from the flanking cluster of poems and images, "The Purloined Letter" is propped as though it were the full-length feature prepared for reception by its opening acts of poetry and illustration. Unlike the even distribution of other stories and poems throughout the book, the concatenation of aesthetic stimulation framing Poe's tale creates an aura of anticipation.

In a recent article that seeks to recuperate the contemporary material context of *The Gift* and its relation to Poe's "The Purloined Letter," Alexandra Urakova persuasively argues that exploring "the relation of the story to its apparently arbitrary periodical framing" provides an alternative to "fashionable intellectual practice in the 1970s and 1980s, inspired mostly by Jacques Lacan's 'Le Séminaire sur "La Lettre volée."'"[16] Working instead to suggest that "the heterosexual commerce of commodified seduction implied by the mainstream stories in gift books finally leads up to the homosocial erotics in Poe's tale," Urakova reads the letter's "round robin" through Sedgwickian triangulation in order to conclude that "Poe's tale seems to be perfectly fitted in its gift book framing."[17] In order to arrive at this verdict, Urakova looks at the neighboring tales to provide evidence for thematic continuity between the counterfeiting of letters that is the basis for Kirkland's "The Schoolmaster's Progress," the

political danger of letters that is addressed by Willis's "The Power of an Injured Look," and the dramatization of the letter's materiality in Poe's "The Purloined Letter."[18] While Urakova's expansion of the frame of reference compellingly challenges the total absence of *The Gift*, or discussion of its contents, in most analyses of Poe's tale, her framing skips the intermediary poems and illustrations. One way of understanding this choice is to consider that material can only be excluded if it is deemed irrelevant and that its designation as irrelevant presupposes the meaning of "The Purloined Letter" as a story, like the two preceding tales, of particular (and particularly related) meaning. Despite her attempt to relocate Poe's story from psychoanalytic abstraction to economies of the gift book, Urakova's move to organize her analysis *thematically* rather than *materially* repeats the gesture she sets out to avoid, thereby mobilizing material for another close reading rather than reading closely the material conditions of the iterations of "The Purloined Letter."

Rather than assuming what "The Purloined Letter" is about, I analyze the mini-cluster of poetry and images surrounding Poe's tale in order to see how "Going Home," "The Necklace," and a portrait of a woman gazing at a necklace structure a possible reading or, at least, undermine prevailing suppositions that narrative content alone can structure readings. The first poem, "Going Home" by C. P. Cranch, describes the thrill of "going home" as a turn away from the external world's duplicity (38). While the opening stanza describes the "music" in the word "home!," the second stanza grounds the desire for "going home" in its restorative relief from the world.

> Going home—from careless looks,
> From eyes that glance and turn away,
> From lips that speak like formal books,
> Or mean not what they say;
> Once more to hear our Christian name,
> Where studied speech is never known;
> And make around the twilight flame
> A kingdom of our own,
> Saying as we sit—
> This is home—this is home!
>
> (lines 1–2, 11–20)

Throughout this poem, and especially in this stanza, the operating metaphor juxtaposes "home" as music, consonance, meaning, and authenticity with the outside world of "careless looks," "lips that speak like formal books" or "mean not what they say," with speech that is "studied" and "cheerless."

Largely exuberant and intended for the gift-book audience, this poem emblematizes the ideology of the gift book as a retreat from the burdens of magazines/books/learning and toward the pleasures of family, familiar simplicity, beautiful things.

This is an invitation that self-referentially describes the setting of its own reading: if you are sharing this book with family and friends (as were all middle-class purchasers), then you are safe and well because you are "home." Seen thus, the gift book becomes a proverbial vehicle for "going home" that in the reading transports you where you, and the book itself, belong. Lastly, the setting of "formal books" in opposition to "our Christian name" further performs the distinction between "formal books" as objects that produce "studied speech" and the Christmas gift book that, inscribed with "Christian names," magnetically pulls its audience away from worldly preoccupations and toward enjoyment of the "circle of dear faces" illumined by "affection" around the "fireside" (lines 20–25).

Continuous with the operation of "Going Home" as a thematic exposition of gift-book ideology, "The Necklace" by Anne C. Lynch uses the format of asking forgiveness for vanity to narrate a revenge fantasy against the woman staring at jewels in the illustration adjoining the poem (40). Attempting to justify the woman's "earnest gaze, / As if those flashing jewels cast / Love-glanced in their rays," the narrator proposes that in the alleged jewels "Some talisman is set, / And for the heart it rests upon, / 'Tis Love's own amulet," thereby assuring the reader that what looks like vanity is actually fidelity to the beloved (lines 2–4, 10–12). And yet, to suggest that the "heart so joyous now, / No heavier burden bear" is to imagine that the threat of unchecked "rapture" is what awaits one whose focus strays from "Love's own amulet" (lines 13–14). The intimation here is that what prevents the "soul-lit eye" from representing "the passing dream / Of woman's vanity" is the work of the "talisman" as it staves off both the woman's "vanity" and her "heavier burden" (lines 6–8). Therefore, in parallel to "Going Home," this poem/image pair tells a self-referential story about how to use a gift book: the receiver is to relish its beauty as long as it remains tethered to someone else—especially because affective economies and kinship practices suggest the giver of "necklace" and gift book is likely the same person. Both works underwrite an ideology of attachment in which the context of affective experience determines its morality. Through this version of contextual determinism, both poems make a claim for the difference the "giver" makes. It is not the object (necklace) or the place (home) that matters in these works so much as the power of an appropriate context to constitute experiential content.

These close readings of the work preceding "The Purloined Letter" raise questions of how we might think of Poe's story in the context of a series of moralizing injunctions—against "roam[ing]" in "Going Home" and against "soul-lit eye[s] in "The Necklace." One possible approach could be to consider "The Purloined Letter" as itself a cautionary tale of what happens when one woman's gaze (Queen) gets diverted from its appropriate object (King) by the "letter," which extends, illegitimately, beyond the royal boudoir. Following the logic of "The Necklace," we could imagine the "letter" as the "glittering toy" that lures each successive thief only to punish him/her eventually. In both of these permutations, what matters more than the "letter" as object is the owner's affective relation to it.

Alternatively, if we were to consider "purloining" in the context of the gift-book economy we might imagine it as the unauthorized recirculation of someone else's inscriptions, in which case the struggle over the letter is actually a love story about who gets to inscribe the Queen's letter—that is, gift book. Since the economy of gift-book giving designated the *giver* as the one who *inscribes*, the Minister, rather than Dupin, is victorious since he inscribed the "letter" that ultimately returns to the Queen with his mark upon it (with Dupin as merely a kind of postal messenger) *as well as* inscribing a new "letter" that he leaves as a facsimile during the theft. Dupin, on the other hand, only inscribes a fresh letter to the Minister that constitutes the inscription marking another, new love story.

As evidence of the story's ending by beginning a future love story qua gift-book exchange, it becomes important that the tale swaps temporalities so that Dupin's inscription comes last rather than his economic transaction with the Prefect, which is in fact the chronological finale. In the context of the book's form, this structural move successfully suppresses the gift-book's currency as a medium of mercenary exchange. By replacing the economic register of the Prefect's payment scene with the affective register of Dupin's note to the Minister, the story effectively effaces the commodification constitutive of gift-book buying/giving. Indeed, whether Dupin's new "letter" is the opening gesture of a homoerotic courtship or fraternal revenge, both love and revenge are *feelings* and their status as plot finale recapitulates the belief, widespread in the period, of inscription as an expressive practice that provides the appropriate contextual framing for affective interchange.

Furthermore, since Poe wrote "The Purloined Letter" specifically *for* the gift-book readership/consumer, we can consider the contorted temporality of the story's ending as a deliberate mechanism for sustaining the foundation of gift-book ideology. Closing with Dupin's newly inscribed letter reinforces the economic circuit of exchange specific to the publication format of a genre

whereby inscribed "letters" are meaningful tokens of emotional representation, expression, and transmission. What is more, ending the story of a lost letter with the production of a new one participates in the relationship between reading habits and commercial practices that aligns the interests of publishers, readers, and authors (more letters, like more gift books, need more stories).

Tales

In his influential *Poe and the British Magazine Tradition,* Michael Allen writes: "All writers are interested in ways of reaching their readers, but a serious writer who is also a journalist is likely to be particularly preoccupied with things like popularity, the nature of the audience, the building of reputations, the extent to which good writing can be widely successful. This is certainly the case with Poe."[19] Corroborating Allen's account of Poe's attention to audience and popularity, Terence Whalen extends the project of thinking through Poe's relation to the new literary marketplace by positing that his "economic imagination" reflected "the material conditions that exercised a powerful influence over the making—and therefore the meaning—of literary texts."[20] Continuous with the work of critics invested in reclaiming Poe from the clutches of reductive psychoanalytic hypothesizing,[21] a close reading of the text in the context of its material conditions—particularly, here, two of its early reprintings—provides a fruitful site for observing the dynamic relation between Poe, his audience, and antebellum literary mediations.

In 1845, Wiley and Putnam brought out a collection of Poe's works titled *Tales.* Having learned of an unauthorized copy of "The Purloined Letter" circulating in *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* and immediately reprinted elsewhere, Poe revised the story for *Tales* and then made a few more minor changes to what became the canonical version and is often referred to as the "Graham copy." Perhaps the most startling difference between the *Gift* edition and all subsequent versions is the new epigraph in Latin: "Nothing is more hateful to wisdom than cleverness." If the distinction between "wisdom" and "cleverness" can be understood to pivot on the parallel difference between depth and surface,[22] then we might consider how this quote becomes a souvenir from the gift-book genre in which only the appropriate affective attachment (via context) can manage the instability of circulating content. Without imagistic adornments cautioning against vanity ("cunning") or poetry rewarding "wisdom" ("going home"), the texts in *Tales* are, as it were, ideologically orphaned.

As he was both familiar with his audience and thoroughly committed to creating the right "effect,"[23] Poe's addition of the epigraph can be interpreted as a move to contextualize what the gift book's context automatically afforded: awareness of the distinction between "wisdom" and "cleverness" as the difference between truth and ornament and therefore, more crucially, of truth's alignment with context. In this way, the epigraph's pedagogy invokes the necessity, inherent to the gift book, of associating "cleverness" with superficial knowledge that is not structurally distinct from loving the "talisman" instead of its giver. This epigraph hails the reader whose able detection of the distinction of "wisdom" from "cleverness" certifies him or her to be the story's appropriate subject. Indeed, insofar as the epigraph transmits *The Gift*'s ideological message, we might think of it as the gift book's gift to all subsequent editions.

In the context of Poe's notably ambivalent relationship to a nationalist literary project, the publication of *Tales* marks a significant moment in Americanizing Poe as an authentic, homegrown writer. Leather-bound, with a spine reading "Poe's Tales" and a cover page that quotes from the "American Copy-Right Club," this edition includes a page titled "Library of Choice Reading. Books which are Books," then a "List of Volumes Already Published." Later, a back page features a stylistically similar list of other American writers and texts, including "Journal of an African Cruiser, Edited by Nathaniel Hawthorne," "The Huguenots in Florida by W. Gilmore Simms," and "Big Able and the Little Manhattan, by Cornelius Mathews."[24]

Included in a list of twelve tales, "The Purloined Letter" is joined here by the two earlier members of the detective series, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) and "The Mystery of Marie Roget" (1842–43). Situating "The Purloined Letter" between "The Mystery of Marie Roget" and "The Man of the Crowd" (1839), this edition foregrounds the tale's relation to the detective story while simultaneously unsettling conventional readings of what being a "detective" means in both "The Mystery of Marie Roget" and "The Purloined Letter." Ending "Marie Roget" with a disquisition on the "Calculus of Probabilities," Dupin says:

> Nothing . . . is more difficult than to convince the merely general reader that the fact of sixes having been thrown twice in succession by a player at dice, is sufficient cause for betting the largest odds that sixes will not be thrown in the third attempt. A suggestion to this effect is usually rejected by the intellectual at once. It does not appear that the two throws which have been completed, and which lie now absolutely in the Past, can have influence upon the throw which

> exists only in the Future. The chance for throwing sixes seems to be precisely as it was at any ordinary time—that is to say, subject only to the influence of the various other throws which may be made by the dice. And this is a reflection which appears so exceedingly obvious that attempts to controvert it are received more frequently with a derisive smile than with anything like respectful attention. The error here involved—a gross error redolent of mischief—I cannot pretend to expose within the limits assigned to me at present; and with the philosophical it needs no exposure. It may be sufficient here to say that it forms one of an infinite series of mistakes which arise in the path of Reason through her propensity for seeking truth *in detail.*[25]

What makes this passage particularly confusing is that it follows Dupin's warning against the predictability of ratiocinative results, declaring, "let it not for a moment be supposed that, in proceeding with the sad narrative of Marie from the epoch just mentioned, and in tracing to its denouement the mystery which enshrouded her, it is my covert design to hint at an extension of the parallel," and later, "the most trifling variation in the facts of the two cases might give rise to the most important miscalculations." The denouncement of prospective "parallels" followed by a theorization that only the "general reader" expects discontinuity between the "Past" and the "Future" skillfully elides the fact that what distinguishes the chance of variation in the first case and the odds of repetition in the second hinges on the difference between individual problems versus those in a series.

As the last sentence of "Marie Roget" in the 1845 edition leads into the first of "The Purloined Letter," and as the game of dice relies on "three" throws, then the difference between whether the case of Marie Roget will repeat itself (Dupin solves this next case) or be variant (Dupin does not solve it) is importantly linked to the passage's other differentiation between "detail" and "Reason." Initially, it would seem that Dupin is the bearer of "Reason" and the Prefect the myopic parable of "detail." However, if Dupin solves the crime by ratiocination (which he does), then the outcome repeats the other two cases, which, to be true according to Dupin's lights, would mean that these stories are *not* part of a series (since, as Dupin made clear, betting on the chances of the same result in a series is "a gross error redolent of mischief").

In a possible reading of this edition, then, we might consider that Dupin's pedantry is simply grandiosity orchestrated to pronounce his brilliance when, *against all odds*, he solves the case a third time (although, despite his bombast, the "Calculus of Probabilities" is accurate), or else that the story is an individual one that continues into the next tale, "The Man of the Crowd." Since "The Purloined Letter" is penultimate to the finale of "The Man of the Crowd,"

we might attend to the ways in which both Dupin and the Minister return here, and with them, the thematic of blindness/recognition that has structured their most recent narrative exchange.

In "The Man of the Crowd," the "D— — Hotel" circulates as a scene of repeated anxiety and confusion, calling attention to both D's of "The Purloined Letter"—the "Minister D" and Dupin. The "human bustle and activity" that here occasions the stranger's disappearance functions in the same way as the street's commotion in "The Purloined Letter," which Dupin organizes to trick the Minister. Further linking this tale to the previous one, this story's anonymous narrator designates the stranger "the type and the genius of deep crime," invoking the darkness of Dupin's contemplative study and the ingenuity of the Minister's crime as a means of solidifying Dupin's and the Minister's attachment to each other and the shared history in which the narrator has implicated them. Ending with the haunting, illegible German that may translate as "it does not permit itself to be read," the story in this final moment reverses the move waged by Dupin in the end of "The Purloined Letter." While many theorists have observed that, like the boy's victory in the marble game, Dupin's success is contingent on the other player's ignorance, the next move in this story dramatizes the stranger's failure to recognize Dupin, so that it is Dupin who becomes the *object* of the other player's ignorance.

If indeed these characters are as continuous as the series of clues suggests—a continuity supported by their material proximity in this collection—then we might note how in "The Purloined Letter" Dupin inscribes a facsimile to the Minister, wishing "to know the precise character of his thoughts" as he opens the letter even as we know that his pleasure derives from anticipating exactly what the Minister's "thoughts" will be. This conundrum suggests that, rather than his "thoughts," what Dupin actually craves is a glimpse of the Minister's face and its expression as he encounters Dupin's inscription. This desire returns in "The Man of the Crowd," which confronts Dupin with the illegibility of the Minister, who, in front of the "D— —Hotel" "noticed me not." Coming as it does after Dupin's confessed desire to see the Minister's face, this story ends by picking up the story where the earlier one left off: the narrator, "stopping fully in front of the wanderer, gaze[s] at him steadfastly in the face." His "gaze" unreciprocated, the narrator settles for foreign words that mimetically reproduce the conditions of his incomprehension so that what "does not permit itself to be read" refers doubly to the German quotation and the face that denies recognition.[26] The order of stories in this edition enables us to imagine the stranger's blank stare in front of the "D— — Hotel" as the Minister's vengeful response to Dupin's vengeful letter, the next move in a game of seeking and forestalling recognition. Furthermore, this final

resistance to reading (the stranger's and the text's) can retroactively reshape any understanding of "The Purloined Letter": what seems to be resolved by *that* story's end returns *here* as the unreadable "letter" that, although opened, remains as yet unread.

Chambers's Edinburgh Journal

The unauthorized and abridged reprinting of "The Purloined Letter" featured in *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* in 1844 literalizes the decontextualization that characterized much antebellum literary culture. Although a brief introduction explains the tale's origin "in an American annual of great typographical elegance and embellished with many beautiful engravings," a number of substitutions and omissions work to neutralize particular aspects of the story that would endanger the sense of its natural belonging in the *Journal*. For example, Poe's story is preceded, not by a plate or poem, but by an article titled "Loitering in France—1844: Visit to Gergovia" that describes a geological/historical inquiry. The first paragraph pronounces: "Thousands of travelers doubtless bestow only a momentary attention on this strangely-shaped mass [that is, Gergovia], and there an end of the matter; but others, inquiring its name, perhaps learn that few mountains in France have obtained such celebrity, and accordingly spend a day's excursion upon it before leaving the country. I wish to say a few words respecting this hill." Juxtaposing the "average traveler" to an "inquiring mind" in order to dramatize the advantages of a "curiosity" vibrant enough to question whether "anything" is "insignificant," the article repeatedly invokes the hypothetical "inquiring mind" in contrast to the general reader. When at the article's end, the writer says, "After satisfying our curiosity . . . we bought a few . . . elegant objects as trophies of French art," the link commerce establishes between "curiosity" and "trophies" signals the conviction that seeking knowledge is ceaselessly satisfying and productive.[27]

This constellation of curiosity, knowledge, inquiry, and conviction returns in the article that follows "The Purloined Letter." A review titled "Liebig's Familiar Letters on Chemistry" offers a synopsis of Liebig's research in chemistry by framing it as worthwhile knowledge for the average curious individual. In its last sentences, the article returns the following verdict on the collection's merit: "Such are the few gleanings from the most important subject touched upon by Professor Liebig in his second series of Familiar Letters. Mere extracts as they are, they may be sufficient to excite the interest and emulation even of ordinary readers. Every reader, it is true, cannot expect to become a Dalton, a Berzelius, or a Liebig; but there is a certain amount of knowledge

which he may obtain, profitably and pleasantly."[28] The two articles that frame "The Purloined Letter" in *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* both posit a "general reader"/"average traveler," but whereas the first structures itself didactically to teach the "average" traveler to wonder "if anything is insignificant," the latter assumes the unscientific reader's interest in chemistry. How do we understand the conceptual distance traversed between these points except as the achievement of an intermediary story showcasing the performance of one, particularly effective, "inquiring mind"?

Absent from the reprint of Poe's tale are Dupin's narrative digressions on fools versus poets, Abernethy, and maps, and his epigrammatic pronouncements on poets versus mathematicians. Indeed, what all these omissions share is their distinctive affiliations to Dupin as a detective/teacher whose key crime-solving talent is his superior intelligence. Rather, by radically decontextualizing Dupin's skills—detaching them from the conventions of detective fiction (established in the earlier Dupin stories, which this article excludes from mention)—this version of "The Purloined Letter" exemplifies the spirit of its neighbors, the inquiring traveler and reviewer of Liebig, whose commitment to curiosity yields concrete results. By erasing traces of Dupin's idiosyncratic method and the cruel reminders of superiority that attend it, "The Purloined Letter" is mobilized here to democratize inquiry by suturing it to real-world effects.

Discourses of Detective Fiction

In their introduction to *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman reflect, as have other critics since, on the psychoanalytic appropriation of Poe at the expense of critical attention to the effects of his cultural milieu. Arguing for the inextricability of Poe from his material conditions, they contend that "Poe's most extravagant literary maneuvers were usually based in the specific cultural and political climate of antebellum America" and continue by acknowledging the necessity of resisting "Poe's assimilation to the realm of psycholinguistic universals." They write:

> It remains easy enough to imagine how Poe's work has come to represent "timeless" psychoanalytic themes . . . . In what epoch has the heart failed to tell its tale? When have our purloined letters not failed to arrive at their phallogocentric destinations? Yet as one thinks of other tales, such as "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" or "The Man that was Used Up," the cultural side of Poe's writing becomes more

> conspicuous . . . . This second group of sociologically inclined stories stands in evident tension with the critical tradition granting Poe's work almost complete autonomy from any social mooring.[29]

While Rosenheim and Rachman designate other tales as "sociologically inclined," they here align "The Purloined Letter" with "'timeless' psychoanalytic themes." Curiously, in a passage warning against the interpretive risks of psychoanalytic reductionism, "The Purloined Letter" stands as an exception. But how do we understand this distinction? What is it about "The Purloined Letter" that qualifies it to be "timeless?" In the context of a case for literature's inextricability from social history, how can certain stories be "timeless" and not others?

In the aforementioned passage, "timeless" refers to "themes" and thus indicates the ways in which this categorization depends on a stabilized interpretation of "The Purloined Letter." The tale's one-line recap —"When have our purloined letters not failed to arrive at their phallogocentric destinations?"— functions as itself a synecdoche for the critical tradition in which meaning, despite its wandering, is always and eventually locatable somewhere/there. In this way, not only do Rosenheim and Rachman counter their own call for a methodological revolution whereby *all* texts must be materially situated because all are materially produced, but they also repeat the allegorizing gesture they intend to upend. Their failure to historicize the conditions of the text's material production reifies its meaning because, absent an interpretive framework that asks how a text is rewritten by context, there is no process for exploring the relationship between content and form. One reason the analysis of form's relation to content is so crucial to "The Purloined Letter" is that the totalizing move that insists on its "psycholinguistic universals" is entirely contingent on a stable determination of the story's genre. This is to suggest that presuming "The Purloined Letter" is a detective story is one way of insuring the "letter" (both *of* the story, and *as* the story) always arrives at its destination.

In his sweeping analysis of the detective-fiction genre, Howard Haycraft, drawing on "The Purloined Letter," writes, "the one completely unforgivable sin in the detective story is the substitution, at any point, of accident, chance, or coincidence for logical deduction." If a bad *writer* of detective fiction is the "mere romancer who commits the unpardonable sin of letting crass coincidence extricate his characters from their predicaments,"[30] then we might think, symmetrically, of the bad *reader* of detective fiction as the *decontextualizer*—one who seeks answers in the miscellany of "crass coincidences," situates stories of "logical deduction" within histories of "chance" textual neighbors and "accident[al]" formats. In fact, as several critics of the

detection process have noted, "logical deduction" is a densely complex term that names various differently organized epistemological strategies. Dupin's particular brand of ratiocination is actually "abduction," "the step in between a fact and its origin . . . which can then be tested out to prove or disprove the hypothesis": "Abduction is a theory developed to explain a preexisting fact."[31] Folding Dupin's abductive method into Haycraft's insistence on the expulsion of reading for "crass coincidence" offers a framework for conceptualizing Dupin within a new distinction, not of "timeless" versus "sociological" or "romancer" versus "bad reader" but of literary critic versus book historian.

If this paper's analysis of three reprintings of "The Purloined Letter" effectively demonstrates the ways in which a text's material conditions of publication, transmission, and circulation destabilize the foundations of an allegorically inclined transhistorical hermeneutics, then Dupin as the figure whose talent is to perceive content *in spite of* changing form becomes, alternatively, exemplary of what critics have not recognized as a tale exploring content that is produced *because* of form. This is to say that if Dupin's identity as a detective hinges on his successful tracking of a single constant "letter" through space and time, this essay's demonstration of how the story is itself a product of changing contextual forces suggests that the "letter" he re-finds and re-turns to the Queen is not necessarily the same letter she lost in the first place. Rather, just as the "Purloined Letter" of the *Tales* is distinct from the gift-book edition, so too the story's "purloined letter" is different depending on its context—in the royal boudoir, the Minister's apartment, Dupin's desk drawer. In fact, the story suggests as much when we learn of Dupin's rediscovery of the letter:

> In scrutinizing the edges of the paper, I observed them to be more *chafed* than seemed necessary. They presented the *broken* appearance which is manifested when a stiff paper, having been once folded and pressed with a folder, is refolded in a reversed direction, in the same creases or edges which had formed the original fold. This discovery was sufficient. It was clear to me that the letter had been turned, as a glove, inside out, re-directed, and re-sealed.[32]

Although critics continue, unanimously, to cite the "letter's" unopened status as proof of the irrelevance of content (most famously essential to Lacan's equation of the "letter" with the signifier),[33] we might ask: how can content transcend form if it is the conviction of the content's constancy that drives the story, Dupin's methodology, and the detective-fiction genre the story singlehandedly launches?

Absent from the unauthorized *Edinburgh Journal* reprinting of "The Purloined Letter" are Dupin's pedagogic digressions, which again, in that

context, seem to reflect a preference for diluting his idiosyncratic method. As this preference relates to a reevaluation of Dupin's detective credentials, and more broadly invites a reconsideration of detection's epistemological ground, we might consider how the didactic asides are also Dupin's only explicitly *narrative* moments. Whether he is relating an episode of Abernethey or game theory, talking of maps or mathematics, or quoting poetry, Dupin's attention to material history is subsumed by an allegorical imagination that, in keeping with "abductive" logic, fills the space between a "fact and its origin" anecdotally. Dupin's detective method consists of assessing the opponent in order to anticipate future behavior. This strategy of generalizing observations into abstract ideas characterizes Dupin's philosophical method as one that subsumes material exigencies into metaphysical concern. For example, the aforementioned account of Dupin's method features a list of the letter's physical qualities only to sublate these "observations" into proof of Dupin's original inference. We learn that "scrutinizing the edges of the paper," Dupin notices they are "chafed," have a "broken appearance," that the paper has "folded" and "refolded," "pressed with a folder," and "refolded in a reverse direction"—all of which makes the "discovery" "sufficient" to show that the letter has "been turned, as a glove, inside out, re-directed, and re-sealed." The profusely repetitious "re" and the acrobatic rotations it describes rhetorically perform the spiraling of the "letter" into a different form. While announcing these "observations" as a "discovery," Dupin nevertheless naturalizes these changes as evidence of his preexisting supposition (that the Minister stole the letter and created a copy) and his superior capacity to notice the letter *in spite of* its altered and nearly unrecognizable form.

Where "abductive" logic produces a hypothesis that precedes the facts, this scene testifies equally to Dupin's "abductive" skills and detective blindness. How can we believe that a letter so thoroughly defiled is the original and not a facsimile, a reprinting with the Queen's note hidden, intact, elsewhere? How can we be sure, without subscribing to Dupin's founding hypothesis of the culprit's criminal physiognomy, that this record of the letter's resembling itself only if turned "inside out" proves the triumph of ratiocination or the hoax at the center of this detective tale? The hoax being not quite that a letter always arrives at its destination, or that it never left, but that transmission—the hands it is in, the readers it has, the text it includes or erases, its form—produces a different letter, every time.

In this way, the literary critic shares with Dupin an investment in assuming, "abductively," the text's availability to allegory—a paradigm made possible by stabilizing meaning and discarding its particular context. But if interpretive analysis is to detect rather than merely abduct, we might consider the book

historian's approach as one that reads the very materiality in the metaphors of a letter's circulation; not only is every letter purloined by its shifting context but content is inextricably related to changing contextual iterations. Rather than believing that "every letter arrives at its destination," we might recognize that being purloined is the condition of every letter. If Dupin finds the letter he was looking for rather the one the Queen lost, then what, we might wonder, do we as Dupinian literary critics imagine finding in the texts we read, texts that we know are "inside out" but read as recognizable objects anyway? What would it mean not only to read of "abductive" detectives but to abduct the genre of detection and replace it with a new model for detective readers? Insofar as this question replicates the plot of "The Purloined Letter," we know the answer: no Dupin, preoccupied by narrativizing, would notice that the genre turned "inside out" might be a different genre. After all, if the tale's *hidden in plain sight* dictum is meant to extend beyond strictly the meaning of the tale's resolution to reading practices, then what could be hidden in plain*er* sight than the form Poe's tale takes, and the content it generates, each time its purloinings produce another letter?

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Notes

[1] "The Gift for 1845," *Philadelphia Inquirer,* 27 November 1844, 3.

[2] David Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1998), 135.

[3] Ralph Thompson provides a rich history of the gift book, demonstrating that "American gift books were by far the finest books the country had ever produced" (*American Literary Annuals and Gift Books, 1825–1865* [New York: Wilson, 1936], 8). Also see Meredith L. McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 1; and Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas: A Social and Cultural History of Our Most Cherished Holiday* (New York: Knopf, 1997). For an explanation of the ways gift books were used, see James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1950), which explains that "the gift book was clearly understood to be ornament, no more fit for daily reading than the horsehair sofa or the polished table or the heavily curtained parlor were suited to everyday use" (89). For a comprehensive history of publishing in antebellum America that situates the gift book in a context of a general nationalist project to be independent from Britain and its publishing empire, see Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *The Book in America: A History of the Making and Selling of Books in the United States* (New York: Bowker, 1951). For a look at the development of "private" versus "public" literatures and their relation to the circulation of texts, see

Donald H. Reiman, *The Study of Modern Manuscripts: Public, Confidential, and Private* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993).

[4]Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, introduction to *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. Cavallo and Chartier, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 3, 5.

[5]McGill, *American Literature*, 1, 5.

[6]Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Routledge, 1994). See also D. F. McKenzie, "The Book as an Expressive Form," in *The Book History Reader*, ed. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (New York: Routledge, 2002), 27–38.

[7]McGill, *American Literature*, 39. Also see Lara Langer Cohen, "Counterfeit Presentments: Fraud and the Production of Nineteenth-Century American Literature" (Ph.D. diss., Yale Univ., 2006), which argues that "literature signifies as much in its circulation as in its initial production" (3).

[8]I use the term "close reading" to specify a critical method that refers to careful analysis of the text, not the same as the interpretive practices associated with New Criticism.

[9]"The Purloined Letter," *Littell's Living Age* (Boston), 18 January 1845; "The Purloined Letter," *Spirit of the Times* (Philadelphia), 20 January 1845 (part 1) and 22 January 1845 (part 2); and "The Purloined Letter," *New York Weekly News*, 25 January 1845.

[10]McKenzie, "Book as an Expressive Form," 37.

[11]Roger Darnton, "What is the History of Books?" in *The Book History Reader*, ed. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (New York: Routledge, 2002), 9–26.

[12]Thompson, *American Literary Annuals,* 2, 3, 4. The term "ladies' books" also refers to the fact that gift books marked women's entrance into the literary public sphere, which Thompson links to their association with sentimentality. In addition, see McGill, *American Literature*, 1–5.

[13]McGill, *American Literature*, 29.

[14]McGill, *American Literature*, 34–35.

[15]*The Gift: A Christmas, New Year, and Birthday Present, 1845* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1844). To view the inscription, see the online book at the American Libraries Archive, Univ. of California, archive.org/details/giftchristmasnew00carerich.

[16]Alexandra Urakova, "'The Purloined Letter' in the Gift Book: Reading Poe in a Contemporary Context," *Nineteenth Century Literature* 64, no. 3 (2009): 323–24.

[17]Urakova, "'Purloined Letter' in the Gift Book," 324, 329. Whereas I argue that Poe replicates the ideology of the gift book, Urakova claims that his tale both supports and subverts gift-book ideology—pointing to a theft-gift continuum in the link she finds between the erotics of triangulation and material context.

[18]For these stories, see *The Gift* (1845), 10–25, 28—37, 41–61.

[19]Michael Allen, *Poe and the British Magazine Tradition* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), 3.

[20]Terence Whalen, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses: The Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1999), 16. On the relation between Poe's writing and his public, see Kevin Hayes, *Poe and the Printed Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000). Hayes proposes, among other things, that Poe chose the tale form because it could "be a highly crafted work of art destined to withstand the ages" in spite of changing literary tastes (73).

[21]Whalen writes: "[There is a] long tradition of literary commentary which, quite paradoxically, uses historical and biographical evidence to demonstrate Poe's isolation from 'external' social conditions . . . especially those [commentaries] which rely on psychoanalysis to sequester Poe from social and economic pressures" (*Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses*, 4). For a foundational example of "applied psychoanalytic reading," see Marie Bonaparte, "Selections from *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation*," trans. John Rodker, in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988), 101–32. More recent readings of the detective fiction often investigate the psychology of either Dupin, Poe, or the reader of detective fiction in ways that are mostly continuous with, rather than skeptical of, psychological/psychoanalytic explanations. See, for instance, Richard Kopley, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Dupin Mysteries* (New York: Macmillan, 2008), esp. 2; and J. Gerald Kennedy, "The Limits of Reason," *American Literature* 47 (1975): esp. 195–96. For a consideration of the genre's paradoxical appeal as something that compels readerly interest even as it withholds the clues to solving, alongside Dupin, the mystery, see John T. Irwin, *The Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1994); and David Van Leer, "Detecting Truth: The World of the Dupin Tales," in *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales*, ed. Kenneth Silverman (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 65–91. For the relation between detective fiction and other genres of writing, see Edward H. Davidson, *Poe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), 182–222. David Ketterer goes so far as to suggest that what motivates Dupin is empathic identification (*The Rationale of Deception in Poe* [Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1979], 243). For a nuanced study of Poe's complex relationship to the masses not only economically but affectively, see Jonathan Elmer, *Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, and Edgar Allan Poe* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995).

[22]Linking ideas of "surfaces" in art and writing to early conceptualizations of American identity, Michael T. Gilmore refers to Dupin as a figure of exceptional "sight"/"vision." Of "The Purloined Letter," Gilmore says, "despite its title, sight holds center stage," and the "detective, as a connoisseur of visibility, can perceive things that the authorities dismiss as unworthy of notice" (*Surface and Depth: The Quest for Legibility in American Culture* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003], 65, 66).

[23]See Edgar Allan Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" (*ER,* 13–25).

[24]"The first printing featured an inner page which begins with 'Tales and Works of Fiction'; an inner back cover which begins with 'The Star of the Court'; and a back cover which lists only 3 titles under 'Wiley and Putnam's Library of American Books'" (Jeffrey

A. Savoye's note on *Tales* at the Web site of The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, http://www.eapoe.org/works/editions/talescvr.htm, last accessed 9 October 2012).

[25]Edgar Allan Poe, "The Mystery of Marie Roget," in *Tales* (New York: Wiley and Putnam, 1845), 199; available at the Web site of The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, http://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/rogetb.htm, last accessed 9 October 2012.

[26]Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd," in *Tales* (1845), 227–28; available at the Web site of The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, http://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/crowdb.htm, last accessed 9 October 2012.

[27]"Loiterings in France—1844: Visit to Gergovia," *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal,* 30 November 1844, 341, 343.

[28]"Liebig's Familiar Letters on Chemistry," *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal,* 30 November 1844, 350.

[29]Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman, "Introduction: Beyond 'The Problem of Poe,'" in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe,* ed. Rosenheim and Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1995), xi.

[30]Howard Haycraft, *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (New York: Appleton, 1941), 258, 224.

[31]Nancy Harrowitz, "The Body of the Detective Model: Charles S. Peirce and Edgar Allan Poe," in *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*, ed. Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1983), 182. See also Jacques Derrida, "The Purveyor of Truth," trans. Alan Bass, in *The Purloined Poe*, 173–212; Shawn Rosenheim, "Detective Fiction, Psychoanalysis, and the Analytic Sublime," in *American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, 153–76. See also Stephen Rachman, "'Es lässt sich nicht schreiben': Plagiarism and 'The Man of the Crowd,'" in *American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, 49–87.

[32]Edgar Allan Poe, "The Purloined Letter," in *Tales* (1845), 217; available at the Web site of The Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, http://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/plttrb.htm, last accessed 9 October 2012.

[33]Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on "'The Purloined Letter,'" in *Écrits,* trans. Brice Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 6–48. See also Derrida, "Purveyor of Truth," 173–212; Barbara Johnson, "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida," in *The Purloined Poe*, 213–51; and Robert Con Davis, "Lacan, Poe, and Narrative Repression," *MLN* 98 (1983): 983–1005.