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# The “ Evil Turn ” of “ The Purloined Letter ”: The Story of a Story in Its French and American Twentieth Century Readings

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**The « Evil Turn » of « The Purloined Letter »: The Story of a Story  
in Its French and American Twentieth Century Readings**

**The Performative Function of the “Purloined Letter” in the French  
and American 20th Century Readings**

**La fonction performative de « La Lettre volée » dans la théorie  
française et américaine au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle**

**Alexandra Urakova**

**Résumé**

Cette communication est consacrée à la fameuse polémique Lacan/Derrida autour de « La Lettre volée » et à la réflexion critique des chercheurs américains qui s'en est inspirée : Barbara Jonson, John Irwin et autres. La structure en ruban rond (*round robin*) désigne au XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle la disposition circulaire des signatures sur une pétition de façon à ce que tous les pétitionnaires soient tenus pour coresponsables, et par extension au XIX<sup>e</sup> une écriture collaborative dans lequel les auteurs rédigent l'un après l'autre les différents chapitres d'une œuvre de fiction). Considérant que la structure de la « La Lettre volée » a été conçue sur ce modèle, je fais l'hypothèse qu'elle a non seulement imposé sa « logique contaminatrice » au discours de recherche des années 1960-1980 concernant le récit, mais qu'elle a aussi initié une nouvelle suite narrative métalittéraire indépendante. Les motifs lesquels sont devenus les participants fictionnels de la discussion qui s'en est suivie.

**Mots-clés**

performatif, *round robin*, *La lettre volée* d'Edgar Allan Poe, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida

In this presentation I am going to focus on the famous readings of Poe's « The Purloined Letter » by Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida taken up by a number of American scholars such as Barbara Johnson, John Irwin and some others. I will argue that the « round robin » structure of « The Purloined Letter » not only imposed its « contagious logic » on the 1960-80-s critical discourse related to it but also initiated a new metaliterary narrative/sequel. Both Lacan and Derrida became fictionalized within the framework of the discussion which followed their critique as the tale's motives of revenge and purloining had been metaphorically projected on their polemics.

« Poe authors his interpreters, whilst he himself dies, “as it were, in-text-ate”, as Joseph Riddel wittingly put it in his 1979 essay on “The Purloined Letter”: “The ‘Crypt’ of Edgar Poe<sup>1</sup>” ». Not quite sharing Riddel’s « proto-deconstructionist<sup>2</sup> » approach, I would like to develop his idea of Poe « authoring » or « inventing » his own interpreters. It is well known that « The Purloined Letter » (1842) has become one of the « high theory » iconic texts, due to Lacan’s « Seminar » followed by Derrida’s polemical response. Much has been said about the « abyssal » or « contagious » logic of the purloined letter, as Johnson nicely put it,<sup>3</sup> which leads to the repetition of the critical gesture in every further reading and, hence, to the reenacting of the plot pattern. The tale began to symbolize inevitable suspense of the last and the « true » word about the text’s meaning

and vulnerability of the authoritative critical position. For example, John Muller ends his essay « Negation in ‘The Purloined Letter’ » by the following self-reflexive comment : « Therefore this is not the last word about “The Purloined Letter”, but rather one moment in the commentary that itself can be read as a series of negations. And so the extraordinary power of this story continues even as readers go beyond what is here presented<sup>4</sup> ». The reader is invited to continue the discussion already knowing that her interpretation will be at best self-negation or logical blockage.

In my paper, I would like to shift the view and focus instead on the performative function of Poe’s tale that resulted in a meta-literary sequel to the original plot. The plot of « The Purloined Letter » gets a new turn in the famous critical argument about it, as the argument itself becomes subject to the narrative order and invites us to read it as a coherent story, albeit dispersed in the body of the critical texts. Thus, I am interested in the way this « story » is narrated questioning its relation to the poetics of Poe’s tale.

Shoshana Felman observed that « in Lacan’s ingenious reading », « The Purloined Letter » is « no less than an *allegory of psychoanalysis*<sup>5</sup> ». Indeed, Lacan reads the tale as a parable of his method and does it overtly, playing on the intersections between Poe’s plot and psychoanalytic practice. For instance, he mentions in passing that Dupin enters the Minister’s office and grasps the letter « without needing any more than being able to listen at the door of Professor Freud<sup>6</sup> » or quotes himself saying « Eat your Dasein » at the Zurich Congress<sup>7</sup>. The

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Riddle, « The ‘Crypt’ of Edgar Poe », *Boundary 2* (Spring, 1979), p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> Scott Peeples, *The Afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe*, New York, Camden House, 2007. p. 85.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Johnson, « The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida », in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, eds. Muller John P. and Richardson William J., Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988, p. 214.

<sup>4</sup> John Muller, « Negation in ‘The Purloined Letter’: Hegel, Poe, and Lacan », in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, eds. Muller John P. and Richardson William J., Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988, p. 365.

<sup>5</sup> Shoshana Felman, « The Case of Poe : Applications – Implications of Psychoanalysis », *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight. Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture*, Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 1987, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Lacan, « The Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’ », in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, p. 48.

allegorical reading and its practical import makes the boundaries between the fictional « drama » and its psychoanalytic implications easily and necessarily crossable.

In « The Purveyor of Truth » Derrida famously attacks Lacan's allegorical approach that, in his opinion, reduced Poe's text to an unequivocal message of the psychoanalytic « truth ». Yet, as Barbara Johnson has demonstrated, Derrida is indulged himself in the parabolic reading as he discusses broader, extra- or pre-textual implications of Lacan's criticism. In the Dupin-like fashion, he discovers an insult addressed to Lacan's rival, M-me Bonaparte, in the « Seminar's » footnote – at once carefully hidden and lying on the surface. Lacan calls the author of a psychobiographic study on Poe and Freud's loyal disciple « a cook » hinting at the « grilling » nature of her analysis<sup>8</sup>. In Derrida's view, Lacan not only purloins Bonaparte's idea without mentioning her name but also discloses the « disdainful nervousness » concerning « a psychoanalyst and her legacy » eventually playing the part of Dupin against Bonaparte playing the part of the Minister<sup>9</sup>. Deconstructing Lacan's indebtedness to the classical psychoanalysis and stressing the vulnerability of his self-assumed position of the « seer », Derrida eventually *narrates* the story about rivalry of the two psychoanalysts over Freud's testament.

The emerging narrative, both related and independent, pre-textual and shaped by the tale's structure, becomes reenacted in Barbara Johnson's essay where she systematically deconstructs Derrida's deconstruction of Lacan. Commenting on Lacan-Derrida-and-Bonaparte relations, she writes, for example, « The interpretation of the letter (as the phallus that must be returned to the mother) must itself be returned to the “mother” from whom it has been purloined – Marie Bonaparte. Derrida thus follows precisely the logic he objects to in Lacan, the logic of rectification and correction...<sup>10</sup> » We can observe a kind of double framing here. Derrida becomes the « partisan of the lady<sup>11</sup> », like Dupin in Poe's tale (returning the letter to the Queen), but he also simultaneously becomes the Dupin of Lacan's *Seminar* (returning the phallus to the mother). Herself as Derrida, Johnson carefully examines the footnotes. In Derrida's footnote in *Positions*, she discovers a mention

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Lacan, « The Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter' », in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, p. 52.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Lacan, « The Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter' », in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, p. 48. Lacan refers here to Baudelaire's mistranslation of the passage regarding the exact location of the letter mentioned by Bonaparte. The location, beneath the mantel piece as in Poe's text and not above it as in the translation, was crucial for Bonaparte interpretation of the letter as a penis hanging from a little brass knob of the mother's body.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, « The Purveyor of Truth », *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, p. 189.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Johnson, « The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida », in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, eds. Miller John P. and Richardson William J., Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988, p. 237-238.

<sup>11</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, « The Purloined Letter », in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, p. 23.

of Lacan's « acts of aggression » in his address<sup>12</sup>. Narrating the earlier exchange of insulting hints between Derrida and Lacan, Johnson therefore reconstructs the « pre-textual crime<sup>13</sup> » which allows her to read Derrida's criticism of Lacanian reading as « the evil turn<sup>14</sup> ».

Johnson's own relation to the story of rivalry seems to be « neutralized » by the chosen « undecidability » of her position as John Irwin figures it out. As far as Johnson does not get involved in the argument by refusing to say the last judgment, she can safely stay at the « outside<sup>15</sup> ». Still Irwin notices that she plays even against Derrida's odds as far as her essay is proclaimed to be « the resulting triptych<sup>16</sup> ». Being the fourth in the line, he himself self-consciously puns this position by introducing two triangles in the title of his own essay: « Mysteries We Reread, Mysteries of Rereading: Poe, Borges, and Analytic Detective Story; also Lacan, Derrida, and Johnson ». Kay Stockholder, however, interprets Johnson's part in the argument in a different way: «...Derrida disparages Lacan by accusing him of repeating Bonaparte's interpretation of the letter, while concealing his indebtedness to her work, and Johnson *insults* Derrida by saying that he accuses Lacan of what he himself is guilty<sup>17</sup> » (*italics are mine*). In Stockholder's reading, Johnson finally gets within the story's framework as insulter herself.

Other critics reflecting on both the « Purloined Letter » and its famous interpretations not only show the mechanism of « contagious » violence at work but also flesh out the rivalry plot, adding new details and particularities. Biographical facts are meant to enrich the plot, make it sound more plausible, and satisfy the reader's interest. For example, a Canadian critic François Peraldi narrates the conflict in terms of « fratricidal vengeance » alluded at the tale's ending<sup>18</sup>: « A bitter dispute had taken place within the French psychoanalytic brotherhood just before Lacan delivered his seminar on “The Purloined Letter”. It led to the schism that was, as often the case in the psychoanalytic community, passionately violent and vile<sup>19</sup> ». Bonaparte, allied to Lacan at first, finally joined Sasha Nacht, « the

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<sup>12</sup> Barbara Johnson, « The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida », in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, eds. Miller John P. and Richardson William J., Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988, p. 219.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Johnson, « The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida », in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, eds. Miller John P. and Richardson William J., Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1988.

<sup>14</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, « The Purloined Letter », *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>15</sup> John Irwin, « Mysteries We Reread, Mysteries of Rereading: Poe, Borges, and Analytic Detective Story; Also Lacan, Derrida, and Johnson », in *MLN* 101.5 (1986), p. 1176.

<sup>16</sup> John Irwin, « Mysteries We Reread, Mysteries of Rereading: Poe, Borges, and Analytic Detective Story; Also Lacan, Derrida, and Johnson », in *MLN* 101.5 (1986).

<sup>17</sup> Kay Stockholder, « Is Anybody at Home in the Text? Psychoanalysis and the Question of Poe », in *American Imago* 57.3 (2000), p. 312.

<sup>18</sup> « Un dessein si funeste, / S'il n'est digne d'Atrée, est digne de Thyeste. They are to be found in Crebillon's 'Atrée'." Edgar Allan Poe, "The Purloined Letter", *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> François Peraldi, « A Note on Time in 'The Purloined Letter' », in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, p. 337.

hated “brother” and former friend of Lacan<sup>20</sup> ». His revenge was « especially nasty » in Peraldi’s opinion : the « cook » in the footnote is a hint at Marie Bonaparte’s « unsuccessful surgical interventions and cauterizing (grilling) of her clitoris in a vain attempt to regain her sexual sensitivity ». The psychoanalytic was (as we learn) « obsessed by the belief that frigidity was due to a malfunction or a misplacement of the clitoris, to which she compared the little brass knob in her comment to Poe’s tale<sup>21</sup> ».

Steven Bretzius also interprets Lacan’s insult as a vengeful act caused by « Bonaparte’s role in his “excommunication” from the International Psychoanalytic Association in 1953, together with the obstacle she presented to his meeting Freud in Paris in 1939, who was staying with Bonaparte on his way to London<sup>22</sup> » At the same time, he speaks of Lacan’s insult as of « the murder of Marie » bringing together Marie Rogêt, the murdered female character of the middle story in Poe’s trilogy, maternal Marie, Lacan’s own middle name, and Marie Antoinette (a hint at Bonaparte’s own royal ancestry)<sup>23</sup>. The « royal » murder motif implied by the reference to Marie Antoinette echoes the famous ending of the mythological plot alluded in Poe’s text: Orestes, the offspring of Atreus, murders Clytemnestra, both the mother and the queen, fulfilling the curse of Thyestes. Two histories – the history of a psychoanalytic movement and of the French Revolution – eventually overlap in the fictionalized space opened up by Poe’s tale. What we get is a story that, as a performative act, is neither true nor false. Its subjects have « real » referents but they lose their independence when they become « emplotted » in the story’s framework as the fictional subjects or « allegorical types ». As Bretzius puts it: « Thus for Mehlman, Johnson, Irwin, and Riddell, the very force of the letter, each of them would almost allow, transforms its various readers into allegorical characters or types of the Minister (Mailman), Poe (John’s son), Dupin (Ur-win), and the letter (Riddle)<sup>24</sup> ».

Marie Bonaparte, indeed, can be renamed as Marie Rogêt or as Marie-Antoinette if we follow the associative logic of the wordplay which, related to the tale’s extended framework, is closer to the logic of invention rather than to that of a critical analysis. Russian structuralists Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspenskii distinguish between two types of consciousness, mythological, on the one hand, and non-mythological or descriptive, on the other. The latter corresponds to the meta-language operating with abstract constructs and categories. While the former refers to the meta-text that *transforms* the original text rather than *translates* it, mostly

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<sup>20</sup> François Peraldi, « A Note on Time in ‘The Purloined Letter’ », in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*.

<sup>21</sup> François Peraldi, « A Note on Time in “The Purloined Letter” », in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*.

<sup>22</sup> Steven Bretzius, « The Figure-Power Dialectic: Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” », in *MLN* 110, 4 (1995), p. 682.

<sup>23</sup> Steven Bretzius, « The Figure-Power Dialectic: Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” », in *MLN* 110, 4 (1995), p. 683.

<sup>24</sup> Steven Bretzius, « The Figure-Power Dialectic: Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” », in *MLN* 110, 4 (1995), p. 685.

through (re)baptizing it<sup>25</sup>. This structural scheme can, indeed, be applied to the critical debate around « The Purloined Letter » where we observe both: the text's translation into the (psychoanalytical) meta-language and its transformation into the meta-text since renaming itself allots « real » participants of the discussion with new fictional entities. At the same time, the reversals and double and triple reversals of Poe's plot producing the *mise en abyme* effect, allow us to discuss the entire critical thread in terms of a sequel as a type of textual transformation.

« The Purloined Letter » is itself a sequel to Poe's earlier « The Murders of the Rue Morgue » and « The Mystery of Marie Rogêt ». Poe notably stresses this relation in the first paragraph of the text where the narrator alludes to « certain topics which had formed matter for conversation between us at an earlier period of the evening : I mean the affair of the Rue Morgue, and the mystery attending the murder of Marie Rogêt<sup>26</sup> ». Poe assumes that the readers of « The Gift » where the tale was first published in 1844, are familiar with the first two stories, and this assumption spares him the obligation of introducing his character. However, another reference to Dupin's « pre-textual » past at the tale's closure – the mention of « the evil turn » that the Minister did him in Vienna – leads us nowhere. The story of the Minister's alleged crime against Dupin, in the same fashion as the content of the purloined letter, is left blank. It is a gap in the narrative, a fictional lacuna. We can only guess, with Lacan, that the insult took place at the Congress. Importantly though, the reference to the « evil turn » is a turning point of the tale, marking its generic ambivalence that has been broadly discussed in criticism<sup>27</sup>. « The Purloined Letter » is the last tale of the mystery-solution trilogy and the first tale with a revenge motif followed by « The Cask of Amontillado » (1846) and « The Hop-Frog » (1849). Having been detached throughout the whole trilogy, Dupin becomes personally involved in the story he investigates; and although the Minister's destruction is political and the « gory » side of the revenge is only hinted in the tale's quote from Crébillon alluding to the « feast of Atreus » this does not make it less « vile ».

« The Cask of Amontillado » and « The Hop-Frog » are, of course, not sequels to « The Purloined Letter » However, it might be no casual that in both tales, revenge takes place during the feast : the anticipated pleasure results in a dreadful murder or atrocious massacre. The plot of « The Cask of Amontillado » is built around the « evil turn » which happened in the past and which is also left blank. « The thousands injuries of Fortunato I had borne at best as I could, but when he ventured upon the insult I vowed revenge<sup>28</sup> » ; the opening of « The Cask of Amontillado » echoes the final paragraph of « The Purloined Letter » : « D-, at Vienna once, did me an evil turn, which I told him, quite good-humoredly, that I should

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<sup>25</sup> Yuri Lotman, Boris Uspenski, « Mif – imya – kultura », in Yuri Lotman, *Semiosfera*, St. Petersburg, Iskustvo, SPB, 2004, pp. 525-543.

<sup>26</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, « The Purloined Letter », *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Richard Hull, « The Purloined Letter: Poe's Detective Story vs Panoptic Foucauldian Theory », in *Style*, Summer 24 (1990), pp. 201-214.

<sup>28</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, « The Cask of Amontillado », in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, New-York, The Modern Library, 1938.



remember<sup>29</sup> ». But unlike « The Cask of Amontillado » and « The Hop-Frog », the fruits of the revenge in « The Purloined Letter » are suspended, put off. We know that the Minister will be politically destroyed but he may also pay back, like Thyestes. If continued, the plot is most likely to lapse in the series of successive « insults » and « assaults » indicating a « narrative crisis » as it were (to paraphrase the « sacrificial crisis » as described by René Girard<sup>30</sup>). This logic, indeed, undermines the critical dispute around « The Purloined Letter » or, more specifically, the way this dispute manifests itself.

As we have seen, writing on « The Purloined Letter » and building their interpretations on the previous readings, reconstruct « the pre-textual crime » to use Johnson's ingenious expression once again. The « crime » left out in « The Purloined Letter », is also left out in both the « Seminar » and in « The Purveyor of Truth ». Filling in the blanks and the gaps of the previous story is one of the possible ways of its continuation, at least if we think of « une continuation elliptique » in the terms of Gérard Genette<sup>31</sup>. A sequel or a prequel often builds itself on what is omitted, completing the fictional reality of the hypo-text. It is not surprising then that the story of rivalry may find its roots in the Psychoanalytic schism but may as well begin with the French Revolution, anticipating both the fictional time of Poe's tale and the birth of Marie Bonaparte, one of the sequel's major « protagonists ».

Furthermore, what is eventually returned to the expanded plot in the course of its (re)narration, is the violated body of a woman, Marie, the body that is missing in the « two-dimensional structure » of Poe's tale<sup>32</sup>. The narrative becomes more vigorous as it borrows largely from Poe's poetical imagery. It contaminates « the semiotic purity<sup>33</sup> » of the tale's plot by exploiting the violent potential of the murder stories that preceded « The Purloined Letter » and the revenge tales that followed. Also, it contaminates the analytical purity of the debate redirecting the reader's attention from the logic of the structural analysis to the history of the argument, intimate biography, and « contagious » punning.

Exploring the fictional dimension of the critical commentary on « The Purloined Letter » could be one of the ways of investigating the fictionalizing, myth-making nature of Poe's prose. His plots outlive the textual boundaries, teasing the critics into a more active, fiction-making role as the opposite of the remote stance of observers.

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<sup>29</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, "The Purloined Letter", *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> René Girard, *La violence et le sacré*, Paris, Grasset, 1972.

<sup>31</sup> Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes : la littérature au second degré*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1982, p. 198.

<sup>32</sup> Shawn Rosenheim, « Detective Fiction, Psychoanalysis, and the Analytic Sublime », in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, eds. Rosenheim Shawn and Rachman Stephen, Baltimore and London, John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1995, p. 157. In my essay, I argue that the « return » of Marie's body, « she of the cauterized clitoris or she of the decapitated head, reinforces the homosocial nature of the tale's intrigue as it gets a new turn in its critical interpretations ». Alexandra Urakova, « 'The Purloined Letter' in the Gift-Book: Reading Poe in a Contemporary Context », *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 64.3 (December 2009), p. 345.

<sup>33</sup> Shawn Rosenheim, « Detective Fiction, Psychoanalysis, and the Analytic Sublime », in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, eds. Rosenheim Shawn and Rachman Stephen, Baltimore and London, John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1995.

Poe's narrators, as is well known, are seldom detached from the story they narrate; their involvement in the plot and the mimetic instability of their position inside the story are part of the famous Poesque effect. The criticism on « The Purloined Letter » marked by the vigorous leading of the plot shows this strategy at work.

At the same time, as the debate around « The Purloined Letter » has now receded into the distant past, we can say that the sequel is complete. The narrative interest is spinning around the confrontation between Bonaparte and Lacan, Lacan and Derrida. Poe's text thus initiated another « secondary reality » as it were, with a limited number of « characters » and their dramatic parts. Seen in this poetical perspective, the critical texts on « The Purloined Letter » may be placed together with classical literary sequels like Jules Verne's famous *The Ice Sphinx* (*Le Sphinx des glaces*, 1897), as they follow the tale's narrative structure, fulfill textual lacunas, and bring a new fictional dimension into being. But while Verne's novel is related to Poe's *Pym* horizontally, the structure of relations between « The Purloined Letter » and its meta-continuation can be described as vertical: interpretations of the text and interpretations of the interpretations *both* build onto one another and keep to the original storyline. The sequel to « The Purloined Letter » (unlike Verne's) is not reduced to the rigid boundaries of an individual work, which also allows us to discuss it in terms of a critical myth.

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