'VOL DU BOURDON': THE PURLOINED LETTER IN PEREC'S *LA DISPARITION*

Georges Perec's 312-page lipogram novel *La Disparition*, first published in Spring 1969, is nowadays preceded, and perhaps subverted, by its reputation as the novel that was written without using the letter e(E).[1] Additional complications seem to stem from Perec's stated view that literature is a game between author and reader, and his citing the classical detective story as a model for this.[2] While *Un Homme qui dort* (Paris: Denoël, 1967), is currently being incorporated in critical studies, alongside consideration of works that already occupy a central position in Perec scholarship, and *Un Cabinet d'amateur* (Paris: Balland, 1979) has recently received extended treatment, *La Disparition* is avoided.[3]

The evident self-reflexivity in *La Disparition* caused early commentators to treat it as 'the epitome of the self-conscious novel' and a tour de force lipogram, where, to sustain his/her interest in Perec's verbal virtuosity, the reader is diverted and entertained by e-less versions of other works ('literary borrowings') and multifarious allusions to the 'missing' e(E).[4] While he worked on *La Disparition*, Perec entered into the workshop spirit of the Oulipo.[5] He engaged fellow members and other friends to write short texts in different languages which he included among the written/textual evidence considered by his investigating characters. Perec also incorporates modified passages, and summaries of whole works, from a variety of other authors (the blanket term 'literary borrowings' refers to examples of these and the foregoing). Using the work of other authors is by this time a characteristic of Perec's œuvre. In *La Disparition* such modified passages and summaries are for the most part placed as evidence. As I have noted elsewhere, Perec engages the reader of *La Disparition* in both the fictional investigation and an investigation of (the nature of) fiction, by reference to communal memory and the shared experience of reading. For the fictional investigation Perec applies his sense of ending, the other investigation is potentially endless and limitless.[6] After the example of Voyl, readers are perhaps led to question even their own perception of the text they are reading; and following the example of Dupin to discover the true identity of the culprit, they find themselves being referred to other works of fiction, where the clues lie not in the passages alluded to in *La Disparition* but elsewhere in these works and to works of non-fiction.

[1] Georges Perec, *La Disparition* (Paris: Denoël, 1969). Page numbers after quotations in French are from this edition of *La Disparition* (hereafter *D*) unless otherwise indicated.

[2] Georges Perec, Interview with Jean-Marie Le Sidaner, *L'Arc*, 76 (1979), 3–10 (p. 10).

[3] See Jacques-Denis Bertharion, *Poétique de Georges Perec* (Saint-Genouph: Librairie Nizet, 1998), and Manet van Monfrans, *Georges Perec: La Contrainte du réel* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999).

[4] These quotes are from Mireille Ribière, 'Bridging the Gap: An Analysis of Three Works by Georges Perec', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1985), p. 107. See also, for example, Warren Motte, 'Embellir les lettres', in *Cahiers Georges Perec 1: Colloque de Cerisy (juillet 1984)*, ed. by Bernard Magné (Paris: P. O. L., 1985), pp. 110–24.

[5] Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle) is a Paris-based writers' workshop co-founded by Raymond Queneau and the mathematician François Le Lionnais, in 1960. Perec became a member in 1967.

[6] In my essay, 'Death by Jigsaw: *La Vie mode d'emploi* by Georges Perec', in *Crime Scenes: Detective Narratives in European Culture since 1945*, ed. by Anne Mullen and Emer O'Beirne (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 171–182, (p. 173). Here I also discuss Perec's spatial concept of literature and Butor as Perec's source for this idea.

In other words Perec treats books themselves as the embodiment of memory.[7] Perec is also treating these books and all parts of their printed texts as being simultaneously available.

Perec, as far as I know, never used the word 'intertextuality'. This was doubtless a conscious omission: he preferred to characterize the incorporation of other works as 'citational literature'. As Andrew Leak observes: 'in the interview with Benabou and Marcenac he [Perec] said that "we are moving towards a kind of art that could be called 'citational', and which permits a certain progress, since the point where our predecessors finished up becomes our own point of departure" '.[8] Perec's concept of 'citational literature' is particularly apt in the context of this article. As Uri Eisenzweig points out in his analysis of 'l'intensité transtextuelle dans la production policière':

> L'allusion aux fameux détectives d'antan n'est que la forme superficielle et symbolique du fonctionnement narratif tout entier. Le Grand Détective est d'autant plus grand qu'il surpasse ses prédécesseurs, mais ce n'est là que la conséquence d'un phénomène structurel plus profond: où le récit ne vaut que par l'écart qu'il exhibe par rapport à ceux qu'il dit imiter.[9]

A second wave of interpretations has been based on theories of denial and displacement deriving from the traumatic circumstances of Perec's wartime childhood. Such an approach *may* begin to give some indication as to Perec's overall unconscious motivation to write, but it attempts to seek a meaning or significance for the work as autobiography, and is at odds with the humour, strangeness, and insights otherwise provided by the text.[10] Whether the involvement of detective fiction is acknowledged or not, most commentators seek to identify more, as it were, serious respectable sources or precursors than the author himself has cited, or obviously used, even in the text itself. Freudian readings of *La Disparition* are seemingly bolstered by the assumption that Perec's main model was Jacques Lacan's reading of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Purloined Letter', not that story itself.[11] The foreground presence of Poe's other two Dupin stories, and background presence of Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* (London: Collins, 1939), quite apart from Perec's narrative strategy which is rooted in and reveals a detailed and extensive knowledge of detective fiction, is not taken into account. This is to read without considering the authorial game or where it leads or may lead.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the so-called Golden Age of the classical detective story, practitioners, who saw themselves writing in a new genre, invented a history for it in which they cited Poe as their most significant historical precursor.[12] In building their own interpretation of Poe's stories (through their own practice) they introduced a significant new orientation in the relationship between reader, text, and author.

[7] As Perec expressed it in his autobiographical novel *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (Paris: Denoël, Les Lettres Nouvelles, 1975), the book is the 'source d'une mémoire inépuisable, d'un ressassement, d'une certitude', (p. 193).

[8] Andrew Leak, 'Phago-citations: Barthes, Perec, and the Transformation of Literature', in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Spring 1993, pp. 57–75 (p. 73).

[9] Uri Eisenzweig, *Le Récit impossible: forme et sens du roman policier* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986), p. 174.

[10] See for example, Claude Burgelin, 'Perec et la cruauté', in *Cahiers Georges Perec 1: Colloque de Cerisy (juillet 1984)*, pp. 31–52.

[11] See, for example, Ali Magoudi, *La Lettre Fantôme* (Paris: Minuit, 1996).

[12] See especially, Dorothy L. Sayers, Introduction to *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror*, ed. by Dorothy L. Sayers, (London: Gollancz, 1928; repr. 1930), pp. 9–47 (p. 17).

To the (well-known and so-called) self-referentiality of the genre (both between fictional characters' references to other fictional characters in different books by the same or different author(s), and to themselves being, or not being, in a book), is brought the notion of the game between author and reader, which at first implicit, is made explicit. The writer seeks to lead and mislead the reader, putting the emphasis for the reader on what (s)he has and has not noticed. In their exploration of this notion, in the 1920s, a significant new dimension is added to detective fiction, an ontological dimension, initially by Agatha Christie.[13] As Raymond Chandler noted (in 1949) of Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* published in 1926: 'The challenge of this story is not "Who committed the murder?" but "Watch me closely and catch me out if you can"'.[14] Christie was closely followed by Ellery Queen whose *The Roman Hat Mystery* (New York: Stokes, 1929) was the first of several Ellery Queen books that featured a 'Challenge to the Reader'. This plus the association of the author with the culprit and the detective with the reader, (there is a sophisticated play on author–criminal, reader–detective correspondences in Queen's *Ten Days' Wonder* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1948) for example), creates (or may create) a particular play on the reader's perception of fiction and reality. In both *La Vie mode d'emploi* (Paris: Hachette, 1978) and *"53 jours"* (published posthumously in 1989, Paris: P. O. L.), Lawrence Wargrave, the culprit in *And Then There Were None* is named as an author of detective fiction. This is a play on the identification of the author of the crime with the author of the book in the classical detective story. (Perec's reading of detective fiction was primarily an adolescent enthusiasm, but he retained a life-long affection for the works of Agatha Christie.)

In *La Disparition* an exploration of the transformation from form into meaning is also an exploration of the boundary between knowing and not knowing. As in the classical detective story, nothing is certain until it is confirmed by the author. In *La Disparition* Perec indicates to the reader that the culprit is the author. Just as the material form of the e(E) is described and alluded to but is not named, does not itself appear, so too is the real author Georges Perec who is described and alluded to but not named. The absence of the material form of the e(E) corresponds to the absence from the narrative of the true identity of the culprit. The culprit being the author, there is a correspondence between the physical absence of the material form of the e(E) from the text, that is the physical presence of the material form of the e(E) (in other books and elsewhere) outside the narrative of *La Disparition*, and the physical presence in the world outside the book, of the person who is the author Georges Perec. The writer's persona as writer is itself intermediate between the writer as a person and the reader. Just as it is impossible to pin down exactly when/how form becomes meaning, it is similarly impossible to discern how much of the real author appears in fiction.

It is important that the reader of *La Disparition* notices the lipogrammatic nature of the text early in his reading of the book, certainly within the first three chapters. Commenting on René-Marill Albérès, who had not noticed at all, Perec himself is

[13] Contrary to McHale: 'Science Fiction [. . .] is the ontological genre par excellence (as the detective story is the epistemological genre par excellence).' Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), p. 16.

[14] Raymond Chandler, 'Casual Notes on the Mystery Novel (written in 1949)', in *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, ed. by Dorothy Gardiner and Kathrine Sorley Walker (London: Hamilton, 1962), pp. 63–70, (p. 67).

clear: 'Quand on lit *La Disparition* [. . .], un livre sans e, il faut vraiment être aveugle pour ne pas soupçonner quelque chose de curieux.'[15]

Fundamental to Perec's strategy with regard to the reader are the facts that in order to realize or confirm that *La Disparition* (or any other text) is a lipogram, the reader must view the text typographically, but in order to follow the narrative, the reader must see the words in the text in terms of their meaning, and it is impossible to do both simultaneously. In a detective story the described crimes register the presence of a culprit, but, until the identity of the culprit is revealed, the author may describe the actions and appearance of a character without the reader knowing that he is the culprit. One may say, therefore, that, (at least until the final revelation), the (true) identity of the culprit is absent from the narrative. In *La Disparition*, the absence of the letter e from the printed text corresponds to the absence from the narrative of the (true) identity of the culprit.

However, after the first crime the reader is all the time aware of the presence of the culprit, because of the crimes, and because he as reader is actively trying in his reading of the narrative to discover the identity of the culprit, which he also expects will be revealed. Perec exploits this awareness and expectation and introduces the e into the narrative as a corresponding presence, by making it the sign of the culprit, which he describes, thereby evoking the characteristic typographical shapes of the alphabetical letter e (E). While evoking in the reader's mind the image of the letter e by this means, Perec also evokes the letter e by alluding to, and otherwise directing the reader to notice, its absence from the printed text. So, when he reads the narrative the reader is constantly made aware of the alphabetical letter e as an image or evocation in his mind, while being constantly drawn (led by the author) to a typographical viewing (where he sees that the letter e is absent) as he tries to discover the identity of the culprit.

The reader is therefore in such a position that when he reads the narrative he is aware of the fiction (unaware of the material form of the text as such) and aware of the alphabetical letter e, and he is constantly directed to a typographical viewing in which he is aware of the material form of the text (unaware of the narrative) and aware that the material form of the alphabetical letter e is absent. In essence one may say that in *La Disparition* when one reads the narrative the physical book/text 'disappears' but the e is 'present', and when one views the text typographically the physical book/text 'appears' but the e is absent, and one constantly alternates between the reading and the viewing. Because only one or the other, viewing or reading, is possible at any one time, and the reader is enticed and encouraged by the author to alternate between the two, one may say that the (one) true reading of *La Disparition* lies between the viewing and the reading.

In *La Disparition* to read between the material form of the text and its meaning as conveyed by the narrative, would require the reader to be aware of the exact instant of transformation of the text from form to meaning, which is to try to watch himself experiencing an illusion fundamental to the process of reading a text. Perec invites this conclusion, and invites the reader to attempt this, through the example of Anton Voyl. Before he disappears, Voyl attempts, throughout the first four chapters, to dissect and describe every aspect of the illusion. Perec employs Voyl as a surrogate

[15] René-Marill Albérès, 'Drôles de Drames', in *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 22 May 1969, p.5. Georges Perec, Interview with Claudette Oriol-Boyer, in *Texte en main*, 1 (1981), 49–59 (p. 54).

reader who is also in the position of a writer. His purpose is to introduce the principle of alternating reading-viewing, and the elements necessary to induce it, while ensuring that the reader is aware of the process as he reads; otherwise the reader may not read in the intended way, that is, he may switch between reading and viewing at random and/or without interpreting the process, (and the reader must be aware of the process to be aware of the illusion).

Having initiated the reader into the mode of reading alternating with typographical viewing, the culprit author of *La Disparition* points up the innovation of his text, in a pivotal Chapter 4, by an appropriation of Poe's detective Dupin. The appropriation is of Dupin in the scenario of Poe's third and last Dupin story, 'The Purloined Letter', with allusions to the first, 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', and the second, 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt'.[16] Tactically using the story that Poe himself considered to be 'the best of my tales of ratiocination' to serve his own ends, the culprit author treats its author and protagonist in the same spirit in which Dupin had, in his turn, slightingly referred back to Vidocq as 'a good guesser, and a persevering man. But, without educated thought, he erred continually' ('MIRM' p. 425).[17]

Chapter 4 of *La Disparition* is about the disappearance of Anton Voyl. 'The Purloined Letter' is retold as the 'Vol du Bourdon'. It is introduced as a report 'dans un journal du soir' which Voyl reads and 'qui l'alarma fort' three days before his disappearance 'à la Toussaint' (1 November) (*D*, p. 53).The letter in Poe's story is a missive addressed to an 'illustrious personage' (whom the reader is led to assume is a queen). It has been stolen by the scheming Minister D-. The contents of the letter are not revealed but are said to be of such an incriminating nature as to give 'the holder of the document an ascendency' ('PL', p. 496) over the queen. The queen has secretly requested the Prefect of police to recover the letter. He has failed in this task, despite an inch-by-inch search of the minister's house, and in turn has approached the detective Dupin. Poe demonstrates the method of substitution by which the letter is stolen by the minister and then retrieved by Dupin, in a description of their actions. Whereas from the reader's point of view Poe's demonstration is an explanation, which shows how this was achieved, the culprit author of *La Disparition* demonstrates a substitution of the letter directly, not as an explanation but as a legerdemain in front of the reader. In the culprit author's revamped synopsis the chief policeman (now a Commandant named Didot) approaches Dupin with the problem of the theft of 'un pli' which he (Didot) has failed to find:

'Pour tout pli disons normal, si l'on nous avait ravi un x ou un y, ça nous aurait fait un faux bond minimal. Mais ici, il a pour filiation un bourdon trop important. . .'
'Un bourdon?' s'intrigua Dupin qui, à coup sûr, ignorait la signification du mot. (*D*, p. 53)

As in 'The Purloined Letter' the policeman is trying to impress on Dupin the importance of the stolen letter without exactly describing its (extremely sensitive) contents. This enables the culprit author to employ logically (in an 'abstractly

[16] All three stories are in Edgar Allan Poe, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* Everyman's Library (London: Dent, 1908; repr. 1984). Abbreviations after quotations in the text are 'PL' ('The Purloined Letter'), 'MIRM' ('The Murders in the Rue Morgue'), and 'MMR' ('The Mystery of Marie Rogêt'); page numbers are from this edition.

[17] Poe to James R. Lowell, 2 July 1844, in *The Letters of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by John Ward Ostrom, 2nd edn 2 vols (New York: Gordian Press, 1966), I, 256–59 (p. 258).

logical' way - Dupin's preferred form of reasoning ('PL', p. 505)) two alphabetical letters commonly used in mathematical and other calculations to represent unknown, or missing quantities, 'x' and 'y' ; and which here represent a normal, that is relatively unimportant letter (missive). 'Pli [. . .] normal' has become 'x' or 'y'. The letter that has been purloined in 'The Purloined Letter' is extremely important, as is the letter (the most frequently occurring of the French language, unlike x or y) 'missing' from *La Disparition*. In terms of 'x' or 'y' the missing letter(s) is(are) 'un bourdon trop important' where 'bourdon' is used for its meaning of the omission of one or several alphabetical letter(s) (or word) from a printed text due to an error by the compositor. The epistolatory letter of 'The Purloined Letter' is transformed into the 'missing' alphabetical letter of *La Disparition*.

The substitution of the alphabetical letter for the epistolary letter has also been effected under the nose of Poe's astute detective Dupin without his noticing its particularity. Dupin, because '[il] ignorait la signification du mot' (bourdon), applies his reasoning as he had done in Poe's story. Dupin tells Didot that the thief has not concealed the 'larcin' but has done no more than make the 'pli' 'sali ou racorni' [dirty or shrivelled] (as in Poe), then '*il l'avait [. . .] blotti dans un sous-marin*' (*D*, p. 54) (my emphasis) which the police must have looked at 'au moins dix fois' without being willing or able to know 'qu'il s'agissait non d'un chiffon trivial, mais du pli si primordial!' *D*, p. 54). Dupin then dismisses Didot's protest that there is no '*sous-main*' (my emphasis) and dashes out to retrieve the 'papyrus': 'Mais quoiqu'il ait raison, du moins dans son calcul, il manqua son coup' (*D*, p. 54).

Dupin 'manqua son coup' in his brief appearance in *La Disparition*, for exactly the same reason, as he himself explains to the narrator in 'The Purloined Letter', that the police fail in Poe's story, even though the measures they adopted were 'the best of their kind' and 'carried out to absolute perfection'. Dupin had then continued: 'They [the police] have no variation of principle in their investigations; at best [. . .] they extend or exaggerate their old modes of *practice*, without touching their principles' ('PL', p. 504, original emphasis). He explains that in their microscopic examination of the minister's house the police had done nothing 'to vary the principle of action' ('PL', p. 504). The police search was the 'exaggeration *of the application* of the one principle or set of principles of search [. . .] based upon the one set of notions regarding human ingenuity [. . .] to which the Prefect [. . .] has been accustomed' ('PL', p. 504, original emphasis). The Prefect has 'taken it for granted' that '*all* men proceed to conceal a letter [. . .] in *some* out of the way hole' ('PL', p. 504, original emphasis). Dupin then states that it would have unquestionably been discovered by the police: 'had the purloined letter been hidden anywhere within the limits of the Prefect's examination — in other words, had the principle of its concealment been comprehended within the principles of the Prefect' ('PL', pp. 504–05).

The episode of the 'Vol du Bourdon' is the culmination of the culprit author's demonstration (to the reader) of *his* 'principle of concealment'; a demonstration, or exhibition, also of superiority, which refutes both parts of Dupin's statement and the idea that both parts are equivalent (as is evinced by the phrase 'in other words'). The culprit author shows that not only is what one sees (or fails to see) determined by preconceptions (as in Poe), but it also depends on what one is in a position, and/or able, to comprehend, and that it is one thing to 'comprehend' a principle, but

quite another to apply it ('in practice'), or recognize its application by another, in fiction and in fact.

The culprit author informs the reader that Dupin 'manqua son coup', but that he is correct 'du moins dans son calcul'. As in 'The Purloined Letter', Dupin has concluded that the letter has not been concealed but merely disguised and placed in the most unlikely, but ultimately most obvious, place. Since he is now in the 'Vol du Bourdon', he has varied his 'principle of action' to include the material form of the text as a place of concealment for an alphabetical letter. When Dupin says '*sous-marin*', Didot understands him to mean *sous-main* ('sous-marin' with the r omitted). Didot has searched the house twenty times without finding the letter, and as from Dupin's superior point of view he is an uncomprehending 'gros ballot' (*D*, p. 504), his objection, that 'il n'y avait aucun sous-main' (*D*, p. 54), is only to be expected: ' "Allons donc", ironisa Dupin. Il mit son mackintosh, prit son riflard, sortit, affirmant: "J'y vais. Dans un instant, tu auras ton papyrus" ' (*D*, p. 54). However, Dupin himself has comprehended the principle but not its application. Dupin is assuming that a letter is missing from the word *sous-main* in the sense that the word *sous-main*, although complete in itself, is incomplete as a clue to the solution of the puzzle without the addition of the missing letter. The addition of the letter will complete the true clue-word, and the meaning of the clue will be apparent in the meaning of this completed word. Confident that he has the solution, and referring sarcastically to Didot's incomprehension as he declares 'Allons donc', Dupin is in turn being subjected to the culprit author's use of irony. Dupin treats *sous-main*, in which he himself has hidden ('blotti') the letter (r), as *sous-marin*, which he then considers in terms of its meaning. This leads him to conclude that the solution to the 'Vol du Bourdon' lies outside the 'Vol du Bourdon' insofar as it resembles 'The Purloined Letter', and in 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt', the story, under Poe's authorship, in which he was involved immediately prior to 'The Purloined Letter', and which 'had formed matter for conversation' ('PL', p. 494) between himself and the narrator at the beginning of that tale.

Dupin has assumed (that is, the culprit author has supplied him with the assumption) in the 'Vol du Bourdon', that the missing letter must be r because it is the initial of the last name of Marie Rogêt who unaccountably disappeared in 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt'. Her body was later discovered in the River Seine. In his investigation Dupin had concluded that she had been murdered 'by a lover, or at least by an intimate and secret associate', who was 'a seaman' 'above the grade of the common sailor', probably a 'naval officer' ('MMR', pp. 488–89). In the 'Vol du Bourdon', Dupin's phrase 'blotti dans un sous-marin', evokes an intimate relationship that has something to do with the navy, while the last part of the last word in the phrase, the word into which the r itself fits, specifically indicates a sailor ('marin'). In 'The Purloined Letter' the culprit is named very early on in the story. Indeed, it is only through his (extensive and detailed) personal knowledge of the culprit that Dupin is able to deduce the location of the purloined letter. Therefore one may say that he could not have found the letter without knowing the culprit; that is, in order to find the letter he had to know the culprit first. In the 'Vol du Bourdon' the identity of the culprit is at the outset not known ('on gardait son incognito' (*D*, p. 53)). Dupin is now confident that he has the solution, declaring as he rushes off, 'dans un instant, tu auras ton papyrus' (*D*, p. 54) because he thinks he

has identified the culprit (the 'marin') and therefore knows (or will know) where the letter is.

That Dupin has reached this conclusion is confirmed by his actions just before he goes, as 'il mit son mackintosh, prit son riflard' (*D*, p. 54). This is a further allusion to 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt', the only one of Poe's Dupin stories in which the weather is mentioned (apart from 'one gusty evening in the autumn' at the beginning of 'The Purloined Letter'), and in only three different phrases. At the 'period of the murder' it was 'warm and damp weather' ('MMR', p. 480), articles of the victim's clothing discovered in a thicket were 'all mildewed down hard with the action of the rain' ('MMR', pp. 457, 479–80); and in the afternoon *on the day of Marie Rogêt's disappearance*, '*it came on to rain heavily*' ('MMR', p. 451) (my emphasis). However, in 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt', Dupin does not know the culprit personally and does not name him. He connects the crime (via the way Rogêt's clothing had been torn and tied) with a 'naval officer' with whom Rogêt is known to have associated, ('the idea of this seaman' 'tends to blend' with that of the 'naval officer' ('MMR', p. 489)), and so indicates the culprit. How the police followed up this 'apparently slight clue' is then omitted, but the reader is told that 'the result desired was brought to pass' ('MMR', p. 491). Thus in the 'Vol du Bourdon' Dupin dashes out at the time of the crime (of 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt') to catch (or meet) the culprit so that he can (get to) know him so that he will know where the letter is. In the course of his deductions in the 'Vol du Bourdon' Dupin has, in the end, 'varied his principles' only to 'extend the old mode of practice' to which he 'has been accustomed'.

That the culprit author leads Dupin to 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' for a solution is particularly ironic. In a letter, written in 1846, Poe had commented:

> These tales of ratiocination owe most of their popularity to being something in a new key [. . .]. I do not mean to say that they are not ingenious — but people think them more ingenious than they are — on account of their method and *air* of method. In the 'Murders in the Rue Morgue', for instance, where is the ingenuity of unravelling a web which you yourself (the author) have woven for the express purpose of unravelling? The reader is made to confound the ingenuity of the supposititious Dupin with that of the writer of the story.[18]

Poe implies that he regards the 'tales of ratiocination' purely as fiction. He seems to acknowledge that purely as examples of rational deduction the stories might not stand up to close examination, and that 'the reader' is mistakenly identifying him with Dupin. However, this overall impression would be misleading, and nowhere is it more comprehensively contradicted than in 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt'. Here, fact is presented as fiction. Poe's real theories about a real-life mystery are presented as Dupin's ratiocinative investigation which the reader is explicitly encouraged to regard as a detailed and accurate appraisal of the real-life case (with only the names changed), and whereas in the fiction Dupin's deductions are correct, in reality Poe was wrong.[19]

Dupin was Poe's fictional exemplar of the consummate analytical mind in action, and Poe had set his standards high. In his outline of the characteristics of such a mind in the prologue to 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', while advancing the card game of whist (in which 'men of the highest order of intellect have been known

[18] Poe to Philip P. Cooke, 9 August 1846, in *The Letters of Poe*, ed. by Ostrom, II, 327–30 (p. 328).
[19] Detailed in John E. Walsh, *Poe the Detective: The Curious Circumstances behind the Mystery of Marie Rogêt* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1968).

to [. . .] delight') as an example of a supreme challenge to 'the faculty of analysis', 'proficiency' in which 'implies capacity for success in [. . .] more important undertakings where mind struggles with mind', Poe continues: 'When I say proficiency, I mean that perfection in the game which includes a comprehension of *all* the sources whence legitimate advantage may be derived. These are not only manifold but multiform' ('MIRM', p. 412, original emphasis). Poe attributes to Dupin comprehension of 'all the sources' necessary in the fictional stories for the successful resolution of the crimes. In the first and last Dupin stories, Poe is positing hypothetical crimes and demonstrating the process of their solution through Dupin's analysis of evidence which he (Poe) has supplied. In his appropriation of Dupin, the culprit author witholds such total comprehension, and attributes to Dupin comprehension of a different set of 'sources', necessary to his own strategy, and based on the fictions in which under the authorship of Poe, Dupin has appeared. However, in the 'Vol du Bourdon' the culprit author does not show that '*all* sources' are not available only to the fictional characters as they are controlled and manipulated by the author. His allusion to 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' carries with it both the general inference that arguments rendered in fictional terms depend on the aims and limitations of the author, (that is that '*all* sources' are not available even to the author himself, and even in his own fiction), while insinuating a specific example of Poe demonstrating by default, and by his own definition, a lack of proficiency.

The culprit author had introduced his appropriation of 'The Purloined Letter' into *La Disparition* as a report in 'un journal du soir' (*D*, p. 53). There are no newspapers mentioned in Poe's last Dupin story, but this is far from the case in relation to its two predecessors. 'Journal du soir' is an allusion to Dupin's initial source of information in 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'. Dupin's attention is first drawn to the murders by a lengthy report, reproduced for the reader, in 'an evening edition of the *Gazette des Tribunaux*' ('MIRM', p. 418). In 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt', which is subtitled 'A Sequel to *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*', Dupin makes his deductions overtly as a reader mainly by scrutinizing the texts of newspaper articles.

In Poe's Dupin stories the quoted newspaper articles report the occurrence of a crime and the failure of the police to solve it, thereby triggering Dupin's intervention and successful investigation. In *La Disparition*, under the authorship of the culprit author, the newspaper report which is the 'Vol du Bourdon' outlines Dupin's failure to solve a crime. The culprit author shows that his 'purloined letter' is concealed in a way that Dupin's line of analysis cannot reach as he leads the detective back through his career in a search for the solution, and renders Dupin's former triumphs, defeats.

The culprit author sums up by saying that Dupin still plays his part in his (the culprit author's) appropriation, but is out of touch and really belongs in the past, dismissing the detective's acumen and powers of ratiocination as a combination of luck and originally being the fictional tool of the right author (who, as he has already insinuated, had flawed and limited theories, and who tailored the facts to fit his theories). The culprit author does this deftly and succinctly in a single line:

> 'Jadis, au moins, j'avais du Pot,' murmura-t-il. (*D*, p. 54)

'Pot' is a play on the word as printed and its pronunciation. The word that the reader immediately recognizes is 'pot' meaning luck, but it has been printed with a capital P as 'Pot' to represent the word as murmured by Dupin. When 'Pot' is spoken (or murmured) it sounds exactly like 'Poe', the author's name, and as such printed with a capital P. The culprit author gives Dupin this remark to underline his demonstration of his own omnipotence and his control over the fictional characters in his literary creation. He makes Dupin use a variation ('pot') of his criticism of Vidocq ('a good guesser') against himself and his former author with the pun, and through it also emphasizes Dupin's incomprehension of his innovative text. Dupin thinks he is saying 'Poe', not understanding that because the material form of the alphabetical letter e cannot (must not) appear in the text, the word will reproduce in print as 'Pot'. In addition, by his reference to his previous author, Dupin is acknowledging the role that the culprit author has cast him in. That is, that, in terms of his previous career, he is in the wrong book under the control of the wrong author, because he should have solved the crime. His former author, Poe, identified with the detective (who in turn identified with the culprit during the process of his ratiocination in order to solve the crime), but this was in the past ('jadis'). Now, and in *La Disparition*, Dupin is totally at the mercy of the culprit because he is the author (although at this stage this is not known to the reader). The culprit author then rounds off his disparagement by returning Dupin to the beginning of his career: 'Puis, par consolation, il s'occupa, laissant la P. J. à son tracas, d'un orang-outang qui avait commis trois assassinats' (*D*, p. 54). The three deaths from Poe's previous two Dupin stories are combined in one case with the culprit from the first (the orang-outang being the culprit in 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'), as if Dupin had not fully solved 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', in which there were only two victims; and, since the culprit author introduces the 'Vol du Bourdon' with an allusion to 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', as if this were the only type of crime and culprit that he *might* (have been, or) be able to identify.

The detective story (the 'Vol du Bourdon') within the detective story (*La Disparition*) shows the reader how to proceed. In the first paragraph of Chapter 1, Anton Voyl had been introduced as a reader:

> Il prit un roman, il l'ouvrit, il lut; mais il n'y saisissait qu'un imbroglio confus, il butait à tout instant sur un mot dont il ignorait la signification. Il abandonna son roman sur son lit.
> (*D*, p. 17)

Through the example of Voyl, the culprit author had introduced the reader to typographical viewing alternating with reading but as yet only on an ontological level. That is, by the end of Chapter 3, so the culprit author calculates, the reader should know (from its description) that Voyl is trying to identify the alphabetical letter e(E), the material form of which is absent from the material form of the text that he, the real reader, is reading, and should be noticing the repetition of certain of the words that evoke the e(E) which are not the e(E). But the culprit author has not yet supplied the reader with a meaning ('signification') in the narrative for the evoked e(E), (and therefore his own additional meaning for the words that evoke it, other than that they do evoke it; with the exception of 'blanc' which has acquired the meaning of literal disappearance).

The prominence of the phrase 'Vol du Bourdon' in the title of Chapter 4, together with the opening sentence, an announcement that 'Anton Voyl disparut à la

Toussaint' (*D*, p. 53), alerts the reader to a possible impending meaning for the evoked e(E) and that it may have some connection with Voyl's disappearance. Voyl then reads the 'Vol du Bourdon' and discovers that even the renowned detective Dupin is no longer omniscient or infallible. The discovery seems to precipitate Voyl's disappearance: 'Si Dupin n'a pas su, quoiqu'il ait d'instinct tout compris d'a à z, il n'y aura pas pour moi d'absolution, nota Anton Voyl dans son Journal' (*D*, pp. 54–55). In terms of his reading to try to identify the shape of the e(E) Voyl is back where he started, but the real reader is not. In the 'Vol du Bourdon' the culprit author connects the evoked e(E) with a crime and an unknown culprit. The 'bourdon' that the reader has come to associate with the alphabetical letter e(E), has been stolen by 'un individu, dont on craignait tant l'obscur pouvoir qu'on gardait son incognito' (*D*, p. 53). It has been stolen because it compromises a 'trio d'argousins qui commandait à la Maison Poulaga' (*D*, p. 53) and can thus be used to wield power. This does not provide the evoked e(E) with a meaning but, the reader knowing why the letter was stolen (in the fiction), provokes the question, 'what is the identity of the person who stole it?' (in the fiction). The culprit author, via his legerdemain transforming the fictional stolen (epistolary) letter into the alphabetical letter, the material form of which is in reality absent from the material form of the text that the reader is reading, covertly indicates to the reader that the question should be more accurately phrased as 'what is the identity of the person who is responsible for the omission of the material form of the e(E) from the text?', which also prompts a logical next question, 'why is it missing?' (since in the case of the material form of the e(E) the reader does not know).

That the culprit author has changed the focus of investigation from the question of identifying the shape, as in Voyl's innocent inquiry, to the questions of 'who is the culprit?' (in the fiction) and 'who is responsible for the omission of the material form of the e(E) from the text?', is confirmed in the example of Dupin's investigation, but the culprit author intends to indicate the answers to these two questions in two different ways: the first is in the fiction, the second is by means of the fiction. The element common to both methods of indication will be the evoked e(E). In the example of Dupin, the culprit author covertly describes his second method (that is how he will indicate who is responsible for the omission of the material form of the e(E) from the text), in the course of which description he also indicates his first method (indicating the identity of the culprit in the fiction), which is the first stage of the second.

The culprit author had used Dupin's own logic to disparage and defeat him, but ultimately Dupin had failed because he was a fictional character being controlled by the culprit author. Dupin 'manqua son coup' but the culprit author in the sentence introducing that remark had said 'quoiqu'il ait raison, du moins dans son calcul' (*D*, p. 54). In order to retrieve the letter Dupin had identified the alphabetical letter r as the initial of a character (in this case a victim) in a story in which he had previously been involved, because in order to retrieve the letter he needed to know the identity of the culprit who had stolen it. In other words the alphabetical letter r indicated to him the identity of the culprit (first stage). The revelation of this identity lay partly inside and partly outside the fiction in which Dupin was pursuing his inquiry. In other words the identity of the culprit was indicated by allusion in the fictional narrative of 'Vol du Bourdon' to a story, 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' which ultimately itself lay outside the 'Vol du Bourdon' (second stage). For 'r' the

culprit author expects the reader to read 'e(E)', and for 'Vol du Bourdon', *La Disparition*.

After the 'Vol du Bourdon' the culprit author assumes that by now the reader has relinquished his 'old modes of practice', and is not merely reading *La Disparition* but alternating reading with typographical viewing, and has learnt from the defeat of Dupin. The 'Vol du Bourdon' was a demonstration of the culprit author's 'principles of concealment' which he will now begin to apply. The culprit author deploys references to the e(E) to mark his victims and register his involvement in the crimes, thereby confirming his role as culprit, that is as author of the crimes. However, as author of the crimes and author as writer he also ensures that these references in combination with other descriptions accompanying or immediately surrounding the demise of characters, indicate roles or functions associated, or connected in some way, with authorship. The indications differ in each case (of crime/death), but overall come to emphasize the role or involvement of author as writer, and that the author as writer is the culprit author of *La Disparition*, the book that the reader is reading. As the narrative proceeds the deaths and disappearances move from being depicted in the fiction to being depicted more obviously (and even announced) as fiction. The astute reader comes to realize, for example, that the manner of the deaths is literary and therefore the origin of the crimes resides in writing, and that the roles or functions associated with authorship are all meanings connected with the word 'author'.

University of Manchester Heather Mawhinney