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An Interview with Claude Richard*

Howerton: We could begin by discussing the disparity between the importance of Poe to the French and the Americans: the fact that, to American critics, Poe has been relegated to relative obscurity, but, for the French, he has been the foundation of a whole new way of thinking about language and writing.

Richard: Poe is an institution in France. You find him everywhere. Poe is there through the Valéry line of literature—Valéry, the Russian Formalists. He is there as one of the great ancestors of “New Criticism.” If you’re interested in the short story, you come across Poe because of Baudelaire’s translations, which are the origin of a tradition in themselves, that of the decadent, end-of-the-century story writers who claim Poe as their master. If you’re interested in Poe as a poet, you meet Mallarmé, who is one of the great ancestors of “blankness,” of the primacy of language, of the absence of referent, of language coiling back upon itself, which, he states very clearly in *Portraits*, he got primarily from the reading of Poe. If you approach French literature from the point of view of literary history, you’ll meet Poe everywhere. If you approach American literature from the point of view of literary history, you’ll meet him nowhere because he didn’t fit into the “picture.”

Murray: What you’re really saying is something about the American critical mentality, that perhaps Poe threatens the Anglo-American critical methodology.

Richard: I think it is true. It seems to me that what is regarded as meaningful, important and influential in American criticism is very often what we would call “humanist” criticism, which is no longer relevant to what Europeans are trying to produce. Here, for instance, interest in language is not prevelant. Criticism is not founded on a theory of language. Whereas the whole effort in France, over the last thirty years, has been to move away from a humanistic conception of literature towards a more linguistic or technical conception.

Murray: Has there been a continuity of interest in France beginning with Baudelaire and carrying through to Derrida and Lacan, or has it changed radically?

*The interviewers were Douglas Glover, Walter Howerton, Ruedi Kuenzli, and William Murray.

Richard: Oh it *has* changed. It has changed because . . .

Murray: You're using Poe now for different things?

Richard: Yes, exactly. For Baudelaire and Mallarmé, he was a theoretician of literature, a writer, an author; he was the loner of America, the victim of America, all that vision, you know, which is part of a traditional French anti-Americanism, which really started with Baudelaire. What Baudelaire has to say about America is ludicrous in its violence. But Poe was a man, a writer and a myth. For Mallarmé, he was a poet who had a sense of blankness, a sense of the blank page. Now, for contemporary French critics, particularly for Barthes, he is essentially a text, that is to say a semiological system, a system of science which is a perfect ground for the exercise of their own brand of criticism.

Murray: Not necessarily literary any more?

Richard: No. But I don't think that for people like Derrida, Barthes and Ricardou the notion of literature is any longer valid. The notion of text is valid, and Poe's text will produce meaning, or will produce models for their criticism. And Todorov, one of the first good linguists to study narrative, has used Poe and James as if they were the same type of person because both produce excellent results when you work on point of view, first-person narrative and unreliable narrators. That's the original structuralist criticism.

Kuenzli: But couldn't one see some connection between today's interest in Poe and the interest in Poe in the late nineteenth century? Mallarmé translated his poetry. And when you read Poe's theories of language, which he used in writing "The Bells" or some of his other poems, you see that there is almost an idea of the non-referentiality of language. The materiality of the signifier—how it sounds—is all important. I wonder if that did not appeal to Mallarmé—you know Derrida's essay on Mallarmé?—if there is not some connection?

Richard: The non-referentiality of language in Poe is worked out step by step between 1839 and 1848 and comes out in *Eureka*. But you have to be very careful because, naturally, Poe never said language is non-referential. He could not, right? He died in 1849. His theory is the following: You have to reach back to the fact that he has a very precise conception of God (I'm sorry but that seems to be the beginning), and his idea of God, which is beautifully developed in *Eureka*, is God as poet, that is to say God as a non-referential poet.

God has made His structure. The world is a pure structure, a non-material structure made up of forces, repulsion and attraction. Matter

is non-material, which is a very interesting paradox. And this perfect balance of science, this perfect equilibrium of pure signifiers, has exhausted poetry.

That is very interesting—it has exhausted poetry! Poetry was being written when God spoke the world into existence. The most perfect of poems, the universe, *is* the poetry. But this poetry is unknowable, unreachable. So what the poet can do is not to imitate the reality, the visible reality because that's impossible—and this is where the non-referentiality of Poe is—but try to suggest or to give a sense of the structure by imitating, in the poem, visually, verbally, non-semanticly, this absolute sense of relativity which is the mark of God's poetry. Kuenzli: This is why you have the relationship between the poet and the mathematician.

Richard: Yes. It's a mathematical relationship. And it's what Poe calls the totality of relationship, an absolute totality of relationship. He tries in a poem to make an iconic and phonic representation of this perfect structure which is always dynamic. That is to say, whatever is suggested by a poem is already dead. It is always beyond. The whole theory is built on Poe's conception of creation as a perfect moment which must not be imitated. He is the most radically anti-mimetic theoretician of literature. Poe is always saying that poetry of imitation is not poetry.

Murray: On the other hand, Poe *is* mimetic in the stories. It isn't the usual mimesis because he imitates patterns of the mind, the logic of the mind. How do you answer the objection that, for instance, in "The Purloined Letter," Dupin gives a lesson to the hearer on how the mind really and truly operates in this situation and you're expected to believe it? Isn't that mimetic? Or is it parody?

Richard: Oh no. Oh my God, no! I don't think it's parody. That's a very good question. Poe made a very neat distinction between poetry and prose, which is traditional in the nineteenth century. He has the sentence somewhere (I don't remember where) that poetry is *not* the realm of truth, but fiction *can* be. So he is not against a certain amount of referentiality in his stories, in particular in the detective stories, which he despised. They were his pot-boilers, you know. He wrote only three, out of sixty-nine, which is not much. Only three detective stories.

It seems to me there are two levels in a story like "The Purloined Letter." You have a level in which Dupin is very didactic—he's showing the truth, how the mind works. There is a letter by Poe saying that the true theme of the story is the working of the mind of the detective.

However, there is another level, which is always worked into his stories, which I would call the symbolic level (it's a bad word). I can't call it allegorical because Poe hated allegory. Allegory is always despicable (that's a quote). Period. That's Poe's style. At any rate, it is the sort of symbolism in which Dupin represents the poetic mind of the universe. The King is the usual representation of power, of God, of the ultimate, of the transcendent. And the Queen? The Queen lapses—she makes a mistake. Right? She belongs to the order of lapses; she has betrayed, as Lacan would say. She has betrayed *something*. That is to say order is jeopardized by the mistake, the error, the lapse of the Queen.

Alright! No one is really concerned except two poets: D— and Dupin. D— is interested because he is interested in power. Since he is interested in power, he works on the lapse in order to appropriate the power, which is Godly power, which is at large. He is interested in appropriating some of God's power because he's a bad poet, a *monstrum horrendum*, a poet without principles. Alright? That's the quote at the end. On the other hand, you have Dupin who is *the* poet, what the poet should be, according to Poe. What the true poet does is to create a work of art, a semiotic message—the purloined letter—to create a verbal structure that will redirect the letter. That is to say it will restore the transcendence of the eternal voice, of the power. And it seems to me that there is a very reactionary side to Poe because his art is an art of order. He is trying to recreate order, the transcendent order, which is unknowable.

Glover: What then is the relationship between the true Poe, or what Poe intended to do, and the Poe which becomes a text for Lacan and Derrida? Is it true to say that they don't actually address the real Poe?

Richard: They don't really. But I have two answers there. Neither Derrida nor Lacan, nor practically any of the modern French critics, is interested in the writer he talks about. That is to say Poe is not the case in point. Literature of text has become a pretext for philosophy in contemporary French criticism. A text yields meaning, or yields potentialities, or does not. The greatness of the writer is no longer a question. Even the writer is no longer in question. Derrida doesn't know anything about Poe. He doesn't know anything about Melville. In *La Carte postale*, Derrida, very amusingly—I hope he doesn't hear me because he doesn't like to be criticized—refers to a great event he had in his life when he was in Charlottesville at the post office and he saw that when the letters are not delivered they go to a place called the Dead Letter Office, which means he's never read “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” He keeps referring to

the Dead Letter Office as a great discovery. I would say that literature as such has become an obsolete category in France because text is what carries the ideology. What transmits the letters is not the writer, it's the text.

Murray: Language is always metaphor then, and very rarely referential, even at the point where people pretend they're communicating information.

Richard: Exactly. Which is what the very commonplace, the very trivial French phrase now means—"There is no referent"; it means that the referent is always constructed.

Kuenzli: The whole debate, including your paper on the Poe text, seems to be dealing with interpretation, with communication, with the production of meaning in the sense "Can we find a definite meaning in the text?" Do we have to describe the text as Derrida does and refuse any fixed meaning, that is to say describe the meaning as constantly drifting, with neither beginning nor end?

But before you answer that I'd like to give some further proofs that indeed this text is about the letter D, about the loss of identity. You state in your essay that a successful recovery of the D seems to aim at a reconstruction of Dupin's identity which has been destroyed by the Minister D—. It would strengthen your argument to use the word *dessein* in the quote in the second-to-last paragraph, which is in English *design*, or the *D-sign*. Or, I am also puzzled about the street name *Rue Dunôt*. Again, there is a quote, it's toward the end of the story, when Dupin makes the facsimile letter "which I had carefully prepared at my lodgings, imitating the D cipher very readily by means of a seal formed of bread." *Du pain* is *bread* in French.

At any rate, having given moral support to your interpretation that indeed the story is about the letter D, I would like to ask how you see your interpretation, in light of this general discussion about reading where Derrida, of course, refuses any decidability of the meaning of the text. In your paper, you come out with a kind of decidable interpretation: This is a story about loss of identity and the regaining of identity, recovering the letter D, etc. But then in the last paragraph, you seem again, I think, "to appropriate" Derrida's undecidability.

Richard: I agree with you. I have no defense. I was trying to get beyond the drifting effect of Derrida's criticism because—you remember the opening of *Writing and Difference* on deconstructing the whole structuralist criticism of Poe—what do you do next? That is my question: What do you do next? When you are drifting with the text?

Kuenzli: I can give you a perfect defense for what you did. If one agrees that what is happening in philosophy, in criticism and in literature (metafiction and poetry) today is the taking of the notion of play quite seriously, then one could go back to Derrida's essay "Structure, Sign and Play" in which he says, "in the absence of the transcendental signified there is only play." So, metafiction, as well as criticism, as well as philosophy, can only point to the "playful" structures which they are establishing. It is constantly pointing to the fictionality of the endeavor, to the absence of truth. In this sense, I felt that what you were doing with the exchange of the D was a very imaginative play with the text, and at the same time, in the last paragraph, you are saying "Look! This is only one way of looking at it, and we can look at it from many different angles. Let's keep the acts of reading and of interpretation dynamic." You didn't want to close it in.

Richard: Okay. Right. I have a name for that which recently came to mind. Someone asked me, "What kind of criticism would you like to practice?" And I answered, "I like to practice 'touch and go' criticism." But I did touch at one moment, and the sentence you cited, the paragraph before last, is thematic criticism. It's my Poe, my Poe heart, which came out there. All these people using Poe to construct or deconstruct, and I know the man, I know he was playing with letters and with words. So that was my metaphysical approach. I finished the essay there. But then, when I reread it, I realized I had left the narrator out. That started me again because when he's got his D, he goes back home *not* to his identity, but to share it. And this is where, I think, we can see "The Purloined Letter" as a very important text because when he reconstructs the message, that is to say when he is in danger of becoming a writer possessing the letter, owning the letter, he goes back to his alter-ego in order to start the whole process of exchange again. But once again it is very Poesque to have reality in constant motion. That's *Eureka*. To have the word as something which cannot be fixed, which is always on the move.

So you're right. I had a passage of metaphysical thematic criticism which I thought about and decided to keep because it's all "touch and try to go" if you can.

Murray: What interests me, Claude, is the fact that Poe is talking about a written text while Lacan and Derrida are interested in the spoken word.

Richard: Not Derrida; Lacan, yes. The great controversy between Lacan

and Derrida is precisely about the type of philosophy represented by Lacan, which would give precedence to the spoken word. Derrida is fighting for writing *before* the letter.

Kuenzli: There is really no difference, I think, in Derrida between the “spoken word” and writing. I think what he feels is that the spoken word has been valorized in western tradition because it gives the appearance of presence. Whereas writing always connotes absence.

Murray: The tendency, of course, with text as writing, is to enclose, because syntax by its nature encloses; it makes a closure. Whereas the spoken word doesn't.

Richard: There is syntax in the spoken word, still. I don't think there is an argument about syntax between Lacan and Derrida. Between Lacan and Derrida what you have is silence, essentially. It seems to me the two systems cannot be reconciled. So you cannot work with Lacan *and* Derrida. If you work along the Lacan line, you use language as a psychoanalyst does. You use language as a system of revelations. You can't ignore the fact that Lacan, in an essay like “The Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’ ” brings out a hidden meaning, a hidden structure. Derrida is precisely against any kind of enclosure. On the other hand, you have to be Derrida to see Lacan enclosing anything. For Lacan, we still are produced by language, by the totality of spoken language; and Derrida wants to bypass that. That's been sort of a lid on French culture for the last twenty years, a sort of stifling truth: that we are the absent product of the signifier working its way on the topological figure, which is spoken.

Glover: Is your last paragraph coming back to some point about the primacy of writing, and the *scene* of writing, the way Derrida talks about it in “Freud and the Scene of Writing”?

Richard: Well. Yes. My last paragraph . . . I don't want to talk about my intentions because a critical text is like any other text—it says what it says. Right?

Murray: We can put on top of the interview the warning that . . .

Richard: The author is not responsible for what he says . . .

Murray: For anything he says, and does not mean it!

Richard: What I am interested in is the relationship of the poet towards language. And it seems to me that, at one point, Dupin tried to appropriate the letter. We can take the letter as the metonymy for the whole of language. But then it seems to me that by bringing it back to the writing of “The Purloined Letter” with a narrator, that is to say a sort

of double voice, a sort of dialogue (which neither Derrida nor Lacan points out)—it seems to me we have the idea here that no one appropriated language. And that the story was born. The story was the product, or the result of the whole adventure, which liberated the letter. I use the word “liberated.” That is to say started it in motion again. The story implies that the letter could not be arrested. Could not be stopped. And that writing was not the product of one voice, but the product of a minimum of two. The narrator asks Dupin to tell him what he has to tell. They talk to each other. That is to say that the message implies a sender and a receiver and circulation between the two. The sender was, as Deleuze puts it, a great number of persons because a sender is someone who is spoken through by all the stories that have been told before. He tells and the receiver receives a metastory. That is to say the circulation is the message. Precisely what Dupin was doing was to start the whole process again, and to refuse the appropriation which is death. The whole idea in my mind was that if we want to know what the story means, let’s ask the writer, which seems to me, to come back to what we said in the beginning, very characteristic of American criticism.

Howerton: American criticism seems to want to stabilize everything and all the talk we’re doing right now is an attempt *not* to stabilize either your essay or the story.

Richard: Right. Exactly.

Howerton: It seems to me “destabilize” may be a better word than “liberate,” because we want to keep a story out of balance so that it’s always trying to recover balance.

Richard: Right. We should avoid what we’re doing. We should avoid interviews. It seems to me that the interviews of John Barth, for instance, are a terrible thing because Barth will always be cornered into saying what he wanted to do in *Lost in the Funhouse*. Or Barthelme. Barthelme is interviewed and they’re all around him saying, “Yeah, well. Yes. What I meant was . . .” And there it is: He’s caught, you see. Whereas for instance, you can’t stop “Bone Bubbles.” He has written it so that it has flux. And it seems to me that Dupin had that sense, that he had to restore the flux of the letter to keep language going. He had to avoid being a writer who owns the meaning, who has a secret hidden in the signifier, which he owns and cannot tell you.

I don’t want to stabilize Poe. But Poe’s poetics—which is the cornerstone of an understanding of Poe’s theory—Poe’s poetics is what he calls, or what I call “the poetics of effect.” *Effect*. That’s very important. That’s

Poe's word. It's the most frequently used of all Poe's critical words. Poe kept saying over and over that "beauty" (he called it "beauty"; he was born in 1809) was an effect. He was the heir of the subjectivist philosophers of England. He'd read them in the *North American Review* and the *Edinburgh Review*. And by this he meant, in his own vocabulary, that poetic meaning cannot be an essence, cannot be a thing per se. It had to be a stimulation. He used the word "stimulation." He also used the word "elevation." Stimulation and elevation. Poetry being a stimulation, or a response to a stimulus, was double. That was his theory. That's "The Philosophy of Composition," a beautiful early theory which was picked up immediately by the Russian Formalists who knew what it was about. Poetry implies a receiver and eternal recreation.

I have one example—one of the most interesting poems to analyze is "The Raven." "The Raven" is a bad poem if you read it literally. It's one of the worst poems ever written. But if you've read it you know that the hero is a poet. He's a reader. Alright? Ninety-five per cent of Poe's heroes are readers. They are interested in words. And he reads "many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore." Bad reading for Poe. Superstition. Then he's got a bird, a bird who owns a signifier called Nevermore. Right? That's the pure signifier because it's told by a raven. That's the situation. He says so in "The Philosophy of Composition." The word, he says (he doesn't use "signifier" because Saussure was not born), is a "mere word." The hero hears "Nevermore" and says "it's only stock and store/Caught from some unhappy master." It's meaningless. But then, as he's a bad poet, he believes in meaning, and little by little he builds it. He hears the word "Nevermore" eleven times, and by the end the word "Nevermore" means nevermore.

Now if you read *Eureka*, you know that nevermore does not exist. There is no never and no always. Poe fought violently against the notion of never and the notion of always. He fought in favor of a notion of reality which was cyclical, which was like the beating of a heart. Reality is created, then destroyed, then re-created. But there is no moment when it is finished. So there is no nevermore. It doesn't mean anything. The reading of the meaning of the response to a stimulus brings madness. It's a very interesting poem because it is narrated by a madman who cannot use language properly, who's been mechanized by meaning, and will say "Once upon a midnight dreary . . ." etc. Purely mechanized language. The whole thing is explained in "The Philosophy of Composition."

Glover: I want to get back to the idea of the actual writing. When Lacan and Derrida are talking about writing, and you're talking about writing here, you're not talking about making literature, are you?

Richard: No. I'm talking about the sheer act of writing.

Glover: And that's what Freud and Derrida are talking about. Freud is talking about memory as a model of writing. The resistance of the neurons makes an indelible pattern in the brain and that's "writing." It's not really coming back to the writer as artist. So what exactly is it? I wonder if you yourself aren't trying to come back to the writer as artist?

Richard: I was tempted. First because I was raised to consider the writer as artist and as master of his creation, for thirty-five years, perhaps more, and you don't get rid of that easily. I got interested in Derrida very recently. You don't get interested in him out of the blue. You have to realize that you are no longer satisfied with the old categories. It's a very difficult question. But to sum it up I would say that writing is essentially regarded as the manifestation of desire, whether you take desire in the psychoanalytical sense or in Deleuze's sense, which is a non-psychoanalytical manifestation of desire, the presexual, as he calls it, memberless desire. Well, all these people would regard writing as the manifestation of an urge to write, which we call desire, which is a sort of catch word which means nothing, because you never know who you're talking about when you talk about desire. You have to talk about Lacanian desire or Deleuze, etc. But writing would be essentially the manifestation of an urge which is not artistic, or aesthetic, but which is the urge to disseminate. Yes, why not? to leave traces.

Glover: Freud and Derrida are talking about the primacy of writing, in a way, or the pre-eminence of writing, that writing comes before speech. That's one of the things that Derrida is saying to Lacan—Lacan is still talking about language as phoneme rather than grapheme. The grapheme is prior to the phoneme.

Richard: Absolutely.

Glover: And saying that we're getting into the forefront of modernism . . . which is what you're saying.

Richard: Yes. Quite. I agree entirely.

Kuenzli: You have worked for so many years with Poe and you know what Poe's philosophy of composition is. But, using a text which you know very well and which you can fit into Poe's whole philosophic system, using *on* such a text models and theories which are in some ways alien to Poe, creates a certain tension. Are you aware of this tension?

Richard: Oh yes. I'm more than aware. I enjoy it. This is very confessional. My whole effort is trying to keep the tension. Whenever I feel that I know what it's all about, I feel that I have to recreate the tension. And one of the great ways of recreating the tension is to read Derrida, or Lacan, or anyone who thinks. Nothing is more terrible than that feeling that the professor or the critic has that he *knows* what it all means, and that he doesn't have to return to the text to teach it.

Now, I shall always remember what *La Carte postale* did to me. I read *La Carte postale* for pleasure, absolute pleasure. I was here in Iowa and decided that, okay, I'm going to enjoy myself. And as I was going through *La Carte postale* I had that feeling, very precise, that all the things I had taken for granted so far in my life were going to pieces one after the other. I remember the moment when I came to the idea of the letter, destination, and the post office. And suddenly I had the feeling that my certainty, in particular about Poe, was crumbling and that I had to do it all over again. This is what I'm going to try and do all my life . . . to find the next book which is going to unsettle what I think is working properly. Destination is death. That sentence, when I came across it, believe me, I didn't understand it at first sight. But destination is death.