

THE ART OF BLACKMAIL

Secrets and Seeing

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IN THE VIVID GRACE OF Chaplinesque time, we watch the jerky dance of art and life with similar horror and delight. The puppets pantomiming us are beautiful and grotesque, but watching them enact a scene, we spectate without recognition. That we view their exaggerated movements as symbolic is what enables us to sit and watch ourselves — we see only representations. We watch and see and do not see. We know he is there, but the puppeteer behind the screen is hidden. We know that they are there, but the wires that jerk the puppet limbs are thin, so thin invisible to our observing eye, even knowing we look at them we do not see. The string by which the puppeteer manages his puppets is known as a *ficelle*. Blackmail by *ficelle*: that which we see but cannot see; that which we see and do not know we see; that which we see and know we see, but cannot see.

But blackmail is nothing so simple as the writer as puppeteer. It goes far beyond, to the most elemental of human apprehensions, the idea of secret. Do writers try to explain mysteries or make them? And does the reader who thinks he apprehends the mystery (or thinks he understands the symbolism) see the *ficelle*? There's blackmail for you: the art is not in the movement of the puppet, but in the unseen movement of the *ficelle*. Blackmail requires three things. First, a secret. Second, the secret's possessor, who wishes to keep the secret secret. Third, a discoverer, who uses the possibility of publicizing the secret to extort whatever — money, love, attention. The secret is not secret anymore. The power of the blackmailer rests not on his knowledge of the secret, but on the secret's potential for not-secret, its opposite. If that potential for not-secret matters, the blackmailer has power. But if exposure of the secret does not matter, blackmail is impossible. The blackmailer relies on the opposite of secret for his role. Without the idea of secret's opposite he cannot extort.

Opposites are integral to secrecy and blackmail, and especially to the conjunction of writer and reader. Opposites attract; only in opposition do we achieve perfect completion. Lovers love their opposites, not their imitators. An opposite is contrary in position; placed or lying (!) over against some thing or theory, on the farther side of an intervening line. Oppose counterposes or contrasts, counter-

balances, balances. Or to dismantle farther, poses, composes, and deposes. Positions a whole or a part of the body for effect. *Poseurs* we are, all opposites, blackmailers and blackmailed alike. Any secret makes us *poseurs*. The writer and the reader. The reader is attracted by the effect and surprise. Pleasure or pain can be enhanced by the extent to which one receives the opposite of what one expects. Oppose, then. Set a thing or an idea or a person over against. Writer opposes novel to reader: "Here it is. Read this. It will draw you into itself, it will draw you out of yourself." Oppose, as in "at variance, or adverse to." Resist, as in "seduce me." Hinder or thwart, as in "fraction, heat." Contend against physically? Fight. Influence, argue, persuade. Do opposites cancel one another? No secret, no blackmailer, no blackmailed. Magnets or sides: opposite sides of the street face each other, but opposite sides of a building face away from each other. Faces, then. Face, façade, fabricate, fabrication, lie, all lead to fiction — not-real life. To make fiction: to make life unreal. Can shadows fall opposite from one another? In a train, objects fly past in an opposite direction to the one we are travelling in. Two people can stand together and look in opposite directions. Two anything coming from opposite sides meet in collision. That train again; is it a C.P.R. train? Collision hostile, antagonistic? Anger. Art is anger. No contented person writes. Repugnant and repulsive opponent or enemy. We can share the same subject and predicate but differ in quality and quantity. Quality matters most. Blackmailer and blackmailed are natural opponents. Position? Here. There. Between.

Writing is a question of the opposites that the writer plays with the reader. The writer has to exert her pre-knowledge to the extent of its oppositeness; she knows the secret. So we begin and end, in all seductive fiction, with secret. Not just the secret of writing itself, the secretive writer, the secrecy of the act, but secret within fiction as the ultimate and terrible conspiracy between blackmailer and blackmailed. Secret is the writer's counterstrategy to the deadly usual. Secret is the best enemy of the mechanics of plot, character, time, and structure and thus, the true friend of fiction. Secret is the secret weapon of the writer, the real knife/hammer/quill.

SEEING THE SECRET is the problem of the reader and because all seeing requires a propositional object, that is the object of the reader's quest — to see the secret. Examples of the opposition of secret and seeing can be found throughout literature, from Othello (what he thinks he sees) and Lear (what he does not see) to Borges' *Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*. My favourite is Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Purloined Letter."¹ The fiction itself is

deceptively candid, detective Dupin's rational solution to a court intrigue. In the story, the Queen receives a compromising letter in her royal boudoir, and while she is reading it, the King enters. She is desperate to conceal the letter from him, but she is forced to leave it lying open on the table. The King sees it and does not notice it, but a Minister, coming in, sees the letter and recognizes both the handwriting and the Queen's confusion. Because the Queen dares say nothing in the presence of the King, the Minister takes the letter quite openly, thus notifying the Queen of his blackmail, or as Dupin says, "the robber's knowledge of the loser's knowledge of the robber."² The King notices nothing. Of course, an attempt is made to retrieve the letter. The police, called in by the Queen, search the Minister and his apartment several times, but find no letter. The police, of course, are offered up as excessively careful and excessively stupid and excessively blind. They make two errors: they assume that the letter must be concealed, and they assume that because the Minister is a poet, he is a fool. Dupin, on the other hand, has no difficulty retrieving the letter. He visits the Minister's apartment and spots it immediately, in plain view, but completely altered in appearance, torn and smudged as though it were a letter of no importance. Dupin hands the letter over to the police upon affirmation of the "secret" that there is a substantial reward involved (one of three "secrets" that the Prefect of police reveals). This fiction confronts every aspect of opposition, the binaries of secret and seeing which underline the duplicity of the secret at the story's core. It opposes deception and complicity, seeing and being blind, interpreting and misinterpreting, knowing and denying.³ The King looks at the letter but does not see it. The Minister looks at the letter and sees it, but sees also its potential (its imploded secret). The Queen sees the Minister take the letter and knows she will be blackmailed, but can do nothing without making the King aware. In the same way, the police look at the letter hidden in plain view but do not see it, while Dupin looks at the letter and recognizes it despite its disguise, which puts him in a position to blackmail the Minister. Blackmail is the privileged possession of secret; the writer's privilege. Purloined (stolen) letter (component of a word): the story is about a poet's attempt to *use* secret. Blackmail with a letter, the letter/words stolen, used, exploited. The writer exploits the secret, the opposite of what is expected.

What is important is not what is seen but what is noticed. The writer creates both noticed and seen, then brings the two into conjunction, a perfect binary, male and female, old and young, rich and poor, black and white, love and hate. So are plot, character, setting, and theme the real enemies of fiction? Or police/readers, seeing but blind? Or is fiction's enemy the secret that the discoverer does not want to discover, his disavowal, continuing and persistent myopia? Or a slavish lust for miracles, the spectator seeing only what he wishes? The fictional secret needs more than blind miracle to work. The enemies of fiction see, like

Othello's blind love, "not wisely, but too well";⁴ and Seneca's epigram warns "The Purloined Letter": "Nothing is more offensive to wisdom than excessive acuteness."

Blackmail then. The writer bears the duplicity of creation, to make both answer and question in the same fiction; only the skilful puppeteer is needed to reveal them to the seeing eye. The writer blackmails, knows the secret, fabricates and simulates the discoveries, leads the reader in search of misinformation. Before knowledge one has monuments or muses; they survive obsolete. Temporal order is not fictional order and truth has nothing to do with false; it is only the opposite of secret. Fiction is the fine art of blackmail, arbiter between secret and sight.

NOTES

¹ "The Purloined Letter," *Selected Prose, Poetry, and Eureka*, ed. W. H. Auden (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950), p. 95.

² *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³ See Peter Wollen, "The Hermeneutic Code," *Readings and Writings: Semiotic Counter Strategies* (London: Verso Editions, 1982), p. 41.

⁴ *Othello*, v. ii. 344.

