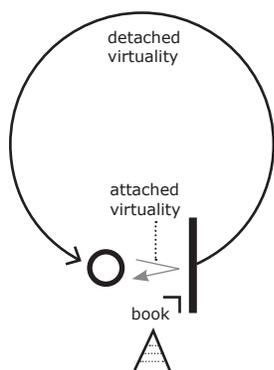




1/ Magritte’s “Not to Be Reproduced.” The Belgian painter René Magritte is noted for his “surrealistic” visual jokes involving frames and superimpositions. In one work, however, he leaves a clue that might be regarded as the key to his whole way of thinking, and to one important source for his originality.

In “Not to Be Reproduced” a young man experiences a “detached virtuality.” The mirror should provide an “attached virtuality,” but it has somehow refused to do this. As if with a will of its own, the reflected image turns its back on its rightful owner, and instead of producing a reproduction of appearance, instead represents *the whole process of mirroring* by “standing behind” the man who wants to see what he looks like.

One point we should not overlooked: the man wants to see “who he is for others” — how he appears in a public world where networks of symbolic relationships require him to be dressed properly, to accept identities from family, occupation, class, and age. He expects the mirror to respond to this demand faithfully. This mirror’s willful detachment from its duties



“The sage ... manages to follow a roundabout way whenever he cannot travel in a straight line.”

as an attached virtuality machine are not unrelated to a repudiation of the entire idea of appearance and its relation to the Symbolic. Through the Imaginary, we have moved from the Symbolic to the Real, but the mirror proclaims, in effect, that because the Real cannot be represented (it has no appearance), it must use an enigma instead. But, this is not an enigma without a clue about its structure. The mirror, instead of following the straight line geometry connecting objects and their reflections, takes a circular journey to curve around through space (also a travel through time, since this is done instantaneously) to the point from which the painting is made, behind the (non-)reflected man. It is a circle with a gap, and the gap cannot be filled. We have a clue, however. On the shelf beneath the mirror lies a book: Edgar Allan Poe’s first novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, 1838. Why? In this book, Poe employs the device of chiasmus: a mirror plot whose story is bent around a central catastrophe, a shipwreck. This allows the first half of the chain of events to find an echo in the second half. The narrative line is bent at the point of this turn, and a space opened up in an “occulted” interior — a design in the shape of the Greek letter lambda: Λ . What is this interior? Where have we seen it before?



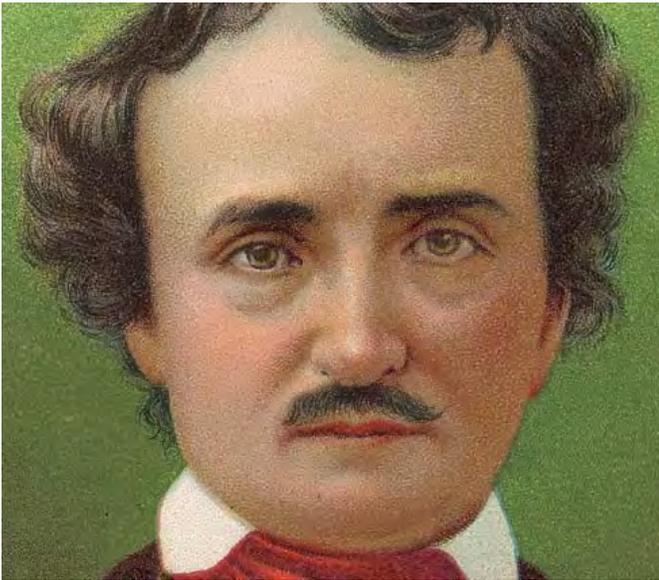
2/ **The Ambassadors' Secret.** Holbein's famous double portrait, *The Ambassadors*, painted in 1533 provides a particularly accurate view of this lambda. At the lower part of the painting, the otherwise realistic representation gives way to a blur. It is easy to discover that this blur is really an image that, if viewed from the proper angle, takes the shape of a skull. Such visual tricks were common when painting acquired the precision afforded by oil paints and small brushes, but they required careful geometrical transformations, more complex than the calculations of vanishing points and perspective lines. An image drawn on a grid would be transferred to a new surface where the grid was deformed, but an oblique point of view could restore it to its original "orthogonal" identity. This was the practice of "anamorphosis" — occultation of images within images, double use of a single representational surface. (For a full

account of the development of anamorphosis, see Jurgis Baltrušaitis' *Anamorphic Art*, 1977.)

For over five hundred years, art historians explained this anamorphic blur as a *memento mori* — reminder of death — a common theme in the paintings of this era. It was not until, however, a British scholar, John David North, paid attention to the date Holbein recorded on the back of the painting's wooden planks: April 11, 1533, 4 pm. It is traditional that the painter record the time of completion of a painting, but this is celebrated at the "vernissage," the varnishing of the painting after it has dried, the official "birth" of the painting. "4pm" is a jarring instance of over-specificity. Varnish does not dry that fast; something else is indicated. North discovered that this hour was the astronomers' calculated time for the Apocalypse, the end of the world, numerically determined as a combination of 3's: three 500's (1500) plus 3x11, 33. April 11 was Good Friday, the day in the Christian calendar when Christ was crucified at age 33.

At 4pm the sun would be 27° ($3 \times 3 \times 3$) over the London horizon. The anamorphic skull is made to be "read" by someone looking at the canvas at a 27° angle, which completes a triangle whose top vertex is marked by the crucifix barely visible behind a green curtain. (In some reproductions, it's cropped out!) The anamorphic skull is the "tell-tale detail" that, amidst the "predications" forming the visual-causal chain of perspectively correct representations — the world as it is constructed for the Other, the viewer — opens up a new space, a "space of the Apocalypse. This becomes literally the "place of the skull," Golgotha, the point of the death of Christ.

Despite the over-determination of Holbein's "message" — that the vanity of the rich ambassadors would be cancelled out by the end of the world, where the first Truth of creation would return in the form of an avenging angel — no art historian before North had bothered to look at the date this way. Why? If nothing else, this proves the effectiveness of signaling; you can yell out your secret but it will still remain concealed. What is required is the sage's possession not just of awareness of the role of the detail but of the method of discovery and transmission of this kind of knowledge. This is not the knowledge of Vico's positivist scientists, deducing low things from "high" principles, but rather the reverse order where the highest truths are deduced from the lowest.



3/ **The Lambda of “The Purloined Letter.”** In the title of this important short story, Poe gives away the secret of his method and his intention to communicate with others who, employing the same art of occultation, will understand its uses and outcomes. This story, analyzed by scores of literary critics and even the great psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, kept its secret until Richard Kopley discovered that the narrative folded neatly in half, at the point where the detective Dupin is handed a cheque in the amount of fifty thousand francs, reward for discovering a letter, presumed scandalous, addressed to the Queen but stolen and concealed by the Minister.

The trick of the concealment is widely known by anyone who reads the story. Instead of choosing a complicated hiding place, the minister hid the letter by placing it where no one searching would think to look: the letterbox. The queen’s secret police had ransacked the Minister’s apartment, taking apart furniture, pulling up floorboards, looking for false bottoms and secret panels. The Minister’s genius was in recognizing Vico’s principle: that most people who “intend to be smart about it” will try to deduce the lowest things (the physical letter) from the highest (the Minister’s presumed cleverness in hiding it). Instead, the Minister employs the logic of the sage, who puts the humble letter in the place where all less important letters are kept.

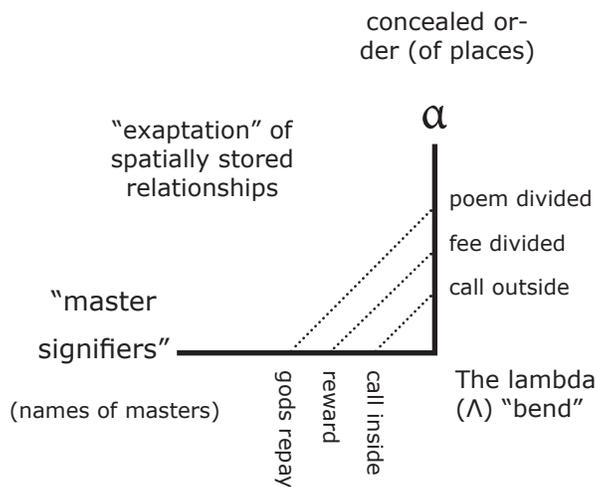
The midpoint of the text of “The Purloined Letter” is defined by the exchange of the reward money for Dupin’s solution of where the letter is hidden. The letter is invisible by being left “in plain sight,” and this is the key to Poe’s use of symmetry, which hides by displaying itself clearly in the expressions paired by folding the text, just as the purloined letter had been “folded and re-folded.”

Using the game of Morra (“odds and evens”) as his ancient precedent, Poe matches such expressions as “Dupin now arose ... but sat down again” with “it is far more easy to get up than to come down.” This indexical use calibrates the fold, so that the Minister’s theft of the letter from the table in the King’s chamber is echoed by Dupin’s theft of it from the Minister’s letter-box. The letter-box is described as a “card-rack,” whose sounds when pronounced backwards show that it is a palindrome, a chiasmus in miniature. The prize match, however, is the connection of a reference to the banquet of Atreus for his twin Thyestes (Atreus fed Thyestes his own children, butchered and cooked, in revenge for Thyestes’ seduction of his wife).

This gruesome event is matched to the most subtle of Poe’s references to Morra, at the beginning of the tale: “It was an odd evening.” Strangely, even the sage Kopley misses this key instance and, thus, is unaware of Poe’s intentional connection to the function of chirality — left and right, handedness, odds and evens (sorites). “Signalizing” creates its own audience, and Kopley in this case was not a part. “The Purloined Letter” is, as a story, itself permanently purloined!

The first connects to the last, and in this Truth, Poe’s chiasmus is revelational. Like that of Simonides’ story of the invention of artificial memory, the space of the Λ is, like the unconscious itself, a treasure where discarded or unnoticed details are kept ready for a future re-embodiment. This will take place quickly, in the minds of the readers who combine the experiences of the low with the spiritual truths of the high: Holbein’s skull with the crucifixion of Christ, the Apocalypse’s process of judgment and resurrection of the dead. (It seems that religion has got the Λ right, if no one else has!)

4/ The Ultimate Lambda: Simonides Invention of the Art of Memory. The story of the invention of “artificial memory” has been recorded by Cicero and Pliny. Simonides, a poet on the Greek island of Ceos, was hired to deliver an encomium for Scopus, a wealthy politician-athlete after a wrestling victory. To prevent backlash from the evil eye, Simonides included lines acknowledging the (appropriate for wrestling) twin gods, the Dioscuri, Castor and Pollux. Scopus took offense and announced that he would pay Simonides only half his fee — he could “go to the gods!” (i.e. “Go to Hell!”) to collect the remainder. At the banquet, Simonides had memorized guests names based on the technique of loci (L.) or *topoi* (Gr.) — memory places fixing each name by associating it with the guest’s place at the table. Before long, however, a message came that there were two strangers who wished to see Simonides outside. When he answered this call, however, he found an empty street. Did the strangers vanish? Before he could go back into the banquet hall the building collapsed. All inside were killed. This “fake call” outside had saved his life. Families gathered to pull their relatives’ corpses from the rubble. A proper burial was essential for the welfare of the soul of the deceased and prosperity of the family as well. But, the bodies were crushed beyond recognition. Simonides memory trick, however, saved the day. By memorizing places as means of recalling names, he was able to identify the victims and allow for their proper burial. Scopus, who had told Simonides



**CHIASMUS
(REVERSED PREDICATION)
OF THE ART OF MEMORY**

to “go to the gods” himself could now go. No interpretations of this anecdote have noticed the chiasmus or correctly interpreted the “acousmatic” function of places for names. Lambda analysis shows how the anamorphosis of the banquet hall relates, as the accounts insist, to the theological logic of the sacrifice of a twin to insure “full coverage” of lordship-bondage at the cosmic scale.

There is an unnoticed backstory to the Simonides tale. The Prytaneion was a new building type associated with the end of the civil wars in Athens. To end the bloody feuds based on family loyalties, homosexuality was consciously introduced as a new basis of political relationships (see Nicole Loraux, *The Divided City*, 2002). The civic flame, originally the consolidation of hearth flames from the individual clans in the city (cf. Rome: the College of Vestals), was housed in the Prytaneion, whose main space was devoted to banquets (*setises*) held in praise of local heroes and visiting dignitaries. This new collec-

tive hearth-space was re-gendered. Originally the hearth was ruled by Hestia. It was the site both for cooking family meals and making offerings and prayers to the family ancestors (*manes*). The wives and daughters of the household were “priestesses of Hestia” and no men were allowed into its space. Strangers visiting were not even allowed to look at it. Scopas’ banquet most surely took place in a Prytaneion; Simonides, as a poet, would have been aware of the need to insert the necessary spells and blessings to avoid a curse on the event and its host. His choice of the Dioscuri was significant. The divine twin Pollux had won back Castor’s life after a fatal accident, under the condition that the twins never again meet. Simonides thought the insertion of a hymn in praise of the twins would be acceptable as a reference to Scopus’s avocation as a wrestler — a sport of evenly matched pairs. His real motive may have been deeper: to ask forgiveness for the theft of the civic flame. The Pollux’s request was granted on the condition that one twin serve time in Hades while the other enjoyed life on earth. Twinship — the merger of semblance in shared identity — was also the basis of the worship of the *manes*; the dead instructed the living. The religion of the hearth, the oldest in human culture, necessitated the belief that every living thing had its shadow being, its representative in the realm of the dead. This logic made every hearth religion essentially an eschatology of shadows and the twinship of shadows with living, solid things.

Thus, when Simonides was called out by, allegedly, “two strangers,” the reference to Castor and Pollux

would have been clear to any ancient audience. The two strangers were the twins, but — more important — the twins were together. This singularity referred to the allowable exchanges between the living and the dead, in the observation of *apophrades*, the “cursed days” akin to All Souls’ Day in later times — when the dead are invited to return from Hades to dine with the living. The strangers were not to be found when Simonides went out to meet them, but their intentions were clear: to save Simonides from the Prytaneion’s collapse, in thanks for his piety. Whether the building’s collapse was sheer accident or the revenge of Hestia on the theft of her flame by men is not clear. But, the subsequent restoration of the names of the crushed corpses did afford the return of the old religion, the worship of the ancestral dead. The art of memory can never be fully detached from this original function, by which memory of the dead assures the blessings of the ancestors in the affairs of the family’s current, living representatives. The family itself was a composite entity, with its own “twinned” elements of living and dead. Without the religion of the hearth and memory of the specific names of departed ancestors, blessings would cease to flow and curses would come in their place.

Castor and Pollux’s twinship may have had the additional significance of reminding the Greeks that the gods had originally forbidden homosexuality in favor of heterosexual marriage. Castor and Pollux’s friendship was a model for the pre-marriage model Athenians revived to end the bloodshed of the civil wars. In any event, Simonides selected this theme wisely, and his choice led to the fortunate discovery of the semantic twinship of the “eternal” name with the mortal and specific material body. Simonides’ shows that Vico’s insight — discovering the highest truths by means of the lowliest details — pertains to the art of memory in its use of fragmentary details as the “storage containers” for wisdom. The Lambda is based on this division, with the materiality, seemingly subordinated by the name or concept, reversed to predicate the idea. This creates an exception to the rule that the “twins” (binary signifiers) of matter and idea must always reside apart. It allows them a brief encounter, a moment that is both predictive and prudent, as the story of Simonides shows.

With binary signification and the reverse predication of the idea by the material detail, there is a gap, an actual place constructed by the imagination for the reunion of the “twins,” the living and the dead. Simonides’ story is about this gap. It instructs us, through its chiasmus dividing the story into left and right parts, evenly disposed about the “hinge” of the call outside, how the dead are to be resurrected by the place of their fall. Hegel literally names this: a “going to one’s ground” (*Gegenstoss*) and gives it a central position in his dialectic. Falling is the gravity by which blood “loves the earth” and, in being released by wounding, mingles with earth in the death of the hero (a word which originally meant, simply, “a dead person”). The fall is twinned by the lifting up of the soul from the fallen blood, and in rituals devised to found cities, this logic is preserved (Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*). As Lacan has said, humans are humans because their most abject condition, i.e. as corpses buried in the ground, are *necessarily signified* by a name.

Despite the clear pattern of chiasmus/lambda in the Simonides story, no commentator before has ever noticed it. This professional blindness is also found in the Holbein and Poe examples where one scholar sees what others have, with their microscopic detection devices, missed. (And, in a 2014 exhibition of Magritte at the Museum of Modern Art, the catalog entry for “Not to Be Reproduced” made no mention of the Poe novel on the shelf beneath the mirror.) The secrecy of the lambda is one that is preserved no matter how much it is exposed. It is a “permanent mystery” because the structure of twinship itself embodies the “impossible-Real” of life’s relation to death, the uncanny necessity of the gap separating palintonic tension with palintropic (predicative) alternation. As the essence of “the unthinkable,” the lambda does not break the rule by which the Real is “that which resists symbolization.” Rather, it performs and, in performing, embodies the gap through an act whose outward appearance is akin to the rabbit appearing suddenly and inexplicably out of the hat, or the disappearance of the large elephant from plain view. These are not acts to be explained but, rather, experienced. Their “explanation,” rather than consisting in a reduction of effects to causes, is instead a discovery of “many causes for one effect,” and an awareness of the “one cause” that is better than the rest ... for no other reason than that it is able to tell the better story.