

“Fabulous Retroactivites:”
The Occult Democracies of E.A. Poe

I have spoken of both “sound” and “voice.” I mean to say that the sound was one of distinct, of even wonderfully, thrillingly distinct syllabification. M. Valdemar spoke, obviously, in reply to the question...

He now said:

“Yes—no—I *have been* sleeping—and now—now—I *am dead*.”

~Edgar Allan Poe, “The Facts of the Case of M. Valdemar.”¹

But these people do not exist. They do *not* exist as an entity, the entity does *not* exist *before* this declaration, not *as such*. If it gives birth to itself, as free and independent subject, as possible signer, this can hold only in the act of the signature. The signature invents the signer. This signer can only authorize him-or herself to sign once he or she has come to the end—if one can say this of his or her own signature in a sort of fabulous retroactivity.

~Jacques Derrida, “Declarations of Independence”²

“—and now—now—I *am dead*.” Thus, to the “unutterable shock and horror” of those gathered at his bedside, Poe’s mesmerized Valdemar performs a speech act that Roland Barthes called the “extraordinary enunciation”³: the paradoxical declaration of his own death in the moments after its occurrence. The drama unfolds as an uncanny mix between the death-scene of a sentimental novel, as Jonathan Elmer has observed,⁴ and an occult misadventure. Ernest M. Valdemar, the “well known compiler of the ‘Bibliotheca Forensica,’” and translator of the Polish versions of “Wallenstein” and “Gargantua,” lies dying of consumption. His friend, the narrator of the text, has convinced him to participate in a certain medical experiment, specifically the mesmerizing of a person “*in articulo mortis*.” (833) So Valdemar lies in a peaceful trance, softly answering the questions put to him. “Do you feel pain in the breast, M. Valdemar?” “No pain—I am dying.” ... “M. Valdemar, do you still sleep?” “Yes; still asleep—dying.” When this last question is repeated, however, the patient appears to die before he has any opportunity to answer. The “hectic spots” in his cheeks vanish, his eyeballs roll up into his head, and his lower jaw falls open

¹ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Facts of the Case of M. Valdemar,” in *Poetry, Tales, and Selected Essays*,

² Jacques Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” in *Negotiations*, trans. Tom Keenan and Tom Pepper

³ Roland Barthes, “Textual Analysis: Poe’s Valdemar,” in *Modern Criticism and Theory*,

⁴ Jonathan Elmer, “Terminate or Liquidate?” in ____ See also, *Poe at the Social Limit*,

with an “audible jerk.” (839) But where this ought to be the conclusion of both the experiment and the story, the blackened tongue lifts itself up out of the still and open jaws, and, vibrating, issues forth Valdemar’s answer: “Yes—no—I *have been* sleeping—and now—now—I *am dead*.”

Riddled with dashes, and “bursting” from the writhing tongue (“but not from the lips of the sufferer”), Valdemar’s reply is not a metaphor, or a symbol, or a delicately crafted nicety of poetic language. (842) Like the premise of a philosophical proof, it means exactly what it says, and nothing more. And it is “extraordinary” precisely because, against all reason, it is true. Logic demands that the proposition “I am dead” cannot be both uttered (let alone thought) and true, because a dead “I” neither thinks nor speaks. Yet the rational, scientific gazes of the narrator and his cohort are presented both with the proposition and the undeniable evidence of its truth-value, a contradictory declaration. The “blackened,” writhing tongue, bursting with a logical fallacy, thus represents an astonishing abbreviation in which the gap between what Poe elsewhere calls the “algebraic ideality” of language, and the cadaverous materiality of the mortal bodies that speak it, is radically erased. Barthes writes of this “impossible enunciation” that “the action of the dead man is a purely linguistic action.” It does not bind, or command, or prohibit, it “designates itself tautologically”—and it is nonetheless a performative, it exerts power.⁵ The strange speech act of Valdemar’s proposition constitutes an eruption of force—but not only as a detonation within logical grammar, which excludes it from the set of “possible” true utterances, but also as a moment of insurrection against the narrator, his mesmeric captor.

In the articulation of this link between the ideality of language and the materiality of the body, Poe presents us with a theorization of power in the form of a mesmeric master-slave dialectic. The structure is mapped clearly onto the trajectory of the story: the narrator’s remarkable mesmeric powers are realized so perfectly over his subject that the success of the experiment (first signaled by the lengthening of Valdemar’s life) inverts in a sudden and monstrous way. The narrator, who aligns himself so closely with the scientific, positivistic

⁵ Roland Barthes, “Textual Analysis: Poe’s Valdemar,” in

rationality of Valdemar's doctors, finds that he has manipulated natural properties that are invisible—and not only to the eye of empiricism, but to the enlightenment eye of reason also. He has evidently manipulated them so effectively that Valdemar is left helplessly suspended between life and death for a period of seven months, and only dies a second time when the narrator decides to “waken” him. The horror for the narrator is precisely that he also finds himself subtly subject to these invisible and unknown forces, first in the enigma of the tongue and its impossible utterance, and again with the horrific event that ensues at the story's end.

Thus this mesmeric master-slave dialectic—the dynamic between the narrator's scientific/mesmeric power and the strange insurrection of Valdemar's utterance—opens onto the question of potentiality, the question of power's origin. Part of the horror is surely the way that the tongue has metonymically appropriated the entire mechanism of speech production, the words emerging neither from the lips, nor the jaws, nor the lungs of the body, which are all inanimate. How, the narrator must be asking, can the tongue possibly produce this “sound,” this “voice,” alone, without the jaw, the teeth, or the breath—produce this “thrillingly distinct syllabification?” “The unwarranted sentence performs an impossibility,” Barthes writes. The sentence is “unwarranted,” an outlaw in respect to the governing principles of logical grammar. Does it operate according to some other logic? Does it threaten to establish a new law? At stake here is not a haunting, but an act that threatens language itself. “Yes;—no;” Valdemar says, opening in the first instant of his utterance a zone of indistinction between the affirmative and the negative, two basic categories of language, before he proceeds to throw into radical doubt, with the vertiginous circularity of his utterance, the very security of “truth” as a category. What it means to thus “perform an impossibility” is the topic of this paper.

“But these people do not exist,” writes Jacques Derrida of the “good people” in whose name the representatives signed the Declaration of Independence, “They do *not* exist as an entity, the entity does *not* exist *before* this declaration, not *as such*.” Derrida speaks here of the force of the declarative act that founds an institution. The state that declares independence does not exist

before the moment of declaration, so that in the declaration it births itself into existence, from nothing, groundless—a causeless, self-impelled force. Even more radically, the entity of the “good people” who populate this state, including the citizens who sign the declaration, did not, strictly speaking, exist prior to the moment the declaration was signed and authorized. So that, by a “fabulous retroactivity,” “the signature invents the signer.”

The “coup de force” makes right, founds right, or law, gives right, *brings the law to the light of day, gives both birth and day to the law.*⁶

This is not just the inaugural moment of an institution, but a scene of creation: the performative barely stops short of saying “let there be light:” it “makes,” “founds,” and brings law into “the light of day.” And we should not forget that the stakes of the “law” Derrida names go beyond particular prohibitions, down to the level of ontology. The grammatical subject of the signer did not exist, not “as such” before the signature spoke the law into being. The condition of the subject who “by right” signs the law into existence is that very non-existent law, as if it were directing the movement of the signing pen from a point in the future. This paradox is the “mystical foundation of authority,” what Benjamin calls the law-creating violence: the self-impelled force at the origins of the human community. I would like to read Valdemar’s enunciation as a kind of declaration—as a complex speech act that sends an anomic shock waves directly to the originary point of articulation between language and matter. The story ends when, as Valdemar is being “wakened” into death, his body instantaneously rots, crumbling and melting beneath the hands of the mesmerist, even while the words “dead! dead!” “burst” from the tongue. The resulting “nearly liquid mass” lying upon the bed represents, in a certain way, the narrator’s triumph. But there is a sense in which Valdemar’s organs are not the only objects to liquefy: the organs of logical grammar dissolve with the syntax of power that yoked him to the narrator. The question, however, is whether this anomic shock wave is merely destructive, the

⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Declarations of Independence,” in *Negotiations*, pg. 50

release of a force that simply negates law, or whether Valdemar somehow liberates grammar from logic—whether a new law, or a new idea of law, is spoken into existence.

In its analysis of “The Facts of the Case of M. Valdemar,” this paper will argue that the structure of the declaration, which Claude Lefort has called the “political originality”⁷ of democracy, is inherent to Poe’s poetic originality. The moments of the horrific that plague his stories and poems are structured like Valdemar’s “unwarranted utterance,” in which objects excluded from life animate with uncanny volition, or in which beings excluded from language begin to speak. When the House of Usher assumes consciousness by uncannily returning the narrator’s gaze with “vacant” yet “eyelike” windows, or when an invisible force under the waves of “Into the Maelstrom,” conjures a giant whirlpool in a demonic act of defiance against the tidal sovereignty of the moon, or when the raven sits perched above that poem’s speaker, casting a shadow from which his soul “shall be lifted—nevermore!” a “coup de force” is at work against regimes of meaning, and in which perhaps new “states” are declared into being.

At the opening of “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundations of Authority,” a sustained reading of Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence,” Derrida admits he has reservations regarding the connotations of the word “force.”

Since this colloquium is devoted to deconstruction and the possibility of justice, my first thought is that in the many texts considered “deconstructive,” and particularly in certain those that I’ve published myself, recourse to the word “force” is quite frequent, and in strategic places I would even say decisive, but at the same time accompanied by an explicit reserve, a guardedness. I have often called for vigilance, I have asked myself to keep in mind the risks spread by this word, whether it be the risk of an obscure, substantialist, occulto-mystic concept or the risk of giving authorization to violent, unjust, arbitrary force.⁸

“An obscure, substantialist, occulto-mystic concept:” this, Derrida seems to say, is the danger involved in a deconstruction of force. That a reference to the occult should appear in a text that

⁷ Claude Lefort, “Human Rights and the Welfare State,” in *Democracy and Political Theory*, pg.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority,” in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, trans.

explicitly theorizes the meaning of revolutionary violence is remarkable, particularly when the subtitle to the lecture names the “mystical” foundation of authority. But what is the danger of this word—what would be the consequence of an inversion of “occulto-mystic” to “mystico-occult,” making the subtitle of Derrida’s lecture, “The Occult Foundation of Authority?” What is at stake in the difference, in the gap between these two configurations? For Derrida, the “fabulous retroactivity” of the declaration is “mystical;” what Poe’s stories provide, in their internalization of the structure of the declaration, is an “occult” declaration.

“Occult” is not an easy term to clearly define, and partly this is because it designates concealment: from Latin *occultus*, the Oxford English Dictionary explains, “secret, hidden from understanding, concealed, past participle of *occulere* to cover up, hide conceal.” The occult secret can be a lost or hidden geography, such as a cavernous civilization under the earth, or the secret of a distant origin or even of a destiny, guarded by the initiated. As an adjective, “occult,” often designates the hidden and sometimes unifying properties of matter, such as the idea of an infinitely rarified substance pervading all things, often connected to latent human powers such as telepathy, telekinesis, or clairvoyance. As the discourse—or more specifically as the discipline—that emerged at the *fin de siècle*, occultism referred, as Alex Owen explains, to “the study (or search for) a hidden or veiled reality and the arcane secrets of existence.”⁹ Thus, when Madame Blavatsky, H.S. Olcott, and W.Q. Judge founded the Theosophical Society in 1875, its aims were to “1.to form the nucleus of a universal brotherhood; 2.to promote the study of Aryan and other Eastern literature, religions, and sciences; 3. to investigate the unfamiliar laws of nature and the faculties latent in man.”¹⁰ According to these criteria “The Facts of the Case of M. Valdemar” belongs to occult literature. The consistency in its themes are overwhelming: it posits the existence of a secret reality, specifically of an unknown “spiritual” form of matter that is susceptible to the effects of the human “will,” through the latent faculty of mesmerism. The

⁹ Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*,

¹⁰ O.E.D

speaking tongue suggests telepathy, and even resembles a transmission device, the telegraph. Moreover, the voice suggests both other worlds and hidden geographies simultaneously, at once described as “unearthly,” and emanating from a cavern “deep within the earth.” And as the record of a scientific experiment, the text figures itself within occultism as a discipline, slowly unveiling, at the ends of science, the secrets of existence.

On this level of larger motifs and themes, it is perfectly unnecessary to perform any deconstructive crystal gazing into his stories or poems. Many of them occupy precisely the same liminal space between an objective, rationalized science and the mysterious or the unknown as our unfortunate Valdemar. “The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall,” perhaps one of the earliest science fiction stories, chronicles a balloon trip to the moon that includes detailed explanation of space travel and the arcs of comets (anticipating Poe’s giant cosmology, “Eureka: A Prose Poem” (952)), the description of a “rare ethereal medium,” and even an anthropology of moon men. (1026) Where Haans Pfall explores the secret population and geography of the moon, the narrator of “Message in a Bottle,” sails to the south pole, where his ship is devoured by a maelstrom popularly believed in the nineteenth century to be a passageway into the earth’s hollow—and perhaps populated—interior. Structured like a communication from the beyond, or perhaps a primitive telegram, the narrator’s message is completed at the very moment the ship circles over the rim of the vortex, jammed into a bottle, and flung just outside the reach of the maw, its last words reading, “Going Down!” (257)

But Poe’s work can be considered early occult literature not only because of a generic affinity, but also because of his work’s underlying social and political stakes. In *The Place of Enchantment*, a philosophical history of English occultism at the *fin de siècle*, Alex Owen connects occult practices to political praxis. She very carefully records that the individuals involved were artists, musicians, actors, socialists, anti-vivisectionists, suffragists, and labor organizers, all deeply enmeshed in the cultural, political, and artistic projects of the time. She locates the significance of Occultism, however, not in a particular set of beliefs, or in a discreet

system or a dogma, but rather in a dynamic and ongoing experiment in the practice of subjectivity. For Owen, it seems that the political nature of these heterogeneous occult “activities”—such as “divination (astrology, palmistry, tarot reading, crystal gazing, and so on), sorcery and black magic (the manipulation of natural forces, often for self-interested purposes), and various kinds of necromancy or spiritualist related practices”—consists in their literary character, in the emerging web of “signifying practices,” and “knowledge claims,” that negotiate the boundary between the rational and the irrational, between an enlightenment secularism dominated by the idea of the absolute sovereignty of human reason on the one hand, and the idea of mystery, or the unknown, on the other. (p.35) Most significantly, the ultimate aim of this viral injection is the re-appropriation of the categories of the “modern” and “enlightenment”—ultimately amounting to the critique and rearticulation of consciousness itself, the development of a “carefully formulated subjectivity.” The Occultism of Owen’s “revisionist” history of the “modern” (a history that would more accurately be described by Foucault’s phrase “counter-memory”), carves out “the place of enchantment” in a world that defines itself as “disenchanted,” and thus comes close to resembling contemporary projects of emancipation—from identity politics to colonial resistance.

With the theoretical advancements made by Owen in mind, I would like to begin articulating the occult political stakes of Poe’s work in a connection implied by the first of the professed goals of the Theosophical Society: “1. to form the nucleus of a universal brotherhood.” For the creators of the theosophical society, the search for the constitutive elements of matter and the latent faculties of man leads so smoothly into the spheres of the social or the political that there is no change in language: the revelation of secret structures of matter coincides with the formation of a “nucleus” of a new human brotherhood, a new order of the human community. This condensation of humanism and what might be called an arcane materialism—expressed with remarkable efficiency in Blavatsky’s phrase “the psycho-physical man”—suggests a conceptualization of the human community that operates according to precisely a “substantialist,

occulto-mystic concept.” While the injection of science with the mystical is perfectly characteristic of occultism’s anti-enlightenment spiritualism, here the structure of the human community is reducible to the structure of matter. Blavatsky’s substantialism is a return to natural law. What does it mean, after the enlightenment, to suture the categories of law and nature back together? It follows from this formulation that the laws governing human behavior, and the principles constituting the human community, are rooted in properties inherent to matter. Yet is entirely unclear, in this liminal space where hyper-rationality and the unknown commingle, whether “law” and “nature” retain their normative meanings. While the injection of science with the mystical is perfectly characteristic of the occult anti-enlightenment spiritualism, here the structure of the human community is reducible to the structure of matter. This connection demands that the concept of “occult law” be examined, as well as its twin, which we might call “occult materialism.”

If the structure of the declaration is inherent to Poe’s work, then it appears in the form of such an occult materialism. An exhaustive interrogation of occult law or occult materialism would require a deep examination of the relationship between thinkers such as Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant on the one hand, and nineteenth century continental tradition—particularly their relationship to Hegel’s idealism and the subsequent reactions of Marx and Kierkegaard. While this is obviously too wide a scope for this paper, I would like to suggest in this line of thought that an occult natural law—contrary to the way it tends to be used today—suggests radical change, upheaval, and revolution. The esoteric discourse by which “arcane secrets of existence” are unveiled is linked to a radical narrative of emancipation. Occult law opens both physical and social laws to radical critique, so that “impossible” acts can be performed: the bending of a spoon, a telepathic dream, the establishment of a utopian community.

Take, for instance, Annie Besant’s concept of the “thought form,” astral travel, telepathy, telekinesis, or clairvoyance. Each of these “latent faculties” is premised on concealed material structures of the physical universe: Besant theorizes that even unspoken thoughts are

objectively externalized in the outward world, so that the idea for a painting hovers nearly invisibly before the artist as he paints, and the character of a novel materializes before the writer with such “objectivity” that it may literally develop a life—and an agency—of his own. Astral travel posits not only the material fact of an astral body, but of an astral agency and intentionality, so that *fin de siècle* occultists could carefully document their travels to other planets, and even, Owen tells us, astral wars. Telepathy and clairvoyance condense space and time; the clairvoyant is enabled to witness distant spatial or temporal events, and the telepath may have unmediated access to the thoughts and internal experiences of the other individuals, closing the abyss of alterity. An individual endowed with telekenesis is so powerful that she can manipulate everyday physical matter, the least impressive demonstration imaginable being the mere bending of forks. The fantasies underlying such “latent faculties” are those of power and potentiality, and are entwined with the alternately apocalyptic and utopian implications of occult millennialism.

The convergence of human nature and the external world is at work, for instance, in *The Coming Race*, and *Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde*. The hero of *The Coming Race* discovers a vastly sophisticated civilization under the earth that has mastered the basic form of energy inherent to all matter. The discovery of this energy has not only transformed them into telepaths and mind controllers, but has enabled them to construct a totally rational, efficient, and peaceful society, in which there is no crime, conflict, or even the risk of over-population. And, in a haunting anticipation of nuclear warfare, this energy will soon serve as the weapon with which they exterminate the primitive civilization on the surface. If *The Coming Race* stages the vengeful return of a radically excluded subterranean population—armed with the nineteenth century equivalent of thermonuclear devices—then Stevenson’s novel portrays a psychological and urban equivalent. Hyde is unleashed not simply from what we might call Jekyll’s unconscious, but also from the urban ghetto that ought to contain him. In each case the forces unleashed by tampering with matter are implicated in the regulation—or dis-regulation—of the city space, of the polis. The total mastery of the Vrilya over matter coincides with a society so totalized in its rationality

that it reads like a nineteenth century dream of totalitarianism. The irrational violence of Hyde, meanwhile, seems to represent not only Jeekyll's repressed desires or personalities, but also an entire ghettoized population of industrial and migrant labor. Hyde suddenly stands forth as a more complicated figure than a deranged killer: in the images of his brutality, Stevenson captures a Victorian anxiety of strike, revolution, and anti-imperialism.

In "Critique of Violence" Walter Benjamin explains the fascination exerted on the public by the "figure of the great criminal." We often admire the great criminal not because of the particularity of the crime—of its specific ends or means—but because of the relationship between his violence and the violence of the law itself. The great criminal is an "out-law" in a rigorous sense: his violence stands "outside" or "beyond" the space of the law, and therefore calls into question the very legitimacy of the law itself. For, Benjamin writes, the law as we know it must have a "monopoly" on violence not in order to maintain to secure or maintain certain ethically or politically calculated "legal ends," but because its first priority is its own preservation. Any violence that is not inscribed within it threatens to be law-creating: the violence of the great criminal is law-destroying violence, but only because it is ominous with the potentiality of a new law.

Perhaps the best example that Benjamin offers is the violence implicit in the right to strike. The strike may be the only legal form of violence not wielded by the law itself because at first glance the suspension of labor, since it is inaction, seems to be non-violent. But the essentially violent structure of the strike is recognizable in its means-end structure: if the workers are willing to return to the factory floor on the condition that certain demands are met, then the economic damage caused by their inaction is not simply an effect or an accidental byproduct, but essential to its structure as coercion. That the strike is in some sense outside or beyond the law is made most visible in its radicalized form—when its end is not the accomplishment of limited demands, but the construction of a new political order. In the face of a general strike, the state claims that the right to strike "was not so intended," and the workers clash with the police on the

street. Here we are on the verge of a revolutionary situation: the violence of the state is not intended simply as an aggressive measure to return the laborers to their factories, but a defensive move of self-preservation. For if the police fail, this suspension of labor has become law-making violence.

In his deconstruction of Benjamin's essay, Derrida widens the semantic range of both "law" and "state," so that "law" designates not only the system that regulates the behavior of individuals, or the order that deploys and distributes bodies to roles and functions within the social sphere, but much more fundamentally as a regime of meaning that polices and determines the legitimacy of meanings. This is not, however, in any sense a depoliticization of Benjamin's work.

A "successful" revolution, the "successful foundation of a state" (in somewhat the same sense that one speaks of a felicitous speech act), will produce *après coup* what it was destined in advance to produce, namely, the proper interpretive models to read in return, to give sense, necessity, and above all legitimacy to the violence that has produced, among others, the interpretive model in question, that is, the discourse of its self-legitimization. (36)

Here we see Benjamin's insight of the law's tautological interest of self preservation at work on the hermeneutic level. The law must first of all regulate meaning in order to secure the fate determined in advance by the "fabulous retroactivity" of its production. In the felicitous, post-revolutionary articulation of the "proper interpretive models," all the concepts necessary for its continued survival (and paradoxically of its origin) are cemented: the idea of the "good people" in whose name the declaration was signed, for example, or the idea of a citizen authorized to be their representative. But what the circularity of a "felicitous" revolution posits the possibility of a hermeneutic general strike:

For there is something of the general strike, and thus of the revolutionary situation in every reading that founds something new and that remains unreadable in regard to the established canons and norms of reading, that is to say the present state of reading or of what figures the State, with a capital S, in the state of what figures possible reading. Faced with such a general strike, we can in various cases speak of anarchism, skepticism, nihilism, depoliticization, or on the contrary of subversive overpoliticization. Today, the general strike does not need to demobilize or mobilize a spectacular number of people: it is enough to cut the electricity in a few privileged places, for example the services, public

and private, of postal services and telecommunications, of radio and television or to introduce a few efficient viruses into a well chosen computer network, or, by analogy, to introduce the equivalent of AIDS into the organs of transmission, into the hermeneutic *Gespräch*. (37-8)

There is a revolutionary situation in every reading: Poe's stories, to use Paul de Man's phrase somewhat loosely, are "allegories of reading," or rather, tales plagued the revolutionary situation described here. The general strike of reading is a rupture of illegibility "in regard to the established norms of reading," a blind-spot opened in a regime where everything must remain legible to be policed. What is Valdemar's vibrating and speaking tongue but such an infected "organ of transmission?" The power-lines are cut, a virus is introduced to the system of repetition and difference, in this case quite literally into the hermeneutic *Gespräch*.

" 'This old man,' I said at length, 'is the type and genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. *He is the man of the crowd*. It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds.' (396) Thus the narrator completes, or rather abandons, his tale. Discreetly following the strange old man through London's streets for a night, observing details, reading him, the narrator has by now struck an interpretive limit. Benjamin writes in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" how one of the disturbing elements of walking through a crowd is the blankness of the surrounding faces, faces that somehow absorb the gaze but do not return it. The old man expresses of this principle in two respects. First, "he refuses to be alone," pathologically walking from group of bodies to group of bodies throughout the night, as though the jostling mass somehow concealed traces that would otherwise be visible on his face. But more disturbingly, the old man's physical presence resists the narrator's gaze even after he has been isolated and even surveiled, as though the memories of his crimes have produced visible and yet illegible traces upon the surface of his body. Thus, with the very last line of the story, the narrator compares the old man to an illegible book: "The worst heart in the world is a grosser book than the 'Hortulus Animae,' and perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that *'er lasst sich*

nicht lesen.” (396) The old man, a single illegible body immersed in the mass, functions like one of Benjamin’s “great criminals,” or as even as an incarnate strike in the order of bodies. Returning to the question of substantialism, I will show that the idea of the secret at work in this story, so closely tied with occult concepts, is premised on a certain materiality.

It does not permit itself to be read: “the type and genius of deep crime” is illegible to the other. “The Man of the Crowd” is famously a drama of reading, or even a drama of phenomenology, as Benjamin’s particular discussion of memory suggests. And even from the start our narrator is sitting at the window of a London Coffee house, first reading the newspaper, and then reading with increasing detail the taxonomies of bodies swarming on the other side of the glass. He sees “stock jobbers,” “pie men,” “ghastly invalids”—a whole bestiary of human bodies that he has no difficulty analyzing. (389-91) But ironically it is the very illegibility of the old man that attracts the narrator’s eye to begin with. The narrator’s classificatory powers are worth to observing. They are exemplary of the way that the gaze tends to assert sovereignty in Poe’s work—of the way this assertion is so systematically undermined.

When he first “peer[s] through the smokey panes into the street” the narrator observes, with the distanced, slightly awkward specificity of language characteristic of a scientist, “two dense and continuous tides of population... rushing past the door.” (388) As night falls and he continues to watch, his observational powers slowly became more and more acute. “At first my observations took an abstract and generalizing turn,” he tells us, transforming the activity of his gaze (and not that of the crowd) into the subject of the narrative. He looks broadly over the masses, thinking “of them in aggregate relations.” (389) And through the course of several pages he demonstrates his descent from general classifications to particularity, to “the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance,” from the generality of those with a “business-like demeanor,” to groups of noble-men and stock-jobbers, to individual pick-pockets and those who must be gamblers, to beggars with “feeble and ghastly faces.” (389-91)

The wild effects of the light enchained me to an examination of individual faces; and although the rapidity with which the world of light flitted before the window, prevented me from casting more than a glance upon each visage, still it seemed that, in my then peculiar mental state, I could frequently read, even in that brief interval of a glance, the history of long years. (392)

The narrator has descended below “aggregate relations.” He no longer considers how the body jostles down the street, or even what “type” the body betrays itself to be. Instead of organizing his knowledge in terms of a matrix of relations among bodies, he understands each face historically, that is, individually, in reference only to itself. And he “reads” these faces in “the interval of a glance”: the faces are perfectly legible, transparent, as though they, too, were only windows. He may be reading individual histories of long years in the contours of every face he sees, but these faces are still conceptualized, here temporally instead of spatially.

The man of the crowd stands in a very strange relation to language. We might say that while these many faces appear in the crowd as individuals, the old man appears instead as a singularity—an entity that refuses to be conceptualized.

With my brow to the glass, I was thus occupied in scrutinizing the mob, when suddenly there came into view a countenance (that of a decrepid old man, some sixty-five or seventy years of age,)—a countenance which at once arrested and absorbed my whole attention on account of the absolute idiosyncrasy of the expression. Anything even remotely resembling the expression I had never seen before. (392)

The “idiosyncrasy” of the face is without precedent; it “resembles” nothing else. The face is as unintelligible as a foreign language. Interestingly enough, the narrator’s first response is to consider it an exemplary phrenological specimen, thinking, “Retzsch, had he viewed it, would have greatly preferred it to his own pictorial incarnations of the fiend.” (392) The “great criminal,” Benjamin tells us, is the one who threatens the law by committing a violence not against it but outside it. He is therefore not only the type and genius of deep crime, but a physical entity that disrupts and calls into question the increasingly minute and penetrating gaze of the narrator. He defies the law of vision because in a certain sense he is outside vision, a kind of boundary of the sensible. The old man “arrests” the narrator’s gaze the way a gap would, or a

dash dividing clauses. He does not permit himself to be read, and so the narrator leaves his position of safety behind the window, and lowers himself into the mob. The sovereign set of eyes must now join the jostling bodies over whom they presided moments ago.

Now that we have seen how the authority of vision was so promptly dismantled by the entrance of the old man, I would like to closely read the rhetoric at work in the story's opening paragraph, which stages an illegibility internal to the old man, the great criminal.

It was well said of a certain German book that "*er lasst sich nicht lesen*"—that it does not permit itself to be read. There are some secrets which do not permit themselves to be told. Men die nightly in their beds, wringing the hands of ghostly confessors, and looking them piteously in the eyes—die with a despair of heart and convulsion of throat, on account of the hideousness of mysteries which will not *suffer themselves* to be revealed. Now and then, alas, the conscience of man takes up a burthen so heavy in horror that it can be thrown down only into the grave. And thus the essence of all crime is undivulged. (388)

The essence of all crime is undivulged: thus the opening passage of "The Man of the Crowd" offers a radicalized definition of crime that hinges on a certain concept of secrecy—of that which does not permit itself to be read, or, alternatively, to be told. This concept emerges in the form of a materiality of silence—or more specifically as a physiology of silence, a physiology of the unspeakable. The story presents an illegible materiality—the materiality of a secret which which will not permit itself to be told.

With the prefatory remark of the first sentence, the story actually begins with a minute scene of reading, in which a "certain," nameless German book does not *permit* itself to be read, whose contents "will not suffer themselves to be revealed." What does it mean for illegibility to be represented as a refusal? What does it mean to not *permit* reading, to not allow, or give leave to the act of reading? Books, for Poe, seem to be frightening objects. For the verb "permit" implies a multi-lateral—and certainly ambiguous—relation of power between the book and the reader, in a way that subtly recalls the encounters of many of Poe's characters with the monstrous. "To permit" certainly means, as the Oxford Dictionary tells us, "To allow, to suffer, give leave; not to prevent." But according to the O.E.D., up through the beginning of the

nineteenth it could mean, much more specifically “To put, or allow to pass, out of one's own keeping or power into that of another (or of some force, influence, etc.); to commit, submit, hand over; to give up, resign, leave; to refer (to the will of).” In either case Poe’s use of this verb implicitly suggests, first, that reading is an exertion of force or an application of pressure upon the book’s body. Secondly—and this is made even more evident with the reflexive use of “suffer itself” a few lines down—the verb implies that illegibility is less the inherent property of the book *qua* object, than a state assumed by an agent, perhaps an exertion of force in its own right—or even the deployment of a counter-force, of resistance. After all, the book that “permits” itself to be read is one that “lets” the reader “pass” into it, or that “releases” its meaning into the reader’s hands, or that “resigns” itself to the power of the reader. There is a clear sense in which this “certain German book” has somehow chosen not to be read. In the scene implied by this first sentence, the hypothetical reader experiences this nameless German book which does not permit itself to be read as an other.

“It was well said of a certain book that *‘er lasst sich nicht lesen’*—that it does not permit itself to be read. There are some secrets which do not permit themselves to be told.” Some secrets, in other words, do not permit themselves to be expressed in precisely the same way that certain books do not permit themselves to be read: it is important to observe the assimilation of speech into reading. With the case of the illegible book, it is perfectly evident that there are two distinct entities at hand: the reader encounters this peculiar being in the world called a book that withholds from him its meaning, as though it possessed an interiority of its own. But the secret relates to the dying man in precisely the same way the illegible book relates to its hypothetical reader. Perhaps reminiscent of Hegel’s “Unhappy Consciousness,” in which the external relationship between the lord and the bondsman becomes internal to the structure of a single consciousness, the relationship between the illegible book and the reader becomes internal to a single individual, the secret becoming an internal and radical alterity.

And this relationship is internalized in such a way that it is certainly appropriate to reverse the usual language: the secret “keeps” its keeper. The silence of the secret, of its refusal to unveil itself, is a violent inaction, exerting a force upon the speaker, as though it were a parasite inhabiting his body. Significantly, it is in the “hideousness” of the secret that it refuses to be revealed: the secret materializes into a physical form lodged somewhere in its host’s body, if not with a shape, then certainly with a mass. Specifically, the secret is literally so heavy that it cannot be ejected from the mouth: the throat convulses with the effort of it, and the heart despairs with the continuing presence of its weight. And indeed the weight is so great that it drags body with it into the earth.

The consequences of this scene are surely far reaching. From any conventional perspective, a “secret” is a magnitude of information covered up, concealed, or withheld from public sight. It goes without saying, of course, that the *content* of the secret is perfectly accessible and transparent to the individual or group seeking to hide it from side, to make it into a secret. The tactics of concealment, after all, are rooted in a consciousness of the information’s sensitivity to begin with. But Poe’s secret—the secret of what his narrator calls “deep crime”—clearly operates according to some other logic. It has its *own* interiority, it is opaque to the mind of its host, who must confront an alien and hostile force within himself. Consider the old man’s silence: he is not reticent, or keeping silent. He is speechless. He is without language, like an animal or inanimate object. He is made silent by a secret that keeps him, made to perform its silence—to perform it so totally that in the end it will be “so heavy” that it will drag him down into the grave. This is a silence so radical turns a makes a body radically without speech, making it first the living dead, only resembling a corpse, before finishing its work.

His silence, in other words, is the effect of a kind of general strike of language that, virally infects the entire text. The old man relates to the illegible being within him in such a way that he becomes an illegible being with respect to the narrator, who becoming infected, transforms into a second man of the crowd as he follows the old man through the dark streets.

And the strike even renders the relationship between the reader and the text inoperative, ironically expressed in the presence of a German sentence that announces to a reader who cannot read it, that it cannot be read. An entire order of representation is crippled but at the same time mobilized: the old man moves pathologically through the streets, followed at the same time by a voyeuristic writer who, although capable of writing the story in the end, nonetheless comes back to the limit of silence that prompted him to write.

Here there are no latent human faculties of millennialist hopes of a future society. But in a certain sense this text operates quite radically within the field of the occult. Here the concealed, occult “secret” is taken to its extreme. Not only is access to this “mystery” radically foreclosed, but the mystery has a body and an agency. Here is a demonic, absolutely illegible thought form that has dispersed itself to the interior of innumerable bodies: it hides maliciously in the old man’s organs, and perhaps in the organs of the narrator, but also in the interstices of the story’s textual body, in the spaces between letters, in the silent, ominously living white of the page.

“The Facts of the Case of M. Valdemar” is a drama of reading whose logic is not altogether unlike “The Man of the Crowd.” Just as the idiosyncrasy of the old man’s “countenance” refuses to be conceptualized, Valdemar subtly resists—and perhaps explodes—the forms of knowledge and power that organize around him. This story is, in the final analysis, a story about force about power. And its various representations of power function like a general taxonomy: there is first of all the remarkable power of medical knowledge over Valdemar’s body, which has enabled his doctors to penetrate beneath the surface of his skin to extract not only detailed maps of sites most affected by his tuberculosis, but to calculate the progressive decay of Valdemar’s inner organs with such accuracy that they predict the time of death down to the hour. The form of power implied by this technique of perception is exemplary of what Foucault calls the “anatomy-politics” of the human body, in which technologies of discipline and surveillance dissolve multiplicities of men into single bodies, ironically articulating the conditions, he argues, for the very concept of the

individual so often invoked in opposition to the regulative and repressive machinery of modernity. Valdemar is a “docile body.”

Of course, the form of power that is this story’s primary concern, and the very subject of the experiment it claims to so “factually” document, is not situated on the hyphen of the configuration “knowledge-power” in quite the same way. It is the mysterious force with which the narrator, “by mere exercise of the will,” mesmerizes his dying friend and then, to his own astonishment, preserves the mind beyond death, as if he has fastened the dead man’s soul to the corpse. Mesmerism is not a technique of power that manages Valdemar’s life, monitoring and regulating organs and functions, but a form of power over life itself, and so extreme that it has succeeded in keeping Valdemar alive after he is dead. The mesmeric power over life, which we could align somewhat loosely with what Foucault calls bio-power, is nonetheless represented optically. We could say that the look of the narrator is that of a doctor, objectifying or mechanizing the patient, recognizing discreet organs and biological processes—at the same time as his gaze is that of a mesmerist, projecting a force directly into the substance of Valdemar’s life. This section will interrogate how Valdemar, both on the level of matter and meaning, complicates these mechanisms of power that have gathered around him. Valdemar’s insurrection will perhaps best be understood as an overthrow of the visual by the aural—how the power of sight (whether in the distinct senses of the look or the gaze) is undone by processes that operate in the sphere of sound.

This undoing of the visual by the aural is clearly at work from the very beginning. The mesmerist and Valdemar are engaged in the dialogue that, as the supplement of an experiment, presumes the transparency and instrumentality of language. After the narrator repeats his question, “Do you sleep, M. Valdemar,” which is followed not only by Valdemar’s death but also by an answer, a horrific fissure appears between words and things. Language suddenly becomes a problem. But before citing the moment in the text when a hole opens up in the world, it is

important to develop a sense of the original power relation. When the narrator first arrives at Valdemar's home, he receives a report on the condition of his tuberculosis.

The left lung had been for eighteen months in a semi-osseous or cartilaginous state, and was, of course, entirely useless for all purposes of vitality. The right, in its upper portion, was also partially, if not thoroughly, ossified, while the lower region was merely a mass of purulent tubercles, running into one another. Several extensive perforations existed; and, at one point, a permanent adhesion to the ribs had taken place. These appearances in the right lobe were of comparatively recent date. The ossification had proceeded with very unusual rapidity; no sign of it had been discovered a month before, and the adhesion had only been observed during the three previous days. Independently of the phthisis, the patient was suspected of aneurism of the aorta; but on this point the osseous symptoms rendered an exact diagnosis impossible. It was the opinion of both physicians that M. Valdemar would die about midnight on the morrow (Sunday). It was then seven o'clock on Saturday evening. (836)

It is as though the surface of Valdemar's body, however visceral, is perfectly transparent. Even before the moment of death, which we have read above, the interior of his body lay exposed. His doctors have somehow penetrated into the dark world beneath the threshold of the outwardly visible, "the secret volume of the body," as Foucault calls it, so that they can relate to the narrator a qualified and precise configuration of Valdemar's particular "phthisis," describing the textures and densities of his tissues, their hardness in some places and their softness in others, or the points at which certain distinct tissues merge. They have not only charted Valdemar's progressive consumption, or even the decay of each lung, but have indeed mapped each onto a minutely detailed geography of decay. The left lung has ceased to be a lung altogether, in a "semi-osseous or cartilaginous state," a gristly, hardened, and callous substance, that, while still flexible, has begun to resemble bone or rock. The "lower portion" of the left lung, meanwhile, has become a swampish, puss filled, confused mess of tubercles, while its "upper portion" is poked through "extensively" with holes, and, considering that it has fused at one point with the ribs, has ossified in this location even more severely than its merely cartilaginous partner. And the specificity of this spatial distribution is matched by the precision of a temporal distribution. They have mapped the occurrence of these formations (or deformations) within each lung so

accurately that their knowledge of the point in time of the adhesion with the ribs (three days ago) is surpassed with a prediction of Valdemar's death to the hour: "midnight on the morrow."

Now take the moment of Valdemar's first death, when, interrupting the dialogue, his jaw snaps open, and his eyes roll up into his head.

While I thus spoke, there came a marked change over the countenance of the sleep-walker. The eyes rolled themselves slowly open, the pupils disappearing upwardly; the skin generally assumed a cadaverous hue, resembling not so much parchment as white paper; and the circular hectic spots which, hitherto, had been strongly defined in the centre of each cheek, *went out* at once. I use this expression, because the suddenness of their departure put me in mind of nothing so much as the extinguishment of a candle by a puff of a breath. The upper lip, at the same time, writhed itself away from the teeth, which it had previously covered completely; while the lower jaw fell with an audible jerk, leaving the mouth widely distended, and disclosing in full view the swollen and blackened tongue. I presume that no member of the party then present had been unaccustomed to death-bed horrors; but so hideous beyond conception was the appearance of M. Valdemar at this moment, that there was a general shrinking back from the region of the bed. (839)

The dialogue should cease, with the "audible jerk" of the falling jaw, and the exposure of his visceral insides. Even as the pupils disappear, the eyes roll themselves open, the lip writhes itself away from the teeth, and the mouth falls open, "disclosing in full view the swollen and blackened tongue." Death, in this symptomology (or clinical "index" as Barthes calls it) is characterized not simply by his swollenness or 'blackenedness,' but by a nearly pornographic moment of opening up, a moment of exposure that, revealing to everyone present the organic interior of his body, paradoxically shows that he no longer possesses inwardness, interiority. Valdemar's body is silent, now, like the man of the crowd, except that it seems his silence conceals nothing. He is an object.

This is expressed in its most abbreviated form with the simultaneous disappearance of the pupils and the "rolling open" of the eyes: the vanishing pupils prove that nothing looks out of the eyes anymore, or perhaps more specifically, that the space 'behind' or 'in' the eyes is no longer of a subjective, but rather of an objective character. To refer to our provisional distinction between the look and the gaze, one can only look into Valdemar's eyes, that is, *at* his eyes in the

medical or scientific sense—perhaps by peeling back the external membranes to see vitrious fluid (or, in Valdemar’s case, “yellow ichor”) inside. It is in this sense that the eyelids withdraw, exposing the blind tissue underneath. These eyes do not resist the scientific gaze of the narrator any more than a rock or a stone might: there is no chance that he will “return” the narrator’s gaze. Now they are mucus filled orbs, no longer the paradoxical subject-object binarisms that eyes are for the living.

The same structure is at work in the audible opening of the mouth. Its grotesque snap, like the slow withdrawal of the eyelids, marks the erasure of a similar binarism. The mouths of living humans are precisely like those of animals, designed for eating, and capable of expressing pleasure or pain with the groan—except for the mysterious additional capacity for speech. But with the “audible jerk” of the falling lower jaw, the mouth becomes nothing but a distended orifice. This, with the sudden vanishing of the “hectic circles” of the cheeks, the transformation of his pallor into a papery one, and the use of reflexive verbs to suggest that these are all processes occurring simultaneously but independent of each other across the surface of the body, would suggest the utter erasure of the Cartesian line drawn through the body, separating the animal or automaton from the soul, as well (obviously) as the end of the dialogue. Except that Valdemar *responds*. He now says, as the tongue begins to vibrate,

“Yes;--no;--I *have been* sleeping—and now—now—I *am dead*.”

Michel Foucault opens *The Birth of the Clinic* by comparing two medical texts, written one hundred years apart. The first describes the treatment of a hysteric by forcing her to take baths ten to twelve hours a day, for ten months. Pomme, the author of the text, describes “membranous tissues like pieces of damp parchment... peel away with slight discomfort, and these were passed daily with urine.” He also describes the peeling away of the “right uterer,” as well as the “internal tunics” of the intestines, which he sees emerge from the rectum, and pieces of the oesophagus, arterial trachea, and tongue emerge “by vomiting or by expectoration.” Where

Pomme, writing in the middle of the eighteenth century, “lacking any perceptual base, speaks to us in a language of fantasy,” the second text, by Bayer, a description of the membranous tissues of a brain that suffers “chronic meningitis,” “with its qualitative precision, directs our gaze to a world of constant visibility.” (xi) The difference between these two texts, for Foucault, is “both tiny and total.” While the interior of Pomme’s hysteric is dark, a space of secrets suggested only by the matter thrown outside the body, Bayer’s brain is drenched in the light. The skull has been broken open, and he speaks with minute clarity of the firmness and tightness of membranes, their contiguity and the difficulty or ease one has in trying to separate them. He speaks of their varying thicknesses and densities, and their shades of colors—but he also compares them to spider webs, and the “albuminous skins of eggs.” Thus their difference is both tiny and total: total because Bayer’s brain, unlike Pomme’s poor hysteric, is immersed in the total visibility of medicine’s gaze. And yet, tiny, Foucault suggests, for even the positivism of naming colors and thicknesses presumes the mobilization of metaphors, of which the description of a membrane as “arachnoidan” requires, unless of course spiders live in the brain—perhaps a possibility Poe will not allow us to exclude.

“From what moment,” Foucault asks, “from what semantic or syntactical change, can one recognize that language has turned into rational discourse?”

What sharp line divides a description that depicts membranes as being ‘damp parchment’ from that other equally qualitative, equally metaphorical description of them laid out over the tunic of the brain, like a film of egg whites? Do Bayle’s ‘white’ and ‘red’ membranes possess greater value, solidity, and objectivity—in terms of scientific discourse—than the horny scales described by the doctors of the eighteenth century? A rather more meticulous gaze, a more measured verbal thread with a more secure footing upon things, a more delicate, though sometimes rather confused choice of adjective—are these not merely the proliferation, in medical language, of a style which, since the days of galenic medicine, has extended whole regions of description around the greyness of things and their shapes? (Foucault, p.xi)

Poe’s fascination with “phthisis” amounts to more than his penchant for jargon. “The Facts of the Case of M. Valdemar,” opening with Valdemar’s dying body so completely immersed subjected to the calculating, “meticulous” gazes of medical science, presents us with a world of “facts,” of

positivistic truths dwelling somewhere in the “sufferers” dying body. Yet it is precisely this visual, positivistic security of the “fact,” of the “secure footing upon things,” that this text, as we have already seen, immediately sets out to undermine. What we have elsewhere observed as a literalization of metaphor at work in Poe’s style is already at work here, enabling a slow bleeding out of these positivist “measured verbal threads,” into inappropriate categories, erasing, or at least folding into a hundred complexities, that “sharp line” Foucault rhetorically asks for here, between a language where membranes are damp parchment, and an empiricism of equally metaphoric language where membranes are “films of egg whites,” or consumptive lungs are bone like masses. By the end of the story, this language of fact, operating under the alibi of science, completely explodes: where tissue is described as cartilaginous and boney, Valdemar’s voice will be “harsh, broken, and hollow,” and where other regions of tissue are purulent, Valdemar’s voice will also impress the narrator’s ears as “glutinous matters impress the sense of touch.” (839) And where the soft tissue of the lung dissolves into the hard matter of the bones, becoming at their connecting point indistinguishable from each other, Valdemar’s entire body, his whole system of organs, will dissolve, or rather consume itself, in fast forward, each organ running into the next, “rotting,” “crumbling” on the bed “before that whole company.”

At stake for Foucault is of course the obscure relation implied in the hyphen knowledge-power, and in the space of medical perception it has everything to do with the gaze, with the relation between the eyes and the dense mass of the body. Where for Descartes, light connotes the straight lines of rational discourse, “the element of ideality,” rendering things “transparent for the exercise of the mind,” at the end of the eighteenth century “seeing consists in leaving to experience its greatest corporeal opacity; the solidity, the obscurity, the density of things closed in upon themselves, have powers of truth that they owe not to light, but to the slowness of the gaze that passes over them, around them, and gradually into them, bringing them nothing more than its own light.” The force of the gaze slowly eats away at the object’s resistant exterior, finding truth at “the dark center of things.” “The Facts of the Case of M. Valdemar” radicalizes this dark

center, making the “secret space” within the body an occult space, an interiority that functions a little like the secret of the man of the crowd—more interior than the interior, a mystery that when unveiled and exposed to knowledge, destroys it. The insides of Valdemar’s body unveil a dark presence that vexes the visual mastery of his captor, liquefying the classifications and categories in which to which it was subjected.

I would like to turn now to the organ of transmission at the center of the story, the fleshy telegram of Valdemar’s occult tongue. Here the rupture in the order of the sensible is most acute. It operates first in the contrast Shawn Rosenheim has noted between the decayed matter of the tongue and the beautifully syllabified utterance, but also on the level of pure epistemology: the production of the voice lies outside any language of anatomy or biological mechanics.

...there issued from the distended and motionless jaws a voice – such as it would be madness in me to attempt describing. There are, indeed, two or three epithets which might be considered as applicable to in part; I might say, for example, that the sound was harsh, and broken and hollow, but the hideous whole is indescribable, for the simple reason that no similar sounds have ever jarred upon the ear of humanity. There were two particulars, however, which I thought then, and still think, might fairly be stated as characteristic of the intonation – as well adapted to convey some idea of its unearthly peculiarity. In the first place, the voice seemed to reach our ears – at least mine – from a vast distance, or from some deep cavern within the earth. In the second place, it impressed me (I fear, indeed, that it will be impossible to make myself comprehended) as gelatinous or glutinous material impress the sense of touch. (p.839)

In the same way that the speaker in “The Raven” is completely confounded by the presence of the bird in his chamber and its single enigmatic utterance, this passage dramatizes a strange general strike in interpretation—with the narrator’s complete inability to sufficiently translate into language the experience that confronts him. One could also say, then, that in the larger sense this passage is about the narrator’s failure to *read* the sense data before him. It is clear that the “two or three” “epithets” that the narrator considers “applicable in part” are merely placeholders, substitutes that operate provisionally, re-presenting what *would be* the *right words*, if they were available to the narrator or if they existed at all. But of course the problem is precisely that the unavailability of the “right words” derives from their total nonexistence and impossibility; the narrator very frankly states that it would be madness to attempt to describe the “hideous whole,”

for the reason that “no similar sounds have ever jarred upon the ear of humanity.” What we have, then, is a semiotic groundlessness that emerges from the radical *originality* of the sense data striking his ears; there are simply no available grounds for comparison. Originality here becomes indistinguishable from sheer alterity: the metaphysical or cosmological implications this adjective has regarding the afterlife aside, we can take the use of “unearthly” in a very rigorous sense. Taking our cue from Heidegger, we could say that this sound emerges from a space completely outside the horizon of the “world” – outside of the structural whole of relationships that provide human beings meaning, and that perhaps are the very condition for the concept of the human subject, of agency, or even of consciousness.

It is important to observe that his attempt to incorporate the event into language – into a narrative – is, even from the beginning, not a complete failure. One may in fact attribute the dramatic aspect of this passage to the narrator’s tarrying with the un-signifiable magnitude of the unearthly sound. His first attempt is the stringing of the three epithets, “harsh, broken, and hollow.” The narrator mentions them only in the course of explaining that this technique fails to encompass within its horizon the whole body of the referent. In Hegelian terms, the “proposition is too small.” But why? Another name for these epithets is “adjectives:” they function by identifying and isolating particular qualities – *extracting* them from the surface of the whole. The narrator’s choice of the word epithet in this sense implicitly carries with it the *taxonomic* meaning of the term: he is locating the signifying gesture on the level of grammar, on the level of the *parts* of speech; the use of the adjective confesses an attempt to render the event intelligible by inserting it into a system of hierarchy and substructure, of subunits and genera.

“Harsh, broken, and hollow” are also epithets in the sense that they are commonplace, banal, used here as rather commonplace and *generic* metaphors to express sonic plasticity. The problem with the use of these adjectives in a case as extreme as this – and this goes for the use of epithets generally – is precisely that they are familiar to us, deeply embedded in the sphere of everyday language, deeply embedded within the semiotic world.

The narrator does, however, begin to abandon a rhetoric that enforces rigid classifications. After he introduces the problem – that his epithets do not frame the whole – he uses images that attempt to frame exactly that.

In the first place, the voice seemed to reach our ears – at least mine – from a vast distance, or from some deep cavern within the earth. In the second place, it impressed me (I fear, indeed, that it will be impossible to make myself comprehended) as gelatinous or glutinous material impress the sense of touch. (p.839)

The narrator retains his categorizing tendency to a certain extent by referring to these images as “two particulars.” Nevertheless, he invents them specifically to give a sense of the unearthliness of the sound. The final image, in which the sound is described as “glutinous” strikes me as particularly interesting; this description functions according to a synesthetic slippage, in which rhetorical technologies used to describe tactile experiences are applied to an aural experience. As such, this is a radicalization of the kind of operation associated with the three adjectives with which he begins. The strangeness of the description cannot be ignored; the narrator himself qualifies it as nearly incomprehensible. This incomprehensibility can be understood in terms of a rendering uncanny of familiar components to the symbolic world – a straining of them towards the outside. It is no coincidence that the image itself is of a formless and nearly liquid substance – a substance that resists a taxonomic division. The rendering uncanny of an aural experience with the use of a tactile one stands as a violation of a law of genus – we might consider it a dissolving of the solid and geometric structures characteristic of taxonomic thinking, a movement from solid to liquid form.

It is in this sense that we can understand the narrator’s description that the voice calls out from “a vast distance, or from some very deep cavern in the earth,” as not only a cosmological claim regarding the after-life. Moreover, the terror associated with this event is not simply the *revelation* of this information. Instead, we may locate the disturbing effect more directly in the extreme displacement of the voice’s origin – in its *sourcelessness*. In other words, the mechanism that produces this sound is altogether unclear. Nevertheless, an *object* associated

with the sound *is* offered to the gaze: the tongue itself. Poe certainly could have had the voice completely displaced and bodiless, like the faint, instrument-less music in *The Assignment*. Instead, the voice is somehow associated with the material of the body – it is somehow generated from, or at least passes through, the physical, plastic, tactile matter of Valdemar’s black and rotten tongue.

The point, of course, is that the structural link between the tongue and the sound produced is impossible to discern, the tongue becoming utterly enigmatic. Fully disclosed by the corpse’s gaping mouth to the taxonomic gaze of language, the “swollen and blackened” tongue is *undeniably* linked to the sound. You might even say that the fact of the link is rendered *legible*. But what is really rendered legible is a pure *illegibility* – the complete impossibility of any successful reading. This aggressively flies directly in the face of a taxonomic standpoint. The fact that we normally associate the tongue – in its normal functioning – with speech production, only intensifies the effect. And the pure legibility of taxonomy, and the enlightened vision of a materialist standpoint inverts like a Moebius strip – not so much worm eaten by its opposite, but *continuous* with its opposite. What we see here is not the mystery of the immaterial bursting from the material; rather, this text demonstrates that the material itself stands at complete cognitive closure.

This model is continuous with its opposite in that it is categorically *metonymic* – the tongue is only a single organ that operates within the whole mechanism of speech production. Now, however, the lips, the jaws, the larynx, and the lungs are all dead – functionless – and the tongue itself stands in for the whole system, rolling violently in the corpse’s mouth as if overcome by that very metonymic over-determination. “Taxonomy” is derived from Greek *taxis* – which means “arrangement.” Latin *taxare* means to touch, to feel, to handle, to censure, value, or estimate. Taxonomy itself involves the classification of organisms into an ordered hierarchical system according to *natural relationships*. What strikes me as interesting here is the association between sensuous experience and value – the implicit notion that experience involves an

arrangement of sense data into hierarchies. What is further interesting is that the structure “perceived” by the senses is presumed to be natural. What Poe’s texts in general – and this text especially – seem to do so well is corrode that structure on all levels. We can see here that the “natural” function of the tongue within the ordered system of speech production is suddenly thrown out of joint – and yet speech is produced. In fact, Valdemar’s “syllabification” is more beautiful than ever.

In this sense, it is not so much the stark contrast between Valdemar’s rotten physical state and the clarity of his language that disturbs us; it is the clarity of his statement in contrast to the complete obscurity of its production. The narrator describes the sound itself of Valdemar’s speech – this sound that in its hideous wholeness exceeds the grasp of language itself – as “wonderfully, thrillingly distinct.” What is so thrilling about this? Not the contrast: but the *lack of contrast*: Poe has rendered unintelligible the distinction between legibility and illegibility. The tongue stands before them completely disclosed, and yet its relationship to that which bursts from it is totally enigmatic. Conversely, the “unutterable, shocking horror” of the “few words” they hear could not be any clearer, could not have been better “calculated to convey” their meaning.

“Yes;--no;--I *have been* sleeping—and now—now—*I am dead.*”

Valdemar’s reply begins by forcing open a zone of indistinction between “yes” and “no,” in a dialogue that requires, in its context of a scientific experiment, both the transparency and instrumentality of language. And just as the fundamental elements of the affirmative and the negative have lost their meaning, so—as everyone in the room can plainly see—has the distinction between life and death. Here death speaks. “Certainly there exist numerous mythical narratives in which death speaks,” Barthes writes, “but only to say: ‘I am alive’. There is here a true hapax of narrative grammar, a staging of words impossible as such: I am dead.” There is here, in other words, an absolutely singular instance within the whole lexicon of “narrative grammar,” within the forms and structures that make narratives—sequences of time, sequences of

cause and effect—meaningful. The narrative grammar that Barthes has in mind is not the narrative of Poe’s tale, but the narrative of Valdemar’s enunciation. From the first breath that erases the boundary between “yes and “no,” the sentence attempts to resolve the evident indistinction of life and death by deploying a “grammar” that divides an emphasized present perfect of “sleep” from a simple present of death with the insertion of a multiplying stutter of nows: “Yes;—no;—*I have been* sleeping—and now—now—*I am dead.*” That Poe’s doubled emphasis falls onto tenses makes the horror of the speaking dead into a horror of logical grammar. the pure singularity of this narrative instantiation therefore consists in the accomplishment of its own logical impossibility. Certainly the sentence is intelligible—there is no doubt, especially considering the response of Valdemar’s listeners, that it conveys meaning. But from the strict standpoint of logical grammar it is impossible for the meaning of the proposition “I am dead” to be both uttered and true. Valdemar speaks the impossible narrative. He speaks in an impossible relation to time, in the simple present of death.

Gilles Deleuze argues in “Bartleby; or, The Formula,”¹¹ that the performative power of Bartleby’s famous phrase “I would prefer not to” consists in a secret “agrammaticality.” The gaunt, silent figure of Melville’s scrivener may find his horrific precursor in Poe’s dead and mesmerized Valdemar. For, as Barthes writes, despite the perfect, all too perfect, clarity of the sentence, a strange, self-referential absurdity is at work. “The action of the dead man is a purely linguistic action; and to crown all, this language serves no purpose, it does not appear with a view to acting on the living, it says nothing but itself, it designates itself tautologically. Before saying ‘I am dead,’ the voice says simple ‘I am speaking’; a little like a grammatical example which refers to nothing but language.” Valdemar’s enunciation is not a message from the beyond, an intervention in the affairs of the mortals, like those many “mythic narratives” in which death speaks only to say “I am alive,” in order to demonstrate that the dead still possess power.

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze, “Bartleby; of The Formula,” in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pg. 68.

“The action of the dead man is a purely linguistic action”: despite the fact that it resembles an example from a grammar book, Barthes nonetheless admits that Valdemar’s enunciation “acts.” In this sense, its circularity bears an ironic resemblance to biblical rather than mythical proportions, so reminiscent of the enunciation emanating from a burning bush: “I am that I am.” Even in its purely linguistic character, Barthes opens the possibility that Valdemar’s utterance represents a certain kind of force. Prefiguring Deleuze’s argument about *Bartleby*, Barthes’s reading thus brings him to the question of performative speech acts.

In the ideal sum of all possible utterances of language, the link between the first person (I) and the attribute ‘dead’ is precisely the one which is radically impossible. It is this empty point, this blind spot of language which the story comes, very exactly, to occupy. What is said is no other than its impossibility: the sentence is not descriptive, it is not constative, it delivers no message other than its own enunciation. In a sense we can say that we have here a performative, but such, certainly, that neither Austin nor Benveniste had foreseen in their analyses (let us recall that the performative is the mode of utterance according to which the utterance refers only to its enunciation: ‘I declare war’; performatives are always, by force, in the first person, otherwise they would slip towards the constative: ‘he declares war’); here, the unwarranted sentence performs an impossibility. (190)

“The unwarranted sentence performs an impossibility”: What it means to “perform an impossibility” is the subject of this paper. Or, to risk tautology for specificity, this paper will interrogate the occult conditions for the performance of the impossible. While constative language is a discursive mode that simply describes, designating other words, other concepts, or other things in the world, performative speech acts self referentially designate themselves in a recoiling movement, as Barthes writes—but they are self referential in the sense that they do what they say they do: I declare war, I command, I promise, I hereby pronounce you man and wife, and so on. Speech acts are indeed actions that affect material change in world. A war begins, a responsibility is given or inherited, a binding contract is made, and in the metaphysical contract of marriage, two souls magically combine into one. Or in the case of the declaration of independence, as we will see, a new state, populated by a new “people” is birthed into existence. Such speech acts perform, as Barthes writes, by “force.”

At first it seems that this is a performative “that neither Austin nor Beneviste had foreseen in their analyses,” because it does not produce any worldly change other than frightening “that whole company” out of their wits. But more significantly, it is a performative that could not have been foreseen by their analyses because, in its circularity, it erases the very distinction between the constative and the performative. Austin is very careful to remind us that only certain speech acts are “felicitous.” In the memorable anecdote in which the queen is about to christen a new ship, a drunk man runs from out of the crowd, snatches the bottle from her raised arm, and, smashing it against the ship’s hull, cries out: “I hereby christen this ship the U.S.S. Stalin!” Clearly, the drunk man’s intervention is not a “felicitous” one (he does not succeed in naming the ship) because he lacks the necessary symbolic capital. One question that Austin’s work raises is how “felicity” can be appropriated: under what conditions can those excluded from what Derrida has called the “right” to name, or the “right” to and of language, appropriate that right? By erasing the distinction between the constative and performative, or perhaps by descending to the level at which all constation is based on an a priori performative, Poe’s *Valdemar* offers an allegory of such an appropriation, thus exposing a political kernel inside the literary shell. What makes this text literary is what makes it political: it is the story of one who speaks in spite of his exclusion from it, one who confers upon himself the right of the name, the right of and to language.

The proposition, “he is dead,” is simply an act of constation, a sentence that designates a certain thing in the world distinct from itself: it tells us that the referent of the personal pronoun “he” is dead. Looking by contrast to *Valdemar*’s enunciation, we are now in a position to understand what Barthes means when he calls it impossible:

I am dead.

By all accounts, it looks like mere descriptive language—except for the grotesque way that the proposition auto-cannibalizes itself. The grammatical sovereignty of the subject over the predicate suffers a radical reversal, so that predicate turns over onto the subject, and modifies its

meaning in such a way that the proposition's own logical conditions are negated. Barthes writes that "performatives are always, by force, in the first person, otherwise they slip towards the constative." Here we have a performative whose "first person" is called into question. This, then, is the vortice of Valdemar's agrammaticality: where, by a "fabulous retroactivity" the felicity of the declaration of independence was assured by its existence in the future, the condition of the proposition "I am dead" is annihilated its very completion by the utterance of the predicate an instant later. The sentence functions like a constative speech act that has appropriated the status of the performative, only to perform its own suicide. The erasure of the difference between "yes" and "no" is therefore not the stuttering product of Valdemar's own confusion. The sentence reads backwards, toward its own oblivion, wiping out the "I," and sending shock waves to its very beginning, where its first rumblings are heard in the oscillation between the initial utterance of "yes" and "no." But who, then, or what, belongs to the thrilling voice that comes out of the tongue?

In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida commented on Barthes reading by saying, "This is not the extraordinary tale by Poe, but the ordinary story of language."¹² Derrida's reasoning rests on the fact that the "I" functions regardless of the life of its referent; just as the "I" of a fictional character operates without the material presence of the body in the world, the "I" of Derrida and Barthes will continue to function after they have died, in precisely the same ways that their names will outlive them, and the books they wrote will continue to function independently of them. Derrida derives "I am dead" out of "I am," and flips Barthes argument so perfectly that the truly impossible utterance becomes "I am immortal." Poe seems to dramatize this theorization with the final moments of the story.

As I rapidly made the mesmeric passes, amid ejaculations of "dead! dead!" absolutely *bursting* from the tongue and not the lips of the sufferer, his whole frame at once—within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk—crumbled—absolutely *rotted* away

¹² Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, p.

beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity. (389)

Thus the master-slave dialectic resolves itself. Here the ideality of words and the “loathsome” putridity of matter coalesce, dissolve into one another insolubly: the word dead “ejaculates” from the vibrating tongue as though it were a bodily secretion even as Valdemar’s limbs coalesce, limbs and bones and connective tissue all rotting into a single, “nearly liquid mass.” It is as though the liquefaction of the body were merely an expression of the liquefaction implicit in his proposition, as though they are plagued by the same vertiginous circularity. Returning to one of our opening points, we could repeat that this moment marks the second and real death of Valdemar, that the resulting pool of liquefied flesh is the seal and sign of the narrator’s mastery as a mesmerist. And yet it is horrifying.

Of the purloined letter, Derrida said to Lacan, in a remarkably precise formula, that the letter can always not reach its destination, that there is always the margin of possibility that the letter will vanish. Here, with the utterance of “I am dead” we have the arrival of a letter, but with no evident sender, implying the opposite formula: there can always be no origin. This is a letter from nowhere, a letter that has written and signed itself. This is the occult “secret” at work in the story, the story’s empty center. At the top of a paragraph the narrator claims this is an unearthly message, a message from an other world, that no human ear has ever heard. Then it is a message from the center of the earth. Similarly, Valdemar’s body is at once liquid and solid: the lower half one lung is a mud of tubercles; its upper portion has ossified, transformed into rock, or bone. When, as he awakens in the moment before death, a “yellow ichor” flows copiously from under the eyelids: the O.E.D tells us that “ichor” can be the blood of animals, a pus-like substance, and the ethereal blood of the gods. The same undecideable ichor oozes from both body and reply.

In “Declarations of Independence,” Derrida argues that the structure of the signature is inscribed within the new institution. If Valdemar’s utterance, conjoined so insolubly with the materiality of his melting body, is a declaration, then it must have a signature. Who, then, has

signed the declaration, “I am dead,” if the “I” has been disconnected from a clear referent? Another way to ask the question: who is haunted here, and by whom? Is the narrator haunted by Valdemar? Is Valdemar haunted by himself, by the narrator? Who is responsible? In the reply, “I am dead,” does the narrator recognize his own signature? Is a mirror stage at work, so that in the reply the narrator—whose gift for mesmerism has ensured this grotesque finale—hears only his own voice, and in the pool of melted flesh he sees his only own image? But not even this would be secure: if he were to see himself in the stain on the bed, the narrator would be infected by the same groundlessness, and become another Valdemar. The horror of Valdemar’s body, his utterance, and the image of his liquefaction is the way it radiates outward, infecting everything with itself, like the old man’s occult, illegible secret. We are all Valdemars.