

VALDEMAR'S TONGUE, POE'S TELEGRAPHY

BY ADAM FRANK

Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" caused a stir when it first appeared in American magazines in December 1845; many readers were willing to believe the tale's first-person scientific account of a mesmeric experiment in deferring death which ends with an instantaneously putrefying body. While Poe did not seem actively interested in perpetrating "Valdemar" as a hoax, he played with his readers' desires to know whether it was true—"It does not become *us*, of course, to offer one word on the point at issue. . . . We leave it to speak for itself."¹ This is Poe's sly joke, for precisely what the tale does through its most startling device, Valdemar's vibrating tongue, is speak for itself to utter into circulation the last, echoing word, a grotesque metacommunication: "I am dead." As Poe put it several years later in a pseudonymous self-review, "Valdemar" "perhaps made a greater 'sensation' than anything else he has written," and it has continued to surprise and attract readers: Poe's main twentieth-century editor Thomas Mabbott introduces "Valdemar" as a "repulsive masterpiece"; Jonathan Elmer, in his reading of the story, labels its climax "one of the most powerfully effective moments in all of Poe"; and the tale has been taken up by Barthes and Derrida.²

This essay reads Valdemar's tongue and its impossible utterances as figures for electromagnetic telegraphy and its unlikely communications, and takes up "Valdemar" in the context of Poe's other writing on mesmerism of the mid-1840s to unfold perceptions and experiences of this ambient technology.³ In part this essay tests a reading method that begins from an observation: at moments when some writers experience shifts in authorial status, their writing and poetics become particularly attentive to whatever publication means, and whatever publication means will be crucially informed by emerging technologies of reproduction or mediums of communication—not only print but also, in the mid-nineteenth-century, photography, telegraphy, and others, whether these are conceived as rival or competing media for print, or simply as newly available and making possible distinctive perceptual experiences.⁴ Between 1843 and 1846 (and especially from the fall of 1844 to the fall of the next year), Poe reached the highpoint of his

career, gaining new fame and infamy, and this moment coincides with his extensive treatment of mesmerism in the three tales and several entries in *Marginalia* that form my main texts in what follows: “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains,” “Mesmeric Revelation,” and “Valdemar.”⁵ Mesmerism offered Poe a way to theorize what a medium for writing could be or do at the moment when just such a new medium was visibly, and audibly, emerging, and he is especially drawn to think through these questions at a moment of transition in his own status as author (or medium).

Poe’s writing makes audible a peculiar experience: Morse’s telegraph offered its perceivers both code—dot and dash inscriptions on paper, in the early version of a recording telegraph—and a kind of sound and movement. The quiet, tap-tap sound, consistently cast as a voice that utters in the absence of the body that is its source, was distinct from other experiences of sound communication without visible sound source, such as thunder, cannon or gunfire, or yells and yodels, all of which depend on sound volume, spatial configuration, and sound wave propagation in the medium of air. Electromagnetic telegraphy communicated coded language by way of electrical signals propagated in the medium of wires and electricity, and its force, I’ll suggest here, lay both in its binary code and in an extension in indexicality which enabled much faster transmission than previous writing or communication at a distance. The strangeness of telegraphic experience for we later users of telephones and CD players is in offering to perception a “voice” that, unlike these later audio technologies, is heard as already code or writing coming from an operator’s fingers and coordinated to the movement of the telegraph key or armature.

This movement was repeatedly figured in nineteenth-century writing as the “clattering tongue” of the telegraph, and if I read Valdemar’s tongue as an early figure for this machine, my aim is to attend to Poe’s writing as it estranges this figure to render telegraphy’s acoustic experiences as a manipulative, violent touch. Poe’s few explicit references to telegraphy make clear that he understood the technology in the specifically graphic terms of his manipulative poetics and theory of writer-reader relations. For example, consider this brief section of the *Marginalia* (November 1844) referring to the device that had six months earlier become a subject of reporting in the newspapers and magazines Poe read, edited, and contributed to:

How many good books suffer neglect through the inefficiency of their beginnings! It is far better that we commence irregularly—

immethodically—than that we fail to arrest attention; but the two points, method and pungency, may always be combined. At all risks, let there be a few vivid sentences *imprimis*, by way of the electric bell to the telegraph. (1322)

Unlike what would rapidly become the standard idealization—the telegraph would be said over and over again to “annihilate space and time”—Poe uses the device as a doubled figure for a “vivid” or arresting writing. Like the bell that signals a communication about to come through the wire, the pun *imprimis* (which condenses the meaning “in the first place” with a word that sounds like impression) directs a reader’s attention specifically to writing. Poe’s advice to begin irregularly or immethodically oddly contrasts with the attention-getting efficiency of this device, as if the telegraphic bell here signals less the efficiency of the new communications medium and more some new risks that accompany it—the risks of the “vividness” of Poe’s preferred sentences or the startling “pungency” he proposes as a method. All Poe’s references to this technology address a figure (specifically an acoustic figure) for his graphic poetics of effect or a theory of writing’s force.

Poe’s writing contrasts with those contemporary treatments that registered telegraphy’s effects with an idealizing, breathless exhilaration that emphasized experiences of simultaneity. Consider this report published in the *New York Herald* on the occasion of an early telegraph line (often described as the first) being tested between Washington, D.C. and Baltimore:

Professor Morse’s telegraph is not only an era in the transmission of intelligence, but it has originated in the mind an entirely new class of ideas, a new species of consciousness. Never before was any one conscious that he knew with certainty what events were at that moment passing in a distant city—40, 100, or 500 miles off. For example, it is now precisely 11 o’clock. The telegraph announces as follows:—

“11 o’clock—Senator Walker is *now* replying to Mr. Butler upon the adoption of the ‘two-third’ rule.”

It requires no small intellectual effort to realize that this is a fact that *now is*, and not one that *has been*. Baltimore is 40 miles from Washington. It is a most wonderful achievement in the arts.⁶

The reporter casts this experience as originating a form of certainty: Senator Walker is now replying to Butler, or rather, Walker is “*now*” replying, as the reporter tries to emphasize with print convention the new experience of simultaneity. If I insist that this fact cannot be known with any more certainty than any other statement—the telegrapher

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sending the message could be lying or wrong, or the operator receiving the message could be misunderstanding the communication—I still do not mean to detract from the reporter’s distinctive experience, which is an experience of writing: “[t]he telegraph announces,” that is, the reporter is listening to someone or something writing at this moment.

Contrast the reporter’s experience with that of a reader of this report who encounters the phrase “11 o’clock—Senator Walker is *now* replying to Mr. Butler”; this reader has no need for telegraphic technology to have some sense of the scene in question, and indeed must be aware of the total lack of simultaneity: “it is now precisely 11 o’clock,” with the accompanying technology of ink on paper and the present tense, insists that it is not precisely 11 o’clock at all; it is any time but 11 o’clock, the 11 o’clock in question; and this any-time-but-now permits the now to be signified. This is Derrida’s point in *Speech and Phenomena* where he cites Valdemar’s impossible utterance in the context of his critique of Husserl’s elaborations of phenomenological presence: “The statement ‘I am alive’ is accompanied by my being dead, and its possibility requires the possibility that I be dead; and conversely. This is not an extraordinary tale by Poe but the ordinary story of language” (97). But what difference does it make that this moment from Poe which assists Derrida in specifying a basic structure of language is both generally or ordinarily graphic and quite specifically telegraphic?

“[T]his is a fact that *now is*”: if there is a new species of consciousness that accompanies electromagnetic telegraphy, it emerges from how aural telegraphic experience makes “this” and “now” and “fact” go together as writing. Electromagnetic telegraphy’s signs are symbolic, but also indexical signs which do not in the first place refer (to some content, “the fact”) but only insist (on some moment) or declare. For the reporter, however, telegraphic experience coordinates indexicality, simultaneity, and truthful representation to reconfigure a form of “liveness” that already belongs to writing but becomes differently embedded in the perception of sound as a guarantee of antfigurative certainty. This reconfigured form of liveness—call it telegraphic sensationalism—is part of C. S. Peirce’s definition of the index: “The index asserts nothing; it only says ‘There!’ It takes hold of our eyes, as it were, and forcibly directs them to a particular object, and there it stops.” Peirce’s speaking sign has particular physiological powers that he casts in these terms:

[T]he *index* . . . like a pointing finger, exercises a real physiological force over the attention, like the power of a mesmerizer, and directs

it to an object of sense. . . . A blinding flash of lightning forces my attention and directs it to a certain moment of time with an emphatic “Now!” Directly following it, I may judge that there will be a terrific peal of thunder, and if it does not come I acknowledge an error. One instant of time is, in itself, exactly like any other instant, one point of space like any other point; nevertheless dates and positions can be approximately distinguished.⁷

Blindness, electricity, and mesmeric power—a power cast as the directing force of utterance—in an experience of simultaneity, a homogenization of space and time, and a control over a reader’s or listener’s attention: Peirce theorizes the index within a discourse of telegraphic sensationalism, a modern (often nationalizing) discourse that coordinates utterance with temporal collapse and physiologized powers over attention and emotion cast as mesmeric.⁸ Perceptions of telegraphy may be crucial to Peirce’s theoretical elaborations, and via Poe as well as Peirce, to Derrida’s.

I turn to Poe’s writings on mesmerism to articulate the relations between the new technology’s acoustic and graphic nature and accompanying fantasies of emotional manipulation. Mesmerism offered Poe and his contemporaries a medium at once spiritual and material in which an individual’s sensations or feelings could be imagined to be connected to those of others and to larger social networks. Electromagnetic telegraphy literalized these social networks of feeling, elaborating a physiologized social body comprised of wires and electricity, keys and armatures. Poe’s writings on mesmerism theorize this physiologized field as it offers access to potentially shared sensations, especially via a (male) reader’s body and its potential for being de-differentiated from the body of the writer. His tales of mesmerism stage scene after scene of writing, each more unlikely, controlling, and dangerous for both writer and reader than the last; they depict not scenes of individualizing mastery but scenes of control’s excess or loss of control for everyone involved.

Poe’s mesmeric poetics depict at an early moment of its emergence the phenomenon that Jonathan Sterne calls telegraphic intimacy, the investment of sound telegraphy “with the possibility of a depth of feeling and communication that was hitherto reserved for face-to-face and written interaction.”⁹ Besides “Valdemar,” the most startling instance of telegraphic intimacy I have encountered is a passage from Robert W. Chambers’s 1932 *Whistling Cat*, a very late addition to the subgenre of telegraph romance that became popular after the Civil War. Two-thirds of the way through the book the narrator Juan and his partner

Iris, Union Army telegraph operators, are trapped behind a group of Southern militia who have downed a communications wire, and Iris uses the two ends of the cut wire to send for help. Juan worries that they cannot receive any message in return since they don't have an armature or key to read with, but resourceful Iris shows Juan what to do:

“Hold them that way,” she said to me. . . . “Try not to hurt me, darling—” And again she thrust out her tongue and I gently pressed the two ends of the wire into it.

Instantly the electric pulsations gave to her tongue a vibratory movement like a telegraph armature. I could read the involuntary oscillations of her little pink tongue as easily as I could have read my own magnet.¹⁰

This over-the-top staging of the graphic quality of electromagnetic telegraphy offers a sadomasochistic love scene between Juan and Iris; but there is also a third person, the distant (and gender unknown) operator who remotely controls Iris while Juan assists and watches. A magnet, a distant finger, a little pink body-part out of control: I think the specific vividness of this scene comes from how it condenses or de-differentiates various body parts and devices, and maps their movements onto a network of communication and control in which organic nerves and inorganic wires are not only analogized but made to be functionally continuous. And the specific function is writing: a hand at-a-distance produces coded or symbolic utterance without any physical interiority—no breath coming from lungs through vocal chords shaped by lips and mouth, but rather an electrical transmission, read visually as if the tongue were part of a writing machine, which it is. Such perceptions of telegraphic writing are only very tenuously perceptions of any individual's “voice”; but they are, in the first instances, perceptions of a vibratory, and most often acoustic, phenomenon. Jay Clayton has suggested that telegraphy's acoustics have made it less easily assimilable to grand narratives of modernity's “scopic regime”: “By consolidating the sensory effects of the signal, sound technology appears to intensify rather than abstract,” thereby bringing listeners into embodied, close, and potentially queer contact.¹¹ Poe's mesmeric poetics do intensify along acoustic lines, bringing readers into extremely close contact with the writer and writing instruments. But whether the particular forms of embodiment that accompany electromagnetic telegraphy make it any less assimilable to modernity remains unclear to me.¹² Poe's mesmeric poetics are central to that other frustratingly large and unwieldy periodizing term, not “modernity” but “mass cul-

ture.” The following pages explore part of the technological basis for “mass culture,” the specific perceptual experiences of telegraphy and its (anti)figurative elaborations.

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In the early 1840s *magnetism* named an eclectic variety of phenomena. The magnetism long associated with the attractive and repulsive forces of certain materials such as iron and amber had recently been shown to interact with electric current. Experimenters in the 1820s and 1830s had determined that an electric current produced magnetic effects and vice versa, and this work (especially that of Michael Faraday in England and Joseph Henry in the U.S.) permitted new approaches to the old problem of communicating “intelligence,” especially military intelligence, at a distance.¹³ But magnetism, as animal magnetism, also connoted the theory and practice of the eighteenth-century Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer, whose startling cures and crises scandalized Vienna and then Paris in the 1770s and 1780s.¹⁴ Mesmerism reemerged in the United States and England in the late 1830s and 1840s with theories of the unified nature of electrical, magnetic, and nervous phenomena. These overlapping meanings and unifying theories help to explain why mesmerism plays a minor but curious role in all the standard narratives of the invention of telegraphy in the United States.¹⁵ In these mostly heroic and individualizing narratives, mesmerism appears just after Morse finally succeeds (in February 1843) in having a bill brought to Congress to appropriate thirty thousand dollars to construct a telegraph line between Washington and Baltimore. The bill is almost defeated when a speaker “moved that one-half of the appropriation be expended in making experiments with mesmerism”; one of Morse’s supporters appeals to the chair to rule out this amendment as in bad faith, and the chair replies: “It would require a scientific analysis to determine how far the magnetism of mesmerism was analogous to that to be employed in telegraphs.” (‘Laughter.’)¹⁶

This scientific analysis was being pursued, at least in England. Alison Winter’s cultural history of Victorian mesmerism shows both that the investigators of electrical and mesmeric phenomena overlapped, and how this overlap contributed to understandings of the social. Winter tracks changes in the meaning of “consensus” from the coordinated action of different body parts in a single physiology (as in coughing and blinking) to a description of a social body, and locates this physiologizing of the social body, among other places, in the responses to sensation

fiction. Readers especially of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859–1860) described their responses in terms of reflex acts, their “rapt” attention a “direct physiological response that was prior to, and perhaps in many cases more powerful than, self-conscious thought.”¹⁷ Reflex physiology attempted to explain not only how a reader could physically experience something that was represented in the narrative (in Margaret Oliphant's famous review, a touch on the shoulder) but also how reading sensational material could be communal: reflexes might vary among individuals, and these differences were greater at higher levels of organization; but at the lower physiological levels at which Collins's writing was said to operate, reading sensation novels could be a collective activity.¹⁸ The idea that “mass culture” as group sensation operates at the level of the lowest common denominator appears to have one theoretical basis in this mid-nineteenth-century theory of reading in terms of sense-physiology.¹⁹

The physiologizing of the social body made consistent use of reciprocal, literalizing analogies between telegraph wires and human or animal nerves.²⁰ Poe uses such analogies in a review of the popular Swiss Bell-ringers act; the bell-ringers, Poe suggests, are actually automata operating according to the same principles as the electromagnetic telegraph, principles which explain both the performers' remarkable precision and also their ability “to *electrify* their hearers” (1120) (here is another instance of the sound of a telegraphically produced bell that thrills a public). Electrified publics appeared often, especially in U.S. journalistic and other mid-century writing on the technology, as for example in the memoirs of J. G. Bennett, one of the most successful early publishers of American tabloid journalism. These memoirs typify the idealizing mid-century discourse on telegraphy: “the Magnetic Telegraph, which radiates intellectual light like the sun itself, or, as a network, spread from city to city, transmits its subtle fires, vitalized by thought, from one end of the country to the other, as it were uniting into the same day's life and sympathies, and virtually narrowing more than a million square miles into a cognizable span.” This national-theological discourse of the “electrical sublime” idealizes national unity, sympathy, and the powers of the press for creating consensus, as in this citation of Bennett's depiction of telegraphy's powers: “The whole nation is impressed with the same idea at the same moment. One feeling and one impulse are thus created and maintained from the centre of the land to its uttermost extremities.”²¹

While this fantasy of centralized national control invokes a kind of physiologized national body, whose center—or competing centers, New

York and Washington, D.C.—controls its extremities through nerve-like telegraph wires, the work of creating and maintaining feeling takes place in the paragraph that immediately follows this, through the simple means of depicting Bennett's face and body: "In this foreshadowing of the future importance of the Magnetic Telegraph, Mr. Bennett displayed that same enthusiasm which is natural to his disposition when he perceives the certainty of an event of public interest. At such a time his face is swiftly crimsoned with excitement—he breaks forth into a few swift words of exclamation—walks a few steps away and reflects, lest he should be deceived by his own fancy—becomes convinced that he is not in error, and it may be, dictates an article, or writes it with his own hands, to stamp his thought upon the public mind."²² A reader is given Bennett's passion and reflexivity, his sincere enthusiasm tempered by thoughtful reflection, in a generic depiction of mid-century sentimental masculinity. As much as it is about creating national unity and creating or regulating a public mind, the promise of telegraphic sensationalism (or sentimentalism, which may come to the same thing here) is made good by the supposed guarantee of transmission of feeling or affect, from a closely observed face to dictation or writing coming from a properly individuated tongue or hands. In print this transmission of feeling over a network of sympathy relies on the careful depiction of faces and bodies, and many of Poe's prose romances (including the tales of mesmerism) offer stark and idiosyncratic versions of such depiction.

In mid-nineteenth discourse the relation between mesmerism and sympathy is close: mesmeric or magnetic fluid is the stuff of the network of sympathy, and Poe radically condenses this fluid within his theory of mesmeric sensation.²³ Where Bennett's more sentimentalizing telegraphic network insists on properly individuated and assigned body parts, Poe's more sensationalizing mesmeric methods of gaining access to readerly sympathies take advantage of the problem of properly individuating and assigning body parts within a field of mesmeric fluid; and body parts which fail to be properly individuated can become particularly vital or telling, indeed they become points of powerful communication. Poe describes the conditions for such bodily non-individuation in "Mesmeric Revelation" (August 1844), published a little more than a year before "Valdemar." This "essay," as Poe liked to call it, largely consists of a philosophico-theological dialogue between P—and a mesmerized consumptive, Vankirk, who once entranced transmits his knowledge of the material substratum of the universe. He explains that there is no immateriality, only gradations of matter,

with the final gradation being the “ultimate, or unparticled matter,” “a matter as much more rare than the ether, as this ether is more rare than the metal” (1034). This unparticled matter permits man to have “two bodies—the rudimental and the complete” or “ultimate.” The former experiences ordinary sensation, communicated by way of “vibrations,” say, from a “luminous body” to the retina to the optic nerve to the brain; that is, Vankirk understands ordinary sensation to work by way of associationist theories of the vibratory action of the nerves as well as sense-physiology’s doctrine of specific nerve energies. The “ultimate body,” however, gives one access to “unorganized” sensation much more directly.

[I]n the ultimate, unorganized life, the external world reaches the whole body, (which is of a substance having affinity to brain, as I have said,) with no other intervention than that of an infinitely rarer ether than even the luminiferous; and to this ether—in unison with it—the whole body vibrates, setting in motion the unparticled matter which permeates it. (1037–38)

The “ultimate body” is all unparticled matter, but we only feel unorganized sensation when the rudimentary body dies or exists in a state that resembles death—between sleep and waking, the mesmeric state. Mesmerism, for Poe, is a method for gaining access to “unorganized” sensation: he is after the “ultimate body.”

Given that the “unparticled matter, not only permeates all things but impels all things—and thus *is* all things within itself” (1033), it remains far from clear how any object or body, in its “whole” or “ultimate” form, can be individuated or distinguished from any other. But this problem turns out to be productive for Poe’s poetics, as can be gathered from the *Marginalia* for March 1846, where he revisits mesmerism as a method of gaining access to particular sensations. “I do not believe that any thought, properly so called, is out of the reach of language,” asserts Poe against transcendentalizing theories of the inexpressible; yet the subject of this short piece is “a class of fancies, of exquisite delicacy, which are *not* thoughts, and to which, *as yet*, I have found it absolutely impossible to adapt language.”²⁴ His search for a method of gaining written access to such fancies leads Poe once again to the mesmeric state.

I am aware of these “fancies” only when I am upon the very brink of sleep, with the consciousness that I am so. I have satisfied myself that this condition exists but for an inappreciable *point* of time—yet it is

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crowded with these “shadows of shadows”; and for absolute *thought* there is demanded time’s *endurance*. (1383)

In the somnambulistic state Poe can open out this point of time and put words to what he calls these “psychal impressions” (a term Vankirk uses as well) (1384). These are no ordinary impressions; accompanying them is a “pleasurable ecstasy,” a feeling-state that Poe analyzes in terms of a “delight [that] has, as its element, but *the absoluteness of novelty*” (1383). This physiologized novelty—“It is as if the five senses were supplanted by five myriad others alien to mortality”—is what he’s after, and motivates his efforts at self-control. Poe writes that he can “prevent the lapse from *the point* of which I speak—the point of blending between wakefulness and sleep” and, waking himself up, “*transfer the point itself into the realm of Memory*; convey its impressions, or more properly their recollections, to a situation where (although still for a very brief period) I can survey them with the eye of analysis” (1384). In “Valdemar,” Poe’s mesmerist-narrator/writer will attempt to open up this point of time in the experiment to defer Valdemar’s death, and there we encounter similar transactions between time, writing, and memory. Here Poe’s solitary mesmeric efforts give him access to a social space of shared fancy:

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I am not to be understood as supposing that the fancies, or psychal impressions, to which I allude, are confined to my individual self—are not, in a word, common to all mankind—for on this point it is quite impossible that I should form an opinion—but nothing can be more certain than that even a partial record of the impressions would startle the universal intellect of mankind, by the *supremeness of the novelty* of the material employed, and of its consequent suggestions. In a word—should I ever write a paper on this topic, the world will be compelled to acknowledge that, at last, I have done an original thing. (1384–85)

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“In a word,” the mesmeric method may have more to do with Poe’s intense desire for successful written material than with anything else. The psychal space, at once Poe’s own and shared by “all mankind”—which, if tapped through mesmerism, guarantees compelling writing (“an original thing”)—sounds remarkably like the space of Vankirk’s ultimate body.

Originality and novelty continue to appear as key terms for Poe’s mesmeric poetics. He returns and complicates these terms in his second Hawthorne review (published in *Godey’s Magazine and Lady’s Book* for November 1847), written, according to Michael Allen, when

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he was “exultant” about “Valdemar”’s success.²⁵ Here Poe spins out a theory of originality and popularity that lets him mark his difference from Hawthorne, “the example, *par excellence*, in this country, of the privately-admired and publicly-unappreciated man of genius.”²⁶ Poe disagrees with the conventional critical explanation of Hawthorne, the one that accepts the cliché that a very original writer necessarily fails as a popular one, and he exults in these “facts” and “truths”: “But the simple truth is, that the writer who aims at impressing the people, is *always* wrong when he fails in forcing that people to receive the impression”; “It is, in fact, the excitable, undisciplined child-like popular mind which most keenly feels the original. . . . The fact is, that if Mr. Hawthorne were really original, he could not fail of making himself felt by the public.” Poe’s embrace of the mass market casts true originality in these terms:

This true or commendable originality, however, implies not the uniform, but the continuous peculiarity—a peculiarity springing from ever-active vigor of fancy—better still if from ever-present force of imagination, giving its own hue, its own character to everything it touches, and, especially, *self impelled to touch everything*.²⁷

Poe reaches out and touches someone, everyone, everything, a force which emerges from that space of supreme novelty Poe describes in the *Marginalia*. But this novelty is only apparent, as he further specifies his manipulative touch in an interesting gloss on “true originality”:

But the true originality—true in respect of its purposes—is that which, in bringing out the half-formed, the reluctant, or the unexpressed fancies of mankind, or in exciting the more delicate pulses of the heart’s passion, or in giving birth to some universal sentiment or instinct in embryo, thus combines with the pleasurable effect of *apparent* novelty, a real egoistic delight. The reader, in the case first supposed, (that of the absolute novelty,) is excited, but embarrassed, disturbed, in some degree even pained at his own want of perception, at his own folly in not having hit upon the idea. In the second case, his pleasure is doubled. He is filled with an intrinsic and extrinsic delight. He feels and intensely enjoys the seeming novelty of the thought, enjoys it as really novel, as absolutely original with the writer—and himself. They two, he fancies, have, alone of all men, thought thus. They two have, together, created this thing. Henceforward there is a bond of sympathy between them, a sympathy which irradiates every subsequent page of the book.²⁸

“True originality” passes through a set of disjunctive phrases, sets itself up in two cases, and concludes as a series of doubles: “pleasure is doubled,” the “real egoistic delight” turns out to be both “intrinsic and extrinsic,” the novelty shared “with the writer—and himself,” and the repetitions of “They two” and “sympathy.” Elmer reads this passage to suggest that “Poe’s sympathy . . . creates a unity . . . a single, mass reading public,” but if so it is a unity that is structured not as a mass but as a potentially infinitely iterable series of readers, “subsequent” as the pages of a book, each of whom doubles the writer.²⁹ Poe decomposes “true originality” to guide the erotics of writing for publication: in imagining his “self impelled to touch everything,” to coax only “*apparent[ly]* novel” serial pleasures, Poe makes a familiar male body the mesmeric space of fancy shared by readers and writer.

This male body appears in Poe’s first tale of mesmerism, “A Tale of the Ragged Mountains,” a baroque story initially published in *Godey’s Magazine and Lady’s Book* for April 1844. The tale offers an opportunity to track some aspects of Poe’s poetics as I have been unfolding them in the last few pages: a mesmeric scene of writing, an accompanying manipulative control over a male body, and the opening up of a point of time with fatal results. As well, a less condensed and more legible version of the figure that appears as Valdemar’s tongue appears in this tale, which will permit me to locate the new graphic technology in this scene of writing. The tale begins with the narrator’s detailed attention to the mysterious neuralgic Augustus Bedloe’s face and body:

He was singularly tall and thin. He stooped much. His limbs were exceedingly long and emaciated. His forehead was broad and low. His complexion was absolutely bloodless. His mouth was large and flexible, and his teeth were more wildly uneven, although sound, than I had ever before seen teeth in a human head. The expression of his smile, however, was by no means unpleasing, as might be supposed; but it had no variation whatever. It was one of profound melancholy—of a phaseless and unceasing gloom. His eyes were abnormally large, and round like those of a cat. The pupils, too, upon any accession or diminution of light, underwent contraction or dilation, just such as is observed in the feline tribe. In moments of excitement the orbs grew bright to a degree almost inconceivable; seeming to emit luminous rays, not of a reflected, but of an intrinsic lustre, as does a candle or the sun; yet their ordinary condition was so totally vapid, filmy and dull, as to convey the idea of the eyes of a long-interred corpse. (940)

This moon-eyed Bedloe resembles a typical Poe beloved, all big eyes and bloodless complexion, skinny, melancholy, and intense. Entranced,

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like Berenice (whose “lifeless and lustreless” eyes and commanding teeth fix the narrator’s attention in that tale), melancholy and (it will turn out) reincarnated like Morella, and feline like the black cat: here are Poe’s unlucky beloveds all rolled up into one, and his specialty too is returning from the dead.³⁰ Like Poe’s heterosexual romances, this tale and “Valdemar” feature struggles of will, episodes of violence, possession, and revenge. The main difference is that the erotics of this romance reside in Bedloe’s “singular” body, which resembles that other sensitized mesmeric subject, “M. Valdemar . . . particularly noticeable for the extreme spareness of his person—his lower limbs much resembling those of John Randolph” (1234). Bedloe is singular, except that he resembles M. Valdemar, who in turn resembles John Randolph, the “cadaverous Virginia statesman” (1243) (as Poe’s editor Mabbott puts it)—in this context, the “spareness of [Valdemar’s] person” seems a pun, for these subjects are all spares for one another.

The tale is largely comprised of Bedloe’s description of his strange experiences wandering through the Ragged Mountains of Virginia. Bedloe is reminiscent of Charles Brockden Brown’s sleepwalkers for whom the altered magnetic state of romance animates the American ground as inexhaustible source for writing. Bedloe finds himself looking down upon “an Eastern-looking city, such as we read of in the Arabian Tales. . . . I could perceive its every nook and corner, as if delineated on a map,” and what he sees is graphic, dense and detailed: “The streets seemed innumerable, and crossed each other irregularly in all directions, but were rather long winding alleys than streets, and absolutely swarmed with inhabitants.” The description that follows, in the mode of what Poe terms arabesque, depicts “wildly picturesque” houses, “a wilderness of balconies, of verandahs, of minarets,” “bazaars abounded” with “rich wares,” and so on (945). This is at once orientalist fantasy and a description of the American ground as inexhaustible resource: the ground, delineated by crossing streets, alleys, and the river, is already a map or writing.

Bedloe’s experience turns out to be a hallucination guided entirely by the writing of his physician-mesmerist, Doctor Templeton: “[A]t the very period in which you fancied these things amid the hills, I was engaged in detailing them upon paper here at home” (949). This, at its most literal, is Poe’s theory or fantasy of the mesmeric relation between writer and reader: Templeton transmits detailed impressions from his pen and Bedloe receives them right in the temple. When Bedloe sets out on his wanderings and follows “the windings of a pass” new to him, imagining that the secluded spot was “absolutely virgin” and he the first

human to tread on that terrain—"the very first and sole adventurer who had ever penetrated its recesses" (942–43)—we can hear what Derrida describes as breaching or path-making, the "excessively sinuous" (943) path that will be Dr. Templeton's presumably cursive script on the "freshly written" (949) manuscripts he produces that day.

Writing means getting into Bedloe's brain. We are given a number of reasons for Bedloe's peculiar susceptibility to Templeton's writing. For one, there's the "very distinct and strongly marked *rapport*, or magnetic relation" (941) that had developed between them that seems to be the explanation for how Bedloe could receive Templeton's transmission. But then there's a strange duplication of faces and names: Templeton writes of seeing his friend Mr. Oldeb killed by a poison arrow at "the insurrection of Cheyte Sing" (949) in Benares in 1780, and Bedloe's and Oldeb's names are almost perfect converses; Templeton also shows Bedloe and our narrator a watercolor portrait of Oldeb which exactly resembles Bedloe, of whom readers have received a detailed description. The continuities between these two are both graphic and photographic: Poe had already written about an uncannily accurate portrait in "The Oval Portrait," and the "miraculous accuracy" (948) of Oldeb's picture, especially if (anachronistically to the tale's setting, but not writing) a daguerreotype would invert Oldeb's image, as the name "Bedloe" inverts "Oldeb." Both graphic image and name make redundant Templeton's agentive, writerly control, for Bedloe's experiences seem to be already determined by the graphic nature of Bedloe as Oldeb reincarnated.

Templeton's redundant writerly control turns out to have fatal consequences for Bedloe. In his hallucinations, Bedloe is suddenly motivated to join some men in partly British uniforms battling the inhabitants of the city. He relives Oldeb's foolhardy rush to combat the crowd, is set upon by spears and arrows, and dies when one of the arrows hits him: "They resembled in some respects the writhing creese of the Malay. They were made to imitate the body of a creeping serpent, and were long and black, with a poisoned barb. One of them struck me upon the right temple" (947). A week after these hallucinations, our narrator reads an item in a Charlottesville newspaper announcing "the death of AUGUSTUS BEDLO" (note the missing 'e') from an accidental application to his temple of a poisonous leech which closely resembles the proper medicinal leech (949). Templeton, it would appear, has unintentionally killed Bedloe twice, for the report concludes with this note:

N.B. The poisonous sangsue of Charlottesville may always be distinguished from the medicinal leech by its blackness, and especially by its writhing or vermicular motions, which very nearly resemble those of a snake. (950)

Poe gives us an always distinguishable (except this time) black leech in an iterated series: black leech, black arrow, black snake, writhing creese. This iterated figure turns up in its most powerful version as Valdemar's tongue, at once extended and creased.

In addition to this iterated figure and the careful description of Bedloe's face and body, I want to take one other thing from this tale back to a reading of "Valdemar," its insistent emphasis on sound: a drumbeat first indicates to Bedloe that he is in some altered magnetic state, or beginning to hallucinate what will turn out to be Templeton's writing; and soon after, "there came a wild rattling or jingling sound, as if of a bunch of large keys" (943). Recall the narrator's particular attention to Bedloe's teeth: "more wildly uneven, although sound, than I had ever before seen teeth in a human head." Bedloe's sound teeth assonate with the creeses and leeches, those agents of his and Oldeb's death, and the keys which initiate Templeton's transmission. If his eyes are photographic, his teeth are telegraphic: the typographical error which takes away the silent "e" in Bedloe's name—the narrator worries over this error at the end of the tale—indexes both the graphic continuity between the identity of Bedlo/Oldeb, and summons the point of time so central to Poe's poetics of "psychal impressions," the "e," that is, the single dot of Morse's code.

Like "Ragged Mountains," "Valdemar" offers an allegory of writer-reader relations in the environment of the new graphic technology. But where the earlier tale poses this relation as one of unidirectional (though unintentional and unpredictable) control, "Valdemar" does something different. Valdemar, the subject of the mesmeric experiment, is himself a writer, specifically a translator who can serve well as a medium. He has published Polish translations of Rabelais and Schiller "under the *nom de plume* of Issachar Marx"; that is, Valdemar is a link to European political theory, and in Meredith McGill's terms, a figure for Poe's "creative embrace of America's cultural secondarity." McGill summarizes a crucial aspect of Poe's manipulative poetics: "Poe's association of authorial control with duplicity defines authorship not as origination but as manipulation, a practice defined by interruption, inconsistency, and uncertainty, not mastery."³¹ Mesmerism, for Poe, names this form of duplicitous authorial control; it may connote mastery but in practice it operates via interruption, inconsistency, and

uncertainty, figuring the manipulation of a social body that is undecidably writer's and reader's. This manipulative agency begins on the side of the mesmerist narrator in "Valdemar" but does not remain there: in this tale agency is transferred to Valdemar, or more specifically, to Valdemar's tongue. Like Templeton's pen and the leech that kills Bedloe, Valdemar's tongue is the point of mesmeric access to the ultimate body of readerly sensation, and while such access is necessarily by way of print for Poe the magazinist, print's possibilities become imbued with perceptions of telegraphic communication.

Much is at stake, then, in the narrator P—'s desire for mesmeric control over Valdemar's body, which is cast as a struggle for control over writing and, particularly, style. The narrator's distinctive style, an officious first-person narration, almost entirely avoids figurative language in favor of a facts-in-the-case insistence on strict timekeeping and medical terminology. This trumped up style echoes that of contemporary publications that aimed to make mesmerism legitimate as a scientific subject in the 1840s.³² But it solicits sensation from the opening paragraph, in which the doctor-mesmerist introduces himself, hyper-defended and overexposed before a voracious, unbelieving public:

Of course I shall not pretend to consider it any matter for wonder, that the extraordinary case of M. Valdemar has excited discussion. It would have been a miracle had it not—especially under the circumstances. Through the desire of all parties concerned, to keep the affair from the public, at least for the present, or until we had further opportunities for investigation—through our endeavors to effect this—a garbled or exaggerated account made its way into society, and became the source of many unpleasant misrepresentations, and, very naturally, of a great deal of disbelief.

It is now necessary that I give the *facts*—as far as I comprehend them myself. (1233)

"To announce a truth is to stipulate the existence of an enigma," writes Roland Barthes, and when the narrator repeats this stipulation (the extraordinary case, the circumstances, the affair, the account, the facts), he builds up the "garbled or exaggerated account" that is both the tale itself and its pretext.³³

Valdemar's writing in a direct, stoic note contrasts with the narrator's officious style and makes clear the urgency of the experiment: "My dear P—, You may as well come *now*. D— and F— are agreed that I cannot hold out beyond tomorrow midnight; and I think they have hit the time very nearly." When P— arrives Valdemar is still strong

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enough to be “occupied in penciling memoranda in a pocket-book,” but the narrator immediately begins to draw the agency of writing away when he “press[es] Valdemar’s hand” and “postpone[s] operations” for more than twenty-four hours, as if to weaken him further. This perverse deferral accompanies P—’s narrative style: he defers for want of “more reliable witnesses” than the nurses in attendance and only continues with the experiment when a medical student shows up. The presence of this student permits the transfer of Valdemar’s writing agency to P—, for “it is from [the student’s] memoranda that what I now have to relate is, for the most part, either condensed or copied *verbatim*” (1235–36).

The tale literalizes the interruption, uncertainty, and inconsistency that comprise Poe’s understanding of manipulation in descriptions of the mesmerist’s attempts to control Valdemar’s limbs. Eventually these succeed, but P— excitedly misreads this success as mastery over Valdemar’s psychic state. He asks Valdemar the same question over and over again (“do you still sleep?”) until the mesmeric operation begins to backfire.

While I spoke, there came a marked change over the countenance of the sleep-waker. 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 the 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 extended, 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. (1239)

As sudden here as Valdemar’s apparent death is P—’s awareness of writing: he interrupts the scientifico-legal style to become reflexive in his choice of words. We get drawn through emphasis and reflexivity to the more or less banal analogy of death as the extinguishing of a candle, but this misdirects our attention from the tale’s first instance of the figurative, the preceding analogy of Valdemar’s skin to white paper.

The presence of the figurative, and the specific figure of white

paper, marks the change in both “Valdemar” and Valdemar: it brings Valdemar further along his passionate trajectory from someone who writes to writing surface, and its concealment brings us closer to what Neil Hertz would call the sublime turn in the story, “the point where the near-fatal stress of passion can be thought of as turning into—as indistinguishable from—the energy that is constituting the poem.”³⁴ Valdemar seems to have become Locke’s perfect passive receptor, the mind as white paper. But it is not Valdemar’s mind—interior, private, nonmaterial—that is likened to white paper, it is the skin of his face; and Valdemar is an old, dead or dying man rather than a newborn blank slate. Poe’s Valdemar, Locke’s epistemological subject turned inside out, is able not just to be impressed or imprinted upon but to impress upon others.³⁵ And he has brought along his own instrument for this sensational effect: Valdemar’s “swollen and blackened tongue,” so exposed and disclosed against his “white paper” skin, displaces the previous figure by making it the ground in this picture. The figure of white paper becomes concealed as a ground is concealed, in plain sight.

This reversal of figure and ground prepares the way for the next long passage, in which Valdemar’s disgusting face forces P—’s writing to shuttle back and forth between the figurative and the inexpressible. The narrator once again becomes reflexive about his writing, and tries to guide a reader.

There was no longer the faintest sign of vitality in M. Valdemar; and concluding him to be dead, we were consigning him to the charge of the nurses, when a strong vibratory movement was observable in his tongue. This continued for perhaps a minute. At the expiration of this period, 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 it 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, nevertheless, 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 matters impress the sense of touch.

I have spoken both of “sound” and “voice.” I mean to say that the sound was one of distinct—of even wonderfully, thrillingly distinct—

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syllabification. M. Valdemar *spoke*—obviously in reply to the question I had propounded to him a few minutes before. I had asked him, it will be remembered, if he still slept. He now said:

“Yes;—no;—I *have been* sleeping—and now—now—I *am dead*.”
(1240)

This amazing passage enacts the disintegration and figurative reconstitution that Hertz calls the sublime turn: the disintegration of P—’s writing in shuttling between the figurative and the inexpressible, and the reconstitution of a different writing in Valdemar’s impossible utterance. What has been transferred is agency of expression or writing itself, from the mesmerist to Valdemar’s tongue: this tongue gives forth utterance that does not have its source in the controlled body that is uttering. The vibrating movement of the tongue aims to make accessible the shared psychic space of the “ultimate body” in Poe’s poetics (to recall the terms of “Mesmeric Revelation”) by way of the broken and hollow telegraphic voice or sound heard as if “from a vast distance.” The narrator’s uncertainty over whether to describe this utterance as “voice” or “sound” registers the particularity of perceptions of Morse’s device, and the “thrillingly distinct syllabification” both radically exaggerates his own antifigurative style and describes the telegraphic transmission’s precision and tap-tap distinctness.

The telegraphic effect of Valdemar’s tongue is cast as much more powerful than the mesmerist’s, perverse and unavoidable. “No person present even affected to deny, or attempted to repress, the unutterable, shuddering horror which these few words, thus uttered, were so well calculated to convey” (1240): here, again, Poe makes acoustic experience available through poetic devices, as the half-rhyme unutterable/shuddering maps the sensation of shuddering onto the movement of the tongue and those who are listening to its utterances. “Mr L—I (the student) swooned. The nurses immediately left the chamber, and could not be induced to return. My own impressions I would not pretend to render intelligible to the reader” (1240–41): Valdemar’s stuttering utterance communicates its effects like a tuning fork struck against the page, as if the stop-start form of the words and punctuation (a semi-colon followed by a dash), emphasis and repetition (“Yes;—no;—I *have been* sleeping—and now—now—I *am dead*”) makes the tongue, its words, and the swooning persons continuous, part of a single sensational medium; and aims to make a reader’s tongue shudder too, or perhaps laugh, for who is doing the calculating here?

My point is not to insist, once again, on Poe the master of manipulation. Poe’s writing, I am suggesting, is itself a medium that registers the

“indescribable” perceptions of telegraphic communication, perceptions both of writing in general and of how telegraphic writing appears to make contact: by way of a “thrilling” consensus of bodily movement. If this tale registers the thrill of telegraphic perception figuratively (the primary figure of Valdemar’s tongue) and formally (in terms of verbal technique), it also does so affectively: Valdemar’s utterance is framed by the overly legible expression of disgust (upper lip up, mouth distended, tongue out), and some of the forceful effects of this tale come from this blatant depiction of a disgusted and disgusting face. Other moments in the tale evoke disgust: when the narrator struggles to describe the feeling of the sound coming from Valdemar’s tongue as “gelatinous or glutinous,” he makes the voice continuous with the substance that later flows from Valdemar’s eyes, a “profuse outflowing of a yellowish ichor . . . of a pungent and highly offensive odor” (1242). This in turn reappears as the substance of putrefaction with which the tale leaves us at the end when, after seven months of suspended animation, the narrator finally decides to end the experiment and bring Valdemar out of his trance.

As I rapidly made the mesmeric passes, amid ejaculations of “dead! dead!” absolutely *bursting* from the tongue and not from 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 beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity. (1242–43)

The temporal collapse and the collapse of Valdemar’s “frame” are both mapped onto the collapse of the frame of the tale, the tongue’s telegraphic emissions bringing everything to a revolting climax.

But why would the force of the new graphic technology be framed specifically by disgust? Are we to conclude that, for Poe, telegraphy is disgusting? I think there are a number of other, more interesting reasons for the presence of this particular affect. First, quite simply, disgust is the only affect that gives you an outstretched tongue; the literalization of a telegraphic “voice” as emerging from a tongue/stylus may, in part, accidentally be disgusting (that is, contingent on the evolution of the human face and this particular expression). As well, disgust lets Poe make fun of us: to tone down the thrill of the conclusion of the tale, think of it as a kind of Bronx cheer. Poe’s mockery may make more sense if one considers the role of disgust in the dynamics of what Silvan Tomkins calls decontamination scripts, scripts or affect theories that organize perception around some impurity; disgust motivates attempts

to expel the impurity.³⁶ The narrator's facts-in-the-case, antifigurative style can be understood as governed by a decontamination script, one that tries to purify itself of figurative language: the struggle between the narrator and Valdemar, a struggle over style, is more specifically over figure, and it is just after the first figure of Valdemar's "white paper" skin appears that Valdemar's expression changes to that of disgust. Poe's Bronx cheer at the end concludes what would then be a broad joke, a burlesque of the antifigurative style and its desire for a purified control. The more the mesmerist-narrator tries to control Valdemar's limbs (his figure), the more Valdemar responds by exaggerated figurations, impossible utterances and, eventually, his exploding body. The decontamination script offered by this tale would not be about the "impurity" of the new graphic technology, but rather what this technology has already begun to serve as a figure for: antifiguration, the coordination of "this" and "fact" and "now" that idealizes the technology within the discourse of telegraphic sensationalism. What Poe's tale lets us read in his twisted version of this discourse is, in part, the decontamination script that guides the tendency to use telegraphy to figure precisely the goal of vanishing mediation and producing transparency, what will become generic movements toward varieties of realism.³⁷ Poe's writing insists not on telegraphy as antifigurative but on telegraphy as (from the start) an overdetermined figure for, precisely, effective or manipulative writing, writing that may conceal the figurative but can never do without it.

This could be one conclusion of my essay: that Poe's writing is a joke on the antifigurative style that the new technology will come to stand for, the changes in how writing can be imagined to make contact. But I want to offer a more positive conclusion as well. Winfried Menninghaus's book on disgust offers a number of possible answers to the question of why disgust frames perceptions of telegraphy in Poe's tale. Disgust, he shows, plays a particular role in defining the field of eighteenth-century (German) aesthetics: in its association with the proximity of the "lower senses" of touch, smell, and taste, disgust short circuits reflection and prevents the experience of aesthetic illusion; disgust becomes the defining limit for Enlightenment aesthetics, especially in rules for depicting the beautiful human form as exemplified by classical sculpture. In nineteenth-century European literature disgust comes to play a different role, in part because music (rather than sculpture) becomes the ideal of the poetic: "with just that art possessing the weakest link to the disgust-sensation coming to dominate the post-1800 stage of aesthetic reflection, the older disgust-taboo loses a considerable amount of its

powers of distinction.”³⁸ Poe’s tale insists on the possibilities of auditory disgust, or to put this differently: disgust foregrounds the indexicality of telegraphic communication by coordinating sound (as well as sight, in depictions of Valdemar’s voice and face) to a forceful touch. The force of this touch emerges in part from the role of disgust in the “poetry of putrefaction” (Baudelaire is Menninghaus’s primary example): “as an organic process, ‘putrefaction’ is a(n) (ironic) figure of defiguration that, starting with the advent of Romanticism, is repeatedly used in the description of libidinous desire, vice, and the historical signature of the passions in general.”³⁹ For Poe’s poetics of manipulation, Valdemar’s putrefaction can represent a (fully and formally self-ironized) manipulation of the passions in general: the stuff of Valdemar’s body is the stuff of sympathy, affect, or sensation itself, a much less refined version than what Vankirk describes in “Mesmeric Revelation.”

Derrida’s reading of Valdemar’s utterance as it insists on the requirement of absence for signification remains more than ever to the point here. What I hope to have done is to open out this point to a variety of experiences of presence, and especially to affective presence in print as taking on the (acoustic, indexical) forces of other graphic means. Valdemar’s utterance, as well as his disgusting face and putrefying body, frame perceptions of telegraphy as they raised the stakes of the liveness/deadness of writing. These stakes are political insofar as the control of body parts, thinking, and feeling of people at a distance through the operations of writing creates the imagined possibility of a social body’s consensus through the powerful force of a mass medium. If these stakes belong more properly to the “liveness” of radio or television than to that of electromagnetic telegraphy (never quite a mass medium), part of what this essay shows is how the groundwork for this configuration was laid in the mid-nineteenth-century discourse of telegraphic sensationalism and the mesmeric powers granted to the indexicality of the new technology. Poe’s writing acutely registers and theorizes such perceptions in the terms of his primary poetic problem, the control of his readers’ sensations or feelings, staged in the form of a repetitive manipulation.

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NOTES

¹ From Poe’s introduction to the tale in the *Broadway Journal*, 20 December 1845. Reprinted in *Edgar Allan Poe: Tales and Sketches*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott, vol. 2 (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2000), 1230. Unless otherwise specified, all references to Poe are to this volume and are cited parenthetically by page number.

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² Poe, "A Reviewer Reviewed," in *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Mabbott, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, Belknap Press, 1978), 1377; Mabbott, in *Tales and Sketches*, 1228; Jonathan Elmer, *Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture, and Edgar Allan Poe* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995), 123; Roland Barthes, "Textual Analysis of a Tale of Poe," in *On Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985), 84–97; Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973), 1 and 96–97. Gregory Whitehead mentions "Valdemar" in the context of a literary prehistory of radio art in "Out of the Dark: Notes on the Nobodies of Radio Art," in *Wireless Imagination: Sound, Radio, and the Avant-garde*, ed. Douglas Kahn and Whitehead (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), 253–63.

³ See Christopher Johnson, "Ambient Technologies, Uncanny Signs," *Oxford Literary Review* 21 (1999): 117–34. Johnson defines ambient technologies by contrast with invisible ones which have become "more or less unconsciously assimilated into everyday practice and behaviour"; "'ambient' technology . . . would refer to 'new' technologies that have not yet undergone such assimilation and as such retain a degree of visibility. This visibility would relate not only to the immediate, empirical instances of when, where and how new technologies are used, but also to their revealing function, that is, how they permit modes of experience, conceptualization, and representation hitherto unimagined" (132 n. 2). My interest here in audibility rather than visibility will make revelation less to the point than selective or directed attention. For a different treatment of Poe and telegraphic writing see Shawn Rosenheim, *The Cryptographic Imagination: Secret Writing from Edgar Poe to the Internet* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997), 87–111.

⁴ I am seeking here to contribute to the growing body of critical work on media change, for example as collected in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*, ed. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003). For another essay that practices this particular reading method see my "Emily Dickinson and Photography," *Emily Dickinson Journal* 10 (2001): 1–21.

⁵ In October 1844, not long after moving to New York, Poe took up a position at the *Evening Mirror*, and the beginning of the next year saw the publication of "The Raven" and Poe's sudden rise to fame: his entry into New York literary society; the publication of *Tales* (Wiley and Putnam, 1845) and *The Raven and Other Poems* (Wiley and Putnam, 1845); his contributions to the *Broadway Journal*, of which he then became editor and proprietor; the "Little Longfellow War" that took place between January and August; and his scandalous reading of a "juvenile poem" at the Boston Lyceum. See Meredith McGill on this moment in Poe's career and the conditions of literary production in relation to the Young America movement of literary nationalism in "Poe, Literary Nationalism, and Authorial Identity" in *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2003).

⁶ James G. Bennett's *New York Herald*, 30 May 1844.

⁷ C. S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel, 2 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992), 1:226, 232.

⁸ Peirce worked for about thirty years with the U.S. Coast Survey and would have been familiar with the Survey's early use of the electromagnetic telegraph to determine longitude. See Carlene E. Stephens, "The Impact of the Telegraph on Public Time in the United States, 1844–1893," *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine* 8 (March 1989): 4–10.

⁹ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2003), 153.

¹⁰ Robert W. Chambers, *Whistling Cat* (New York: A. L. Burt & Co., 1932), 287. The telegraph romance subgenre begins in the 1870s and addresses, among other things, the role of women telegraphers in the labor force. See Thomas C. Jepsen, "Women Telegraphers in Literature and Cinema," in *My Sisters Telegraphic: Women in the Telegraph Office, 1846–1950* (Athens: Ohio Univ. Press, 2000).

¹¹ Jay Clayton, "The Voice in the Machine: Hazlitt, Hardy, James," in *Language Machines: Technologies of Literary and Cultural Production* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 223. Clayton has suggested that, in its nineteenth-century literary treatments, telegraphy is associated with a specifically female homoerotics, and the scene in *Whistling Cat* could be read queerly as primarily between a distant woman operator and Iris. The tapping fingers and vibrating tongues which are constitutive of telegraphic intimacy and sexuality, especially in North America, emerge in part from the specificity of Morse's device: unlike Cooke's and Wheatstone's telegraph in England which operated with needles pointing to letters of the alphabet, Morse's telegraph was both more abstracted from everyday language (via its binary or digital dot-dash code) and more connected to specific body parts. The telegraph sounder or key, in giving a distant finger's movement and clicking sound, permitted a faster operation of sending and receiving than recording and needle telegraphs, eventually enabling Morse's device to displace its competitors. After the first decade or so operators did away with the automatic recording stylus of Morse's earlier machines and learned to send and receive based on sound. Operators learned to distinguish each others' sending rhythms, forming competitive subcultures around speed of transmission and reception; stories of rivalries, friendships, and romances developing over the telegraph wires are a staple of telegraph lore. One might say that telegraphy became sexy because operators could have (manual, digital) style. See *Lightning Flashes and Electric Dashes: A Volume of Choice Telegraphic Literature, Humor, Fun, Wit and Wisdom*, compiled by W. J. Johnson (New York: W. J. Johnson, 1877), and Katherine Stubbs, "Telegraphy's Corporeal Fictions," in *New Media, 1740–1915*, ed. Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003) 91–111.

¹² Clayton's claims may be contrasted with those of James Carey, who practically makes telegraphy into modernity's cause in opening up the field of telegraphy's effects in relation to monopoly capitalism, business practices, religious discourse, common sense, perceptions of time, and language. His claim that the telegraph "can stand metaphorically for all the innovations that ushered in the modern phase of history" strikes me as a desire to engage in genetic explanation; rather, it would make more sense to think of genetic explanation and the notion of code as source (of history, of life) as both emerging, at least in part, with electromagnetic telegraphy. Carey, "Technology and Ideology: The Case of the Telegraph," in *Communication As Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 203. See also Evelyn Fox Keller, "The Body of a New Machine: Situating the Organism Between Telegraphs and Computers," in *Refiguring Life: Metaphors of Twentieth-Century Biology* (Columbia Univ. Press, 1995).

¹³ Telegraphic forms that predate the electromagnetic varieties that emerged in the 1830s and 1840s are optical: smoke signals, warning fires, naval semaphore systems, and the Chappé brothers' optical telegraph system in France.

¹⁴ The best social and cultural histories of mesmerism I have read are Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* (New York: Schocken Books,

1970), and Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998). On the relations between human automata and idealizations of social order, see Simon Schaffer, "Enlightened Automata," in *The Sciences in Enlightened Europe*, ed. William Clark, Jan Golinski, and Schaffer (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999). On mesmerism and romantic poetics see Nigel Leask, "Shelley's 'Magnetic Ladies': Romantic Mesmerism and the Politics of the Body," in *Beyond Romanticism: New Approaches to Texts and Contexts, 1780–1832*, ed. Stephen Copley and John Whale (New York: Routledge, 1992). For an essay that offers to explain the ubiquitous presence of Benjamin Franklin in American Spiritualist séances of the 1840s and 1850s and argues that this cultural moment can best be understood in relation to technological innovations of the day and especially telegraphy, see Werner Sollors, "Dr. Benjamin Franklin's Celestial Telegraph, or Indian Blessings to Gas-lit American Drawing Rooms," *American Quarterly* 35 (1983): 459–80.

¹⁵ See Alfred Vail, *The American Electromagnetic Telegraph* (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1845); James Reid, *The Telegraph in America* (New York: John Polhemus, 1886); Carleton Mabee, *The American Leonardo: The Life of Samuel F.B. Morse* (New York: Knopf, 1943); Lewis Coe, *The Telegraph* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1993); and Tom Standage, *The Victorian Internet* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998).

¹⁶ Quoted in Nathan Sargent, *Public Men and Events*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1875), 2:194. For a report of the debate in Congress, see Mabee, 256–58.

¹⁷ Winter, 324.

¹⁸ See Margaret Oliphant, "Sensation Novels," *Blackwood's Magazine* (May 1862): 572–73.

¹⁹ D. A. Miller's reading of Collins would imply the queerness of group sensation. Miller shows how sensation consists first in a male reader catching nervousness from the woman in white: "Every reader is consequently implied to be a version or extension of the Woman in White, a fact that entails particularly interesting consequences when the reader is—as the text explicitly assumes he is—male." Miller reads this in relation to the inversion model of male homosexuality and the homophobic defense against it. For Poe, sensation does not appear to be gendered in quite the same way, for nervousness is not made available in or as the body of a woman, an identification with which is then both enacted and disavowed. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), 153–54.

²⁰ See Laura Otis, "The Other End of the Wire: Uncertainties of Organic and Telegraphic Communication," *Configurations* 9 (2001): 181–206; and "The Metaphoric Circuit: Organic and Technological Communication in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63 (2002): 105–28.

²¹ [Isaac C. Pray?], *Memoirs of James Gordon Bennett and His Times* (New York: Stringer & Townshend, 1855), 342, 364. On the "electrical sublime," see Carey. For the racial logic that accompanies discourse on telegraphy as a mid-19th century national unifier, see Paul Gilmore's "The Telegraph in Black and White," *ELH* 69 (2002): 805–33.

²² *Memoirs of James Gordon Bennett*, 364–65.

²³ In *Reading at the Social Limit* Elmer addresses sympathy as sentimentalism's "liquid principle" and reads Poe's sensationalism in his tales of mesmerism as revising the conventions of the sentimental. In "Valdemar" and "Mesmeric Revelation" Elmer notes that Poe rewrites the generically sentimental scene of a character on his death-

bed “dying of the disease of choice in nineteenth-century sentimentalism—consumption . . . delivering his last communications and visions of the world to come” (115). By contrast with Little Eva’s visions of the afterworld, Poe’s sensationalism gives us Valdemar’s overly literal utterances and his disgusting body. Elmer reads a moment towards the end of “Valdemar” when the narrator observes a disgusting substance emerging from Valdemar’s eyes as possibly “the most grotesque revision of sentimentalism in all of Poe’s work, the tears which figure and confirm the precious moment of connection—those ‘sacred drops of humanity,’ to recall Rowson’s phrase—become . . . revoltingly opaque” (122).

All of Poe’s mesmeric writings are located at or within what Elmer calls the “social limit” indexed by “the ambivalence of affect, the unavoidable experience of being taken out of oneself into another, an unmasterable affection by the otherness internal to the self” (14). By mapping this internal limit onto a limit “internal to the discursive sociality of mass democratic society,” Elmer offers a powerful way to read “Poe’s ostensibly psychological tales and poems, in their very focus on representational and psychic division attending the individual—and despite their frequent lack of reference to contemporary conditions—[as] in fact profoundly responsive to social reality” (19–20). The social limit offers a solution to the problem of reading “romance” in American Studies as this names a kind of disconnection to the social, to the symbolic, and an accompanying compensatory embodiment. Informed by Elmer’s work, my reading of Poe in this essay nevertheless attempts to move away from the reification “mass culture” and its accompanying genre/gender configurations and toward sexuality, specific affects, and how perception is reciprocally shaped by emerging technologies and mediums.

²⁴ Poe, *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), 1383.

²⁵ Michael Allen, *Poe and the British Magazine Tradition* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), 150. For Poe’s second Hawthorne review, see *Essays and Reviews*, 577–88.

²⁶ Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 578.

²⁷ Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 583, 579.

²⁸ Poe, *Essays and Reviews*, 581.

²⁹ Elmer, 118.

³⁰ Poe, vol. 1 of *Tales and Sketches*, 215.

³¹ Meredith McGill, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 152, 186.

³² For examples, see Chauncey Hare Townshend, *Facts in Mesmerism, With Reasons for a Dispassionate Inquiry Into It* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1841), and John Elliotson, *Numerous Cases of Surgical Operation Without Pain in the Mesmeric State* (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1843).

³³ Barthes, 84. It would be possible to describe the narrator’s style using terms from Anthony Wilden’s work on analog and digital communication: Poe’s techniques of interruption, negation, and avoidance of figure are digital techniques for the creation of the analog effects of deferral and anticipation. This redescription would permit a return to the use that Barthes and Derrida make of Poe’s tale as it invites a critique of presence, the self-presence that phenomenological perception locates in or as speech or voice, and which writing as difference, iteration, and supplement deconstructs. Poe’s digital techniques make salient both writing in general and Morse’s digital telegraphic code in particular. See Wilden, “Analog and Digital Communication,” in *System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1972).

³⁴ Neil Hertz, "A Reading of Longinus," in *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1985), 5. Hertz reads Longinus to describe aspects of sublime turning, both in poetic texts and in texts that make more historical truth-claims than do poems, as would the case study here. In these latter, not only must passion shift to poetic action, as in poetic texts, but in addition, this figurative action must be concealed; what must be concealed is "the figurativeness of every instance of the figurative": "It is when a literary text provides us with a powerful apprehension of this phenomenon [oscillation between two poles] that we are drawn to characterize it as 'sublime'" (18–19). The tongue becomes the tale's transfer point from passion to poetic, figurative action, enacting the "vibratory activity of sublime turning" (17) in which movement the figurative language of the "facts in the case" is concealed.

³⁵ See Joan Dayan, *Fables of Mind: An Inquiry into Poe's Fiction* (New York and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987).

³⁶ See Silvan Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*, 4 vols. (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1991), 3:348–76; and "Revisions in Script Theory—1990," in *Exploring Affect: The Selected Writings of Silvan S. Tomkins*, ed. E. Virginia Demos (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995).

³⁷ See Richard Menke, "Telegraphic Realism: Henry James's *In the Cage*," *PMLA* 115 (2000): 975–90. Menke explores how, for realist writers like Dickens, Thackeray, and Gaskell, "the figure of electric telegraphy helps crystallize the assumptions and evasions of Victorian realism, its claims to transmit a domain of shared meaning neutrally." Menke shows how Henry James's *In the Cage* treats telegraphy rather differently at the end of the century, and argues that James "literalizes and estranges a metaphor that had occasionally provided Victorian writers with a powerful technological analogue, and even a kind of working model, for Victorian realism" (976).

³⁸ Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2003), 107, 122.

³⁹ Menninghaus, 141.