

Resonant Noise: Poe's Pit and Deleuze's Pendulum

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Abstract

Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense* (1969) bases his emergent theory of language on a duality of body/surface: out of "noise" in the corporeal depths arises voice, from voice comes speech and finally the "pure event of the verb" at the body's "surface." This body/surface duality is set in relation to dualities of (Freudian) Eros/Thanatos (where the latter, the death-drive, encompasses and dissipates the depth-drives of Eros) and Chronos/Aion (where Aion is the "pure empty form" or "surface" of time which absorbs Chronos-time within its more encompassing "repetition of difference"). Here I read Poe in terms of these dualities: whereas "The Raven"'s self-reversing time-frame (of death and memory) suggests a line or horizontal plane that can be interpreted in the light of Deleuze's Aion, "The Pit" brings into play the vertical-horizontal dynamics of the descending pendulum, a figure of time/Eros/Thanatos. This figure I read specifically in terms of Deleuze's own "pendulum"-figure at the close of *The Logic of Sense*, which embodies the forced movement of depth-drives in relation to or toward a "metaphysical surface," the interplay between the deep-body ("erotic") function of eating and the surface (or conscious) functions of speaking and thinking. "Thinking" in its most abstract (surface) projection is again tied to Thanatos as the "purely speculative death-instinct" which, like Aion, encompasses the repetitions of Eros and Chronos. Deleuze and Poe are finally both guided by the awareness of an encompassing "noise" (nonsense) whose wider repetitions "give sense."

Keywords

repetition, reversal, body, metaphysical surface, the Verb, noise,
nonsense, Eros, Thanatos, Chronos, Aion

There are repetitions and there are repetitions. Minimal repetitions are necessary in order for "sense" to emerge from its background in "nonsense"; over-repetition returns us to (fades us back into) that background. This notion is perhaps most clearly stated in Serres's model of significant sounds/languages emerging (like tuned-in stations on a radio) out of static or background noise. In *The Parasite* (1982) Serres argues that once chaos (noise) has self-ordered into bodies/meanings it will ultimately reach a point of over-saturation (the super-repetition or super-efficiency of formal logic, logical

tautology): this marks the beginning of decay back into disorder/noise/nonsense.

But the dependency of meaning on minimal (controlled) repetition is already implicit in the less radically “empirical” model of structural linguistics and its post-structuralist revisions. Thus for Saussure *langue* is a system of arbitrary differences, signs (arbitrary signifier-signified connections) whose sense or meaning is determined through points of difference on both phonetic (“pen”/”hen”) and semantic (“pen”/”pencil”/”brush” as “writing instruments”) articulatory scales, within a larger set or continuum and so against a kind of “voided background.” For Derrida, meaning (signification) depends on the iteration of signs (in order for “pen” to mean “pen” it must repeatedly be used with the same meaning) yet there seems to be no escape from this (open-within-closed) economy of iterations/meanings—no more than from Nietzsche’s cosmic version of eternal return as a self-enclosed, self-repeating “game” with no law or ground outside of it—so that the whole system of *langue* becomes itself ungrounded, radically contingent, meaningless.

Here is Deleuze on “structuralism” in *The Logic of Sense* (1969):

Structure is in fact a machine for the production of incorporeal sense.... But when structuralism shows in this manner that sense is produced by nonsense and its perpetual displacement, and that it is born of the respective position of elements which are not by themselves “signifying,” we should not at all compare it with ... philosophy of the absurd ... for the [latter], nonsense is what is opposed to sense in a simple relation with it, so that the absurd is always *too much sense: an excess produced and over-produced by nonsense as a lack of itself*.... Nonsense is that which has no sense, and ... as it enacts *the donation of sense*, is opposed to the absence of sense. (71, my emphasis)

If “sense” is produced by/out of “nonsense” (“and its perpetual displacement”) then we can view this “excessive sense” (that out of its own excess can “donate sense”) either as the “original” (self-displacing) nonsense—for this is not (like the “absurd”) a “deficiency of sense”—or as a “further” (encompassing) nonsense generated out of the overflow of (nonsense-generated) sense itself; we suspect that Deleuze wants (paradoxically) both readings here, a move from the initial “structural” nonsense to the encompassing nonsense of pure overflow, a move which also operates like a Gestalt-switch. The same ambiguity (or equivocation) haunts our “reading” of the crucial notions (tropes) of overflow and donation (gift) in Nietzsche and Bataille—and

(of) Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche's eternal return as a kind of "nonsense" (*LS* 301)¹ and Derrida's recent (Heideggerian) reflections on Bataille, Mauss and "the gift of death." But we tend to think of the Nietzschean return, like the Serresian one, primarily as an "encompassing" nonsense or excessive-sense (tied closely if not equivalent to the encompassing repetition which generates or returns us to it). And we could almost read as a variation on Serres's (rather than Nietzsche's) return to Freud's theory of a *Thanatos* or death-instinct that drives us toward the ultimate repetition, "return to the inorganic state;" the binding energies of *Eros* (love-instinct) are set "within" this more encompassing drive toward decay or dissolution.² Deleuze, however, is very interested in those structural "elements which are not by themselves 'signifying,'" bodies or their molecular parts; the "production of incorporeal sense" is grounded in his duality of bodies ("depths") and their (metaphysical) "surfaces" (geometrically defined in terms of lines and points), as becomes clear in his discussion of the Stoics in *The Logic of Sense*:

According to the Stoics, all that exists is a body (including such things as the soul, qualities and virtues). Each body, like a growing plant, is a dynamic entity which possesses an inner force that brings it to its completed form. Hence ... each body is its own cause, and all causes are in harmony within the single body of the universe. Bodies constitute a realm of causes; effects, properly speaking, do not exist. None the less, the Stoics recognize the "subsistence," or "insistence" of certain effects, or "incorporeals" (*asomata*) which haunt the surfaces of bodies ... when a tree grows green, the "greening" of the tree is a mere surface effect which partakes in no way of the being or the inner causal force of the tree. It is ... an ephemeral attribute, a passing surface effect ... an *event* rather than a state of things, a way of being rather than actual being, and the Stoics insist on expressing such events as verbs, reserving nouns and adjectives for the denotation of actual bodies and qualities.... (Bogue 67-68)

This body/surface duality then correlates with a duality of sound (noise, nonsense)/meaning (sense):

¹ Shapiro similarly suggests viewing the eternal return in relation to Serresian (cosmic) background noise.

² Inasmuch as pleasure is a "release of tension" death is, after all, the ultimate form of "relaxation" (ultimate "vacation"). Bogue (52): "The ground or precondition of the regular, rule-governed discharge of excitation in conformity with the pleasure principle is the process of binding or linking (*Bindung*) of *Eros*, which forms the energetic links of excitations and the biological bond between cells. This ground (*fond*) of the pleasure principle, however, brings with it a groundless element (*sans-fond*), the inanimate realm of *Thanatos*, from which life emerges and to which life returns, whose basic function is to unbind energy and dissolve the bonds of organic matter. Neither *Eros* nor *Thanatos* can be experienced directly; 'all that is given are combinations of both—the role of *Eros* being to bind the energy of *Thanatos* and subject these combinations to the pleasure-principle in the Id'" (*Masoch* 101, 100).

For the Stoics, words are bodies, in that they are sonic entities that possess real being. A word as sonic body, however, is the same entity for those who understand it as for those who do not (such as foreigners). That which makes a word understandable to one individual and not to another is its meaning, an incorporeal attribute which is added to the word and which in no way affects the word's being as a body. Both words and things, then, are bodies upon whose surfaces incorporeal *lekta* ["expressibles," "surface effects," "events"] "insist" or "subsist," the surface effects of words being "meaning," and those of things, "events." (Bogue 69)

Thus the model suggested above, of an "encompassing" noise or nonsense, may be too simplistic to fit Deleuze. For now we have "noisy bodies"—"a corporeal plenum of non-individuated bodies, 'bodies taken in their undifferentiated depths, in their unmeasured pulsation'" (LS 149), in which "Deleuze situates corporeal nonsense, the experience of words as bodies to which schizophrenics are particularly sensitive" (Bogue 74)—acquiring sense as their mere "surface effects." Or more precisely, since "meaning and events form a single surface," meaning itself is a "simulacrum, a paradoxical, contradictory entity..." (Bogue 73). Thus, on what Deleuze calls the metaphysical surface of "structures" (where sense is "born of the respective position of elements which are not by themselves 'signifying'"), that is, of "corporeal bodies" and body-parts, "there is always *too much sense: an excess produced and over-produced by nonsense as a lack of itself...*" (LS 71).

But it is the correlation of body/surface with the two modalities of time, *Chronos* and *Aion*, which will bring us back again, via Nietzsche and Freud, to "repetition":

The Stoics place time within the category of incorporeals, but ... recognize two forms of time: the variable present of bodies, or *Chronos*, and the unlimited past and future of incorporeals, or *Aion* (literally, eternity). Bodies have being and exist as causes in a perpetual present. Hence the time of *Chronos* may be imagined as a series of Chinese boxes, each present contained by a larger present, the present of God containing all other presents. The time of *Aion*, by contrast, is that of the past and future with no present. Like incorporeal attributes, past and future have no real existence ... they form the continuum of time against the background of which the present emerges. A time of pure becoming, *Aion* infinitely expands into an unlimited past and future and simultaneously contracts into smaller and smaller units of time ... ever nearing the target of the present.... *Aion* "extends as a straight line, unlimited in both directions ... *the pure empty form of time*" (LS 194, Deleuze's emphasis)... Repetition ... in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* ... Deleuze says should be identified as ... "a 'transcendental' synthesis of time" (*Masoch* 100, 99) ... in his interpretation of Nietzsche Deleuze characterized the Eternal Return as the synthesis of time, arguing that time can only "pass" or "become" if past, present and future coexist simultaneously.... The emergent moment of Eros at the origin of life, therefore, always includes within it the preceding moment of inanimate matter, of Thanatos. Likewise, it always brings with it the moment after life, of a returned Thanatos. Eros is an ever-repeating synthesis which constitutes the present, but Eros only emerges against the background of the larger field of the pure form of time. That field is the groundless dimension of Thanatos, a dimension convulsed by an incessant

repetition of a simultaneous past, present and future. (Bogue 68, 52)³

Is this more “encompassing” repetition—whether we think of it as Nietzschean return, Freudian Thanatos or Serresian cyclic decay (back into chaos, background noise)—to be then finally, as/on that widest “incorporeal surface,” the “overflow” of sense into nonsense? Does it “donate sense” to senseless bodies (to a senseless “world”)? Presumably this encompassing, “affirmative” (Nietzsche) repetition would need to be distinguished from a merely negative, mechanical (and perhaps “absurd”) repetition of the Same. Thus in his Introduction to *Difference and Repetition* (1968) Deleuze demarcates Platonic/Hegelian essence, identity and resemblance from Kierkegaardian/Nietzschean difference, repetition, singularity and the simulacrum. And one year later, in Appendix II of *The Logic of Sense*, “Phantasm and Modern Literature” (closely echoing part of *DR*’s Introduction), he cites Klossowski’s

... opposition between exchange and true repetition. For exchange implies only resemblance, even if the resemblance is extreme. Exactness is its criterion, along with the equivalence of exchanged products. This is the false repetition which causes our illness. True repetition, on the other hand, appears as a singular behavior that we display in relation to that which cannot be exchanged, replaced, or substituted—like a poem that is repeated on the condition that no word may be changed. It is no longer a matter of an equivalence between similar things, it is not even a matter of an identity of the Same. True repetition addresses something singular, unchangeable, and different, without “identity.” Instead of exchanging the similar and identifying the Same, it *authenticates the different*. (287-88, Deleuze’s emphasis)

And again we get the connection here between “true repetition” and the “economy of the gift which is opposed to the mercantile economy of exchange (... homage to Georges Bataille) ... in the host and the gift, repetition surges forth as the highest power of the unexchangeable...” (*LS* 288).

There is of course a certain congruence between, on the one hand, the relation of this “singularity” of true repetition (the repetition of difference, more fully discussed in *DR*) to false or mechanical repetition (repetition of the same) and, on the other hand, the relation of the sense/nonsense of incorporeal surfaces (Aion, Thanatos and pure verb/event) to the noisy bodies (depths, “sonic bodies,” Chronos, Eros) they encompass. And yet this particular congruence may not be easy to fully comprehend or

³ See previous note.

“encompass”—Deleuze’s very mode of (extremely creative and open-ended) “thinking” may not (any more than Nietzsche’s) be “meant” for “comprehension” in this sense. But it has struck me that we get some of these same themes (images, motifs) in Poe, indeed arguably the same or a similar “congruence,” that by attempting a sort of Deleuzian “reading” of Poe we might simultaneously try to further elucidate or clarify Deleuze, at least insofar as we would be projecting his thinking onto concrete poetic and narrative “lines.” Deleuze has written at length about Melville, Kafka and Beckett⁴ but very little about Poe, whose poetics of “rational calculation” and “forced repetition”—the descending pendulum (with its painted image of Chronos, Father Time), the raven’s refrain of “Nevermore!”—and explicit interest in the relation of repetition to nonsense (in the opening passage of “The Pit and the Pendulum” the spoken words of his “sentence” become a “burr” of noise in the ears of the protagonist), might suggest, for instance, the question: is Poe himself limited (as it may at first appear) to a “false” (merely mechanical) repetition, or does he also (given Deleuze’s own example of the forced repetition, the “repeating on the condition that no word may be changed,” of that singularity which we call a “poem”) have something like the more “singular” sort? After first considering then the linear or horizontal vibration (resonance) of the (self-reversing) “poetic line” in “The Raven,” I will move to that more fully “pendular” movement of/in “The Pit,” a vertical-horizontal movement which I will try to read in terms of Deleuze’s own dynamic image of the “pendulum” at the opening of the final main chapter of *LS*, “Thirty-Fourth Series of Primary Order and Secondary Organization”:⁵

⁴ Melville (“Bartleby; or, The Formula,” a discussion of that “agrammatical” formula, “I would prefer not to”) and Beckett (see concluding discussion) in *Essays* (1993), Kafka in *Toward a Minor Literature* (1986, with Guattari). They are all (like Poe?) “minor” or “marginal” writers who set a “foreign language” to work “within language.”

⁵ And here we need to keep in mind that Deleuze is himself a “poetic”-metaphysical thinker and that his pendulum is (perhaps like Poe’s) a culminating “figure”; it catches/entails/resonates with crucial images/thoughts/“motifs” that have been gradually accumulating (like leitmotifs) throughout this book, a book of thoughts/figures which the author himself finally calls (*LS* 249, near the end of the closing chapter) “*Musik für ein Haus*” (“Music for a House”; “House-Music”). Although in *LS* 7 he calls the book a “logical and psychoanalytic novel,” Deleuze plays with/on the musical theme in various ways throughout it: the notion of “forced motion” (logic, geometry within a circumscribed space, the physics of a pendulum), the aesthetic “inevitability” of a musical passage once given the foregoing rhythm and melody. Deleuzian thinking is perhaps “contrapuntal.”

... the resonance induces a *forced movement* that goes beyond and sweeps away the basic series. It has a pendular structure: the basic series traversed ... the resonance and the forced movement of an amplitude greater than the initial movement. This initial movement is ... the movement of Eros.... But the forced movement which represents desexualization is Thanatos and “compulsion;” it operates between the two extremes of the original depth and the metaphysical surface, the destructive cannibalistic drives of depth and the speculative death instinct.... (239, Deleuze’s emphasis)

I will be especially interested, with “The Pit,” in Deleuze’s eating/speaking (eating/thinking) dualities, and his “emergent” theory of language: “meaning” emerges (as we have seen) at the “metaphysical surface” out of the noisy/senseless depths of bodies through a series of stages (concentric surfaces); more specifically, “voice” emerges out of (mere senseless) “noise,” “speech” from “voice” and the (univocity, singularity, pure event of the) “infinitive Verb.” If “The Raven” then can be read as the pure “surface” of *Aion* and the Verb/event (disjunctive opening to the future), “The Pit” embodies a more complete progression from those schizophrenic inner depths of corporeal bodies “outward” to Thanatos, *Aion* and the Verb.

Poe’s “Raven”: Vertex and Reversal

Kierkegaard in his own “Repetitions” (1843)⁶ claims:

Just as [the Greeks] taught that all knowing is a recollecting, modern philosophy will teach that all life is a repetition.... Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backwards, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward. Repetition, therefore ... makes a person happy, whereas recollection makes him unhappy.... If one does not have the category of recollection or of repetition, all life dissolves into empty, meaningless noise. (131, 149)

In Kierkegaard’s highly ironic view (and game) of “repetition” (which has almost as many different interpretations as Nietzsche’s eternal return⁷) we get essentially a distinction between the (knight of faith’s) vision of the repetition of this earthly life in eternity (“the true repetition is eternity”)—which is what Nietzsche and Deleuze

⁶ The year Poe’s “Berenice” appeared (see following discussion). While Deleuze sharply distinguishes the Nietzschean eternal return from Kierkegaard’s “Christian” repetition, in the Introduction to *DR* he does see Kierkegaard as effectively Nietzsche’s forerunner, that is, as initiator of the notion of “true repetition” through his dramatic-ironic “style,” his constant “wearing of masks.” (Perhaps Deleuze is ambivalent about Kierkegaard.)

⁷ See for instance Mackey.

presumably reject—and the (pure aesthete’s) understanding that an awareness of everyday life’s constant renewal of itself (experienced through a kind of repetition with variation of past experiences) makes life more interesting than (as the aesthetic “novice” might have thought) the constant seeking for something new, for “change” in our daily routine—which is the sort of “ethical program” (“repetition is the *interest* [*interesse*] of metaphysics” [149]⁸) Deleuze, at least, would not be concerned with. But for our purposes here two points are significant. The first concerns the whole issue of memory and Platonic recollection (as “repetition backwards” and as something “sad”), which we will return to in the context of “The Raven.” The second is this: life without either recollection (backward repetition) or (forward) repetition is “empty, meaningless noise” because, we assume, it has no continuity and thus no “order” (since order, in Serres’s sense at least, is based on a random repetition of elements within the “chaotic flux”). The author here raises but leaves “open” such provocative questions as this: Does the “novice aesthete” think life is boring precisely because of its mechanically repeating routines—that is, because of its “sense”—and seek “change” in disorder/chaos/nonsense? In any event we assume that the “true” aesthete wants in everyday life not a mere mechanical repetition of moments/experiences (“false repetition”) but a higher order, a “true repetition,” just as the knight of faith looks forward (“forward recollection”) to the “truest” repetition of all (the model for the repetition in/of “everyday existence”), that of this earthly life in eternity.

Kierkegaard does seem to think life-as-constant-flux (Heraclitean and perhaps Nietzschean view) is boring and meaningless; this view is reinforced by Deleuze in the Introduction to *DR*, where we have “change” placed under the category of “scientific reason,” along with essence, identity and resemblance (for scientific laws describe “change” through formulae of substitution and exchange) and over against true repetition, difference, simulacra and the singularity of the event (the Verb). But does Kierkegaard also think that repetition of the Same (mere mechanical repetition, false

⁸ Literally “between-*esse*,” “between-being,” “interest” initially had the pragmatic sense (as in interest on a loan, a “financial interest” in X); Kant distinguishes the “practical interest” of reason (in ethics) from its empirical and speculative interest; Kierkegaard here apparently “deflates” the pretensions of metaphysics by using the word in some such “pragmatic” sense, although he would also be deflating any “serious” (i.e. Kantian) sense.

repetition) is meaningless? Is this sort of repetition also noise, another form of noise? It is clearly not the same as “change” or “flux.” We normally might think change and mechanical repetition are opposite terms: perhaps the point of Kierkegaard (and Deleuze) is that these logical opposites still bear (as Hegelian dialectical terms) a “resemblance,” they are interchangeable (exchangeable), still “rational-scientific” terms. In any event, in Kierkegaard’s essay the relation of mere chaos/noise to mechanical repetition (another kind of noise) would seem to remain (as suggested above) an open question.⁹

Constantine Constantius’s (and we note the name’s irony) “thought-experiment” in “Repetition,” his self-conscious quest for “repetitions” in his daily life, especially in the trip to Berlin that forms the central “interlude” of the essay, almost begs for comparison with the narrator’s thought-experiment, or rather “monomania,” in Poe’s “Berenice” (also 1843). Here Egaeus’s mania or compulsion (“forced movement”) is to meditate on, to contemplate “even the most ordinary objects of the universe”:

To muse for long unwearied hours, with my attention riveted to some frivolous device on the margin or in the typography of a book; to become absorbed ... in a quaint shadow ... the steady flame of a lamp ... the perfume of a flower; to repeat, monotonously, some common word, until the sound, by dint of frequent repetition, ceased to convey any idea whatever to the mind; to lose all sense of motion or physical existence, by means of absolute bodily quiescence.... (Auden 378-79)

This mental “condition” is contrasted ironically with the all-too-apparent psychosomatic “dissolution” of Berenice and is (within the narrative form) “self-referential”—like that first object of contemplation, “some frivolous device on the margin ... of a book”—inasmuch as Poe claims to have written the (seemingly absurd, nonsensical or “frivolous”) story-essay on a bet that he could write something “interesting” on/around the theme of a man’s obsession with a woman’s teeth. We also come back to the issue of mechanical repetition and “noise” (which as nonsense may again refer to the whole narrative within which it appears): “to repeat, monotonously, some common word, until the sound, by dint of frequent repetition, ceased to convey any idea whatever to the mind.” This is an accurate description of an “experiment” children conduct: words will indeed begin to seem senseless if we keep repeating them

⁹ A Serresian interpretation might be possible here.

indefinitely. Empirical psychology (*via* brain chemistry) could no doubt provide one kind of explanation, and certain kinds of brain-based mental abnormalities (schizophrenia, catatonia, aphasia), in which Deleuze is vitally interested (in *LS* the move from “schizophrenic” noise to “depressive” sound), may well suggest themselves here. Or we could try to interpret this phenomenon through Serres’s notion of the redundancy of super-repetition (i.e. of pure logic), as in “A=A=A=A=A,” the mere extension into a continuous series of logic’s foundational “Law of Non-Contradiction” (or “Principle of Identity”). But how would we relate this induced meaninglessness of indefinitely repeated words (signifiers) to the Saussurian-Derridean picture of a system of *langue* in which individual signs (meanings) depend on the possibility of iteration, while the whole system itself has no determining ground (outside the “eternally self-repeating text”) or totalizing sense? Or to Deleuze’s (Nietzschean) notion of an overflowing nonsense that encompasses and “gives” sense?

On our Kierkegaardian-Deleuzian model, we assume that this mere logical or mechanical repetition, as repetition of the Same, is a “false” repetition, the lower mental state of an “unenlightened” person in Kierkegaard’s sense, or in Deleuze’s sense—as again becomes clear in his discussion of those two most primitive levels of emerging language, “noise” and “voice”—a mentally ill one. However, is it so certain that Poe has limited himself here to this sort of merely mechanical repetition? In any event the ironic voice-tone of the narrator-author, the parodying of metaphysics, suggests a somewhat “wider” view. Thus Egaeus contrasts this “attentive” use of his mind with the more normal “speculative” flights of the day-dreamer (and, we might think, philosopher): whereas the latter begins with an “object usually not frivolous” (perhaps a “universal idea”) and then “imperceptibly loses sight of this object in a wilderness of deductions and suggestions issuing therefrom,” at the termination of Egaeus’s reverie: “the first cause ... had attained that supernaturally exaggerated interest which was the prevailing feature of the disease” (379). We note that this latter “praxis” is ironically closer in some respects to (while also parodying) Platonic metaphysics, to the omnipresence and centrality of the Logos—logocentric “obsession” with self-present meaning, tautological truth, “A=A”—while the day-dreamer’s praxis,

in “losing sight of the first premise,” of the Logos, more sharply criticizes it.

But the speaker’s fixation on objects (the repetition of a continuous gaze) also leads him “to lose all sense of motion or physical existence, by means of absolute bodily quiescence”: it could be the description (not only the parody) of a serious meditation technique, but also echoes the striking “metaphysical inversion” earlier in the story: “... wonderful how total an inversion took place in the character of my commonest thought. The realities of the world affected me as visions, and as visions only, while the wild ideas of the land of dreams became, in turn, not the material of my every-day existence, but in very deed that existence utterly and solely in itself.” This sort of radical and totalizing world-inversion can be taken as nonsense (beyond its obvious ironic and parodic modalities), as madness or as something “serious,” a kind of radical thinking if not quite a Deluzian “singularity” or “pure event” of thought.¹⁰ The question then becomes one of the relation of this sort of trope of (radical, hyperbolic) inversion—suggestive perhaps of Descartes’s hypothesis of God as *malin genie* who tricks us by making us think that “A=A”—to the tropes of both mechanical and “singular” or “true” repetition. For such hyperbolic inversion might after all also be said to “transcend sense” in the direction of an overflowing “nonsense,” a nonsense (noise) which may nonetheless be felt to have generated that “sense” in the first place

However, we must also bear in mind that unlike the daydreamer’s, Egaeus’s “meditations were *never* pleasurable.” As most psychoanalytic critics of Poe beginning with Bonaparte have pointed out, masochism (closely bound up with sadism) is seldom very far away in much of Poe’s writing. In “Berenice”—as in its variations in “Usher,” “Tell-Tale Heart” and various other tales—the sadistic disfigurement of the just-dead (?) character is tied up with the narrator’s (and perhaps author’s) own painfully masochistic tendencies, and (therefore) perhaps also with Oedipal issues, with (Bonaparte) a mother-fixation. We must of course be careful about identifying author-narrator, especially when the “Schlegelian Ironist”¹¹ view of Poe sees him as (in

¹⁰ “Within language, the aleatory point manifests itself as nonsense, i.e., as a paradoxical element ... which ‘possesses no particular meaning, but is opposed to the absence of meaning’” (*LS* 89, Bogue 77).

¹¹ G. R. Thompson’s influential 1973 reading of Poe as “romantic ironist” takes him as being heavily influenced by F. Schlegel’s (*circa* 1800) notion of the “absolute transcendence of irony”: Poe’s dark view

many respects like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche) a constant game-player. Thus in “The Raven,” according to Poe’s own explanation of how/why he wrote it in “The Philosophy of Composition,” masochism clearly plays a central role, though we will need to keep in mind (and especially in this case) the Transcendental Ironist caveat:

I saw that I could make the first query propounded by the lover—the first query to which the Raven should reply “Nevermore”— . . . a commonplace one [“Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night’s Platonian shore!”]—the second less so—the third still less, and so on—until at length the lover, startled from his original nonchalance by the melancholy character of the word itself—by its frequent repetition—and by a consideration of the ominous reputation of the fowl that uttered it—is at length excited to superstition, and wildly propounds queries of a far different character—queries whose solution he has passionately at heart [“*is there balm in Gilead?*”]—propounds them half in superstition and half in that species of despair which delights in self-torture—propounds them not altogether because he believes in the prophetic or demoniac character of the bird (which, reason assures him, is merely repeating a lesson learned by rote) but because he experiences a frenzied pleasure in so modeling his questions as to receive from the expected “Nevermore” the most delicious because the most intolerable of sorrow. Perceiving the opportunity thus afforded me—or, more strictly, thus forced upon me in the process of the construction—I first established in mind the climax, or concluding query—that query to which “Nevermore” should be in the last place an answer—that query in reply to which this word “Nevermore” should involve the uttermost conceivable amount of sorrow and despair. (Auden 425-26)

After a brief preface, Poe quotes the penultimate stanza of his own poem:

Here then the poem may be said to have its beginning—at the end, where all works of art should begin—for it was here, at this point of my preconsiderations, that I first put pen to paper in the composition of the stanza:

“Prophet,” said I, “thing of evil!” prophet still if bird or devil!
By that heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore
Tell this soul with sorrow laden, if within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.
Quoth the raven “Nevermore.” (426)

Poe then, in the “preconsideration” or “repetition” (recollection forward) of his poetic design, conceives of the raven as a kind of divine-demonic messenger or “prophet”—and here we must consider the inversion not just of Christianity and the prophetic tradition but also of Platonic *anamnesis*, “truth as recollection”—whom his speaker will ask a series of increasingly “serious” metaphysical questions, “queries whose solution he has passionately at heart.” The ultimate question is particularly

of human existence as ultimately hopeless and meaningless (only nothingness and decay after death) is then tempered by a comic-absurd, transcendental-ironic attitude—which I would compare with that of Beckett (see concluding discussion).

“serious” to the speaker, its “solution” most desperately awaited:¹² “After I myself die, will there be continued existence in heaven (where I can again see Lenore)?”. The point is then not just that we the readers can predict the reply, as it is (has long since become) the poem’s refrain, but that the speaker (himself a reader) also can, and further that he is perversely anticipating this reply: “he experiences a frenzied pleasure in so modeling his questions as to receive from the expected ‘Nevermore’ the most delicious because ... intolerable ... sorrow.” But *this* situation, this sorrow (on being told there is only nothingness after death, and/or that he will never see Lenore again) is further compounded, or perhaps ironically undercut, on the next level: the bird in fact is not the symbolic embodiment of an oracle or prophet, even if demonic; it is an actual living bird and thus a subhuman creature who cannot really think or intelligently answer the speaker’s questions, so that it only repeats the refrain *mechanically* (“reason assures him” it “is merely repeating a lesson learned by rote”).¹³ On the Schlegelian reading—Poe as transcendental ironist whose main “game” is hoaxing his readers—this poem works as a (self-reflexive and self-destructive) joke on several levels; on this reading what a psychoanalyst presumably takes as the speaker’s (“performed”?) masochism, perversity or insanity becomes (simultaneously?) an outrageous form of humor, comic absurdity.

We might compare this sort of “performed masochism” to that of Sacher-Masoch as analyzed by Deleuze. On the one hand, of course, “... the accelerated reiteration of scenes of violence in Sade and the frozen progression of torture tableaux in Masoch must be interpreted through the Freudian concepts of repetition, Eros and Thanatos...” (Bogue 51). Yet on the other hand:

In Masoch, and in masochism generally, the mother is granted the authority of law, and one of the means of solidifying that authority is the contract. Many of Masoch’s heroes ... draw up quasi-legal documents granting specific powers to the tortures for a certain length of time. Such documents, however, tend to self-deconstruct, for eventually the tortures exceed the limits of the agreement and the victim becomes an abject slave. Here Deleuze finds the essential humour of Masoch and masochism: a derisory mockery of the law through an

¹² Is Dickinson finally less ironic than Poe on this point?

¹³ Johnson’s 1995 reading of the poem, in taking the repeated refrain as an “excessive” or “floating signifier” and thus as a kind of “noise,” and Humphries’s somewhat more traditionally “post-structuralist poetic” 1985 reading, are also sensitive to the “mere noise” aspect of the poem but do not develop the notion of repetition in relation to Deleuzian singularity.

exorbitant dedication to the letter of the law... the punishment [Masoch] and his heroes undergo subverts the legal function of punishment, for the masochist's pain does not prevent forbidden pleasure but provokes and ensures it. (Bogue 51, 49-50)

This “parodying” of logic itself by taking it too “literally”¹⁴ extends all the way from the Socratic *reductio ad absurdum* to Beckett’s theater of absurd; in *Watt* for instance Beckett painstakingly works out all the (conjunctive and disjunctive) logical possibilities of that vast “language machine” which is the text (Kenner’s and Deleuze’s interpretation).¹⁵ But here (with Masoch and Poe) we get a certain “twist”: the self-deconstruction of purely logical rules (Poe does this e.g. in *Eureka*) becomes now the self-deconstruction of legal or moral ones, the “restrictions” of the “superego.” Indeed we may say that in this “poem” Poe sets up the most rigid, highly determined (or over-determined) structure, only so that (like perhaps the superego itself) it may parody itself through its own perverse self-repetition. But let us for the sake of simplicity suspend the ironic or (more properly) “humorous” reading¹⁶ and take this poem “seriously.” Its very form in effect becomes the “forced movement” of a kind of pendulum, for the poet goes on in “Composition” to “induce” (parodying logic again) the poem’s necessary “pivot”:

The length, the province, and the tone, being thus determined, I betook myself to ordinary induction, with the view of obtaining some artistic piquancy which might serve me as a keynote in the construction of the poem—some pivot upon which the whole structure might turn. In carefully thinking over all the usual artistic effects—or more properly points, in the theatrical sense—I did not fail to perceive immediately that no one had been so universally employed as that of the *refrain* ... [which] depends for its impression upon the *force of monotone—both in sound and thought*. The *pleasure* is deduced solely from the sense of identity—of *repetition*. I resolved to diversify, and so heighten, the effect, by adhering, in general, to the *monotone of sound*, while I continually varied that of thought: ... I determined to produce *continuously* novel effects, by the *variation* of the application of the refrain—the refrain itself remaining, for the most part, *unvaried*. (423-24, my emphasis)

¹⁴ For Deleuze this is technically “humor” rather than “irony” (and he takes Sade as an ironist, as against Masoch the humorist): “If repetition is possible, it is as much opposed to moral law as it is to natural law. There are two known ways to overturn moral law. One is by ascending towards the principles: challenging the law as ... a second-hand principle which diverts an original force or usurps an original power.... The other way ... is to overturn the law by descending towards the consequences, to which one submits with a too-perfect attention to detail.... The first way ... is ironic, where irony appears as an art of principles, of ascent.... The second is humour, which is an art of consequences and descents, of suspensions and falls...” (Introduction to *DR*).

¹⁵ See concluding discussion.

¹⁶ See note 14.

The “pivot upon which the whole structure might turn” is then to be the “refrain,” in its most universal or abstract sense (which Poe requires) as repetition (of a word/line/theme in music and poetry) Poe foregrounds here the “pleasure of repetition”: the “force of monotone” or “forced movement” of an explicitly mechanical repetition (noise, nonsense)—which is now also the movement of “predetermination” or “fate”—gives us (perverse) pleasure. Refrain originally means “curve back” (*refrenere*)—usually as in “control” or “repress”—and also “break off” (*refringere*, related to “refract”). It thus has a sense of discontinuity—the sudden turning-back of the reversal—and even disruption, rupture, “breaking off.” To call the refrain the “pivot” also suggests that it is a kind of turning point of the poem, perhaps also then the vertex of the verse, that apex or apical “point”¹⁷ from which the verse is *vertically suspended* and can flow in both directions, rhythmically (periodically, like a pendulum) or even simultaneously. The “vertex” is “the top, properly the turning point (*veriere*, ‘to turn,’ see ‘verse’); the summit, apex; same as zenith; the point of intersection of the two sides of an angle; a corner-point of a triangle ... or other geometric figure....” Geometry fits, after all, Poe’s logical-mathematical “design” of “The Raven” as analyzed in “Composition,” and also fits one sense (though not specifically the “dramatic sense”) of “points.”

To see this “poem,” then, this non-human, mechanical, perhaps computer-generated¹⁸ repetition of the “answer” (“Nothing”) to a series of “serious” philosophical questions as the singularity and forced movement (pre-determination) of a Deleuzian “true repetition” (“like a poem that is repeated on the condition that no word may be changed”), as well as (of course) a “false” one,¹⁹ we need to combine this sense of the oscillating poetic line (self-reversing at its central vertex) with the notion of a self-reversing time. The poet prefaces the quotation of the final (“ultimate”) stanza

¹⁷ We also get this “apex,” and in connection with a bird, in Poe’s “The Duke de l’Omelette.”

¹⁸ How would we distinguish this “original necessity” from the random or computer-generated series of answers generated by a divinatory ritual or praxis (e.g. the *I Ching*), assuming that the same “answer” (hexagram) kept randomly “coming up”? (Raven as prophet or diviner’s “spirit.”)

¹⁹ The false/true (mechanical/singular) duality of the repetition bears some relation to Deleuze’s overflow of sense into nonsense, or rather of nonsense (noisy bodies) into the surface effect of a paradoxical sense/nonsense.

of his poem, in “Composition,” with the observation that “not until the very last line of the very last stanza” will the reader be “permitted” to see clearly that this bird is (has all along been) “emblematical of Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance...”:

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting,
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon’s that is dreaming,
And the lamplight o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul *from out that shadow* that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted—nevermore. (431)

The raven symbolizes both the speaker’s sad “Remembrance” (of the dead Lenore) and the (our, its) memory (remembrance, commemoration) of a speaker also now already (perhaps long since) dead. The dead speaker—shades of Valdemar articulating the shocking sentence, “I say to you that I am dead!”—needs a “continuous” monument precisely because once he is dead he will be continually dead; the continuous flow of memory (as represented by the bird) is in a sense congruent with the continuous flow of death. This is “continuous memory” rather than “eternal memory”: we are now within an “immanent” domain of reality; the bird is an actual bird (or machine), not a “prophetic voice” which can communicate between the worlds of Time and Eternity, nor the embodiment of *anamnesis*, immediate self-presence in “recollection” of “eternal ideas.”²⁰ But on another “level” of reading we see that we are placed on a crux of continuity/discontinuity here (hence the “singularity” of the poem). This “Nevermore” is continuous,” “your life is an irreversible but merely finite flow.” The speaker’s life-flow ends but the raven continues it, perhaps (as its parrot-like speech also suggests) *mimics* it in his function as a memory/memorial which seems more the shadow or *simulacrum* of the poet’s own memory than other people’s “actual” memory of him. The monument and commemoration is really (dis)continuous; memory is a reverse (as well as perverse) movement, pointing toward (repeating) both past and future. Thus if the speaker’s life-flow here is irreversible (and discontinuous), the

²⁰ That is, if we take the force of the “negative” seriously here we effectively move beyond Kierkegaard’s notion of “recollection” as a backward-repetition that is always “sad”—his essay also concerns the love of a young man for a young woman now “lost” to him, but does it further ironically suggest that Platonic metaphysics is “sad”?—versus a forward-looking (ultimately to eternity, but in the sense of life’s constant self-renewal) repetition that is always “happy.”

memory-flow suggested by the bird goes in both directions simultaneously, is both reversible and (dis)continuous.

The refrain, then, as both death and the memory of life, or perhaps simply as the (dis)continuous memory of (dis)continuous death—for as in “Valdemar” we foreground or “begin from” the “difference” (LS 261-62) or “encompassing noise” of death—is the “pivot” and “vertex” of the verse, the hinge on which it turns, from which it flows in opposite directions in rhythmic pulsations or rather (what may be finally the same thing viewed from a more “static” perspective) simultaneously. This is the self-returning movement of *Thanatos* (Freud’s death drive, return to the inorganic state) viewed from a very encompassing, abstract perspective as simultaneous self-reversal, the refrain’s “force of monotone” as a kind of (life-affirming) “fate” (Nietzsche’s *amor fati*), seen now as the crux of refrain-as-determinism (fate) and refrain-as-indeterminacy, of release-of-tension (Freud’s “pleasure”) and tension (“refraining,” self-control, bending back, Freud’s “unpleasure”). This is the pendulum’s neutral oscillation confined to a plane surface, a purely linear/horizontal movement, a self-canceling and thus “equivocal,” finally “empty” temporal structure which one might compare to Deleuze’s image of Aion:

... in accordance with Chronos ... whatever is future or past ... belongs to a more vast present which has a greater extension or duration. There is always a more vast present which absorbs the past and the future.... Chronos is the regulated movement of vast and profound presents.... [But] Chronos must still express the revenge taken by future and past on the present in terms of the present.... In accordance with Aion, only the past and future inhere or subsist in time. Instead of a present which absorbs the past and future, a future and past divide the present at every instant and subdivide it ad infinitum into past and future, in both directions at once.... Whereas Chronos was limited and infinite, Aion is unlimited ... and finite like the instant. Whereas Chronos was inseparable from circularity and its accidents.... Aion stretches out in a straight line, limitless in either direction. Always already past and eternally yet to come, Aion is the eternal truth of time: *pure empty form of time*.... (LS 162-65, Deleuze’s emphasis)

Poe’s “Pit”: Verticality and the Metaphysical Surface

As for the “force of monotone” and its “effect on the reader,” Poe claims in “Composition” to have chosen “Nevermore!” as his refrain in the first place merely for its *sound*: “That such a close, to have force, must be sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis ... inevitably led me to the long o as the most sonorous vowel, in

connection with r as the most producible consonant.... ‘Nevermore’ ... was the very first [word] which presented itself” (424). Perhaps he hears the drawn-out “ore”-sound as resonating “from a vast distance, or from some deep cavern within the earth” (voice of the dying/dead Valdemar), or as the unnerving whirring of a mosquito’s wings in our ear, the whine of an airplane propeller. The narrator in “MS. in a Bottle” first felt how “the air now became intolerably hot, and was loaded with spiral exhalations similar to those arising from heated iron;” then he “was startled by a loud, humming noise, like that occasioned by the rapid revolution of a mill-wheel, and before I could ascertain its meaning, I found the ship quivering to its centre.” This humming whirl (whirl, the “mael” of the maelstrom, “whirling stream”), this “burr of the mill-wheel” is echoed in one of Poe’s most powerful openings. The “ore” of “nevermore” may be the engine driving the pendulum’s horizontal oscillation in “The Raven” but in “The Pit and the Pendulum” it becomes the singular sound of “revolution,” the overturning or reversal of surface-vortex:

I was sick—sick unto death with that long agony; and when they at length unbound me, and I was permitted to sit, I felt that my senses were leaving me. The sentence—the dread sentence of death—was the last of distinct accentuation which reached my ears. After that, the sound of the inquisitorial voices seemed merged in one dreamy indeterminate hum. It conveyed to my soul the idea of *revolution*—perhaps from its association in fancy with the burr of a mill-wheel. This only for a brief period, for presently I heard no more. Yet, for a while, I saw; but with how terrible an exaggeration! I saw the lips of the back-robed judges. They appeared to me white—whiter than the sheet upon which I trace these words—and thin even to grotesqueness.... I saw that the decrees of what to me was Fate were still issuing from those lips. I saw them writhe with a deadly locution. I saw them fashion the syllables of my name; and I shuddered because no sound succeeded. (Auden 61)

So the prisoner in “The Pit” perceives the voices of his “judges”—Zeus or his Father, Chronos, time/fate/*Thanatos*—human voices which seem to fade from articulated sense into the mechanical repetitions of mere noise, and from there into silence. (At last the “noise” is suggested only visually—it becomes visual noise—by the sight of moving lips, as if from the perspective of a deaf person.) Poe’s play on “sentence”²¹ is crucial: the legal meaning is qualified, perhaps reduced to absurdity by

²¹ “*Sententia*” in Latin is a “way of thinking, opinion, sentiment, probably for *sentientia*, from *sentiens*, from *sentire*, to feel, *sense*,” and the dictionary lists three meanings of “sentence”: the legal (judgment, determination of punishment), the grammatical and the musical—the sentence is a musical “period,” a “group of measures arranged in two phrases and ending with a cadence.”

the grammatical one, for if the “death sentence” were in fact nothing but the *sound* of an English sentence (or, at a “further remove,” nothing but the appearance of a mouth forming that sound)—as opposed to its efficacy as a “performative utterance”—it would be reduced to meaninglessness, as on another level might any articulated sentence or word if it were indefinitely repeated or “revolved,” thereby losing its “distinct accentuation,” its “thrillingly distinct syllabification” (“Valdemar”).²² But if the total system of *langue* gives sense to the individual grammatical sentences within it, articulated (by arbitrary difference) out of it—and, within a further subset of these, to officially proclaimed “legal judgments” (e.g. “sentences”)—then is this total system not itself encompassed by noise, articulated out of noise (Serres)? Thus the possibility is indirectly suggested here that, once again, this merely “mechanical” noise (false repetition) may also be something more than that, a noise perhaps which encompasses all sense and “gives” that sense out of its own overflow. Such a notion could only be reinforced by the “second move” here, the move beyond sound to the “truer noise” (truer repetition) of silence. This (silent) noise will be “repeated,” as we shall see, by the (figure of the) pendulum descending down toward the body of the prisoner and, beneath him, the abyss.

“Revolution” is from *revolvere*, to “roll back,” and one of its original meanings is/was to “revolve” or “roll over” (ponder in the sense of “repetition”) in one’s mind. This whole “tale of horror” focuses on the states of mind of the prisoner—whose prison may be the world, life itself, as for Hamlet or Bartleby (who dies in a prison called The Tombs at his story’s end)—as he alternately feels shock and terror, reflects philosophically (“And then there stole into my fancy, like a rich musical note, the thought of what sweet rest there must be in the grave”²³), tries to “get clarity on his

²² Though Derrida’s point is again that the condition of possibility of meaning of a spoken or written word/sentence is its “iterability.”

²³ The “rich musical note” strikes us. We might expect music to be a “harmony” suggestive not just of the traditional notion of paradise (singing angels, blasting trumpets), that is, of eternal life in heaven, but of Serresian excessive order (on the brink of return to disorder). Yet we also sense “music” is something quite different from either Platonic logic or its “excess,” perhaps closer to the initial (Serresian) formation of order, based on repetition, out of the chaotic atomic flow. Poe, enamored as he is of “discordant melodies” (“The Haunted Palace” in “Usher”) shows something of this same ambivalence in his discussions of music in *Marginalia*. Serres in *Genesis* suggests—and here we will think above all of “The Raven”—that music, in the reversible repetitions of its “flow” (chaotic flows are reversible, ordered

situation” (K. in Kafka’s *The Trial*), tries to figure out how to escape. This prison cell (torture chamber, Freud’s life as death-drive) is indeed a complete world, a vertical world in the Homeric sense: the prisoner on his level surface (the earth), the pit of Hades/hell beneath his feet (on whose edge he is precariously perched, as if at the edge of a flattened world), the judges/guards/gods “up above” who can watch the prisoner through a small aperture (“there came a sound resembling the quick opening and as rapid closing of a door overhead, while a faint gleam of light flashed suddenly through the gloom, and as suddenly faded away” [67])²⁴, the descending pendulum with its painted image of Father Time (Chronos), and finally the heated (infernally) walls that move on hinges, closing in upon him to push him into the abyss.

I now want to suggest a kind of Deleuzian reading of the story in terms of bodily depth and the “metaphysical surface.” Here I will set, over against the pre-articulate, noisy “body” of the torture chamber—which includes within it, as part of its larger “mechanism,” the narrator’s body, lying (in the central scene) supine on the floor beneath the descending pendulum—the metaphysical surface of the narrator’s consciousness (stream of his thoughts) and more generally the language-surface of the (of Poe’s) “text.” We are thus reducing the whole “scene” of the story to the most abstract spatio-geometrical and (psycho-) dynamic terms: a man, trapped within the (moveable) walls of a chamber, all of whose thoughts center on the fear of death, on life (or its absence) after death and the praxis of escape; the pit (abyss), smelling of decaying organic life (“my forehead seemed bathed in a clammy vapor, and the peculiar smell of decayed fungus arose to my nostrils” [66]), on whose edge the man is tied down in supine position; the pendulum with its deadly blade descending silently down upon him; the silent (pre-articulate) guards above who can watch him through an opening in his “ceiling;” and last but not least (leaving out the “second torture” of the inward-moving walls), the rats who occasionally make noises, eat the man’s food and finally bite through the ropes binding him (through pure contingency) as they consume

ones linear and irreversible), “overcomes” the irreversible flow (inevitability) of death. (Back again to the trumpets of the *Book of Revelation*, which Poe gives us in various places, including, in muted form, “Usher.”)

²⁴ And Poe, as we have seen, is not “above” ironic or comic-absurd effects here, combined with a

the bits of food he rubs on them. The narrative logic of the prisoner's actual mental states, the revolutions (turnings-over) in his mind as he explores this world of moveable walls/margins and central abyss,²⁵ then may be seen as a kind of "metaphysical surface" upon which those "external facts" are projected or expressed (the Deleuzian move from noisy depths through voice to "speech" at the surface); but this surface is also the force or thrust of *Thanatos* with which all the man's thoughts are tied up, the fear of death which is itself set within the encompassing death-instinct or death-wish, the (perverse, erotic) desire for (expectation of) "return to the inorganic state," for the ultimate reversal or "revolution."

But here I am (like Deleuze) taking the "pendulum" itself as a figure for the movement from (vertical) depth to (horizontal) surface: the pendulum thus enacts, in a sense, this very "interpretation" of the tale in terms of the expressive force, force of "articulation" of an inarticulate (pre-articulate) "body." Whereas the horizontal oscillation in "The Raven" gives us a (simultaneous and equivocal) self-reversing flow that suggests Aion as the empty form of time, now we have the descending pendulum of time/fate/"sentence" and thus the combination of vertical and horizontal movement, a conflict between Chronos/Aion, corporeal/incorporeal, present/absent, depth/surface:

... the resonance ... has a pendular structure: the basic series traversed ... the resonance and the forced movement of an amplitude greater than the initial movement. This initial movement is ... the movement of Eros.... But the forced movement which represents desexualization is Thanatos and "compulsion;" it operates between the two extremes of the original depth and the metaphysical surface, the destructive cannibalistic drives of depth and the speculative death instinct.... We can therefore name the entire forced movement "death instinct," and name its full amplitude "metaphysical surface." ... the forced movement is not established between the basic sexual series, but rather between the two new and infinitely larger series—eating, on the one hand, and thinking, on the other, where the second always risks disappearing into the first, and the first ... risks being projected onto the second.

(LS 239-40, Deleuze's emphasis)

"The destructive cannibalistic drives of depth" are the deep irrational impulses of the human unconscious (sexual desire, violence, sadomasochism and other "perversions"), tied by Deleuze to (the libidinal energy of) Eros in the corporeal body

skeptical reflection on "ontological limits." (Postmodern cinema, e.g. *The Truman Show*.)

²⁵ A decentered (ungrounded as Nietzschean/Heideggerian *Abgrund*) world with permeable (indeterminate) margins—a "postmodernist" world/text.

and thus, in this interpretation, also to the pendulum's vertical descent. While Thanatos in its most abstract form ("speculative death instinct") will be projected onto the surface of the narrator's (and/or author's, textual) consciousness, Deleuze wants here the "forced movement" or drive of Thanatos that operates "between" depth and surface," that is, as the total pendular sweep which includes vertical and horizontal motion of the pendulum. The sense of fear and horror, Poe's narrative "death-compulsion," is manifested in this total motion that lies between the deep drives and surface awareness. Here the "cannibalistic drives" of depth are embodied in the vertical descent of the blade (Chronos, Time) which hungers like a tooth for the prisoner's flesh and so serves as extension of the rats' teeth ("... the vermin frequently fastened their sharp fangs in my fingers" [73]); they are also felt throughout the "body" of the torture chamber, in the death-stench from the pit and the random noises of the rats but most directly in the frenzied feeding of creatures who are mainly waiting to eat the man's body once he dies (slight displacement of cannibalism). "A slight noise attracted my notice, and, looking to the floor, I saw several enormous rats traversing it.... They had issued from the well ... [Another pit, simulacrum of the first? A different bodily orifice?] while I gazed, they came up ... hurriedly, with ravenous eyes, allured by the scent of the meat.... They were bold, ravenous; their red eyes glaring upon me as if they waited but for motionlessness on my part to make me their prey. 'To what food,' I thought, 'have they been accustomed in the well?'" (69-73, my brackets). The rats and pendulum blade are hungry for the man's flesh; the man is hungry (thirsty) for food, water and above all life. Life-hunger is the depth-drive of Eros; its most "metaphysical" projection onto the surface of thought is that death-wish which (for Poe as well as Freud) "encompasses" life.

Deleuze's "theater of terror" ("Twenty-Seventh Series of Orality" in *LS*), by bringing "oral-anal voracity" into play, suggests what may be one psychoanalytic interpretation of "The Pit"—the torture chamber as womb or rather womb-world interface, world as first experienced by the terrified newborn infant.²⁶

²⁶ This "theater of terror" will suggest, beyond Sade, Artaud, and Bataille (*Visions of Excess, Inner Experience*) will suggest Kristeva (*Powers of Horror*). Poe indeed plays between pre- and post-natal (and pre- and post-death) states of consciousness in an earlier passage of the story, though here the prisoner's

Now, the history of depths begins with what is most terrifying: it begins with the theater of terror.... In it, the nursing infant is ... stage, actor, and drama at once. Orality, mouth and breast are initially bottomless depths. Not only are the breast and the entire body of the mother split apart into a good and a bad object, but they are aggressively emptied, slashed to pieces, broken into crumbs and alimentary morsels.... (187)

This theater of terror is a kind of prison-world (torture chamber) within which the newborn infant, having just “abjected” (Kristeva) or “split apart” from the initial prison of the womb, now confusedly finds itself. But within the theater’s larger “body” can we read the descending pendulum (perversely) as the mother’s breast proffered to the ravenously life-hungry (death-hungry) prisoner? It seems much easier to read Poe’s scene as an inversion of the post-natal one whose central actor is a wildly feeding infant, since here it is the surrounding body which feeds upon the prisoner: the pendulum’s mouth, tongue or tooth (“it swept so closely over me as to fan me with its acrid breath” [71]) which hungers for the life of the prisoner here, and in its feeding frenzy could cut apart not only the prisoner’s body but also the larger “body” of the chamber, were it not a controlled motion (“the hissing vigor of its descent, sufficient to sunder these very walls of iron” [71]), the ropes, voracious rats, “crumbs and alimentary morsels” (suggestive of the food-crumbs but also the prisoner’s body, about to be cut apart and become rat-food). This looks much more like the scene of a dead man, buried and consumed by worms (Poe’s “premature burial” obsession), which yet we somehow sense would be (for Poe if not Deleuze) the inversion of the newborn infant’s world.

Of course we may much more easily see the descending blade, not as mother’s breast but as the phallus of a rapist who would penetrate, violate, “split apart” the victim’s (her/his) body—and/or as the phallus of the (his/her) castrating father, the Law of the Father (Lacan). That is, Oedipal readings may suggest themselves more readily than pre-Oedipal ones, and the castration reading seems especially apt considering that

awareness is clearly a metaphysical projection: “Arousing from the most profound of slumbers, we break the gossamer web of *some* dream.... In the return to life ... there are two stages; first, that of the sense of mental or spiritual; secondly ... of physical, existence ... if, upon reaching the second stage, we could recall the impressions of the first, we should find these impressions eloquent in memories of the gulf beyond. And that gulf is—what?... Very suddenly there came back to my soul motion and sound.... Then a pause in which all is blank. Then again sound, and motion, and touch.... Then the mere consciousness of existence.... Then, very suddenly, thought.... Then entire forgetfulness of all that followed...” (Auden 62-64).

the same Chronos (“Father Time”) painted on the pendulum castrated his own father, Uranus/Sky (Freud’s primal scene of Oedipal rebellion against the father in *Totem and Taboo*), and later was killed by his rebellious son Zeus’s thunderbolt. But Deleuze, who after all critiques Freud in *Anti-Oedipus* (his next major work after *LS*, written with Guattari), clearly gives priority to what we perhaps cannot even properly term the “pre-Oedipal”: the Chronos-dimension (verticality) of the descending pendulum in fact (unlike the Law of the Father) points us back toward the corporeal depths, corporeal noise. In Chronos, we remember, past and future are effectively folded or absorbed into the present, they exist only “relatively” to the present: “Chronos is an encasement, a coiling up of relative presents” (Poe’s pendulum as hissing serpent, its kinesis coiled up as potential energy), “with God as the extreme circle or the external envelope;” “Inside Chronos, the present is in some manner corporeal. It is the time of mixtures or blendings, the very process of blending.... The present measures out the action of bodies and causes” (*LS* 162). But given its essential nature as corporeal, “passionate,” a “mixture,” Chronos splits apart:

Is there not a fundamental disturbance of the present, that is, a ground which overthrows and subverts all measure, a becoming-mad of depths which slips away from the present? Is this measureless something merely local and partial, or does it stretch rather little by little to the entire universe, establishing everywhere its poisonous, monstrous mixture, and the subversion of Zeus and Chronos itself?... The becoming-mad of depth is then a bad Chronos, opposed to the living present of the good Chronos. Saturn [Chronos] grumbles from deep within Zeus.
(*LS* 163-164)

But here we are back again in those “schizophrenic” inner depths of the body, and particularly of an infant’s body, back to a frenzied (and) “oral and anal voracity.”²⁷ Deleuze’s duality of the “infinitely larger series” of eating and thinking—where thinking “always risks” being “eaten” and eating always risks being projected/abstracted/dispersed into/onto mere “thought,” so that we need to project this duality onto the “wider amplitude” of the descending pendulum’s swing or sweep—clearly has its basis in a (“displaced” Freudian pre-genital, pre-Oedipal)

²⁷ And I have decided to forego the various “anal” readings that might suggest themselves—for instance that the abyss can be (as well as a mouth and throat) an immense alimentary tract, colon or anus (within the maternal body), perhaps even a “toilet” down which the inquisitors wish to flush the prisoner (treating him as waste, “pure excess.”).

priority to oral and anal stages: the mouth is for eating but also speaking, and thinking arises out of speaking. Deleuze is really “beginning” with/from what he calls “dynamic genesis,” the “production of surfaces out of depth,” the emergence of meaningful sound out of the pure noise/nonsense of “bodies,” of “speaking” out of “eating and shitting”:²⁸

Language is rendered possible by that which distinguishes it. What separates sounds from bodies makes sounds into the elements of a language. What separates speaking from eating renders speech possible.... The surface and that which takes place at the surface is what “renders possible”.... It is a question of a dynamic genesis which leads directly ... *from depth to the production of surfaces* ... we posit eating and speaking by right as two series already separated at the surface. They are separated and articulated by the event which is the result of one of them.... Henceforth, everything takes place in the depth, beneath the realm of sense, between two nonsenses of pure noise—the nonsense of the body and of the splintered word, and the nonsense of the block of bodies or of inarticulate words.... And then the first stage of the dynamic genesis appears. The depth is clamorous ... the shattered sounds of internal objects, and also the inarticulate howls-breaths of the body without organs which respond to them—all of this forms a sonorous system bearing witness to the oral-anal voracity ... speaking will be fashioned out of eating and shitting, language and its univocity will be sculpted out of shit.... (LS 186-93)

In the story’s opening scene, the words/sentences *mouthed*, articulated by the judges’ teeth and tongues become to the prisoner’s ears a mere “hum” that he associates with the “burr of the mill-wheel” (mills *grind* grain to make *food*, just as teeth grind food into “internal objects” but also articulate words with “distinct accentuation”). Once they have become this “hum” (of noise/nonsense) he ceases to hear them and only sees the judges’ lips move silently (as if miming articulation): “I saw ... the lips.... I saw them writhe with a deadly locution. I saw them fashion the syllables” (where “writhe” suggests the “hissing snake” of the pendulum’s mouth/tongue/teeth). Perhaps this scene is itself situated in the noisy corporeal depths, “beneath the realm of sense, between two nonsenses of pure noise—the nonsense of the ... splintered word, and ... of inarticulate words...,” a duality which Deleuze also explains in terms of the “maternal voice” that “must be decomposed, without delay, into literal phonetic sounds and recomposed into inarticulate blocks.” For in this scene articulated sounds (Saussure’s signifiers, sound-images as “random slices” from the pure sound-stream

²⁸ Again, Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (pre-Oedipal baby-talk in the indefinitely extended “semiotic *khora* of language”) and *Powers of Horror* with its mother-baby mutuality of “abjection”: here the abject and disgusting bodily “secretions” or “wastes” include both the (mother’s view of her) emerging baby (which after all emerges from out of her “corporeal depths”) and the (baby’s reciprocal view of the) “abjected” mother.

which are in themselves meaningless) are blurred together into the sound-stream itself, and then further blurred into the more extreme “state” of silence; that is, the move is from discrete “phonetic sounds” (“splintered words”) to “inarticulate blocks.” Yet we sense that this move could be (perhaps repeatedly, as by a pendulum’s sweep) self-reversed, so that the words (of a death-sentence) could again be “spit out” like bullets at the prisoner (“wounding the body,” as Deleuze says), just as the “maternal voice” must be (simultaneously or in succession, with the obsessive compulsion of a *fort-da* game) “decomposed” and “recomposed.” Is this after all an “operation” performed by the infant-victim upon the “maternal voice” (down in the incorporeal depths where he is “sentenced”) of the judges?

Deleuze’s first stage of the dynamic genesis then appears out of the body’s “clamorous depths.” The preliminary stage of language development in the infant, the move from “bodily noise” to “voice” is a move from “depth” to “height”:

But ... the first stage in the formation of a language, is the good object of the depressive position up above. For it is this object that, from among all the sounds of the depth, extracts a Voice.... For the child, the first approach to language consists in grasping it as the model of that which pre-exists.... And so we are left in a *pre-sense* of heights: the voice does not yet have at its disposal the univocity which would make it a language.... [I]t awaits the *event* that will make it a language. It is no longer a noise, but is not yet language. (186-94)

Perhaps we could also read the pendulum, hovering above the narrator, as something slightly more abstract than a purely corporeal object (like a mother’s breast) yet “not yet a language,” as the infant’s “pre-sense of heights,” of the other as “height” which is also his preliminary view of language as “model of that which pre-exists.” In this progression from noise (noisy body) to language (speaking body), then, “voice” is in a sense “outside of itself” (or it is “noise outside of itself” but also “language outside of itself”) and so “voiceless.” Here I think of the judges’ “silent speech” at the story’s opening—after hearing their utterances as the mere “burr” of “revolution” (noise) the narrator only sees their lips moving—and the silent hissing sound of the pendulum’s swing; a Deleuzian reading would put the emphasis on the nearness to noise/sound (“hissing” as an actual sound), on “voice” as “off-noise.” This limitation (or in-between state) of “voice” pushes us closer to the “corporeal surface,” in a kind of (non-Hegelian, non-dialectical) forced movement, and thus to “speech.” For “in the surface sexual

position ... we go from voice to speech ... [which] begins when the formative elements of language are extracted at the surface, from the current of voice which comes from above” (*LS* 232).²⁹ Rather than a patriarchal Chronos (as “good Chronos of the surface,” perhaps as Logos)—if “speech” does seem to stand in *some relation to* this Chronos, we still must distinguish Chronos from a Lacanian (Oedipalized) Law of the Father—we might want to picture this “current of voice ... from above,” the voiceless voice of the previous developmental stage, in terms of Saussure’s pure stream of sound and pure stream of thought, out of which “signs” are arbitrarily “sliced”: here the “elements of language are extracted at the surface” from this “current.” And we remember Deleuze’s view of structuralism (*LS* 71): “Structure is in fact a machine for the production of incorporeal sense.... [S]ense is produced by nonsense and its perpetual displacement, and ... is born of the respective position of elements which are not by themselves ‘signifying.’”

With “speech” Deleuze brings “erogenous zones” and “phallic coordination” into play. While again we would distinguish this from an Oedipal model, emphasizing rather the Deleuzian “structuralist” view that meaning emerges (is expressed) only on the surface, Deleuze’s positing of a “sexual surface” in relation to “speech” does suggest a reading of Poe’s man-pendulum interface (taken now as “speech”) which foregrounds the (perversely sexual) approach of the blade to the surface of the prisoner’s body and contact with that surface. Here we must keep in mind Deleuze’s underlying duality of eating and thinking/speaking: if rats and the pendulum blade (embodying “cannibalistic drives of depth”) can “eat” the man’s ropes and, beneath these, his clothes and finally (innermost surface) his flesh, then “speech” can also be “expressed” at these same surface-levels, and in relation to the same (narrative or textual) “terms.” That is, with “speaking” we have effectively entered the domain of “thinking”; we are on the metaphysical surface of the narrator’s mind. Here then we are looking primarily at a man’s own awareness of the “exciting” blade now about to touch his skin; this

²⁹ Perhaps the “extractions” from the “current of voice” will “stimulate” or “shock” the prisoner into speech, just as the candles he sees near the beginning in a trance-like state transformed his vision into “slender angels”: “I felt every fibre in my frame thrill as if I had touched the wire of a galvanic battery...” (246).

excitation is in the first place a stimulation of human consciousness.

But let us delay our fuller reading of Poe's pendulum (or man-pendulum interface) in terms of Deleuze's emergent-speech theory until we have considered its final move from speech to verb. The "genesis of the Verb/Event" is a kind of move into pure possibility, contingency or the "future." (This is Mallarme's pure event of the dice-throw, *coup de des*, to which he compares it.) Thus in the last chapter of *LS* Deleuze posits the verb in relation to "ideal events," the absolute "disjunction" (or *difference*)—choice between opposite paths, paradox, rupture—and the "silence" of the death-instinct:

Speaking, in the complete sense of the word, presupposes the verb and passes through the verb, which projects the mouth onto the metaphysical surface, filling it with the ideal events of this surface. The verb is the "verbal representation" in its entirety, as well as the highest affirmative power of the disjunction (univocity, with respect to that which diverges)... The verb, however, is silent, and we must take literally the idea that Eros is sonorous and the death instinct is silence.... In the verb, the secondary organization is brought about, and from this organization the entire ordering of language proceeds. Nonsense functions as the zero point of thought, the aleatory point of desexualized energy or the punctual Instinct of death; Aion or empty form and pure Infinitive is the line traced by this point, that is, a cerebral crack at the limits of which the event appears; and the event taken in the univocity of this infinitive is distributed in the two series of amplitude which constitute the metaphysical surface. (*LS* 241)

A vast swinging pendulum going both ways—thus generating a wide plane or amplitude in its flight—has in its closed/open economy an openness which is something like that of (a simulacrum or fulcrum of) the infinitive of the verb with its plethora of tenses (tensions) and conjugations (articulations): e.g. "to eat," "to speak," "to think," "to be." This "figure" combines the purely horizontal disjunction (either/or, branching out simultaneously to left and right, self-reversal on a plane, "Raven"'s vertex) with the vertical thrust of immanence in the now-moment (Verb as "Event"): the singularity of the rhizome rather than (that traditional vertical-horizontal model) the tree, thus a more radically "empirical" or "corporeal" structure (figure, model) than what we get with, say, the Saussurian-Jakobsonian view of vertical-metaphoric and horizontal-metonymic modalities within the vast system of *langue*. But: do we see this "zero point of thought" simply as "non-thought" or as some threshold or liminal point between thought/non-thought? Deleuze mentions Jakobson's "phoneme zero" in the context of that sense-encompassing (and sense-giving) nonsense with which we started:

From the point of view of structure ... there is always *too much sense: an excess produced and over-produced by nonsense as a lack of itself*. Jakobson defines a phoneme zero, having no phonetically determined value, by its opposition to the absence of the phoneme rather than to the phoneme itself. Likewise, nonsense does not have any particular sense, but is opposed to the absence of sense rather than to the sense that it produces in excess....

(LS 71, my emphasis)

Thus, breaking away as we are from the traditional structural-linguistic model, in this Deleuzian “economy of differences” (economy of depths projected or expressed onto surfaces), we have the “zero point of thought” as a point defined “in opposition to the absence of a thought,” that is, simply as (pure) (non-) thought: Deleuze wants to avoid defining the “essence” of thought in a Platonic-Hegelian manner, avoid setting thought against non-thought in the manner of Hegelian dialectic (logical negation); “sense and nonsense”—and, we assume, thought and non-thought—“have a specific relation which can not copy that of the true and false, that is, which can not be conceived simply on the basis of a relation of exclusion” (LS 68). This “zero-point of thought” is also the “aleatory point,” which is again (a mode of) Aion. Where (“good” or “surface”) Chronos, we remember, is “cyclical, measures the movement of bodies and depends on the matter which limits and fills it out,” Aion is “pure straight line at the surface, incorporeal, unlimited, an empty form of time, independent of all matter” (LS 62); the final move from speech to (the infinitive) Verb or pure Event is parallel to (projected onto) a move from (“good”) Chronos to (the infinity of) Aion. Deleuze’s Aion-chance (“aleatory point”) connection draws from the purely contingent and future-opening moment of Mallarme’s *coup de des* and Nietzsche, who alludes to a passage in Heraclitus where *Aion* (Greek “always” or “ever”) is a child-god playing dice “at the table of the gods”:

The Aion is the ideal player of the game; it is an infused and ramified chance. It is the unique cast from which all throws are qualitatively distinguished. It plays or is played on at least two tables, or at the border of two tables. There, it traces its straight and bisecting line.... The two tables or series are like the sky and the earth, propositions and things, expressions and consumptions.... The Aion is precisely the border of the two, the straight line which separates them; but it is also the plain surface which connects them, an impenetrable window or glass.

(LS 64)

But the dice-throw of the infinitive verb, the absolute disjunction and contingency of the Event occurs in the *moment*; the abstract, infinitely extended surface of

Aion/Thanatos is therefore effectively “frozen” in/at this moment, whose vertical pendulum-thrust comes from the fact that the verbal infinitive/dice-throw of all possibilities is being *spoken*: we are just “at” the (nonsensical) “zero point of thought, the aleatory point of desexualized energy or the punctual Instinct of death,” where “punctual Instinct” itself becomes a kind of point; “Aion or empty form and pure Infinitive is the line traced by this point” (*LS* 24).

At last we come back to Poe’s “Pit” and to his pendulum now fast approaching the surface of the narrator’s skin. Of course it would be difficult to “read into” this “tale of horror” all of “this”; and yet, the prisoner’s immanent moment of *waiting* for the pendulum to strike him (his own *suspense*, for the “suspension” of the pendulum echoes his own, is its simulacrum) is a scene which (in some sense echoing the ritual performance of the mad poet’s suicidal dice-throw in Mallarme’s *Igitur*) also seems to open itself to such a reading. Time slows down in the narrative as the man waits for the blade to first touch the *surface* (his garment) of the *surface* of his body, and then begin to cut into this surface itself, an event which finally does occur: *this* is after all the long-awaited *Punkt* or “point” of death (which gets miraculously delayed again, its “line” slightly further “extended”; within the limits of this tale “actual” death is thwarted). And Poe is, after all, rather obsessed with “surfaces” here; the narrative “framework” is a geometrical space of lines, points and surfaces:

The vibration of the pendulum was at right angles to my length. I saw that the crescent was designed to cross the region of the heart. It would fray the serge of my robe—it would return and repeat its operations—again—and again. Notwithstanding its terrifically wide sweep ... and the hissing vigor of its descent ... still the fraying of my robe would be all that, for several minutes, it would accomplish. And at this thought I paused. I dared not go further than this reflection. I dwelt upon it with a pertinacity of attention—as if, in so dwelling, I could arrest *here* the descent of the steel. I forced myself to ponder upon the sound of the crescent as it should pass across the garment—upon the peculiar thrilling sensation which the friction of cloth produces on the nerves. I pondered upon all this frivolity until my teeth were on edge. Down—steadily down it crept I took a frenzied pleasure in contrasting its downward with its lateral velocity.... Down—certainly, relentlessly down! It vibrated within three inches of my bosom!... Down—still unceasingly—still inevitably down! I saw that ten or twelve vibrations would bring the steel in actual contact with my robe.... The surcingle hung in ribands from my body. But the stroke of the pendulum already pressed upon my bosom. It had divided the serge of the robe. It had cut through the linen beneath. Twice again it swung, and a sharp sense of pain short through every nerve. But the moment of escape had arrived. (71-74)

The painstakingly slow progress of a steel blade through layers of cloth/flesh is

“rehearsed” long minutes before it becomes an actuality. The prisoner even takes a “frenzied pleasure” in his detached observation of the pendulum’s motion: we note the contradiction between the irrational excess of this pleasure (vertical drives of depth) and the controlled abstraction of the “calculation” (Thanatos as death-wish or death-speculation on the metaphysical surface), an *aporia* more fully “amplified” in the schizophrenic equivocation (self-reversal) of trying to “arrest *here*”—that is, “in thought” (at the zero-point of thought perhaps)—“the descent of the steel” (stop it with the mere *thought* that it must first cut through the thin layer of cloth, or the mental *image* of it’s doing so) while simultaneously pondering “upon the sound of the crescent as it should pass across the garment—upon the peculiar thrilling sensation which the friction of cloth produces on the nerves” (71-72). Indeed, in the forward repetition of this last anticipation thought is displaced from itself (into feeling or “sense”): “to ponder ... upon the ... *sensation*...” (my emphasis). In fact we have two “series” here: “ponder the sound of the crescent-passing-through-cloth” and “ponder the sensation of the cloth-against-skin” (cloth-against-nerves). The latter metonymically “extends” the former (blade pushing cloth against skin), just as the tactile sense extends the sound. We might then say “ponder” is the “Verb” here, its disjunction marking the zero-point of thought and “aleatory point” (*Igitur* again) in the direct line of pendulum/death. Deleuze claims that

Speaking, in the complete sense of the word, presupposes the verb and *passes through the verb*, which projects the mouth onto the metaphysical surface, filling it with the ideal events of this surface. The verb is the ... highest affirmative power of the disjunction (univocity, with respect to that which diverges)... *The verb, however, is silent*, and we must take literally the idea that *Eros is sonorous and the death instinct is silence*. (LS 241)

In Poe’s passage above, the prisoner’s anticipated “thrilling sensation” correlates with “sound” (“the sound of the crescent passing through the cloth/skin/surface”) and more specifically suggests “speech” (tied by Deleuze to the erogenous zones, to *Eros*); his “pondering” at this “flattened-out” point/*Punkt*/moment (*Thanatos*) may be the event of the infinitely disjunctive verb, pure aleatory possibility: “silence.” But while (for Poe) sound/sensation passes/cuts through thought (rupturing it), or (for Deleuze) “speaking passes through the verb” (through silence, cuts through it like a knife)—the projected series is “speech surface silence,” or speech-silence/speech-silence (one kind

of recursive series)—on the other hand (for Poe) “thought projects the mouth (speaking blade/eating food) onto the surface” (here the corporal surface), or (for Deleuze) “the verb projects the mouth onto the metaphysical surface,” that is, “silence projects speech onto the surface,” giving us the series silence-speech-surface or silence-speech-silence/speech (the reverse recursive series). This would be but one reading, the variables are ever-shifting: the metaphysical surface of body/clothing (which seems to “fit” better in this case) can also be the metaphysical surface of the narrator’s consciousness in the story, which gets intermittently cut/disrupted; but the “verb” suggests “pondering” as the opening into a frenzy of disjunctions/possibilities *in the moment*.

Now we can return also to the interpretation I set forth at the beginning of our discussion of “The Pit,” and try to more fully elaborate it in the context of Deleuze’s noise/voice/speech/Verb. I suggested that the “burr” of “revolution” does more than create (as in “The Raven”) a self-reversal on the horizontal plane of equivocity, that it perhaps “overthrows” the order of surface/vortex; that this merely “mechanical” burr of the mill-wheel (false repetition) may also be a noise which encompasses/overflows and “gives” sense (thus a true or “singular” repetition); that such a notion is reinforced by Poe’s move beyond sound or noise here to (the truer repetition of) silence—or rather, to the sound-silence interface. The judges voices/speech, we remember, “merged in one dreamy indeterminate hum ... which conveyed to my soul the idea of revolution,” until finally the narrator (or “speaker”) sees only the judges’ “writhing lips”: this can be read as a move that breaks down the coherent speech (or coherent “death-sentence”) into noise and nonsense, but we end by moving from noise to a silenced form of that same noise (from the hum to the lips) which seems somehow (on the most abstract “surface”) to give it “sense.” The horizontal/vertical vectors of this “burr” that becomes “silenced”—and perhaps the self-reversal of the movement here—are repeated by/projected onto the figure of the descending and “hissing” (silent/voiced) pendulum, a (writhing and foul-breathed) projection of “orality,” but also repeated by/projected onto the figure of the “victim” himself. He is “silent” (utters no sound or noise) though his mind (and so Poe’s text) is “filled with speech,” filled with a flow of panicked jumps and self-interruptions, self-reversals; yet (reversing it) ultimately we can also say

that these “revolutions” or “turnings-over” in the narrator’s mind are mere “noise” (frenzied drives, death-panic in his, and/or in the “author”’s, “corporeal depths”) which finally become absorbed into silence on the metaphysical surface of consciousness—that is, when we read them all as part of a unifying Thanatos which synthesizes the energies of Eros by dissipating them, an encompassing death-drive or death-wish. Thanatos is closely tied to Aion, the “pure form of time” and encompassing repetition (revolution) of its “transcendental synthesis”:

The emergent moment of Eros at the origin of life, therefore, always includes within it the preceding moment of inanimate matter, of Thanatos. Likewise, it always brings with it the moment after life, of a returned Thanatos. Eros is an ever-repeating synthesis which constitutes the present, but Eros only emerges against the background of the larger field of the pure form of time. That field is the ground-less dimension of Thanatos, a dimension convulsed by an incessant repetition of a simultaneous past, present and future. (Bogue 52)

The Stuttering of Language

Virtually all Poe critics have seized on the writer’s “obsession” with “enclosed spaces.” Thus Bloom says, citing “William Wilson” and “Marginalia”: “With its ‘incomprehensible subdivisions’³⁰ this circumscribed ‘infinity’ (the building itself)” reflects Poe’s theory of the short tale, for “‘it has always appeared to me [i.e. Poe] that a close circumspection of space is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident: it has the force of a frame to a picture. It has an indisputable moral power ... and, of course, must not be confounded with mere unity of place’” (78). Bloom ties this spatial “circumscription”—“While space is circumscribed the mind is free to explore its limits”—to Poe’s narrative tactic of “circumlocution”³¹ ... [as] a stylistic device for ‘widening’ a text and keeping it within extremely narrow boundaries” (78), and also to William Carlos Williams’s perception that Poe “‘as a habit, borrowed perhaps from algebra, of balancing his sentences in the middle, or of reversing them in the later

³⁰ Here one might think of Kafka and of Deleuze’s “bureaucratic” reading of Kafka in *Toward a Minor Literature*.

³¹ “Circumlocution” as a “delaying” (holding in suspense, like a suspended pendulum) of the “main point” (final point, “Nevermore!”) in narrative discourse is analyzed by Poe in “Imp of the Perverse”: here it is one example of (an author’s) perversity, of “torturing the reader,” which is what Poe effectively does by delaying the essay-tale’s “climax” with this long-winded “philosophical discourse.”

clauses.’ And it is this reversal that inscribes the laws of logic within the schemes of madness” (80).³² This view of sentences equivocating, vibrating, oscillating, self-reversing themselves at mid-point is one I have suggested in relation to the “poetics” of “The Raven;” in the pendular dynamics of “The Pit” the indefinitely iterated silence/sound (noise/sound) of the “refrain” (*refringere*, “bending-back”) which self-reverses becomes that of “flapping lips” whose tongues can hiss and strike. Arguably the horizontal play of “The Raven,” of this sub-human (mechanical) creature which cannot really “speak,” does not move beyond the structuring of noise-voice: it remains forever frozen in an empty Aion, remaining on the surface “between;” the horizontal-vertical structuring of “The Pit” is closer to something like a full-fledged language, with the audible “erotics” of speech on a metaphysical surface that now can cut along the vertical through the silence of the moment: the Aion of the dice-throw, Thanatos as an opening into pure possibility.

But on both structural “levels” here we can see the praxis of a circumlocutionary or “delaying” discourse (poetic-narrative “suspense”) closely tied to Poe’s stylistic tendency to balance and reverse his “sentences” at their mid-point. This self-reversal then is simultaneously a self-delay of discourse: a dynamic which may well parallel, as Bloom claims, the later Freud’s “ultimate pleasure principle” or ultimate release of tension (*Thanatos*, return to the inorganic state) in relation to the pleasure/unpleasure (tension/release) of *Eros* and that compulsive repetition of neuroses which “delays” the full release of energy in another sense. This sort of dynamic then is at play in Poe within a “circumscribed space” vaster, that is, more abstract even than the psychoanalyst’s “unconscious” and narrator-reader-”analyst” dynamics that Bloom is talking about: Poe distinguishes, as we have seen, in “Marginalia” his notion of such a space from “mere unity of place,” perhaps giving it thereby the universality and abstraction of a purely geometric space, even of the space of *langue* itself, or of nose-voice-speech-Verb. Within this language-space, then, the self-reversing/self-delaying oscillation of Poe’s style is performed. However, in the pendular “theater of terror” of “The Pit” we

³² This last insight is of course quite “Deleuzian,” since Deleuze to a degree grounds his “logic” in the discourse of institutionalized schizophrenics.

have “expanded” this dynamic beyond the limits imposed upon it on the equivocal poetic plane of “The Raven,” expanding it further out toward the encompassing limits of language-space itself, limits which Deleuze’s Verb/Event challenges, puts at stake.

In the late essay “He Stuttered” (1994) Deleuze claims, in what can be seen as a kind of “expansion of the Verb beyond speech”—and Mallarme’s “The Book” of 1895, that book “which is a total expansion of the letter” and “in this spaciousness must establish some nameless system of relationships,” surely hovers here somewhere in the background—that writers like Luca and Beckett “make the language as such stutter”:

It is no longer the character who stutters in speech; it is the writer who becomes *a stutterer in language*. He makes the language as such stutter: an affective and intensive language, and no longer an affectation of the one who speaks.... [I]f the system appears in perpetual disequilibrium or bifurcation, if each of its terms in turn passes through a zone of continuous variation, then the language itself will begin to vibrate and stutter, but without being confused with speech, which never assumes more than one variable position among others, or moves in more than one direction.... If Gherasim Luca’s speech is eminently poetic, it is because he makes stuttering an affect of language and not ... of speech. The entire language spins and varies in order to disengage a final block of sound, a single breath at the limit of the cry, JE T’AIME PASSIONEMENT.... “*Passionne nez passion-nem je / je t’ai je t’aime je / je je jet je t’ai jetez / je t’aime passionem t’aime.*” Luca the Romanian, Beckett the Irishman. Beckett took this art of inclusive disjunctions to its highest point, an art that no longer selects but affirms the disjointed terms through their distance, without limiting one by the other or excluding one from the other, laying out and passing through the entire set of possibilities. Hence, in *Watt*, the ways in which Knott puts on his shoes, moves about his room, or changes his furniture ... in Beckett, these affirmative disjunctions usually concern the bearing or gait of the characters.... But this is how the transfer from the form of expression to a form of content is brought about.... [Beckett] places himself in the middle of a sentence and makes the sentence grow out from the middle, adding particle upon particle ... so as to pilot the block of a single expiring breath.... *Creative stuttering is what makes language grow from the middle, like grass; it is what makes language a rhizome instead of a tree, what puts language in perpetual disequilibrium.* (Essays 107-11, my emphasis)

Kenner (1961), influenced by Mercier, elaborated the “formal self-exhaustion” reading of Beckett, noting the author’s fascination with 6th-century B.C. Pythagorean mathematics (“surds,” irrational numbers) and 17th-century Continental rationalism (algebra, geometry, the infinitesimal calculus): Beckett’s playing out of all logical possibilities, conjunctive and disjunctive, of the (novel as) *language machine* (on Kenner’s reading) becomes for Deleuze the indefinite extension of “disjunctive series” within that abstracted geometrical space of body-text (body-without-organs). But inasmuch as Deleuze (1994) speaks of the “limit of language ... subtending the entire language system” and “tension inside language ... that brings the language system to

this limit....” it seems we could also fit Poe’s own dynamics of oscillation, of “resonant noise” within such a framework. I am not sure if Poe’s language-space is more or less circumscribed than Beckett’s in *Watt*; clearly it is circumscribed “differently.” But we do directly feel in Poe the “tension inside language” bringing the whole system “to its limit.” In his abruptness and violence Poe seems to have reduced his stuttering to the single oscillation, stroke or shock that runs through all language (“zigzag fissure” in the *House of Usher*, Deleuzian crack on the metaphysical language-surface); reduced it to that (im)possible disjunction at the death-point of the infinitive Verb³³ pronounced by Valdemar (in a voice coming “from some deep cavern within the earth,” with a “vibratory movement of the tongue”): “... quick! quick!—put me to sleep—or, quick!—awaken me!—quick!—*I say to you that I am dead!*”.

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³³ By extension: “To be or not to be....”

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"The Pit and the Pendulum" is a short story written by Edgar Allan Poe and first published in 1842 in the literary annual *The Gift: A Christmas and New Year's Present for 1843*. The story is about the torments endured by a prisoner of the Spanish Inquisition, though Poe skews historical facts. The narrator of the story describes his experience of being tortured. The story is especially effective at inspiring fear in the reader because of its heavy focus on the senses, such as sound, emphasizing its He chased the doctor and he fell into a pit and died. He stuck his wife in a torture machine out of sight and gagged her. Then her brother came down. Nicholas seized him and put him on table below a razor sharp pendulum. Right as it was cutting his shirt two servants busted in and threw Nicholas into the pit with the doctor and saved him. READ. Paul Theroux's *The Mosquito Coast: Summary & Analysis*. The Pit and the Pendulum (Edgar Allan Poe). D Major. Key. 10B. Camelot. 7:43. Duration. The following tracks will sound good when mixed with Nelson Olmsted - The Pit and the Pendulum (Edgar Allan Poe), because they have similar tempos, adjacent Camelot values, and complimentary styles. Camelot. BPM. Popularity. Energy. Danceability. Happiness.