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A Tour of Reading: “The Man of the Crowd”

There are many different gifts many of us owe to Professor Tadeusz Sławek. The one which stands out for me is the practice of reading, such reading that takes its time, that is patient and respectful of details, but which also takes risks in making unconventional connections, that negotiates between the inside and the outside of a literary text. And which does not have to arrive to a conclusion to make sense. Hence the following piece which engages, along these very lines, with Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, “The Man of the Crowd,” once given such prominence through Walter Benjamin’s writings.

Points of Departure

A tale of movement, “The Man of the Crowd” has an emphatically stationary point of departure. Even doubly so, as an unnamed narrator sitting at the window in an also unnamed London Coffee-House convalesces after his recent protracted illness, which kept him, we are to imagine, confined to bed “for some months.”¹ The gradual return to shape coincides with just as gradual return to social activity; while not long ago homebound, and so detached from human company and the larger world, the narrator now reunites with society, doing so in a cautious manner. The Coffee-House interior serves this purpose in that it allows a return on

¹ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man of the Crowd,” in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), 475. All further page references to the novel, given in parentheses in the text, are taken from this edition.

one's own conditions, when one can join company by merely occupying social space, while at the same time keeping one's distance and maintaining one's detachment.

The chosen seat "at the large bow-window" (475) in a communal room bespeaks this social unreadiness; obviously a peripheral location, it creates a secure situation of liminality. On the edge of the room, the narrator resides in-between reclusiveness and conviviality, detachment and participation, inaction and action. His tentative presence in the room is paralleled by the equally tentative behaviour which informs his progress towards recovery (of health, senses, intellectual sharpness, social ground): "With a cigar in my mouth and a newspaper in my lap, I had been amusing myself for the greater part of the afternoon, now in poring over advertisements, now in observing the promiscuous company in the room, and now in peering through the smoky panes into the street" (475). Eagerness to engage and experience his senses anew produces some sensory disorientation; gaze, which illness and confinement starved of visual material, struggles for focus, as it moves between the printed word, the coffee-house patrons and the street.

The liminality of the narrator's position has, of course, one other form, since placing him by the window, Poe places him between the inside and the outside, thus feeding his senses with impressions of not only a different point of origin, but also different intensity and dynamics. The interior which encloses the narrator and whose human and material contents he observes for a good deal of the afternoon constitutes a strangely blank spot in the narrative, as if it mattered only as a transitional territory, a testing ground. There the observer reclaims the use of his sight and intellectual capacities, breaking them in for a proper perceptual challenge. While the room is underdescribed, slightly more recognition is accorded to the window, which, indeed, plays a more instrumental role in the sensory and mental recuperation of the narrator.

The Window

It is casually specified as a large bow-window – in other words, a curved bay-window – a very specific feature of English architecture, of which Hermann Muthesius writes so approvingly in his monumental study. Rather than perceive the window in terms of the customary boundary separating the outside from the

inside, Muthesius describes the bay as a glass box which is a part of the interior, the extension of its area which adds to its comfort. Whereas the window acts as "a source of light and as a means of communication with the outside world,"² the bay-window performs these two functions in a reinforced manner. First of all, its projected, box-like structure allows to admit more light even to the rooms which do not face the sun, and secondly, its low position turns it into an extremely *comfortable* vantage point: one can "look out of the window while remaining seated."³ Poe's narrator relies on these two functions: though probably dimmish, because of the time of the year (autumn), the light which the window provides still facilitated reading through much of the afternoon, while at the same time it allows a leisurely observation of the world outside.

Originally alternating between these two activities, with the additional visual interest provided by the company assembled inside, the narrator eventually directs his gaze outward, which, again, is determined by light. With the evening and darkness drawing in and the street outside being lit up by the lamps, the scene enframed by the window acquires the value of the spectacle and monopolises the observer's attention. On the practical level, the light cast by the street lamps simply improves visibility of the scene without, but what properly captivates the observer is the mass and variety of impressions supplied by the throng spilling into the thoroughfare after dark, a sight unknown to him. But perhaps at issue is more than a variety; given his sitting and stationary attitude, the crowd, which walks into and out of the frame, fascinates and challenges his perception on account of its mobility. If one is to read this moving mass, available to one's senses but for a fraction of time, one must attain and retain unflagging alertness to note and process the numerous evanescent sights. Or, and this will be a novel and more feasible response, one has to take recourse to selection and "modernize" one's perception: "the concentrated and accelerated mobility

2 Hermann Muthesius, *The English House*, vol. 2: *Layout and Construction*, trans. Janet Seligman and Stewart Spencer (London: Frances Lincoln, 2007), 190.

3 Muthesius, *The English House*, 193.

of people and things demanded an assimilation of perceptual capacities.”⁴

And yet, at this point, despite commitment and intensity, observation is a mere game, an idle diversion, indulged in with confidence or arrogance of the viewer who believes his vantage point gives him advantage. As Isobel Armstrong puts it, “the gazer from within claims ownership of the space not only in the room behind but also of the optical field of the street ... beyond the window.”⁵ There is a sense of self-congratulatory empowerment in the narrator’s report of his ensuing observations in that he describes results of less a visual and more an intellectual pursuit, and so he describes not the crowd but what *he*, the master of optical ceremonies, does with the crowd: “At first my observations took an abstract and generalizing turn. I looked at the passengers in masses, and thought of them in their aggregate relations. Soon, however, I descended to details, and regarded with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance” (475). But there is a sense of privilege, too. His confession that “at this particular part of the evening [he] had never before been in a similar situation” (475) could refer to more than temporal and spatial circumstances, created by the conjunction of the lit-up congested street and his own behind-the-glass, comfortable, and sheltered point of observation. His privilege is the privilege of man of leisure, little familiar – by virtue of his convalescent and, one may suspect, socioeconomic position – with the evening rush hour, the post *work* frenzy of urban traffic. So the barrier created by the window may be, too, an expression of the observer’s apparent *social* detachment from the crowd, while at the same time the window serves as a medium for dissolving the distance, even if only superficially.

4 Christoph Asendorf, *Batteries of Life. On the History of Things and Their Perception in Modernity*, trans. Don Reneau (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 61.

5 Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds. Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

Gaze

Difference is built into the situation, though. "The hiatus of the window dramatizes the uneven relation of the subject and object,"⁶ Armstrong notes, and, indeed, Poe's story highlights the through-the-window observation as such an unsymmetrical affair. It is not only that the narrator does not find himself in the position of being an object of the scrutiny from some observer without (nor, for this matter inside); he does not even contemplate such a possibility, let alone express any discomfort at being gazed at. In her study of Victorian London, Lynda Nead mentions a 1859 handbook of etiquette whose anonymous writer describes himself as a "man in the club window." He spends his convalescence, like Poe's narrator, on observing the street reporting and instructing the readers on the propriety and economy of the gaze exchange. Interestingly, his own vantage point from which he watches the passers-by exempts him from the social rules stipulating the rudeness of the prolonged gaze or close inspection. The glass pane gives the observer immunity.⁷

The relationship between the stationary observing self and the rushing crowd is unsymmetrical visually, kinetically, and socially. In all these aspects, regardless of his invalid condition, the narrator has an upper hand. He seems to be in control of the crowd that enters and exits his field of vision also when he marshals it in his mind, breaking its mobile heterogeneity into different "classes," "tribes," "divisions," and "battalions" (476). Despite the declared novelty of the sight, his reading of the passengers indicates some familiarity, as the narrator efficiently allocates respective social and professional identities to them, on the basis of "varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance" (476). And so he discerns "noblemen, merchants, attorneys, tradesmen, stock-jobbers," "junior" and "upper clerks," to then move to "the race of ... pick-pockets," (476) and "gamblers" (477). By his own admission, the filter he deploys in this management of the crowd is that of the social rank, and so he quickly and methodically, too quickly and too methodically in fact, lists "successive" categories of citizens "descending in the

6 Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 7.

7 Cf. Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon. People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 73.

scale of what is termed gentility” (477). The generalising filter is intellectual as much as it is visual perhaps, as the unrealistically panoramic parade of human types that seems to unfold before the narrator’s eyes – and through his vision, also ours – is already processed in his mind. Hence, the more or less genteel gradually give way to the humbler, shadier, and shabbier types:

Jew pedlars, ... professional street beggars, ... feeble and ghastly invalids, ... modest young girls returning from long and late labour, ... ruffians, ... women of the town, ... drunkards; ... beside these, pie-men, porters, coal-heavers, sweeps; organ-grinders, monkey-exhibitors and ballad mongers, those who vended with those who sang; ragged artisans and exhausted laborers of every description. (478)

There is, of course, another filter at work which assists the narrator’s classification, and this is darkness. The growth of the cities at the end of the eighteenth century combined with the introduction of lighting erased the boundaries between work and rest or retreat, thus opening up urban time and space.⁸ The progress of the evening and the steady fall of darkness coincide thus with the exposure of the nether classes retiring from (or just starting) their sundry occupations. Darkness turns the metropolis inside out, revealing, thanks to the light of the gas-lamps, its working parts as well as less respectable presences, which are now brought to the leisurely observer’s attention.

His gaze remains cursory because of the mobility of the crowd, but earlier “global” reading can now acquire sharpness which acknowledges details and discerns individual features and identities. The list is almost worthy of Henry Mayhew or George Gissing, except that Poe’s narrator seems a declared selfish rather than a socially oriented observer. His glance is too amusement-bound not to rebound off the objects it skims, but if his observations take such a superficial turn, they also do so because of their accidental context and conditions that permit little else. Not that the narrator considers these circumstantial complications as being an obstacle to his gaze, but the

⁸ Cf. Joachim Schlör, *Nights in the Big City. Paris, Berlin, London 1840–1930*, trans. Pierre Gottfried Imhof and Dafydd Rees Roberts (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), 36–37.

observation for a long time consists in no more than recognition, and so essentially remains a passive exercise. This intellectual inertia somehow accords with the narrator's convalescence-determined languor, embodied by the comfortable posture by the coffee-house bow-window.

The window pane may act at this point more as a medium than a barrier⁹ in that its apparent transparency implies no resistance that the gaze, or the mind, meets. The narrator hints a number of times at the frictionlessness of his taxonomic reading, priding himself on how "easily recognizable" (476, 477) particular categories or professions were to him. Thus, for instance, such tell-tale signs as strangely quickly noticed "voluminousness of wristband" and "an air of excessive frankness" make him "easily" understand some individuals as "belonging to the race of swell pick-pockets." "Easily," "always," "undoubtedly," "obvious," or "not possible to mistake" (476–77) are phrases that recur in the inventory of his findings. However, boastfulness mixes with frustration; the world without disappoints with its transparency, failing to offer a challenge for the observer's increasingly keen eye and mind. His glib deciding strangers' identities could, of course, be wide off the mark. Inferences he fabricates so comfortably just as images heave into sight are, after all, not subject to any verification. We have to take him at his word that looking at individual faces, "in [his] then peculiar state [he] could frequently read, even in that brief interval of glance, the history of long years" (478). Constructed on feeble evidence and delivered with impunity, speculations, like so much reading, are idle, frivolous guesswork; whatever inaccuracies they contain, the outcome can hardly have any serious consequences. One simply moves on. This readability of the crowd brings out complacency as well as boredom, because they were identified at a single glance, members of the crowd "did not greatly excite [his] attention" (476). Even though darkness puts on the street "every species of infamy," (478) supplying the narrator with "darker and deeper themes for speculation," (477) these more intriguing faces flitting by are still read effortlessly.

⁹ Cf. Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 7.

Resistance

Writing of windowpanes, Armstrong notes that “transparency is something that eliminates itself in the process of vision. It does away with obstruction by not declaring itself as a presence. But the paradox of this self-obliterating state is that we would not call it transparent but for the presence of physical matter, however invisible – its visible invisibility is what is important about transparency. It must be both barrier and medium.”¹⁰ Poe’s use of the window initially stresses these paradoxical properties and functions: its implied transparency enables the narrator to conduct the observation of the thronged street the coffee-house looks out to, but there is a significant awareness of the glass’s more solid, almost opaque, materiality: while the vantage point itself might be comfortable as is, presumably, the armchair in which he sits, the gaze is less so, as he is “*peering* through the *smoky* panes” (475). As the eye gets accustomed to the opacity, the barrier of the window pane becomes cleared and forgotten. The medium turns, however, into a barrier again, once the falling darkness makes more remarkable individuals replace regular daylight figures, whereby observation gathers intensity and difficulty: now the narrator surveys the mob “with [his] brow to the glass” (478). The “brow to the glass” posture expresses at this moment seriousness of the occupation, no longer belittled as amusement which can be abandoned at will. Intensity verges upon addiction. From the moment of fixing his gaze to the crowd outside, the narrator’s re-attachment to the world is expressed through the progress towards the immediate and the material. Contiguity spells imminent confrontation.

Further development is only too well known: an intriguing countenance in the nocturnal crowd triggers a dramatic change in the narrator’s attitude and spurs him into action, thus facilitating his recovery: he experiences the animation of the body and the mind alike. No longer sheltered, passive, languid, or complacent, he resigns “protection against any direct confrontation,”¹¹ and steps into the street reintroducing himself to the urban fold in the process. It is also a moment of crisis, or, at least severe complication in the reading exercise the narrator took upon himself: for once his gaze meets with resistance, and

¹⁰ Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 11.

¹¹ Asendorf, *Batteries of Life*, 127.

at this moment of a puzzle or illegibility the window pane makes its materiality felt; it is an obstacle to understanding. Let us recall Armstrong once more: "The window is the seam, or junction, of the body's internal space. It turns inward and outward. Instigating both transitive vision and obstruction, it is a faultline, the point of tension. At its intersection, trauma, crisis, and epiphany occur."¹²

The sight of the stranger's physiognomy induces a combination of all these: "trauma, crisis, and epiphany." A single glance proves no longer sufficient, not that, if we trust the narrator's report, it fails to supply him with any material; on the contrary, "the brief minute [sic] of the original survey" (478) offers too much:

As I endeavoured ... to form some analysis of the meaning conveyed, there arose confusedly and paradoxically within my mind, the ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense — of supreme despair. (478)

"The history of long years," so cavalierly attached to merely glimpsed faces, now cannot be even attempted. This stranger's countenance "does not permit itself to be read" (475); it lacks false transparency which until now made the viewing and interpretative exercise such an effortless affair. What with its excess of traces and experiences, the face becomes a barrier, an obstruction which the hitherto smooth, automatic almost, perception eventually runs into. On coming up against a "difficult" form, Poe's observer moves from the economy of recognition to the effort of understanding; no longer complacently going through the motions, the narrator becomes a reader proper: "singularly aroused, startled, fascinated" (478).

Breakthrough

This breakthrough necessitates a step outside one's comfort zone: "Hurriedly putting on an overcoat, and seizing my hat and cane, I made my way into the street, and pushed through the crowd in the direction which I had seen him take; for he had already disappeared. With some little difficulty I at length came within sight of him, approached, and followed him closely ..." (478).

¹² Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 115.

The narrator's leaving the coffee-house is the story's unassuming critical point; a sentence buried somewhere in the middle of a paragraph marks a number of changes: the most obvious ones being the shift from the inside to the outside, from sedentary immobility to active walking, from frivolous amusement to focused pursuit, from the slowness of routine to the hurry of impulse, from the position of empowerment to that of subordination, from sheltered comfort offered by a civilised place to the exposure to elements – “thick humid fog ..., soon ending in a settled and heavy rain” (479) – and danger presented by nocturnal streets. It is a breakthrough also in that venturing into the street and its crowd, the observer detaches himself or does away with the window, whether as a barrier or a medium. From a stationary nonchalant *flâneur* – which, naturally, is a contradiction in terms – he becomes a conscientious detective,¹³ after all, Armstrong notes, “despite its stubborn physical existence, the window's boundary makes the scopic trajectory *theoretical* because the body can never follow the eye.”¹⁴ The narrator must abandon the window in order to see, only thus can he “keep the man in view – to know more of him” (478).

Now the body does follow the eye, but principally, of course, the body and the eye, now in collusion, have to follow the object of the scrutiny. And now vision depends on the body and its ability to keep pace with the other man. For the narrator a return to physical activity means the loss of autonomy, though. It is not his own mobility that he enjoys as he accepts the rhythm imposed by the observed stranger. The fear of losing sight of him, as well as the fear of being detected require that he follow closely and replicate every change of the man's pace. It seems that once in the street, the narrator adjusts not just his pace but also purpose of the observation. The examination of the stranger which the narrator can carry out at the onset of his pursuit, as soon as he catches up with him, is reported to heighten rather than abate his curiosity, but one cannot help thinking that at some point the man's appearance, or even the man himself as the foundation for “a history” (478) loses relevance. The very action of following, that is, keeping *behind*, naturally makes the observation of the

13 Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1997), 40.

14 Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 115.

countenance a near impossible task, save some moments when the stranger changes direction and "[comes] round with a sudden movement" (479). The narrator modifies his examination in that to "know more" (478) of the man, he must put him in a context, as if only in the connection with place and time interpretation could proceed and make sense. The face might be striking in its own right, and it is the "absolute idiosyncrasy of [its] expression" (478) that intrigues the observer and undermines his cognitive confidence. The text of the face, as it were, does not suffice, and venturing outside can be treated as a move outside the text which the act of decoding cannot do without. Still, the context, if the world outside the coffee-house is viewed in this manner, complicates rather than helps the process. This is because it, too, is distinguished by some oddity, or scandal.

Circulation

Poe's story apparently does not dwell on the material texture of London in that it largely lacks extensive descriptions of places. However, the few particulars that it offers allow us to retrace the itinerary of the twenty-four-hour tour of the metropolis onto paper to draw a map of sorts, and so rationalise the apparently chaotic and restless journey: "the great thoroughfare," "a cross street" which is "narrow and long," "a square brilliantly lighted," (479) a "by-street," "many crooked and peopleless lanes," "the great thoroughfare whence we had started," "a great variety of devious ways," "a narrow and gloomy lane," and then "the noisome quarter" on "the verge of the city," (480) from where the old man "retraced his steps at once to the heart of mighty London" (481). While for a long time Poe avoids the give-away vocabulary, at last he merely confirms what was an obvious analogy, whereby the tangle of city streets was likened to the cardiovascular system, with its vast and thick vessels as well as fine and narrow passages with the centre as the heart. It seems that more important than the shape or category of the passages themselves is their condition measured by, paradoxically, congestion. Thus the aforementioned different streets are revealed to be heavily "thronged," "densely filled with people," carrying few passengers or "overflowing with life" and then "little frequented," "comparatively deserted" or even desolate (479–81). The more congested – so, from the medical point of view, the more obstructed, the healthier the lanes are.

Congestion as conceived by Poe does not exclude circulation; on the contrary, the crowd, whether sparse or populous, always keeps moving. And it is the mobile crowd that is the source of energy which the man indefatigably, frantically at times, seeks to sustain his own vitality. If the man “is the type and the genius of deep crime,” as the narrator concludes, the crowd might be read as a necessary refuge or disguise allowing him to divert the attention away from his strangeness in the way in which foreign travellers would blend in with a local crowd.¹⁵ The relationship or interaction of the stranger with the crowd that he tries to connect himself to has a more crucial, that is, life-giving character. Literally almost, the crowd is a reservoir from which energy is drawn. Circling round the street follows the pattern of exhaustion and replenishment determined by, respectively, a distance from and proximity to the throng. Every thinning out of the crowd saps the man of energy and life: deserted streets make him not merely uneasy but on the verge of agony: “pale” and “gasp[ing] as if for breath” (480). At the most dramatic moment, haunting some outermost district, poorly lit, chaotically built-up with hardly any passageways left between tenements, the man is relieved by the sight of “large bands of the most abandoned of a London populace ... reeling to and fro.” The scene is that of resuscitation: “the spirits of the old man again flickered up, as a lamp which is near its death-hour. Once more he strode onward with elastic tread” (481). The affinity between circulation and health, established by William Harvey’s studies of blood’s flow in the body, and then applied to the urban environment whose condition was determined by continual motion receives here its evident illustration.

Like a *flâneur*, if we follow Christoph Asendorf’s take on this urban figure, Poe’s man of the crowd is “bound up extremely closely with urban circulation ... he is a part of a circulating crowd, moves entirely within the generality of circulation.”¹⁶ And yet, a *flâneur* he is not. He lacks the whimsical interest in the crowd which makes the *flâneur* casually enter the throng while retaining his distance from it. It is a distance in part required by the practice of leisurely observation and reflection attendant

¹⁵ John Plotz, *The Crowd. British Literature and Public Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 18–21.

¹⁶ Asendorf, *Batteries of Life*, 63.

upon some sensory experiences, and in part caused by retaining his seclusion or separateness despite his just as casually entering different personalities.¹⁷ He cannot afford such an impromptu approach, nor is he the master of the crowd. Rather, Poe places him at the mercy of the crowd, in the compulsive relationship of dependence that has little to do with the intoxication available to the *flâneur*.

Conclusion

Writing of metropolitan perception Joachim Schlör invokes as one of the relevant ideas the concept of "the city as a 'perceptual scandal' of the sensual stimulation represented by the city itself."¹⁸ The nocturnal city amplifies the range of that stimulation not least by the practice of *vagabondage nocturne*. In roaming through the city at night, "danger is sought out and challenged, and pleasure in the discovery of this new world and pride in having taken the decisive step out of the shelter indoors and onto the streets are part of the newly forming urban mentality: the complete city-dweller has to learn to master the night."¹⁹ In Poe's story, published in 1840, at the time when according to Schlör night in the city becomes a subject of public debate, while there is no such danger-oriented use of nocturnal streets, the narrator's experience certainly can be seen as one of "discovery" and an attempt, even though unwitting, "to master the night." Following the stranger who walks the street to secure the company of the crowd, the narrator comes full circle temporally, topographically and cognitively. Twenty-four hours on from the onset of the venture, he terminates the tour with a confrontation: "stopping fully in front of the wanderer, [I] gazed at him steadfastly in the face," (481) to admit his failure as a reader: "This old man ... is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. *He is the man of the crowd*. It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds" (481).

The circular shape of the undertaken pursuit may suggest a sense of futility the confrontation with the impenetrable matter delivers; this particular act of reading turns out a humbling

¹⁷ Cf. Asendorf, *Batteries of Life*, 63.

¹⁸ Schlör, *Nights in the Big City*, 19. The phrase "perceptual scandal" comes from Heinz Brüggemann.

¹⁹ Schlör, *Nights in the Big City*, 56.

experience since the narrator-observer-reader, despite the effort taken, arrives nowhere. Yet only apparently so. What announced itself as an exercise in detection of some individual's "history," developed, *en passant*, into a study of perception, darkness, and mobility, as well as an observation of the metropolis on the edge of modernity.