Reading and Not Reading ‘The Man of the Crowd’: Poe, the City and the Gothic Text

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‘How many things begin with Poe?’, Borges asked. The question is of course rhetorical. Posed in an essay called ‘The Detective Story’ it builds up a by-now familiar argument, that, in a few stories written in the early 1840s, Poe initiates the genre of detective fiction, an invention which Borges considers part of a more important Poe innovation: the notion that literature must be ‘considered as an operation of the mind, not of the spirit’. But Borges’s question applies on a wider scale, too. Poe can also plausibly be considered the pioneer of science fiction, the horror film, the short story, Symbolism, modern prose romance, modernism, perhaps even modern American literature itself.

Like many individual Poe stories, his enigmatic 1840 tale, ‘The Man of the Crowd’ has its own particular claims to originality. A line of critics (whom I shall come to in due course) have agreed with Borges’ opinion that it is central to Poe’s ‘invention’ of detective fiction, as if the story is the very ‘question’ to which the three Dupin stories, which followed in the years immediately after (1841-4), provide an answer. It has also been persuasively linked to the origins of cinema, noir, and ‘metaphysical’ detective fiction. But it enjoys a special status in cultural criticism as a foundational text in the documentation of a new urban social formation which demands a distinctive form of ‘reading’ one’s surroundings in order to make sense of the mass of people and stimuli in the modern city. This leads to the ultimate claim for the story’s originary credentials: its concern with the ‘urban text’ means that it would seem to capture nothing less than the beginnings of modernity itself – in conjunction
with related works by other authors, such as Baudelaire’s ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ (1863), which it partly inspires, and works by Dickens (e.g. Sketches by Boz [1836]), or Melville (‘Wakefield’ [1835]).

In what follows I do not intend to challenge the assumption of the story’s ‘originary’ status in these traditions, but I do want to query how it has been read. Often, I think, the story has been read selectively, or even – and this is a word one ought to use with great care in relation to readings of Poe – erroneously. Caution is required because to suggest that there is a correct way of reading any particular Poe story is to fall into a well-known trap: Poe’s opaque texts have the capacity to seduce readers into what Joseph G. Kronick refers to as ‘identifying the interpretation with the text’.⁶ A concern with what we might call the ‘seductions’ of reading has been something of a mainstay of Poe criticism since the 1980s, when his work became reappropriated by poststructuralist critics. This approach is typified by the influential collection The Purloined Poe, which appeared in 1988.⁷ In an 1980 essay reprinted for that collection, Shoshana Felman argued that what is unique about Poe’s influence ‘is the extent to which its action is unaccountably insidious, exceeding the control, the will, and the awareness of those who are subjected to it’.⁸ The ‘insidious’ effect is most obvious in T. S. Eliot’s efforts to pigeon-hole Poe in his 1949 essay ‘From Poe to Valéry’, which begins with the disparaging assertion that studying Poe has influenced no poets apart from Edward Lear, but soon doubles back on itself to observe that ‘one cannot be sure that one’s own writing has not been influenced by Poe’.⁹

The ‘insidious’ effect of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ is the overall subject of this essay, which complements the approach to Poe adopted by poststructuralist rather than sociologically-oriented critics. It is a story about reading which has also been the
subject of a great many readings – the majority of which acknowledge reading as the dominant theme. Yet, curiously, despite the critical scrutiny, the focus on reading in the tale has tended to involve working with a model of reading which is rather impoverished. What one might call literary reading – the engagement with the complexities of narrative form and polysemic language, and an understanding of the ‘self-reflexive’ tendencies of literature – is neglected in favour of a more simplistic model of reading as a primarily visual method of mastering (or failing to master) one’s surroundings, which is at odds with the opaque, seductive quality of Poe’s prose and, especially in the case of ‘The Man of the Crowd’, with the looping structure of the story.

In what follows my aim is not to try to provide a ‘definitive’ reading of the story (an impossible ideal, of course) but to counter what has become a rather over-familiar approach to Poe’s story: the determination to regard it as a sociological document, in a way which tends to dissociate it from Poe’s own body of work. Stephen Rachman begins a 1997 analysis of the indebtedness of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ to Sketches by Boz by complaining that ‘the rush to elaborate the cultural contexts of urban literature has led some literary scholars to dispense with the literary to the point where there is all con- and no text’.\(^1\) I agree with Rachman that the treatment of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ as a canonical document of urban visual culture has removed the story from its literary context.

Consequently, in this essay, I go against the historicist grain of current literary criticism and risk a more strictly ‘formalist’ reading of the story, one which foregrounds literary contexts – especially Gothic fiction and Poe’s own body of work – rather than broader social or cultural ones. The essay will contend that readings of the story have been marked by a ‘sociological’ bias which has over-valued (in a way
which exemplifies the kind of Poe-esque seduction identified by Kronick and Felman) the setting of the story – early nineteenth-century London – at the expense of the compulsive pursuit it details of one man by another. I seek to redress the balance by arguing that Poe’s depiction of reading in the story (an aspect central to sociological readings) is actually carefully distinguished from its depiction of modes of visual perception and contemplation, and in fact amounts to a far more complex literary kind of engagement with a ‘text’. One implication of this, as I shall argue, is that ‘The Man of the Crowd’ presents us not with an embryonic detective but a version of the reader of detective or gothic fiction. Another consequence is to recognise that Poe’s story itself is more deliberately impenetrable and opaque than is often taken to be, primarily because of its deeply enigmatic preamble and conclusion, and its circular structure, which compels the reader to return to the beginning of the text once he or she reaches the conclusion. My claim is that the story is carefully designed to resist interpretation – and it is this factor which demands that we place it in the context of Poe’s other, Gothic, fiction. Like many Poe stories, the gothic has been a context for readings of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ – though not as significantly as one might expect, and chiefly in relation to the story’s content rather than its form.\textsuperscript{1} My reference to the ‘typical’ effect of gothic here, however, has less to do with the convention of the uncanny double and more to do with the particular notion Stewart terms ‘the gothic of reading’\textsuperscript{2} – a process by which depictions of reading in a text activate a mindset in the reader which mirrors that of the deluded Gothic protagonist.

As its form is central to its effect – and has a concealed complexity frequently overlooked in critical readings – I want first to offer a detailed summary of the tale before turning to how ‘The Man of the Crowd’ has been interpreted by its many readers.
FOLLOWING ‘THE MAN OF THE CROWD’

On the face of it, the actual story in ‘The Man of the Crowd’ is straightforward. To summarize how it works, it is useful to divide the tale into two almost equal parts, both which are prefaced by its brief introduction:

It was well said of a certain German book that ‘es lässt sich nicht lesen’ – it does not permit itself to be read. There are some secrets which do not permit themselves to be told. Men die nightly in their beds, wringing the hands of ghostly confessors, and looking them piteously in the eyes – die with despair of heart and convulsion of throat, on account of the hideousness of mysteries which will not suffer themselves to be revealed. Now and then, alas, the conscience of man takes up a burthen so heavy in horror that it can be thrown down only into the grave. And thus the essence of all crime is undivulged.13

After this short elliptical paragraph we enter the narrative proper. The first ‘half’ begins with the narrator – who is nameless and will remain so – sitting behind the window of a coffee-house on one of London’s busiest streets, contemplating and classifying the crowd passing by on the streets outside. He has recently recovered from a period of illness and consequently finds himself in a peculiarly heightened mood, one ‘of the keenest appetency’, which leads him to feel ‘a calm but inquisitive interest in every thing’ (p.179). The crowd increases as evening descends, so that, at the time the story begins, ‘two dense and continuous tides of population were rushing past the door’ (p.180). Never having been so well placed as to observe this phenomenon before, he feels ‘a delicious novelty of emotion’ (p.180) and becomes absorbed in the scene outside.
First he considers the citizens in ‘masses’ in an ‘abstract and generalizing turn’ before turning to ‘details’ such as ‘figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance’ (p.180). Poe provides nearly three pages of detailed description of different types of people: ‘noblemen, merchants, attorneys, tradesmen, stock-jobbers’, clerks both ‘junior’ and ‘upper’, pickpockets, gamblers, dandies, military men, Jewish pedlars, beggars, invalids, servant girls, ‘women of the town of all kinds and of all ages’, drunkards, ‘pie-men, porters, coal-heavers, sweeps; organ-grinders, monkey-exhibitors and ballad mongers, those who vended with those who sang; ragged artizans and exhausted laborers of every description’ (pp.180-3). As night falls, however, the narrator becomes fixated on one particular person who he is unable to classify, a ‘decrepid old man, some sixty-five or seventy years of age’ with a peculiar ‘idiosyncratic’ expression (p.183). ‘Any thing even remotely resembling that expression I had never seen before’, he thinks. The narrator is suddenly struck by a ‘craving desire to keep the man in view, to know more of him’ (p.184), and quickly leaves the coffee-house and goes out on to the street to get a closer look at him and satisfy this desire.

At this point the story moves into its second ‘half’. When he approaches the old man, what he sees puzzles the narrator even more. The man is short, thin, and feeble, his clothes ‘filthy and ragged’ yet ‘of beautiful texture’. He thinks he catches sight through his coat – although he acknowledges that perhaps ‘my vision deceived me’ – of a diamond and a dagger (p.184). ‘These observations heightened my curiosity’, he says, ‘and I resolved to follow the stranger whithersoever he should go’. Thus begins a relentless pursuit that lasts for almost as long as 24 hours, a veritable marathon of stalking. Throughout the pursuit, the narrator becomes more and more agitated. His quarry walks through the streets, changing direction on a whim,
behaving eccentrically – suddenly rushing down a side-street, or entering a shop, but without any pretence of browsing. His moods are documented by the pursuing narrator: at one point he wanders moodily, at another he rushes as if in desperate search of something. What strikes the narrator is that the man does all this for no discernible reason: he describes his actions repeatedly as aimless: ‘without apparent aim’ (p.184), ‘without aim’ (p.185), ‘without apparent object’ (p.187). As daybreak approaches, after going in and out of a gin palace in ‘the most noisome quarter of London, where every thing wore the worst impress of the most deplorable poverty, and of the most desperate crime’ (p.86) the old man, ‘with a mad energy’ (p.187), leads the narrator back to the street on which he started, which is now thronging even more with the crowd.

Following the hints, we might surmise that the old man is mentally unstable or a drunk, but we cannot be sure. What is clear is that he is unlike the other people, those who belong to identifiable social types, whom the narrator was earlier happy to contemplate. The climax of the story comes when, just as the second evening is beginning and the whole weird business looks set to start all over again, the narrator, having grown ‘wearied unto death’, stops in front of the man and ‘gaze[s] at him steadfastly in the face’ (p.187). Yet there is no recognition, no confrontation, no communication. The story ends with the narrator, ‘absorbed in contemplation’, voicing a despairing conclusion:

“This old man”, I said at length, “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. The worst heart of the world is a grosser book than the ‘Hortulus Animae’”, and perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that es lässt sich nicht lesen’ (p.188).
This last line, with its repetition of the quotation in the first suggests that the story should be read as a kind of parable illustrating the points made at the beginning about mysteries which cannot be revealed and the essence of crime. The implication is that there is something criminal about the man of the crowd which cannot be revealed, and this is why the narrator has been compelled to tell his story.

READINGS OF ‘THE MAN OF THE CROWD’

The chain of readings which constitutes the canon of criticism on ‘The Man of the Crowd’ begins with a brief discussion by its original translator into French, Charles Baudelaire, in ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ (1863). Baudelaire uses the story as a paradigm of the modern artist, one who has the ability of the flâneur simultaneously to immerse himself in the crowd and to transcend it, because he is able to perceive in its components the essence of modernity, ‘the transient, the fleeting, the contingent’. The modern artist has the ‘spiritual condition’ of the ‘eternal convalescent’, and is continually able to see things intensely, as if for the first time.

Baudelaire’s reading is the starting-point for what is by far the most influential analysis of the story, Walter Benjamin’s brief, fittingly enigmatic, discussion of it in his 1938 essay ‘The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire’, which challenges the earlier reading. Where Baudelaire ‘connives’ with the idea of the man in the crowd, Benjamin contends that it is clear from the text that Poe himself regards it with suspicion, and argues that the particular genius of the story is that ‘it includes along with the earliest description of the flâneur the figuration of his end’. The increased size and rapidity of the crowds, emphasized in the story, dehumanize the people who constitute them, causing them to act mechanically and ensuring there is no place any
more for a dawdler, an ambling seeker of the quick-fix emotional purchase which comes from being in the crowd.

But Benjamin’s discussion also sows the seeds of another important way of reading the ‘The Man of the Crowd’. He describes it as an ‘X-ray picture of a detective story. In it, the drapery represented by the crime has disappeared. The mere armature has remained: the pursuer, the crowd, and an unknown man’ (p.48). The story shows how the masses function as ‘the asylum that shields an asocial person from his prosecutors’ (p.170). The man’s idiosyncrasies are dangerous. As his appearance doesn’t advertise who or what he is, the implication is that he is hiding a terrible secret. ‘The Man of the Crowd’ shows that ‘[t]he original social content of the detective story was the obliteration of the individual’s traces in the big-city crowd’ (p.43). What is needed is someone who can harness the flâneur’s special abilities to blend in with the crowd and observe, decode and categorize, yet direct them towards a sociologically beneficial end – someone, in other words, like the detective.

Benjamin’s discussion of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ thus initiates the argument that the story marks the starting-point for detective fiction proper by directly prefiguring the activities in which Poe’s Dupin will specialize\(^1^8\) – even though the narrator’s behaviour when confronted with the mystery of the old man is more obviously suggestive of the mobile private eye than the armchair detective.\(^1^9\) But it is also the ancestor of another, related, series of readings of the story by critics who value the story as a sociological document which reveals and critiques aspects of the scopic and material conditions of the modern city.\(^2^0\) This ‘quasi-sociological’ interest in the text, Patricia Merivale has suggested, mirrors the contribution of ‘The Purloined Letter’ to critical theory, only on a smaller scale.\(^2^1\) Yet, as important as this post-

Benjamin sociological appropriation of the story has been, it has also been marked by
a peculiar tendency to misrepresent the story in ways that point to the ‘insidious’ habit of Poe’s building of allegories of reading into his tales.

This tendency began with its first published reading, Baudelaire’s short summary in ‘The Painter of Modern Life’, in which he claims that, at the beginning, the narrator is ‘identifying himself in thought with all the thoughts that are moving around him’ and ‘passionately wants to remember everything’ – neither of which statement is borne out by the story. But where Baudelaire seems obviously mistaken, the more nuanced, careful twentieth-century readings still manage to misrepresent the balance of the story. In my view there are two principal narrative components of ‘The Man of the Crowd’, each inextricably linked with one another: 1. the basic ‘choreography’ of the pursuit, i.e. one man becoming unaccountably fascinated by another and following him for a whole day (i.e. the second ‘half’ of the tale), and 2. the backdrop for this fascination and pursuit, the crowded, gas-lit city streets, which seem to provide the perfect environment for the stalking-narrator’s actions, if not the trigger for them (i.e. the first half). In sociological readings of the story this second element, the urban setting, has tended to be privileged over the first, the actual pursuit. Ultimately critics are interested – and assume the story is too – in what the narrator’s pursuit might tell us about flânerie and the city rather than what motivates this pursuit, what accounts for the narrator’s obsession, or what his fascination, in turn, might say about the story’s own self-reflexivity. The second element of the story is given priority over the first, as if the narrator’s behaviour on the streets is depicted only in order to expose the flaws in his initial practice of contemplation. This strategy is summarized by Dana Brand’s reading of ‘The Man of the Crowd’, which argues that the story, as an ‘embryo’ of detective fiction, testifies to the ‘epistemological anxiety’ provoked in the flâneur when confronted by ‘unprecedented and undefined’
elements which defeat his initial practice of reducing the inhabitants of the city to manageable types.

Brand’s reading also points to something odd about some of the critical approaches to ‘The Man of the Crowd’, and that is their willingness to compare its narrator to specific types of person, despite little direct justification. Given that he tails the old man as if he is a suspect, and associates him with crime, it is plausible to regard the narrator as a detective in the making. But (as Brand’s reading has to acknowledge) he is not a detective, only loosely comparable to one in his actions – and this comparison must be made retroactively, based on the conventions identified by years of critical studies of the detective genre. Similarly, although the narrator may resemble the flâneur (as Benjamin, Byer, Brand and Gunning state) while he is in the coffee-house, this parallel – even if we leave to one side the fact that the flâneur has even less basis in reality than the literary detective – is much less tenable once he goes on the street, where he moves about with an absolute determination to keep the old man in sight but is also subject to the whims and movements of the crowd, both quite incongruous with the passionate yet detached discrimination of flânerie. More plausible is Gunning’s view that at this point the narrator is more like the ‘badaud’ or ‘gawker’, another of the contemporary urban figures of interest to Benjamin, who lacks the ‘characteristic detachment’ of the flâneur and surrenders his individuality by becoming wholly immersed in the sensations of the street. Perhaps most persuasive is Baudelaire’s assumption that the narrator is an artist, as this is supported by the literary and historical allusions Poe’s narrator draws and of course the fact that he is narrating, perhaps even writing, the story (an issue I shall return to in due course). But there is no proof. Both central figures in the story are without name, history, class, nationality, and profession.
Such readings are plausible and creative, but they depend upon putting the story into a context for which there is only limited support in the text. All we know for sure of the narrator is that he has recovered from illness, is probably educated, and knows New York as well as London. Even less is known of the old man and his possible crime, though some readers have attempted to determine just what it is that he is guilty of. Yet this seems a typical approach adopted in sociological readings of the story. The desire to fill in the gaps in the man’s identity testifies to the story’s strange capacity to deflect the attention of readers away from what is on the page towards what it suggests about the contemporary social scene, a move from text to context, in other words – much as the narrator himself is lured away from his reading of the newspaper into the city streets. It is another dimension of the seductive effect of Poe’s story. Moreover, the efforts of critics to identify and interpret a puzzling individual is precisely what the narrator of the story tries and fails to do. This is an example of what a number of critics have recognised as one of the defining effects of Poe’s fiction, by which the ‘errors of reading’ (as Joseph Kronick calls them) in the text become mirrored by the reader of the text.

In the remainder of this essay, my own reading of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ will restrict the interpretative associations to those which are suggested by the text rather than inserting the story into broader socio-historical contexts. Counter to the sociological tradition which would see the text as a representation of a particular mode of inhabiting and understanding the city, I will argue that the chief value of Poe’s strange stalking story is not what it tells us about reading the urban text, but its message – and indeed its demonstration of this message through its strange, circular, logic – that decoding the mysteries of a literary text is in fact impossible. The odd thing is that this message is clearly stated in the tale from the outset. It is a case of the
logic which underpins Poe’s ‘The Purloined Letter’: sometimes what is staring us in the face can seem more occluded than what is hidden.

While all readings of the story acknowledge to some degree that its narrator’s activities constitute a form of reading in which the city and the old man figure as ‘texts’, I think it is important to consider exactly which methods of reading are detailed in the story, and which specific kinds of texts are called to mind. Neither of these questions have properly been considered, for the ‘sociological’ approach to the story works with a model of ‘reading’ the city and the crowd which is little more than a process of cataloguing, registering information, or even simply taking pleasure in observing. To go beyond this will involve placing Poe in another contemporary context to nineteenth-century urban culture and society: the rest of his fiction. For perhaps the strangest effect of ‘The Man of the Crowd’s capacity to seductively divert the attention of its readers from its narrative to its background is that, with the exception of ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, it is seldom compared to Poe’s other short stories and what they suggest about reading.

READING IN ‘THE MAN OF THE CROWD’

In their concern with reading the city, critics analysing the story have noted that Poe’s representation of the psychology of the crowd is framed by what Robert Byer terms ‘a dialectic of seeing and reading’. This dialectic would seem to involve the two activities being more or less interchangeable, as they combine to service the narrator’s overwhelming desire to make the visible world intelligible. Yet I think it is also clear that the story distinguishes between these practices. The term ‘read’ actually only appears four times in the story. Twice this is in the German quotation in the first
and last lines – ‘lesen’ – and another is in the translation of this word in the opening sentence. The fourth appearance is significant, but we will return to that, and the opening preamble, in a moment. In the first half of the story the narrator describes his activities initially as ‘peering through the smoky panes into the street’ and ‘becoming absorbed in contemplation of the scene without’ (pp.179-80). Subsequently he refers to his ‘observations’ (p.180), how he ‘regarded with minute interest’ (p.180), ‘discerned’ (p.180), ‘watched [...] with much inquisitiveness’ (p.181), ‘observed’ (p.182), ‘found darker and deeper themes for speculation’ (p.182). He describes how his mind processes the things he sees: e.g. as having ‘noted’ (p.180) or ‘easily understood’ (p.181), or ‘imagine[d]’ (p.181) them, or found what they ‘were distinguished by’ (p.181) or that ‘he could always detect them’. Twice he offers an overall description of what he is doing, and it is the somewhat passive ‘contemplation’ and taking an ‘interest’ in the scene (p.180; p.183). These activities can plausibly be considered synonymous with ‘reading’, but they are really forms of thoughtful attention or curiosity. In the first half of the story there is no imperative to see where this curiosity leads, nor to derive any meaning from what he contemplates. Instead he simply sets about distinguishing one type of person from another.

This changes markedly with the short paragraph that functions as the ‘passageway’ from the first to the second half of the story, from coffee-house to street:

The wild effects of the light enchained me to an examination of individual faces; and although the rapidity with which the world of light flitted before the window, prevented me from casting more than a glance upon each visage, still it seemed that, in my then peculiar mental state, I could frequently read, even in that brief interval of a glance, the history of long years. (p.183).
This is the fourth use of the term ‘read’, and the only one in the diegesis, the only one, that is, which actually refers to his activity on the street. But rather than being able to read, his choice of words emphasizes that it only seems as if he can do so as a result of his heightened state of mind. This qualification is justified shortly after. His first attempt to put his newfound ability to read ‘the history of long years’ into practice is when he focuses on the old man’s idiosyncratic expression, and tries to determine ‘the meaning conveyed’. But the results are quite unlike the confident descriptions which have resulted from the period of observation from behind the coffee-house window:

As I endeavoured, during the brief minute of my original survey, 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 extreme despair. I felt singularly aroused, startled, fascinated. (pp.183-4)

It seems significant too, that this paragraph should conclude with the only use of the verb ‘to write’ in the story: “‘How wild a history,” I said to myself, “is written within that bosom!’” Then came a craving desire to keep the man in view – to know more of him’ (p.184). When faced for the first time with something resembling a text rather than a scene, the narrator is faced with a bewildering multiplicity of possible interpretations rather than a single one.

We seem to be faced here with the breakdown of the flâneur-narrator’s reading strategy, his inability – as Dana Brand puts it – to impose his customary ‘interpretative mastery’ on the ‘urban text’ by ‘reduc[ing] the crowd to to a set of types, always look[ing] for what has been seen and defined’33 But it seems to me that this paragraph more plausibly marks the point of transition between two distinct
though related activities: viewing and reading. The only activity the diegesis explicitly designates as reading is the encounter with the old man. And reading the old man is quite unlike the more detached practice of ‘observing the urban landscape and reading its signs’. It is in fact closer to the experience of reading the aesthetic. This shift from observing to reading coincides with the narrator’s move from the interior of the coffee-house to the world of the city and means that any detached classifying of the crowd is impossible. It can only be experienced from within, as if one is fully immersed in a complex text – that is, deeply implicated at a conscious and unconscious level in the scene which one ‘enters’.

From a literary-critical perspective, there are of course other methods of reading than a rather reductive process of comprehending and ‘decoding’. There are also different kinds of text. Kevin J. Hayes makes a convincing case for the way the story captures the historical emergence of practices of ‘reading the street’ in the modern city in the 1840s, but there is a clear difference between reading billboard signs on the streets or newspapers in a coffee-house and reading a work of literature. The assumption in many of the readings of the story seems to be that the narrator approaches the objects of his analysis – the city and the unknown man – as if they were examples of the literary ‘work’, in Roland Barthes’s terms, that is, a piece of writing which remains stable until ‘activitated’ by the reader, and ‘closes on a signified’. But it is more plausible to treat the old man and the narrator’s reactions as he pursues him as a case of what Barthes called the ‘text’ – i.e. as an encounter with something dynamic, fluid and plural.

In an essay which examines ‘The Man of the Crowd’ in relation to the early crime film Traffic in Souls (1913), Tom Gunning has offered a more nuanced consideration of how the story might detail an encounter with a more complex kind of
text. Poe’s tale, he suggests, shows that ‘[d]ecades before the cinema, urban experience and an emerging commodity culture had already carved out a visual receptivity into which the film experience crept like a hermit crab’. Spectators were experiencing the excitement of city life, the teeming crowds, the goods in shops framed by brightly-lit windows, etc., in ways which prefigured the absorption of the viewer of film in the spectacle on screen. Poe’s story, he argues, progressively depicts three distinct cinematic spectator positions, which transmute into responses to film the ways of viewing the crowded city associated with the three principal urban types identified by Benjamin: ‘a flâneur observing with both pleasure and detachment’, ‘a gawker [badaud] spellbound and merging with the spectacle he sees, [and] a detective actively following the enigmas, the narrative traces’.

Gunning’s suggestive argument invites a parallel reading which considers how the story might allegorize the kinds of reader constructed by literary texts. Instead of the flâneur, the first half of the story, relatively unproblematically (though this conclusion comes with a cautionary note, which I shall return to in due course), casts the narrator as an essentially passive reader of a Barthesian ‘lisible’ text, that is, detached from yet able to experience the action as if he were at the centre, able to process and order what is before his eyes while taking pleasure in what it reveals, guided in this task by a pre-existing system attributing meaning (e.g. the typology of city-dwellers). Rather than being given a depiction of the breakdown of this mode of reading in the second half of the story, as Brand argues, here (to continue the parallel with Gunning’s cinematic analogy) we see one kind of reader modulate into another as the text he is confronted with is transformed. This reader no longer consumes what he reads from an ‘external’ position but, seduced by an encounter with a compelling yet opaque figure, surrenders to the text’s own elusive, non-realist, logic. He is able to
make ad hoc, ‘localized’ interpretations of what confronts him but lacks an overall perspective from which to interpret the whole. He has moved from ‘bird’s-eye view’ to what Gunning, quoting John F. Kasson, calls the ‘mole’s-eye view’.41

To follow Gunning’s lead, I contend that this modulation can be explained in terms of the distinction between the flâneur and a combination of the detective, who seeks to decode enigmas and clues, and the badaud, whose individuality, in Victor Fournel’s famous words, ‘disappears’, as he becomes ‘absorbed by the external world…. which moves him to the point of intoxication and ecstasy’.42 Throughout the second half the narrator’s engagement with the ‘text’ he has entered veers between two opposing states of mind. On the one hand, he is at the mercy of the whims and movements of both crowd and old man, feeling ‘overshadowed by a world of umbrellas’ when it starts to rain, surprised by a sudden ‘blaze of light burst[ing] upon our sight’ (p.187), and continually bewildered by his quarry’s unpredictable movements (he confesses to being ‘surprised’, ‘astonished’, ‘amazed’ [p.185], ‘at a loss to comprehend the waywardness of his actions’ [p.186]). The crowd prevents him from being in complete control of his pursuit: ‘the press was still so thick, that, at every such movement, I was obliged to follow him closely (p.185). Yet on the other hand, he resists total badaud-like absorption by the crowd and, like the detective, retains a measure of composure and discipline about his actions despite the power of the mass, never giving up on the task of making sense of the stranger. Clad in his ‘caoutchouc over-shoes’, he is able to exercise ‘much caution on my part to keep him within reach with attracting his observation’ (p.185). He preserves sufficient individuality not to put up an umbrella like everyone else, but ties a handkerchief around his mouth to protect his fragile health.
Rather than a prototypical detective, surely what we have here is the literary counterpart of Gunning’s cinematic viewer: the prototypical reader of detective fiction. In ‘The Detective Story’ Borges argues that to state that Poe invented the detective story in the 1840s is really to say that he invented the reader of the detective story, that is, ‘a reader who reads with incredulity, with suspicion, with a special kind of suspicion’. Rather than capturing an embryonic detective, ‘The Man of the Crowd’ documents the emergence of this kind of reader. There is a subtle but important difference between readings (such as Benjamin’s and Brand’s) which see the tale as a crypto-detective story featuring a new kind of suspicious urban investigator, and the idea that the protagonist mirrors more directly a particular kind of reader of literary texts who exists in the early Nineteenth Century. This reader inhabits a world full of puzzling and menacing appearances, signs and clues, and consequently assumes the real story lies beneath.

One immediate problem with drawing this conclusion is that the kind of text which confronts the dramatized reader in ‘The Man of the Crowd’ is in fact very unlike the world-as-text traversed by the detectives of conventional crime fiction as it developed. Even Dupin’s mastery of the Paris world of ‘The Murders of the Rue Morgue’ is never remotely under threat. The world and the ‘assignment’ which confound the narrator in ‘The Man of the Crowd’ amount to something more like a modernist poem, a noir crime story, or even Borges’s own parody of detective fiction, ‘Death and the Compass’ (1941). Once removed from his stable position in the coffee-house, he is faced by what Barthes calls, in defining the scriptible text, the ‘infinite play of the world’, forced to produce meaning from what he encounters without recourse to pre-established systems of interpretation. In fact, what the narrator
is engaged in in this second part of the story is not so much the difficulty of producing a reading but the problem of writing or, at least, narrating, an unfathomable story. 46

The concern with writing – and telling – a story is a crucial aspect of ‘The Man of the Crowd’, and I shall return to it below. Before doing so, however, it is important to acknowledge that what makes the text the narrator enters particularly seductive and troubling, and what compounds his inability to occupy a detached, ‘bird’s-eye’ position, is the fact that, as in film noir or ‘Death and the Compass’, what appears to be an external mystery is somehow thrillingly and disturbingly personal. As those who have considered the tale in relation to the gothic have noted, the story is another instance of the motif of uncanny doubling which Poe deployed in other stories, such as ‘William Wilson’ and ‘The Cask of Amontillado’. 47 Placing it in this context in fact shows us that, in his fascination with Poe’s invention of the suspicious reader of detective fiction, Borges overlooks the reader of late eighteenth-century gothic, which pre-exists Poe’s fiction by a good half-century and frequently features characters (e.g. in The Mysteries of Udolpho) thrown into an investigation out of the fear generated by an unfathomable world. Borges misses this perhaps because gothic is less a ‘literature of the mind’, in his terms, and a more a literature which acts on the body, or at least stimulates emotions, excitement, and the uncanny. Nevertheless a ‘suspicious’ attitude to a world loaded with hidden meaning and menace, and the impulse towards investigation to solve its mysteries, are integral to gothic reading. As much as ‘The Man of the Crowd’ might be read as a portrait of a prototypical reader of detective fiction, then, it might equally be seen to represent the reader of gothic.

A BEGINNING WHICH IS REALLY A CONCLUSION
As a parallel to Gunning’s outlining of cinematic spectator-positions in ‘The Man of the Crowd’ (flâneur-badaud-detective), I contend that the story depicts three types of reading experience (the latter two juxtaposed) which are analogous to engagements with literary texts: the initial ‘realist’ reading gives way to a combination of gothic openness to sensation and the suspicious questing required by detective fiction. But having questioned the critical tendency to impose characterisations on the protagonist of the tale, I do not intend to take this classification of readers any further – especially since defining reading-types is even harder than pinpointing the historical emergence of nineteenth-century urban figures. Suffice to say that the depiction of reading in ‘The Man of the Crowd’ is more complex than a relatively straightforward visual mastery or contemplation or reaction to the stimuli of urban experience. Poe’s protagonist is more than simply an urban spectator or a premonition of the film-viewer, but engages with his environment in an emotional and cognitive manner which resembles the reader of the kind of sophisticated literature actually available at the time the story was written.

Gunning’s reading is valuable in offering an alternative to the ‘sociological’ approach to the story because it takes seriously the connotations of the metaphor of ‘reading’ the city and relates these to an authentic engagement with the aesthetic. Yet however ‘cinematic’ it is, Poe’s story is of course not film but prose. Consequently, we must recognise that there is a special value to comparing the narrator’s activity to that of an actual reader of literary texts, one which comes from more than simply preserving a welcome compatibility between ‘reading’ in the story and the object of study itself. It enables us to take into account the effect of the story’s complex, self-
reflexive structure – a dimension of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ which is overlooked by Gunning and many other critics.

The critical oversight regarding analogies with other kinds of text and reading seems particularly noticeable when we acknowledge that ‘The Man of the Crowd’ itself does not yield easily to the kind of reading practices associated with either conventional notions of the ‘city as text’ nor the Barthesian ‘work’. As well as being a document of the nineteenth-century city, ‘The Man of the Crowd’ is an example of the opaque, over-determined text in which Poe specialized, and which appealed to poststructuralist critics such as Shoshana Felman and Jane Gallop.

Poststructuralism aside, however, the most obvious value to considering this story in the context of Poe’s other tales is that it allows us to view its narrator as an unreliable narrator, a move which – despite the (over)familiarity of this concept – is nevertheless seldom made in readings of the tale. One of the most distinctive features of Poe’s stories is his preference for first-person narration and the peculiar ‘delusional’ effect this creates, whereby (as in stories such as ‘The Oval Portrait’, ‘The Black Cat’ or ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’, for example) there is a profound uncertainty about whether we are to take what we are reading as really having happened or as the product of the narrator’s delusional condition. Poe’s stories tend to begin with the narrator confessing to be in some unusual state of mind, a remark which is the prelude to the strange behaviour detailed in the story, and which functions as a warning to the reader about his reliability as interpreter of the fictional world depicted in the tale.

In ‘The Man of the Crowd’ the warning signs are there from the start. Although the narrator begins the coffee-house section of the story reading a newspaper in a ‘happy mood’, with a ‘calm but inquisitive interest in everything’, he acknowledges that his mental condition is actually not as stable as these descriptions
would suggest. He refers to his state of mind enigmatically as ‘precisely the converse of ennui […]’ when the film from the mental vision departs — ἀφλάνες ὀς πρὶν ἐπιμεν — and the intellect, electrified, surpasses as greatly its everyday condition, as does the vivid yet candid reason of Leibnitz, the mad and flimsy rhetoric of Gorgias’ (p.179).

If we compare this to the opening of Poe’s other tales, the obvious conclusion is that there is a good chance the narrator is not simply a recovering convalescent, but perhaps a little deranged to begin with – unstable enough at least to make the impulsive pursuit of a stranger for around 24 hours less unlikely than it may seem.

Though readings of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ acknowledge the effect of his feverish state of mind on his actions they do not consider how such an unstable disposition might contribute to the narration of the tale. But can we trust in the capacity of a man who confesses his intellect is ‘electrified’ and compares it to ‘mad and flimsy rhetoric’ to provide an accurate depiction of the city?

Analysing the narrator as narrator — rather than simply as the equivalent to ‘protagonist’, which is the standard procedure in readings of the tale — ensures that we take account of the complex self-reflexivity of both the story’s opening paragraph and its ending, the point where the narrator lets the old man go on without him and concludes that he is ‘the type and the genius of deep crime’ and that the ‘worst heart of the world is a grosser book than the Hortulus Animae [which] es lässt sich nicht lesen’. Here it is important to note that the conclusion to the story is not simply this last line but, paradoxically, its opening paragraph too. Both the last and the first line of the story contain the same phrase, ‘es lässt sich nicht lesen’ and this means that the final line directs us back to the opening paragraph; the line voiced by the narrator is part of the diegesis, but it also points outwards to a level above it, to the extradiiegetic paragraph which begins the story. In fact, one could move from this line to the first
line of the story and thus begin a second reading of it, from the beginning without pause, and nothing would jar. While many readings of the story acknowledge its circularity, they tend to overlook the profundity of the effect it creates. It means, for example, that the apparently neat progression Gunning highlights in the story – that the pursuit enables the narrator to ‘at last classif[y] the stranger’ as ‘the type and genius of deep crime’, 54 in other words, to complete the task he was engaged in when in the coffee-house – is in fact much less straightforward because the ‘succeeding’ (ie. preceding) paragraph obfuscates this already rather opaque ‘type’ further by comparing it to a book which ‘does not permit itself to be read’.

Besides the enigmatic phrasing, the exact relationship of this extradietic preamble to the diegesis which follows is indeterminate. We naturally assume that it is narrated by the same individual who tells the story, and that the story will illustrate the opening assertions, in the way that the case detailed in ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ exemplifies the opening theory of ‘analysis’. But when and from where is he narrating? What is his situation now? Has he changed as a result of the story he tells? This opening section is devoid, in other words, of references to what was once called the ‘epic situation’ in first-person narratives: 55 clues which enable readers to rationalize the conditions of its narration. To posit the ‘epic situation’ of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ is to assume that the narrator has been compelled to tell the story because of what it documents: his pursuit of the old man. Yet running end and beginning into one another in a fully circular reading, as the story invites us to do, still does not explain why the narrator is narrating and what he wants to tell us. The overall logic remains elusive. Thus the closed circle keeps out the real meaning rather than reveals it at its heart. It is too elliptical, too paratactical, too ambiguous. If we try to decode the overall meaning logically, what we have is a puzzling equation: because the old
man refuses to be alone but is ‘of the crowd’ he is therefore ‘the type and the genius of deep crime’ and representative of the ‘worst heart of the world’. He thus seems to illustrate the assertion in the opening paragraph that men die ‘on account of the hideous mysteries which will not suffer themselves to be revealed’, ‘secrets which do not permit themselves to be told’. The implication – central to the readings of the story which see it as a detective story without a detective – is that the narrator suspects the old man of being driven by a hideous mystery, an utterable secret.

But aside from the fact that these lines do not enlighten us about the old man, their meaning is elusive in other ways. It is not clear whether they are telling the reader that men die knowing their secret but unable to reveal it, or whether they are unaware of the secrets themselves, and this unawareness is what kills them. Nor can we be sure whether the statement that this is a burden ‘on the conscience of man’ is a reference to ‘mankind’ or to those individual men who are unable to reveal the secrets. In saying ‘thus the essence of all crime is undivulged’, does this mean that the men who are unable to reveal their secrets or who are unaware of their secrets are criminals and the essence of their crimes remains undivulged, or that the essence of all crime itself amounts to these impenetrable mysteries? And what is ‘deep crime’, in any case? Crime beyond the legal statutes? Sin? Moreover, what are we to make of the oddly precise phrases ‘permit themselves’ and ‘suffer themselves’? What does it mean for a text or a secret not to permit or suffer itself to be told? The implication of what I call ‘textual agency’ in these ideas – that a secret or mystery could conceivably be told, but its ‘text’ somehow prevents its telling – seems to present a different case from a tale that is impossible to tell (ie. because it’s incomplete or too complex). And are ‘permit’ and ‘suffer’ to be taken as synonyms?
Rather than trying to unravel this semantic knot, we must surely acknowledge that the opening paragraph of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ is a puzzle, an unfathomable linguistic conundrum. Its opacity means that at precisely the point at which skilled readers of literary texts would normally be able to decode a difficult story and achieve mastery over the undecideable aspects of the text, instead they founder. More precisely, the problem is that the opening paragraph is built upon a pattern of four illegible or ineffable things: books that do not permit themselves to be read, secrets which do not permit themselves to be told, mysteries which do not suffer themselves to be revealed, and crime which remains undivulged. Are these to be read as equivalents, or parallels, where the inability to read is matched by the impossibility of telling? The line ‘mysteries which will not suffer themselves to be revealed’ would seem to apply both to reading (ie. decoding a mystery) and narrating (revealing a secret). But how these constructions relate to each other is unclear. Likewise, exactly how they – or even one of them – relate to the story that follows is uncertain.

This is why it is quite logical to do as most readings have done and connect the mystery of the old man to the story’s opening remarks about books, secrets, mysteries and crime, to assume that the opening lines of the story are referring to the world it depicts. The man is someone who cannot be read like a book… except that some books are unreadable. He seems to be driven by a hideous secret which either he does not know himself, will not reveal, or which cannot be uncovered – and his mad wanderings seem to prefigure a desperate death, lying in his bed wracked with fear. Perhaps the narrator’s failed attempt to fathom this secret means this fate awaits him too. This is all quite plausible. But the circularity of the tale’s structure means that ultimately it does not refer to the outside world, but to itself – or, at least, to a
textually-constructed London which, as Stephen Rachman has shown, Poe found in Dickens and drew on heavily in ‘The Man of the Crowd’.⁵⁶

Acknowledging this self-referential dimension necessitates another way of reading the story in which the emphasis is placed on its aesthetic properties rather than its capacity reliably to refer to the social world of the 1840s. The continuity between end and beginning means the boundary is blurred between the two levels of the story, diegetic and extradiegetic, represented world and narration. The final point the narrator makes about the book which does not permit itself to be read – the Hortulus Animae – is uttered on the street (as the quotation marks around it confirm) but is ‘continued’ at the point of narration, as if the last line and the first paragraph are all part of the same thought process.⁵⁷ This ensures that the distinction between the ‘experiencing’ and the ‘narrating’ self, almost by definition separate in first-person retrospective narrative, become blurred into one in ‘The Man of the Crowd’. This makes the story a kind of narrative equivalent of the Möbius strip. The way the last line prefigures the first paragraph suggests the narrator, like the Ancient Mariner, is condemned to repeat his story eternally – just as within the narrative the narrator could conceivably begin his pursuit of the man all over again, once the old man has returned him to their starting-point. He does not allow himself any position properly outside the story, for the extradiegetic postion he adopts in telling it will simply lead him back into it again. There is thus no stable distinction between narration and represented world.

In this respect ‘The Man of the Crowd’ itself is a mystery which does not permit itself to be revealed. Poe’s story performs a parallel version of what it tells us. Just as the old man’s secret (if he has one) cannot be uncovered, so the point of the story itself remains obscure. The beauty of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ is that it both
presents readers with what seems like a secret which cannot be told and itself figures as a text which cannot be read. Of course the story can be ‘read’ in a superficial sense (its language and narrative can be understood, followed, summarized, in a similar way to the narrator’s systematic surveying of the crowd in the first part of the story). Yet it cannot fully be read, that is, ‘interpreted’, made to close on a signified, for it retains some secrets even after the reading process: it does not reveal its own mystery.

A PARABLE OF READING

In this way ‘The Man of the Crowd’ creates an effect which a number of critics have regarded as a distinguishing feature of Poe’s fiction, whereby the reader’s efforts to make sense of the narrative are reflected in the story the narrative tells. More precisely, ‘errors of reading’, in Joseph Kronick’s phrase, are both depicted in the story and prompted by it. The story documents an encounter with an opaque, seductive ‘text’, which deflects the investigative glare of a fascinated ‘reader’, and this process has repeatedly been replayed when scholars have attempted critical readings of it, drawing them away from the text itself and into the nineteenth-century city just as surely as the narrator is lured out of the coffee-house and into the crowded streets.

It would be perverse to deny that ‘The Man of the Crowd’ gives a valuable insight into the urban conditions of the early to mid-nineteenth century. Yet one of the distinguishing features of Poe’s fiction as a whole is its curiously modern – or modernist – use of first-person narration, and this dimension is what gets overlooked if we consider the story as numerous ‘quasi-sociological’ readings have done, as merely a historical document, a kind of pretext for a representation of the city, or an
inquiry into emergent forms of reading or viewing urban reality. The idea of reading the city, of the city ‘as text’, has become a commonplace in sociologically-inflected analysis of literature and modernity. But considering this crucial example invites us to question whether a more nuanced model of reading which underpins this concern is required.

‘The Man of the Crowd’, then, is a self-reflexive text, as much about the nature of writing and reading fiction as anything else. It is self-reflexive in the sense that Garrett Stewart uses the term in his study Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction (1996) to denote ‘moments’ or episodes in nineteenth-century fiction ‘where the act of reading within the text – or its momentary approximation – registers as a reflex of and upon the text’s own consumption’.60 Stewart’s analysis has, I think, a bearing on critical readings of ‘The Man of the Crowd’. Rather than the specific mise-en-abyme kinds of self-reflexivity associated with modernism and postmodernism (a book inside a book, etc.), his interest is in the preponderance of more extensive ‘narrative parables of which reading is itself the subject’ in nineteenth-century fiction. From such ‘parables’ the reader is ‘signaled to extrapolate some adjusted orientation towards the continuing event of reading’, ie. reading fiction.

Though his work is not mentioned by Stewart in this book,61 it seems clear that Poe’s fiction produces ‘parables of reading’ which are close to the kind of reflexive effects Stewart identifies as emerging in late-Victorian gothic, where ‘the phenomenology of reading is itself renarrativized as gothic melodrama’. In texts such as The Picture of Dorian Gray, The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, or Dracula, Stewart argues, we find ‘all manner of vicarious, voyeuristic, mesmeric, and vampiric phenomena in which psychic usurpation, somatic doubling, or perversely
gendered otherness doubles for the aesthetic distance – and transacted gap – between reader and read’.\(^6\) This doubling is what we have in ‘The Man of the Crowd’, in which the narrator becomes transfixed by a kind of double of himself, and whose attempts to make sense of him are in turn doubled by the reader.

Given the tale’s structure, Stewart’s idea of the ‘gothic of reading’ is especially useful in assessing how it works. The theory has already been usefully applied to Poe’s fiction by Harriet Hustis in a reading of ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’. The narrator of this story is often assumed by critics to be the ‘heroic’, perservering reader who, during the course of the tale, becomes infected by Roderick Usher’s tendency to read suspiciously. In fact, Hustis argues, from the outset the tale suggest that ‘an inclination toward a “gothic of reading” is a preexisting condition’ which besets him.\(^6\) When ‘reading’ his surroundings, the narrator exhibits the tendency to respond through ‘affective impression’ rather than the ‘perseverence without illusion’ which characterizes, for example, the Jane Austen heroine and reader: ‘I know not how it was – but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit’.\(^6\) This, as reading ‘parable’, has the effect of activitating a ‘gothic of reading’ in the reader of the tale too, so that we begin to read it in a similarly paranoid, excited state, responding as hysterically to the world it presents us with as the narrator.

To return to ‘The Man of the Crowd’, the narrator’s continual references to his having ‘regarded’, ‘discerned’, ‘watched’, ‘observed’, etc. indicate that the story is a self-reflexive parable of reading, in Stewart’s sense. The narrator’s susceptibility to the gothic of reading is clear from the outset, in the dramatic, elliptical assertions which make up the first paragraph (the response, moreover, the narrator implies, to a particular reading of a powerful text, the Hortulus Animae) and subsequently, in the
story itself, in his predisposition to taint what he surveys on the streets with expressionist interpretations rather than to present it objectively. Nowhere is this more glaring than the scene (quoted above) where he first views the man of the crowd, and instantly compares him to a Retzsch portrait of the devil and lists the ‘confused’ and ‘paradoxical’ ideas which come into his head as a result.

The point about this kind of inscribed scene of reading, for both Stewart and Hustis, is that it reveals to the reader how he or she has colluded or conspired without realising it in the gothic effect of the text. As Stewart says, in such texts ‘it gradually dawns on you that all this is your doing as well as the author’s – and not only your doing, but a figurative rendition of it: of an immanent and activating interest heated, derivative, vicarious, now schizoid, now parasitic, even a little vampiric’. What seems surprising in this context is that, while critics have almost universally recognised ‘The Man of the Crowd’ as a parable of reading, any sense of collusion in its effect, any nagging concern that it is the reader of the tale who is co-producer of the phantasmagorical presentation of both old man and city, has been absent from the many readings of the story. This is the consequence of its seductive power, and the story would thus bear out Hustis’s remark that the ‘gothic of reading’ might be regarded ‘as a text’s revenge upon its critics’ – a kind of pre-emptive strike against future readers.

All this underlines the credentials of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ to be regarded as a gothic text rather than a proto-detective story. As Hustis argues, ‘It is ultimately the collusion between text and reader that creates the gothic; the reading of the gothic text effectively activates the text as gothic’. Deciding between gothic and detective fiction is an unnecessary exercise, not least because detective fiction is a genre (with origins in gothic) whose examples also function as extended parables of reading.
Innumerable studies of the genre have noted that the detective is a surrogate reader and that the reader of the fiction, in following the story, shadows the detective-work depicted within, deciphering signs, piecing together a conclusive narrative. Not only does detective fiction present us with the suspicious reader par excellence, the detective, who refuses to trust appearances, it demands a suspicious reader itself, one who recognises that the author is playing a game with her or him and must enter into it in the same spirit. In Stewart’s terms, we might argue that the ‘suspicious’ reader of detective fiction also colludes in the creation of its effects, though he or she is lured into the illusion of sharing in the hermeneutic decoding practiced by the detective rather than the seductive expressionism of a deluded narrator.

Because we are, as Borges puts it, ‘an invention of Poe’ in a way that Poe’s original readers could never be, it means that ‘The Man of the Crowd’ seems to function as a critique of the methods of reading a genre which did not exist when this tale was first written or read. As I have argued in this essay, the story’s self-reflexive structure short-circuits ‘suspicious reading’ and asks its readers instead to remain open to the effects of the text, just like the reader depicted within. This logic suggests, finally, that one of the most famous (mis)readings of the story might also be taken as one of its most accurate. Dana Brand has argued that when Benjamin calls ‘The Man of the Crowd’ an ‘x-ray picture of a detective story’, he really means an ‘embryo’, because he was unaware of the American publication dates of Poe’s stories and had therefore not realised it predated Dupin. Yet, misreading or not, Benjamin’s remark has a rhetorical value just as it is, for it suggests that ‘The Man of the Crowd’ penetrates to the very bare bones of detective fiction, ‘seeing through’ its parables of suspicious reading.

2 Chiefly the three tales featuring the detective Dupin: ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ (1841), ‘The Mystery of Marie Rôget’ (1842-3) and ‘The Purloined Letter’ (1844), though other ‘tales of ratiocination’ have been co-opted into the argument. For Borges, the Dupin tales and ‘The Gold Bug’ (1843) and ‘Thou Art the Man’ (1844) add up to Poe’s ‘five examples of the detective story’ (Borges, p.21).


4 An indicator of prevailing academic assumptions about Poe’s status as literary pioneer is the 2002 volume The Cambridge Companion to Poe which contains a number of essays which interrogate his influence on such traditions (see John Tresch’s ‘Extra! Extra! Poe Invents Science Fiction’, Peter Thoms’s ‘Poe’s Dupin and the Power of Detection’, Mark Neimeyer’s ‘Poe and Popular Culture’, and Kevin J. Hayes’s ‘One-Man Modernist’ in Kevin J. Hayes, The Cambridge Companion to Poe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).


9 T. S. Eliot, ‘From Poe to Valery’ [1949], To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), pp.27-42 (p.27).


12 Stewart, Dear Reader, p.81.


14 He follows the unknown man from the ‘closing of an evening’ (p.179) to the emergence of ‘the shades of the second evening (p.187). For an analysis of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ as one of the first modern stalking narratives, see Bran Nicol, Stalking (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), pp.86-90.

15 A note by Poe included gives further details of the text referred to: ‘The Hortulus Animae cum Oratiunculis Aliquibus Superadditis of Grüninger’. This, critics agree, is most likely to the German translation of the Hortulus Animae, a Catholic prayer book.
popular in the late 15th and early 16th Centuries. Kevin J. Hayes has explained that although printed in Germany, this book was in Latin, meaning that most people couldn’t read it. Poe had, however, apparently read of a publication which accompanied this text with obscene images, making it, as Hayes says, a book ‘whose images were readable yet whose texts were not’: Kevin J. Hayes, ‘Visual Culture and the Word in Edgar Allen Poe’s “Man of the Crowd”’, Nineteenth-Century Literature, 56:4 (2002), pp.445-65 (pp.463-4). In his notes to the story in The Portable Edgar Allan Poe, J. Gerald Kennedy writes that ‘Poe alludes to an obscure devotional text from 1500 (“The Spirit of the Garden”) said by Isaac D’Israeli to contain unseemly illustrations’: J. Gerald Kennedy, The Portable Edgar Allan Poe (London: Penguin, 2006), p.614.


19 Merivale, ‘Gumshoe Gothsics’; Brevda, ‘Search for the Originary Sign’.

American Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp.221-46;
Brand, ‘From the Flâneur to the Detective; Morris Dickstein, ‘The City as Text: New
Monika M. Elbert, “‘The Man of the Crowd” and the Man Outside the Crowd: Poe’s
23 Robert Byer, for example, argues that the point about the old man’s actions,
however enigmatic they are, is to ‘bring the city into view for the narrator in a way
that seems to order and mark it as a “text” fraught with significance’ (Byer,
‘Mysteries of the City’, p.238). Similarly, Dana Brand argues that the narrator’s
resolution of the problem of the man by pronouncing that he ‘is the type and genuis of
depth crime’ means the story functions as a ‘critique of the interpretative strategies of
the flaneur [sic]’ (Brand, ‘Flâneur to Detective’, p.89). For Monika Elbert the
‘midnight stroll’ depicted in the story is a futile quest to discover both the old man’s
history and his own – and is thus an allegory of the quest for America itself at the time
of the story for its own history (Elbert, ‘The Democratic Reader’, p.21).
24 Brand, ‘Flâneur to Detective’, p.88; p.98.
25 In this respect, Benjamin’s take on the story, that it is more about the demise or the
impossibility of the flâneur, is more persuasive. In ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ he
states that it ‘is hard to accept’ Baudelaire’s view that the man of the crowd whom the
narrator follows is the flâneur: ‘The man of the crowd is no flâneur. In him,
composure has given way to manic behaviour. Hence he exemplifies, rather, what had
become of the flâneur once he was deprived of the milieu to which he belonged’


28 Less plausible speculations, to my mind, are those which identify the narrator as an American. Kevin J. Hayes suggests that he is ‘an American merchant stranded in London by his recent illness’ (Hayes, ‘Visual Culture and the Word’, p.449) presumably because he refers at one point to Broadway in New York (Poe, ‘The Man of the Crowd’, p.185), while Monika Elbert, keen to return Poe from his characterization as ‘German romantic’ to his rightful place as politically-engaged citizen and writer of the American South, contends that the narrator’s attitude to the old man marks him out as an amalgamation of aspects of the Whig and Democrat spirits of the time (thus effectively making him a depiction of Poe himself) engaged in re-evaluating ‘attitudes towards individuality in a democracy’ (Elbert, ‘The Democratic Reader’, p.25).

29 Patricia Merivale notes a number of attempts ‘to figure out the “precise crime” of the Man of the Crowd’ (Merivale, ‘Gumshoe Gothics’, p.105): e.g. David Lehman, The Perfect Murder: A Study in Detection (New York: Free Press, 1989), Priestman, Detective Fiction and Literature, and Arnold Weinstein, ‘Nobody’s Home’: Speech,
Self and Place in American Fiction from Hawthorne to DeLillo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

30 Kronick, ‘Error of Reading’; Harriet Hustis ‘Reading, Encrypted But Persistent: The Gothic of Reading and Poe’s The Fall of the House of Usher’, Studies in American Fiction, 27 (Spring, 1999), pp.3-20; Gutiérrez, ‘Misery and Mystery’.


32 Kevin Hayes states, for example, that the initial ‘act of observing has become analogous to reading a written text’ (Hayes, ‘Visual Culture and the Word’, p.445) while Brand notes that ‘When he sees the old man, the narrator is forced to interrupt his reading’ (Brand, ‘Flâneur to Detective’, p.83). For Brand it is a matter of two attempts to read, one successful the other a failure, and two kinds of ‘text’, one confusing but intelligible, the other threatening and unintelligible.

33 Brand, ‘Flâneur to Detective’, p.88, p.98.


35 Hayes, ‘Visual Culture and the Word’.


37 Gunning, ‘Urban Spectatorship’.

38 As indeed Benjamin does in an alternative reading of the story: see Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs’, pp.170-1.


44 In The Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges and the Analytic Detective Story (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press) John Irwin traces the fascinating connections between Poe’s and Borges’s writings.


46 For Barthes, of course, the encounter with an opaque, polysemic text, meant that reading was in fact a kind of ‘writing’. Certainly, the preamble to ‘The Man of the Crowd’ suggests that the problem it circles around is equally one for the writer: the four ineffable things - books that do not permit themselves to be read, secrets which do not permit themselves to be told, mysteries which do not suffer themselves to be revealed, and crime which remains undivulged – are obstacles which the writer of a tale must grapple with. This idea is strengthened by the fact that eight years after the publication of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ Poe published, as one of his pieces of ‘Marginalia’ in Graham’s Magazine, a piece entitled ‘The Unwritable Book’ which claimed it would be impossible to write a book entitled ‘My Heart Laid Bare’ (‘The Unwritable Book’, The Portable Edgar Allan Poe, ed. By J Gerald Kennedy, Penguin, 2006, p.601).

47 Although Poe features neither in Between Men (1985) nor her earlier The Coherence of Gothic Convention (1980), the story would seem to conform to Eve Kosofy’s Sedgwick’s idea of the homo-erotic double-chase between two increasingly
indistinguishable men explored in her this work. ‘The Man of the Crowd’ is considered, however, in the doctoral dissertation which was the basis for this book: Sedgwick, ‘Gothic Conventions’.

48 Dickstein, ‘City as Text’.


51 This is a quotation from Book V of The Iliad – ‘the mist is lifted from the eyes’ – used in Poe’s text untranslated, in the original Greek.


53 This suggests that to refer to ‘Poe’s crowd’ in the story, as Byer repeatedly does, or even to ‘the business man’s peculiar gait in the crowd that Poe describes’ (Byer, ‘Mysteries of the City’, p.232) is not quite accurate. Benjamin’s discussion of the story has a particular tendency to refer to what Poe – rather than his narrator – ‘describes’ (e.g. Benjamin, ‘Paris of the Second Empire’, p.48, p.52), and this has the
effect of oversimplifying the story when it comes to questions of how ‘Poe’ ‘lingers over the city by gaslight’ (p.50) or provides what ‘can hardly be a weirder description of this light’ (p.51). This might, in one sense, be a moot point: Poe is his narrator, of course, and all descriptions are his. But when it comes to particular narrative effects, such as lingering over details or creating a ‘weird’ effect, we need surely to acknowledge that in this story – as in many of Poe’s – we might not be presented with things ‘as they were’ but with how they appeared to be to a narrator in a peculiar state of mind.


56 Rachman, ‘Reading Cities’, .

57 Stephen Rachman points out that the tale begins ‘with its own ending, a quotation, or, more precisely, a misquotation’. The effect is that ‘the conclusion mirrors not only the opening but the title and epigraph’ (Rachman, ‘Reading Cities’, p.70). In making this point Rachman’s aim, as he sets out in a further essay, “Es lässt nicht schreiben”: Plagiarism and “The Man of the Crowd”’, is to demonstrate how Poe turns to plagiarism and ask what this means for the question of origins. The story is effectively ‘quoted’ because of its structure, and Rachman shows how it is derived from ‘The Drunkard’s Death’ in Sketches by Boz, especially the details of the picture of London (and some of its phrasing). Rachman argues that ‘the latent theme of plagiarism’ shows how the texts which make up the tale ‘permit themselves to be read […] only as “translations”’, as borrowed text (Stephen Rachman, “Es lässt nicht schreiben”: Plagiarism and “The Man of the Crowd”’, in Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman, eds., The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p.74.
Stewart, ‘Dear Reader’, p.81. This use of the term ‘self-reflexivity’ is not incompatible with general literary-critical usage, where it refers to a text’s foregrounding of its own status as aesthetic object. But where the ‘self-reflexive’ and the ‘self-referential’ are often used synonymously in literary criticism, Stewart is keen to distinguish self-reflexivity from directly self-referential places where a text ‘refers (by association) to its own articulation’. For Stewart, however, writing is ‘a material fact and its manifestation’ and reading ‘an activity and a duration’ (p.81).

Ref required to recent Stewart book which does mention Poe.


Hustis, ‘Gothic of Reading’, p.12


Hustis, ‘Gothic of Reading’, p.18.

Hustis, ‘Gothic of Reading’, p.10.

Borges points out that ‘the first readers of detective fiction [...] were not educated as we are, and were not an invention of Poe as we are’ (Borges, ‘Detective Story’, p.21). The paradoxical fact is that readers who come to his fiction over a 170 years later are more subject to Poe’s influence than his own original readers.

Brand, ‘Flâneur to Detective’, p.79.