Chapter 8: The Urban Environment

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In his notorious 1849 obituary of Poe, Rufus Griswold notes that the author was given to ‘walk[ing] the streets, in madness or melancholy, with lips moving in indistinct curses, or with eyes upturned in passionate prayers for the happiness of those who at that moment were objects of his idolatry’. Like many of the details in the piece, this one is cunningly designed to install in the minds of future readers a view of Poe as a damaged, tortured figure, so imprisoned in a hellish dream-world ‘peopled with creations and the accidents of his brain’ that he was incapable of looking out objectively at the outside world, and thus producing the great art to which his gifts were tailored. This calculated attack was hugely effective. As Kevin J. Hayes has said, Griswold’s piece was largely responsible for the enduring critical habit of conflating Poe’s ‘mentally unbalanced narrators’ with the author himself (Hayes, 2009, p.8). Certainly Griswold himself seems to fall back on images from the fiction to legitimate his portrait of their author. In the image of Poe deliriously wandering the city streets, he seems to be drawing – perhaps unintentionally – on one of Poe’s most memorable stories, ‘The Man of the Crowd’ (1840), in which the narrator, recently recovered from illness, becomes obsessed with a decrepit old man he observes through a London coffee-house window and impulsively follows as he wanders through the streets, mirroring his unpredictable movements and delirious immersion in the crowd. Whether or not there is any accuracy in Griswold’s claim, there is no doubt that walking through the city and reflecting on the kaleidoscopic sensations of the streets was a common literary response to the urban environment of the early Nineteenth Century, a new world marked not only by teeming crowds of people, but by unprecedented advances in technology such as the gas-lamp, and the birth of consumer culture and mass media. Poe’s work, like that of Dickens, Baudelaire, Engels or Heine, was at the forefront of this response, and early nineteenth-century urban
experience provides an important context for understanding his fiction. More precisely, to explore how Poe captured the intensities of everyday life in the city means to begin not just with ‘The Man of the Crowd’, the subject of numerous analyses by critics, but with the influence on their readings of Walter Benjamin’s insights into the story and its context in his vast ‘Arcades Project’.

Benjamin values Poe as one of those prominent literary 'students of the physiognamy of the big city'. Physiognamy is the ancient pseudo-scientific practice whereby a person’s inner qualities are deduced from facial and other external characteristics. Reading the city as if it were a person – and the complementary practice of reading the people of the city – were common techniques in early literary engagements with the city, from the proto-modernist poetry of Baudelaire to the ‘physiologies’, pocket-size paperbacks sold on Paris street which amusingly catalogued urban ‘types’. One of these types, in fact one who doubles as the very producer of such sketches, is the flâneur, a term originally used in Poe’s time to refer to the writers and journalists (such as the magazine writer Nathaniel Parker Willis, his compatriot and contemporary) who produced sketches of urban life from a strolling or panoramic perspective. But from the outset, as Benjamin is aware, the flâneur seemed to take on more mythical proportions. He described the flâneur as a ‘botanist on asphalt’ (Benjamin, 1983, p.36), a man who possessed the ability of a trained scientist to decode the mysterious elements of the peculiar object which confronted him: the city and its inhabitants. Baudelaire – Poe’s great European champion – characterized the flâneur as perfectly at home in the city, its exterior spaces figuring as his interior dwelling: ‘The crowd is his domain, just as the air is the bird's, and water that of the fish. His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd’ (Baudelaire, 1995, p.9). For Benjamin, flânerie, the practice of urban strolling, looking and interpreting, functioned as a defence mechanism to be deployed against the potentially overwhelming confrontation with different sensations and strangers on the city
streets, managing to transform the vastness and complexity of the city into a series of impressions to be consumed by readers.

Benjamin singles out ‘The Man of the Crowd’ as a valuable text in encapsulating both the comforts and limitations of this kind of fantasy. Initially the tale depicts a relatively unproblematic flânerie in action. For the first three pages, as he is safely ensconced behind the coffee-house window, its narrator describes the different types of people who pass by outside: ‘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’ (‘The Man of the Crowd’, pp.476-8). But Benjamin also notes – unlike Baudelaire himself, who is determined to see the tale as a paradigm of the modern artist, the ‘eternal convalescent’ who sees things intensely, as if for the first time – that its energy comes from the fact that the story documents a failure of urban physiognamy. When confronted by the sight of the old man the narrator loses the flâneur’s characteristic detachment and runs out of the coffee-house in pursuit. What he sees up close puzzles him 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 (‘The Man of the Crowd’, p.479). He resolves ‘to follow the stranger whithersoever he should go’. Thus begins the relentless pursuit that lasts for almost as long as 24 hours, a veritable marathon of stalking, in which the narrator himself becomes more and more agitated as his quarry traverses the streets, changing direction on a whim, entering shops without any pretence of browsing, leading him in and out of a gin palace. As daybreak approaches, ‘with a mad energy’ (‘The Man of the Crowd’, p.481), the old man leads the
narrator back to the street on which he started, now thronging even more with the crowd. At this point he gives up, deciding – as the conclusion of the story has it – that ‘This old man [...] is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd’ (‘The Man of the Crowd’, p.481). In an enigmatic allusion, the narrator goes on to link the man to the impenetrable heart of darkness of the modern world, summed up by a quotation he provides from the widely ‘unreadable’ German translation of the Hortulus Animae: ‘es lässt sich nicht lesen’ [it does not let itself be read] (‘The Man of the Crowd’, p.481).

The first half of the story supports Benjamin’s argument that the city-dwellers of Europe’s capitals in the nineteenth century constituted both an emergent ‘reading public’, in that they were required to ‘read’ and experience their surroundings like a text, and a body of mass consumers, who took in different aspects of social experience just as they browsed and purchased the vast array of goods on display. In fact, though, Benjamin contends that the particular genius of Poe’s tale is that ‘it includes along with the earliest description of the flâneur the figuration of his end’ (Benjamin, 1983, p.54). 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. The effect of their mechanical, uniform behaviour effectively ensures, as Robert Byer has shown in a reading which builds on Benjamin’s, that Poe brings a gothic sensibility to the depiction of the crowd which is not apparent to the same degree in his contemporaries. ‘The Man of the Crowd’ presents the nineteenth-century crowd as an ‘uncanny spectacle’ (Byer, 1986, p.228).

It is not the only occasion in Poe where we find a fascination with how the city crowd can act as one individual. In an earlier story, ‘The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall’ (1835) – widely credited with pioneering another genre, science fiction – a ‘vast
crowd of people’ (‘Hans Pfaall’, p.3) watches a balloon ascend in Rotterdam. We are told that ‘in an instant’, ‘ten thousand faces were upturned toward the heavens, ten thousand pipes descended simultaneously from the corners of ten thousand mouths, and a shout, which could be compared to nothing but the roaring of Niagara, resounded long, loudly and furiously, through all the city and through all the environs of Rotterdam’ (‘Hans Pfaall’, p.3). This story provides the reverse of the perspective in ‘The Man of the Crowd’, as it features the crowd united in viewing a single individual, who is made to seem even smaller and ridiculous than he already is, more isolated from what passes as normal behaviour. Although Poe’s fiction depicts the crowd much less frequently than that of a contemporary like Dickens – and indeed favours being set in an ‘other-worldly’, or unidentifiably ‘ancient’ place rather than contemporary urban reality – this kind of sketch points to his status as an important nineteenth-century documentor of the urban mass.

Byer’s reading of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ is one of a whole series of ‘sociologically-inflected’ analyses which take their point of departure from Benjamin’s, and which value how the story reveals and critiques aspects of the scopic and material conditions of the modern city (Brand, 1991; Dickstein, 1991; Elbert, 1991; McDonough, 2002; Hayes, 2002). So many are there that Patricia Merivale has suggested that ‘The Man of the Crowd’ almost parallels the contribution of ‘The Purloined Letter’ to critical theory (Merivale, 1999, p.105). Among these readings is Tom Gunning’s elaboration of Benjamin’s idea that film was the perfect medium for a society conditioned by ‘perception in the form of shocks’ (Benjamin, 1969, p171). He argues that people 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. ‘The Man of the Crowd’ might therefore fruitfully be read as a kind of dream of the future medium of cinema: the narrator
begins in front of a large window frame watching a lit spectacle before becoming so
entranced by it that he is compelled to enter the action himself (Gunning, 1997, p.32).

Perhaps the most influential of the ‘sociological’ readings of ‘The Man of the Crowd’
is Dana Brand’s in his book The Spectator and the City: Fantasies of Urban Legibility in
Nineteenth Century England and America (1991). Building on Benjamin’s famous
description of the story as an ‘X-ray picture of a detective story’, in which ‘the drapery
represented by the crime has disappeared’ and all that remains is ‘the mere armature [...]': the
pursuer, the crowd, and an unknown man’ (Benjamin, 1983, p.48), Brand argues that ‘The
Man of the Crowd’ was a necessary first step in Poe’s invention of one of the most enduring
and popular genres to result from the increased urbanization of society in the Nineteenth
Century: the detective story. As an ‘embryo’ of detective fiction (a term which better
describes what he believes Benjamin really means by ‘x-ray’) ‘The Man of the Crowd’
testifies to what Brand calls the ‘epistemological anxiety’ (Brand, 1991, p.88) provoked in
the flâneur when confronted by ‘unprecedented and undefined’ (Brand, 1991, p.98) aspects of
city life (ie. the old man) which defeat his initial practice of reducing the inhabitants of the
city to manageable types. Brand goes on to argue that the two elliptical concepts referred to at
the end of the story – ‘deep crime’ and illegibility – become more powerfully and graphically
combined in two stories Poe wrote shortly after ‘The Man of the Crowd’ which feature his
detective Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ (1841) and ‘The
Mystery of Marie Rôget’ (1842), and which, along with ‘The Purloined Letter’ (1845),
inaugurated the genre of detective fiction. In these two stories, however, the reader is
immediately aware that they are in a city far removed from the safe, legible and predictable
fantasy-world of the city of the flâneur. In the brutally murdered corpses around which each
story revolves we are given a precise vision of the kind of ‘deep crime’ which the narrator of
‘The Man of the Crowd’ can only dimly apprehend. They show the violence and danger
inherent in city living. The mother and daughter who are the victims in ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ are savagely attacked while getting ready for bed in a place one might ordinarily assume is perfectly safe: a locked room in an upper floor of their building. The eponymous victim in ‘The Mystery of Marie Rôget’ (which Poe based on the real unsolved murder of Mary Cecilia Rogers in July 1841 in New York) disappears despite being in the very heart of a crowd – a fate which resonates powerfully with the kind of shocking urban mystery which is a common feature of our own media age. While one newspaper states that ‘[i]t is impossible that a person so well known to thousands as this young woman was, should have passed three blocks without someone having seen her’ (‘Marie Rôget’, p.178), Dupin is unconvinced. On the contrary, he says, it is not just possible but ‘far more than probable, that Marie might have proceeded, at any given period, by any one of the many routes between her own residence and that of her aunt, without meeting a single individual whom she knew, or by whom she was known’ (‘Marie Rôget’, p.189). ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ details a similar failure of other people to assist the investigation. The neighbours who hear what they assume are the voices of the murderers of Mme. L’Espanaye and her daughter each assume – naturally perhaps, since they are all of different nationalities themselves – that the ape’s voice is a human speaking in a tongue they don’t recognise.

By accenting the possible consequences of the anonymity the metropolis affords – an advantage to a criminal, a danger to others – Poe’s newly-created genre of detective fiction, Brand contends, is founded upon ‘exploit[ing] the aesthetic appeal of urban anxiety’ (Brand, 1991, p.92). Yet the appearance of a detective in each story manages to keep this exposure to urban anxiety at an acceptable level by providing reassurance that the apparently illegible city ultimately can be mastered and read. Dupin is clearly a variation on the flâneur, as evidenced by his habit (referred to in ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’) of going out at night and ‘roaming far and wide until a late hour, seeking amid the wild lights and shadows of the
populous city that infinity of mental excitement which quiet observation can afford’ (‘Rue Morgue’, p.144). He has the flâneur’s ability to read the city but has been able to hone his skills further and direct them towards a socially beneficial end. The narrator of ‘The Man of the Crowd’ can plausibly be regarded as a prototypical detective, one who pursues his quarry through the mean streets of London in ‘caoutchouc overshoes’ (‘The Man of the Crowd’, p.180), i.e. ‘gumshoes’ (Merivale, 1999, p.109). Yet where he is confounded by the ‘suspect’s’ idiosyncrasies, Dupin, a more advanced model of sleuth, is able to account for precisely ‘those elements of urban experience that appear as gaps in the reading of the flâneur’ (Brand, 1991, p.98). Where the flâneur’s strategy is ‘to reduce the crowd to a set of types’, to measure it against what is already known, the detective’s is to assess the ways in which a crime differs from an ordinary robbery or murder. This development of the technique of urban reading means ultimately that while the detective inhabits a much more menacing and incomprehensible city than the flâneur, he too is ‘a reassuring figure’ (Brand, 1991, p.103). Each type deploys his reading strategies to impose an overall, unifying vision on the chaotic elements of the city. The practice conforms to the panoptic model of disciplining a mass of people which Michel Foucault showed is at the heart of nineteenth-century structures of power. Everything that is hidden can be brought into the light by an all-seeing, policing, gaze.

In some of the key works of what we might call his ‘urban crime fiction’ – ‘The Man of the Crowd’, ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ and ‘The Mystery of Marie Rôget’ – Poe depicts the exciting and menacing aspects of urban reality as well as the methods of ‘reading’ required to master its dangerous illegibility. Elsewhere in Poe, there is the sense that the city’s chaotic energy can lure those who live in it into impulsive behaviour. Where else would the ‘perverse’ decision to confess to a murder a man has hidden successfully for years be made than when ‘bound[ing] like a madman through the crowded thoroughfares’ (‘Imp of
In ‘A Predicament’ (1838), the urge to achieve a masterful overview of the city itself becomes fatally seductive in. The pompous and self-consciously delusional narrator (Poe’s only female narrator) is overwhelmed by a sudden urge to climb a vast Gothic cathedral in Edinburgh: ‘I was seized with an uncontrollable desire to ascend the giddy pinnacle, and then survey the immense extent of the city’ (‘A Predicament’, p.347). She manages to do it by standing on her black servant’s back in order to reach the hole in the clockface at the top of the steeple-tower. Soon, just like the narrator of ‘The Man of the Crowd’, where the phrase is similarly portentous, she becomes ‘absorbed in contemplation’ at ‘the glorious prospect below’ (‘A Predicament’, p.349). So immersed in the spectacle is she, however, that she is decapitated by the gigantic minute hand which pins her to the clock. Her fate is hubristic, and not just because it visits upon her the comeuppance her cruelty towards her servant, Pompey, demands (and which balances out the obvious racism which has disturbed some readers of the story). She needs to be punished for presuming she is entitled to a God’s-eye view of the city rather than accepting her place amidst the chaos and squalor of its streets, for which she has expressed her disgust at the beginning: ‘Men were talking. Women were screaming. Children were choking. Pigs were whistling. Carts they rattled. Bulls they bellowed. Cows they lowed. Horses they neighed. Cats they caterwauled. Dogs they danced’ (‘A Predicament’, p.346).

More broadly than those stories which specifically depict the crowd or the city, the urban context of Poe’s fiction explains one of its most common structural and dramatic elements: its acute sense of the effects of proximity. Over and over again his stories revolve around a fascination between two men, which descends either into uncomfortable doubling, or outright rivalry. This is clear in ‘The Man of the Crowd’, of course, but also in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ or ‘William Wilson’. In ‘The Purloined Letter’ – a Dupin detective story which eschews the urban template of the previous two stories – the obsession between the
detective and the mysterious Minster D____, lies behind the investigation. In some tales the proximity is clearly though implicitly the result of the realities of urban living. In the comic story ‘Why the Little Frenchman Wears his Hand in a Sling’ the narrator is irritated to find he has a rival for his designs on his next-door neighbour, Mistress Tracle, in the figure of ‘the little ould furrener Frinchman that lives jist over the way, and that’s a-oggling and a-goggling the houl day’ (‘Frenchman’, p.517). His attempts to warn him off, however, simply cause the rivals to become even closer, as the Frenchman ends up gripping the narrator’s hand thinking it is Mistress Tracle’s. Even in ‘Metzengerstein’ (1835), which purports to be a historical account of an age-old dispute between two families in ‘the interior of Hungary’, there is a reference to how ‘the inhabitants of the Castle Berlifitzing might look, from their lofty buttresses, into the very windows of the palace Metzengerstein’ (‘Metzengerstein’, p.672). While probably intended as a metaphor to indicate how obsessed with one another the families are, the image evokes a facet of life in the time the story was written rather than when it is set – looking through the windows of a neighbour’s house.

To return to Poe’s crime fiction, the proximity between city-dwellers is central to those stories which arguably figure as the origins of another line of crime writing to have developed alongside the detective story: ‘noir’ killer fiction, or those accounts of depravity narrated by psychopaths which manage to seduce the reader into responding sympathetically – as perfected a hundred years later by Jim Thompson. ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ (1843) is unforthcoming about whether or not it is set in the city, nor about the nature of the relationship between the two men, but what seems intolerable to the narrator is the sheer fact of his proximity to the old man with whom he shares his home – an unbearable closeness conveyed by his conviction that the old man’s eye is always upon him. This is why he harasses then murders him without ceremony, dismembers him and buries him under the floorboards. The immediate catalyst for the murder is the narrator’s fear that a neighbour will
hear the sound of the man’s beating heart as he is persecuted. Sure enough, as soon as he has finished concealing the body, the police arrive, having been alerted by a neighbour who has heard the old man shreik. The proximity of others is what leads a deranged man to murder, but is also what causes him to be caught. A similar world seems to be behind the events in ‘The Black Cat’ (1843). After murdering his wife, the narrator of that story is aware that he cannot remove the corpse ‘either by day or by night, without the risk of being observed by the neighbors’ (“The Black Cat”, p.228). His response is likewise to retreat further into the intimate spaces of his own home and conceal the body in the walls of his cellar. Yet after inquiries about the disappearance, and a search for his wife, both presumably by neighbours, the police come to search his home and the wailing of the cat – a metaphor for the difficulty of keeping secrets in the city – gives it away.

Poe’s stories suggest that the perpetration, concealment and detection of ‘deep crime’ is indissociable from the modern urban environment. To the list of peculiarly modern literary archetypes which he was among the first to create and which continue to strike a chord with readers nearly two centuries later – the detective, the flâneur, the psychopath, etc. – we ought therefore to add another: the menacing urban neighbour. Freud argued in Civilisation and its Discontents (1930) that the point of the commandment to ‘love thy neighbour’, the maxim which underscores modern society, is not that the others with whom we share our space in modernity are lovable, but precisely the contrary. They are loathsome, threatening, and would have ‘no hesitation in harming’ us either to gain some advantage or simply to satisfy some desire (Freud, 2004, p.59). To dilute this threat is exactly why we need to be commanded to love them. Freud’s misanthropy here seems the consequence of writing in a chaotic modern urban environment, of taking for granted the tensions created by a vastly-populated, aggressive, competitive, technological world – one which is portrayed with a powerful sense of immediacy almost a century earlier in the fiction of Poe.
WORKS CITED


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