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*Edgar Poe*

THE ANNOTATED  
POE

EDITED BY KEVIN J. HAYES

WITH A FOREWORD BY WILLIAM GIRALDI

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# The Man of the Crowd

Ce grand malheur, de ne pouvoir être seul.  
La Bruyère<sup>1</sup>

**I**t was well said of a certain German book that “*er lässt sich nicht lesen*”—it does not permit itself to be read.<sup>2</sup> There are some secrets which do not permit themselves to be told.<sup>3</sup> 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.

Not long ago, about the closing in of an evening in autumn, I sat at the large bow window of the D——Coffee-House in London.<sup>4</sup> For some months I had been ill in health, but was now convalescent,<sup>5</sup> and, with returning strength, found myself in one of those happy moods which are so precisely the converse of *ennui*—moods of the keenest appetency, when the film from the mental vision departs—the *αχλυσ ος πριυ επηευ*<sup>6</sup>—and the intellect, electrified, surpasses as greatly its every-day condition, as does the vivid yet candid reason of Leibnitz,<sup>7</sup> the mad and flimsy rhetoric of Gorgias.<sup>8</sup> Merely to breathe was enjoyment; and I derived positive pleasure even from many of the legitimate sources of pain. I felt a calm but inquisitive interest in every thing. With a cigar in my mouth and a newspaper in my lap,<sup>9</sup> I had been amusing myself for the greater part of the afternoon, now in poring over advertisements, now in observing the promiscuous company in the room, and now in peering through the smoky panes into the street.<sup>10</sup>

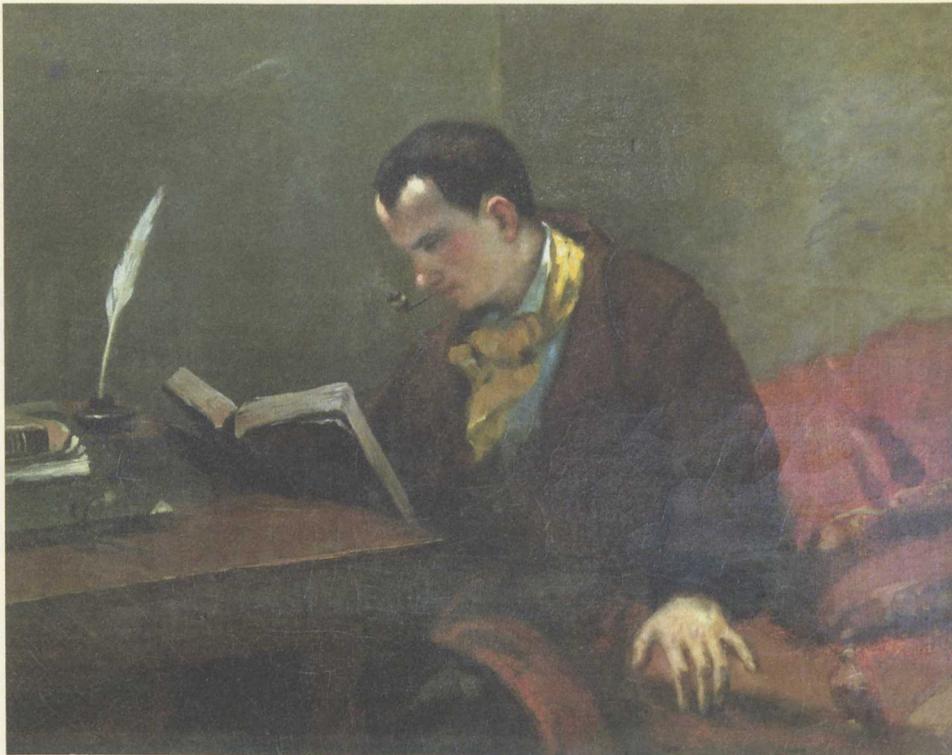
This latter is one of the principal thoroughfares of the city,

Poe's enigmatic tale “The Man of the Crowd” recalls a singular day of crowd watching (one among presumably many other, if less remarkable, ones), in which its narrator observes a mysterious old man with an “idiosyncratic” expression. Intrigued, he leaves behind his newspaper and the coffeehouse where he has parked himself, plunges into the crowd, and pursues the old man through London's streets for the next twenty-four hours in a futile effort “to know more of him.” The tale has attracted considerable scholarly attention. It has been seen as a proto-detective story that anticipates the Dupin tales, while other readings have emphasized its playfulness, indeterminacy, and self-reflexivity. But by far it has received the most sustained critical attention from a now long line of readers—beginning with Poe's great French champion and translator Charles Baudelaire and the German cultural theorist Walter Benjamin—who have drawn attention to the story's modern urban setting and new modes of visual perception to which the city gave birth in the nineteenth century, as urban dwellers tried to make sense of the crowds and a myriad of other stimuli.

In “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863), Charles Baudelaire holds up “The Man of the Crowd” as exemplary of the mind-set of the modern artist, who attempts to capture on canvas the fleeting, ephemeral experience of new urban life. To be successful, however, the artist must become like the flaneur, or urban idler—a new urban type, a man of leisure who strolls about the city observing the street and the people in it for his own pleasure. The flaneur immerses himself in the life of the modern city yet somehow remains apart from it. Benjamin speaks of the flaneur as a kind of “botanist on asphalt” who turns the Parisian boulevards into a drawing room in which he identifies and classifies the crowd. He interprets or “reads” the city and its inhabitants like a “text.” In his essays and notes on Baudelaire, Benjamin revises Baudelaire's earlier reading of “The Man of the Crowd.” For Benjamin, Poe's tale demonstrates the impossibility of the flaneur's cool detachment and his ultimate failure to read the city-as-text. “It is a magnificent touch in Poe's story,” Benjamin writes, “that it includes along with the earliest description of the flaneur the figuration of his end.”

“The Man of the Crowd” was originally published in the last issue of Burton's *Gentlemen's Magazine* and revised and republished for Wiley and Putnam's *Tales* (1845). The text of the 1845 version is presented here.

1 “That great evil, to be unable to be alone.” This quotation also appears in “Metzengerstein.” D. H. Lawrence interprets the phrase to mean that all men and women yearn for love, that our inherent impulses compel us to avoid loneliness and seek companionship (Eric W. Carlson, ed., *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Criticism since 1829* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966], 126).



Gustave Courbet,  
Charles Baudelaire, 1847.

The phrase may be more complex than Lawrence realizes. The verb “pouvoir” is ambiguous. It signifies “to be able to,” but it may also mean “to be allowed to.”

2 Poe took this phrase from something Thomas De Quincey says: “Of a German book, otherwise entitled to respect, it was said—*er lässt sich nicht lesen*, it does not permit itself to be read: such and so repulsive was the style” (“Style,” *Blackwood’s* 48 [1840], 17).

3 The proverbial expression “to read someone like a book” meant in Poe’s day what it does today: to know exactly what someone else is thinking or feeling without having to ask. Here, however, Poe draws an analogy between an unreadable book and secrets that “do not permit themselves to be told.” In other words, neither people nor literary texts are so easily read as common wisdom would have us believe.

4 Commercial travelers from overseas frequented London coffeehouses, lodging at adjoining hotels and using the coffeehouse as their business address. After bringing his family to Great Britain to establish a London branch of his firm in 1815, Poe’s foster father, John Allan, would have patronized the London coffeehouses regularly to learn the latest shipping news and establish business connections. The

narrator’s presence in the coffeehouse suggests that he, too, is an American in London (Kevin J. Hayes, “Visual Culture and the Word in Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Man of the Crowd,’” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 56 [2002], 448–449).

5 In “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863), Baudelaire likens the modern artist to an “eternal convalescent” or “man-child” in his heightened perception and undiminished curiosity about all aspects of modern life: “The convalescent, like the child, is possessed in the highest degree of the faculty of keenly interesting himself in things, be they apparently of the most trivial. Let us go back, if we can, by a retrospective effort of the imagination, towards our most youthful, our earliest, impressions, and we will recognize that they had a strange kinship with those brightly coloured impressions which we were later to receive in the aftermath of a physical illness, always provided that that illness had left our spiritual capacities pure and unharmed” (*The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne [1964; reprinted, London: Phaidon, 1995], 7–8).

6 “The mist that before was upon them”: Pallas Athena speaks these words in Homer’s *Iliad*, book V, line 127, telling Diomedes that she has taken the mist from his eyes so he can distinguish between god and man on the battlefield.



Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford) in the opening scene of Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). Like the narrator in "The Man of the Crowd," Deckard is eventually compelled to wander among the teeming crowds in the city streets.

and had been very much crowded during the whole day. But, as the darkness came on, the throng momentarily increased; and, by the time the lamps were well lighted, two dense and continuous tides of population were rushing past the door. At this particular period of the evening I had never before been in a similar situation, and the tumultuous sea of human heads filled me, therefore, with a delicious novelty of emotion. I gave up, at length, all care of things within the hotel, and became absorbed in contemplation of the scene without.<sup>11</sup>

At first my observations took an abstract and generalizing turn. I looked at the passengers in masses, and thought of them in their aggregate relations. Soon, however, I descended to details, and regarded with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance.<sup>12</sup>

By far the greater number of those who went by had a satisfied business-like demeanor, and seemed to be thinking only of making their way through the press. Their brows were knit, and their eyes rolled quickly; when pushed against by fellow-wayfarers they evinced no symptom of impatience, but adjusted their clothes and hurried on. Others, still a numerous class, were restless in their movements, had flushed faces, and talked and gesticulated to themselves, as if feeling in solitude on account of the very denseness of the company around. When impeded in their progress, these people suddenly ceased muttering, but redoubled their gesticulations, and awaited, with an absent and overdone smile upon the lips, the course of the persons impeding them. If jostled, they

7 The 1840 text, which reads "the vivid, yet candid reason of Combe," pays homage to George Combe (1788–1858), one of the founders of phrenology. Omitting Combe in favor of philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) when he revised the story, Poe substituted a reference of greater literary cachet. The revision does create a slight textual anomaly. The narrator's fascination with the "tumultuous sea of human heads" in the following paragraph makes more sense coming after his appreciation for a founder of phrenology than following a reference to the founder of differential calculus.

8 A native of Sicily, Gorgias (ca. 483–ca. 385 BCE) was a pre-Socratic philosopher and rhetorician. In a work that does not survive he emphasized the nonexistence, incomprehensibility, or incommunicability of all things.

9 Poe implicitly connects the activity of observing the urban landscape and reading a written text. In the early nineteenth century, as literacy became widespread in major cities, the relationship between the written word and visual culture was changing in the metropolis. Language was becoming more and more visible—in mass-market periodicals, on advertisements and shop signs, and on the placards carried up and down the street by sandwichmen. See Kevin J. Hayes, "Visual Culture and the Word in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd,'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 56 [2002], 448–449.

10 John D. Dorst is among those critics who prize "The Man of the Crowd" for its understanding of the modern urban experience. He notes parallels between Poe's tale and Ridley Scott's sublimely dystopian film *Blade Runner* (1982): "We first encounter Rick Deckard . . . as he sits reading the newspaper and waiting for service at a curbside 'noodle bar' in a nightmarish future Los Angeles. Like his mid-nineteenth century counterpart, he is confronted with a dense tide of motley humanity streaming by in front of him. And soon he too will find himself compelled to wander the night streets of a great metropolis in the effort to resolve ambiguities that go well beyond the immediate circumstances of the case assigned to him" ("Parsing the City," *American Quarterly* 50 [1998], 645).

11 Baudelaire observes: "The crowd is [the flaneur's] element, as the air is that of fishes. His passion and profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flaneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite (*The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, 9).

12 Poe's description of life in urban London is characteristic of the "city sketch." Horace Greeley, one of the great newspaper editors of the day, recognized the affinity between Poe's tale and this subgenre, excerpting the next six paragraphs as "A London Thoroughfare" in the *New Yorker* (December 5, 1840), which the *Washington Daily National Intelligencer* reprinted (December 21, 1840).

13 Walter Benjamin observes: "These are less the movements of people going about their business than the movements of the machines they operate. With uncanny foresight, Poe seems to have modeled the gestures and reactions of the crowd on the rhythm of these machines" (*The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin [Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999], 337).

14 Unscrupulous stockbrokers.

15 The hereditary aristocracy of Athens or, more generally, a person of noble descent.

16 The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term "flash house" as either a resort of thieves or a brothel. Here, Poe twists the term to mean a newly established place of business, which he contrasts with "staunch firms" in the following paragraph.

17 Poe's coinage (not in the *OED*).

18 Polite or fashionable society.

19 Still played today in many cities around the world, the thimberig or the shell game is a gambling game that in reality often involves sleight-of-hand. The operator or con-man places a pea under one of three thimbles or walnut shells and then, as he manipulates the shells on a flat surface, invites onlookers to place bets on where the pea will end up. Typically shell men set up shop on the busiest street corners to snare tourists and other unwary passers-by.

bowed profusely to the jostlers, and appeared overwhelmed with confusion.<sup>13</sup>—There was nothing very distinctive about these two large classes beyond what I have noted. Their habiliments belonged to that order which is pointedly termed the decent. They were undoubtedly noblemen, merchants, attorneys, tradesmen, stock-jobbers<sup>14</sup>—the Eupatrids<sup>15</sup> and the common-places of society—men of leisure and men actively engaged in affairs of their own—conducting business upon their own responsibility. They did not greatly excite my attention.

The tribe of clerks was an obvious one and here I discerned two remarkable divisions. There were the junior clerks of flash houses<sup>16</sup>—young gentlemen with tight coats, bright boots, well-oiled hair, and supercilious lips. Setting aside a certain dapperness of carriage, which may be termed *deskism*<sup>17</sup> for want of a better word, the manner of these persons seemed to me an exact facsimile of what had been the perfection of *bon ton*<sup>18</sup> about twelve or eighteen months before. They wore the cast-off graces of the gentry;—and this, I believe, involves the best definition of the class.

The division of the upper clerks of staunch firms, or of the "steady old fellows," it was not possible to mistake. These were known by their coats and pantaloons of black or brown, made to sit comfortably, with white cravats and waistcoats, broad solid-looking shoes, and thick hose or gaiters.—They had all slightly bald heads, from which the right ears, long used to pen-holding, had an odd habit of standing off on end. I observed that they always removed or settled their hats with both hands, and wore watches, with short gold chains of a substantial and ancient pattern. Theirs was the affectation of respectability;—if indeed there be an affectation so honorable.

There were many individuals of dashing appearance, whom I easily understood as belonging to the race of swell pick-pockets, with which all great cities are infested. I watched these gentry with much inquisitiveness, and found it difficult to imagine how they should ever be mistaken for gentlemen by gentlemen themselves. Their voluminousness of wristband, with an air of excessive frankness, should betray them at once.

The gamblers, of whom I descried not a few, were still more easily recognisable. They wore every variety of dress, from that of the desperate thimble-rig bully,<sup>19</sup> with velvet waistcoat, fancy neck-

erchief, gilt chains, and flagreed buttons, to that of the scrupulously inornate clergyman, than which nothing could be less liable to suspicion. Still all were distinguished by a certain sodden swartheness of complexion, a filmy dimness of eye, and pallor and compression of lip. There were two other traits, moreover, by which I could always detect them;—a guarded lowness of tone in conversation, and a more than ordinary extension of the thumb in a direction at right angles with the fingers.—Very often, in company with these sharpers, I observed an order of men somewhat different in habits, but still birds of a kindred feather. They may be defined as the gentlemen who live by their wits. They seem to prey upon the public in two battalions—that of the dandies and that of the military men. Of the first grade the leading features are long locks and smiles; of the second frogged coats<sup>20</sup> and frowns.

Descending in the scale of what is termed gentility, I found darker and deeper themes for speculation. I saw Jew pedlars, with hawk eyes flashing from countenances whose every other feature wore only an expression of abject humility; sturdy professional street beggars scowling upon mendicants of a better stamp, whom despair alone had driven forth into the night for charity; feeble and ghastly invalids, upon whom death had placed a sure hand, and who sidled and tottered through the mob, looking every one beseechingly in the face, as if in search of some chance consolation, some lost hope; modest young girls returning from long and late labor to a cheerless home, and shrinking more tearfully than indignantly from the glances of ruffians, whose direct contact, even, could not be avoided; women of the town of all kinds and of all ages—the unequivocal beauty in the prime of her womanhood, putting one in mind of the statue in Lucian, with the surface of Parian marble, and the interior filled with filth<sup>21</sup>—the loathsome and utterly lost leper in rags—the wrinkled, bejewelled and paint-begrimed beldame, making a last effort at youth—the mere child of immature form, yet, from long association, an adept in the dreadful coquetries of her trade, and burning with a rabid ambition to be ranked the equal of her elders in vice;<sup>22</sup> drunkards innumerable and indescribable—some in shreds and patches, reeling, inarticulate, with bruised visage and lack-lustre eyes—some in whole although filthy garments, with a slightly unsteady swagger, thick sensual lips, and hearty-looking rubicund faces—others

20 A frogged coat is adorned with “frogs,” ornamental fastenings made from spindle-shaped buttons, which pass through loops on the other breast of the garment.

21 This comparison refers to a passage found in “The Dream, or The Cock,” by Lucian (ca. 120–after 180), an ancient Greek rhetorician and satirist. In the passage in question, the Cock (Pythagoras reincarnated) compares a monarch to “the great colossi that Phidias or Myron or Praxiteles made, each of which outwardly is a beautiful Poseidon or a Zeus, made of ivory and gold, with a thunderbolt or a flash of lightning or a trident in his right hand,” the inside containing “bars and props and nails driven clear through, and beams and wedges and pitch and clay and a quantity of such ugly stuff housing within, not to mention numbers of mice and rats that keep their court in them sometimes. That is what monarchy is like” (Lucian, trans. A. M. Harmon, K. Kilburn, and M. D. Macleod, 8 vols. [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913–1967], II, 223).

22 -In his edition, Mabbott notes Poe’s indebtedness, here and elsewhere, to Charles Dickens. His description of the prostitutes owes much to Dickens in “The Pawnbroker’s Shop” in his *Sketches by Boz* (Thomas Ollive Mabbott, ed., *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 3 vols. [Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969–1978], II, 516). More recently, Stephen Rachman has called attention to Poe’s appropriation of Dickens: “While unabashedly relying on Dickens for the details of his London picture, and at times even for his turn of phrase, Poe transforms the socially intelligible world of Dickens into a diabolical parade of types, of urban hieroglyphs ostensibly significant to the narrator only in their potential decipherability” (“Reading Cities: Devotional Seeing in the Nineteenth Century,” *American Literary History* 9 [1997], 659).

23 Coal gas was first used for street lighting along Pall Mall in London in 1807. The general illumination of London streets began within the next half dozen years.

24 Mabbott traces this comment about Tertullian (ca. 160–ca. 240), the early Christian theologian, to a quote by Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac (1594–1655) found in the second edition of Gilles Ménage's collection of anecdotes, *Menagiana* (1694). Poe, however, took the quotation from Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Paul Clifford* (1830). In his dedicatory epistle, Bulwer-Lytton characterized the literary style of William Godwin by using "the simile applied somewhat too flatteringly to that of Tertullian,—that it is like ebony, at once dark and splendid."

25 The phrase "world of light" reads "world of life" in the earlier 1840 version of the story. Modest as it is, Poe's revision enhances the story considerably. It suggests that the narrator cannot really "read" the history of each passer-by, as he claims he can; rather, he takes in only the spectacle of the crowd—the light reflected from the surfaces of so many passing faces.

26 Middle-class consumers on both sides of the Atlantic eagerly purchased editions of literary works illustrated by German illustrator Friedrich August Moritz Retzsch (1799–1857), who made his early reputation with his etchings for Goethe's *Faust*. Retzsch worked in "outline," a style that combines rich symbolism with an austereness of line. In a review of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Ballads and Other Poems*, Poe's observations about Retzsch's outline style invite reflection on his own methods: "It is curious to observe how very slight a degree of truth is sufficient to satisfy the mind, which acquiesces in the absence of numerous essentials in the thing depicted. An outline frequently stirs the spirit more pleasantly than the most elaborate picture. We need only refer to the compositions of . . . Retzsch. Here all details are omitted—nothing can be farther from truth. Without even color the most thrilling effects are produced" (*Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson [New York: Library of America, 1984], pp. 694–695). For a discussion of how Retzsch's style influenced Poe's aesthetics, see Kevin J. Hayes, "Retzsch's *Outlines* and Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd,'" *Gothic Studies* 12 [2010], 29–41.

27 Glossing this sentence, the poet Charles Simic observes: "On a busy street one quickly becomes a voyeur. An air of danger, eroticism, and crushing solitude play hide-and-seek in the crowd. The indeterminate, the unforeseeable, the ethereal, and the fleeting rule there. The city is the place where the most unlikely opposites come

clothed in materials which had once been good, and which even now were scrupulously well brushed—men who walked with a more than naturally firm and springy step, but whose countenances were fearfully pale, whose eyes hideously wild and red, and who clutched with quivering fingers, as they strode through the crowd, at every object which came within their reach; beside these, 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, and all full of a noisy and inordinate vivacity which jarred discordantly upon the ear, and gave an aching sensation to the eye.

As the night deepened, so deepened to me the interest of the scene; for not only did the general character of the crowd materially alter (its gentler features retiring in the gradual withdrawal of the more orderly portion of the people, and its harsher ones coming out into bolder relief, as the late hour brought forth every species of infamy from its den,) but the rays of the gas-lamps, feeble at first in their struggle with the dying day, had now at length gained ascendancy, and threw over every thing a fitful and garish lustre.<sup>23</sup> All was dark yet splendid—as that ebony to which has been likened the style of Tertullian.<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup>

With my brow to the glass, I was thus occupied in scrutinizing the mob, when suddenly there came into view a countenance (that of a decrepid old man, some sixty-five or seventy years of age,)—a countenance which at once arrested and absorbed my whole attention, on account of the absolute idiosyncrasy of its expression. Any thing even remotely resembling that expression I had never seen before. I well remember that my first thought, upon beholding it, was that Retzsch, had he viewed it, would have greatly preferred it to his own pictorial incarnations of the fiend.<sup>26</sup> As I endeavored, 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 supreme despair. I felt singularly aroused, startled, fascinated. “How wild a history,” I said to myself, “is written within that bosom!”<sup>27</sup> Then came a craving desire to keep the man in view—to know more of him. Hurriedly putting on an overcoat, and seizing my hat and cane, I made my way into the street, and pushed through the crowd in the direction which I had seen him take; for he had already disappeared. With some little difficulty I at length came within sight of him, approached, and followed him closely, yet cautiously, so as not to attract his attention.<sup>28</sup>

I had now a good opportunity of examining his person. He was short in stature, very thin, and apparently very feeble. His clothes, generally, were filthy and ragged; but as he came, now and then, within the strong glare of a lamp, I perceived that his linen, although dirty, was of beautiful texture; and my vision deceived me, or, through a rent in a closely-buttoned and evidently second-handed *roquelaire*<sup>29</sup> which enveloped him, I caught a glimpse both of a diamond and of a dagger.<sup>30</sup> These observations heightened my

together, the place where our separate intuitions momentarily link up. The myth of Theseus, the Minotaur, Ariadne, and her thread continue here. The city is a labyrinth of analogies, the Symbolist forest of correspondences” (*Dime-Store Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell* [Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1992], 10–11).

28 Walter Benjamin theorizes that the detective story has as its genesis the modern phenomenon of the big-city crowd. It is the criminal’s frightening ability to hide in plain sight that gives birth to detective fiction. In “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” (1938), he observes: “The masses appear as the asylum that shields an asocial person from his persecutors. Of all the menacing aspects of the masses, this one became apparent first. It lies at the origin of the detective story.” Later, in the same essay, he famously calls “The Man of the Crowd” “something like an X-ray of a detective story. It does away with all the drapery that a crime represents. Only the armature remains: the pursuer, the crowd, and an unknown man who manages to walk through London in such a way that he always remains in the middle of the crowd” (*Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott [Cambridge,



Friedrich August Moritz Retzsch, “Faust and Mephistopheles in the Witches’ Cave,” from *Illustrations of Goethe’s Faust*, 1843. Poe was drawn to Retzsch’s minimalist style.

MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003], 21, 27). Poe had not yet invented the detective story with his Dupin tales, but Benjamin's observations initiated the critical debate about whether or not the tale serves as a prototype for the detective story. See Bran Nichol, "Reading and Not Reading 'The Man of the Crowd': Poe, the City, and the Gothic Text," *Philological Quarterly* 91 (2012), 465-493.

29 A roquelaure, as it was also spelled, was a knee-length cloak.

30 The narrator acknowledges that perhaps "my vision deceived me." But what he sees suggests as much as anything else that his imagination may in fact be playing tricks on him: The diamond-hilted dagger was in Poe's day a cliché of romantic fiction, as many contemporary readers would have recognized.

31 Compare Luke 9:57: "And it came to pass, that, as they went in the way, a certain *man* said unto him, Lord, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest."

32 The narrator's familiarity with Broadway and City Hall Park reinforces the idea that he is an American in London. This passage also indicates why Poe set this story in London: he needed a city that was populous enough to create large street crowds. No American city would do.

curiosity, and I resolved to follow the stranger whithersoever he should go.<sup>31</sup>

It was now fully night-fall, and a thick humid fog hung over the city, soon ending in a settled and heavy rain. This change of weather had an odd effect upon the crowd, the whole of which was at once put into new commotion, and overshadowed by a world of umbrellas. The waver, the jostle, and the hum increased in a tenfold degree. For my own part I did not much regard the rain—the lurking of an old fever in my system rendering the moisture somewhat too dangerously pleasant. Tying a handkerchief about my mouth, I kept on. For half an hour the old man held his way with difficulty along the great thoroughfare; and I here walked close at his elbow through fear of losing sight of him. Never once turning his head to look back, he did not observe me. By and bye he passed into a cross street, which, although densely filled with people, was not quite so much thronged as the main one he had quitted. Here a change in his demeanor became evident. He walked more slowly and with less object than before—more hesitatingly. He crossed and re-crossed the way repeatedly without apparent aim; and the press was still so thick that, at every such movement, I was obliged to follow him closely. The street was a narrow and long one, and his course lay within it for nearly an hour, during which the passengers had gradually diminished to about that number which is ordinarily seen at noon in Broadway near the Park—so vast a difference is there between a London populace and that of the most frequented American city.<sup>32</sup> A second turn brought us into a square, brilliantly lighted, and overflowing with life. The old manner of the stranger re-appeared. His chin fell upon his breast, while his eyes rolled wildly from under his knit brows, in every direction, upon those who hemmed him in. He urged his way steadily and perseveringly. I was surprised, however, to find, upon his having made the circuit of the square, that he turned and retraced his steps. Still more was I astonished to see him repeat the same walk several times—once nearly detecting me as he came round with a sudden movement.

In this exercise he spent another hour, at the end of which we met with far less interruption from passengers than at first. The rain fell fast; the air grew cool; and the people were retiring to their homes. With a gesture of impatience, the wanderer passed into a bye-street comparatively deserted. Down this, some quarter

of a mile long, he rushed with an activity I could not have dreamed of seeing in one so aged, and which put me to much trouble in pursuit. A few minutes brought us to a large and busy bazaar, with the localities of which the stranger appeared well acquainted, and where his original demeanor again became apparent, as he forced his way to and fro, without aim, among the host of buyers and sellers.

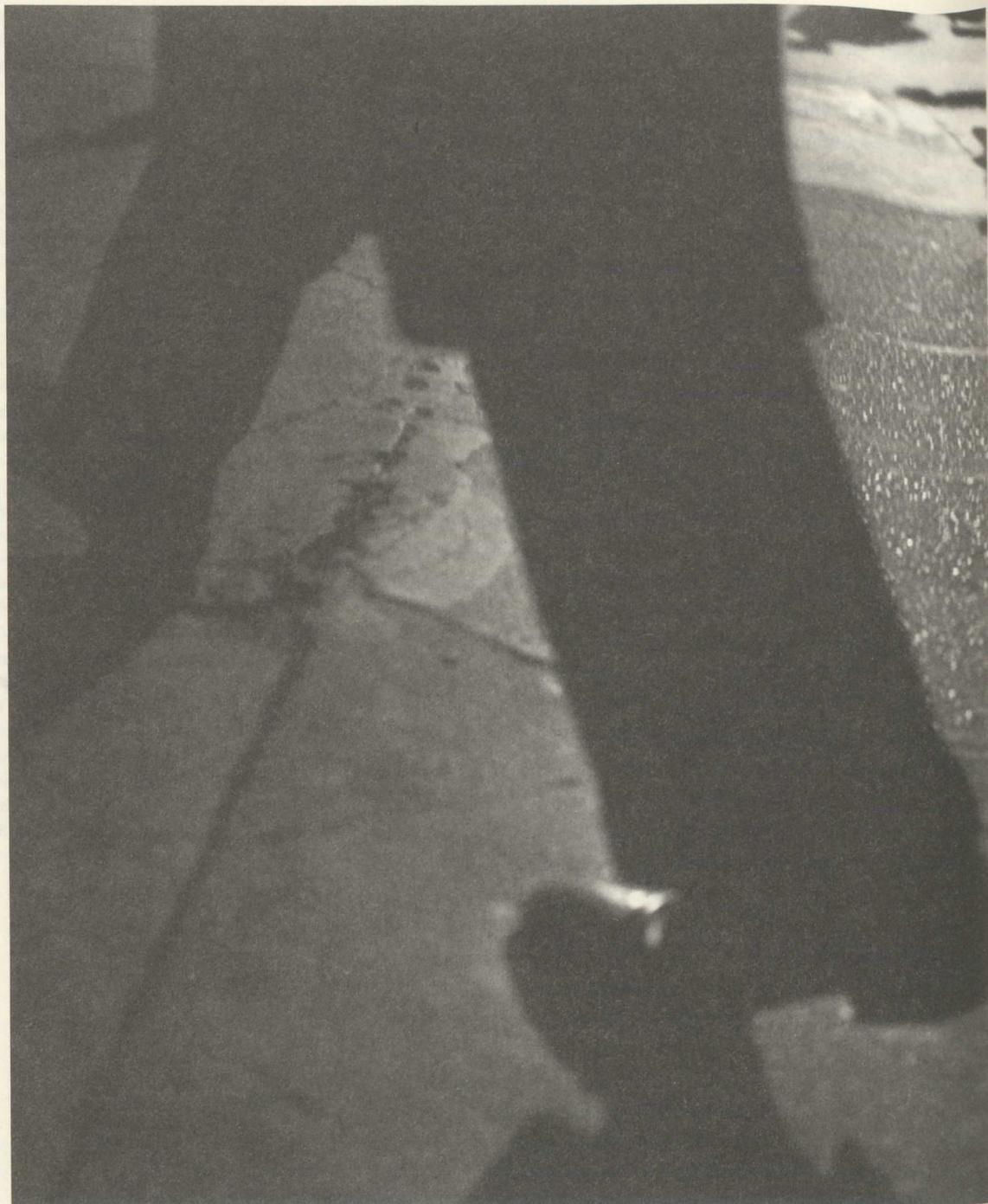
During the hour and a half, or thereabouts, which we passed in this place, it required much caution on my part to keep him within reach without attracting his observation. Luckily I wore a pair of caoutchouc over-shoes,<sup>33</sup> and could move about in perfect silence. At no moment did he see that I watched him. He entered shop after shop, priced nothing, spoke no word, and looked at all objects with a wild and vacant stare. I was now utterly amazed at his behaviour, and firmly resolved that we should not part until I had satisfied myself in some measure respecting him.

A loud-toned clock struck eleven, and the company were fast deserting the bazaar. A shop-keeper, in putting up a shutter, jostled the old man, and at the instant I saw a strong shudder come over his frame. He hurried into the street, looked anxiously around him for an instant, and then ran with incredible swiftness through many crooked and people-less lanes, until we emerged once more upon the great thoroughfare whence we had started—the street of the D——Hotel. It no longer wore, however, the same aspect. It was still brilliant with gas; but the rain fell fiercely, and there were few persons to be seen. The stranger grew pale. He walked moodily some paces up the once populous avenue, then, with a heavy sigh, turned in the direction of the river, and, plunging through a great variety of devious ways, came out, at length, in view of one of the principal theatres. It was about being closed, and the audience were thronging from the doors. I saw the old man gasp as if for breath while he threw himself amid the crowd; but I thought that the intense agony of his countenance had, in some measure, abated. His head again fell upon his breast; he appeared as I had seen him at first. I observed that he now took the course in which had gone the greater number of the audience—but, upon the whole, I was at a loss to comprehend the waywardness of his actions.<sup>34</sup>

As he proceeded, the company grew more scattered, and his old uneasiness and vacillation were resumed. For some time he fol-

33 In the 1840 version, the narrator wears “gum over-shoes.” Both “gum” and “caoutchouc” were synonyms for rubber, which was becoming an increasingly important product since American inventor Charles Goodyear discovered the vulcanization process in 1839. A fashionable Londoner would likely sport patent leather shoes regardless of the weather; however, a practical-minded American might wear watertight rubber galoshes. The narrator’s shoes also allow him to move undetected through the city streets. In *Poetic Justice* (1967), Ellery Queen calls Poe’s narrator the earliest gumshoe detective in literary history. Patricia Merivale sees the tale as a “metaphysical gumshoe story” or “Gumshoe Gothic” for short: a genre that deals with “a Missing Person, a person sought for . . . gumshoe style, through endless, labyrinthine city streets, but never really Found—because he was never really There . . . One was, as postmodernist detective after postmodernist detective discovers, only following’s one’s own self” (“Gumshoe Gothics: Poe’s ‘The Man of the Crowd’ and His Followers,” *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*, ed. Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999], 104). What “*er lasst sich nicht lassen*” means, then, is that we cannot understand *ourselves*, let alone others.

34 Poe’s description of the old man’s agitated restlessness anticipates the candid “street photography” of American photographer Lisette Model (1901–1983). Using a thirty-five millimeter camera, Model captured the movement of the modern city. Some of her most memorable work depicts people in a fragmented, depersonalized way—lower legs and feet—as they hurry through streets on their way to work or home or to appointments to which they feared being late.



Lisette Model, *Running Legs*, New York, ca. 1940–1941.

lowed closely a party of some ten or twelve roisterers;<sup>35</sup> but from this number one by one dropped off, until three only remained together, in a narrow and gloomy lane little frequented. The stranger paused, and, for a moment, seemed lost in thought; then, with every mark of agitation, pursued rapidly a route which brought us to the verge of the city, amid regions very different from those we had hitherto traversed. It was the most noisome quarter of London, where every thing wore the worst impress of the most deplorable poverty, and of the most desperate crime. By the dim light of an accidental lamp, tall, antique, worm-eaten, wooden tenements were seen tottering to their fall, in directions so many and capricious that scarce the semblance of a passage was discernible between them. The paving-stones lay at random, displaced from their beds by the rankly-growing grass. Horrible filth festered in the dammed-up gutters. The whole atmosphere teemed with desolation. Yet, as we proceeded, the sounds of human life revived by sure degrees, and at length large bands of the most abandoned of a London populace were seen reeling to and fro. The spirits of the old man again flickered up, as a lamp which is near its death-hour. Once more he strode onward with elastic tread. Suddenly a corner was turned, a blaze of light burst upon our sight, and we stood before one of the huge suburban temples of Intemperance—one of the palaces of the fiend, Gin.<sup>36</sup>

It was now nearly day-break; but a number of wretched inebriates still pressed in and out of the flaunting entrance. With a half shriek of joy the old man forced a passage within, resumed at once his original bearing, and stalked backward and forward, without apparent object, among the throng. He had not been thus long occupied, however, before a rush to the doors gave token that the host was closing them for the night. It was something even more intense than despair that I then observed upon the countenance of the singular being whom I had watched so pertinaciously. Yet he did not hesitate in his career, but, with a mad energy, retraced his steps at once, to the heart of the mighty London. Long and swiftly he fled, while I followed him in the wildest amazement, resolute not to abandon a scrutiny in which I now felt an interest all-absorbing. The sun arose while we proceeded, and, when we had once again reached that most thronged mart of the populous town, the street of the D——Hotel, it presented an appearance of human bustle and activity scarcely inferior to what I had seen on

35 Swaggering or noisy revelers.

36 Gin drinking was a much greater social problem in nineteenth-century Great Britain than the United States. Exposés against gin palaces recurred frequently in the contemporary British press. See, for example, [W. H. Leeds,] "A Chapter about Boutiques and Gin Palaces," *Fraser's Magazine* 20 (1839), 697–714.

37 In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin identifies Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Eugene Aram* (1832) as Poe's source. In the novel, Bulwer-Lytton writes: "Through this crowd, self-absorbed as usual—with them—not one of them—Eugene Aram slowly wound his unaccompanied way. What an incalculable field of dread and sombre contemplation is opened to every man who, with his heart disengaged from himself, and his eyes accustomed to the sharp observance of his tribe, walks through the streets of a great city! What a world of dark and troublous secrets in the breast of every one who hurries by you! Goëthe has said somewhere, that each of us, the best as the worst, hides within him something—some feeling, some remembrance that, if known, would make you hate him. No doubt the saying is exaggerated; but still, what a gloomy and profound sublimity in the idea!—what a new insight it gives into the hearts of the common herd!—with what a strange interest it may inspire us for the humblest, the tritest passenger that shoulders us in the great thoroughfare of life!" (*Eugene Aram: A Tale*, 3 vols. [London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1832], II, 276–277).

38 "The *Hortulus Animae cum Oratiunculis Aliquibus Superadditis* of Grünninger [Poe's note]." Poe added the note when he revised the story in 1845. The *Hortulus Animae* is a devotional manual illustrated with gruesome images, printed in Strassburg in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. See M. Consuelo Oldenbourg, *Hortulus Animae: (1494)-1523* (Hamburg: Hauswedell, 1973).

39 Bran Nicol argues that Poe's tale is a "parable" about its own refusal to be read: "'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" ("Reading and Not Reading 'The Man of the Crowd,'" 483).

the evening before. And here, long, amid the momentarily increasing confusion, did I persist in my pursuit of the stranger. But, as usual, he walked to and fro, and during the day did not pass from out the turmoil of that street. And, as the shades of the second evening came on, I grew wearied unto death, and, stopping fully in front of the wanderer, gazed at him steadfastly in the face. He noticed me not, but resumed his solemn walk, while I, ceasing to follow, remained absorbed in contemplation. "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."<sup>37</sup> The worst heart of the world is a grosser book than the *Hortulus Animae*,<sup>38</sup> and perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that '*er lasst sich nicht lesen*.'"<sup>39</sup>