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(RE)CONSIDERATIONS ON THE AMERICANNESSE OF POE-TIC CITYSCAPES

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Abstract: The present study attempts to examine Edgar Allan Poe's controversial Americanness, as revealed by his poetical and narrative treatment of cityscapes in apparent contrast with a Romantic focus on nature. As such, it addresses the challenge of portraying an author of so many 'faces' (American, French, German, etc.) against an ever-shifting background, which one can stabilize in a snapshot of the city. His convincing urban imagery not only surpasses a purely descriptive function, but proves consistent with a concern with self-definition, while departing from realistic representations in more elusive explorations of American spaces of the mind and in reflections of American temperament. The texts meant to support the hypothesis are *The City in the Sea* and *The Man of the Crowd*, capturing the urban scene from distinct angles, one as a barren and desolate place reigned by death, the other as a swarming collectivity. The devices used in grasping a 'spirit of the place' include elemental explorations, the interplay between nature and civilization, between light and darkness, between the West and the East, all converging in an urban imagery of the nineteenth century. This state of spectatorship marks the paradoxes of an urban psychology of collective and anxious solitude, anticipating detective fiction and, in the process, revealing an ambivalent sense of belonging and of being conditioned by a geographical space. Illustrative moments in the demonstration are the intertwining tendencies with colonial narratives, the telling exclusions and surprising resonances that determine the cautiousness in situating Poe. Under these circumstances, the city looms as a firm territory for the present enterprise.

In an attempt to situate Edgar Allan Poe at some point in the American narrative of self-definition, his most prolific creative phase quite uncomfortably overlaps with the so-called American Renaissance. It is one of the most illustrative moments of such mentioned reactive condition to a sense of belatedness and of conformity towards a European authority. In the more specific case of urban America, a rupture manifests both in comparison with the European mentality and within the city-versus-country argument. Edgar Allan Poe – who happens to be born on the territory where these luminous civilizing expectations were first kindled by the Puritan colonies – seems to subscribe to a rather naturalistic European imagery of the city, engaging thus in what Merriman qualifies as a "rhetoric of disease and decay", characterizing a city perceived as biological organism. A fragment from *The Colloquy of Monos and Una* proves illustrative in this sense:

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Meantime huge smoking cities arose, innumerable. Green leaves shrank before the hot breath of furnaces. The fair face of Nature was deformed as with the ravages of the most loathsome disease. (Poe 737)

Urbanization perceived as a plague illustrates a contradiction between an acute but damaging interest in nature and a gradual artificialization as well as a need of healing and even revival, possible through the separation between body and spirit, a rupture considered to stand at the very core of Poe's fiction.

Touching upon the rural versus urban dichotomy, the city also stands as a fundamental factor in the transition from romanticism to modernism, a transition from a state of communion with nature, of universal harmony, to a state of confusion and unrest (Versluys 17). This phenomenon derives from the development of a highly stimulating environment, requiring a shielding mechanism of its inhabitants. Simmel explains this necessity, resulting in a defensive act of objectivization, as man is forced to "turn himself into a giant of ratiocination, of calculation" (qtd. in Versluys 5-6), otherwise overwhelmed by the violent stimuli of the city. Nonetheless, urban utopias can also be perceived as resulting from a desire of harmony (Heller 87), suspended ever since the nineteenth century in an awareness of unattainability and a shift from the city of law and order to the city of corruption. Heller notices a difference between the palimpsestic European cities and the anguish of American cities, a "human rootlessness desiring and not finding roots" (Heller 90). Contemplations of natural landscapes pervade the works of Transcendentalists such as Thoreau's paradisiac *Walden*, while the rise of the industrial city favoured hardly flattering depictions of smoky gloomy cities, mechanisms pedaled by a "capitalistic speculation for profit – derived from the explosion of that volatile chemical compound Balzac called money oxide" (Pike xii). Yet, there is room for urban realities in the Romantic discourse, depicted in milder terms, provided that some sort of outlet is available: "Indeed, looking back a little to Romantic literature, the city is acceptable provided it is actually a pastoral, characterized by cyclical rhythms, seasons, sufficient respites from noise and filth" (Heller 88).

Thoreauvian descriptions in their turn are counterpoints to an earlier sense of anguish towards the wilderness of the New World, possibly more serene expiatory versions of an eradicating past, and these contrasting views of nature as threat and saviour are said to provide a rich material for nineteenth century writers (Gooder 111), suspending the notion of civilized space along the heights of smoking factories and an image of a jungle of concrete.

Along similar considerations on material, it is also worth exploring the city of lead and paper before being able to visualize with clarity Poe's water city. More precisely, an important distinction is to be made between the physical city, examined in scientific works, and the fictional city. This opposition is apparently subsumed to a paradigm shift announcing the Industrial Revolution and manifested in a simultaneous inward and outward exploration. Thus, investigations of space are performed both as projections of the psyche in its discontinuity and fragmentariness or, on the contrary, as empirical measurement, that is quantification, classification. As Pike explains:

The word-city was presented more and more as an irritable nervous energy, and its inhabitants came to seem more prowlers than citizens. . . . The idea that the city represented a stable community over a long period also faded; the instability of the outer world as seen by a solipsistic character or narrator reflected an increasing disorientation of the time sense as well as the space sense. (Pike 72)

Furthermore, Leo Marx questions the apparent anti-urbanism as being in fact “an expression of something else: a far more inclusive, if indirect and often equivocal, attitude toward the transformation of society and of culture of which the emerging city is but one manifestation” (Marx 165). Marx further explains that this anti-urbanism is in fact “a banal and misleading conception of the relations between that urbanizing America out there in reality and the imagined world we encounter in literature” (Marx 166). All this taken into consideration, the lens meant to examine literary urban representations should perform a refractive rather than reflective act.

One instance of such distinction is Poe’s version of the city as becoming a matter less of realistic representation but rather of style (Gooder 110), subsumed to a more general concern of Poe with the origins and the limits of language, given a certain scriptural quality of the city. It is precisely at this point that Poe’s specific treatment of the American climate is to be revisited, in his concern with language as a self-generating tool with no didactic function, a manifestation of a heightened subjectivity, by exploring in strangely familiar places of the mind a residual America.

It is not surprising that Poe’s enterprise received mixed reactions from the intellectuals of the time, concerned in finding an American voice. Rosenheim and Reichman would speak of “Poe’s syncopated relation to American culture” (xii), making his integration in his time and space somewhat uncomfortable, and due at least in part to “Poe’s own seeming disengagement with American literature” (ix). Moreover, it is a commonplace fact that he was perceived as an actual “abashment” to American literature, advancing against the effervescent Transcendentalist current, and that a transatlantic journey was necessary for a more positive estimation of his literary caliber.

Meredith McGill would offer a quite conflicting analysis of Poe’s relationship with his environment, departing from qualifications of his stance as evidence of opportunism and turning them into a matter of loss of control: “Rather than being a story of heroic resistance, unavoidable complicity, and unfortunate psychological collapse, Poe’s implication with the coteries and with the cause of literary nationalism forms a crucial chapter in the history of the production of Poe as a subject who stands outside history” (McGill 272). In McGill’s view, Lowell’s praise of the author of *The Raven* would mark his recognition on the American stage, and more particularly would respond to the politicized currents of the Young Americans, placing Poe in a compromising position between a freedom and popularity of literary expression inversely proportional with his journalistic possibilities of criticism. Lowell’s choice to represent the present state of American literature is quite graphical in this sense:

Our capital city, unlike London or Paris, is not a great central heart, from which life and vigor radiate to the extremities, but resembles more an isolated umbilicus, stuck down as near as may be to the centre of the land, and seeming rather to tell a legend of former usefulness than to serve any present need. . . . Meanwhile, a great babble is

kept up concerning a national literature, and the country, having delivered itself of the ugly likeness of a paint-bedaubed, filthy savage, smilingly dandles the rag-baby upon her maternal knee, as if it were veritable flesh and blood, and would grow timely to bone and sinew. (Lowell 49)

To this disturbing image, Lowell opposes the precocious geniality of Poe, an author with a similar history of paternal absence, of loss and perpetual mourning, and therefore most appropriate to serve as an iconic figure on the American literary stage. Poe seems to act as a concretization of centralizing endeavours, even more so as certain biographical details echo a shared fate of separation and rootlessness. To this centralizing vision one might oppose a conception of marginality, but the opposition is immediately neutralized by an understanding of this marginality not as provinciality, but rather as a metatextual potential, therefore again not a matter of spatial sensibility but of style, of self-referential hemming.

Interestingly enough, Poe's dislocation occurs, among other things, also due to an idiosyncratic perception of nature, of space in general. If the Transcendentalists promote escapism as condition for the discovery of an authentic self in nature, Poe's preference for a hostile *topos*, ranging from premature enclosures, through labyrinthine streets, to tempestuous seas, often proves unconvincing in a declared mission to pin down the spirit of the place.

The dark vision that is by now his immediate stylistic landmark would open towards more generous Symbolist sensibilities, feeding on Poe's genius, however arching over the Atlantic to the reach of Baudelaire, Mallarmé or Valéry. In this sense, T. S. Eliot, himself reluctant towards Poe's literary merits, would justify the French mythologizing responsiveness to Poe through a more unitary perception of his work as opposed to the fragmentariness of American and English critical stance:

Anglo—Saxon critics are, I think, more inclined to make separate judgements of the different parts of an author's work. . . . These French readers were impressed by the variety of form of expression, because they found, or thought they found, an essential unity. (Eliot 31)

In addition to this divergent intra-authorial portraying (confronting the so-called French and the American face of Poe), an inter-authorial analysis of 19th century literary landscape places Poe against Melville on the basis of distinct(ive) spatial exploration, the former tracing his fictional paths along a city of ever-hinting and elusive textual potential, while the latter relies on unsettling representations of the sea, equally perceived as alternatives to a "national narrative" of a fertile and idyllic land. Tally Jr. renders such associations in the following terms:

Just as Melville had discovered an alternative to the national narrative in the transnational or postnational space of the ocean, Poe found in this emergent space of the city a radical departure from the national culture that was coalescing in the public imagination of his era, and Poe used the peculiarities of this urban experience to redefine both the art and the craft of his literature. (Tally 111)

Along and beyond these contextualizing lines of exploration of Poe's work as a consistent departure from well-worn settings, the present study attempts to examine the way in which Edgar Allan Poe's specific approach of fluid cityscapes contributes to a reconfiguration of American literature, countercurrent to rural contemplations and settling tendencies, in an equally convincing urban imagery that extends beyond a purely descriptive function.

My intention is to bridge, in the overlapping marine and urban imagery, Poe's apparently distant literary shores in poetical visions of doomed cities and anticipatory detectivistic explorations of tidal crowds. Moreover, by doing so, I shall focus on the way in which this imagery aligns to a notion of Americanness despite Poe's dismissal of the idea of national literature by all means, as formulated in his Exordium to *Critical Notices*,¹ an Americanness to be understood not as spatial confinement, but rather as an emphasis on atmosphere, a stylistic and narrative device. It is a reactive Americanness, dissatisfied with surface explorations of a much too concrete land² and reaching primitive layers of the human psyche, unburying instincts of criminality and death, as well as the need of investigating past the limits of the knowable. Hence the looping approaches of the world as unreadable text caught in a quest of "a repeatable solution" (Irwin 2).

I argue that Poe's fiction reflects social realities without quite bounding them to a certain locality – capturing both the anxiety of city dynamics and urban vulnerability and the need of control, resulting from such anxiety and responding to a justice system no longer - or at least only partially - reliable/tenable, tumbling in blind spots. As a matter of fact, his stance proves consistent with a general tendency in the nineteenth century of representing the city as "an unstable refraction of an individual consciousness rather than as an object fixed in space" (Pike 71), as "an irritable nervous energy" (Pike 72). Forclaz states that what makes Poe a representative writer for his country is less a reference to an American setting, but rather his reflection of an American temperament (122), of a certain pragmatism combined with a tragic vision, a cauchemaresque vision - in which science and the urban civilization interferes with the paradisiac and dreamlike vision of the promising land (Forclaz 124-125).

For the present purposes of illustrating his conception of the city as integrative of a Poesque Americanness, the texts in focus are *The City in the Sea* and *The Man of the Crowd*, capturing the urban environment in apparently distinct hypostases, one as a barren and desolate place reigned by death, the other as a swarming collectivity. The two works seem to resist juxtaposition, belonging to different stages and territories of Poe's literary creation.

¹ Poe marks a present state of affairs in American literature: "But the watchword now was, 'a national literature' as if any true literature could be 'national' as if the world at large were not the only proper stage for the literary histrio" (1027).

² It is worth mentioning that this dissatisfaction with „horizontal explorations" ultimately continues the frontier narrative. Reynolds' experience with the white whale, serving as source of inspiration for *Moby Dick* or *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, is the experience of a man who subscribed to the theory of the Earth's emptiness, a theory that would inform subterranean fiction, which in turn can be perceived, under a Jungian lens, as a particular kind of fictional exploration of the psyche.

The former is a piece of poetry, for what is worth among his finest, although it is a territory where Poe has received less appreciation, and mainly orbiting around his *Raven*. It is a poetical overlapping of two apparently dissimilar environments, the sea and the city, in an image supposedly originating in the fallen city of Gomorrah, and reminding of an earlier poem, namely *Al Aaraaf*.

The latter is a story that deceives through its apparent structural simplicity: a man recovering from a recent illness - that has left him in a state of heightened sensitivity to external stimulus - contemplates the passing crowd from the window of a coffeehouse in London. Suddenly, an old man captures his attention up to the point of determining a persistent and irrational chase. The pursuit ends in the resigned ascertainment of the stranger's illegibility and the conviction that this intriguing character is "the type and genius of deep crime".

This short story is considered to anticipate detective fiction, a genre invented by Poe. In support of this theory, it is said to contain three essential elements for this type of prose, namely "the detective-as-physiognomist, the ontological quester, the flâneur". Hence, Paul Jahshan's purpose to "show how this constant crossed, as it were, the Atlantic, received from Europe renewed impetus in the shape of a postmodern sensibility, and then returned to the New World, powerfully shaping the American detective genre" (Jahshan). In fact, Poe's literary fate is marked by such meandering responses, which indicate a certain unreadiness of inland readership as well as a resounding force with unpredictable (boomerang?) aiming, making us wonder with Quinn: "But what do they see in him?" (Quinn 28). A question worth expanding upon by further asking: why did the Americans failed to see it?

The City in the Sea was thought to represent the "disfigurement and re-imagination of America" (Lopez 98), a critique of the "American experience, by prophetically fantasizing about a tragic endpoint in the nation's evolution" (Lopez 98-99), a city absorbing in its viscous poetry a series of contradictions. Such a contradiction was emphasized by the mention of the "westernized location of the city" as a "purposeful paradox" (Lopez 95), meant to enhance the feeling of alienation and strangeness, triggering an interplay of essences and appearances, captured in passages such as: "There shrines and palaces and towers/(Time-eaten towers that tremble not)/Resemble nothing that is ours". It is considered that the poem reflects

the spiritual destiny of America as 'a city upon a hill' and Enlightenment notions of the advance of civilization westward, which Poe associated with the rise of industry, the city, republican government, "omni-prevalent Democracy", and the emancipation of slaves. Although the city lacks specific historical reference . . . the association of figures of blackness with the vision of apocalyptic doom that closes the poem registers a widespread - and still prevalent - cultural fear of the fall of the West that will come as a result of some sort of catastrophic uprising of the dark other, associated with blackness, the satanic, the Orient, the city, blood, and death. (Mabbott 610)

Poe's grasping of the dynamics of the city can be articulated around his political convictions as well, as he is said to embrace the conservative ideal in an agrarian republic, opposed to the views of an industrial North, and as such he attacked the "huge, smoking cities" (Daniel 6).

Furthermore, a certain sense of extreme “westernness” points to a problematic marginality of America, to be traced back to the first explorations of a territory wrongly interpreted in 1493 as the Indies. This location “Far down within the dim West” might as well hint to that originating uncertainty, later solved through a southward/downward movement. Referring to Amerigo Vespucci’s voyages over the Atlantic, Marcus and Sollors would mention that “the discovery was striking not because it lay far off to the west but rather because it lay so far to the south” (Lester 2).

Poe’s Southernness (not by birth but by allegiance to a Southern way of thinking) is defining for his attitude towards the city. His responsiveness to aristocratic and conservative views of the South would more likely have brought him closer to a predominantly rural side of America, which makes his choice of urban spaces even more surprising. A revealing Southernness in the times of Vespucci, points to a presumed sea, “that sea which they called the Atlantic” (Lester 3). Under these circumstances, if Poe’s fictional city more immediately invites associations with myths of sunken lands such as the Atlantis, it also captures a reverse mechanics of water withdrawal, which materializes in a vivid imagery reminding of the luxurious settings that the first navigators would admire during their predatory enterprises. Reversely, the sea also ‘sinks’ (that is, withdraws) under the explorer’s steps and a need of firm land so gratifyingly fulfilled by the fertile soils of the new continent. The graves “level with the luminous waves” enforce this land-water interplay.

As Lopez points out: “The city has been sensually transformed, refracted perhaps to reveal a side of some familiar place that normal perception will miss. The refraction takes place through the exercise of Poe’s aesthetics. It is entirely plausible that this city in the dim West is ours with the we being America” (Lopez 96). Along these lines, Poe’s doomed city is rendered through the de-familiarizing lens of a dark caricaturist of the ideal of superior American civilization, smothering an unresolved otherness – “civilisation has paradoxically brought back a primeval state which implies the negation of the Other” (Chambost).

On the other hand, the sea is experienced as a liminal and linking space, while the urban and the marine space share: “expansiveness, its shifting currents of commerce and humanity, and its quotidian unpredictability” (Tally 111), confirmed by the image of the city as construct with deceiving walls concealing their temporal flimsiness. And this precise randomness or unpredictability is a sign of unresolved otherness – not understanding alien reasons, ways of thought, failing to build genuine and solid relationships. Poe’s detective fiction would articulate around a need of reaching for the other, of understanding his methods and his reasons, in a shift from *what* to *how* and *why*, ending in a doubling artifice that links the murderer and the investigator. This ‘reaching for the other’ is not to be seen however as an act of empathy towards the criminal, but rather a detached understanding of his reasoning and motives. This attitude is supposedly a point in which Poe departs from a literary trend that somehow justifies criminal deeds. Poe’s procedure is described as a “recoil away from unregulated manifestations of the Subversive imagination” (Reynolds 228). One way of intellectualizing murder consists in a move from gore to more subtle captures of the disturbed psyche. In *The Man of the Crowd* for instance there is no murder occurring, only hints of criminal predispositions, which are after all

insufficiently justified but shifting the focus from consequence to intention as ethical reference aspects in criminal psychology. The city is not only a text but actually a *pretext* for psychological analysis: “The two-day journey through the gaslit streets, the slums, the saloon district is like the popular writer’s plunge into the seamy urban underworld – except that Poe is interested not so much in the dark city ‘mysteries’ as in how these mysteries reflect the even darker soul of the criminal” (Reynolds 234).

However, representations of external spaces pervade the narrative thread of *The Man of the Crowd*. The insertion of a comparison between London and Broadway supports the belief in Poe’s concern with a spatial distinctiveness and marks a moment of unexpected concreteness:

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. (Poe 273-4)

Other less precise spatial denominations retain a sense of palpability, in images such as: “tall, antique, worm-eaten wooden tenements were seen tottering to their fall” (Poe 275), an image illustrative of Poe’s recurrent architecture of subtle decay, more famously exploited in *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Yet, as inhabiting spaces, they acquire an energetic quality of coexistence; they trigger consuming tendencies, as agonizing sparks parallel/counteract the convalescent and feverish excitement of the pursuer (both liminal states): “The spirits of the old man again flickered up, as a lamp which is near its death-hour” (275). Water and fire become interdependent and mutually stirring elements, given previous images of the crowd as “dense and continuous tides of population” or as “tumultuous sea of human heads” (269). Poe’s water is a kind of water that kindles fire, a fluid that contradicts its own nature and its chemical proprieties.

Another revelatory detail in which the two text meet is the provisional title *The City of Sin* – containing a concept with a religious and moral connotation that might be said to contradict the sense of amoral numbing referred to in the poem: “Where the good and the bad and the worst and the best/Have gone to their eternal rest” (946). The concept of sin transferred to the profane dimension, can be approximated by the notion of crime, pointed out by Jorge Luis Borges as a converging point between the two Americas, with the particular case of slavery. Moreover, “crime translates easily from one hemisphere to the other” (Diaz 81), functioning as a linguistic code.

Consistent with this notion of violence, Walter Benjamin pointed out the barbaric nature of urban crowds: “Fear, revulsion and horror were the emotions which the big-city crowd aroused in those who first observed it. For Poe, it has something barbaric about it; discipline barely manages to tame it” (Benjamin 190). These communities are based on the negation of the other, yet held under control by a social contract. Instances of such barbaric nature are discernible in the description of the lower strata, providing “darker and deeper themes for speculation” (Poe 271): the exposure of the innocent to rapacious stares, the desolation of invalids, the desperate

withering of feminine charms, etc. According to Christophe Chambost, “it seems that humanity has been given up and that the only thing that prevents people from murdering each other is the minimal convention consisting in letting the impersonal flux of city dwellers flow into the streets”, a condition acquiring the status of natural law. Nonetheless, the detective will be born out of a break of the contract (either we call it sin or crime) and out the necessity of reestablishing a causality, of discovering an undercurrent of intentions under the apparent randomness of facts.

A certain sense of primitiveness can as well be read in instances of elemental explorations, articulated around a predominant aquatic current. Under such circumstances, the imagery of still water becomes terrifying in its impenetrable depth and mute luster, hinting at the mysteries under the impenetrable surface: “This city of the living dead drifts in an eerily stagnant motion from which one never escapes, a kind of metropolitan submerged version of the Flying Dutchman” (Dowling 37).

Burton Pollin speaks of a “trend of sea-borne thought” (Pollin 145) in Poe’s works, distinguishing three main water representations, namely the sea, the lake, and the river. Each has a different symbolical force: the sea in a waterscape of violence and coldness, the lake a melancholic and motionless, while the river has a more optimistic meaning of freedom and utility (Pollin 148). This sea in its apparent calm overlaps two Poesque waterscapes, allowing comparisons with other poems, such as *The Lake*. The latter is a depiction of a lonely spot, slightly disturbed by a murmuring “mystic wind” arousing Death’s “poisonous wave”. In this case, in the loneliness of fancy, Edenic visions appear, while *The City in the Sea* ends in hellish overcoming visions. This choice of demonic settlement, as perceived in Christian imagery, is questionable. Stovall interprets it as the Greek idea of Hades, a point supported by Poe’s own change performed on the 1836 version of the text, while Hell becomes a matter of “rhythmic strength” (Stovall 213). This would not be an isolated case of Poe’s purely formal and insubstantial artifices. However, the alternation is not inconsequential in interpretation. If Hades is a more neutral place of the dead, fitting the description of a place “Where the good and the bad and the worst and the best/Have gone to their eternal rest”, baring as well a Christian variant as the place where Christ descended after Crucifixion, hell is seen as a place of the damned, a place of torture and restlessness. This restlessness results, apart from the guilt of sin, from a crowdedness reminiscent of Dante’s representations and standing as cause of a centrifugal movement (Wicher 91). It is the kind of unease that the man of the crowd experiences. Should we transfer the pretensions of “prophecy” of the poem from the sacred to the profane, the apocalyptic visions turn into estimations of destructive urbanization, converging past (oblivion) and future (apocalyptic vision) in the notion of forgetfulness in death (Stovall 212-3).

Marie Bonaparte, in her psycho-analytic interpretation, reminds of water as mother symbol, attributing the specifically human aesthetic pleasure in the contemplation of the sea to a sense of a familiar image, namely that of the act of birth and the emergence from the amniotic water, not to mention the basic indispensable nature of water for survival (290).

As a matter of fact, the two texts under discussion rely on this dynamics of water as indicative of the stillness of death as reflecting the monotonous flux of life, rhythms of an equally inertial impression. Moreover, water in *The Man of the Crowd*

is an ambiguous symbol: both concrete (rain) and metaphorical (crowd), adjusting the density of population and implicitly the degree of comfort experienced throughout public exposure, more particularly the awkwardness in rarefied spaces.

The flâneur, threatened to become a *badaud*, advances in this fluid urban environment, initially as a detached contemplator, then lured in the febrile hyper-stimulating social vertigo, that hinders him from forming genuine bonds: “as if feeling in solitude on account of the very denseness of the company around”. The failure is due to a need of control, manifested in artificial and manageable classifications of people, meant to separate the waves of anonymity that represent a most effective hindrance/masque for the wrong-doer. The breaking of the zone of contemplative comfort into the streets, where all the action takes place, is a phase in the act of detection, marked by mixed feelings of fascination and anxiety. However, this phase is suspended, only to be retaken later in tales such as *The Mystery of Marie Roget* or *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, but by this time returning to a static strategy, that of the armchair detective.

This way, this image of the flâneur, as minute observer of spatial and physiognomic complexities, evolves, channeling gratuitous observing energies towards more useful investigating purposes, which respond to the requirements of a pragmatic yet labyrinthal society. In this sense, the man of the crowd qualifies indeed as an x-ray of the detective, as Walter Benjamin’s notices.

Furthermore, the image of the flâneur contributes to an impression of movement in stillness. The story of the man of the crowd begins with the framing vision allowed by the contemplation of the passers-by through the window (restrictive, detached). An instance of such limited view is this instinct of compartmentalization, of fitting people within certain categories and thus gaining a sense of control. “These are museum exhibits, albeit highly mobile, viewed from a perspective of ‘scientific’ detachment, without affection. And they themselves do not interact, except occasionally to bump into each other in the street. No imaginative effort is invited or expended on how they might work within a community, on how money, goods or love might circulate between them” (Fender 337). Under these circumstances, the man of the crowd is “the ultimate distillation of the urban population who, like the types viewed through the window (and like Newman) goes nowhere except back and forth” (Fender 337).

In the context of the Industrial Revolution, a certain concern with movement as exchange, subverted by Poe's crowd in Brownian motion, can be considered as a distinctive effect on America, where noticeable changes occurred in transport. This emphasis on the circulation of people and goods is integrative to the nation's concern with establishing itself as an autonomous force. Milton Meltzer describes the world surrounding Poe as a world of urban growth and infrastructural development: “Soon after the Allans returned home, the first railroad in America began operating” (Meltzer 25). The cityscape would be furrowed by such artificial connecting paths. As for more stable representations, the “homely” will be upturned into a sense of domestic danger that is so transparent in Poe’s detective fiction. The “horrors of urban habitation” reveal an association between the city and death. Faflik adds to the biographical justifications of Poe’s obsession with death a correspondence between his gradually more urban themes and his stay in Philadelphia and New York (Faflik 255). Under

such observations, the representation of the city as an empire of Death is not surprising, determined not only by the serial deaths that scar Poe's life but also by the very characteristics of the living space. Once again, fiction opposes reality, much too "quotidian" buggies leave place to fictional majestic turrets. Nonetheless, these majestic constructions are inconsistent figments, contradicting basic temporal laws in their unflinching flimsiness, sustained by the deathly gaze from above.

Complementary to the water imagery, there is also a rich symbolism of light. As opposed to the vernal luminosity in Thoreau's contemplations, Poe's light is cold, artificial, self-generating, acquiring expressionist overtones: "No rays from the holy heaven come down/ on the long night-time of that town;/ But light from out the lurid sea/ Streams up the turrets silently". The resulting elongated shadows are to be projected on the reader's mind with unsettling effects. This Gothic interplay of light and darkness clears the way for Biblical references, for instance a description of the New Jerusalem: "And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof" (King James Version, Revelation, 21-23). This rhetoric of self-sufficiency under a luminous providential protection has been integrated in the American discourse ever since the first explorations of the Puritans, having the Holy Bible as a prophetic narrative of a manifest destiny of the chosen people. Among other revisions performed by the Puritans, the attitude towards material goods was based on an acceptance of inequality as a just state of affairs as well as a sense of charity exerted upon the less-advantaged meant to strengthen community. In Poe's texts, one might point out a decadent richness. Luxury is here an indicative of corruption in the same way that some examples of contact literature present it. For instance, if diamonds usually stand as symbols of purity, the old man's diamond further enforces suspicions regarding his morality.

However, if this artificial light synaesthetically connects with the coldness of death, at a certain point we also come across a more predictable and conventional association between light and life: "a square, brilliantly lighted and over-flowing with life" (Poe 274). The light in *The Man of the Crowd* artificial in the same way that urban life is artificial, a tidal light marking a specific moment in the evening as paramount of mental excitement at the view of an eclectic mass of people: "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" (Poe 269-270); "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 everything a fitful and garish lustre. All was dark and splendid – as that ebony to which has been likened the style of Tertullian" (272).

The ending reference is intriguing and allows multiple interpretations. It is said to be an allusion to the Blackwood magazine, admired by Poe for its outspoken, even incisive, content. On the other hand, Tertullian was a church writer known for his harsh style, such that it has been qualified by writers like Balzac as possessing the "brilliance of ebony": "The language of Tertullian is harsh, uncouth, inflated and obscure. His Latinity . . . is full of unnatural and barbarous constructions. Yet it cannot

be denied that bursts of great force and vivacity occasionally flash through his dark and distorted sentences” (Jeremie 108). Should this reference be a friendly over-the-ocean poking, manifest of journalistic affinities, or a return into a past of severe Christian doctrine, is yet to be settled. In both cases, it concludes a reflection on a sea of human worldliness, encapsulating in each individual face “the history of long years”, and more specifically the history of America.

More generally, Poe’s entire fiction confirms a unitary concern with a universal urbanized locality, characterized by a pervading gloomy and allusive spatiality, rendered in tidal phrasing of atmospheric force. His contemplative narrative positioning is also marked by a shared urban state of spectatorship, converging the intimate and the distant, thus marking the paradoxes of an urban psychology of collective and anxious solitude. Moreover, to confirm his concern with cityscapes, biographical data of shifting urban homes qualifies Poe as urban wanderer, while his controversial histories within the milieu of literati of his time, reveals his worldliness and a practical sense perfectly congruent with the pragmatism of citylife and integrating him within the American setting.

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