

The man of the crowd



The very first lines of Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" imply that this is a secretive story by nature, for Poe suggests that this particular narrative may not "permit itself to be read" (p. 1561). The story itself takes on a responsibility independent of that of the author, for it is the story itself that must compel a reader to find reason in its foundation. This story is much like the "secrets which do not permit themselves to be told" (p. 1561), for like the bearers of these secrets—the men who die "nightly... on account of the hideousness of mysteries which will not suffer themselves to be revealed" (p. 1561) — the author, Poe, does not have the capacity to liberate that which does not want to be liberated. Consequently, the reliability of the narrator comes into question, for the line separating the seemingly sane narrator, and the suspiciously insane man being followed, becomes vague when both are literally elbow to elbow, retracing each other's own recycled steps again and again. Through careful analysis of the narrator's somewhat clinical observations, the reader is able to decipher his actions, for like the followed man, he is wracked with despair and has a "mad energy" (p. 1567) that cause him to retrace another's steps instead of directing himself. The narrator is not able to deliberately release the unexplained complexities within himself that have kept him "ill at health" (p. 1561), but being a convalescent, he is now able to project the "film of [his] mental vision departed" (p. 1561) upon this text to illuminate himself in the context of the man whom he follows in more ways than one— The unnamed man of the crowd. From the very beginning of this story, the reader is bombarded with evidence of the narrator's education, whether it is from the various quotes in different languages that are cited or the impressive vocabulary that is often used. This can only be described as attempts to secure the reader's trust by

proving an intelligence that has just recently been liberated and “ electrified, surpass[ing] as greatly its every-day condition as does the vivid, yet candid reason of Combe [and] the mad and flimsy rhetoric of Gorgias” (p. 1561).

After the “ mist that was upon [the narrator’s intellect]” has been lifted, Poe takes special precautions in drawing a comparison between the narrator’s own source of rationale and that of Gorgias, who as the fifth footnote indicates is “ known for a kind of rhetoric that preened itself at the expense of reason” (p. 1561). It is exactly this reason that comes into question, for while upon first glimpse this metaphor may hold the narrator’s own healing intellect up to some impressive standard, in actuality, the very wording of the sentence causes the narrator’s rationale to come into question. His rhetoric matches that of Gorgias, for in attempting to reassure the reader that he is a reliable source of information, the text is bogged down with quotes from three different languages in the very first two paragraphs, and seems overly verbose without a clear purpose. As the evening progresses into night, the narrator describes a carriage “ which may be termed as deskism for want of a better word” (p. 1562), but the true irony lies in the fact that almost any other word would have conveyed a definitive meaning to the reader, for the word “ deskism” is in fact not a word at all. The narrator’s control over his language, the method by which he is both revealing his mysterious story and the method by which he hopes to persuade the reader that he is viably a consistent, dependable narrator, becomes lacking as he journeys further into the night. The man whom the narrator follows exists in the context of the narrator’s own delusion. The narrator’s reality changes as he is consumed by that which is conducive to his ameliorating condition “ the every-day” light (p. 1561) and is slowly

becoming a victim of circumstances that he himself cannot control. Poe intentionally singles out the “day” by distinguishing the hyphenated word “every-day” (P. 1561) that he uses in the passage from the more colloquial “everyday,” for it is the light that skews the narrator’s perspective by perhaps freeing a delusional mind that should not have been released from the “mist...[of]...ennui” (p. 1561) that had begotten the absence of paranoia. Before finding the man whom he follows, the narrator falls victim to his own hallucinatory perspective. The wild effects of the light enchained me to an examination of individual faces; and although the rapidity with which the world of light flitted before the window, prevented me from casting more than a glance upon each visage, still it seemed that, in my then peculiar mental state, I could frequently read, even in that brief interval of a glance, the history of long years. (p. 1564) The narrator creates his own “misunderstanding” of reality by molding his observations in order to justify his own prefabricated theories. After admitting to being in a “peculiar mental state,” (p. 1564) almost immediately does the narrator find a man whose “absolute idiosyncrasy of... expression” (p. 1564) prevails in the complete absorption of the narrator’s “whole attention” (p. 1564). He notes that “any thing even remotely resembling that expression [,] I had never seen before” (p. 1564), but paradoxically goes on to analyze in great detail the qualities that only a man with such an expression could have. He calmly makes uneasy judgments from trivial visual stereotypes which force the reader to reconsider his standing as a trustworthy narrator. He invokes his own violent, self-satisfying descriptions of what he perceives to be concealed within the man, for “there arose confusedly and paradoxically within my mind, the ideas of vast mental power, of caution, or 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" (p. 1564). There is nothing distinctive about the old man that would spur on such a reaction from the narrator, for the only evidence that would spawn such a violent impression the stranger's diamond or dagger is only noticed after the narrator's initial tirade. Now being "fully night-fall... a thick humid fog" hangs over our narrator, and like the "odd effect" that the weather conditions have upon the crowd, our narrator too, in a different way, seems affected. He does "not much regard the rain... [however] the lurking of an old fever in [his] system rend[s] the moisture somewhat too dangerously pleasant" (p. 1565). He is unable to control both the rain and the effects it has upon his emotions, but what is perhaps more fearful is the fact that he seemingly has anticipated such changes in himself without the conscious acknowledgment of such. Immediately he ties a handkerchief around his mouth, as if subconsciously trying to prevent or obstruct himself from communicating. The secrets that lurk under the surface of our narrator do not wish to reveal themselves, for it is at this very point that the clinical observations stop and the plot is cyclical in structure. Like the rainy weather, the cold and unemotional descriptions of people in the crowds are no longer described as "evincing no symptom" (p. 1562) or having "flushed faces" (p. 1562), for it is the narrator himself that comes into scrutiny. He notices only a "sudden change in demeanor" (p. 1565) of the man whom he is following, and yet curiously for pages cannot realize why the man's behavior is so nervous and erratic in nature. From the reader's perspective it is easy to explain why the man changes his path and the pace at which he walks, for his behavior is justifiable if he senses that he

is in fact being followed— Almost a surety as the man being followed nearly turns into his stalker many a time and is forever trying to lose him in crowded places. As the “ rain fell fast” (p. 1565), the narrator blindly follows the stranger only hoping that he will remain undetected. He comments on how “ lucky” it is that he is wearing “ a pair of gum over shoes [that cause him] to move about in perfect silence” (p. 1565), not realizing that again, his subconscious has preemptively taken precautions to impede whatever actions the narrator’s physical body might take to reveal the internal mind’s guarded secrets. The rainy imagery and stagnation in the plot culminate in the reflected chaos of the narrator’s psychosis in following a stranger. The narrator ends his pursuit of the unidentified man by concluding that the man whom he is following simply “ refuses to be alone.... [and] is a man of the crowd” (p. 1567), yet he himself is not unlike the man he is following in this fact, for he moves through the crowds as well, like the people whom he observes, “ feeling in solitude on account of the very denseness of the company around” (p. 1562). He stays in the crowds willingly, having first sought out the busiest street in London to drink his coffee, and then keeping about in the “ tumultuous sea of human heads” (p. 1562). It is now possible for the reader to notice that just as he reflects himself in the stranger whom he follows, just so does he do the same, but to a lesser degree, with the other observed characters. Among the beggars, he finds that “ despair alone” (p. 1563) has driven them to the streets, “ feeble and ghastly invalids, upon whom death had placed a sure hand, and who sidles and tottered through the mob looking every one beseechingly in the face, as if in search of some chance consolation, some lost hope” (p. 1563). He too follows the stranger for no definable reason until he finally “ firmly resolve[s]

that [they] should not part until [he has] satisfied [himself] in some measure respecting [the followed man]" (p. 1565). He is like the beggar who searches for hope, for in following a stranger who assumes the qualities truly possessed by he himself, the narrator is resolved not to quit his peculiar journey until he can respect himself. The narrator ends this story by saying that " perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that ' er lasst sich nicht lessen'" (p. 1567), for like the book that does not permit itself to be read, the narrator's actions cannot be explained. His motivations, however, can be revealed, for in realizing that he cannot ever reveal the mysteries of his inner mind's workings, he comes to respect himself as he regards the stranger whom he follows as the " type and genius of deep crime" (p. 1567). After a full day has passed of following this stranger, the narrator is revived to his senses and can only come to the understanding that he is at a " loss to comprehend the waywardness of [the followed man's] actions" (p. 1566). In this understanding, or lack thereof, does the narrator grow " wearied unto death" (p. 1567), for the narrator is at the mercy of his recount of the truth, but not necessarily the absolute truth. This time, his delusions help him escape the despair that cause men to die " nightly in their beds" (p. 1561), for in claiming genius, he has transgressed whatever the internal mysteries within him may be, no matter that his secrets continue to conceal themselves. In searching for the origin of these secrets, he learns that like the stranger, " it will be in vain to follow" (p. 1567) for he shall never find that which he yearns to know. Thus, he fabricates a nature that is able to alleviate the pressure of a conscience so " heavy in horror that it can be thrown down only into the grave" (p. 1561), and by doing so, is able to avoid dependence on his real secrets by deluding himself further with what he

convinces himself to be the “ truth.” Thus, in his narrative the narrator is able to reveal his fictitious nature of “ genius” and survive, as oppose to being oppressed by the secrets that are not his to reveal, and literally die.