

Poe the Impressionist, and *The Man of the Crowd* as a Modernist Writing

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*“Do you remember a picture (for indeed it is a picture!)
written by the most powerful pen of this age
entitled The Man of the Crowd?”*

This question was raised in Charles Baudelaire’s extremely influential 1863 essay *The Painter of Modern Life*¹. The essay describes an anonymous painter, simply dubbed M.G., who roams the streets of Paris in search of inspiration. The work was widely associated with the artistic philosophy of the Impressionists, and is credited with coining the term *modernity*. Baudelaire compares M.G. to the convalescent in Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Man of the Crowd* who, after spending hours observing pedestrians from inside a coffee house, impulsively follows and studies a suspicious old man, and in the process spends an entire night winding through the various quarters of London. This paper aims to demonstrate that the similarities between the two works extend beyond those between the two main characters. In fact, Poe’s entire artistic philosophy is surprisingly similar to that of the Impressionist painters who would arrive over two decades later, both in style and subject matter.

The Man of the Crowd, like most of Poe’s works, is not meant as a social commentary; its purpose is not to inform. Likewise, it is not a framework for the expression of a clever

¹Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life“, 1863. From *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Literature* trans. P.E. Charvet (Viking 1972), 397.

plot or a subtle irony. It is meant, above all, to give the reader an emotional impression; to temporarily bring the reader into the world of the main character, a world of inquisitive pleasure. Yet, by enveloping the reader in this world, Poe is incidentally documenting the situation in which the main character is placed. By instilling the reader with the same impression that is experienced by the main character, Poe recreates the experience of the modern city.

This is similar to the Impressionist in that, as the name implies, Impressionist paintings were primarily designed to effect an impression in the observer. Certainly, this is *one* aim of all art. Yet, the impressionists differed from their predecessors in the lack of importance that they placed on realism in their paintings. Traditional artists could spend years painstakingly layering paints and attending to the finest detail of each blade of grass, even the veins of each leaf. The effects of a painting were dependent primarily, but not solely, on the subject matter. Impressionists, though, included only those details that furthered the primary objective of the painting: the production of a sensation in the viewer. Much of the desired impression was affected either by the omission of irrelevant details, or the creative presentation of important ones.

In *The Painter of Modern Life*, Baudelaire speaks of the wonderment of children when “confronted with something new, whatever it may be, face or landscape, light, gilding, colours, watered silk, enchantment of beauty, enhanced by the arts of dress.”² This sense of wonder, according to Baudelaire, is characteristic of a true artist. Also essential, though, is the ability to express the specific sensation to an observer. Poe echoes this sentiment, although in an earlier time. His purpose in writing is not accuracy. In fact, his work is not motivated by its subject; the creation of a subject is motivated by the “consideration of an effect.”³ That is, the impression given by his poems and stories supersedes their content in

²Baudelaire, pg 398.

³Edgar Allen Poe, *The Philosophy of Composition*, 1846. pg 1.

importance. Poe's articulated this aesthetic sensibility:

Music, when combined with a pleasurable idea, is poetry; music without the idea is simply music; the idea without the music is prose from its very definiteness."⁴

Perhaps Poe would argue that painting, when combined with a pleasurable idea, becomes art; without the pleasurable idea, it is simply a transcription of a scene. If so, he would be well in line with the thoughts of the Impressionists. Both rejected the idea that precision and detail were primary goals of art; both focused on the impression that would be aroused in the audience.

Furthermore, Poe in his time, and the Impressionists later, both attached great importance to the concept of originality. Baudelaire laments that "the majority of artists are, let us face it, very skilled brutes, mere manual laborers, village pub-talkers with the minds of country bumpkins."⁵ He insists that painting should be more than a technical exercise, and questions why artists are content to simply imitate the work of past masters. Certainly, compared to many of their contemporaries, the Impressionists were uncommonly original; the painting techniques that they developed, such as shading with complementary colors instead of simply mixing in black, still flourish today. Poe echoes this sentiment, asserting that in writing *The Raven*, his "first object (as usual) was originality. The extent to which this has been neglected in versification is one of the most unaccountable things in the world."⁶ Furthermore, both Poe and the Impressionists rejected the idea that arduous labor is necessary to create great art or literature. Poe commented that:

It is to be hoped that common sense, in the time to come, will prefer deciding upon a work of art, rather by the impression it makes, by the effect it produces,

⁴Edgar Allen Poe, "Letter to B-". pg 385.

⁵Baudelaire, 397.

⁶Poe, "Letter", 5.

than by the time it took to impress the effect, or by the amount of "sustained effort" which had been found necessary in effecting the impression."⁷

This ideal was shared by the Impressionists. While their predecessors spent months in studios applying numerous delicate layers of paint, the Impressionists worked quickly, outdoors, without even waiting for their paint to dry before applying a new coat. They made no attempt to impress the viewer by filling a painting's background with exquisite detail, but instead focused on the most salient features, the ones most vital to creating the intended emotional effect. The purpose of this practice is two-fold: first, it allows artists to create more spontaneously and prolifically. Second, borrowing the expression that Poe uses to describe literature, the lack of extraneous detail creates a "unity of impression."⁸ Because the observer need not apply painstaking scrutiny to experience the intended impression, the effect is both more genuine and more intense.

Thus, just as the Impressionists created paintings that were ingenious in their simplicity, Poe created poems and stories that drew intensity and purity of effect from their very brevity. His descriptions are never exhaustive, so that the imagery formed in the reader's mind is uncorrupted by mundane or irrelevant details. For example, *The Man of the Crowd* begins with a description of the "D- Coffee-House" in which the main character is contentedly people-watching. Yet, over the course of nearly five pages of vivid description, scarcely a detail is given concerning the coffee-house itself, because it is not relevant to the intended effect. Instead, the reader is simply told that the convalescent has a cigar in his mouth and a newspaper in his lap, and is "peering through the smoky panes into the streets." More knowledge of the coffee house would distract the reader from visualizing the throng of pedestrians outside, just as additional detail in the background of an Impressionist painting would detract from the subject that the painter chooses to highlight.

⁷Edgar Allan Poe, from "The Poetic Principle". pg 1607.

⁸Poe, "Philosophy", 3.

Poe's work was uncommonly pictorial; almost every paragraph paints in the reader's mind a scene so poignant and remarkable that a story such as *The Man of the Crowd* could inspire a score of paintings. One common theme in this imagery is the effect of light. He describes how "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."⁹ The theme appears repeatedly, as Poe describes "the rapidity with which the world of light flitted before the window"¹⁰ or the details revealed as the mysterious "man of the crowd" steps into the "strong glare of a lamp."¹¹ Poe constantly alternates between scenes of brilliant gas and then, for contrast, plunges the reader into dark, winding alleys, eventually taking care to describe the approach of day-break and then the rising of the sun. In fact, the lighting of virtually every scene in the story is carefully defined.

Because Poe included only those details that directly furthered the intended effect of his works, and because he spent so much time writing about light, we can be confident that he considered lighting to be indispensable to creating a powerful effect. This was certainly not lost on the impressionists. In Baudelaire's essay, M.G. cries, upon waking, "What a fanfare of light!...an endless number of things bathed in light."¹² Furthermore, Monet, often called "The Painter of Life, shows the dramatic effect that a change in lighting can produce in his *Haystack* series, among many others. The Impressionists realized that even the hue of light can acutely change the effect of a painting; for example, adding a blue component to light-colored surfaces simulates the effect of the sky, producing an outdoors effect.

Yet, the most remarkable similarity between Poe and the Impressionists is their mutual infatuation with modernity. This term must be used precisely, for it does not refer to progress or technology; it does not refer to the *modern*. Rather, it refers to the the *experience of the*

⁹Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd", 1840. pg 183.

¹⁰Poe, "Man", 183.

¹¹*ibid*, 184.

¹²Baudelaire, 399.

contemporary. The most famous and influential definition is given in Baudelaire's essay:

Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable.¹³

A modernist, then, attempts to capture this ephemeral beauty. To do this, however, the artist needs to *experience* contemporary culture. And here, we arrive at the most remarkable feature of *The Man of the Crowd*. Poe, over two decades before the idea gained wide popularity, invented the *flâneur*—the most prominent figure in Impressionist art.

The idea of the flâneur, like so much of the essence of Impressionism, was articulated in Baudelaire's essay. Baudelaire presents the ideal flâneur in the form of an anonymous artist named M.G., who "loves mixing with the crowds, loves being incognito."¹⁴:

The crowd is his domain, just as the air is the bird's, and water that of the fish. His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd. For the perfect idler, for the passionate observer it becomes an immense source of enjoyment to establish his dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and the infinite."¹⁵

Two characteristics, then, define the flâneur. First, he takes a passionate interest in all that happens around him. The crowd, to him, is "an enormous reservoir of electricity,"¹⁶ and he notices every change of fashion, every idiosyncrasy or unusual event. He is particularly interested in people. This, of course, is the essence of *The Man of the Crowd*. Poe goes to great lengths to convey the connoisseur's interest in the public life around him. The main character "gives up, at length, all care of things within the hotel, and [becomes] absorbed

¹³Baudelaire, 401.

¹⁴Baudelaire, 395.

¹⁵Baudelaire, 399.

¹⁶Baudelaire, 399.

in contemplation of the scene without.”¹⁷ He peers out of the coffee house window, with his “brow to the glass, . . . occupied in scrutinizing the mob.”¹⁸ While this behavior may seem unusual or even suspicious today, it is typical of the flaneur.

The second characteristic of the flaneur, then, is an anonymity—a secrecy—that can only be obtained in the midst of a crowd. While this situation might seem typical to modern readers, it was a novelty to readers in the 18th century. Modern cities—particularly Paris and London—were growing at an unprecedented rate. Farmers and villagers were leaving their close-knit communities and becoming assimilated in the massive urban sprawl, surrounded by strangers and bombarded with a dynamic and unfamiliar culture. Poe attempts to express the situation to his American readers, explaining how “vast a difference there is between a London populace and that of the most frequented American city.”¹⁹

Yet, the flaneur, according to Baudelaire, takes this anonymity as an opportunity. He is “a prince enjoying his incognito wherever he goes.”²⁰ Indeed, Poe’s flaneur enjoys the purest incognito; not a single interaction passes between the convalescent and the subjects whom he studies. Even the old man whom the main character follows for many hours is never aware that he is being observed. At last, the weary main character, “stopping fully in front of the wanderer, gazed at him steadfastly in the face.” Yet, still no interaction passes; his incognito is preserved. Poe created an image not just of the modern city, but of the experience of anonymity that plagues, or in some ways liberates, its citizens.

Poe powerfully articulates the most characteristic experiences of modernity by showing their effects on the city’s inhabitants. He demonstrates the loneliness inherent in anonymity by describing how pedestrians “talked and gesticulated to themselves, as if feeling in solitude on account of the very denseness of the company around.”²¹ Furthermore, he comments

¹⁷Poe, “Man”, 180.

¹⁸Poe, “Man”, 183.

¹⁹Poe, “Man”, 185.

²⁰Baudelaire, 399.

²¹Poe, “Man”, 180.

on the stark economic differences between quarters of the city by contrasting the vibrant, brightly lit heart of London, near the D– Hotel, with the city’s “most noisome quarter,” with its “antique, worm-eaten, wooden tenements” and “horrible filth festered in the dammed-up gutters.”²²

Furthermore, just as M.G. in Baudelaire’s essay, Poe’s flaneur regards “with minute interest” the crowd’s “innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance.”²³ This in in striking similarity to Baudelaire’s comment, twenty-three years later, that the “dress, the hairstyle, and even the gesture, the expression [of a a given age] form a whole, full of vitality.”²⁴ Poe paid painstaking attention to each of these aspects, and in doing so captured much of the fashion—much of, as Baudelaire might say, the modernity—of his time.

Each class of people, Poe notes, have certain characteristics in common. All of the high-ranking bankers “had slightly bald heads, from which the right ears, long used to pen-holding, had an odd habit of standing off on end.”²⁵ The description is powerful and, significantly, shows the author’s awareness of how a person’s lifestyle impacts their physical appearance—and thus, how the character of a given place and time is manifested a populace’s very bodies. He moves on to describe the gamblers, “distinguished by a certain sodden swarthy of complexion, a filmy dimness of eye, and a pallor and compression of lip.”²⁶ The description is analogous to Impressionist paintings; only a few key features are considered by the artist, but these features are well chosen and sufficient to characterize the subject. Any further details would be likely to diminish the purity of the impression.

Poe’s vivid descriptions, as Baudelaire noted, are so powerful as to almost function as pictures. Yet, the story’s medium—literature—allows the use of devices that are far more difficult

²²Poe, “Man”, 186-187.

²³Poe, “Man”, 180.

²⁴Baudelaire, 401.

²⁵Poe, “Man”, 181.

²⁶Poe, “Man”, 181.

in painting. For instance, Poe deliberately explains the mood of of the main character:

I 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 . . . merely to breathe was enjoyment; . . . I felt a calm but inquisitive interest in every thing. ”²⁷

Through this description Poe, to a certain extent, defines the mood of the reader. This is often attempted in painting by careful choice of the observer’s vantage point. For example, in Mary Cassatt’s *Little Girl in a Blue Armchair*, the low vantage point signals that the observer is a child. Alternatively, the subject itself can yield information about the observer; in Manet’s *Olympia*, the observer is clearly the courtesan’s client, and as such the painting can produce impressions such as shame or awkwardness. Still, these can be vague or unreliable. In contrast, Poe’s vivid description of the convalescent’s mental state wholly changes the reader’s interpretation of the story’s events. As we are transported to the convalescent’s point of view, we even begin to share in his pleasure and “inquisitive interest.” Small details, such as the fact that the convalescent walks with a cane,²⁸ or that he is put to “much trouble” in pursuit of the old man, enhance the novelty of the reader’s experience.

Furthermore, due to his choice of medium, Poe is able to explicitly dictate the emotions of the reader in a way that is not, in my opinion, possible through painting. For example, if an artist were to attempt to render the “decrepit old man,” he or she would probably, like Poe, draw attention to his stature, his clothing, and the suggestive diamond and dagger kept under his coat. Yet, Poe can go further to describe the *effect* of the man’s appearance; how it arouses in the observer’s mind “ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense—of extreme despair.”²⁹ The painter would attempt to arouse these emotions,

²⁷Poe, “Man”, 179.

²⁸Poe, “Man”, 184.

²⁹Poe, “Man”, 183-184.

but Poe has the option to do so directly.

Finally, Poe is able to easily and straightforwardly use sequences of events to create impressions of modernity. Certainly, painters have attempted to do this, with various degrees of success; they can, for example, show motion using blurred lines or tell narratives using multiple paintings. Yet, Poe is able to do this almost effortlessly. For instance, he compares the response of two different classes of people to having their path obstructed on the busy street. The businessmen, he says, “evinced no symptoms of impatience, but adjusted their clothes and hurried on.”³⁰ Yet, many others “redoubled their gesticulations, and awaited, with an absent and overdone smile upon the lips, the course of the persons impeding them. If jostled, they bowed profusely to the jostlers, and appeared overwhelmed with confusion.”³¹ These short and seemingly inconsequential interactions are vital to our ability to assess personality and emotion, and Poe’s facility with their description enables him to express an aspect of modernity that is problematic to painters.

Poe’s emphasis on the impression that the reader derives from his work, as opposed to the work’s accuracy or depth of description, is representative of a aesthetic philosophy shared by the impressionists. Furthermore, his interest in modernity (as evidenced especially in *The Man of the Crowd*) was far ahead of his time. In particular, his image of the flaneur was enduring, and may have been a heavy influence on Baudelaire’s canonical essay. Poe’s work, when compared with that of the Impressionists, provides for a fascinating study in the application of an artistic philosophy to multiple disparate fields of art.

³⁰Poe, “Man”, 180.

³¹Poe, “Man“, 180.