

3.

The crowded eye. Some notes on writing in the crowd.

On July 29th, 2008, in Rue des Canettes, Paris, an old man passed where I was sitting. He was in between alone and not alone; in between real and unreal. He stood still while the environment around him changed; he disappeared and reappeared. Nothing here was like the gas-lit streets of London in the 1840's. But parallel to Baudelaire who in *Les Sept Vieillards* saw a ghostly old man appear before him seven times in the streets of Paris, I saw this man as a double of a figure that was there before him.

In 1840 Edgar Allen Poe's *The Man of the Crowd* was published, a story about an observer-narrator 'I' following a visually striking old man through the crowded streets of London, for an evening, a night, a day, a second evening. The old man never leaves the crowd—it is his asylum. The observer finally has to conclude that the old man cannot be read like the other people in the streets:

'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. The worst heart of the world is a grosser book than the *Hortulus Animae*, and perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that *es lässt sich nicht lesen.*'

The German phrase that ends the story is also quoted in the beginning, making this a circular tale about the unreadable: "it does not permit itself to be read."

White, unreadable texts are the spaces in the crowd where the traces of the individual are erased, where secrets hide from scrutiny. The detective story (and *The Man of the Crowd* is a detective

story) was born when literature began to concern itself with the function of the crowd; the crowd was the place where the criminal could disappear.

On the other side of the street stands the observer with the camera eye. This 'I' tries to capture fleeting instances, to read disappearing traces. Is this observer able to be alone, we wonder, or is he or she far more involved, and in fact a double of the man of the crowd? Baudelaire, in *Les Foules*, wrote of the poet-observer who performs a "prostitution of the soul", entering anyone's personality and giving himself entirely "to the unknown passer-by".

In poststructuralist literary theory, this prostitution of the soul is specified as intertextuality. There's the notion that poetic language is relational, and writing a dialogue between the text at hand and the corpus of texts already in existence. In a double, overlapping movement a text both evokes and transforms other texts. So writing itself is an act of walking in the crowd (the discourse of texts in existence is of course a crowded scene); the resulting text being like a snapshot of the streets; a closure for that moment of what was infinite in possibility.

That this activity is criminal at the outset, plus simultaneously like detective work, is conveyed in Julia Kristeva's description of literary practice in *Towards a semiology of paragramms*:

'To read' was also 'to bring together', 'to gather', 'to watch for', 'to discover the trace of', 'to take', 'to steal'. 'To read', then denotes an aggressive participation, an active appropriation of the other. 'To write' would then be 'to read' as production, as

industry; writing-reading, or paragrammatic writing, would then be the aspiration towards aggressivity and total participation. (quoted from *The Tel Quel Reader*, ed. by French & Lack, Routledge, 1998)

Perhaps then the man of the crowd cannot be read because he is (in the act of) writing. He refuses to be alone. The same goes for his double, the other I.

In Samuel Beckett's *Film*, there is a man-of-the-crowd-like character called O (Object, played by Buster Keaton) who, with one eye covered, is fleeing from being perceived. He practically tries to blend in with the walls as he walks down the street, at home he covers up the mirrors, the staring parrot, the staring fish. He is followed by E, the camera eye. If E exceeds an angle of 45 degrees, O feels he is being observed. At the end of *Film* it turns out E is O, who cannot escape from self-perception.

At night, a train passes through town; solely in sound, changing nothing in the darkness.

According to the data of my digital camera, the event recorded in Rue des Canettes lasted four minutes.

I'd like to dedicate this book to my father.

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