

THE POET IN THE ERA OF THE CROWD
The Crowded Vision of Poe, Baudelaire, Rilke, and Eliot

Crowds are somewhat like the sphinx of ancient fable: it is necessary to arrive at a solution of the problems offered by their psychology or to resign ourselves to being devoured by them.

Gustave Le Bon, *La psychologie des foules*

Crowds dominated the urban centers of the nineteenth century. The Western metropolis overflowed with the popular classes demanding work, entertainment, power and representation in the culture. In 1895, Gustave Le Bon proclaimed in the most popular and influential book about crowd behavior, that "the age we are about to enter will in truth be the ERA OF CROWDS."¹ The energetic presence of the crowd in public life prompted nineteenth-century intellectuals to investigate it as a social, political and psychological unit. Realizing the historical significance and political role of the crowd, they sought to understand its psychology and define its characteristics. By examining and classifying it, they tried to confront and control its power.

Although perceived as "scientific", this new approach to the crowd was in fact mythopoeic: Le Bon and his followers voiced in social, historical and psychological terms a myth already existing in the romantic imagination, that of the "madding crowd."² The mythology of the crowd as a dark, mysterious, savage, irresistible force emerged in the novels of Victor Hugo and Eugene Sue, as well as in the *roman feuilleton* of the mid nineteenth century.³ The image of the crowd in literature answered to the growing demand of the

1. Le Bon, a conservative ideologue, a popularizer of science and one of the chief architects of "scientific" racism and sexism, did not invent crowd psychology but summarized ideas and theories on crowds by the historian Hippolyte Taine (*Origines de la France contemporaine*, 1875-1888), the novelist Emile Zola (*Germinal*, 1885), the social scientists Scipio Sighele (*La folla delinquente*, 1891), Henry Fournial (*Essai sur la psychologie des foules*, 1892), and Gabriel Tarde (*La philosophie pénale*, 1890). However, Le Bon's derivative work became the classic treatise of crowd psychology because it situated the crowd in history: by naming in the great destroyer of civilization, Le Bon emphasized the need for a leadership that can control crowds. In other words, Le Bon affirmed the superiority of the individual over the crowd, a view that appealed to politicians and intellectuals alike. On Le Bon see Barrows 162-189, Nye, Reynié, and Kelsen.

2. A recent study on the myth of the madding crowd and its persistence in political and social theory can be found in McPhail.

3. On the representation of the crowd in Hugo's *Les Misérables* and Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris*, see Macherey 67-89. Other studies on literary crowds can be found in Schor and Mills.

popular classes to be represented in culture. In an essay on Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin emphasizes the role of the crowd in the nineteenth century as the new reading public, the new "customer", wishing "to find itself portrayed in the contemporary novel, as the patrons did in the paintings of the Middle Ages" (166).

Like the sphinx of the fable, the crowd posed a riddle to nineteenth-century writers. The crowd, as both the topic and the audience of a new kind of literature required the creation of new poetic forms. Moreover, the confrontation between crowd and poet raised the question of their relationship: Is the author a member of the crowd, or an outsider, an observer? Does the poet identify with the crowd, or withdraw from it? Does he dominate it or is he consumed by it? Le Bon's comparison of the crowd to the sphinx (resolve the riddle or be devoured by the monster)⁴ corresponds to the relation between author and crowd. This riddle emerges in the representation of the crowd by Poe and Baudelaire in the nineteenth century and by Rilke and Eliot in the early twentieth century, revealing an endless but ever-changing conflict between the poet, the city and its dwellers.

The relationship between author and crowd is ambiguous. The desire to represent the crowd in a work of art is juxtaposed with the fear of losing the self; the fascination with the crowd's energy with the banality and the ugliness of the everyday life of the masses. The author's relation to the crowd fluctuates from domination to assimilation. It often emerges as a passionate and obsessive love affair, moving from love to hate and vice versa. The poet's wish to be absorbed and the desire to dominate at the same time recall Baudelaire's idea of love: "L'amour veut sortir de soi, se confondre avec sa victime, comme le vainqueur avec le vaincu, et cependant conserver des privilèges de conquérant" ("Love wants to emerge from itself, to merge with its victim, as the victor with the vanquished, and, meanwhile preserve the privileges of the conqueror") (*Fusées* 628).⁵ The word love could be substituted with author and the word victim with crowd. In the confrontation between poetic persona and urban masses, the author-narrator oscillates between being victim and victimizer of the crowd.

4. Le Bon's metaphor implies that the crowd is a devious and dangerous monster like the sphinx, and like Oedipus, the "reader" of crowds has to resolve the riddle in order to avoid self-destruction. Le Bon's solution lies in the domination and manipulation of crowds by a charismatic leader. Moreover, the metaphor of sphinx who was half female half beast suggests that the crowd is also seen as female, bestial, carnal, unruly, impressionable, and mentally inferior, in need of a "great man" who can tame and control it. The gender and body metaphor for the crowd appeals both to the social / scientific and to the literary imagination.

5. The translations of Baudelaire's prose are my own; for the poetry I used Richard Howard's translation (*Fleurs du mal*). The translation of Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* is by Stephen Mitchell.

By creating a "poetics" of the crowd, the poet is defining his politics. The interaction with the crowd is simultaneously political, erotic and economic. It appears as a discourse of exchange, related to the economy of the era of high capitalism, an exchange which often confuses economy with sexuality and commerce with art. Baudelaire's "vanquisher" and "vanquished" correspond to the consumer and the consumed, roles which constantly alternate in an exciting and dangerous game.

A strange game between narrator and urban masses is played in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Man of the Crowd*, which is set in London. The narrator of the story, having just recovered from a long illness, decides to go out into the city. Sitting in a cafe, he observes the crowd through the windows and is fascinated with its density and movement:

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. (131)

In a rather idiosyncratic way, the narrator distinguishes different classes of people among the crowd. He first classifies the noblemen, merchants, attorneys, tradesmen and stock-jobbers, as the upper-middle class. Then he describes the employees, dividing them in two categories, the junior and the upper clerks. Moving from the middle-class working people to the elegant-looking pickpockets and gamblers, he arranges the latter into a separate class. Another class is formed by the people who live by their "wit", military men or dandies. The description of the rush-hour crowd concludes with the *Lumpenproletariat*, a grotesque group consisting of sewpeddlars, streetbeggars, invalids, prostitutes and drunkards. The narrator does not separate this crowd, the people who live in and from the street from the working class; the "pie-men, porters, coal-heavers, sweepes" are heaped together with:

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. (134)

Ignoring the autonomy of the working class, the narrator unites laborers and beggars, prostitutes and street-performers into a disorderly and restless mass. The heterogeneity and energy of the poor disturb him by escaping classification. As the density of the crowd increases, social distinctions become more difficult. The busy streets of the metropolis impose a temporary democracy. Noise, movement and physical proximity distort the social hierarchy established in the narrator's mind. The social anarchy of the mass threatens the individuality of the observer. The Romantic author

perhaps identified the London rush-hour crowd with the democratic American society.

Poe's description of the crowd transforms ordinary urban life into a surreal nightmare. The reader feels the density of humanity, the physical struggle required to pass through, the evening rain falling on the dark streets, sees the anonymous human faces dimly lit by the gaslight, hears the babble and the jarring noises of the city. The sudden appearance of an old man culminates the expectations for horror and mystery. Fascinated with the old man's expression, conveying "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 extreme despair" (135), the narrator follows him through the fog in a magic and unreal adventure.

Poe names the old man "the wanderer". His endless wanderings through the city provide Baudelaire with the literary archetype of the *flâneur*. However, Poe's man of the crowd is not a simple nineteenth-century *flâneur*. Benjamin argues that in the old man "composure has given way to manic behavior", exemplifying "what had to become of the *flâneur* once he was deprived of the milieu to which he belonged" (172). Poe does not identify the man of the crowd: he remains a mystery for both narrator and reader. Like the enigmatic German book mentioned in the beginning of the story, the old man cannot be interpreted, "es lässt sich nicht lesen." In the city where everything — according to Baudelaire's poem "Le cygne" ("The Swan") — becomes allegory,⁶ the old man is an allegory of the urban encounter between individual and crowd. As the old man throws himself in the mass ("I saw the old man gasp as if for breath while he threw himself amid the crowd"; 137), the crowd becomes a sea, a reservoir of energy and power. On the one hand, the crowd's vitality revives the haggard old man; on the other, it engulfs and devours him. The old man absorbs the mass and is in turn absorbed by it; his selfhood is simultaneously stimulated and lost. He is indeed the *flâneur* turned mad, the individual who can exist only within the multitude.

On the contrary, the narrator experiences revulsion and horror in his

6. Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie
N'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs
Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie,
Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs.
(Paris changes... But in sadness like mine
nothing stirs — new buildings, old
neighbourhoods turn to allegory,
and memories weigh more than a stone.)

confrontation with the crowd. Following the old man through the city like a detective in search of a criminal, he witnesses the stranger's urban obsession. His initial ability to distance himself from the mass disappears as he realizes its absorbing power. The narrator's fascination with the old man corresponds to the latter's fascination with the crowd. This twofold enchantment becomes a mystery in itself, an unresolved riddle. Operating as a detective, the narrator sees a criminal element in the relationship between individual and crowd. However, unlike Dupin, Poe's cunning detective who resolves all urban puzzles, the narrator of *The Man of the Crowd* fails in solving this mystery. Like the strange German book of the story, the crowd does not allow interpretation.

In the context of Poe's favorite motif of the "double", the old man functions as the Other; the frightening dark part of the self which cannot be explained or controlled, the unknown territory which urges towards self-annihilation and assimilation to the mass. The psychological is bound to a political fear: to defend the boundaries of the self, Poe's narrator must distance himself from the crowd, maintaining a superior position. His effort to analyse and resolve the mystery of the old man recalls Le Bon's comparison of the crowd to the mythical sphinx. Resolving the riddle of the crowd would assert the superiority of the individual; on the other hand, resigning signifies total surrender and destruction. Poe's observer recalls not only Le Bon but also Alexis de Toqueville, the Romantic observer of American democracy. In *Democracy in America*, Toqueville argues that the rule of the masses implies a rule of mediocrity, which destroys the genius. Surrounded and misunderstood by the ruling masses, Poe fears the barbaric energy, the incessant commotion, the suffocating homogeneity of the crowd, threatening the individuality cherished by the Romantics.

The crowd of Paris haunts the poetry and prose of Charles Baudelaire, the admirer and translator of Poe. The Parisian masses both repel and fascinate the poet, secretly invading his work like a deadly but irresistible disease. In the collection of poems entitled *Tableaux parisiens*, the presence of the crowd emerges through the fog, is imprinted on the dark empty streets. Baudelaire's urban experience is both horrible and magical, absurd and profound, mundane and mysterious. The crowd is part of the paradox of city life, a life which simultaneously inspires and wounds the poet. Unlike Poe's narrator, the poet of *Tableaux parisiens* confronts the mass directly without the man of the crowd as mediator. The poet plays the role of the *flâneur*, observing the city through the dense masses of its inhabitants.

Poe's short stories, which Baudelaire had been translating since 1848, inspired Baudelaire's prose poems (*Petits poèmes en prose*), entitled *Le spleen de Paris*. In the dedication to Arse Houssaye, Baudelaire emphasizes the creation of a new literary genre portraying a new experience: "la

description de la vie moderne, ou plutôt d'une vie moderne et plus abstraite" ("the description of modern life, or rather of a modern and more abstract life") (*Petits poèmes en prose* 146). Poetic prose is engendered by life in the giant cities to represent the web of their numberless interconnecting relationships.

The prose poem "Les foules" ("The Crowds") is Baudelaire's answer to Poe's *The Man of the Crowd*. Instead of observing, describing and classifying the urban masses like Poe's narrator, the speaker of "Les foules" desires to possess the crowd. The encounter is erotic rather than social: "jouir de la foule est un art" ("to delight in the crowd is an art";⁷ 155). Narrator and man of the crowd, poet and *flâneur* are momentarily identified, as the self is offered to the mass as a gift or sacrifice: "...sainte prostitution de l'âme qui se donne tout entière, poésie et charité, à l'imprevu qui se montre, à l'inconnu qui passe" ("holy prostitution of the soul which offers itself whole, poetry and charity, to the unexpected that arises, to the unknown that passes by"; 155). The love poetry of modernity depends on a movement from the interior (the poetic "soul") into the streets.

The "holy prostitution", the analogy between *flâneur*, artist and prostitute, intrigues Baudelaire. Prostitution identifies the erotic with the economic, transforming sexuality and the human body into commodities. To make "passion" into a profession, to find the highest pleasure in the infinite and random encounters of the street become for Baudelaire the characteristics of the modern artist. In the portrait of the painter Constantin Guys, *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (*The Painter of Modern Life*), Baudelaire uses again sexual metaphors to describe Guys' relation to the crowds of Paris:

Sa passion, et sa profession, c'est d'épouser la foule. Pour le parfait flâneur, pour l'observateur passionné, c'est une immense jouissance que d'élire domicile dans le nombre, dans l'ondoyant, dans le mouvement, dans le fugitif et l'infini. (552)

(His passion and profession is to marry the crowd. It is an immense pleasure for the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate observer to settle in the multitude, in the undulating movement, in the fleeting and the infinite).

The *flâneur* throws himself amidst the crowd, not in despair, as Poe's old man, but in ecstasy, as a lover: "l'amoureux de la vie universelle entre la foule comme dans une immense réservoir d'électricité" ("the lover of universal life enters the crowd as in an immense reservoir of electricity"; *Le peintre de la vie moderne*, 552). The crowd is charged with vibrant sexuality,

7. The sexual connotation of *jouir* is lost in the English translation.

an energy which the artist seeks and absorbs. The phrase "le moi insatiable du non-moi" ("the insatiable self of the non-self") from the same essay epitomizes the poet's experience in the metropolitan streets: the poet invades every person's character like a vampire (see "Les Foules") in a demonic desire to release the self within the multitude.

At the end of "Les foules" Baudelaire identifies the *flâneur's* love for the crowd (which is, after all, the political embodiment of democracy and revolution) with domination and imperialism by comparing the lover of crowds to colonists and missionaries. Baudelaire's metaphor foreshadows Le Bon's portrait of the crowd as primitive and female in essence (unruly, emotional, physical): the crowd, feared and desired, is loved only after its submission.

In other works, Baudelaire contradicts the notion of a possessive erotic relationship between artist and crowd. Revulsion substitutes the passion experienced on the streets. In the prose poem "A une heure du matin" ("At one o'clock in the morning"), the speaker is relieved to be alone at last, disgusted by the city and its dwellers:

Enfin! seul! On n'entend plus que le roulement de quelques fiacres attardés et éreintés. Pendant quelques heures, nous posséderons le silence, sinon le repos. Enfin! la tyrannie de la face humaine a disparu, et je ne souffrirai plus que par moi-même... Horrible vie! Horrible ville! (152)

(At last! alone! One can only hear the rattle of a few tardy and exhausted carriages. For a few hours we shall possess silence, if not rest. At last! the tyranny of the human face has disappeared, and I will suffer only on my own... Horrible life! Horrible city!)

Crowds impose the tyranny of the human face: the human face with its character of singularity demands to be recognized and identified. Every individual face desires to receive the gaze of the poet which will distinguish it from the mass. But the number of faces transforms this democratic desire of recognition into a tyranny; a tyranny inflicted on the individual nearby who has to be rejected so that the first one can be recognized; a tyranny on the *flâneur* who is constantly forced into an arbitrary choice, and finally a tyranny on the harmony and hierarchy of the social organism. Baudelaire fears that the demand of the faces within the crowd will lead to anarchy (Pachet 142-3). Contrary to the poet's erotic desire for the crowd, the mass desires to be recognized as separate individuals. The poet realizes that by being forced to choose he loses — instead of increasing — his power to absorb and dominate.

In another prose poem, entitled "La solitude", Baudelaire ridicules his own concept of "holy prostitution". Not only does he contradict the notion of the

artist "marrying" the crowd, but disgusted by the city and its inhabitants, he is nostalgic for the lost solid "subject", the Cartesian *cogito*:

"Presque tous nos malheurs nous viennent de n'avoir pas su rester dans nos chambres", dit un autre sage, Pascal, je crois, rappelant ainsi dans la cellule du recueillement tous ces affolés qui cherchent le bonheur dans le mouvement et dans une prostitution que je pourrais appeler fraternelle si je voulais parler la belle langue de mon siècle. (164)

("Almost all our troubles come from not having known to stay in our rooms," said another wise man, Pascal. I think, summoning in this way to their cells of meditation all those panick-stricken souls who seek happiness in movement and in a prostitution which I could call fraternal if I wanted to speak the lovely language of my century.)

The ironic tone of the prose poem recalls Baudelaire's bitter comments in his journal *Mon cœur mis à nu* (*My Heart Laid Bare*), concerning his involvement in the revolution of 1848. The poet not only regrets his association with the rebellious masses during 1848, but also denounces his own actions as a member of the crowd as a dangerous intoxication. By revolting, and thus identifying with the crowd, the poet loses his intellectual superiority and becomes "natural" like the urban masses. In Baudelaire's vocabulary, "natural" signifies materialist, vulgar, abominable, and also female;⁸ "natural" summarizes whatever opposes spiritual aspiration, sublimity and transcendence:

Mon ivresse en 1848.

De quelle nature était cette ivresse?

Goût de la vengeance. Plaisir *naturel* de la demolition.

Le 15 mai. — Toujours le goût de la destruction. Goût légitime si tout ce qui est naturel est légitime. (631)

(My intoxication in 1848.

Of what nature was that intoxication?

Urge for revenge. Natural pleasure in demolition.

The 15th of May. — Always the urge for destruction. Legitimate urge if what is natural is legitimate.)

Instead of identifying poet with *flâneur*, as he did in *Le peintre de la vie moderne*, Baudelaire, after the defeat of 1848, tries to separate and confirm his identity as an outsider. Baudelaire's representation of the crowd creates

8. In *Mon cœur mis à nu*, Baudelaire writes that "woman is *natural*, that is to say abominable" and, therefore, she is "the opposite of the dandy" (631).

two opposite movements: one centrifugal (away from the crowd and towards the self), and the other centripetal (away from the self and towards the crowd). The centrifugal movement has a political justification for Baudelaire, related not only with his disappointment in the 1848 revolution, but also with his fear that the political domination of the masses would lead to the intellectual domination of the mediocrity over the genius. In his literary criticism of Edgar Allan Poe, Baudelaire associates the American masses with the tyranny of a mediocre majority, recalling de Toqueville's *Democracy in America*. Poe is the victim of the United States, of a monstrous and barbaric world which imprisons the poet:

Les États-Unis ne furent pour Poe qu'une vaste prison qu'il parcourait avec l'agitation fiévreuse d'un être fait pour respirer dans un monde plus amoral — qu'une grande barbarie éclairée au gaz —. (337)
(The United States was for Poe nothing but a vast prison, in which he wandered with the feverish agitation of a being made to breathe in a world more amoral than a great gaslit barbery.)

The United States become for Baudelaire an allegory like the Belgium of *La pauvre Belgique*. He sees America as the tyranny of beasts, "la tyrannie des bêtes ou zoocratie." In his portrait of Poe, Baudelaire recalls with nostalgia his subject's Romantic opposition between the crowd and the lyric "I". The American crowd represents the reign of pure matter suffocating Poe, the intellectual representing pure spirit. The genius becomes the sacrificial victim of the insatiable mass.

However, Baudelaire cannot define the crowd as the "other" in opposition to a Romantic lyric persona (Mercer 20). In fact, centripetal and centrifugal movements coexist in Baudelaire's work, a coexistence culminating in *Mon cœur mis à nu* with the phrase: "De la vaporisation et de la centralisation du Moi. Tout est là" ("Of the vaporisation and the centralization of the Self. All is there"; 630). The discourse employed to present the self, the artistic work, and the crowd involves not only dispersion, prostitution and sacrifice but also concentration, centralisation and conservation. Oscillating between "centralisation" and "vaporisation", it searches for an imaginary equilibrium between the two opposition tensions; the balance, however, is not to be found, and the constant fluctuation creates ambivalence and confusion.

Characteristically, in the intimate journals Baudelaire confuses sexuality (related to dispersion of the self) with artistic productivity (based on concentration), and commerce with art:

L'amour, c'est le goût de la prostitution. Il n'est même pas de plaisir noble qui ne puisse être ramené à la Prostitution...
Qu'est-ce que l'art? Prostitution.

Le plaisir d'être dans les foules est une expression mystérieuse de la jouissance de la multiplication du nombre. ...Le goût de la concentration productive doit remplacer, chez un homme mûr, le goût de la déperdition.

(*Fusées* 623)

(Love is the urge for prostitution. There is, indeed, no noble pleasure which cannot be related to Prostitution...

What is art? Prostitution.

The pleasure of being in crowds is a mysterious expression of the joy in the multiplication of number... When a man is mature the desire for productive concentration has to replace the desire for dispersion.)

Crowd, sexuality and art merge within the system defined by centralisation and vaporisation. The notions of productive concentration on the one hand, and dispersion on the other, suggest a system of economy, and more specifically bourgeois economic values. Reckless spending is juxtaposed with concentration, investment, and accumulation of wealth. The economic metaphor identifies the struggle of the poetic self between *flâneur* and creator, "mature man". In the interaction between poet and crowd Baudelaire sees an economic, erotic and intellectual exchange. Offering the self to the mass represents for Baudelaire the total expenditure of the soul.

The contradictory relation between author and crowd continued in the twentieth century. The great war advanced modern technology, emancipated women and destroyed the old world order, accelerating the rise of the popular classes to power. Just like their Romantic precursors, artistic modernists like Rilke and Eliot, disliked the modern urban world of the twentieth century, including its greater democracy and mass society. The crowd continued to be identified with the restless and destitute *Lumpenproletariat*, with women, with the drunk and insane. The aesthetic view of politics and the loathing of the modern industrial world, represented by United States and Belgium in Baudelaire, reappears in Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge* (*The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*), written in 1910, and in Eliot's poetry inspired by urban life.

Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge is a non-narrative, partly autobiographical novel centering around a young German poet in Paris. The solitary poet, destitute despite his bourgeois background, wanders in the city, observing the masses; in his notebooks he confesses his ambivalent feelings towards them. Like Poe and Baudelaire, Rilke's alter-ego Brigge experiences simultaneously fear and fascination, interest and disgust. The novel begins with an image of the crowd:

So, also hierher kommen die Leute, um zu leben, ich würde ehe meinen, es stürbe sich hier. Ich bin ausgewesen. Ich habe gesehen:

Hospitler. Ich habe einen Menschen gesehen, welcher schwankte und umsank. Die Leute versammelten sich um ihn, das ersparte mir den Rest. (9)

(So this is where people come to live; I would have thought it is a city to die in. I have been out. I saw: hospitals. I saw a man who staggered and fell. A crowd formed around him and I was spared the rest.) (3)

The fragmentation of form in Rilke's writing succeeds in capturing the rhythm of the modern city. The author uses a bare language, short sentences and striking images to present the poet's experience of the city through his wanderings. His impressions of Paris are fragmented, distorted and jarring. There is no exchange between the poet and the people he encounters in the city; images of solitude are juxtaposed with images of crowds. Both the mystery of the crowd (Poe) and the ambiguity of the poet towards it (Baudelaire) evolve in a lyrical hallucination in Rilke's prose, where time and place are just sounds and images among others.

Brigge is a *flneur*: he wanders around Paris and then returns to his room to write. Although in terms of his habits he resembles Baudelaire's painter of modern life, Constantin Guys, Brigge's relation to the crowd is the opposite of the French *flneur*'s. Whereas Guys is, according to Baudelaire, inspired by his passion for the city and its crowds, Brigge cannot relate to the masses. Instead of the need to impose the self on the crowd, to experience the Baudelairean "prostitution" of the artist's soul, Brigge needs to keep a distance from the crowd, to avoid any contact or confrontation. Unlike Guys, or the narrator of "Les foules", Brigge is not a man of the crowd. He believes that artistic inspiration stems from the secret realms of the soul, brought to light through the process of memory.

As Brigge says in the beginning of the novel, he is just now learning to see — just starting to learn — and it's still going badly ("Ich lerne sehen... Alles geht jetzt dorthin. Ich weiss nicht, was dort geschieht"; 10). For Brigge seeing starts from within. His vision of the crowd emphasizes the grotesque, the tragic and the frightening. The representation of the crowd in *The Notebooks* can be summarized in a single word: alienation. The urban mass always signifies anonymity, loneliness, emptiness and death.

In his wanderings through Paris, Brigge experiences the crowd as a multitude of faces, faces that seem dissociated from the rest of the human body. His description of the faces which have a life and a function of their own has a tragic quality:

Dass es mir... niemals zum Bewusstesein gekommen ist, wieviel Gesichter es giebt. Es giebt eine Menge Menschen, aber noch viel mehr Gesichter, denn jeder hat mehrere. Da sind Leute, die tragen ein Gesicht jahrelang, natrlich nutzt es sich ab, es wird schmutzig, es

bricht in den Falten, es weitet sich aus wie Handschuhe, die man auf der Reise getragen hat. ... Andere Leute setzen unheimlich schnell ihre Gesichter auf, eins nach dem andern, und tragen sie auf. ... Sie sind nicht gewohnt, Gesichter zu schonen, ihr letztes ist in acht Tagen durch, hat Löcher, ist an vielen Stellen dünn wie Papier, und da kommt dann nach die Unterlage heraus, das Nichtgesicht, und sie gehen damit herum. (11)

(... it never occurred to me before how many faces there are. There are multitudes of people, but there are many more faces, because each person has several of them. There are people who wear the same face for years; naturally it wears out, gets dirty, splits at the seams, stretches like gloves worn during a long journey... Other people change faces incredibly fast, put on one after another and wear them all out. ... They are not accustomed to taking care of faces; their last one is worn through in a week, has holes in it, is in many places as thin as paper, and then little by little, the lining shows through, the non-face, and they walk around with that on.) (6-7)

The face becomes a cheap mask which conceals the uniformity, the non-face characterizing the crowd. The tyranny of the human face experienced by Baudelaire becomes in Rilke the fear of the non-face showing through the worn-out mask. The surrealist vision releases the poet from an actual threatening confrontation with the human faces in the crowd. Seeing in every face the sign of absence, Brigge feels that he is the only person walking in the streets of Paris. The non-identity of the mass confirms his own identity and humanity: he is the *flâneur* translating the public into the private sphere, the urban into the personal. As the people become dehumanized, the cityscape becomes strangely alive:

Die Strasse war zu leer, ihre Leere langweilte sich und zog mir den Schritt unter den Füßen weg und klappte mit ihm herum, drüben und da, wie mit einem Holzschuh. (12)

(The street was too empty; its emptiness had gotten bored and pulled my steps out from under my feet and clattered around in them, all over the street, as if they were wooden clogs.) (7)

In his wanderings Brigge notices only the grotesque and the pathetic part of human existence. Cripples, beggars, lonely men and women, people suffering from an unknown pain constitute the image of Paris crowd. Brigge has a pathological fear of beggars. Although he describes himself as clean and respectful-looking, he feels that beggars recognize that in reality he is one of them: "Die sehen mich an und wissen es. Die wissen, dass ich nur ein bisschen Komödie spiele"; (36) ("they look at me and know. They know

that in reality I am one of them, that I'm only acting"; 39). Brigge is afraid that, being poor and marginal, he could belong to the destitute urban population. The fear continuously torments him: "Wer sind diese Leute? Was wollen sie von mir? Warten sie auf mich? Woran erkennen sie mich? (36) ("Who are these people? What do they want of me? Are they waiting for me? How do they recognize me?" 39). Brigge imagines that an old woman keeps walking at his side staring at him; that another small gray woman stands at his side in front of a store's window for half an hour; that the homeless beggars who keep themselves warm in the Louvre grin at him the moment he steps in. He feels constantly persecuted by the destitute and deformed crowd of the metropolis who remind him that he is also an outcast.

The city and its people become part of Brigge's imagination. Whereas Paris, however ambiguous and personal, emerged as a city in Baudelaire, a physical and social creature, in Rilke it is virtually absent. The city transforms into an anonymous space containing pitiful crowds, the landscape of nightmares. Rilke's narrator can only see a world at the verge of collapsing; he can only represent images of agony and desolation in a fragmented language. Characteristically, Brigge's impressions of "Paris" exist in the form of notebooks, suggesting incompleteness and emphasizing fragmentation and solipsism. The notebook form theoretically excludes the notion of a reader, an audience, since it is addressed only to the "writer" himself.⁹

The moment of the actual confrontation between Brigge and the crowd of Paris is one of the most haunting images in the novel. As the narrator leaves a cr  merie, he finds himself suddenly surrounded by throngs of people:

Aber ich konnte auch jetzt nichts zu mir nehmen; ehe die Eier noch fertig waren, trieb es mich wieder hinaus in die Strassen, die ganz dickfl  ssig von Menschen mir entgegenrannen. Denn es war Fasching und Abend, und die Leute hatten alle Zeit und trieben umher und rieben sich einer am andern. Und ihre Gesichter waren voll von dem Licht, das aus den Schaubuden kam, und das Lachen quoll aus ihren M  nden wie Eiter aus offenen Stellen. Sie lachten immer mehr und drangen sich immer enger zusammen, je ungeduldiger ich versuchte vorw  rts zu kommen. ...An den Ecken waren die Menschen festgekeilt, einer in den andern geschoben, und es war keine Weiterbewegung in ihnen, nur ein leises, weiches Auf und Ab, als ob sie sich stehend paarten. (43-44)

(But even now I couldn't wait for the eggs; before they were ready, something drove me out again into the streets, which rushed towards

9. The notebook device also suggests that Rilke either planned to write a novel or poetry about the city but failed, or that in this way he fictionalized his journals from the Paris years.

me in a viscous flood of humanity. It was carnival-time, and evening, and people, with time on their hands, were roaming through the streets, rubbing against one another. Their faces were full of the light that came from the carnival booths, and laughter oozed from their mouths like pus from an open wound. The more impatiently I tried to push my way forward, the more they laughed and crowded together. ... On the street corners, people were wedged in, flattened together with no way to move forward, just a gentle back-and-forth motion, as if they were copulating.) (48-48)

The nightmarish quality of Rilke's description recalls James Ensor's carnival paintings. The presentation of the festive crowd as a tide, a natural force swaying away the individual corresponds to Elias Canetti's definition of the "open crowd", which acquires its power by its increasing number and density (29-30). The open crowd terrorizes the individual who does not want to become a part of it; whoever is not within the crowd is against it — and will be devoured.

The most striking element of Rilke's description is the disgusting physicality of the crowd. The density of the people becomes obscene; Brigge sees the "rhythmic" crowd (Canetti 29-30) as a herd of animals "rubbing against one another" and "copulating". The association between crowd and animal sexuality recalls Baudelaire's comment in *Mon cœur mis à nu*: "la foutérie est le lyrisme du peuple" ("copulation is the lyricism of the masses"; 648). Even the crowd's laughter sounds obscene to Brigge: the comparison of laughter to pus oozing from a wound associates the crowd with a disease, an infection that might contaminate the narrator.

Indeed, the physical contact between poet and crowd affects him psychosomatically, producing the symptoms of nausea and suffocation. Brigge feels "stupefying pain", is covered in sweat and unable to breathe (49). The crowd becomes a plague which infects and poisons him. Brigge will try to cure himself by exploring his past, by plunging into the depths of his consciousness.

Contemporary social psychologists argue that the traditional assumption that crowding produces stress is wrong: "Crowding by itself has neither good effects nor bad effects on people but rather serves to intensify the individual's typical reactions to the situation" (Freedman 89-90). Brigge's agoraphobia is a social reaction. Unable to assert his superiority over the crowd and afraid to become part of it, Brigge ends his narrative in a state of total self-absorption. The mystical revelation which he experiences towards the end of the novel signals his retreat from the streets towards the interior.

The narrator's fear of the crowd, the inability to represent the crowd without threatening the sanity of the self — and the eventual withdrawal

within the self — is a political stance, linking Romanticism (Poe) with modernism. The progress of T. S. Eliot's poetry from an modernist representation of urban experience to an abstract confession of religious experience, follows and amplifies Brigg's path, the transformation of the *flâneur* into the suffering soul, the analysand, the confessor. The relationship between intellectual and crowd emerging from Eliot's poetry, combines images of Baudelaire with the anxieties of Rilke, illustrating an opposition to the growing representation of the crowd in twentieth-century culture.

"The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" presents an intellectual, sensitive, and neurotic individual. Prufrock is afraid to interact with the world, always postponing the moment of confrontation: "There will be time, there will be time / To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet." As in *The Notebooks*, the human face is seen as a mask which disguises the self. To be among the crowd signifies for Prufrock the betrayal and eventual loss of the self.

The poem begins with the speaker getting ready to go out for the evening. He wanders "through certain half-deserted streets", avoiding the crowd. Nonetheless, Prufrock can smell its presence in the streets, the unpleasant smell of humanity — of filth and sex, or "birth, copulation and death" as Eliot writes in "Sweeney Agonistes". Prufrock is not a *flâneur*, the lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows, whom he sees during his wanderings are extensions of his own self. Prufrock's vision absorbs only the disgusting aspects of the city and its inhabitants. Unable to have any exchange with the crowd, Prufrock is enclosed in an entirely solipsistic world.

The vision of the dullness, ugliness and filth of urban life continues in Eliot's "Preludes". The smell of food and stale beer and the grim weather ironically contrast with the poem's title. The poem echoes Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens* without, however, any of the magical quality which coexists with the horror of the modern cityscape in Baudelaire's urban poetry. Eliot is disgusted by the daily routine of the masses. The crowd is reduced to dirty feet and hands, polluting the city:

The morning comes to consciousness
Of faint stale smells of beer
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee-stands.

The vastness of the London crowd overwhelms the individual. The feet of the masses during rush hour trample on the poet's soul. The poet defines himself as a "soul" in opposition to the crowd, represented as body parts.

Eliot's allusions to Baudelaire's vision of city life continue in "Morning at the Window" which echoes Baudelaire's "À une passante" ("In Passing").



However, the allusion emphasizes the difference between the two poets' approach to the city and its crowd. In "Morning at the Window", the speaker does not encounter the unknown woman at the street (as in Baudelaire's poem), but watches her from above, protected behind his window; all the excitement of the Baudelairean encounter is lost:

The brown waves of fog toss up to me
Twisted faces from the bottom of the street,
And tear from a passer-by with muddy skirts
An aimless smile that hovers in the air
And vanishes along the level of the roofs.

From his post of observation, the speaker claims not only his distance but also his superiority over the distorted faces of the morning crowd. The smile of the passer-by is forced and futile instead of promising, a signal of possibility as in Baudelaire's poem. The image of the stranger's muddy skirts and the aimlessness of her smile demystify the experience of Baudelaire's sonnet. "À une passante" dramatized a transient exchange between poet and crowd: the crowd brought to the city dweller a figure that fascinated him, creating a new kind of desire.¹⁰ As Benjamin wrote in his essay on Baudelaire, "the delight of the urban poet is love — not at first sight but at last sight" (168-9).

Desire is absent from Eliot's urban world; instead he represents the crowd through images of debased sexuality. The figure of Sweeney embodies the crudest aspects of the life of the urban masses: food, drink, copulation, absence of any spirituality. In "Sweeney Erect" the classical allusions of the beginning of the poem are ironically juxtaposed with the scene of copulation that follows. In the lower-class boarding house, where the poem takes place, humanity is debased. People are presented as animals: "Gesture of orang-outang / Rises from the sheets in steam." The ironic tone of the poem reaffirms the distance and the intellectual superiority of the poet.

Sweeney reappears in the *Waste Land*, in part 3, entitled the "Fire Sermon". "The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring / Sweeney to Mrs Porter in the spring" (197-8) distracts the speaker from his "fishing", the activity which Eliot associates with the myth of the "Fisher king". Sweeney, with his noisy motor vehicle and his suspect country excursion, is the representative city-dweller, the inhabitant of the Waste land. Classical references are juxtaposed with banal instances of urban life, often related to

10. Car j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,
Ô toi que j'eusse aimée, Ô toi qui le savais!
(Of me you know nothing, I nothing of you — you
whom I might have loved and who knew that too!)

sexuality. The speaker, while describing the London crowd during the evening rush-hour, transforms into Tiresias, the blind prophet of Greek tragedy. The poet-prophet will "see" the scene that follows, the assignation of the typist and the clerk. Love-making is presented as part of the lower-classes' routine, empty of any emotion. The poet's identification with Tiresias emphasizes his disgust:

And I Tiresias have foresuffered all
 Enacted on this same divan or bed;
 I who have sat by Thebes below the wall
 And walked among the lowest of the dead.

(243-247)

The poet complains that instead of writing about gods and heroes, he is forced to represent his age, the era of crowds, the petty encounters of typists and clerks. The irony stresses Eliot's discontent with urban reality. The poet believes that he has a visionary power enabling him to leave behind the ugly masses and experience a mystical revelation — as in the last part of the *Waste Land*.

Poetic vision separates the poet from the London crowd; in the first part of the *Waste Land*, entitled "The Burial of the Dead", the speaker identifies the masses going to work in the morning with the crowds of the dead, the damned souls of Hell:

Unreal City
 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
 I had not thought death had undone so many
 Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,
 And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.

(60-65)

By combining allusions to Baudelaire's "Les sept vieillards" ("The Seven Old Men")¹¹ with echoes from Dante's *Inferno* III.55-57 and VI.25-27¹², Eliot

-
11. Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves,
 Où le spectre, en plein jour, raccroche le passant!
 (Swarming city — city gorged with dreams
 where ghosts by day accost the passer by).
12. e dietro le venia sì lunga tratta
 di gente, ch'i' non avrei credutto
 che morte tanta n'avesse disfatta
 (... and there the folk folorn
 Rushed after it, in such an endless train

reflects on the representation of the crowd in modern poetry: On the one hand, the poet tries to find in the city and in its dwellers the source of his poetic inspiration; on the other hand, finding only debasement and misery he turns to a poetic tradition of metaphysical experience. Unlike Baudelaire, Eliot cannot discover the mystical within the contradictions of urban life. In the last part of the *Waste Land*, the poet desires to flee the present and return to the past.

In Eliot's apocalyptic vision, the giant "unreal" cities of past and present (Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, London) collapse. He envisions all civilization shattered in fragments; he confesses that the poet can only create a jigsaw puzzle out of the fragments ("Those fragments I have shored against my ruins"; 430). Searching for "redemption" in art (a spiritual activity linking tradition with modernity), Eliot transforms from the poet of modern life into the poet of religious experience. The *Waste Land* manifests this transition; in fact, after this poem, Eliot gradually abandons the city and its crowd with their allegorical potential to return to religious symbolism. Like Rilke at the end of *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, Eliot ends the discourse of exchange with the crowd. The religious discourse is one that the poet can control, one that refuses the contradictions of the exchange between self and crowd but instead focuses on conflict and "salvation" within the self. The metaphysical interrogation carries the poet away from the confrontation with the crowd, traditionally defined as physical. By associating the poetic self with the soul, the spirit which transcends time and history, Eliot distances himself from the matter, the bodies representing the crowd. This opposition in the context of twentieth-century history is a poetic as well as political position. Rilke's and Eliot's final self-absorption defends the poet's self from being devoured by the crowd, and in this way conserves the myth of the poet.

Eliot and Rilke are not interested in resolving the riddle of the sphinx-crowd but instead appropriate it within their solipsistic world. Baudelaire, on the other hand, evokes the ambiguities of the relationship between author and crowd through the ambiguities of his own discourse (of genre, form, content, manner). As his discourse fluctuates from the sexual to

it never would have entered in my head
There were so many men whom death had slain.) (III.54-57)

Quivi, secondo che per ascoltare,
non avea pianto mai che di sospiri
che l'aura eterna facevan tremare

(We heard no loud complaint, no crying there,
No sound of grief except the sound of sighing
Quivering for ever through the eternal air;) (IV.25-27)

the social, from the personal to the political, the poet-crowd relationship undergoes a constant change. In this way, Baudelaire transcends his own extremist political opinions and develops a social reality into an artform. Baudelaire's sensibility seems closer to postmodern culture, interested in the fusion of the personal with the political, the individual with the crowd, "high" art with popular culture, than the anxieties of the modernists, struggling to conserve the hierarchy of the soul.

WORKS CITED

- Barrows, Susanna. *Distorting Mirrors: Visions of the Crowd in Late Nineteenth-Century France*. New Haven: Yale, 1981.
- Baudelaire, Charles. *Oeuvres complètes. L'intégrale*. Paris: Seuil, 1968.
- . *Les Fleurs du mal*. Trans. Richard Howard. Boston: Godine, 1982.
- Benjamin, Walter. "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1969.
- Canetti, Elias. *Crowds and Power*. Trans. Carol Stewart. New York: Viking, 1963.
- Dante. *The Divine Comedy*. Trans. Dorothy Sayers. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949.
- Eliot, T. S. *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. London: Faber, 1963.
- Freedman, Jonathan. *Crowding and Behavior*. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1975.
- Kelsen, Hans. "La notion d'Etat et la psychologie sociale." *Masses et politique. Hermès*. Paris: CNRS, 1988. 134-169.
- Le Bon, Gustave. *La Psychologie des foules*. Paris: Alcan, 1895.
- Macherey, Pierre. "Figures de l'homme d'en bas." *Masses et politique*. 67-89.
- McPhail, Clark. *The Myth of the Madding Crowd*. New York: Gruyter, 1991.
- Mercer, Colin. "Baudelaire and the City: 1848 and the Inscription of Hegemony." *Literature, Politics and Theory*. Ed. Francis Barker et al. London: Methuen, 1986.
- Mills, Nicolaus. *The crowd in American Literature*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1986.
- Nye Robert A. *The Origins of Crowd Psychology: Gustave Le Bon and the Crisis of Mass Democracy in the Third Republic*. London: Sage, 1975.
- Pachet, Pierre. *Le premier venu*. Paris: Denoel, 1976.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *Selected Writings*. Ed. Edward Davidson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956.
- Reynié, Dominique. "Théories du nombre." *Masses et politique*. 95-105.

- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*. 1910. Frankfurt: Insel, 1982.
- . *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Trans. Stephen Mitchell. New York: Random, 1982.
- Schor, Naomi. *Zola's Crowds*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Ευτέρπη Μήτση, *Ο ποιητής στην εποχή του πλήθους*

Στα τέλη του δέκατου ένατου αιώνα, οι λαϊκές τάξεις κατέκλυσαν τα μεγάλα αστικά κέντρα, απαιτώντας εργασία, ψυχαγωγία, πολιτική αλλά και πολιτιστική εκπροσώπηση. Χαρακτηριστικά, ο Γάλλος συντηρητικός ιστορικός Gustave Le Bon ονόμασε την εποχή του «εποχή του πλήθους». Το βιβλίο του Le Bon *Η ψυχολογία του πλήθους*, που επηρέασε κάθε μετέπειτα ανάλυση της συμπεριφοράς των μαζών, εκφράζει την προσπάθεια των διανοουμένων της εποχής να αντιμετωπίσουν και να ελέγξουν τα πλήθη των μοντέρνων μεγαλουπόλεων. Η δυναμική παρουσία του πλήθους στη δημόσια ζωή ανάγκασε όχι μόνο τους ιστορικούς και πολιτικούς επιστήμονες αλλά και τους λογοτέχνες να ασχοληθούν με τις λαϊκές μάζες και κυρίως με τη σχέση ατόμου και πλήθους. Η εργασία αυτή εξετάζει τη σχέση λογοτέχνη και πλήθους στα τέλη του δεκάτου ένατου και στις αρχές του εικοστού αιώνα: Μέσα από τα κείμενα των Poe, Baudelaire, Rilke και Eliot εμφανίζεται μια διφορούμενη και συνεχώς μεταβαλλόμενη σχέση που αντανakλά το πέρασμα από το ρομαντισμό στο μοντερνισμό. Ο ποιητής των πόλεων, όπως και ο Le Bon, βλέπει το πλήθος σαν τη μυθολογική σφίγγα: ο «αναγνώστης» του πλήθους, σαν τον Οιδίποδα, πρέπει να λύσει το αίνιγμα για να επιζήσει. Οι ρομαντικοί ποιητές παρουσάζουν τη σχέση ποιητή και πλήθους σαν μια σύγκρουση μεταξύ υποκειμένου και αντικειμένου, μεταξύ λυρικού «εγώ» και «άλλου».

Ήδη όμως από το διήγημα του Poe *Ο άνθρωπος του πλήθους*, αυτός ο ασφαλής διαχωρισμός απειλείται και η σχέση ταλαντεύεται ανάμεσα στην αίσθηση υπεροχής και στον κίνδυνο αφομοίωσης: η επιθυμία του λογοτέχνη να απεικονίσει το πλήθος μέσα στο λογοτέχνημα συγκρούεται με το φόβο της απώλειας του εαυτού μέσα στον όχλο. Αυτή η διφορούμενη σχέση κυριαρχεί στο ποιητικό και αυτοβιογραφικό έργο του Baudelaire, που ενσαρκώνει το μεταίχμιο ανάμεσα στο

ρομαντισμό και το μοντερνισμό. Κατεξοχήν λογοτέχνης της πόλης, ο Baudelaire περιγράφει το μοντέρνο ποιητή και σαν θύπη και σαν θύμα του πλήθους. Σαγηνευμένος αλλά και αηδιασμένος από τη σύγχρονη αστική ζωή, ο Γάλλος ποιητής προσπαθεί να βρει νέες φόρμες και νέα είδη γραφής για να αποδώσει μια εντελώς νέα εμπειρία. Η επαφή με το πλήθος εκφράζεται σαν λόγος συναλλαγής, μέσα στα πλαίσια της εποχής του εξελιγμένου καπιταλισμού. Ο λόγος του Baudelaire, λόγος ταυτόχρονα πολιτικός, ερωτικός και οικονομικός, συγχέει την οικονομία με τον ερωτισμό και το εμπόριο με την τέχνη.

Όσο οι λαϊκές μάζες αποκτούν μεγαλύτερη δύναμη με τον ερχομό του εικοστού αιώνα (ειδικά μετά τον Πρώτο Παγκόσμιο πόλεμο), τόσο ορισμένοι μοντερνιστές όπως ο Rilke και ο Eliot νοσταλγούν το ρομαντικό ποιητικό υποκείμενο, που έχει τελεσίδικα πια χαθεί. Στα *Σημειωματάρια του Malte Laurids Brigge* του Rilke και στα ποιήματα του Eliot που αναφέρονται στην αστική ζωή, με αποκορύφωμα το *Waste Land*, το πλήθος ταυτίζεται με το λούμπεν προλεταριάτο, με τον όχλο των αστέγων, μεθυσμένων και γυναικών, με την ασχήμια, τον υλισμό και την πεζότητα των πόλεων. Αντίθετα από τον Baudelaire, ο μοντερνιστής ποιητής απομακρύνεται από το πλήθος, απορροφώντας το μέσα στον σολιψιστικό του κόσμο και συντηρώντας έτσι το μύθο του ποιητή. Δημιουργώντας μια ποιητική του πλήθους, ο λογοτέχνης μοιραία αποκαλύπτει και την πολιτική του.