06

Nika Keserović

“The genius of deep crime”: Edgar Allan Poe’s Dupin and the Production of Information

It is commonly stated that in the three stories that feature C. Auguste Dupin—"The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Mystery of Marie Roget," and "The Purloined Letter" – Edgar Allan Poe invented the detective story. These stories are collectively referred to as the tales of ratiocination, as their narrative primarily focuses on methodical analysis or logical reasoning as a tool for elucidating mysterious or puzzling events. While Poe's three ratiocination stories (and detective fiction in general) have been the topic of many a paper, it is nevertheless clear that they possess an undercurrent of social facts and processes which still demand attention. The aim of this paper will be first to explore the social context in which the character of Monsieur Dupin was brought into literary existence, and then to discuss the way in which the capitalist mode of production took control over him by the end of the ratiocination cycle.

Before moving on to Poe's tales of ratiocination, some of the conditions that surround the beginnings of detective fiction should be considered; namely, a new idea of political governing that appeared in the 18th century—liberalism—and the oversaturation and commodification of information. Both are deeply interconnected. As a political philosophy, liberalism became a central concept in the Age of Enlightenment, critiquing the existing monarchies across Europe, putting an emphasis on the notions of individual rights, liberty, and equality, as well as market freedom. Of course, it was also the conceptual basis for the American Revolution and the United States' subsequent declaration of independence from the British Crown. For Michel

Foucault, at the time of its appearance, liberalism signaled a change in the principle of governing, a modification of the already existing concept of *raison d'État* (fr. national interest) (22). While governing in accordance with *raison d'État* simply meant "arranging things so that the state becomes sturdy and permanent, so that it becomes wealthy, and so that it becomes strong in the face of everything that may destroy it" (4), liberalism signified "a sort of intensification or internal refinement of *raison d'État*" (28) by turning to the market as a site of truth for guidance in governing (30). It was the start of perceiving market principles as natural (31) and for the government, it meant the beginning of "working with interests," in fact, dealing with "a complex interplay between individual and collective interests, between social utility and economic profit, between the equilibrium of the market and the regime of public authorities, between basic rights and the independence of the governed" (44). For Foucault, working with interests means that a liberal government is "forced to determine the precise extent to which and up to what point individual interest, that is to say, individual interests insofar as they are different and possibly opposed to each other, constitute a danger for the interest of all" (65). Thus, we see that liberalism spurred a new principle of calculation of justice and individual liberties. In that sense, "liberalism is not acceptance of freedom" because "freedom is something which is constantly produced" (65). Of course, what is produced alongside it is its dialectical complement—a "system of constraints" which limits individual action by evoking the idea of security, and the way liberalism arbitrates between the two is "by reference to

the notion of danger" (65-6). Danger functions as the border of the perceived limitlessness of personal freedom—it is the reason to stop, to turn away, to hide. It can therefore be utilized as a mechanism of restriction, a way for the liberal government to order and discipline the otherwise unrelenting conflict of wills. Foucault states that:

> An entire education and culture of danger appears in the nineteenth century which is very different from those great apocalyptic threats of plague, death, and war which fed the political and cosmological imagination of the Middle Ages, and even of the seventeenth century. The horsemen of the Apocalypse disappear and in their place everyday dangers appear, emerge, and spread everywhere, perpetually being brought to life, reactualized, and circulated by what could be called the political culture of danger in the nineteenth century. […] For example, […] the appearance of detective fiction and journalistic interest in crime around the middle of the nineteenth century; […] everywhere you see this stimulation of the fear of danger which is, as it were, the condition, the internal psychological and cultural correlative of liberalism. There is no liberalism without a culture of danger. (66)

The notion of danger became a political necessity and permeated all aspects of life. This can also be seen in people's rising suspicion in their fellow men and a concurrent idea of man's inherent baseness and corrupt nature. This was only exacerbated as the urban population grew. As cities expanded in both size and number, and many countries went through a bourgeois revolution, masses appeared. Man found himself submerged in a vast sea of others whose interests and intentions varied from and even conflicted with his own. The city thus frequently represented a place of ambiguity and anxiety, if not of outright violence. This hectic reality left man feeling disoriented and lost, so it is no wonder that its perceived dangers and repercussions were explored in the fiction of the time.

Poe does exactly that in his 1840 tale "The Man of the Crowd," whose autodiegetic narrator is trying to make sense of a puzzling stranger he spots in the crowd. As the tale immediately preceding "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Man of the Crowd" stands as a transitional work between the Gothic tales of the late 1830s and the tales of ratiocination of the early 1840s (Kennedy 187). In some ways, the narrator in "The Man of the Crowd" is a precursor to C. Auguste Dupin; he turns to his analytical faculty to get to the bottom of the mystery of the strange man. Having recovered from an illness, the narrator of the tale finds himself "in one of those happy moods" when "the intellect, electrified, surpasses as greatly its everyday condition" (Poe, "The Man of the Crowd" 33); he feels "a calm but inquisitive interest in every thing" (34). In such a mood, he turns to people-watching and has a strong belief in his analytical prowess—he focuses on details intently, and is convinced that he is able to "frequently read, even in that brief interval of a glance, the history of long years" in each face despite the volume of the crowd (37). However, his thorough but peaceful observing of the crowd is interrupted by the sight of a man who appears to be 'unreadable'; he leaves the narrator with simultaneous impressions 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 supreme despair" (38). Furthermore, his intentions are unclear—the narrator catches "a glimpse both of a diamond and of a dagger" under his clothes (38). This, however, leads to nowhere; after following him for hours, the narrator finally realizes that the stranger

simply "refuses to be alone"—he has no intentions beyond staying among people, only following the flux of the crowd (41). This does not come as a relief to the narrator, but rather utterly terrifies him. He proclaims the stranger to be "the type and the genius of deep crime" (41), perhaps meaning that he is a man who has been emptied out, who cannot find any solace in solitude and is ultimately lacking in personhood—the concept of the crowd incarnate. Even though the man does nothing 'wrong', the narrator is left feeling uneasy at the thought of a man with an impenetrable (and perhaps even non-existent) interior who he cannot 'decipher' and 'sort' the way he did other people. Similarly, Whalen notes how "'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' conjures up an unreal urban space where anything seems possible" and how the narrator in "The Mystery of Marie Roget" refers to the great frequency of crimes in large cities (230). Insofar as the feeling of general confusion and distrust permeates the modern society, "The Man of the Crowd" captures the social conditions present in the consequent tales of ratiocination.

However, the confusion and distrust do not only arise because of urban masses, but also because of a change in the production and dissemination of information. The Western world of the late 18th century underwent the Industrial Revolution, which brought on mass production and infrastructural development (among other things), and in the 19th century it also saw great scientific progress. Both of these things meant new possibilities for the expansion, organization and circulation of knowledge. This went hand in hand with the mass print culture of the time. In the United States, popular

journalism catering to the large working and middle classes "was at once a cause and consequence of the Industrial Revolution" (Gross 319). While "in the Old World, heavy taxes on newspapers restricted their circulation to an economic elite," in the States "news was potentially accessible to all" as "the press enjoyed special privileges under the fostering arm of government" (317). There was a desire to make information available to everyone, partly because of the values purported by the Enlightenment, but also because of profit, financial as well as political. Gross states that "the federal government that came into being with the Constitution in 1789 set about promoting a greater sense of nationality" and that "newspapers were central to that goal" (317). Moreover, Whalen argues that to some people of the time "writing and especially printing appeared as symptoms of a signifying environment in which the individual had forever lost the capacity to grasp the totality of knowledge" due to the sheer volume of it (237). As the idea of wisdom arising from deep contemplation seemingly became obsolete, the concept of the intellectual had to change in order to adapt to these new conditions. Whalen states that "wherever science and the systematic accumulation of knowledge had abetted a bourgeois revolution, the intellectual ceased to be a repository of wisdom and became instead a storehouse of information", or at least aimed to become one (233). This historical conjuncture of liberal governing (and its reliance on the notion of danger), the appearance of urban masses, and the change in the production of knowledge frames the construction of the character of C. Auguste Dupin, the detective genius of Poe's tales of ratiocination.

First, Dupin is a polymath (Whalen 242). In "The Murders of the Rue Morgue" the narrator is astonished by "the vast extent of his reading" (121) and his ability to follow links in other people's trains of thought, as if he can read their minds (124); in "The Mystery of Marie Roget" he shows his understanding of physics and chemistry in order to disprove the hasty conclusions about Marie Roget's death made by newspapers (219). More importantly however, Dupin possesses a great analytical power, which is in some ways evocative of the genius of the British Romantics or, more precisely, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's idea of the secondary Imagination as opposed to the Fancy in regard to man's creative capacities. While the Fancy "must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association" and "has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites," the secondary Imagination "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate" (Coleridge 167). In other words, while Fancy is the creative faculty that combines ideas by associating them to one another, the secondary Imagination is in a sense capable of creating syntheses, that is, new ideas. In "The Murders of the Rue Morgue," Poe explains that:

> The analytical power should not be confounded with simple ingenuity; for while the analyst is necessarily ingenious, the ingenious man is often remarkably incapable of analysis. The constructive or combining power, by which ingenuity is usually manifested, […] has been so frequently seen in those whose intellect bordered otherwise upon idiocy […] Between ingenuity and the analytic ability there exists a difference far greater, indeed, than that between the fancy and the imagination, but of a character very strictly analogous. It will be found, in fact, that the ingenious are always fanciful, and the truly imaginative never otherwise than analytic. (132)

Therefore, it is not simply that Dupin's mind is replete with various kinds of knowledge, but that he navigates the superabundance of information in the world with ease. In

fact, the analyst appears to exhibit "a degree of acumen" which to ordinary people seems "preternatural" and whose conclusions have the "air of intuition" (Poe, "The Murders of the Rue Morgue" 118). Dupin's boasts that "most men, in respect to himself, wore windows in their bosoms" and that he could gain "intimate knowledge" of other people's thoughts and intentions (Poe, "The Murders of the Rue Morgue" 123) are very similar to the one made by the narrator of "The Man of the Crowd." The narrator there, however, fails to 'read' the strange man primarily because "he cannot maintain a critical detachment," but rather "falls under the influence of vague sensations" and abandons "his observation post to plunge into the chaos of the streets," symbolically leaving behind "a detached, analytical perspective for a more visceral involvement in the world of human striving" unlike Dupin, who "calmly withholds judgment until the evidence has been weighed" (Kennedy 188-89). Perhaps to further illustrate Dupin's intellectual power, Poe does not write the tales of ratiocination from his point of view, even though he is the central character; as Dupin's mind remains concealed by the narrative, his genius is put on a pedestal. Whalen states that "the narrator plays a mediating role between common intelligence—whether of the police or of the public—and the extreme brilliance of Dupin," which in turn "fosters a structural identification between reader and narrator, who are both presumably subordinate to Dupin in everything except wonder" (230). Dupin stands in opposition to the ordinary intelligence of the local authorities, and it is only his superior acumen which can solve the mysterious crimes. Shulman, who refers to the analytical power as

poetic power because of its ties to imagination, says that what the tales of ratiocination do is show Dupin's superiority over the inspector, "put the authority figure in the power of the poet" and "affirm that power at the expense of practical men of affair" (255). While the "thorough, diligent, practical" police Prefect, Monsieur G, "works hard, methodically, and dully" (Shulman 255), Dupin holds that "there is such a thing as being too profound"; in his view, "truth is not always in a well" and is in fact "invariably superficial" (Poe, "The Murders of the Rue Morgue" 133). For Dupin, what is important is to grasp reality as broadly as possible, a not to focus on its delicate details. Whalen states that the ratiocination tales show "Poe's growing premonition of a world where all truth would be transferred from the metaphysical depths to the material surfaces of culture" (226). At a time when most people struggled to obtain the correct information, both because of its overproduction as well as sensationalist reporting, in Dupin, Poe created a character who possessed the right skills to make sense of it all, as "the necessary knowledge" became "that of what to observe" (Poe, "The Murders of the Rue Morgue" 120). Dupin's duty thus becomes to "make sense out of a conflicting mass of information and thereby lead the city out of confusion and impending chaos" (Whalen 229); he unveils the mystery of the gruesome murder of Madame L'Espanaye and her daughter, disproves theories posed by sensationalist journalists about Marie Roget's death, and stops a minister from being able to blackmail the queen.

However, by the end of the ratiocination cycle, Dupin not only remains able to process information, but also "transform it into productive capital" (Whalen 234). While in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" Dupin is not yet a professional detective—he does not provide his analytical skills in exchange for money—in "The Mystery of Marie Roget" he already "refuses to work without a contract," and in "The Purloined Letter," his biggest immediate incentive to help Monsieur G is the money being offered by the Prefect (Whalen 241). Whalen explains that "while Dupin solved his first mystery to amuse himself and (secondarily) to exonerate an innocent man", in the remaining two stories he "works as a paid consultant to the police"; his genius thus becomes "a marketable commodity" (231). Therefore, Dupin's guiding principle is no longer simply bringing truth to light, but revealing only particular truths to particular people (paying customers). From the beginning of the ratiocination cycle, Dupin has personal motives for solving the mysteries: the egoistic pleasure he derives from defeating his rivals (the Prefect and the speculating newspaper reporters in "Marie Roget")"; a favor he owes to Le Bon, the bank clerk wrongfully accused of the murder of Madame and Mademoiselle L'Espanaye; his wish to exact personal revenge on Minister D— and his political bias which makes him work in the queen's favor (Thoms 137). However, this fact itself doesn't prevent him from making that knowledge public, *selling it* does. Furthermore, Thoms states that:

> Dupin, who assumes an oppressive power in trespassing upon the private lives of others and in explaining the community to itself, is not the criminal's opposite but a tainted figure who is entangled in the very world he seeks to explicate. [...] The tales seem to construct Dupin as an unbiased observer,

> whose objectivity is guaranteed by his apparent aloofness from the social world in which crime occurs. (136)

While he and the narrator retreat from society during the period of time between the murders of the Rue Morgue and Marie Roget's death, Dupin is far from disconnected from society; his ambiguous past, which includes both a past favor from a bank clerk and a preexisting relationship with a minister, shows otherwise. Thoms also argues that "we should examine the act of investigation itself" as the question of what is not being considered arises (137). While he does successfully solve the grisly murders of the Rue Morgue, Dupin "overlooks the money-making motive of the sailor" whose plan is to sell the orangutan that committed the murders; thus "the killings become merely an unlucky interlude within a successful financial venture that remains unquestioned" (Thoms 138). The question of ethics in regard to the sailor's actions (taking the animal out of its natural habitat for monetary gain) appears to be of no interest for Dupin. In "The Mystery of Marie Roget," Dupin disapproves of the press's unfounded inferences about the case, but does not solve it, perhaps willfully ignoring the very real possibility that Marie Roget died in a secret abortion attempt, as was the likely explanation of the death of Mary Rogers, whom Poe's story is based on (Thoms 140). Reducing these situations to a mere question of "Who did it?" stifles any comprehensive critique of the status quo. In that sense, Dupin seems to be protecting the established political order and the dominant production of knowledge, even when he intellectually challenges the authorities. In some ways, Dupin becomes "the genius of deep crime" (Poe, "The Man of the Crowd" 41), whose intentions remain obscure to the people, but

is nevertheless involved in the preservation of 'deep' social structures, which organize the distribution of political power and strengthen institutional authority. While his main motivation in the beginning might have been an analyst's predictable love of enigmas and mysteries, by the end Dupin embraces his role as provider (and depriver) of public knowledge. This becomes perhaps the most clear in "The Purloined Letter," when Dupin's financial incentive aligns with the political goal of those in charge. Dupin acknowledges that the incriminating letter provides the Minister with power over the queen only as long as it is not 'employed'; once it was made public, he would not have anything to hold over her head. In other words, if it became "common knowledge," the information "would lose its special utility, namely the political power it confers on its possessor" (Whalen 246). But the contents of the letter are never revealed, even after Dupin gets a hold of it. The question whether the letter should be made public is never posed, and Dupin never sees it as a public issue—the political drama is dealt with behind closed doors to protect "the honor" of the "exalted personage" (Poe, "The Purloined Letter" 339). The limits of knowledge come under the control the market and Dupin simply gives over the information to "the highest bidder" (Whalen 246). As the world becomes subsumed in the logic of interests, the Enlightenment ideal of knowledge as a universal right simply disintegrates.

The aim of this paper was to consider how the character of C. Auguste Dupin, despite being created in response to the modern crisis of overproduction of information, became implicated in it. Instead of using his analytical skills for the benefit

of the people, he turned them into a commodity and virtually placed them into the hands of the powers that be. His analytical power stayed within (in Whalen's terms) the realm of surfaces, and in doing so it enabled the structure that created the potential dangers in the first place. The man who was once capable of helping the urban masses by weeding out useless information and leading out of the chaos of modernity moved on to become the one financially profiting from the culture of danger, and eventually even endorsing it as the power of the market took over.

WORKS CITED

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Biographia Literaria*. London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1960.

Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France*. Translated by Graham Burchell. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Gross, Robert A. "Building a National Literature: The United States 1800–1890." *A Companion to the History of the Book*, edited by Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose, Blackwell Publishing, 2007, pp. 315-28.

Hull, Richard. "'The Purloined Letter': Poe's Detective Story vs. Panoptic Foucauldian Theory." *Style*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1990, pp. 201–14. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/42945851. Accessed 20 June 2023.

Kennedy, J. Gerald. "The Limits of Reason: Poe's Deluded Detectives." *American Literature*, vol. 47, no. 2, 1975, pp. 184–96. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/2925480. Accessed 20 June 2023.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Man of the Crowd." *Collected Works of Poe, Webster's Thesaurus Edition*, Volume V, ICON Group International, 2005.

—— "The Murder of the Rue Morgue." *Selected Tales of Edgar Allan Poe.* Penguin Books Ltd., 1994.

—— "The Mystery of Marie Roget." *Selected Tales of Edgar Allan Poe.* Penguin Books Ltd., 1994.

—— "The Purloined Letter." *Selected Tales of Edgar Allan Poe.* Penguin Books Ltd., 1994.

Shulman, Robert. "Poe and the Powers of the Mind." *ELH*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1970, pp. 245–62. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/2872400. Accessed 20 June 2023.

Thoms, Peter. "Poe's Dupin and the power of detection." *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, edited by Kevin J. Hayes, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Whalen, Terence. *Edgar Allan Poe and the Masses: The Political Economy of Literature in Antebellum America*. Princeton University Press, 1999.