

Impossible Readings: Transparency and Opacity in Poe's Urban Imaginary

“It was well said of a certain German book that ‘es lasst sich nicht lesen’ -- it does not permit itself to be read” (108). The line is from Edgar Allan Poe's enigmatic tale, “The Man of the Crowd,” a meditation on the corrosive power of guilt and a fable of inaccessible psychologies. For Poe, the man of the crowd is a closed secret, a cipher, epistemically available intermittently and only to those possessing the requisite expertise. In this paper I shall argue that Poe's man in the crowd inculcates those twin principles (articulated so forcefully in the Dupin stories and in the essay “Maelzel's Chess Player”) of transparency and opacity, whose interplay structures our ability to see and know. Further, I shall maintain, this binary informs key initiatives of Poe's imagined London, from the various social programs aimed at regulating and reforming the ‘criminal classes’ to the formal conventions of an emerging literary genre: the detective story.

Animating the closed-secret story is the nineteenth-century fear that criminality is a latent, progressive infection incapacitating the social body via the figure of the criminal; crucially, a criminal individual or organization characterized by a dangerous invisibility. Framing the criminal classes as a social problem was inflected by multiple discourses: health and hygiene, heredity, degeneration, class continuity, medicine, biology and so on. Each of these discourses was, I shall argue, anxious to rephrase opacity as transparency; or, in the case of the emerging detective story, to provide a reductive but fully-justified paraphrase of complex social negotiations in the form of an explanation: the dénouement. Just as in the “German book,” however, detection is doubled by the prospect of opacity, that ever-present shadow across the truth of our conditions and ourselves that flourishes within the urban imaginary.