

Scott Peeples, *The Man of the Crowd: Edgar Allan Poe and the City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 224 pp.

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Edgar Poe was the second son of traveling actors who crisscrossed the Atlantic seaboard, working the antebellum theater circuit. Poe's father—a drinker, debtor, and punching bag for theater critics—abandoned his family soon after Poe was born. Poe's mother—talented, dedicated, but fatally ill—died some months later. Orphaned at two, Edgar was fostered by a family in Richmond, but he was never legally adopted, and his surrogate father eventually disowned him. Living by his pen, Poe spent his professional life rolling up and down the Atlantic coast, working in one major publishing city after another. At each stop, he enjoyed varying degrees of fame but never stable success. Some combination of drink, debt, literary ambition, or his family's welfare drove him to the next city, where the cycle would repeat. Born to loss and transience, Poe never attached anywhere for long.

He has since attached to the world's imagination, however, his shadow looming large over the global literary landscape, his whirlwind life retold in countless narratives. Bringing an overworked biographee like Poe back to the page is no easy endeavor. Yet when someone who has studied Poe for years detects new patterns in the old biographical evidence, produces new evidence reinforcing those patterns, and draws important conclusions from the findings, we're reminded that it can be done. Scott Peeples's *The Man of the Crowd: Edgar Allan Poe and the City* is a lean and brisk biography, stylistically crafted for a wide readership. Poe courted the same readership—then called the masses. But he also wrote for the “critical taste,” as he put it, for the crowd well lettered. The same goes for Peeples, whose study combines the accessible and the academic in ways that should satisfy both the general and specialist reader.

The Man of the Crowd contains an introduction, which theorizes Poe's life as one of constant movement within or between cities, four chapters grounded in cities that most shaped Poe and his career, and a final one on the author's last 18 months—spent, fittingly enough, mostly on the road. The project benefits from important earlier biographical research, the wealth of historical texts on the Poe Society of Baltimore website, and Michelle Van Parys's excellent photography. It also benefits from the historicist repositioning of Poe that began in the late twentieth century. Exasperated by a long tradition of reading Poe in terms of timeless universals—as “Out of Space - Out of Time”—new historicists intervened and told traditionalists that *they* were out of space and out of time, and that the time had come to read Poe in historical context. Here Poe emerged not only as a writer attuned to social exigencies of race, class, and gender but

also as a roving author-editor who was both a product of and producer within the largely urban publishing industry.

While Poe's nomadic career is the moving center of this biography, Peeples also explores the social categories, especially race. In the chapter "Richmond," we see how the author grew up just blocks from the auctions, violence, and separation of black families that were the daily horrors of the city's slave trade. And we see how Poe later lived in his foster father's newly purchased mansion, maintained by several enslaved Black live-ins. Poe's proximity to chattel slavery lends additional weight to an observation Peeples makes earlier, designed to put Poe's talent and mobility in context. After acknowledging how exceptional Poe was, Peeples acknowledges that Poe "was also, in many ways, a typical American white man of the first half of the nineteenth century: he was free to move, to pursue a dream" (11-12).

The Man of the Crowd also evolves from recent geocritical writing on Poe—much of which appears in the fine collection *Poe and Place* (2018)—that uses concepts of place to better understand the author. Thinking about Poe and place is nothing new. The question of where to place this antebellum oddity—regionally, nationally, canonically, bibliographically—has preoccupied Poe studies for years. What's new is that the geocritical doesn't *question* Poe's place but rather seeks to better understand the author in relation to the specific geographies he inhabited or imagined. Drawing on geocritical practice, Peeples shows how the *home*, during the urban population boom of Poe's day, became a symbol of stability, a place to anchor in a rapidly changing world. That Poe never finds a place to call home, but rather spends his time in a constellation of places, makes him a geocritical goldmine; it also generates the biography's central tension.

That tension culminates in the book's persuasive two-part conclusion. By "spending his life on the move, between or within cities," Peeples asserts, "Poe became essentially cosmopolitan in his outlook, arguably America's first modern writer" (179). Implied here is that Poe's multiurban moves widen his worldview beyond the regional, offering insight into how Poe saw the world and why the world came around to meet him. It's a perceptive diagnosis of Poe's self-becoming; it's the stuff of good biography; but it's not as provocative as what follows: the proposition that the man of motion and many cities is "arguably America's first modern writer."

That's a big statement and an argument worth weighing. For decades, scholars have extolled Poe's modern sensibility, but mostly for its influence on future moderns, particularly Baudelaire, the first modern writer, so the story goes. When Poe enters the discussion, words like "anticipates," "heralds," "germinal," "prefigures," "protomodern," "protomodernist" place him, time and again, outside modernity proper.

There are, to be sure, those who affirm Poe's modernity. But by arguing for Poe's firstness, Peeples moves beyond affirmation, repositioning Poe in relation to modernity.

The foundation for Peeples's claim rests on Poe's lack of foundation—on his astonishing, lifelong transience—on the fact that he “was not so much uprooted as unrooted” (Peeples 3). That important insight, and the way the book demonstrates it, aligns Poe with modernity's own claim of rootlessness—its claim to have severed itself from the past. Modernity's insistence on extreme rupture has been criticized for denying historical continuity, yet there's no denying that Poe's “unrooted” life epitomizes the impermanence, mobility, and radical change at the heart of modern life.

Poe's urban identity fortifies the parallel: much as modernity evolved in the metropolis, Poe's “life and career,” argues Peeples, “were inseparable from the development of the American city” (11). That idea gains force after Poe quits his quasi-gentry life in Richmond and ends up in Baltimore. If young, industrializing Baltimore is “a work in progress” (Peeples 48), so too is Poe, who begins to professionalize himself within the city's aspiring magazine industry. When Poe moves to the established, rapidly modernizing cities of Philadelphia and New York, his life and career become more visibly (and ominously) impacted by the urban milieu.

Despite a depressed economy, Poe's Philadelphia enjoys robust industrial and population growth, and the author works under a full head of steam, thriving in the fast-paced world of magazine publishing while producing some of his best Gothic tales. At the same time, disillusionment sets in, and he uses satirical fiction to peel back the grand veneer of Philadelphian modernity to expose its mechanical logic, duplicity, and hollow progress. New York City intensifies it all—then makes it transitory. When Peeples describes the city's “chaotic energy,” “acceleration of change,” “population conditioned to transience,” and “ever-changing landscape” (121-22), he evokes Marshall Berman's propulsive study of modern evanescence, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (1982). Indeed, Poe's New York does seem to be melting, its endless innovation threatening to evaporate everything in its path. In response, Poe seeks relief in the semirural suburbs, where he ends up revising and publishing “The Raven” (1845). Sensation and fame follow, as do publishing opportunities, drawing him back to Gotham. There, following a pattern of self-sabotage, Poe's double breaks loose and rampages. His opportunities melt into air.

Among the most impressive parts of this biography is its potential to place Poe in serious dialogue with modernity studies. Exploring what happens if Poe were to replace Baudelaire as “first modern writer” might be a tempting place to start that conversation, but it risks running afoul of modernity scholars's recent efforts to decenter the West as the origin and primary domain of modernity. The same scholars have argued alternately

for a global or planetary approach to modernity, thus breaking a singular “modernity” into multiple modernities, which have developed—worldwide—in different places at different times. One way forward that would even better accord with Poe’s “cosmopolitan outlook” might be to approach this author as the exemplar of a particular modernity among a larger constellation of plural modernities. Future considerations aside, with *The Man of the Crowd*, Peebles has created a highly absorbing, important, and superbly crafted study that deserves a place on the top shelf of Poe biographies.