Introduction

The seventh section of George Oppen's poem *Of Being Numerous* (1968) appears as follows:

> Obsessed, bewildered
>
> By the shipwreck
> Of the singular
>
> We have chosen the meaning
> Of being numerous.[1]

The forty-part poem in its entirety can be read as a searching, speculative meditation on this particular section's concerns: crisis, singularity, choice, meaning, and above all numerosity. This section's syntax of narrative (the complete sentence, the present perfect verb tense), along with its testimonial collectivity (the first-person plural), gestures toward the historically persistent hold of these concerns on modern consciousness. The gesture is justifiable. In American literature, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" is often treated as the locus classicus of this inquiry into what being numerous entails. The story dramatizes one man's inexplicable attraction to crowds, an existential mystery that is compounded by the narrator-protagonist's inexplicable fascination with this one man. Oppen's lines could almost be taken as a latter-day ventriloquism of Poe's mute character, were it not for the fact that this man appears so obsessed and bewildered as to be incapable of choosing anything at all.

Choosing – or more simply exemplifying – the meaning of being numerous: this book offers a necessarily selective and truncated genealogy of this preoccupation. Its point of entry is the city crowd. Beginning with the antebellum era's incipient urban consciousness and concluding with what is commonly referred to as the nation's second great wave of mass immigration, I focus on the period during which Americans came to understand themselves as veritable veterans of numerosity, that is, as inhabiting

a culture of crowds. By the end of the nineteenth century it was as commonplace to allude in passing, as William James did in his preface to *The Principles of Psychology*, to "this crowded age," as it was still inflammatory and melodramatic to pronounce it, as Gustave Le Bon and Friedrich Nietzsche respectively did, "the ERA OF CROWDS" and "the century of the crowd."[2] The aesthetic, political, psycho-physiological, and social scientific discursive currents that informed such comments comprise the material of my examination. My aim is to track the implications of this emerging imagination of the crowd as a ubiquitous, culturally saturating phenomenon for the era's concomitantly evolving political and aesthetic commitments. I undertake to demonstrate how a heightened awareness of inhabiting a crowd culture could contribute, perhaps ironically, to more resolute distinctions between political and aesthetic categories of experience.

Throughout Western history, crowd representations have been fraught with political meaning. In his book *The Crowd and the Mob* the historian J. S. McClelland suggests that since its inception political thought has practically revolved around the crowd: "It could almost be said that political theorizing was *invented* to show that democracy, the rule of men by themselves, necessarily turns into rule by the mob." McClelland goes on to sum up this preoccupation:

> Plato's account in *The Republic* of democracy as mob rule degenerating into tyranny prepares the way for a host of crowd images: the crowd hounding Christ to death; the crowd bawling for blood in the circus; crowds of mutinous legionaries looking round for someone to raise to the purple; crowds led by wild men in from the desert in Late Antiquity; the Nika riots which nearly cost Justinian the Empire; later Roman mobs making trouble for popes; medieval crowds volatile at great festivals and fairs; peoples' crusades[;] . . . the barbarism of crowds during the Wars of Religion; crowds at public executions; peasant revolts; Whilkite and Church and King mobs in London; liberty mobs in Boston; the crowd in the French Revolution; lynch mobs; the mobs of industrial discontent; the list is endless.[3]

In American literary history as well, the list of crowd representations verges on endlessness. The reader of this study may notice the absence of some of the more conspicuous crowd scenes: Hester Prynne enduring the punitive stare of the Puritan multitude; Ahab magnetizing his crew; Colonel Sherburn fending off the lynch mob after killing Boggs; Pudd'nhead Wilson alternately stirring and stilling the courtroom audience with his fingerprint evidence; Carrie Madenda generating male spectators' phantasmatic affection by frowning quaintly on stage; George Hurstwood being called a scab by trolley strikers; Lawrence Selden spotting the vivid Lily Bart amid the

Grand Central Station crowd; Tod Hackett finding himself caught up in the surges of the Hollywood premiere crowd. Rather than attempting a comprehensive account in which all these crowd scenes (and the multitudinous others going unmentioned) might be addressed, I have elected to dwell on a relatively small number of texts. While some of these are indeed obscure (such as Lydia Maria Child's *Letters from New York* and Henry James's "The Papers"), they have all been selected on the basis of their ways of representing, in particularly dramatic or crystallized form, certain aspects of the culture of crowds that I wish to highlight.

In the genealogy I trace, unmotivated city crowds turn out, similar to the motivated crowds McClelland cites, to register a fundamental incompatibility with prevailing political practices. But they do so not so much by violating democracy as by abandoning liberalism, its principles and procedures of justice. Nevertheless, these crowds had a crucial discursive role to play, one that, for reasons elaborated below, can be termed aesthetic. Such figures of the crowd did ultimately bear political meaning, but it was a negative meaning; it entailed the negation of their place at the political-liberal table. As opposed to politically motivated or purposeful crowds, urban crowds – the kind that Poe's character psychotically immerses himself in – became highly valuable for delineating the moral and psycho-physiological boundaries of liberalism, thus for rendering a political mode of "being numerous" distinct from other modes of being in the world.

In other words, because of the way urban crowds readily embodied a modern polity's democratic populace without, however, harboring any specific political contention, they, as discursive figures, made visible the idea of a categorically separate sphere, wherein this politically defined populace could be seen as engaged in distinctly non-political, but nevertheless deeply attractive and arguably humanly essential, activity. Such representations thus clarified the value of conceiving the political as *not* being everywhere, of conceiving it instead as a set of specific principles and procedures pertaining to a circumscribed sphere of social life. Even as an overarching conceptual structure of political liberalism would remain the enabling mechanism for such distinctions; even as certain non-trivial realms of life, such as the economic, would appear at once political and non-political; and even as certain features of non-political life, such as the Judeo-Christian tradition of the covenant, would overlap with central features of political liberalism, representations of urban crowds made visible the conceptual value and moral necessity of preserving such formally operative distinctions.

Broadly speaking, the central political task from the mid-nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries was to hammer out the formal meanings,

the procedures, and the institutional formations of large-scale democratic liberalism, while confronting some of the nation's egregiously illiberal practices such as slavery and its aftermath of Jim Crow policies, gender discrimination, and the favoring of corporate power at the expense of the laboring poor. As Michael Schudson explains in his recent history of American civic life, "the politics of assent" characterizing the founding period of limited suffrage and largely uncontested elections "gave way early in the nineteenth century to a new mass democracy, the world's first." This expanded territory of politics required working out "basic rules of political practice, including formal constitutional provisions, statutory laws, and conventional patterns of public activity," all of which were destined to transform over the course of the century.[4]

But while this expansion of the political field would seem to require more, not less, political awareness and skill on the part of an increasingly enfranchised populace, the era also witnessed the rise of scientistic discourses, such as psycho-physiology and crowd psychology, that called into question the human being's capacity to function as an autonomous, self-determining, rational subject, that is, as a political-liberal agent. Literary representations that first flesh out the socio-political tensions arising from this prevailing set of phenomena and truths, of ambitions and misgivings, and second mediate these tensions through the articulation of a crowd aesthetics, constitute the focus of the present study. In order to clarify how these mediations took discursive shape, this study's key terms – the crowd, the public, the aesthetic, and the political – themselves need fleshing out, both historically and theoretically.

THE CROWD MIND

Crowd psychology derived its tools of analysis and explanatory authority from the era's medical research on hypnotic suggestibility and imitation, and advanced a set of "laws" which it saw as socially determining the actions and passions of all but the most self-controlled persons. Such premises were far-reaching. For while crowd psychologists built their cases on what had for centuries been stigmatized as undesirable mob behavior, they applied their arguments to widely divergent and largely normative social phenomena. Legislative bodies, electoral populations, juries, fashion crazes, religious movements, newspaper readerships, and urban street populations could all exhibit symptoms of a crowd mentality. Gabriel Tarde, for instance, warned against the city as such: its "animate environment" could function like "magnetic passes," thereby rendering its population "somnambulistic."[5]

Largely French and Italian, these analysts influenced the then burgeoning field of American sociology. "Imitation-suggestion," the historian of science Ruth Leys remarks, "became the unifying concept for a newly professionalizing American sociology committed to abandoning contractual, utilitarian, and biological models of society in order to place the study of the relation of self to other on a new, psychological foundation."[6] Committed as both American and European social scientists were to this overarching psychological theory, however, their own ideological stances betrayed a deep analytical inconsistency. Theorizing social suggestion and imitation, they exhorted individualism and innovation.[7] Indeed Le Bon's entire project aimed to explain how the best way to manage crowds was by becoming their savvy and manipulative leader. As the American sociologist Edward Ross argued in his 1897 essay, "The Mob Mind," in "a good democracy blind imitation can never take the place of individual effort to weigh and judge . . . We must hold always to a sage Emersonian individualism, that . . . shall brace men to stand against the rush of the mass."[8] Ross is best known as a theorist of social control who sought to mold individuals by means of suggestion, but clearly such means were not meant to apply to the molders themselves. Ross counts among the many nineteenth-century social scientists who retreated from their own theory of imitation-suggestion – and back into an essentialist individualism – at the point where it conflicted with their ideological desire to preserve the domain of innovation, leadership, and social progress.

In other words, crowd psychology undercuts its own oppositional structure, while the theorists of crowd psychology reactively back off from it. This double movement, as Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen has incisively shown, is especially prominent in Le Bon's work, in which the crowd is represented as verging on a sort of internal differentiation. "Profoundly 'anonymous,' even unnameable," Borch-Jacobsen writes, the crowd's unconscious "has no content [and no identity] of its own. The paradox of [Le Bon's] crowd is such that its homogenization is based not on a common ground but on the absence of any 'subjectal' ground." It is thus "impossible to define crowds except through their 'impulsiveness,' their 'mobility,' and their 'irritability'" – in other words, through "their *total lack of specificity*" or their "*noncharacteristics*."[9] The crowd enters, in other words, what William James calls, in the preface to his former student Boris Sidis's work, *The Psychology of Suggestion* (1898), "the limits of the consciousness of a human being." Sidis himself will describe this hypnotic self (in reference to a schizophrenic patient) as a "[n]obody, nothing," "a reality [which] has no being." This self is "devoid of all personal character; it is both subpersonal

and impersonal . . . [I]t is always roaming about, passing through the most fantastic metamorphoses." The final quarter of his book is devoted to applying imitation-suggestion theory to the analysis of crowd phenomena. He essentially reprises the arguments advanced in his 1895 article published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. There he describes the man who joins a mob as undergoing "the entire loss of his personal self."[10]

Long before crowd psychology emerged as a scientific discourse, conventional tropes registered this sense of a crowd's loss of personality. Rendered as oceans, streams, seas, swarms, and masses that press, jam, crush, flock, mob, throng, and pack their way into being, crowds were figured as inanimate, homogeneous, at best animalistic entities. In the crowdedness of the crowd thus obtains a pure, anonymous power or affect, what Borch-Jacobsen calls "unpower" – there no longer being present a subject, so to speak, to subject. In this sense the crowd is internally differentiated: it is constituted through the aggregation of persons, whereby the aggregation itself occasions the evacuation of these persons' personalities. Such is crowd psychology's key claim about the nature of human being.

But as Borch-Jacobsen goes on to clarify, this account of human being is effectively "blocked, in *The Crowd*, at the point where a leader, a *Führer*, is peremptorily assigned." Both Le Bon and Tarde are constrained by their "inability to think the group through to the very end: beyond the individual, beyond the subject . . . [E]verything came to freeze or fixate around the Hypnotist-Leader . . . [who] came out of nowhere, explained everything without explaining itself." Le Bon speaks of "the instinctive need of all beings forming a crowd to obey a leader." Similarly, Tarde asserts that "the magnetised subject imitates the magnetiser, but that the latter does not imitate the former," going on to insist that the "unilateral must have preceded the reciprocal. Without an age of authority . . . an age of comparative fraternity would never have existed."[11] Yet neither Tarde nor Le Bon explains how a hypnotic, affectively animated entity such as the crowd could produce an autonomous, self-willed individual such as a leader. Adhering nonetheless to this model of commanding hypnotist and obeying subject, crowd psychology thus forces itself to retreat from its radical conceptualization of the crowd as enacting what amounts to the pre-collective or pre-subjective "noncharacteristic" of human being.

To put it another, more schematic way, while late nineteenth-century social analysts muscled their way back into an ideological opposition of the one and the many, their own materialist theories of human psychophysiology posited the hypnotic limit of consciousness as something like a zero: hence Sidis's nobody, nothing, a reality without being. The zero, as

William James once suggested, is a sort of impossible actuality: "Half the ideas we make use of are impossible or problematic things – zeros, infinites, fourth dimensions, limits of ideal perfection, forces, relations sundered from their terms, or terms defined only conceptually."[12] The conception of zero also informs his idea of "pure experience." For the purposes of historical and theoretical contextualization, it is worth noting that when James endeavors to describe in *Essays on Radical Empiricism* the condition of pure experience, he does so by invoking an image that dramatically calls the crowd to mind: the mosaic. James jostles conventional empiricist expectations by having the mosaic illustrate something other than an atomistic, quantitative conception of manyness and diversity. He reconfigures it as an entity that coheres by virtue of impossibly real transitions – transitions which are both actual and absent:

> In actual mosaics the pieces are held together by their bedding, for which bedding the substances, transcendental egos, or absolutes of other philosophies are taken to stand. In radical empiricism *there is no bedding*; it is as if the pieces clung together by their edges, the transitions experienced between them forming their cement . . . [E]xperience itself, taken at large, can grow by its edges. That one moment of it proliferates into the next by transitions, which, whether conjunctive or disjunctive, continue the experiential tissue, cannot, I contend, be denied. Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected.[13]

This passage illustrates how, without resorting to dialectical negation, "no bedding" paradoxically becomes bedding. Within James's radical empiricist or materialist reality, relations function as external yet immanent limits – as "edges." There is no negation but rather "proliferation," no nothingness but rather "life." In this configuration, as James writes elsewhere, "[n]o part *there* is so small as not to be a place of conflux. No part there is not really next its neighbors; which means that *there is literally nothing between*; which means again that no part goes exactly so far and no farther; that no part absolutely excludes another, but that they compenetrate and are cohesive; . . . that whatever is real is telescoped and diffused into other reals."[14] In pursuing this line of thought, James avoids the pitfalls of a conventional empiricism which reduces experience to sense-perception and ontology to atomistic humanism. He aims instead for a conception of reality that is "continuous yet novel," as he puts it in his notes, knowing full well that this "notion involves the whole paradox of an *it* whose modes are alternate and exclusive of each other [that is, internally differentiated], the same and not the same interpenetrating. Express it as you will, you can't get away from this *sort* of statement when you undertake to describe reality." Such "compenetration," he maintains, "admits better of the *con* and *ex*

relation being simultaneous, [and] such simultaneity is the crux" of a radical empiricism.[15]

It is the crux as well, I want to suggest, of a revaluation of representations of urban modernity and its iconic topos, the crowd. For in his appropriation and redescription of the mosaic as an exemplum of "pure experience," James effectively affirms crowd psychology's logic of internal differentiation while eliminating crowd psychology's self-contradictory assertion of a crowd leader. In James's system there is no place for leaderly management of pure experience. Emblematic of a psycho-physiological or ontological condition, the mosaic marks the originary novelty of being, the emergence of something out of nothing, of persons and consciousness out of an impersonal, non-conscious state.[16] Though usually formulated in far less philosophical or scientistic terms, the crowd representations to which I attend in this study incorporate crucial elements of this psycho-physiological or what I would call hyper-materialist ontology. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the urban crowd became the material, socio-political site on which to elaborate this ontology's conditions and ramifications.

Some literary and cultural historians, enjoined by a causation-oriented methodology, might regard skeptically this study's scant attention to historical sequence. I do not squarely address, for instance, whether crowd phenomena gave rise to the very idea of internal differentiation or vice versa. For me, however, of far more compelling interest than the issue of historical causation are the broader political and aesthetic implications of such highly charged crowd representations. For during this time period, the crowd, as an icon of American democracy, of "the people," already bore considerable discursive weight. What I hope to demonstrate over the course of this study was the viability of accepting, as an aesthetic mode of being, the hyper-materialist logic of the crowd, in which the crowd or hypnotic subject embodied the limit – the mosaic's "edge" – of consciousness, while simultaneously maintaining a commitment to the political requirements of liberal republicanism, whose presupposed citizen possessed self-conscious reason.[17]

Most of the writers featured in this study perform this u-turn by subscribing, if only implicitly, to a Kantian dualism between the sensible and the intelligible (or supersensible), between affect and reason. Kant's political-moral thought entered the American scene primarily by way of the Transcendentalist movement of the 1830s and 1840s. The movement's resident Kant authority, Frederic Henry Hedge, saw in his system of distinctions (between subject and object, phenomena and noumena, reason

and understanding) a proclamation of "moral liberty . . . as it had never been proclaimed before."[18] As an alternative to Locke's sensationalism and Hume's instrumentalist claim of reason's enslavement to the passions, Kant offered, according to the committed democrat, German scholar, and semi-Transcendentalist George Bancroft, "the categorical rule of practical morality, the motive to disinterested virtue"; he goes on to suggest that "therefore [Kant's] philosophy claims for humanity the right of ever renewed progress and reform."[19] Where the Calvinist theologians at Princeton, J. W. Alexander, Albert Dod, and Charles Hodge, criticized the Transcendentalists for mistakenly using Kant to support their claims to reason's "divine and active powers," they also (disparagingly) clarified Kant's work:

> [Kant] meant to attribute to pure reason the power of directing the cognitive energy beyond its nearer objects, and to extend its research indefinitely; but by no means to challenge for this power the direct intuition of the absolute, as the veritable object of infallible insight . . . The system of Kant led to skepticism . . . that all the laws of thought are altogether subjective, and the evil consequence was remedied only by assigning an illogical office to the Practical Reason.[20]

However murkily and even mistakenly understood, and however unappealing to devout theologians, Kant's thought contributed to the on-going engagement in the United States with Enlightenment ideas and ideals.

In his anti-slavery writings, William Ellery Channing perhaps stated most succinctly the political-moral dimension of this engagement:

> Such a being [the enslaved man] was plainly made for an End in Himself. He is a Person, not a Thing. He is an End, not a mere Instrument or Means . . . Such a being was plainly made to obey a law within Himself. This is the essence of a moral being. He possesses as a part of his nature, and the most essential part, a sense of Duty, which he is to reverence and follow, in opposition to all pleasure and pain, to all interfering human wills. The great purpose of all good education and discipline is, to make a man Master of Himself, to excite him to act from a principle in his own mind.[21]

In this system of personal autonomy and non-sensible Duty, "excite[ment]" serves merely to activate the moral will; it is what John Rawls designates a conception-dependent desire, in contradistinction to object-dependent desires, which comprise our bodily impulses and socially internalized inclinations.[22] Thus intentions and motives, rather than rational self-interest or prudence, serve as the basis for moral reasoning. The confidence that, as Bancroft put it, "reason is a universal faculty," made possible in turn the confidence in the political-moral rectitude of "the common mind," "the multitude," hence in the viability of mass democracy.[23]

Where the widely influential Scottish moral sense philosophy underwrote alternately sentiment-based and reason-based moral structures, with Kant, such equivocation disappeared. Common sense or the *sensus communis* entailed for him not simply knowing innately moral truth, but being capable of justifying it through reason. It is "a *public* sense, i.e. a critical faculty which in its reflective act takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation of every one else, in order, *as it were*, to weigh its judgement with the collective reason of mankind."[24] Universal reason, of course, informs the "categorical rule of practical morality" invoked by Bancroft and recorded by Emerson in "Civilization" (1862):

> The evolution of a highly destined society must be moral[.] . . . It must be catholic in its aims. What is moral? It is the respecting in action catholic or universal ends. Hear the definition which Kant gives of moral conduct: "Act always so that the immediate motive of thy will may become a universal rule for all intelligent beings."[25]

Even the Harvard professor, Unitarian theologian, and *North American Review* editor Francis Bowen, who in his *Principles of Metaphysical and Ethical Science Applied to the Evidences of Religion* (1852/1855) eschewed Kant's a priori categories and considered the moral faculty "above reason" (282), tilted far more toward Kant's ethical system than toward the sympathy-driven rational benevolence and outcomes-driven instrumentalism articulated by various Scottish Enlightenment philosophers.[26] Apart from Kant's claim of a priori reason as the limit of human capacity, which disabled Bowen's proving God's existence by way of reasoning from effect back to the "infinite Cause," Bowen's ethical conceptions accorded fully with Kant's. He argued that the conscience or moral obligation is innate, that it is distinct from sense or sympathy, from desire or compulsion, that it is not subject to a system of punishment and reward, that it is grounded in motives and intentions, not in prudence or consequences, and that it has no prior cause, not even divine command: "We do not do right because God commands it, but God commands it because it is right."[27] Altogether Bowen's moral universe shares remarkably much with Kant's.

What is primarily absent from Bowen's moral universe is the element of universal reason. Besides serving as a legitimizing mechanism, universal reason functions in Kant's system to link individual morality to a political justice grounded in equality. It also functions to endow ethical reason with what Rawls terms its own "court of appeal." Reason "is always free to reconsider its prior decisions; no case is ever shut for good." By contrast, Bowen