

THE AESTHETICS AND
POLITICS OF THE CROWD
IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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*When travelers swarm forth: antebellum urban
aesthetics and the contours of the political*

When Walt Whitman, democratic crowd champion bar none, salutes the people of the polity, he looks to the masses crossing Brooklyn Ferry, the crowds milling about Manhattan's commercial district, the tides flowing through Broadway. In other words, he does not look to explicitly political crowds, such as those in Baltimore rioting against rampant bank faults in the late 1830s, or those in upstate New York rebelling against rents on long term leases in the 1830s and 1840s, or even those widely admired Dorrites demanding suffrage expansion and forming an extra-legal People's Convention to protest the elected state government in Rhode Island in 1842. Similarly, when Hawthorne scrutinizes what it means to be a "naturalized citizen," he turns to an everyday crowd scene: a train-station peddler selling his goods to the "travellers [who] swarm forth."¹ Such literary enterprises testify to the trend, begun in the antebellum period, to displace revolutionary crowds with urban crowds in representations of the fledgling democracy's populace. They accord with Tocqueville's observation in 1838 that "[a]t this moment perhaps there is no country in the world harboring fewer germs of revolution than America."² Indeed such crowd representations bear the mark of a polity preoccupied less with self-installation than self-maintenance.

This is not to say that those writing in the antebellum period lost all interest in representing revolutionary crowds, but that their support for such crowd action was at best ambivalent. To take only one well-known example, when Hawthorne describes Robin in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" (1832) as "seized" by the "contagion" of brutal, mocking, anti-Royalist laughter that "was spreading among the multitude" who have tarred and feathered his uncle (*TS* 86), he reminds his readers of the nation's brutalizing past. But as Nicolaus Mills contends in *The Crowd in American Literature*, "Hawthorne will not let us forget that what is going on is controlled political violence."³ That is, even when the revolutionary mob, a "mighty stream," has succumbed, like Robin, to "mental inebriety," Hawthorne

acknowledges – and gives qualified support to – its pre-political relevance (*TS* 84–85). The mob is implicitly acknowledged as an effective, almost supernaturally unifying force that helps to install democratic republicanism. However, Hawthorne’s skeptical and ambivalent account of what led up to the “temporary inflammation of the popular mind” – that is, the townspeople’s suspiciousness and secrecy, the passwords and masks, the night-time intrigue and conspiratorial activity – suggests that the affair is not to be confused with bona fide democratic procedure (*TS* 68). A mob’s pre-political relevance or even historical necessity, in other words, does not for Hawthorne legitimize it as a constitutive feature of liberal-democratic collectivity.

In his valuable study, Mills examines novelists’ depictions of politically motivated crowds, disputing the claims of Lionel Trilling, Richard Chase, Henry Nash Smith, and others that American writers are either attuned primarily to the pastoral features of American life or socially and politically disengaged from it altogether. He illuminates the parallels between nineteenth-century “classic American novel[s]” and Tocqueville’s well-known concern about the tyranny of the majority. “In the midst of an era of nationalism and expansion,” Mills writes, these novels reflect “an abiding fear that in America democratic men are the enemy of democratic man.” Depictions of mobs in the shape of overly demanding farmers (Cooper), overly rigid Puritans (Hawthorne), overly duplicitous anti-royalists (Hawthorne), overly compliant sailors (Melville), and overly rabid slave hunters (Twain) all display the “belief that in the America they [the writers] knew, democratic men acting as a crowd were time and again a danger to the freedom and independence of democratic man.”⁴ Mills thereby suggests that the central conflict made visible by crowd representations is between the individual and the group.

While many of Mills’s specific interpretive claims are insightful, his general analytic opposition of man and men tends to imply, mistakenly I think, that democracy is at odds with itself.⁵ The danger of crowds that tyrannically hunt slaves or slavishly succumb to charismatic captains is not that they’re “antidemocratic” per se as Mills suggests, but that they violate the republican or liberal virtues by means of which the polity legitimizes its democratic structure.⁶ Members of such crowds have abandoned the ethical principles of propriety, public reason, and justice as fairness that render popular sovereignty an acceptable form of governance. When Tocqueville warns against the tyrannous capacity of a majority, he aims his criticism at that which embodies interests and opinions, which is to say, a body politic distinctly unmoored from liberal justice. For Tocqueville, “justice” is the

“one law which has been made, or at least adopted, not by the majority of this or that people, but by the majority of all men.” Significantly, he goes on to quote Madison on the subject: “Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society.” Thus implying the legitimacy of justice as modernity’s dominant *and universally acceptable* political ethos, Tocqueville shows that the trouble with majorities is not that they embody democratic man multiplied, but that, in his view, there are few “guarantee[s]” built into the American form of government to ward off those occasions when the majority will abandon justice.⁷ The crowd representations cited by Mills do indeed dramatize the tyranny of the majority, but not simply by positioning the many against the one, but by positioning those with a diminished capacity to reason justly against others (a character, a narrator, an implied reader) who possess the faculty of reflective, ethical judgment. Writers such as Hawthorne, Melville, and Twain are deeply invested in portraying the human frailties and psychic susceptibilities that weaken liberal democratic governance, but they do not for all that imply an internal contradiction within democracy itself.

While features of the tyranny of the majority discourse also appear in some of the everyday urban crowd representations on which I focus, one core reason for focusing on them is that the cultural work they perform extends beyond this specific and familiar political problem. As icons of implicitly rather than explicitly political collectivity, everyday urban crowd scenes allowed antebellum writers to keep attention locked on the *demos* of the American landscape while also bringing into focus the nation’s emerging socio-economic realities. Such crowds effectively embodied the incipient mass phenomena – immigration, urbanization, industrialization, and technological innovations in transportation and communications – that indeed brought dense populations into being and to which municipal, state, and national polities prepared to respond. For instance, urban crowds attracted the attention of those concerned with suffrage expansion, that is, with the moral and civic competency of voting citizens. Tocqueville, for one, considered the “lowest classes in these vast cities [New York and Philadelphia]” to be “a real danger threatening the future of democratic republics of the New World.”⁸ His was not an isolated view. In *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920*, the historian Paul Boyer has pointed out that religious reformers from the early part of the century, such as Lyman Beecher, warned “that without vigorous countermeasures hordes of urban poor would soon ‘swarm your streets, and prowl your dwellings.’” This attitude had changed little by the middle of the century, as evidenced by another reformer, John Todd, who “unleashed a vehement attack on cities as ‘gangrenes on the

body politic,' 'greenhouse[s] of crime,' and centers of 'all that demoralizes and pollutes.'"⁹

The volatile ambivalence with which the new nation's new masses were received is illustrated by the singular case of author-editor Orestes Brownson. One-time staunch defender of both democracy and Transcendentalism, and equally staunch supporter of the laboring classes, Brownson initially declared in no uncertain terms his confidence in the crowds: "the masses are not so poor and destitute as . . . [is] suppose[d]. They are not so dependent on *us*, the enlightened few, as we sometimes think them. We need not feel that, if we should die, all wisdom would die with us, and that there would be henceforth no means by which the millions would be able to come at truth and virtue."¹⁰ But a few years later, in 1840, after these masses were, as Brownson saw it, duped into electing the Whig candidate Benjamin Harrison, Brownson "commenced to regard the 'people' as an inchoate mass which would probably follow the side of the loudest songs and biggest torchlight procession."¹¹ Subsequently and infamously Brownson converted to Roman Catholicism and authoritarian politics.

Complicating the socio-political valence of the antebellum urban crowd was its by no means unique but nonetheless not inconsiderable aesthetic power – be this power negatively or positively charged. Hence, for instance, Lydia Maria Child's supreme pleasure in a "multitude of doves" encountered on Broadway, but also her profound aversion to a "hopeless mass" of beggars encountered on her doorstep.¹² Similarly, as discussed more fully in the introduction, it is the parade crowd's aesthetic appeal that nearly lures Hawthorne's Clifford Pyncheon from his second-story window, just as it is the aesthetic intrigue of a man of the crowd that lures Poe's protagonist from the café. As Dana Brand has shown in *The Spectator and the City*, there emerged not only in early nineteenth-century Europe but also in the antebellum United States a "creative and consuming" modern consciousness. It was embodied by the *flâneur*, and effected an aestheticization of everyday urban life, including its crowds.¹³ As early as Book Seven of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, literature in English began to depict the urban street crowd as deeply attractive to modernity's aestheticizing consciousness, even as that attraction was often fraught with disturbing, alienating apprehensions.

It is fair to say, then, that the antebellum figure of the everyday urban crowd garnered formidable political and aesthetic interest. In my view it is precisely because of, not despite, the urban crowd's double duty as democratic icon and aesthetic object that it became so prominent a discursive touchstone for the modern era. As outlined in the introduction, modernity's central aesthetic and political models shared the structural feature

of entailing one or another conception of common sense. Whether in the mode of rational intuitionism's perception-based common sense (or good taste) or Kant's non-empirical, reason-based universal public, the available logics underpinning modern political and aesthetic theory applied equally to the one and the many, to the subject and the socius. At stake in this and ensuing chapters, then, is not so much an opposition between the one and the many (man and men), nor for that matter between the political and the aesthetic (even if this latter situation is what the crowd representations I examine so often imply); rather, the point I develop is that certain writers, as they stage the relation between the beholder and the crowd, make visible modernity's available political and aesthetic logics and their varying commitments to them. In doing so, they participate in the era's imagination of the foundational structure of the democratic-republic polity and, concomitantly, the incumbencies and potentialities of this polity's citizens. Such crowd figures yielded insight, in other words, into what it meant to be or not to be a liberal democratic entity, whether subject or socius, while simultaneously yielding insight into the implications of absorptive and reflective modes of aesthetic experience.

For even if antebellum Americans were now focused more on political maintenance than installation, there were many issues pertaining to democratic-republican life, to the consequences of its principles and practices, that remained unsettled. One important issue before the new nation was the polity's very capacity to change. As the antebellum era witnessed such phenomena as the rise of the party system, Jacksonian populism, the institutional strengthening of the presidency, the influx of immigrants from non-democratic countries, and increasing tensions between the North and South, concerns as to how the polity was or, equally important, was not changing animated political and literary discourses. After the British visitor Charles Joseph Latrobe observed Georgia's State Convention in 1835, he commented that "[i]t is not merely because their government is a democratic republic that I think it is liable to change, or to pass away – but because it is one of human institution, and as such the seeds of mutability are within its bosom."¹⁴ In other words, he suggests (even if without conviction himself) the possibility of political "change" occurring without incurring the "pass[ing] away" of republican democracy. I hope to clarify over the course of this chapter what kind of democracy – popular or constitutional, radical or liberal, material or formal – underwrote what kind of change.

Rather than following a strict chronology, I begin this chapter with a discussion of Whitman, given his reputation as the most enthusiastic

champion of democracy and its crowds. I point out the stresses and limitations marking his poetic-political project, especially where he aspires to reach beyond his envisioned fact-world of flux and force and into the realm of value and truth claims. As contrasts I examine Child's *Letters from New York* (1843), Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), and Hawthorne's "The Old Apple-Dealer" (1843). While these texts exhibit a similar receptivity to the notion that flux and force inform human experience, they also understand the relation of these material conditions to the political sphere to be causal rather than constitutive. That is, implicit in their various representations of urban crowds is the argument that empirical phenomena and human dispositions may well contribute to the very desire for a politically structured society, but that these material causes do not determine the ethical form or constitutional principles underlying their preferred political structure. To the contrary, their preferred principles turn out to be ideational, not material, grounded in ethical reason, not sentiment. All of these writers' crowd representations, I argue, disclose much about the prevailing conceptions of political democracy in the antebellum era. Articulating the socio-political conditions of everyday life, they also importantly foreground the structural relation between these conditions and the subject-citizen who experiences them.

PHYSIOLOGY FROM TOP TO TOE

When Walt Whitman champions "the word Democratic, the word En-Masse," he declares his allegiance not simply to democracy but to democracy of a particular kind: radical, embodied, affective. In "One's-Self I Sing" (1867) the word democratic holds out the promise of a political "physiology from top to toe," a "Life immense in passion, pulse, and power."¹⁵ This poem of nine lines emblemizes in miniature Whitman's decades-long poetic project of envisioning democracy as something thoroughly to relish more than to recommend, to adore more than to respect. But however unequivocally affirmative, Whitman's celebratory embrace of crowds, of the entire culture of crowds, reveals the difficulty radical democracy faces when it endeavors to move beyond the world of fact and to make claims of value. Critical or reflective judgment, the constitutive disposition of a political and aesthetic reasoning being within a liberal polity, is supplanted by universal physiological affection. In *Song of Myself*, the body politic maps perfectly onto an urban body: "This is the city . . . and I am one of the citizens; / Whatever interests the rest interests me" (*LG* 76, ellipsis in original). This ubiquity of interest makes everyone eligible for reciprocal

affection, the ambition that he famously proclaims at the end of the 1855 *Preface*: “The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it” (LG 26).

Further, *everything* warrants and reciprocally promises affection. Crowds play a central role in merging persons and things so as to envision democratic affection as radically ubiquitous. In the opening stanza of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” (1856), for instance, Whitman salutes “face to face” flood-tides and clouds in the first two lines before proceeding in the third to their human counterparts, the “Crowds of men and women” (LG 307–308). In “Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd” (1865), “ocean” and “crowd” are no longer separated by line, but only by definite article: “Out of the rolling ocean the crowd came a drop gently to me, / Whispering *I love you, before long I die*” (LG 263). As objects of a prepositional phrase, “ocean” and “crowd” grammatically occupy the same place: seemingly indistinguishable, one or the other bears a “drop” capable of human speech. As the poem thematizes separation and union (“I too am part of that ocean my love, we are not so much separated”; “the irresistible sea is to separate us”), it becomes clear that such formal components as line breaks and definite articles do not serve to reinforce the separation of persons and things, but to occasion separation itself so as indeed to dramatize the ontological union (or undifferentiation) of persons and things.

As everyone and everything, indeed every notorious atom in the Whitmanian universe, avail themselves of exchange and attraction, of transformation and reversal, the ethical toothlessness of a political metaphysics of “passion, pulse, and power” comes to the fore. Whitman’s commitment to the embodied and the interested tends to sweep into the sensible realm words and phrases that might otherwise evince a reflective, abstractly universalizing disinterest, and thereby offer political-liberal anchorage. Such is the case, for instance, when he writes in *Song of Myself*, “[I] peruse manifold objects, no two alike, and every one good, / The earth good, and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good” (LG 32). Here, goodness’s ubiquity and the speaker’s unflagging agreeableness combine to suggest that the designation of goodness is less a demonstration of the speaker’s reasoned or moral evaluation of the object at hand than it is a registration of something like the object’s talent for being what it is. And from this affirmation of all that is, as is, the author derives sensible pleasure, much as he does when he joins the crew of a Yankee clipper: “I tucked my trowser-ends in my boots and went and had a good time” (LG 35). In Whitman’s hands, then, the good drives out the bad entirely; the good brooks, in effect, no opposition.

Which is to say, it loses its relevance as a term of ethical judgment, of critical discrimination.

Whitman's aesthetics of democratic goodness, in which reflective judgment is elided and replaced by all-encompassing affect, delivers to radical democratic theory its nearest poetic correlative. The self-proclaimed "poet of commonsense" (LG 48), Whitman renders the *sensus communis* a site of "arduous struggle," as Kerry Larson puts it in *Whitman's Drama of Consensus*, "to secure consent." In other words, rather than making, as in Kant's theory (to which Larson refers), the *abstract possibility* of everyone's agreement the basis for reflective judgment, which in turn assumes the non-negotiable separation of the poem or poet-object from the beholder or reader-subject, Whitman imagines an *empirical* agreement wherein everybody simply feels the same way. He aspires, as Larson observes, "to erase all boundaries, to overcome all distance, to create, in effect, a space in which reader and poem are one."¹⁶

As Allen Grossman also explains, "Whitman devised a 'song' that would reconcile variety and order, equality and constitution, one and many without compromising either term . . . [He] situates his new American organic law and true sovereign . . . at the zero point of unanimity."¹⁷ His, then, is a project which works to make agreement synonymous with physiological rapport – with being "face to face" and seeing eye to eye. No wonder the historian George Frederickson counts Whitman among the Northern radicals whose politics takes the form of a "nonpolitical, noninstitutional theory of mass democracy [that affirms] the anarchist's faith that formal government can be replaced by the spontaneous action of the people."¹⁸ In short, Whitman contributes importantly to the radical democratic project of rendering essentially indistinguishable objects and representations, particulars and universals, things and persons, sentiments and reasons, causes and effects, poetry and policy.¹⁹

What this drama of consensus achieves, then, is the elimination of the space for argument. As Whitman remarks about the democratic poet in the *Preface*, "He is no arguer . . . he is judgment. He judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing" (LG 9, ellipsis in original). This statement may have appeared refreshingly open-minded to a mid-nineteenth-century liberal oppressed by the era's narrow moralism. But as a political-theoretical claim, it is devastating for the political agent of any era who "aims," as even the contemporary, self-described radical democrat Chantal Mouffe does, to "challeng[e] a wide range of relations of subordination," to "assert . . . equal liberty for all," and "to constitute forms of power that are compatible with democratic values." In *Bodies That Matter*

Judith Butler similarly envisions a politics that effects a “radical rearticulation of what qualifies as bodies that matter, . . . lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving” [*sic*].²⁰ Yet such moral yearnings are rendered simply irrelevant by a materialist metaphysics of “passion, pulse, and power” because, as Whitman discloses, everyone and everything under the sun are transformed into helpless things. Without the a priori, non-empirical idea of justice as fairness (the ethical correlative of disinterested reason), there is no possible way to evaluate one set of experiences or treatments over and against another. Disturbingly, then, radical democracy’s negation of reason as the source of moral deliberation leaves “abjected and delegitimated bodies” rather high and dry.²¹

In other words, with no ethical grounds for arguing what might constitute a democratic value or how a specific helplessness might benefit from “rearticulation,” radical democracy’s plurality of “lives” dissolves into what Mouffe calls (and Whitman exemplifies) “total pluralism.” As she acknowledges, “extreme pluralism” culminates in “a multiplicity of identities without any common denominator, and it is impossible to distinguish between differences that exist but should not exist and differences that do not exist but should exist.” She acknowledges as well that this total pluralism amounts to a “pluralism without antagonism.” What she fails to acknowledge, however, is that her own brand of democratic theory produces this culminant condition, and that to block its arrival, she must capitulate to an arbitrary imperative: “such a view [radical, pluralist democracy] does not allow a total pluralism.”²² Which is to say, she deploys a moral universal after all.

In Whitman’s own time, the Whigs and even the Jacksonian populists understood the significance of mediating democracy through liberal ethical principles, embedded as these principles were in the discourse of republican virtue. Invocations of the crowd often served to drive home the point. In one of his *Junius Tracts* (1844), for instance, the Whig spokesperson and Henry Clay supporter Calvin Colton stated in no uncertain terms that what was wrong with Jackson was his mob appeal. The problem with him was not so much his popularity, but that under his “new ‘Democracy’” politics meant “servility in the masses and despotism in the leaders.” Jackson’s mobocracy, according to Colton, “is as remote from grammatical, historical, and philosophical democracy, and from *any* democracy ever recognized as such, as Monarchy itself.”²³

In his concomitant effort to show that Whigs were democrats, not elitists, Colton reclaimed Jefferson as the party ideal: “Jeffersonian democracy . . . was the power of the PEOPLE. Jackson ‘Democracy’ was the

ascendant star of one MAN. The first grew out of an alarm for the safety of popular rights; the last sprung from an obsequious regard for a Military Chieftain." Colton clearly hoped to redirect party politics away from the "property versus people" debate (in which Whigs looked like privileged aristocrats) and toward one about the conditions of liberal democracy as revolving around rights and popular civility. Thus he also insisted that for Whigs, democracy "is not MEN, but PRINCIPLES," by which he meant the natural rights principles "of the Constitution, [which is] the organ and instrument of the democracy of the country."²⁴ For Colton, then, political democracy signified something other than the passion, pulse, and power of the masses. Similarly, many of those who supported the substantive goals of the Dorrites balked at their revolutionary, extra-constitutional means of achieving them. "Dorrism," as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. has noted, "threatened all constitutional guarantees. If a majority out of power could overturn the constitution at will, then a majority in power could plainly do so, 'and thus, all constitutional right is merged with the will of the strongest.'"²⁵

The Jacksonians, too, made their arguments in the name of the common man's *virtue*. While rhetorically emphasizing their ability to represent and better protect the commoners' *interests* (by way, for example, of extending the franchise and establishing direct elections of party candidates), the Jacksonians championed their constituents' capacity to make reasoned, prudent decisions that accorded with democratic republican premises of natural rights and justice. As Russell Hanson explains in *The Democratic Imagination*, Jackson's "Democracy was the organized expression of 'the democracy'; it was the party that might serve as the governing agent of 'the democracy' and its allies. The Democracy would restore virtuous men to their rightful place in the republic, and in so doing, restore virtue to the republic polity."²⁶ While the parties may have harbored differing levels of trust vis-à-vis the virtue of common citizens, the necessity of virtue was recognized on both sides. It was this basic socio-political agreement that enabled terms such as "King Andrew" and "mobocracy" to circulate so easily as pejorative epithets.

But the overt political logic most resembling Whitman's is neither the Whigs' nor the Jacksonians'. Despite his Free-Soiler credentials, Whitman's political-poetic commitments to affection and embodied power have much in common with the political logic espoused by Southerners such as John Calhoun and the monomaniacal George Fitzhugh (for whom virtue pertained to Christian obedience and destiny, not to liberal-republican self-legitimation). Not unlike Tocqueville, but with considerably more at stake personally and politically, Calhoun was concerned with the way a numerical

majority could drown out the voices of a minority faction. Thus he devised a theory of “concurrent majorities” whereby a dissenting region such as the South would have “the power of preventing or arresting the action of government, be it called by what term it may, veto, interposition, nullification, check or balance of power.”²⁷

Resonating with Whitman’s politics of affection and “arduous struggle,” Calhoun built his political philosophy upon a psychology, in his words, of “feeling and affection,” adding to it a “great law of self-preservation which pervades all that feels” and “which makes us feel more intensely what affects us directly than what affects us indirectly.” This law “necessarily leads to conflict between individuals” – hence “the tendency to a universal state of conflict between individual and individual,” in which “government has its origin.”²⁸ Thus adhering to Hobbesian modes of psychology and social contract, Calhoun argued for a constitution that would protect minority interests and secure a state’s or region’s material improvement. But as Hanson remarks, “Calhoun’s attempt to provide a constitutional accommodation for diverse and competing interests undermined the traditional republican idea of commonwealth politics.”²⁹ In effect Calhoun dismissed what Tocqueville saw as the danger, indeed the inevitable self-destructiveness, of a “mixed government, that is to say, one equally shared between contrary principles.” Where Calhoun was prepared to build conflicts of interest into the polity’s foundation, Tocqueville insisted on underlying agreement: “in any society one finds in the end some principle of action that dominates all others.” Moreover, such a unifying (liberal) principle must be adopted by means of political legitimation, not force: “Force is never more than a passing element in success; the idea of right follows immediately after it. Any government which could only reach its enemies on a battlefield would soon be destroyed.”³⁰

Calhoun’s efforts to redraw the federal polity as one based on competing state interests rather than on nationally unifying principles of justice and equality were amplified by the South’s most diligent pro-slavery propagandist, George Fitzhugh, who took radical political theory to its logical and distinctly anti-democratic conclusion. His writings comprise perhaps the most illuminating antebellum account of the implications of a politics of power. One might say that he stands as the nineteenth century’s paragon of localist, situationalist, anti-legalist, anti-abstractionist virtue. In line with his argument in *Cannibals All!* (1857) that governments are always established by force, never by consent, and are always “continued by force,” is his claim that “[a]ll platforms, resolutions, bills of rights and constitutions are true in the particular, false in the general. Hence all legislation should be

repeatable, and those instruments are but laws” – not, then, “fundamental principles” meant to endure.³¹

Finding, moreover, the theories of eighteenth-century British writers such as Adam Smith and John Locke too “abstract” if not downright “here[tical],” Fitzhugh maintains in *Sociology for the South* (1854) that American slavery has been misunderstood because critics have ignored its specificity.³² Only the Southerners who “see every day around them the peculiarities and characteristics of slave society” can assess its positive value. He elaborates in the later text: “the wisest and best of men are sure to deduce, as general principles, what is only true as to themselves and their peculiar circumstances.” Apart from the logical absurdity of Fitzhugh’s particularism and Calhoun’s regionalism – absurd because ever smaller particulars and regions can always contest the status quo by claiming to know what is “true as to themselves” – there are also the subtler but in some ways more crucial problems having to do with presupposed relations between cause and effect. Most remarkable is Fitzhugh’s presumption that a government “originated in force” must needs be “continued by force.”³³ He thereby elides the distinction between installation (where force may be required to ward off external adversaries) and maintenance (where agreement and civil debate among internal constituents may well take the place of force). He eliminates the possibility of replacing force with agreed-upon principles and procedures (such as are mandated by a constitution). In his world there is no such thing as a reasoning, consenting political public.

If Fitzhugh could be seen as merely supplying an immanent description (with however many revisionist twists) from within American history and politics, then his account would be simply one among many, to be accepted or rejected. It would be intelligible to those who see history and politics as he does, and unintelligible to those who do not. But Fitzhugh breaks his compact with his vision of a particularist, force-driven politics of transformation when he stops describing and starts endorsing (as he does throughout both texts) his brand of authoritarianism. Which he does, moreover, “simply [to] point out what is natural and universal, and humbly [to] try to justify the ways of God to man.” Authoritarianism is clearly for him of universal moral value: “Good men obey superior authority, the laws of God, [and] of morality.”³⁴

Bearing ideological as well as testimonial weight, Fitzhugh’s defensive-aggressive account thus contains an ineradicable universalist moment – one, however, that precludes argument by locating that universalism in God the Object, God the Interested Father. This convergence of a politics of power and faith is what enables Fitzhugh to hate Jefferson’s sins – the

Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Bill of Rights – but love the sinner: “The true greatness of Mr. Jefferson was his fitness for revolution. He was the genius of innovation, the architect of ruin, the inaugurator of anarchy.”³⁵

What becomes clear through the example of Fitzhugh is how a commitment to particularist politics recuperates a universalist element as soon as it makes any value claim for itself. Where Fitzhugh grounds his universalism explicitly in “God,” contemporary secular theorists more often invoke a seemingly more material but for all that no less divinely motivated conception of power. “Power’s condition of possibility,” Foucault contends, “is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable.” A politics emanating from a materialist metaphysics of immanent power has no grounds, say, for making policy because it has no grounds for distinguishing materializations or identifications worth preserving from those worth eradicating. Its own commitment to immanence limits it to descriptions of, in Foucault’s words, “the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them [multiple force relations].”³⁶ A metaphysics of force and transformation, in other words, must make much of force and transformation.

In *Democratic Vistas* (1871) Whitman indicates just how close radical democratic ideology is to an objective naturalism. Claiming “variety and freedom” to be the “greatest lessons of Nature,” he goes on to liken these qualities of “general humanity” to “the influences that make up, in their limitless field, that perennial health-action of the air we call the weather – an infinite number of currents and forces, and contributions, and temperatures, and cross purposes, whose ceaseless play of counterpart upon counterpart brings constant restoration and vitality.”³⁷ If fluxes in the social field assume the same significance as fluxes in the atmosphere, then the situation, say, of getting struck by a mob of anti-abolitionists would be equivalent to getting struck by lightning.³⁸ Cosmologically appealing perhaps, such equivalence – which is the upshot of radical democracy – offers little in the way of social justice.

ORGANS OF JUSTICE

Lydia Maria Child was one who recognized the limitations of a politics of feeling and force; and she mobilized representations of crowds to dramatize these limitations. In *Letters from New York* (1843) she records parenthetically a phrenologist’s prognosis: her “organ of justice” is “unusually developed in

[her] head" (*LNy* 189). She thus confirms what her weekly reader would have by that letter already surmised, namely, that her recorded impressions are invariably filtered not only through a Christian-reformist but also a democratic-republican lens. Indeed, there may be no significant evaluation or judgment in the series of letters that is not guided by a procedure of critical reflection and by principles of equality and justice as fairness. Child's gravitation toward this liberal ideology strengthens her explicitly made claim of distinction from the numerous antebellum Christian doctrinaires and authoritarians who contend, as she puts it, that "God has sanctioned" such unjust practices as slavery and the slave trade (*LNy* 148). In *Letters from New York*, which is a compilation of her columns published in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* during her tenure as editor, and offers a panoramic yet also highly detailed account of New York life, Child demonstrates that liberal ethical reason, rather than either personal sentiment or Christianity's command morality, animates her political sensibility. Where she enters public debate on such current issues as capital punishment, slavery, the city's routine and brutal dog-killing, and laissez-faire capitalism's effects of urban poverty, she exhibits her capacity to deliberate and to form judgments according to "fixed principles of right and wrong" (*LNy* 146). And when she examines the banes of American society, she finds theological sects, political parties, and local prejudice at the source of selfish, blind, and whimsical public opinion. Public opinion of this stripe constitutes in her view a social dysfunction, hobbling the effort to legislate out of existence such national crimes as slavery.

Over and against such public opinion stands the "lamp" of "reason and conscience in each individual," which, she maintains, "never goes out, though it may shine dimly through a foggy atmosphere" (*LNy* 149).³⁹ Succumbing fully to the forces of partisan politics or local prejudices, Child implies, amounts to blowing out the lamp. This is not to say, however, that she eliminates all sentiment from her sensibility, only that she does not attempt to legitimize her political positions through sentiment or particular attachments. For example, while "sad and troubled" by the "savage custom" of capital punishment (*LNy* 207), Child condemns the practice not on account of these "surging sympathies," but on account of its being "legalized murder." As such capital punishment would serve as a public-destroying symbol, provoking "the very spirit of murder . . . among the dense crowd which throng[s] the place of execution" (*LNy* 208–209). Here the imagined bloodthirsty spectator crowd attending an execution, "throng[ing]" in its physicality, functions rhetorically as the antithesis of a reasoning and just political public.

However grounded in reason her political ethics may be, Child's aesthetic disposition is decidedly sentimental. Yet perhaps because, like so many nineteenth-century persons, harmony matters to her, she manages to square this sentimental aesthetics with her political-moral organ of justice. Whatever is good is beautiful, by her lights, and vice versa. Where she is "charm[ed]" by the Battery's natural beauty (*LNy* 109) and uplifted when a "multitude of doves [goes] careering before [her]" on Broadway (*LNy* 104), she exhibits her belief that "beauty alone is immortal and divine" (*LNy* 157). Conversely, she despairs over New York's "bloated disease, and black gutters, and pigs uglier than their ugly kind," and finds "oppressive" the visual effect of brick walls painted their own color, "like the shining face of a heated cook" (*LNy* 11–12). In line with her conviction "that it is wisest and best to fix our attention on the beautiful and the good, and dwell as little as possible on the evil and false" (*LNy* 218), Child concludes she would not like her memory to work like a daguerreotype machine, "taking likenesses of whatsoever the light of imagination happens to rest upon," given the world's abundance of "disagreeable" material (*LNy* 76–77).

Child's aesthetics, in sum, is a matter of personal, sentimental preference, which happens also to be calibrated to her organ of justice. In terms of *content* her aesthetics can be seen as an almost redundant extension of her moral and political faculty; but in terms of *form* it operates according to her personal disposition. Thus for Child, the personal is not the political. Her reader is not invited to debate her dislike of red paint on brick walls as he or she is her position on capital punishment. Though restricted on account of her sex from participating fully in political processes, Child thus demonstrates that her person answers to the minimum daily requirements of liberal democratic citizenship. This demonstration turns less on the content of her political and aesthetic assessments (such as opposing slavery and favoring flocks of doves) than on the means through which she comes to those assessments, specifically, the means of separating out the political from the personal.

Child's representations of her relation to urban crowds underscore this double maneuver, which allows for the possibility of being oppressed aesthetically while remaining politically reasonable and responsive. One scene involves her encounter at her door of yet "[a]nother group" of impoverished "suffering wretches" (peddlers and beggars), to which she responds by "turn[ing] away again, with the feeling that there was no use in attending to the hopeless mass of misery around [her]" (*LNy* 181–182). As

one of those aesthetically “disagreeable” moments, Child’s excessive sentiment prompts her to imagine this “group” as a “mass” from which she first recoils but finally “yield[s],” returning as she does to her more characteristic “generous impulse” and buying up all their (to her useless) wares, as well as donating her remaining change (*LNy* 182). The emotionally fraught encounter also triggers moral-political analysis, leading her to argue that the desperation of the “hopeless mass” has its source not in the lower classes’ genetic immorality or criminality but in material “[h]ardship, privation, and perchance severity.” This set of conditions has transformed the “gladsome thoughtlessness” gracing unfettered childhood into one particular mass-child’s “grasping sensuality” (*LNy* 182). In such analyses, Child exhibits her command of ethical judgment, applying it to the socio-economic realities of antebellum New York.

At the same time the quotidian ordeal of facing a mass of beggars inspires in Child a moment of self-witnessing: “At times I almost fancy I can feel myself turning to stone by inches” (*LNy* 182). In other words, she imagines herself transforming into an inhuman mass, not unlike the beggars and peddlers themselves. In this metaphor of turning to stone Child reveals much about the kinds of transformation that are and are not available within a liberal democracy’s political sphere. Turning to stone plainly is not. Now, insofar as she remains, through “feel[ing]” keyed to reason, aware of her increasing stoniness (which amounts to an increasing disincorporation, to a divestment of specific, contingent interests), one might say that her organ of justice becomes ever more “developed,” purifying itself of excess sentiment. In this metaphorical scenario she increasingly assumes the form of the abstract, equalized, disinterested yet still nominally sympathetic citizen-subject undergirding liberal justice.⁴⁰ If, however, stone creep were indeed to traverse all available “inches,” overtaking her completely, she would be not only bodiless but mindless. Where the organ of justice once was, would now be inert mass.

In contrast to the middle classes’ more widely received view of the urban masses as criminal and immoral, for Child, becoming a hopeless mass, like turning to stone, means having no moral faculty at all. That she views such a state as beyond the justice principle rather than a transformation of it becomes clearer elsewhere in the *Letters*, namely, where she associates the extra-moral disposition specifically with urban crowds. Having encountered in the “public square” – that is, the marketplace – the busy auction of “piles” of “ready-made coffins,” she describes the disconcerting effect on her of this “business transaction”:

There is something impressive, even to painfulness, in this dense crowding of human existence, this mercantile familiarity with death. It has sometimes forced upon me, for a few moments, an appalling night-mare sensation of vanishing identity; as if I were but an unknown, unnoticed, and unseparated drop in the great ocean of human existence. (*LNY* 57)

Taken together, these passages make evident that for Child, affective and physical crowdedness or amassment, whether of the wretchedly impoverished or the middle-class kind, amounts to subjective death, to a vanishing of identity, even as it obtains within the realm of “human existence.” Whereas moral turpitude might threaten because it corrupts liberal democracy, the extra-moral threatens because it could wipe out the polity altogether. In her nightmare vision of economic populism, the evacuation of ethical (as opposed to calculative) reason implies the utter elimination of moral, political, and aesthetic life as she knows it. Some forms of change are viable; others clearly are not.

While she acknowledges the multiple force relations acting upon and within the world, such as are materialized in New York’s mercantile crowds and the “nightmare sensation” “forced upon” her, Child relies on a resilient reflective capacity to separate her moral and political “identity” from these forces. That is, her organ of justice, bound as it is to principles of equality and fairness, and articulated through critical judgment, enables her to distinguish the morally unjust such as hopeless poverty from the extra-morally unjust such as the sensation of unseparation from a crowd. Discriminating between the worlds of empirical force and formal justice, Child articulates a system which is governed by a conceptual separation of cause and effect. Moreover, this separation enables Child, once her flash-flood of sentiment recedes, to mount a persuasive – which is to say arguable – indictment of *laissez-faire* capitalism’s socially crippling effects. In contrast to those who see politics as war by other means, as Fitzhugh and Foucault the Machiavellian would have it, for Child liberal-democratic politics begins where power ends, where coercion is replaced by consent.⁴¹

In Child’s and Whitman’s work we begin to see how crowd representations contribute to the articulation of political and aesthetic modalities. For Child, the crowd embodies the end of the political – the end of justice, of reason, of autonomous identity – and the beginning of “grasping sensuality,” of oceanic feelings. The crowd likewise embodies the end of the aesthetic, a foreclosure on the possibility of conceptually determining a correspondence between an object of beauty and moral goodness. Whether

troped as liquid or solid, massification functions in Child's prose to mark the outside limit of the ethically human self, to mark the vanishing of identity. For Whitman, crowds signify the birth of the political: masses, both human and non-human, receive affirmation as organic, affectively consensual entities. As figures of "passion, pulse, and power," Whitman's crowds similarly give rise to the aesthetic, to the sensual attractions of everyday life. Decades later William James will comment, in "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" (1899), that Whitman, embodying "a sort of ideal tramp, a rider on omnibus-tops and ferry boats . . . felt the human crowd as rapturously as Wordsworth felt the mountains, felt it as an overpoweringly significant presence, simply to absorb one's mind." James recognized that, in contrast to Schopenhauer's "emotional anaesthesia" and Carlyle's reprobation, Whitman finds "beauty" in everyday urban life, obtaining from it "mystic satisfaction."⁴²

In sum, Child and Whitman elaborate formally (though not substantively) similar modes of sentimental aesthetics, but two different relations between sentiment and democracy. In Child's version, sentiment stimulates awareness of the need for political deliberation but does not extend into the polity's fundamental principles. In Whitman's version, sentiment and democracy are inseparable, hence the interminably "arduous struggle." This is a struggle not so much to come into accord with presupposed political-moral principles as to bring into accord new sentiments and new principles.

Poe and Hawthorne, on the other hand, differ both from Child's sentimental aesthetics, which wishes all aesthetic objects to be good and beautiful, and from Whitman's sentimental politics, which wishes all objects and subjects to feel their rapport. Contributing importantly to their reconfigurations of aesthetics and politics are their representations of anonymous urban crowds. With Poe's putative contempt for American politics and Hawthorne's putative conservatism, one might expect them to harbor deep doubts about the value of liberal democracy in the manner, say, of Joel Headley who recounted in his 1873 history, *The Great Riots of New York, 1712-1873*, the election riots of 1834. He held that these riots were incited by party antagonisms, as well as by the immigration of (and automatic extension of suffrage to) a "mass of [human] material wholly unfit for any political structure," that is, "men, the greater part of whom could neither read nor write, who were ignorant of the first principles of true civil liberty, who could be [politically] bought and sold like sheep in the shambles."⁴³ If believed to be predominant, such "masses" might well throw into question the viability of political liberalism.

However much it may appear that Poe and Hawthorne generally share Headley's skepticism, in their depictions of urban crowds they both register (in various ways) rather firm commitments to the principles of reason and autonomy that underwrite liberalism.

SHOCK AESTHETICS

In considering the political and aesthetic implications of "The Man of the Crowd," it is important to keep in mind that its drama depends on two characterological relations. The one usually receiving attention by critics is between the old man and his beholder, who, when in feverish pursuit of the old man through the crowd, resembles him. The relation often overlooked is between the beholder-protagonist's slightly more distant past acting self – when he follows the old man – and his nearer past acting self – when he does not. Also worth mentioning is the difference between the protagonist's acting and narrating self. In his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" Walter Benjamin works out an analysis of urban aesthetic experience that helps to explicate the first relation. He makes a case for Baudelaire's innovative aesthetics, engendered by urban capitalism and inspired in part by the *flânerie* exhibited in Poe's story. Baudelaire's anti-academic theory of beauty is well known for celebrating modernity's "*particular* beauty, the beauty of circumstance," by which he means "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent."⁴⁴ Benjamin sees in this feature of contingency the ideas for an aesthetics no longer grounded in what he calls aura. Aura, he explains, is a specific mode of "perceptibility":

Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return.⁴⁵

Baudelaire develops, in contrast to this auratic aesthetics, one grounded in shock, one which Benjamin likens to photography "since the camera records our likeness without returning our gaze." While it is possible to dispute this particular claim about photography (and to argue, say, for photography's auratic status), it is more important to understand what Benjamin means by a shock aesthetics derived from urban experience. This has to do with Baudelaire's self-referential gestures of the "poet at work," where he is engaged in "fantastic combat," stumbling over words, and colliding with verses: "it is the phantom crowd of words, the fragments,

the beginnings of lines from which the poet, in the deserted streets, wrests the poetic booty.” These are instances of the poet in shock: the returned gaze is replaced by a “mirrorlike blankness” which has its own aesthetic “charm.”⁴⁶

“The Man of the Crowd” provides the blueprint for this mode of urban aesthetics. The story’s protagonist twice undergoes shock: first, when he suddenly catches sight of the old man through the window of the cafe; and second, when, after following the old man through the crowd for twenty-four hours, he “stop[ped] fully in front of the wanderer, [and] gazed at him steadfastly in the face. He noticed [him] not, but resumed his solemn walk, while [the protagonist], ceasing to follow, remained absorbed in contemplation.”⁴⁷ Granted, there is little in this second moment to indicate the protagonist’s physiological experience of a shock of non-recognition; but it is telling that he explains to himself why he “ceas[ed] to follow” only *after* the fact of being face to face with the old man’s mirrorlike blankness: “I said at length, . . . ‘It will be vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds’” (*PT* 396). This act of suddenly ceasing to follow can be understood as a shock effect in that it replicates in reverse the moment in which the pursuit is initiated, when the protagonist is evidently quite shocked: “suddenly there came into view a countenance . . . which at once arrested and absorbed my whole attention” (*PT* 392). The combination of being both “arrested” and “absorbed” by an object of attention establishes an urban aesthetic situation of radical detachment from the environs. The arresting shock by definition severs the protagonist-beholder from his self-consciousness. It renders him incapable of being further excited by external stimuli, leaving him, as common locution has it, beside himself. It thus transforms him into a perceiving but impassive, self-enclosed fragment – a fragment which is its own totality. Like another figure whom Benjamin regards as constituted through shock, the gambler, he has no past. For the person who plays the game of chance, each game is its own totality; “no game is dependent on the preceding one.”⁴⁸ This is what it means for Poe’s protagonist’s “whole attention” to be given over to the old man: in being wholly attentive he is also wholly disconnected, just as a mirror is both reflective and blank. It thus makes a certain kind of sense that a few lines later he records how “[t]hen came a craving desire to keep the man in view” (*PT* 392). Such intensely consuming desire may be understood as the temporal and psychical extension of the shocked, essentially unself-conscious state.

This account of Poe’s shock aesthetics differs from Dana Brand’s. He argues that Poe “exploits the aesthetic appeal of shock” for the same reason