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The “Men” of the Crowd: Mobs, Armies and Public Space in Classic American Literature

Several literary critics, historians, and political scientists have discussed the conflicting nature of crowds and mobs and their actions within US culture, and many of them agree in identifying the origin of a peculiarly American penchant for cultural “demophobia” during the American Revolution and in the era of the Early Republic (see Wood; Mouffe; Bouton; Borch). As Jeremy Engels suggests, the ostracization of mobs and the disruptive potential of a crowd action as a mean of social and political protest was the result of a rhetorical construction determined by moderate political elites in those years (for example, John Adams and Alexander Hamilton), and aimed “to embrace the politics of enemyship and engage in the act of ‘drawing a line,’ finding unity through the performance of division” (Engels 60). In particular, during the post-revolutionary age this purpose constituted the mean through which the political leaders of the Early Republic intended to mitigate what were believed to be the domestic dangers of revolution, namely the radical tensions of wide segments of the population which had been instrumental in the successful outcome of the Independence War, both in terms of consensus and logistics, but which had demonstrated, however, the power of mass action: its disruptive potentiality had always been conceived as a threat to social order in the majority of the Founding Fathers. According to Engels, “American elites ha[d] feared democracy from the beginning” (19), and they “did strike back by criminalizing democratic mobilization and turning the state’s monopoly of violence against rowdy citizens” (14), which later on became one of the most serious preoccupations expressed in Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835-1840), where he speaks of the “tyranny of the majority” (Tocqueville 292).

Starting from these premises, the American preoccupation with crowds and mobs became persistent and historically endemic within US culture

and society, generating a complex and never resolved conflict between the national structures of power and popular forms of protest. Yet, as argued by Engels, the criminalization of mass protests was, first, the result of a “rhetorical architecture” (Engels 35), a form of signification, a discourse which was applicable to different dynamics, from the demonization of the loyalists during the American Revolution, to the political stigma on mobs at the beginning of the nineteenth century:

Enemyship signifies the many ways that political actors name the enemy in order to achieve desirable rhetorical effects, which, in the early Republic, included unity, hierarchy, and deference. [...] enemyship is a bond of mutual antagonism for an enemy, resulting in a solidarity of fear, a community of spite, a kinship in arms, and a brotherhood of hatred. In the early Republic, counter-revolutionaries employed the rhetoric of enemyship to great effect, naming enemies to distract rowdy Americans from their political and economic grievances and to encourage allegiance to the Constitution by trading obedience for protection. Elites managed democracy by cultivating fears – some real, some imagined. (13)

One of the most evident rhetorical operations in this sense was indeed what contributed to stigmatizing mass protests, namely, in terms of semantics, the switch from the term “crowd” to “mob.” The main element of differentiation between the two notions is the potential and practical violence that characterizes the latter, as opposed to the former, conventionally classified as a large number of people, whose very definition focuses on quantity rather than “quality.” In this sense, quality encompasses all those traits that connote a crowd beyond its merely numerical rate. As counter-intuitive as it may sound, the notions of mob and crowd thus tend to intersect and disconnect, mutually integrating and subtracting each other: in particular, any crowd might turn into a mob – given the connotative qualifications that such a transformation requires – but, at the same time, quantity does not determine an exclusive parameter to distinguish between the two notions. Taking into consideration these aspects, the present analysis will resort to both terms – clearly not as synonyms – to approach multitudes depending on the possible connotations that they may or may not convey.

On this line, the transformative connotations of the terms at issue play a fundamental role, thus reinforcing the idea of how both notions have repeatedly been treated as part of a discourse. Quite recently, Christian Borch has discussed the politics of crowds from a sociological standpoint and proposed to focus on the historical semantics of crowds, grounded in psychology studies, whose origins reside in the cornerstones of crowd studies – Gustave Le Bon and Elias Canetti as the *chefs-de-file*.

Having this scenario as a background, the present study aims at analyzing the stabilization of the perception of crowds and mobs in the light of the language and the descriptive modes through which they are represented. Yet, intersecting with Engels's notion of "enemyship," the approach here applied will be that of observing the rhetorical use of language that connoted crowds and mobs' depictions in some works of the first half of nineteenth-century American literature: particularly in Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" (1819), Nathaniel Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux" (1832), Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), and Herman Melville's *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile* (1855).

However, as Mary Esteve points out, in the history of American literature "the list of crowd representations verges on endlessness" (Esteve 2). For this reason, I have consciously avoided including in the present essay other literary classics mainly from the twentieth century which approach the role of mass protests in the United States, such as John Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle* (1936) or Nathaniel West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939), to mention the most famous ones. This choice is not only due to the need for selection but also to the overall aims of the present contribution, which are three and concentric: first, by agreeing with the line that traces the origin of American "demophobia" to the era of the Revolution and its immediate aftermath, this essay aims at demonstrating how such a preoccupation became rooted and crystallized in American culture through the literature of the first half of the nineteenth century, in particular through those texts that depict historical scenarios which were prior to or concomitant with the foundation of the United States. Second, to demonstrate that a very significant cause of such a phobia can be identified with the "military" potential of mobs, an aspect which is evident in the way they occupy

and modify space. Third, to demonstrate how the only functional form of order and containment that is able to limit the uncontrolled disruptive potentiality of a mob is the mediation of a representative leader, a symbol of authority, whose most extreme manifestation is the establishment of a “state of exception,” that becomes operational through repression,¹ or its halo. This last and narrower point implies a problematic correspondence; if, on the one hand, a representative leader and military repression represent State power in two different ways, then on the other hand protesting mobs can be consequently reconfigured as an internal enemy of the State, and it is probably in this uncertain status that the origin of the conflicting relationship between American culture and mass protest lies. The result may sound paradoxical: a raging mob of protesting US citizens is thus turned into the enemy of the United States; in other words, as long as they act together, these US citizens syllogistically become the nation’s enemies.

One of the first American authors to describe and analyze the simultaneous and organic action of multitudes in a work of fiction was Edgar Allan Poe in his well-known short story “The Man of the Crowd,” first published in *Graham’s Magazine*, in 1840. The tale is set in London, and the crowd it describes is not connoted as a protesting mob, but rather as a mass of people who somehow contribute to constructing the scenario of the tale, together with the urban context; yet, the short story allows us to isolate some modes of description of a crowd that may function as a sort of model through which other literary cases can effectively be interpreted. Although most of the text is focused on the unnamed protagonist who is tailing a particular man, the so-called man of the crowd, the tale underlines the centrality of the multitude and, at the same time, functions as a model of representation of the physicality of crowds. In particular, two elements stand out from the text: first, the story provides a description of the mode according to which crowds fill the space, and it shows how this massive occupation is able to modify the perception and the use of the space; second, it focuses on the physical uniformity of crowds, an element that is particularly visible in the occupation of space and the movement of people.

Both traits emerge very clearly in the aquatic metaphors which permeate the text. For example, in one of the first textual references to the mass of people, the crowd is depicted as a tide: “the throng momentarily

increased; and, by the time the lamps were well lighted, two dense and continuous tides of population were rushing past the door [sic]" (Poe 288). This passage highlights the compactness of the crowd, which is described as dense (and, consequently, uniform) and rushing, precisely like a stream of water. Moreover, the metaphor suggests the visual idea of two streams of water that cannot be crossed but must be followed or avoided, but in both cases, they impose the necessity to change position accordingly.

In other literary representations of crowds, the semantic area dedicated to water was and still is the most evocative: in his poem "Out of the Rolling Ocean the Crowd" (1865) Walt Whitman describes the multitude of people through liquid metaphors, as the opening line recites: "Out of the rolling ocean the crowd came a drop gently to me". (Whitman 87). The rhetorical origin of this choice, though, does not coincide with Poe's work, but it seems to have been already part of the cultural rationale of the time; in fact, Mary Esteve observes that some distinctive narrative tropes regarding crowds had been developed before the emergence of a theoretical debate about crowd psychology:

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. (Esteve 6)

These two aspects – the occupation of space and uniformity – merge and define another fundamental element in the actions of crowds: the uniformity of their motion, a massive movement that is carried out by all the members of the multitude simultaneously as if they constituted a single organism. This is very evident later on in the tale when it starts raining: "It was now fully night-fall, and a thick humid fog hung over the city, soon ending in a settled and heavy rain. This change of weather had an odd effect upon the crowd, the whole of which was at once put into new commotion, and overshadowed by a world of umbrellas." The people simultaneously – almost mechanically – open their umbrellas and they act together as a single organism. This passage suggests the uniform action of people: just as drops are not distinguishable in a stream, neither

are individuals in Poe's tides of the crowd: the protagonist has the illusion of being able to classify all the people he sees in the multitude, but in fact he cannot. That is why he follows only one man, "apparently" the only one he is not able to categorize, but the truth is that that particular man cannot be categorized: he is the only one who stands out. While describing the crowd, the narrator labels several categories of people by describing them as all alike. It does not matter that they are "noblemen, merchants, attorneys, tradesmen, stockjobbers" (or many other types). The narrator's observation is characterized by what he calls a "generalizing turn," and all the classes which compose the crowd literally melt together: "There was nothing very distinctive about these two large classes," and "They did not greatly excite my attention" (Poe 389). Some of the traits that transpire from Poe's empirical description and understanding of crowds were later on theorized by Elias Canetti in his *Crowds and Power* (1905) – particularly, the physicality of multitudes:

It is only in a crowd that man can become free of this fear of being touched. That is the only situation in which the fear changes into its opposite. The crowd he needs is the dense crowd, in which body is pressed to body; a crowd, too, whose psychical constitution is also dense, or compact, so that he no longer notices who it is that presses against him. As soon as a man has surrendered himself to the crowd, he ceases to fear its touch. Ideally, all are equal there; no distinctions count. Not even that of sex. (Canetti 15)

The equality that Canetti recognizes in crowds is mirrored by the sensory incapability of Poe's protagonist in distinguishing the men of the crowd, a recurrent feature of mass scenes in literature. In particular, it affects the actions of the multitude: as the verbs suggest, every action is collectively performed by all the people as if it were done by a single entity. This generalizing (and plural) mode of acting performed by the crowd is not limited to dynamic verbs but is also extended to reporting ones. The unanimous behavior of crowds is thus broadened to the use of the "word," a trait that is particularly visible in a famous passage of Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle": when Rip awakes, he goes back to his native town, totally unaware of the fact that the American Revolution has occurred, and professes himself as "loyal to the king"; the small crowd of villagers

responds instantly and aggressively, turning into a mob: "Here a general shout burst from the bystanders – 'A tory! A tory! A spy! A refugee! Hustle him! Away with him!'" (Irving 90). The action is performed collectively: when the people of the mob speak, they do it as one single threatening voice, producing "a general shout," which is made up of hostile accusations and insults. In other words, together with the uniformity of the crowd, the semantic choices of the men of the crowd contribute to igniting the connotative transformation that converts the crowd into an aggressive mob.

In this case, one individual intervenes and lessens the tension erupting in the mob. The narrator isolates the only person who can be visually distinguished from the mass: "It was with great difficulty that the self-important man in the cocked hat restored order; having assumed a tenfold of austerity of brow, demanded again of the unknown culprit, what he came there for, and whom he was seeking!" (90). By asking those questions he represents the mob thus functioning as a delegate, although "self-elected," thus reminding us of Gustave Le Bon's description of the role of the leader: "The influence of the leaders is due in very small measure to the arguments they employ, but in a large degree to their prestige. The best proof of this is that, should they by any circumstance lose their prestige, their influence disappears" (Le Bon 126). The role of the "man in the cocked hat" is that of stemming the tide of the unanimous action of the mob, providing a potential example of Tocqueville's well-known formulation, which Chantal Mouffe has recently reshaped as "extreme pluralism," namely "a multiplicity of identities without any common denominator" in which "it is impossible to distinguish between differences". (Mouffe 30). The absence of common denominators is the precondition for anarchy and, in the case of a mob, for mobocracy: a totally unpredictable and unregulated drift characterized by a potentially violent impulse, as in "Rip Van Winkle."

Another famous representation of revolutionary multitudes in American literature is Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux," originally published in *The Token and Atlantic Souvenir*, in 1832, and subsequently included in *The Snow-Image, and Other Twice-Told Tales*, published in 1851. The story revolves around young Robin Molineaux, who arrives in Boston and looks for his kinsman, Major Molineaux, the colonial authority representing the British Crown. After

an unsuccessful day-long search, the protagonist falls asleep on the steps of a church porch, and when he wakes up he witnesses a rioting parade of villagers who have tarred and feathered his kinsman. According to Larry Reynolds, "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux" epitomizes Hawthorne's personal preoccupation for the collective irrationality and bestiality that can take control of the actions of a mob, as he argues that "individuals and mobs engage in forms of symbolic emasculation, portrayed as savage or demonic". (Reynolds 15). In particular, Reynolds observes, Hawthorne feared the typically human irrational side which, if extended to an entire crowd and thus turning it into a mob, had proved its destructive power. It is not by chance that, in his essay about the Civil War titled "Chiefly About War Matters" and published in 1862, Hawthorne argues that "our children will be less prodigal than their fathers in sacrificing good institutions to passionate impulses and impractical theories" (Hawthorne, "Chiefly About War Matters" 419), thus blaming passionate impulses as the origin of any social form of disorder. Quite interestingly, the idea of mobs as entities that are subject to impulses was later on developed by Gustave Le Bon: "The varying impulses which crowds obey may be, according to their exciting causes, generous or cruel, heroic or cowardly, but they will always be so imperious that the interest of the individual, even the interest of self-preservation, will not dominate them". (Le Bon 11).

Such fear of those "impulses" is self-evident in "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux," and it is represented at two different levels, individually and collectively; or, rather, it is visible in the figure of the leader of the mob, as well as in the mob itself. Somehow in line with the equally famous short story "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), the leading authoritative character may be interpreted as a personification of the devil: "his forehead [has] a double prominence," he has a "broad hooked nose, the shaggy eyebrows, and fiery eyes" (Hawthorne, "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux" 263). His position of power is evidently expressed through his physical description, as he is presented as a "horseman, clad in a military dress, and bearing a drawn sword, rode onward as the leader, and, by his fierce and variegated countenance, appeared like war personified: the red of one cheek was an emblem of fire and sword" (269).

The character's satanic symbolism corresponds to the disruptive nature of the crowd the horseman leads: he leads the parade, he is not a mediator

but rather an amplifying figure, a synecdoche and, at the same time, a catalyst of the collective mood; the subversive force that erupts from him invests the crowd and infects even Robin, the only person of the scene who is related to the tarred man, and who ends up joining and literally blending in with the mob. The proximity of the leader and the mob's "passionate impulses" remind us of a sort of "communicating vessels" continuity which expands from the individual to the multitude:

And lastly, there sailed over the heads of the multitude a great, broad laugh, broken in the midst by two sepulchral hems; thus, "Haw, haw, haw – hem, hem-haw, haw, haw, haw!" [...] The contagion was spreading among the multitude, when, all at once, it seized upon Robin, and he sent forth a shout of laughter that echoed through the street. [...] When there was a momentary calm in that tempestuous sea of sound, the leader gave the sign, the procession resumed its march. On they went, like fiends that throng in mockery around some dead potentate, mighty no more. (271-72)

Although to varying degrees, what both Irving and Hawthorne underline are the risks of an uncontrolled wave of people, and both focus on the relationship between dangerous protesting mobs and individual figures of power of some sort, whose role is that of containing multitudes by symbolically representing their tensions. However, neither in "Rip Van Winkle" nor in "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux" are the disruptive mobs contrasted by a repressive form of containment, in the representation of the State. In *Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile*, Herman Melville depicts this opposition in a similar historical framework, but in a different geographical context, namely in England during the American War of Independence. In chapter 21, titled "Samson among the Philistines," the protagonist of the novel witnesses the disembarkation of Ethan Allen, a rebel in the American Revolution,² brought to England as a prisoner of war to be tried and executed. Israel is not the only spectator in the scene: in fact, he is unwillingly part of a vast crowd of aggressive English citizens who surround the prisoner in an attempt to lynch him. What stands between Ethan Allen and the ferocious mob is a squad of redcoats who escort their prisoner to Pendennis Castle. Although outnumbered by the mob surrounding the prisoner, the soldiers are heavily armed, and this allows them to prevent

any uncontrolled action on the part of the multitude, simply because of the threatening power of their weapons:

Some of this company having landed, and formed a sort of lane among the mob, two trim soldiers, armed to the teeth, rose in the stern-sheets [...]. Immediately the mob raised a shout, pressing in curiosity towards the colossal stranger; so that, drawing their swords, four of the soldiers had to force a passage for their comrades, who followed on, conducting the giant. [...] Israel heard the officer in command of the party ashore shouting, "To the castle! To the castle!" and so, surrounded by shouting throngs, the company moved on, preceded by the three drawn swords, ever and anon flourished at the rioters, towards a large grim pile on a cliff about a mile from the landing. (Melville 281)

The tension between the mob (which is also defined as being composed of "rioters"), its target, and the containing role of the soldiers is explicit. The way in which both parts occupy the public space signals the intensity of the contrast between them: the people are deployed along two lanes moved by a sort of centripetal force; they literally direct the soldiers' way right in the middle and press toward the center, represented by Ethan Allen, the magnetic pole which attracts the collective passionate tension. This transformation may be interpreted and reactualized through the observations elaborated by Gustave Le Bon:

The disappearance of the conscious personality, the predominance of the unconscious personality, the turning by means of suggestion and contagion of feelings and ideas in an identical direction, the tendency to immediately transform the suggested ideas into acts; these, we see, are the principal characteristics of the individual forming part of a crowd. He is no longer himself but has become an automaton who has ceased to be guided by his will. (Le Bon 8)

Once the transformation from crowd to mob occurs, Robert E. Park observes that the "collective mood temporarily controls individuals in a crowd" (Park 10). This argument interacts with Le Bon's definition of crowds as psychological:

The isolated individual may be submitted to the same exciting causes as the man in a crowd, but as his brain shows him the inadvisability of yielding to them, he refrains from yielding. This truth may be physiologically expressed by saying that the isolated individual possesses the capacity of dominating his reflex actions, while a crowd is devoid of this capacity. (Le Bon, 11)

This psychological process, in which individuality melts into collectivity, has a narrative correspondence in the large use of aquatic metaphors that characterizes literary representations of mobs (as it already happens in Poe's "The Man of the Crowd"). The indistinguishability of water drops within a mass of water is thus psychological but also aesthetic, as suggested by Mary Esteve, and, besides, political, if one connects those same metaphors to Mouffe's notion of crowd, understood as an indistinguishable "multiplicity of identities." Irving and Hawthorne's representations of mobs seem to imply both interpretations *avant la lettre* of such a loss of borders that affects individuals; in this regard, Le Bon uses the metaphor of "contagion" – which is the exact term that occurs in "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux," as young Robin is absorbed by the mob that is ridiculing his relative: "The contagion was spreading among the multitude, when, all at once, it seized upon Robin, and he sent forth a shout of laughter that echoed through the street – every man shook his sides, every man emptied his lungs, but Robin's shout was the loudest there" (Hawthorne, "My Kinsman, Major Molineaux" 272). In a slightly different modality, the same physical process involves Rip Van Winkle once he professes himself as a loyalist: instantaneously, the mob surrounds Rip, filling the public space, submerging it (along with Rip), and occupying every possible spot.

The coincidence of the origins of a peculiarly American fear of mobs and the revolutionary period has been thoroughly discussed. Yet, the process through which this generally homogeneous feeling settled in US culture should not be entirely attributed to the vision of the most moderate among the Founding Fathers. It should rather be taken as the result of a progressive cultural and political transformation developed through rhetorical strategies employed during the first few decades of the Early Republic, which some significant works of fiction of those years did not fail to record. As this essay wished to demonstrate, the cultural crystallization that has concerned the stigmatization of mobs and

popular protests is particularly evident in those narratives that are set in proximity to the stormy years of the American Revolution, such as “Rip Van Winkle,” “My Kinsman, Major Molineaux,” and *Israel Potter*. If one common denominator of these narratives stands out, it is a quite evident form of criticism of the Revolution or, rather, a preoccupied glance at its possible collateral risks: popular action, that had been conducted during the struggle for Independence, acquires the aura of a potential threat to the fragile stability of the post-revolutionary Union. If this belief may seem implicit in Washington Irving, in Hawthorne’s case it is not, as Larry Reynolds summarizes: “For Hawthorne, strong feelings not under the control of the intellect posed a grave threat not only to individuals but also to societies and nations. Like Edmund Burke, he came to disdain radical action and to imagine revolution and warfare in terms of a breakdown in the familial [and national] order” (Reynolds 15). In a similar way, Melville retrospectively criticized several aspects of the American Revolution in the age of its memorialization (as the ironic dedication in *Israel Potter* clearly suggests), but transposed the American anxiety about angry mobs to a different context, namely to England. In this sense, Melville’s position shows some similarities with Hawthorne’s: as Robert Zaller states, “[a]ll his life Melville was preoccupied with the problem of authority and rebellion” (Zaller 607), a preoccupation that *Israel Potter* partially erases but whose traces emerge in other parts of Melville’s work – for example, in one of his dyptichs, “Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs,” published in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, in 1854.

However, although belonging to different contexts, representing different situations, and conveying different background ideologies, all these literary texts share a set of common traits which underline the common origin of a generalized critical perception of mobs, and they all describe, to a greater or lesser degree, the physical and psychological elements at the basis of the American “demophobic” tradition. The ways Irving, Hawthorne, and Melville describe revolutionary crowds and mobs testify to a certain general level of preoccupation the military potential of mobs, due partially to the spontaneous and unregulated nature of their actions, and in part to their belligerent mode of occupying space. The most significant element that emerges from their narratives is the relationship between crowds and

the authorities, between order and dissent, and between disruption and repression; in particular, these authors seem to question the possibility of containing popular dissent and the ethics of repressive measures, when the cause for dissent is determined by the very guardians of order. At the same time, these few examples from classic American literature show a preoccupation attributable to the lack of leadership, which consequently determines the risk of “extreme pluralism,” the degeneration of the “passionate impulses” so well described by Hawthorne in “My Kinsman, Major Molineaux.” This risk places the mob in antithesis to the very notion of American authority, not only demonizing internal dissent but connoting it as an illicit form of disobedience.

Notes

¹ I am referring to Giorgio Agamben’s re-examination of Carl Schmitt’s notion of “state of exception,” which emerges during uncertain and ambiguous periods of imbalance between legal politics and substantial power. Agamben defines civil war as an example of these situations, a case which derives from a social and cultural process of construction of an enemy within a given society; Larry J. Reynolds identifies a critique to this construction in Hawthorne’s political view, as he “understood that the demonization of one’s enemies often constituted the cultural justification for inflicting violence on them” (Reynolds 24).

² He had become famous for conquering the fortress of Ticonderoga in British Canada and for attempting the occupation of Montréal, which failed and was followed by Allen’s capture and deportation to England. The most relevant phases of both military actions are reported in Allen’s autobiographical *A Narrative on Col. Ethan Allen’s Captivity*, published in Philadelphia, in 1779, by Robert Bell.

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