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Introduction

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

In 1823, when Edgar Allan Poe was a restless fourteen-year-old living with his foster family in Richmond, Virginia, a well-known actor named John Howard Payne wrote the lyrics to what would become one of the most popular songs of the nineteenth century:

> Mid pleasures and palaces, though we may roam,
> Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home,
> A charm from the sky seems to hallow us there,
> Which, seek through the world, is ne're met with
>   elsewhere,
>
>   Home, home, sweet, sweet home!
>   There's no place like home, oh there's no place like
>   home!
>
> An exile from home splendor dazzles in vain,
> Oh, give me my lowly thatched cottage again,
> The birds singing gaily that come at my call,
> Give me them with that peace of mind, dearer than all.
>
>   Home, home, sweet, sweet home!
>   There's no place like home, oh there's no place like
>   home!

Coincidentally, Payne had appeared onstage opposite Poe's mother throughout April and May 1809, just after Edgar was born.[1] Because his mother died before he turned three,

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Edgar probably never knew of this connection to Payne, but he surely knew the song "Home Sweet Home," which was a sheet-music blockbuster performed in parlors and on stages throughout his lifetime.

Like most songs about home, Payne's lyric is really about *longing* for home. It first appeared in the operetta *Clari; or, the Maid of Milan*, where it was sung by the unfortunate title character after she left her home and fell prey to a wicked seducer. Appropriately, the American Payne composed the song while living in Paris. He wrote to his loved ones around the same time, "My yearnings toward Home become stronger as the term of my exile lengthens . . . I feel the want of you, parts of myself, in this strange world, for though I am naturalized to vagabondage, still it is *but* vagabondage . . . I long for a home about me."[2] Payne's song, and the endless stream of popular music evoking the same longing, resonated with generations of Americans who found themselves somewhere other than "home."

In the first half of the nineteenth century, somewhere-other-than-home was likely to be a city such as the ones where Edgar Poe spent most of his life. The years 1820–50—three-fourths of Poe's lifetime—saw "the most rapid urbanization in American history," according to historian Daniel Walker Howe.[3] Driven by manufacturing and trade, American cities grew dramatically, populated by young people who migrated from family farms as well as by European immigrants, mainly from Ireland, England, and Germany. The number of American towns with populations over ten thousand went from six to sixty in less than fifty years.[4] Of course, a person can have more than one home in a lifetime, and yet the notion of a "homeland" as a place to which one is emotionally anchored, through ancestry, memory, and sentiment, persists even today. Especially in the sentimental culture of antebellum America, "home" evoked

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not just a "lowly thatched cottage" but also the rural community that surrounded it; the city, by contrast, was a place of estrangement. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan describes home or homeland as the center of a person's spatial system: "The stars are perceived to move around one's abode; home is the focal point of a cosmic structure. . . . [T]o abandon it would be hard to imagine."[5] Living far away from that center, that focal point, is what the song "Home Sweet Home" is about.

Poe was not one of those who left the farm for the factory, but, with the exception of a few years spent in college and the army, he lived in cities his entire life. And, as the son of actors whose companies performed up and down the eastern seaboard, Poe was not only a child of the city but a child of transience, constantly moving from place to place. If Payne felt exiled, or "naturalized to vagabondage," Poe was born into vagabondage. Throughout his childhood, living with the Allan family of Richmond, he was acutely aware of his orphan status, as he was never legally adopted or included in his foster father's will. Including changes of address within cities, Poe relocated approximately thirty-five times in his forty-year life. Although he called the city of Richmond home as a young man, for most if his life, *home*—homeland or cosmic focal point—was experienced not as something lost but something he never really knew. Poe was not so much uprooted as unrooted.

In his vagabondage as well as his struggles with poverty, Poe differed from most "major" American authors—at least most major white authors—of his time. Poe's contemporary Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, was very much rooted in Salem, Massachusetts, and, except for an extended residence in Europe from 1853 to 1860, lived in New England his entire life. Though never wealthy, Hawthorne's living conditions were solidly middle class, and he had a support system that included a United States president, Franklin

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Pierce. Harriet Beecher Stowe, who lived twice as long as Poe, was born in Litchfield, Connecticut, and died in nearby Hartford, where she spent her last thirty-six years. When she lived in other cities (Cincinnati, Ohio, and Brunswick, Maine), she and her family stayed for over a decade, in comfortable, spacious homes. James Fenimore Cooper, who was born two decades before Poe but outlived him by three years, is closely associated with Cooperstown, New York, the town his father established, and where he spent his last fifteen years. In between, he lived prosperously in New York City and, for seven years, in Europe. All of the other figureheads of the "American Renaissance" were rooted in a specific city, town, or region, even if they did not spend their entire lives there—Concord, Massachusetts, for Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau; New York City for Walt Whitman and Herman Melville; and Amherst, Massachusetts, for Emily Dickinson. Whitman and Melville experienced economic hardship as children, and Thoreau chose a Spartan economic life as an adult, but none of them experienced the career-long poverty that Poe did, and none of them moved nearly as often. Poe's rootless life might not have been unique among poor yet ambitious men of his time, but it seems to have been quite unlike that of his canonical contemporaries.

This book is an attempt to tell the story of that unrooted life with a distinct focus on the American cities where Poe lived for extended periods of time: Richmond, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. Of course, Poe's life does not fit neatly into chapters set in those four cities. There is also Boston, his birthplace; London, where he spent five years as a boy with the Allans; Charlottesville, Virginia, where he was a student; West Point, New York, where he was a cadet; Sullivan's Island, South Carolina, and Old Point Comfort, Virginia, where he was an enlisted man. Moreover, after leaving Richmond

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in 1827, he would return several times to visit and would relocate there for over a year, in 1835–37. He lived in New York on two separate occasions, though little is known about the first, shorter stay. While I describe all of those departures and arrivals, in this book I will incorporate them into chapters anchored by the cities that define distinct periods of Poe's life, then conclude with a chapter chronicling the last year and a half of that life, a period defined less by residence than by travel. *The Man of the Crowd*, then, is a compact biography of Poe that reconsiders his work and career in light of his itinerancy and his relationship to the cities where he lived.

By emphasizing his physical and social environment, I hope to counter an old but still pervasive impression of Poe as an isolated figure, a "nowhere man" who lived somewhere in America but perhaps did not belong there, who was oblivious to his surroundings.[6] "There is no place," wrote W. H. Auden, "in any of [his stories] for the human individual as he actually exists in space and time."[7] The poet Richard Wilbur, an astute interpreter of Poe, would go even further, arguing that he "sees the poetic soul as *at war with the mundane physical world*; and that warfare is Poe's fundamental subject."[8] And here is Galway Kinnell, contrasting Poe to his contemporary Walt Whitman: "Poe's poetry was the poetry of a blind man, a man who was imagining some realm somewhere else."[9] Such claims are understandable, given that most of Poe's poetry and much of his best-known fiction takes place in unspecified or imaginary locations. Poe neither provides the coordinates of the "kingdom by the sea" where Annabel Lee is buried, nor indicates the town nearest the House of Usher—nor, for that matter, the country in which Usher resides. When he does set a story in an actual place, it's likely to be a place he did not know firsthand, such as Paris in the three stories featuring the original literary detective C. Auguste Dupin.

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Although Poe did not know Paris firsthand, the Dupin stories exemplify his fascination with "the city" as a phenomenon. The modern detective story, which Poe originated, could only have developed in an urban milieu: though urbanization is not a necessary condition for crime, by Poe's time cities and crime were closely associated. Increasingly, cities established police forces to catch criminals and solve crimes—and thereby to serve as foils for amateur sleuths like M. Dupin. Cities were populated by "strangers," a condition that both enabled crime (anonymity is the norm, and there is no shortage of victims) and created suspicion (when nearly everyone is a stranger, anyone could be a criminal).[10] And, perhaps most significant, cities had newspapers, which, especially with the rise of the penny press, publicized crime and made it possible for an "armchair detective" to operate. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," which I discuss in chapter 3, Dupin gleans information about the killing from the newspaper and uses a newspaper advertisement to lure the criminal. Its sequel, "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," is essentially a conversation with newspaper reports and speculation about a murder.

"Marie Rogêt" is a true tale of the city, though it might be hard to tell which city. Poe wrote the story while living in Philadelphia; he set it in Paris, but it follows the investigation of a recent murder in New York. He first pitched the tale to a Boston editor:

> The story is based upon the assassination of Mary Cecilia Rogers, which created so vast an excitement, some months ago, in New-York. I have, however, handled my design in a manner altogether *novel* in literature. I have imagined a series of nearly exact *coincidences* occurring in Paris. A young grisette, one Marie Rogêt, has been murdered under precisely similar circumstances with Mary Rogers. Thus, under pre-

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> tence of showing how Dupin (the hero of "The Rue Morgue") unraveled the mystery of Marie's assassination, I, in reality, enter into a very long and rigorous analysis of the New-York tragedy. No point is omitted. I examine, each by each, the opinions and arguments of the press upon the subject, and show that this subject has been, hitherto, *unapproached*. In fact, I believe not only that I have demonstrated the fallacy of the general idea—that the girl was the victim of a gang of ruffians—but have *indicated the assassin* in a manner which will give renewed impetus to investigation. (T 2:718)

Both the Boston *Notion* and Baltimore's *Saturday Visiter* took a pass on the sequel to "Rue Morgue," but Poe managed to place it in a New York magazine called the *Ladies' Companion*. A freelancer with connections to periodicals in all the major eastern cities, he was used to pitching his work, getting rejected, and weighing the relative benefits of high visibility or decent pay. With "Marie Rogêt," Poe had written a timely tale with a looming expiration date. He was writing about what people on the street were talking about—in this case, a grisly unsolved murder—but the story also shows him intervening in a real-life mystery through the medium of the periodical press, itself a creature of the modern city and the center of Poe's professional life. At the peak of his career, Poe considered himself "essentially a Magazinist": a title that describes his professional life more accurately than the terms usually applied to him today: fiction writer, poet, critic, editor (L 1:470). He was all of those things and more (journalist, essayist), but with rare exceptions, he made his name, and his living, providing content for magazines published in the major eastern cities of Richmond, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston.

In the case of "Marie Rogêt," Dupin does not feel the need to visit the scene of the crime or to interview any witnesses.

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Like his creator, Poe, Dupin relies on newspapers. Poe quotes extensively from New York papers (renamed with French titles) to review the leading theories and to set up Dupin's—that is, his own—response. Although the crime itself was real, Poe's story is very much a product of print culture, with one writer responding in public to other writers. Poe does not develop Marie/Mary's character or anyone else's. He does not solve the mystery of Marie Rogêt, either: Poe "indicated the assassin" to be an unnamed, swarthy naval officer, an acquaintance of Marie/Mary, and even *that* claim turned out to be inaccurate. Between the second and third, final installment of "Marie Rogêt," new evidence in the Mary Rogers case emerged in the form of a deathbed confession by one Frederika Loss, who confirmed an already prevalent theory that Mary had died from complications during an abortion. At that point Poe couldn't win: if he changed his story to conclude that Mary died during a botched abortion procedure, he would be seen as cheating, but if he stayed the course, he'd be seen as having spent a lot of time and effort to reach a false conclusion. So, after delaying the publication of the final installment by a month, Poe punted, merely arguing against an already debunked hypothesis—that Mary had been abducted and killed by a street gang.[11]

"The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" is not one of Poe's greatest accomplishments: in the one story in which Dupin attempts to solve a crime that was not plotted by his creator, he comes up short. The "long and rigorous analysis" Poe promised is long indeed, and a bit tedious for most modern readers. And yet, in its focus on urban crime, its attempt to blend journalism with fiction in order to intervene in a current controversy, "Marie Rogêt" shows us a Poe very unlike his popular image as an isolated, mad genius "at war with the physical world."

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Poe's stories told by killers have a decidedly urban feel, as well, despite not being set in a specific city. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," the police suspect foul play because neighbors had heard the old man's shriek; the street is densely populated enough for them to hear it, and too densely populated for the killer to risk moving the body from the house. In "The Black Cat," the narrator twice calls attention to the "dense crowd" that "filled" his garden on the night his house catches fire (T 2:853). And in this story, too, the killer buries the victim on the premises to avoid "the risk of being observed by the neighbors" (T 2:856).[12]

Indeed, to nineteenth-century readers, cities were dangerous, mysterious places: they were constantly changing, easy to get lost in, and hard to comprehend. One of the most popular fictional genres of the mid-nineteenth century was the "city mystery" novel, which highlighted crime and vice, particularly prostitution and extramarital sex, as well as theft, gambling, and drunkenness. These novels were "mysteries" not in the whodunit sense, but, rather, in their insistence on exposing illicit activity usually hidden from view. Not coincidentally, one of the earliest and most popular American city mystery novels, *The Quaker City*, was written by Poe's friend George Lippard, whom he met in Philadelphia in the early 1840s.

While living in Philadelphia, Poe wrote the story that lends this book its title. In "The Man of the Crowd," which I discuss in chapter 3, the story's narrator spends an entire night following another man through the crowded streets of London. A creature of the city, the man keeps moving, always part of the crowd. The pursuer provides a clinical description of the people, the streets, the whole nocturnal scene of the city, while focusing on this one man who, paradoxically, stands out for the extent to which he blends in or embodies the crowd. While the title of my book implicitly

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refers to Poe, I don't mean that Poe blended in with the crowd—far from it. Poe did not love crowds and was consistently dismissive of "the mob," yet he was much more a product of the city than his reputation suggests. Not only did he live in rapidly growing cities for most of his life; his livelihood depended on appealing to "the crowd," the increasingly urban consumers of magazine literature. And like the man of the crowd, Poe had to keep moving: literally, he walked the streets of every city he knew, from rented house to magazine office, from magazine office to another writer's house, and, too often, to a nearby saloon or bar. But, in a broader sense, too, he was almost constantly on the move. Poe's attachments to specific places were temporary, and he understood them to be so.

The narrator of "The Man of the Crowd" is both fascinated and mystified by his subject, concluding that he is "a book that will not permit itself to be read." I know how he feels: I've been following Poe around from city to city for some time, and he remains enigmatic, always one step ahead. Even so, in these pages I've tried to offer more than a fleeting glimpse of a man in motion; I've tried to depict Poe as a man living and working, enjoying professional victories and frustrating losses, in the cities that were increasingly coming to define modern American life. Like his fictional man of the crowd, Poe was accustomed to movement, and acquainted with alienation.

This is not a work of academic criticism or a comprehensive biography or complete overview of the Poe canon. I have not skipped over any major events in Poe's life, but, in emphasizing where Poe was and what it was like for him to live there, I have spent relatively less time on other aspects of his personal life and his writing process. The works I discuss also reflect my focus on Poe's urban experience: for that reason, I devote more attention, for instance, to "The

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Murders in the Rue Morgue" and the journalistic series "Doings of Gotham" than I do to "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Black Cat." But, while I don't discuss every major work, I have been struck by how much of Poe's writing does connect to the simple fact that his life and career were inseparable from the development of the American city. Poe craved success as a writer and editor—his career-long ambition was to control his own magazine—and there was no way to separate that ambition from the series of cities to which he moved, ending with New York. He encountered true poverty in Baltimore in the early 1830s, and it followed him throughout his adult life, showing up in his stories in various guises. His drinking problem cannot be blamed on city life, but the cities he lived in certainly offered opportunities and occasions to give in to that dangerous impulse.

As these chapters demonstrate, Poe was ambivalent about urban life and about the places where he lived and worked. When he could manage it, especially after his wife became ill, he tried to live on the outskirts, close enough to ply his trade as an editor and a freelance writer but at a somewhat safe distance from the noise, foul air, and temptations of the city center. Still, at a time when suburbs were a new concept and public transportation was slow and somewhat expensive, life outside the city tended to leave Poe personally and professionally isolated. He had a number of priorities when it came to choosing where to live, some of which were in conflict with each other: low rent, proximity to local publishing centers, and a healthy, semirural environment. It's no wonder he moved as often as he did.

Poe was one of the most inventive and original writers of his time. But, exceptional as he was, he was also, in many ways, a typical American white man of the first half of the nineteenth century: he was free to move, to pursue a dream,

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but frustrated by low pay and limited career options. Other men owned the businesses he worked for. Other people owned the houses he lived in. So he kept moving and tried to make a decent life for his family. His legacy in literature and popular culture is wide ranging and profound, yet in his lifetime he must have felt that he never quite made it. He achieved fame and admiration for his writing but he never gained control over his career. He found and held on to a loving family, but he never found a place to rest. Wherever he was, it was no place like home.

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