In June of 1839, after two very lean years of freelancing following his break with the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Edgar Allan Poe found a welcome if not exactly comfortable landing place at *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine*. Founded in 1837 by the popular Philadelphia character actor William Burton, *Gentleman’s* was the original American men’s magazine—the predecessor of today’s *GQ*, *Esquire*, *Details*, and the like. Redefining gentlemanliness as a distinction between minds rather than between estates, *Gentleman’s* cultivated and addressed an ideal reading public for itself: a new, distinctively American class of young men who aspired to make themselves into gentlemen not only by their professional success, but also by refining their tastes, manners, and intellect. Not surprisingly, Poe briddled against the bourgeois aims of the magazine, proving himself, as usual, a headstrong and quarrelsome editor; but despite his disagreements with Burton, writing for *Gentleman’s* provided Poe a stimulating context for exploring the contours of Jacksonian-American manhood. In addition to his many reviews, Poe contributed seven tales and sketches to the magazine, most of which systematically purge the word “gentleman” of its familiar meanings. From “The Fall of the House of Usher,” which depicts the intellectual aristocrat as an emasculated invalid, to “Peter Pendulum (The Businessman),” which exposes the self-made man as a petty con artist, Poe seems to be searching in vain for the robust, integral, wholesome gentleman that was supposed to
grace the pages of the magazine. In the place of this idealized but elusive figure, Poe posits a fractured masculine subject whose potency derives not from self-sufficiency, but from desire.

Poe’s first contribution to Gentleman’s, “The Man That Was Used Up,” is not only a sharp satire of Jacksonian-American ideals of manhood; it also contains the kernel of Poe’s celebrated “invention” of the detective story. In its investigation of an irresistibly attractive gentleman, the tale places a mystery of sexual definition at the heart of Poe’s detective fiction in its formative stages. “The Man That Was Used Up” introduces the detective impulse as originating in the narrator’s vexed, homoerotic desire for intimate knowledge of another man—an impulse that will be pursued to dissatisfying ends both here and in Poe’s last contribution to Gentleman’s, “The Man of the Crowd.” The governing metaphor of these tales, however, has as much to do with textuality as with sexuality: the pursued men are figured as ineradicable texts that the narrators, with much difficulty, are endeavoring to read and transcribe. We might therefore read the work of detection as an instance of what Lee Edelman calls “homographesis,” a literary practice that “textualizes male identity as such, subjecting it to the alienating requirement that it be ‘read,’ and threatening, in consequence, to strip ‘masculinity’ of its privileged status as the self-authenticating paradigm of the natural or the self-evident itself.”

But Edelman’s “homographesis” hinges on the historical emergence, late in the nineteenth century, of “homosexuality” as a minority signifier of personal identity. These tales were all written between 1839 and 1841, at least a generation before questions of “sexual orientation” began to be articulated in terms that are familiar today, but right in the midst of a vigorous public dialogue about gender roles and sexual purity, without which the medical and social categories of homosexuality and “sexual inversion” that emerged a few decades later would have been inconceivable. Whereas the ideology of “separate spheres” and the scientific and literary discourse on sexuality was beginning to place inordinate trust in the direction of one’s desire as a decisive marker of identity, these tales show desire leading in divergent and unpredictable directions, opening rather than closing the covers of the masculine text.

As precursors to Poe’s tales of ratiocination, “The Man in the Text” and “The Man of the Crowd” train the reader not to expect a satisfying solution to the mystery the author has woven. The desire for a cohesive narrative subject leads to one moment of frustration after another, as Poe employs an array of devices that fracture and divert the narrative. Poe thus veers from a philosophy of composition based on “totality, or unity, of effect”; at the same time, he undermines a corresponding American ideal of masculinity as unified, integral, impenetrable, and fraternal. In so doing, Poe helps to create new discursive conditions for representing masculinity and desire in multiple, queerly shifting configurations.
In “The Man That Was Used Up,” Poe burlesques a popular figure of nationalist masculine heroics—exposing a renowned war hero in the wars against the Indians as a false image, propped up by slave labor and the latest technology. The narrator, a “constitutionally nervous” socialite, is initially aroused by the “entire individuality” of General John A. B. C. Smith, by his “presence singularly commanding,” and by the distinct air of aristocracy “pervading the whole man” (378, my italics). Poe’s emphasis on the General’s singularity and wholeness is striking in the opening paragraphs of the tale, evoking an image of the “purified, unified, ‘vigorous,’ brotherly, national manhood” that Dana Nelson delineates as the ideal held up (but never realized) in American political and literary discourse from the Constitution to the Emancipation Proclamation. According to Nelson, in the early years of the republic, Federalist rhetoric promoted a homogenized, unified vision of white, American manhood “as a corrective to a whole range of frictions and anxieties men were experiencing as a result of postwar political, economic, and social dislocation.”

Although such a unified subject position is impossible to achieve or maintain in practice, the ideology of white manhood nonetheless “has worked powerfully to naturalize ‘white’ men as essentially unified subjects” (27). In her discussion of Poe’s “Some Words with a Mummy,” Nelson argues that Poe exposes national (white) manhood as “a state of melancholy, a false and unhealthy nostalgia for a uniform, brotherly state of unity and wholeness that never in fact did or even could exist” (204). For Nelson, the revivified mummy in the tale represents a whole range of “democracy’s ‘others’”— “supplementary bodies” marked by race, gender, and class, which must remain contained (or dead) within the abstracted, homogenous space of U.S. democracy.

In “The Man That Was Used Up” it is not any “supplementary body” that exposes the tenuous foundations of white manhood; rather, the conventional ways of knowing (or not knowing) public figures effectively shield these foundations from view, and it takes the persistent detective work of our narrator—who seems not at all sure of his own “purified, unified, ‘vigorous,’ brotherly, national manhood”—to reveal them. At first glance, the Brevet Brigadier General John A. B. C. Smith appears to embody one of his era’s most popular and legible stories: the tale of the valorous and ingenious white man who triumphs over a set of bloody, wretched savages. General Smith may have been a satirical stab at a number of American military heroes, including Andrew Jackson himself, who, like Smith, was well renowned for his “valor” in fighting Indians and his dedication to progress and innovation. As Robert Beuka writes, “the Jacksonian mystique of masculinity posited a unifying image in the figure of the robust common man, committed to diligent labor and na-
tional progress,” and importantly, Indian removal (35). Poe’s tale systematically deconstructs this “unifying image,” complicating the simplistic text of masculine nationalist heroism by the fetishistic dissection of the General into a catalogue of body parts, by the intersection of his story of manhood with a series of other texts, and finally by his exposure as a mere jumble of prosthetic devices.

With the first sentence, Poe invites the reader into an elaborate exercise in intertextuality, tying this burlesque tale to one of his most solemn arabesques. “I cannot remember when or where I made the acquaintance of that truly fine-looking fellow, Brevet Brigadier General John A. B. C. Smith,” the narrator begins. Compare the opening sentence of “Ligeia”: “I cannot, for my soul, remember how, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia” (378; 310). As the narrator continues, the tale begins to look like a lively self-parody. Just as Ligeia’s narrator-husband describes her physical beauty in minute detail, the narrator of “The Man That Was Used Up” renders the General’s body into a veritable catalogue of fetish objects. Having verbally dissected their respective objects of desire, both narrators proceed to reassemble and resurrect them through the process of narration. In an illuminating side-by-side reading of the two tales, Ortwin de Graef argues that Poe’s “transformation of the other into literature . . . involves a considerable deployment of totalizing violence, a recuperation of that reality into an order which is alien to it and consequently negates it.” According to de Graef, “The Man That Was Used Up” depicts a “narcissistic dead-end at the heart of literature.” In contrast to Ligeia, whose narrator “sustains the unbearable tension of the possibility of literature to the very end,” General Smith is stuck with a narrator who is too easily satisfied with language’s ability to “use up” the identity of the other—and who “thereby reveal[s] himself to be a very poor reader” (1114).

Reading the text of the General’s body with conventional expectations of linearity, climax, and conclusion, the narrator is looking for what Roland Barthes might call a masterpiece. In Barthes’s revision of the term, a masterpiece is a pronouncement, necessarily false but nonetheless appealing, of wholeness, originality, immediacy. To comprehend a masterpiece is “to put an end to the infinity of codes, to find at last the origin (the original) of the copies, to ascertain the cultural starting point.” In contrast to the masterpiece, which effectively jams the mobile play of linguistic codes in order to present the reader with the illusion of a stable and graspable meaning, Barthes posits the plural text, which reveals the plurality of its reader as well:

The more plural the text, the less it is written before I read it . . . and I is not an innocent subject, anterior to the text, one which will subsequently deal with the text as it would an object to dismantle or a site to
occupy. This “I” which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite or, more precisely, lost. (Barthes, S/Z 10)

Seeking in the object of desire a sense of wholeness he lacks in himself, the narrator of “The Man That Was Used Up” strenuously resists the fragmentation and plurality with which his desires confront him. His text, however, remains dynamically open and plural, inimical to the monolithic language of the masterpiece. In its place Poe offers a narrative style characterized by play, self-parody, comic hyperbole, innuendo, double-entendre, and eroticism.

Taking the homoerotics of envy and admiration to comic extremes, the narrator confesses, “Upon . . . the topic of Smith’s personal appearance—I have a kind of melancholy satisfaction in being minute,” and then proceeds to describe General Smith’s “richly flowing . . . jetty black” hair, his “unimaginable whiskers . . . a mouth utterly unequalled . . . the most entirely even, and the most brilliantly white of all conceivable teeth . . . a voice of surpassing clearness . . . the finest bust you ever saw . . . the ne plus ultra of good legs” (379). Superlatives pile up on each other, measuring the distance between the narrator and this seeming paragon of “national manhood.” Face to face with the General’s charming “air distingue,” the narrator is reduced to a state of “anxious embarrassment” (378), driven by a compulsive need to penetrate what he immediately perceives as a mystery surrounding the General.

As Barthes writes of Balzac’s “Sarrasine,” the subject knows the object of desire “only as a division and dissemination of partial objects: leg, breast, shoulder, neck, hands. . . . This sundered, dissected body . . . is reassembled by the artist (and this is the meaning of his vocation) into a whole body, the body of love descended from the heaven of art, in which fetishism is abolished and by which Sarrasine is cured” (S/Z 112). Like Sarrasine’s pursuit of La Zambinella, Poe’s narrator’s pursuit of General Smith is an effort to reassemble the body that his own fetishization has sundered, and thus to rewrite his disjointed story as a single coherent narrative—a closed text, the text as a property that may be grasped and enjoyed, and which may thereby reify the reading subject’s unitary, phallic wholeness. But just as Sarrasine’s pursuit of La Zambinella culminates in “her” exposure as a castrato and thus Sarrasine’s own symbolic castration, Poe’s narrator’s pursuit of General Smith culminates in Smith’s exposure as “used up,” divested not simply of his sexual organ (which goes unmentioned), but of his arms and legs, his shoulders and bosom, his hair, eyes, and teeth, even his palate.

Long before this climactic discovery, the emasculating effects of both reading and desire operate heavily on the narrator, as his detective impulse projects him into distinctively feminine social circles. Unsatisfied by “delightfully luminous conversation” with Smith himself—for the
General is evasive on the subject of his personal history—the narrator fishes for gossip with a series of ladies. In these scenes, Poe depicts gossip as an indirect and insinuating language, practiced mostly by women, discreetly winding its way between the mainstreams of masculine public discourse. The narrator tries to insinuate himself into the network of gossip, beginning with a whispered “tete-a-tete” with Miss Tabitha T. at church one Sunday morning. Her long response to his inquiry demands careful attention, as it sets the pattern for all the responses that will follow.

First, she repeats the surname and verifies that the narrator is really asking about the General: “Smith! . . . Smith!—why, not General John A.B.C.?” Such an absurdly common name demands the addition of an official title if it is to signify the particular person in question. Second, she expresses her surprise that the narrator does not already know “all about him!” The implication that the secrets she is about to reveal are already common knowledge serves both to excuse her indiscretion and to delimit a social circle that includes only those who already know “all about” the General. Her revelations, therefore, would grant the narrator entry into this exclusive society, with herself as his patron. Third, she rattles off a string of fragmentary and glancing allusions to this “wonderfully inventive age,” the General’s “immortal renown,” and his opponents’ savagery. Taken together, these snippets of information demonstrate the speaker’s casual familiarity with facts that are painfully out of the narrator’s reach, suggesting a kinship between herself and the renowned General, and reiterating the narrator’s distance from such “prodigies of valor.” As the other ladies the narrator questions repeat these elements of Tabitha’s speech, in almost the same terms, the repetition comprises a mounting chorus of innuendo, tantalizing the narrator with worthless common knowledge before leading up to the secret heart of the matter with the phrase, “Why, he’s the man—” (382, 384, 385).

Just at this crucial moment in her speech, each woman is rudely interrupted when someone picks up that syllable, man, and diverts it from the referent toward which she was presumably leading. Each interruption, moreover, drowns out the subtle arts of gossip with the domineering language of decidedly masculine texts—the Bible, Shakespeare, Robinson Crusoe, Manfred. For example, Tabitha T.’s monologue is interrupted by a verse of scripture, bellowed from the mouth of the humorless Reverend Doctor Drummummpupp: “Man . . . that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live; he cometh up and is cut down like a flower” (383; Job 14:1–2). With a thunderous thump on the pulpit, he unleashes language in its sternest Lacanian sense: the law of the father, drumming up a threat of universal castration. The imagery of coming up and being cut down is echoed in the next interruption, at the theater, when an actor by the telling name of Climax cuts off the near ecstatic shrieking of Arabella Cognoscenti with some lines from Shakespeare: “______ mandragora /
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world / Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep / Which thou ow’dst yesterday!” (384; Othello III.3.330–33). The climax of cognition is thus preempted by a literary warning about the heavy cost that knowledge exacts upon its bearer. Next, in the tale’s sharpest mockery of the notion of a masterpiece, the utterance of the word man at the Widow O’Trump’s soirée elicits an argument over the title of Byron’s poetical drama: Man-Fred or Man-Friday? The interchangeability of Manfred (Byron’s iconic romantic hero, and the embodiment of defiant self-determination) and Man Friday (Defoe’s figure of the affectionately submissive black slave) not only demonstrates the slipperiness of textuality as a foundation for white male subjectivity, but also prepares the reader for the anticlimactic end to the narrator’s efforts to master the fragmented text of General Smith’s body. As we shall soon see, this romantic American hero depends on his own “Man Friday” for the air of self-possession he so convincingly exudes.\(^9\)

But first, we must attend to one more deferral. In a last resort before returning to the General himself, the narrator turns from the female gossips to his “particular friend, Mr. Theodore Sinivate.” This conversation brings gossip’s role in detective work into sharper focus. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes, “the precious, devalued arts of gossip, immemorially associated in European thought with servants, with effeminate and gay men, with all women . . . have to do not even so much with the transmission of necessary news as with the refinement of necessary skills for making, testing, and using unrationaled and provisional hypotheses about what kinds of people there are to be found in one’s world.”\(^10\) With the peculiar character of Sinivate, Poe registers this crucial connection between the indeterminacy of language and the mystery of sexual identification. “Sinivate,” as Thomas Mabbott explains, echoes a Cockney pronunciation of “insinuate,” as rendered in Dickens’s Pickwick Papers and a Gentleman’s article by William Burton, for example (“Used Up,” 390–91, note 2). This “particular friend” is certainly full of insinuations—stating nothing, implying everything. Particularly maddening to the narrator is the way Sinivate recasts the practice of insinuation back onto the narrator himself: “You don’t mean to insinuate, now, really, and truly, and conscientiously, that you don’t know all about that affair of Smith’s, as well as I do, eh?” (196). Not only does this perpetuate the mystery surrounding the General; more importantly, it refocuses the investigative lens on the narrator himself, causing him to question the nature of his interest in the General and the nature of his friendship with Sinivate. The narrator now finds the language of gossip and innuendo confronting him with the cultural irregularity of his own desires. Storming away from his “particular friend” in a state of indignation and painfully heightened curiosity about the object of his investigation, he appears to be suffering an episode of homosexual panic.
Anachronistic though such a reading may be, Sinivate strongly resembles a character type that will become more familiar in the decades following the publication of this tale: the effete and \textit{au fait} homosexual man. His appearance as the last in a series of feminine socialites, his identification as the narrator’s “particular friend,” his insinuating speech patterns (drawling vowels and breezy cosmopolitan affectations), and the narrator’s sensitivity to his insinuations all contribute to the impression. But is this, as Valerie Rohy suggests of her lesbian reading of “Ligeia,” merely “an optical illusion, visible only from one historical vantage point”?\textsuperscript{11} Or should this apparently anachronistic character challenge our historical understanding of homosexuality’s emergence as a marker of personal identity much later in the nineteenth century? What I am suggesting lies somewhere between these two alternatives. If Sinivate looks and sounds a bit queer to a modern reader, this perception results from a reading practice that is enabled, indeed required, by Poe’s own style of composition. In Poe’s rendering, insinuation is allied with an effeminate desire for the integral masculine subject, while a denotative textuality is allied with that elusive subject. Like connotation, insinuation and innuendo proliferate and disperse meanings, foiling the narrator’s attempts to read the text of the General’s body. In contrast to connotation, as Barthes demonstrates, denotation establishes “the closure of Western discourse” by tidily arranging “all the meanings of a text in a circle” around itself (\textit{S/Z} 7). The narrator’s desire for General Smith is both an intellectual desire to read the text of manhood itself, and an erotic desire to see the General’s body as a beautiful whole; but the denotative language of the masterpiece encircles and protects the object of desire from the narrator’s view. Thus depicting the detective impulse as a problem both of language and of sexual identification, the tale’s prolonged deferrals and digressions suggest not only the eternal insatiability of desire, but also the linguistically constructed nature of white manhood.

Finally giving up on the language of gossip and insinuation, the narrator resolves to “go to the fountain-head . . . and demand, \textit{in explicit terms}, a solution to this abominable piece of mystery” (386; my italics). For all his determination, however, the narrator proves inadequate to the task of reassembling the body that his own fetishization has sundered. It is not the narrator, but a maligned black servant, who restores the General to the wholeness of a masterpiece.

Discovered in his bedchamber early in the morning, the General is nothing more than “a large and exceedingly odd-looking bundle of something,” which gradually takes the shape of a man only with the assistance of an elderly Negro valet by the name of Pompey.\textsuperscript{12} His “own” body having been decimated in his battles against the Indians, General Smith now consists of a set of expertly crafted prostheses, which Pompey dutifully reassembles each day. Among Poe’s sporadic appropriations of racist stereotypes and ideologies, Pompey occupies a somewhat anomalous
The Man in the Text

position. Neither a minstrel buffoon nor a menacing savage, Pompey silently reconstructs the disheveled model of white manhood, one prosthetic device at a time. For today’s critic, this is a problem of historical dimensions: Pompey further dramatizes the way in which “whiteness” and “manhood” rely on each other for their discursive power in antebellum constructions of civic personhood. For Poe it is the perfect gag: without Pompey’s assistance, the General has “one of the smallest, and altogether the funniest little voices” the narrator has ever heard (197). Yet with a barrage of racist epithets, this emasculated voice commands Pompey’s service: “Now, you dog, slip on my shoulders and bosom! . . . Now, you nigger, my teeth! . . . Pompey, you black rascal . . . my palate” (198). Not only is the General’s body a fake; his “air distingué” is a cover for his common, uncouth racism. Pathetic as these commands sound coming from this whistling, squeaking voice, they achieve their purpose. Inserting “a somewhat singular looking machine” into the General’s mouth, Pompey re-embodies the General’s voice, which immediately resumes its “rich melody and strength” (388). Thus the General regains the power to articulate and perform his white manhood, and the narrator receives his text, from the hands of the black servant.

At last, the unmanned, nervous, compulsively curious narrator is able to read his text—and hence able to tell his tale. Yet along with the solution to the mystery comes a deflation of desire. The eroticized image of masculine nationalist heroics has been reduced to a closed text—an amusing tale, but one that doesn’t bear much scrutiny. Freed of the unsettling dependency of desire, the narrator-detective closes his investigation with a feeling of satisfaction—“a perfect understanding . . . a full comprehension of the mystery which had troubled me for so long” (389). For the reader, however, the effect of this anticlimax is quite different. If the tale has succeeded in mobilizing a desire that it never explicitly articulates, this bizarre yet tidy conclusion will only leave us yearning for further elaboration. Unlike this easily satisfied narrator, we remain unwilling to close the text.

THE CLOSED TEXT: “THE MAN OF THE CROWD”

The smug satisfaction with which this narrator closes his text seems to have struck Poe himself as too easy a response to the complicated questions the text had raised; fortunately, in his steady position at Burton’s, Poe had the opportunity to pursue these questions in subsequent articles. Magazine work, as Margaret Beetham and James Werner have noted, does not engender the expectations of formal closure that readers and writers bring to a novel: “As a serial entity, coming out over time, the periodical is ‘open’ and resists formal closure; its boundaries are fluid, with articles referring to or continuing earlier pieces.” This is especially
clear in Poe’s development of the detective impulse, from its inception in “The Man That Was Used Up” to its fuller elaboration in the first proper detective story, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” So before turning to that first Dupin tale, I would like to take a brief look at an intervening tale that picks up where “Used Up” leaves off.

No sense of satisfaction awaits the narrator of “The Man of the Crowd”—for the subject of this narrator’s investigation is a book that “does not permit itself to be read” (511). This reader-narrator begins the tale sitting in a London coffeehouse, looking for something to read. He describes his mood as one “of the keenest appetency,” a feeling of “calm but inquisitive interest in everything” (511). The word “appetency” again highlights the element of desire in Poe’s development of the detective impulse: it means “the state of longing for, desiring, craving; appetite, passion,” and it is usually used in conjunction with a preposition like of, for, or after (OED). So one may have an appetency for coffee and cigars, for example, or an appetency after an intriguing bit of news, or an appetency of a particularly fascinating person. But at the tale’s opening the narrator’s desire has no object. His attention wanders from the advertisements in the newspaper in his lap, to the “promiscuous company” in the coffeehouse, to the passersby on the street outside, as if searching for an object to which he may attach his free floating desire. His observations of the passersby gradually sharpen—first “abstract and generalizing,” then “descend[ing] to details,” and finally fixing upon the face of a “decrepid old man” (507–8). At last, his desire has found an object, which he quickly renders in terms of textuality: “How wild a history . . . is written in that bosom” he remarks to himself, as he is gripped by “a craving desire to keep him in view” (511).

Up to this point, the narrator has portrayed himself as a skillful reader of human texts. By carefully observing “the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance,” he is able to divide the crowd into types and classes; but the old man will confound his abilities as a reader. Poe habitually provides minute physiognomies of his major characters; even his critical articles typically include a detailed physical description of the author under review. As James Werner has shown in his study of Poe’s “cosmic physiognomy,” Poe’s interest in phrenology and autography indicates his belief that outward appearances have much to say about inward character. But while Poe’s physiognomic analysis comes with a “promise of legibility,” this promise is always thwarted by “a nagging indeterminacy. . . . Each face Poe describes has at its essential core a cipher, something that ultimately defies being read” (Werner, 101–2). What first blocks comprehension in this case is the heterogeneousness of the old man’s expression. Far from the admirable unity of effect that General Smith exudes in “The Man That Was Used Up,” the old man’s expression suggests a jumble of foreboding and contradictory impressions: “ideas of vast mental power, of caution, of
penuriousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense—of supreme despair” (511). Even more explicitly than in “The Man That Was Used Up,” this narrator’s detective work will be figured as an attempt to read and transcribe an encrypted text— to stitch these confused and paradoxical signifiers into a single cohesive narrative.

In a famous essay from his biography of Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin identifies the old man of the crowd as a prime example of that consummate reader of the urban landscape, the flaneur. Benjamin’s discussion of the flaneur is indeed integral to understanding this tale, but (as Werner also notes) the narrator is also a flaneur, and in some ways a better example of the type than is the old man. A flaneur is not a vagrant or an aimless wanderer; rather, “the street becomes a dwelling for the flaneur; he is as much at home among the facades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls.” Unlike the flaneur, who is perfectly at home on the crowded streets of the nineteenth-century metropolis, the old man moves restlessly among the crowd with an air of extreme discomfort, “his eyes roll[ing] wildly from under his knit brows in every direction, upon those who hemmed him in” (512). The more he is crowded, the keener his agitation; he gasps for breath, twisting his face into expressions of “intense agony,” evincing no particular interest in anything, failing even to notice when the narrator “gaze[s] at him steadfastly in the face” (515). By contrast, the narrator is a calm but eager observer of everything he sees. The street is his library, and the old man is (to borrow a phrase from “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”) a “very rare and very remarkable volume.”

The flaneur is not only a reader, but also a detective; as Benjamin writes, “no matter what trail the flaneur may follow, every one of them will lead him to a crime” (Benjamin, 41). Indeed, the old man in this tale appears to be guilty of nothing more than walking, yet the narrator concludes that he is “the type and genius of deep crime” (515). So what is the crime in this tale? I argue that it is a type of illicit solicitation: he provokes in the narrator an unwholesome desire that he cannot fulfill. This is the real respect in which, as Benjamin writes of the flaneur, “he shares the position of the commodity” (Benjamin, 55). Benjamin notes that the flaneur circulates in the department stores and shopping arcades of nineteenth-century Paris without buying or selling, thus approximating a type of empathetic relationship with the objects for sale there: “The intoxication to which the flaneur surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers”; and “empathy is the nature of [this] intoxication” (55). The commodity in the window seems to speak to passersby, inspiring and promising to fulfill their desire at the same time: “You want me, you can have me.” But the old man of the crowd blocks any such empathetic exchange. Never buying, never sell-
ing, never offering himself in any relation of exchange, the old man breaks the laws that structure the economy in which he endlessly circulates.

To provoke a desire that cannot be satisfied is to demand of the desiring subject a reevaluation of his desire. Perhaps there is something wrong with a subject who is drawn to such an unappealing object. The narrator resists this implication by seeking satisfaction: “[I] firmly resolved that we should not part until I had satisfied myself in some measure respecting him” (513). Gustavus Stadler notes a sexual valence of the phrase, suggesting that the narrator’s language “slides into, and puns on, the meaning of ‘satisfying myself’ that signifies physical action, sexual climax.” Whereas Stadler argues that the tale narrates the inability to know the object of one’s desire “while simultaneously allowing the narrators merger with a figure of ‘deep crime’” (21), I maintain that this merger is keenly desired but never achieved, because the textualized body of the old man proves to be impenetrable, forbidding any form of intercourse.

To “demand satisfaction” was also a conventional way of challenging an offender to a duel in Poe’s day—another mode by which men defended their honor and competed for sexual dominance. But if this is a duel, it ends in a standoff. Having followed the old man for nearly twenty-four hours—along the thronged streets of London, through the marketplace and the theater district, into scenes of “deplorable poverty,” and back into the teeming streets in the morning—the narrator finally concedes, “It will be in vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds.” Unsatisfied, he consoles himself with pious speculation: “perhaps it is but one of the great mercies of God that ‘er lässt sich nicht lesen’” (515; “it does not permit itself to be read”). But if the narrator fails to “satisfy himself” regarding this man-who-is-a-book, it is not for lack of trying. As Werner notes, “the secret writing itself refuses to be read; its recalcitrance is not an indictment of the flaneur’s method, but a testament to the city’s (and humanity’s) tendency to retain mystery” (142). Given the great pride and satisfaction Poe took in solving cryptograms, reading autographs, and performing physiognomic analysis, one must surmise that nothing would be more maddening to him than such a recalcitrant textual body. The detective impulse is thus further developed here as a desire to read and thereby master a consolidated textual subject. But here as in “The Man That Was Used Up,” the erotic detective impulse is thwarted. The illegibility that frustrates desire in these two tales provides the impetus for the development of the detective story, wherein the desire for a consolidated textual subject—the desire to read, to write, to know, to be such a subject—is radically reconceived.
When William Burton sold Gentleman’s to George Graham, Poe carried on as an editor at the new venture; “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” was his first contribution to Graham’s Magazine (March 1841). Though innovative and hugely influential, Poe’s first Dupin tale is not a “masterpiece” in either the conventional or the Barthesian sense of the term. Like the escaped orangutan who perpetrates the murders, the tale itself refuses to be mastered. Few stories elicit greater resistance to the sense of an ending than what is widely acknowledged as the first modern detective story. An orangutan did it? It’s an absurd and even maddening solution—designed to amaze and astound rather than to satisfy the reader. Many readers even feel cheated by the ending, as if victims of a cruel hoax. As John Bryant complains, “Poe never plays fair.” According to Bryant, Poe’s narrative manipulation leaves readers feeling “intellectually deflated . . . forced to discard our deeper ratiocinations for something that is anticlimactically artificial” (34). John Irwin represents the opposite reaction, contending that the genius of Poe’s detective fiction derives from his creation of “a repeatable solution, a solution that conserves (because it endlessly refigures) the sense of the mysterious.” Shawn Rosenheim helps explain these two opposite reactions by identifying decapitation as the tale’s “structuring metaphor” in forcing us to “discard our deeper ratiocinations” for a solution that depends wholly on the apprehension of brute physical force, Rosenheim argues, the tale duplicates within the reader the split the narrator imagines within Dupin.

Much as the narrator of “The Man That Was Used Up” imaginatively dismembers the object of his desire through elaborate narrative fetishization, Dupin’s narrator-admirer begins his tale by dividing Dupin in two: “Observing him in these [analytic] moods, I often dwelt meditatively upon the old philosophy of the Bi-Part Soul, and amused myself with the fancy of a double Dupin—the creative and the resolvent” (533). But “Murders” complicates the tidy closure of the masculine textual body that we see in the comedic conclusion of “Used Up.” In the more psychologically unsettling conclusion of “Murders,” Poe reintegrates the sundered text of the masculine body by imagining it as a penetrable space. Boasting to the narrator “that most men, in respect to himself, wore windows in their bosoms” (533), Dupin introduces a second structuring metaphor for the tale: that of the open window. The metaphors of textual and sexual penetration in the “Man” tales take on more menacing and violent implications in “Murders,” as Dupin “throws himself into the spirit of his opponent” (529)—a ferocious orangutan who leaps through barred windows with “almost praeternatural . . . agility” (555). In the process of his investigation, Dupin will reenact the violent penetration of the L’Espanayes’ private domestic scene, satisfying his detective impulse.
with a vicarious experience of the orangutan’s “prodigious power.” At the same time, however, the narrative will stealthily pry open the window in Dupin’s own bosom, reintegrating him into a personal economy of circulation and exchange. The reintegrated masculine body is thus figured as a penetrable body, and the masterpiece is reimagined as an open text.

When the narrator first meets him, Dupin is a fallen aristocrat, “reduced to such poverty that the energy of his character succumbed beneath it, and he ceased to bestir himself in the world, or to care for the retrieval of his fortunes” (531). The detective plot will transform this listless aesthete into a model of self-possession and mental virility by ejecting him from his mental isolation and into purposeful engagement with the world outside. Indeed, the narrator is the tale’s first detective, investigating the personal and family history of his fascinating new friend; but the two characters will merge in both formal and thematic ways over the course of the tale, with the roles of narrator and detective shifting back and forth between them.

As in the “Man” tales, the work of detection begins as a search for a text, with Dupin and the narrator happening to meet in the library in the Rue Montmarte, both “in search of the same very rare and very remarkable volume” (531–32). The text is soon forgotten, however, as the narrator transfers his interest onto Dupin himself. The two set up housekeeping together, with the narrator playing the role of the solicitous husband by paying the rent “and furnishing in a style which suited the rather fantastic gloom of our common temper, a time-eaten and grotesque mansion, long deserted through superstitions into which we did not inquire, and tottering to its fall in a retired and desolate portion of the Faubourg St. Germain” (532). This secluded locale resembles a familiar type of domestic situation for Poe’s male-female couples, who live in retirement from society and crave only each other’s company. Like Roderick and Madeline Usher in their crumbling ancestral mansion, these two bachelors carry on a suspiciously private and unproductive textual intercourse in a house that is “tottering to its fall.”

The literary bachelor occupied a liminal position in the nineteenth-century bourgeois discourse of separate spheres and domesticity. In Katherine Snyder’s concise summation, “Although home and marriage were not literally synonymous, their ideologies were so intricately interwoven that they were virtually interchangeable.” According to these ideologies, the wife and mother was the producer and guardian of family virtue; a house was not a home without its “angel of the hearth.” Insofar as married home life was essential to the cultivation of full civic personhood, bachelors were half-formed men. In popular literature by and about bachelors, books were often figured as the bachelor’s surrogate family, and the bachelor’s relationship to his book was construed as both problematic and redemptive. Unencumbered by family or national at-
tachments, the bachelor is all the more attached to his text. For Washington Irving, as Bryce Traister argues, textuality is the bachelor’s unique mode of productive citizenship. “Whatever I have written has been written with the feelings and published as the writing of an American,” Irving writes in a letter to Henry Breevport—“How else am I to serve my country—by coming home and begging an office of it? . . . If I can do any good in this world it is with my pen.” Irving’s fictional bachelors are both producers and consumers of narrative, and as such they both create and meet the demand for a distinctively American literary product.

The bachelors in residence in the decrepit mansion in the Faubourg St. Germain, though great lovers of books, do not initially take part in Irving’s rhetoric of textual circulation and exchange. As an aristocrat of intellect, Dupin is a connoisseur and a collector, not a producer, of texts. “Books, indeed, were his sole luxuries,” the narrator informs us (242)—desirable not for their utility or market value, but as self-edifying intellectual property. Textuality for him represents not the circulation of ideas, but the acquisition of a property that he takes out of circulation, shutting it up with him behind the “massy shutters” of his mansion. It takes a form of textuality quite different from the rarefied volumes they so treasure to draw this pair into more productive engagement in the public sphere: it is a headline in the evening newspaper that draws their attention to the “Extraordinary Murders” in the Rue Morgue. As Benedict Anderson has demonstrated, newspapers and other inexpensive, popular print media played an important role in the creation of a national imagination. Newspapers fostered an awareness among their readers that they were part of a public—a readership. The Gazette des Tribunaux has an even more direct effect on Dupin and the narrator, as it draws them into public circulation. They begin their investigation with a minute reading of the papers, but in order to solve the mystery, they will have to venture out of their claustrophobic gothic mansion in the light of day; they will have to call on a favor from the Prefect of Police; and Dupin will even be able to repay a favor to his acquaintance Adolphe le Bon, who has been wrongly implicated in the murders.

It must be said that this is a particularly troubling manifestation of the homosocial structure in which the exploitation of a passive female object facilitates the abstraction of the bonds between men. The brutal murder of two women prompts Dupin and the narrator to redirect their erotic energy into the socially useful task of narration, thus enabling the abstraction of their relationship necessary to their formation as citizens in the imagined community. Without minimizing the significance of these shocking scenes of violence against women, however, I want to draw attention to the lines of affinity the tale draws between the victims, perpetrators, and investigators of this crime. First, the remote situation of Dupin and the narrator is mirrored by that of the murder victims and the criminal pair. Having captured an exotic orangutan during an excursion
in Borneo with the intention of selling it for a profit, the sailor tries to keep his property secluded in a closet in his own residence—in order to avoid “the unpleasant curiosity of his neighbors” (564). The L’Espanayes, an elderly mother and her unmarried daughter, are said to have lived “an exceedingly retired life” on the lonely bystreet called the Rue Morgue. According to the newspaper account, “no one was spoken of as frequenting house. . . . The shutters of the front windows were seldom opened. Those in the rear were always closed” (539). Violently opening up channels of circulation between these three discrete pairs, the tale reflects some of the worst anxieties that accompanied urban encroachments on private space.

Second, Mme. L’Espanaye’s decapitation has its parallel in Dupin’s own absorption in the life of the mind, to the exclusion of material concerns. Until involving himself in this investigation, Dupin’s description of the Prefect of police would apply equally well to himself: “In his wisdom is no stamen. It is all head and no body, like the pictures of the Goddess Laverna—or, at best, all head and shoulders, like a codfish” (568). Dupin’s rejection of abstract, disembodied modes of analysis indicates an important development in Poe’s conception of the intellectual aristocrat. Like Roderick Usher—coooned in a realm of “excited and highly dis-tempered ideality”—Dupin displays symptoms of “an excited, or perhaps . . . a diseased intelligence” in the early days of his acquaintance with the narrator (“Usher,” 405; “Murders,” 533). Something about this investigation, then, mends the split between Dupin’s body and his mind. As Rosenheim argues, “it is the knowledge of his own embodiment that permits Dupin to solve the mystery of the L’Espanaye’s deaths” (173). This is a deeply troubling knowledge, for the reader as well as for Dupin: “Insofar as ‘stamen’ refers to the male generative organ of a flower, it marks the (male) reader addressed by the text. . . . To have a male body seems inseparable from complicity in the orangutan’s gendered violence” (Rosenheim, 174). Is Poe suggesting, then, that the reintegration of the masculine body is to be achieved through monstrous violence against women? By looking back at the emergence of the detective impulse in “The Man That Was Used Up,” I would like to propose an alternative to this conclusion.

In “Used Up,” the appearance of masculine bodily integrity is restored by the labor of an ill-treated black servant; by reassembling the General’s dismembered body, Pompey provides the narrator with the closed text he has been trying so desperately to read. As a subversion of antebellum ideals of “national manhood,” this solution to the mystery is humorously satisfying; but any reader misguided enough to have been hoping for a revelation about the essence of masculine integrity will be deeply disappointed by this tidy closure. By the same token, if “The Man That Was Used Up” and “The Man of the Crowd” have prepared us to see a crisis of sexual definition at the heart of Poe’s detective fiction, we
will remain skeptical about the air of supreme self-possession and masculine integrity that Dupin conveys at the end of “Murders.” As Dupin reasons about the L’Espanaye’s locked apartment, “there must be something wrong,” some opening in this apparently impenetrable edifice.

In the clue that reveals the murderer’s mode of egress, we see the convergence of the tale’s two structuring metaphors: decapitation and the open window. As the police’s investigation of the apartment has confirmed, the only possible means of egress is through the back windows—but these are nailed shut. Dupin’s investigation, however, reveals that it is not the apartment itself, but the perception of the police, that has been “hermetically sealed” (558). Following his instinct that “these apparent ‘impossibilities’ are, in reality, not such,” Dupin is led to the nail in one of the back windows:

It had, I say, in every respect, the appearance of its fellow in the other window; but this fact was an absolute nullity (conclusive as it might seem to be) when compared with the consideration that here, at this point, terminated the clew. ‘There must be something wrong,’ I said, ‘about the nail.’ I touched it; and the head, with about a quarter of an inch of the shank, came off in my fingers. The rest of the shank was in the gimlet-hole, where it had been broken off. . . . I now replaced this head portion in the indentation whence I had taken it, and resemblance to a perfect nail was complete—the fissure was invisible. Pressing the spring, I gently raised the sash for a few inches; the head went up with it, remaining firm in its bed. I closed the window, and the semblance of the whole nail was again perfect. (553)

I have quoted at some length, because so much hangs on this tiny nail. It is the master clue that brings all the other clues together into a coherent narrative; it establishes a closed text by appearing to fix every divergent and unstable signifier in its place. Yet just as the nail gives the apartment the appearance of being sealed from within while in fact enabling its ventilation and penetration, Dupin’s apparently airtight solution actually leaves the text open, by confounding the desire that has driven it. The homoerotic desire that initiates the detective impulse—the desire to apprehend an integral masculine subject—is redirected toward an irrational and unmotivated actor rather than a culpable human agent who might be brought to justice. In place of a criminal mastermind, we find simply a sailor who couldn’t keep his beast in the closet.

The broken nail thus serves as a curious lynchpin for Poe’s ratiocinative method. For all its thematic significance, it also serves to play a trick on the reader—teasing us with the promise of a tidy solution.23 We are encouraged to unravel the mystery for ourselves, by reading between the lines, searching for hidden clues, filling in the gaps to create a coherent narrative and solve the crime. Like “The Man That Was Used Up” and “The Man of the Crowd,” the tale trades in insinuation and innuendo, seducing us into the game of detection only to redirect our desire toward...
a broken object—a used-up man. But this image of dismemberment, this broken nail, is no joke. Dupin’s discovery opens onto a new configuration of masculine bodily and intellectual potency that acknowledges the masculine subject’s vulnerability as well as its propensity to inflict harm on others. If the open window represents a masculine subject that achieves potency by being opened, the broken nail suggests that this subject is irreparably fractured by the impulses of beastly violence that pass through it.

Leaving behind the security of purely abstracted intellectual life, Dupin enters a public sphere where his intellectual labor has a monetary rather than an intrinsic value. Despite his persistently condescending attitude toward the police, his transformation from the dilettante detective of the Rue Morgue to the investigator-for-hire in “The Mystery of Marie Roget” and “The Purloined Letter” demonstrates his interpellation by and service to the state legal apparatus. The pleasure Dupin takes in vicariously experiencing the orangutan’s murder of Madame and Mademoiselle L’Espanaye proves that he has not remained uncontaminated by the perversions of this economy—but Poe is not finished with this character yet. In two subsequent tales, Dupin will continue to intervene in an economy of personhood that depends on the circulation of both texts and women’s bodies. With Dupin, Poe mobilizes and sustains a narrative desire for a masculine subject that is defined not by wholeness, independence, purity, and integrity, but by fragmentation, contingency, desire, penetrability, and yes, violence. Dupin’s life as a character, moreover, extends far beyond the three tales in which he first appeared. Siring a long line of literary detectives, Dupin is the very definition of an open subject—a man, it seems, who will never be used up.

NOTES

1. Taken from Bernard Ward’s biography of Edward DeVere, the Gentleman’s motto defines gentlemanliness as an intellectual quality, not a matter of family name or fortune: “By a gentleman, we mean not to draw a line that would be invidious between high and low, rank and subordination, riches and poverty. No. The distinction is in the mind” (italics in original).

2. In the order that they were published, Poe’s major contributions to Gentleman’s were “The Man That Was Used Up” (August 1839), “The Fall of the House of Usher” (September 1839), “William Wilson” (October 1839), “The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion” (December 1839), “Peter Pendulum (The Business Man)” (February 1840), “The Philosophy of Furniture” (May 1840), and “The Man of the Crowd” (December 1840).


5. William Whipple's case for Richard Johnson (then vice president under Martin Van Buren) as the target of Poe's satire is probably still the strongest: "Poe's Political Satire," University of Texas Studies in English 25 (1956): 81-95. Robert Beuka suggests Winfield Scott and William Henry Harrison as other possible targets, but argues that Gentleman's readers could readily see that "in a larger sense Poe was satirizing a tendency toward self-aggrandizement in contemporary politics" (30). See also Daniel Hoffman, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe, Poe (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972); and Richard A. Alekna, "‘The Man That Was Used Up’: Further Notes on Poe’s Satirical Targets," Poe Studies 12 (Dec. 1979): 36.


8. Compare "Ligeia," 311–312. The narrator’s fetishization of the General’s beautiful body parts also recalls the narrator of "Berenice," whose fetishization of his beloved’s teeth takes a particularly grotesque turn.

9. As Mabbott notes, Man-Fred (as Poe spells it here) is the title of a popular minstrel burlesque of Byron’s drama, first performed in 1834 (“Used Up,” 390, note 19).


11. The object of queer reading, Valerie Rohy argues, is not the "truth value" of what queer readers see, but "the angle of vision itself" ("Ahistorical," GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies 12, no. 1 (2006): 63). Drawing on recent theories of "queer time" in the work of Jonathan Goldberg, David Halperin, Terry Castle, Chris Nealon, and others, Rohy argues for the value of "ahistorical" reading, suggesting that the critical taboo against projection and identification unwittingly "upholds the illusion of a true, unidirectional history, whose effect of veracity and realism is in fact sustained by the very retroaction it condemns. Resistance to phobic definitions of homosexuality as anachronistic . . . might mean a turn away from the discipline of straight time, away from the notions of historical propriety that, like notions of sexual propriety, function as regulatory fictions" (70).

12. It was a common racist practice among slaveholders to name slaves after the heroes of antiquity and classical mythology. Harking back to the ancient Roman military hero, the name Pompey also provides an ironic counterpoint to the plebian "John A. B. C. Smith." It is also worth noting that Pompey is also the name of the poet’s servant in "How to Write a Blackwood Article."


19. Despite his lack of guilt, paranoia, self-loathing, and homicidal tendencies, the narrator begins to resemble the husband/narrators in some of Poe’s marriage tales, idolizing Dupin’s mental abilities in much the same way as Ligeia and Morella’s husbands prostrate themselves before their wives’ prodigious talents. Like Morella’s husband, who feels “a forbidden spirit enkindling within” under the influences of
Morella’s “gigantic . . . powers of mind” (230), Dupin’s narrator suffers the exquisite pains of intellectual arousal: “Above all,” he confesses, “I felt my soul enkindled within me by the wild fervor, and the vivid freshness of his imagination” (532).


22. Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s analysis, David Anthony shows how the emergence of tabloid journalism and scandal reporting during the early to mid-1800s provided space for a new type of violence-inflected, homosocial bonding among broader classes of urban men. In contrast to more staid newspapers such as the *Times*—which catered to “a landed citizenry [who] could supposedly debate political questions in a purely abstract, disembodied fashion”—upstart penny tabloids such as the *New York Herald* and *Sun* “provided a representational opportunity for a number of different voices, many of which were forcing vexed questions of class, gender, and ‘self-possession’ into public discourse in disruptive ways” (“The Helen Jewett Panic: Tabloids, Men, and the Sensational Public Sphere in Antebellum New York,” *American Literature* 69, no. 3 (Sept. 1977): 491). Anthony shows how sensational reporting of the well-known prostitute Helen Jewett’s murder, which dominated New York tabloids for several weeks in April 1836, brought readers into imaginative connections with one another over the site of her corpse. This is precisely what happens as Dupin and the narrator read the *Gazette des Tribunaux*’s account of the murders of Madame and Mademoiselle L’Espanaye. Poe based his next Dupin story, “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” entirely on actual newspaper accounts of the murder of Mary Rogers in New York.

23. In an 1846 letter to his friend Philip Cooke, Poe admits that his Dupin tales are not as “ingenious” as many readers have supposed: “Where is the ingenuity of unraveling a web which you yourself (the author) have woven for the express purpose of unraveling? The reader is made to confound the ingenuity of the suppositious Dupin with that of the writer of the story” (qtd. in Mabbot, 521).