

The Aesthetics and Politics of the Crowd in American Literature

By Mary Esteve

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Reviewed by Granville Ganter

Near the beginning of Nietzsche's *Uses and Abuses of History* come the famous words: "Consider the herd." Much of Nietzsche's modernism can be understood as a complaint about herd mentality, particularly his often-misunderstood comments about the popularity of Wagner. Nietzsche recommended Wagner *not* because he endorsed the rebirth of national spirit or *geist*, but because Wagner so clearly expressed the rotten nationalist consciousness of the Germans who enjoyed his music. After listening to Wagner, Nietzsche had to open the windows yelling, "bad air! bad air!" It was the smell of a great crowd of people worshipping decayed ideals. Like Nietzsche, too, many writers of the late nineteenth century tended to have a skeptical opinion of the democratic potential of crowd consciousness in American life. An elitist disdain for the crowded agora has been a staple of western philosophy and literature since Plato.

Mary Esteve's book is an attempt to rescue the herd from disrepute, but she does not seem to like it either. She asks why crowds keep uncannily reappearing in American literature, and what kinds of political commitments those representations entail. She argues that crowds (or at least the images of crowds in late nineteenth century U.S. literature) help to define what a political citizen should be. Most of the evidence Esteve cites are negative examples (3). She argues that crowds gesture toward the political ideal of a rational, deliberative, individual citizen because most crowds do not act in that way.

For Esteve, the crowd that behaves like a great hypnotized monster obliges observers to imagine its alternative: the thoughtful individual citizen. So, in other words, anonymous crowds teach that the "loss of personhood" is not a good thing (6-8). Rather than bewailing the modern age, however, Esteve studies *how* these paradoxical, two-faced images of crowds keep reappearing in nineteenth and twentieth century literature. For Esteve, literary representations of the crowd always generate a dialectic between responsible individuality and anonymous aggregation.

To make her case, Esteve focuses on what she calls "unmotivated crowds," crowds that are not bent on collective action. With the exception of her Du Bois chapter, her study does *not* focus on angry or celebratory crowds seeking some sort of social justice—the "mob." Rather, Esteve prefers to focus on the aesthetic meaning of crowds that have no collective agenda (the "sight" of a crowd of people). Even if we ignore what purpose they have in congregating, Esteve argues that these non-political bodies make the political visible.

If Esteve's thesis is that the herd teaches us what we should *not* be like when we want to do politics, she is aware that her work is running against the grain of Foucauldian-inspired American cultural studies that wants to celebrate eruptions of the "irrational" and the "popular" wherever it finds it. Esteve states that she thinks abstraction and rationality are essential parts of any political program worthy of the name. She laments a tendency in scholars as varied as Michael Warner, Wai Chee Dimock, and Philip Gould to fetishize popular resistance and difference at the expense of justice (14; 18-21). (To be fair to these scholars, none of these scholars advocates irrationality per se, even though they are concerned that the voices of the underclass get heard.) Esteve openly applauds the Kantian definition of moral conduct: "Act always so that the immediate motive of thy will may become a universal rule for all intelligent beings" (10). She is also a defender of the democratic ideals of Jurgen Habermas. Although she critiques both of these philosophers, it is unusual to see *literary scholars* of Esteve's generation wrestling with the problem of articulating neo-Kantian "universals" in the current vogue to celebrate "difference" wherever it can be found.

Her very convincing discussion of several Stephen Crane short stories forms the centerpiece of her book. Entitled "Documentary Anaesthetics," Esteve's chapter argues that Crane's writing is propelled by a

republican-inspired philosophy of social reform, but it simultaneously retreats from that program by trafficking in images of insensibility. Esteve studies Paul Strand's urban photography, such as the "Blind Woman," showing how the images both arrest our sympathy and numb us by their anonymity at the same time. She compares this effect to Crane's portrayals of the crowd in stories such as "A Man Falls, a Crowd Gathers" and "The Broken Down Van." This chapter illustrates her argument that the modern crowd presents a paradox: the degree righteous purpose that often defines a crowd is usually accompanied by an equivalent degree of its opposite, a sense of blank anonymity.

Esteve's chapter on the lynching scene in Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* is also very compelling. She frames her reading of Du Bois in the context of black protest about their exclusion from the 1892 Chicago Columbian Exhibition, and she argues that Du Bois ironically aestheticizes the lynch mob to demonstrate its bankrupt politics. The final chapters of Esteve's book focus on minority identity during the first three decades of the twentieth century, with sustained readings of Abraham Cahan, Anzia Yezierka, Nella Larsen, and Henry Roth. Esteve ably demonstrates that the "crowd," even if composed of one's peers, is not always a vehicle for liberation.

I found the initial pages of Esteve's book to be an informative and highly readable survey of late nineteenth-century sociology of the crowd. As Esteve moves into her theoretical argument, however, her language becomes hard to follow. Although I am familiar with the aesthetic theories of Kant and the British Common Sense philosophers, I had difficulty recognizing the intervention that Esteve is trying to make about Kant's theories of the sublime and the beautiful.

If I get her right, Esteve seems to agree that Kant inaugurated a *big problem* in aesthetics that concerns teleology. Another way of phrasing the teleology problem is to ask, "whose purpose does art serve in the end—God's? The artist's? Ours?" The central question Kant asks with the 1790 *Critique of Judgement* is where the *purposiveness* exhibited by nature (or art) comes from. Kant seems to reply: *no one's purpose in particular*. Kant famously defined beauty as "purposiveness without any representation of a purpose" (*Critique* 1.18). On one hand, it sounds like Kant is claiming that art stands independent from society—it follows its own rules, which never need express a specific purpose in life. This claim gestures toward the idea that art contains abstract universals, either given by God, or granted as part of our perceptual machinery. People who talk about the magical aura of a piece of art (disciples of Heidegger) often unconsciously invoke this "purposiveness without purpose," a neo-Kantian moment of aesthetic wonder. But on the other hand, Kant held that the capacity and *inclination to discuss taste as if it could be shared* was also universal among men. This second claim suggests that beauty is somehow connected to society, not simply privately intuited.

So far, so good—this is a standard account of why Kant's statement about the arts in the *Critique of Judgement* is thorny and difficult.

But Esteve wants to say that the aesthetics of the moment of beholding the crowd involves a different kind of collective feeling than the way in which ideals of taste are shared. She feels that the moment of contemplation of the "sublime" crowd is thus political in a different way than the claim to the universality of claims to taste (16).

Now if all this makes your eyes cross, it should. The question is where the "social" part of beauty comes from, and it is a notoriously tricky issue. My problem with Esteve's account is that she tries to invoke a new, rather sketchy interpretation of the socialized aesthetics of the sublime in two pages. She apologizes that she does not have room to fully explain herself. At this crucial point in her introduction, she footnotes several recent major studies of Kant and the sublime, but she does not adopt or advance their arguments. In the end, I am not sure why she needs a new reading of Kant to do the kind of analysis that appears in her literary readings. It seems to me that the aesthetic problems posed by "the crowd" invoke fairly conventional Kantian paradoxes of individual judgement and social connection.

On the level of literary explication, I found Esteve to provide stronger overall interpretations in the second half of her book. Particularly toward the beginning, Esteve does not often connect her close readings of crowd scenes to overall claims about the general politics or gist of a given author's work. To her credit, she tends to discuss passages from less-well-known works. I was grateful for her unorthodox choices. But I found her silent about larger movements in the writing of Poe, Hawthorne, James, and Crane. Esteve's close reading of a passage from Lydia Maria Child's 1843 *Letters from New York* does not attempt to teach us much about the larger context of Child's writing, for example, the numerous crowd scenes in her republican romances like *Hobomok* (1825), *The Rebels* (1826), or *Philothea* (1836). In contrast, I found her discussions of Du Bois, Larsen, and Cahan more satisfying because they touched on larger questions of these authors' motives and politics.

In all, I found this to be a very rich study of the aesthetics of the crowd in American culture, and very sensitive to questions of gender and race. One of the big questions that Esteve raises toward the end of her book is what kinds of popular aggregation are valuable for identity politics. Although I found her theoretical claims murky at times, Esteve tackles the difficult work of articulating ideals of collective, responsible citizenship in an age of political fragmentation.