

Isabel Vila-Cabanes

## Re-Imagining the Streets of Paris

The French Flaneur in Nineteenth-Century Literature

JENAER STUDIEN  
ZUR ANGLISTIK UND AMERIKANISTIK

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Dedicat a ma mare, a mon pare i al meu germà



# Table of Contents

1	Introduction .....	1
1.1	Preliminary Reflections on the Study of the French Literary Flaneur .....	1
1.2	Walter Benjamin's Study of Modernity: Towards a Definition of Flanerie? .....	5
1.3	Structure of the Book .....	16
2	The Eighteenth-Century Parisian Flaneur <i>avant la lettre</i> : Spectatorship and Metropolis .....	17
3	The Nineteenth-Century Literary Flaneur in the Streets of Paris .....	23
3.1	The Flaneur in the Paris of the Early Nineteenth Century: Positive vs. Derogatory Portrayals of the Type .....	23
3.2	The Physiologies of the July Monarchy: The Flaneur as a Distinctive Parisian Type .....	35
3.3	The Flaneur in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century: Estrangement and Nostalgia .....	52
4	Early Twentieth-Century Paris and the Avant-Garde Flaneur: Louis Aragon and the Myth of Paris .....	69
5	Conclusion .....	81
6	Bibliography .....	85
7	Appendix .....	95
	Illustrations .....	95
	Translation: <i>The Flaneur in the Salon, or M. Bonhomme;</i> <i>Joyful Review of Paintings, Mixed with Vaudevilles</i> .....	103





# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Preliminary Reflections on the Study of the French Literary Flaneur

The flaneur – or meditative urban stroller – is an unusual literary and socio-historical type that almost seems to have eluded scholarly criticism. It is with the rise of urban and cultural studies during the second half of the twentieth century that the figure of the flaneur has become the focus of attention of literary and sociological research. The flaneur is an interdisciplinary character that, as a real-life urban individual, can shed light on the culture and society which produce it, and, as a figment of the imagination of modern artists, can also help to understand literary and pictorial interpretations of modern urban existence. An avid observer of the city and its effervescent life, the literary flaneur documents every single aspect of an emerging society, translating the experience of the modern metropolis into words. Originally associated with nineteenth-century French metropolitan culture, the growing interest in the type in academia has widened the scope of research from modern Paris to other thriving metropolises worldwide. Today, the flaneur has become a popular and relevant motif for urban representation, individuality and modernity in literatures all over the globe.

The flaneur is traditionally identified with artists such as Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire, and its conceptualization in contemporary criticism is greatly conditioned by the works of Walter Benjamin, who saw in the flaneur an instance of the effects of industrial modernity on the urban individual. However, later studies agree that Benjamin's definition is far too ambiguous and narrow to be regarded as the paradigm for the literary flaneur.<sup>1</sup> Benjamin claims that the flaneur is represented at best in the writings of Baudelaire or Louis Aragon's *Le paysan de Paris* (1926), and neglects the fact that the flaneur had been a popular urban type in the Parisian literary scene since the early nineteenth century. This topic is discussed in for instance Karlheinz Stierle's study of flanerie and Baudelaire<sup>2</sup> or in Margaret Rose's edition of two physiologies.<sup>3</sup> As the following chap-

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1 See section "Walter Benjamin's Study of Modernity: Towards a Definition of Flanerie?" in this chapter.

2 Karlheinz Stierle, "Baudelaires *Tableaux parisiens* und die Tradition des *Tableau de Paris*", *Poetica* 6 (1974): 285-322.

3 Margaret Rose, *Flaneurs & Idlers* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2007); Louis Huart: *Physiologie du flaneur* (1841) and Albert Smith: *The Natural history of the Idler upon Town* (1848). Physiologies are sketches and essays which parody the works of natural philosophers that offered rational explanations of human nature.

ters will show, the figure of the flâneur underwent several transformations before acquiring the aloofness and complexity that characterizes Benjamin's notion of the stroller. To give an example, since the flâneur is closely connected to the metropolis, changes in the life and appearance of the city are to affect the evolution of this urban type. The paradigmatic instance of this interdependence between the city and the flâneur is the reform of Baron Haussmann in Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century, which is registered in French flâneur accounts such as Baudelaire's poem "Le Cygne" (1861) or later in Louis Aragon's novel *Le paysan de Paris*. Their flâneurs walk around a Paris which seems to be disappearing before their eyes, and, as a result, their vision of the city has a melancholic and nostalgic tone.<sup>4</sup>

After Benjamin's early study on the French flâneur and modernity in the early decades of the twentieth century, the figure of the flâneur almost disappears from the academic discourse. It is not until the 1980s that the study of the character undergoes a revival. In the field of sociology, David Frisby's extensive research on urban modernity (1985-2001) has become pivotal in any discussion of the flâneur and the modern epoch. For instance, in *Fragments of Modernity* (1985) Frisby draws on the works of the German thinkers Georg Simmel, Walter Benjamin, and Siegfried Kracauer to characterise the experience of modernity in the big city, exploring in detail the role of the socio-historical flâneur as representative of certain aspects of modern metropolitan existence. Another important work is *The Flâneur* (1994), an early collection of essays by renowned scholars such as Frisby, Zygmunt Bauman, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, or Janet Wolff and edited by Keith Tester. The essays consider the concept of the flâneur from a wide variety of perspectives, which range from social theory and literature to gender or cultural studies.

Relevant studies in the context of French flânerie are Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson's numerous articles on the flâneur and her book *Paris as Revolution: Writing the Nineteenth-Century City* (1994), and Christel Hollevoet's dissertation *The Flâneur: Genealogy of a Modernist Icon* (2001). Ferguson explores the transformation of the flâneur from the bourgeois type of the first half of the nineteenth century to the artist-flâneur of Baudelaire and Flaubert. She traces the origins of the French flâneur back to 1806 and looks at the different stages of the evolution of the type in French literature. Christel Hollevoet's doctoral thesis

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Physiologies usually describe different social types, institutions or popular topics at the time, and they became particularly popular in the 1830s and 1840s.

4 Walter Benjamin examines in detail the impact of Haussmannisation on the literary scene in *The Arcades Project* and *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*.