EDWIN MUIR: ONE FOOT IN EUROPE

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A central feature of interwar modernism was its cosmopolitanism. Works as diverse as *The Waste Land* (1922), *Ulysses* (1922), Hugh MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926), Pound's *Cantos* (1917-1970), and David Jones's *In Parenthesis* (1937) incorporate extensive material from other eras and languages. Translators are crucial mediators and prompters of the mysterious processes by which influences and themes are transferred between cultures, by accident, coincidence or design. Would Ezra Pound's career, for example, have taken a different tack if the widow of Ernest Fenollosa had not entrusted her husband's papers on *The Chinese Written Character* to the poet? Edwin Muir (1887-1959) was a considerable poet as well as a pioneer translator. His main contribution to the culture of modernism, however, consisted less in his own work than in the kinds of writing he made available to his contemporaries, as one of the leading translators and promoters of European, and particularly Germanic, literature in the English-speaking world. To examine how Muir came to be a translator of Continental literature, and the impact of his mediations on the second generation of Anglo-American modernists, is to cast a representative light on the role and significance of translation in the production of Anglophone modernism.

In a 1931 essay on Virginia Woolf, centred on her newly published novel *The Waves*, Edwin Muir wrote:

> Nothing is stranger in modern literature, and nothing probably could tell us more about it, than this hostility to tears, the mark at which once even the greatest writers aimed [...]. In spite of all [D. H. Lawrence's] anti-intellectualism he was more penetrated by what he himself called the virus of intellect than George Eliot, though she was as powerfully resolved to be intellectual, as he to be "instinctive". Indeed almost all modern novelists are more intellectual in a certain sense than any of their predecessors of fifty

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> years ago: in the sense that the intellect conditions their emotional responses more decisively, making those responses less naive and immediately satisfying. More deliberate and unsure also, however; for it is difficult to achieve, where the intellect is in part control, any effect possessing the simple inevitability of a burst of tears. This may partly account for the sense of emotional frustration, of indefinite postponement, which so many modern novels produce [...]. .The old catharsis was definitely impossible; the new one was difficult to find. In *The Waves* a new catharsis has been found. Its art is at once modern and complete. (In Butter 1988: 24-25)

The essay compares *The Waves* favourably with Pirandello's "much overpraised" *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and with Rilke's "superb prose" (probably particularly in *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge*), "which was a sort of inspired shorthand". The essay is typical of Muir's critical procedures. Three elements emerge clearly. First, Muir is not afraid to make large general statements about cultural history or trends in literature. Second, he looks to literature to reveal certain values and to provide certain effects for readers. Third, he locates and appraises a literary work in a wide comparative context. In considering Muir's relation to the European intellectual tradition, I shall concentrate mainly on the third, from which, indeed, the other two can be seen largely to derive.

Born in the Orkney Islands, north of the Scottish mainland, in 1887, Muir spent his early years in a largely oral culture. There were few books in his parents' farmhouse. He could remember the *Bible, Pilgrim's Progress* and a copy of Burns's poems. There was, however, a strong tradition of playing music, ballad singing and story-telling. By the time he was fourteen, he had left school, had left the Orkneys with his family and he was reading voraciously whatever books he could find. As a menial clerical employee in various concerns, including a beer-bottling factory and a bone factory, he was not subject to the orthodoxies he would have encountered in a university education. What prompted a direction in his reading was a socialism forced on him by his experiences in industrial Glasgow in the early years of the twentieth century. Public libraries gave him access to journals which combined political and literary interests, and in his early twenties he began to subscribe to the radical little magazine *The New Age*, edited by A. R. Orage.

With like-minded socialists in the Clarion Scout Rambling Club and the Independent Labour Party (I. L. P.), and as treasurer of the new local branch of the National Union of Clerks, Muir discussed not only such classic authors as Marx, Shakespeare, Pascal and Hume, but also more contemporary

figures such as Havelock Ellis, Bergson, Joyce and Sorel. He found Heine's poetry and prose intoxicating, and Dostoyevsky painfully close to what he detested in his own life; but it was in Nietzsche that he found an empowering force which allowed him to rise above the misery around him. He had written to Orage in 1909 asking for intellectual guidance. Orage wrote back sympathetically and recommended the reading of the complete output of a great mind. Orage himself had read Plato in this way and now suggested the *Mahabharata* to the young man. Muir, instead, decided to read Nietzsche, whose works had been published in English, edited by Oscar Levy, and whose thought had been propagated in the pages of *The New Age*. For more than ten years, starting when he was twenty-two, Muir was "more attracted to him than to any other writer. He has *spoken* to me as no one else has" (in Butter 1974: 21). But he later regarded Nietzsche as a misguided and misguiding enchanter, the power of whose writings was ultimately meretricious.

By his mid-twenties he was widely but unsystematically read, in a way that did not distinguish clearly between "literary" and "non-literary" works. He read to expand his world of parochial drudgery, to explore challenges to the assumptions and dictates of that world, and to take pleasure in visions of life beyond his own, constructing a cultural realm for himself rather than inheriting one from his class, family, educational training or nationality. He began his writing career in 1913 with contributions of verse and prose to the journal which had helped shape his thought. His first book, based on these contributions to *The New Age*, was published in 1918 as *We Moderns: Enigmas and Guesses*, a choice of title which somewhat qualifies Bradbury's and McFarlane's contrast in *Modernism*, between the "near-obsessive concern for the term "modern" [on the Continent] and the comparative disregard of it during these same years in England, where between Meredith's *Modern Love* of 1862 and Michael Roberts's anthology *The Faber Book of Modern Verse* in 1936, the term is rarely used in any programmatic way" (Bradbury and McFarlane 1976: 37-38).

The American propagandist of the novel, H. L. Mencken, was so impressed by Muir's book that he arranged for its publication in America with an enthusiastic preface by himself; while Herbert Read, soon to become an advocate of modernist writing, wrote in his *War Diary* in June 1918: "I don't remember a book that I have found so full of acceptable suggestions" (Read 1963: 133). Muir himself by 1924 found his book of thoughts on contemporary culture "raw, immature, and an expression of a lamentable bad-taste" (in Butter 1974: 35). What he presents as "modern" is progressive ideas related to emancipation, in contrast to mere modish novelty. Heavily

influenced by Nietzsche, who is lavishly referred to, Muir's view of "modern" writing seems very tame. Galsworthy, Wells, Shaw and Chesterton are assessed and found deficient in progressing beyond the nineteenth-century figures he rates highly: Goethe, Ibsen and Nietzsche. Poetry emerges weakly and there is no awareness shown of Eliot, whose *Prufrock and other Observations* had been published in 1917, or of Pound, some of whose work Muir must have encountered in *The New Age*, to which Pound was a fellow contributor. Stranger still, there is no reference to the First World War or any public events of the time. It is as if Muir were simply showing off his reading, expressing a disappointment with his contemporaries, and waiting for more significant developments.

Some of these developments featured in his next two prose collections, *Latitudes* in 1924 and *Transition* in 1926, although the titles both indicate travelling rather than arriving. As early as 1925, however, he could express a guarded optimism. A period of the "full grown" in literature, he writes,

> may come in the generation to follow ours if the experiments of this age are successfully prosecuted and should open out a new opportunity [...]. At any rate, with all the disadvantages, I would far rather live in this age which can show Joyce and *Ulysses*, than in the last one, which could show nothing better than Shaw [...]. I know the expense of spirit in this waste of shame which our generation is; the mysterious spiritual destruction of such really fine and gifted natures as Eliot, the spiritual twisting of Joyce, the distortion of everything, the chaos between the fall of one set of values and the discovery of another. (In Butter 1974: 47-48)

Major changes took place in Muir's circumstances in the early 1920s. After his marriage in 1919 he moved with his wife, Willa, to London, where he became assistant to Orage on *The New Age*, made a meagre living by literary journalism, and underwent psychoanalysis in an attempt to release pent-up confusions and anxieties. As a consequence of the publication of *We Moderns* in the United States, Muir was invited to contribute regular, well-paid articles to a new, radical, American magazine, *The Freeman*, and the income allowed the Muirs to travel to the Continent. They settled in Prague for seven months and then moved about between Germany, Austria and Italy during the next couple of years. Their work as translators began in 1924 with the plays of Gerhart Hauptmann. Muir would also date his writing career proper in poetry, fiction and criticism from this spell abroad. His first book of poetry, *First Poems*, was published in 1925; his first novel, *The Marionette*, appeared in 1927.

In the language, syntax, structure, narrating voice and ideas of his own three novels and eight volumes of poems there is little that would allow us to describe Muir as a modernist writer, and his attitude to modernist experimentation in his contemporaries was deeply ambivalent. Exasperation with some experimental authors breaks out at times, as, for example, in what is presumably a reaction to parts of "Work in Progress": "Joyce I have given up, and Stein has always seemed to me a stupid person with good intentions. [Wyndham] Lewis is hammering away at something or other, but he has not divulged to his readers what it is: perhaps he does not know himself" (in Butter 1974: 67). In this same letter to Sydney Schiff in 1929, however, he recommended two books he had read recently: Rilke's *Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, written in 1910 and to be published in translation as *The Notebook of Malte Laurids Brigge* in 1930, and Franz Kafka's *Das Schloss*, published in 1926 and to be translated by the Muirs as *The Castle* (1930). Much as he was thrilled by the intense introspective prose of Rilke, Muir found his poetry often brilliant but unsatisfying. He wrestled with his difficulties and one form of his usefulness to readers of his criticism is that he involves the readers with his problems and encourages them to try Rilke for themselves.

In his novel *Poor Tom* (1932), Muir quotes in German from the opening of the *Duino Elegies*: "and even the nodding beasts are aware/ that we don't feel very securely at home/ in this interpreted world" (translation by Leishman and Spender: 170). The insecurity diagnosed by Rilke was, for Muir, a central feature of modern consciousness and a major element in his own work. It can be related to what he described as "the chaos between the fall of one set of values and the discovery of another" (in Butter 1974: 48). His discovery of the work of Kafka was utterly appropriate —one of these seemingly inevitable conjunctions which happen with artists— and Muir was immediately caught by that alarming Kafkaesque mixture of otherworldliness and solidity.

A perusal of Elgin W. Mellown's *Bibliography of the Writings of Edwin Muir* and the indexes of his *Selected Letters* and collections of critical essays reveals the extraordinary range of reference to non-Anglophone literature in his work. Poetry, fiction and drama appear to have been equally attractive to his eclectic appetite, and thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Spengler, Jung, Gabriel Marcel, Schopenhauer and Simone Weil feature in his discursive prose. The "poetic" or imaginative, however, always appealed more to him than realist writing. It was *Peer Gynt* and *Brand*, not *A Doll's House*, that he rated highly in Ibsen and, indeed, it is *Peer Gynt* that has come to be commonly regarded as a seminal work in the early phase of modernism.

Probably Muir's longest-running and most substantial promotion of a foreign writer was of the German poet Hölderlin, who died in 1843, having spent almost half of his long life in a state of quiet insanity. Not well-known even in Germany till a more complete collection of his poems was published in 1916, Hölderlin's poetry was first written about by Muir in 1923. He included two substantial essays on him in *Essays on Literature and Society* (1949) and he was still discussing him in a letter of 1956 when he describes him as "the great modern representative figure" of "bewilderment" (1974: 187-188). Hölderlin's poetry exerted considerable influences on Rilke and Stefan Georg. His juxtapositions and meltings of past and present, physical and spiritual, human and divine, mythical and immediate, and his dislocations of ordinary syntax, anticipate aspects of modernist poetics, a connection which Muir makes:

> The derangement of Hölderlin's mind can be more clearly seen in the extreme disconnections of some of his poetry, where a gap seems to yawn between one statement and the next, producing an effect as if the reader closed his eyes for a moment and found himself in a different place when he opened them again. (Muir 1949: 87)

Michael Hamburger, the main translator of Hölderlin into English, similarly relates him to later developments in symbolism and imagism, suggesting that some pieces "prefigure the kind of association practised by twentieth-century innovators, such as Mr. Ezra Pound in the *Cantos*" (Hamburger 1980: 15). The figure of Hölderlin appears several times in Muir's own poetry, for example:

> Mad Hölderlin
> Praised God and Man, cut off from God and Man
> In a bright and twisted world. (In Butter 1991: 285)

He features also in "Hölderlin's Journey" and "A Mad Poet". Obviously something in Hölderlin's intense and fractured story matched an aspect of Muir's own psyche, and some clash between a romantic, idealist aspiration and the denial of that aspiration in modern harshness seemed, to Muir, to be emblematic of the hazardous situation of the individual in our century.

A second poet promoted by Muir is the Austrian Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874-1929). Interestingly, although their lives were completely dissimilar, Hofmannsthal, like Hölderlin, entered something of a poetic silence in the second half of his career and devoted his energies to the

theatre and opera. (In 1923, when Muir was reading Hofmannsthal and Hölderlin, he was also excited by the work of Rimbaud, another poet who absconded from poetry). As late as 1956, Muir was still eager to write something substantial on Hofmannsthal. The ambition was never fulfilled, but the Austrian poet is highly praised in his essays and letters: "I don't think that for sheer perfection there is any other German poet to touch him" (in Butter 1974: 89), and he is compared with Rilke, Georg and Trakl. In the famous *Letter of Lord Chandos* (1902), Hofmannsthal presents the dilemma, experienced by all serious poets in various degrees, of the gap between words and things, and the untransparentness and self-defeat in the enterprise of writing. Although Hofmannsthal in the dramatic disguise of the *Letter* seems to concede the inadequacy of lyric poetry, Muir felt that the actual lyrics disproved him. Muir also found confirmation of his own beliefs about literature in some of Hofmannsthal's contentions in other prose pieces. In his essay, "The Poetic Imagination", Muir writes:

> Hugo von Hofmannsthal said once that great imagination is always conservative. By this he may have meant that it keeps intact the bond which unites us with the past of mankind, so that we can still understand Odysseus and Penelope and the people of the Old Testament [...]. Or he may have meant something more: that imagination is able to do this because it sees the life of everyone as the endless repetition of a universal pattern [...]. Imagination tells us that we become human by repetition [...]. Or Hofmannsthal may have meant that in the past only is the human pattern complete, that there is the place to which the present turns back to find its finished and timeless pattern. So that the present is a question perpetually running back to find its answer at a place where all is over. (Muir 1965: 225)

All three suggested meanings fit well with what we find in Muir's own poetry.

Obliged to earn his living with literary journalism, Muir wrote on many topics not close to his heart (he produced around a thousand reviews), but he was free to express opinions and make assessments according to his tastes. When we come to the books he helped to translate we are in different territory. *The Freeman* ceased publication in 1924 and some way had to be found to earn a living. The publisher of the magazine invited Muir to translate Hauptmann's plays, plays which Muir was to find stupid. Willa Muir had taken a degree in Classics but she quickly attained a competence in German when they travelled abroad. Edwin Muir's progress was slower, but

his ability to read German advanced faster than his spoken German. It is worth noting that they did not undertake to translate poets; in fact, apart from some verse in the books they translated and some quotations used in his essays, Muir embarked on no translation of poetry with an intention to publish. Willa translated a number of books on her own and she probably did more than her share on some of the longer novels. Particularly in the case of Leon Feuchtwanger, where none of the novels is short and some are over seven hundred pages, the work was often numbingly tedious.

Feuchtwanger's *Jew Süss*, published in London and New York (entitled *Power*) in 1926, a year after its German publication, was an enormous commercial and critical success. The Muirs did not share in the profits (they were paid a set fee), but their work was widely praised, as for example in the reviews quoted on the end-papers of *The Ugly Duchess*, their next Feuchtwanger novel, published in 1927: "Mr and Mrs Muir have rendered it in a translation so beautiful that even commendation seems almost impertinence" and "The translation [...] is a remarkable feat". As a result of this they were soon in a position to propose further books for translation. It was thus they came to translate Kafka's *The Castle*. When they had been in Prague in 1921-22 they had not known of his existence. They had mixed only with Czech speakers, such as the dramatist Karel Capek, and were unaware of the small groups of German speakers. Kafka was there or thereabouts during their stay and it seems rather Kafkaesque that they, who were to become so intimate with and entangled in his work, may have passed him in the street without recognition.The entry for Kafka's diary on 18 October 1921 reads:

> Eternal childhood [...]. Life calls again. It is entirely conceivable that life's splendour forever lies in wait about each one of us in all its fullness, but veiled from view, deep down, invisible, far off [...]. It is there, though, not hostile not reluctant, not deaf. If you summon it by the right word, by its right name, it will come. This is the essence of magic, which does not create but summons. (In Brod 1964: 393)

This coincides with a central contention of Muir's thinking later to be fully developed in his final volume *One Foot in Eden* (1956), Part II of which opens with the poem addressed to a Kafka seen as a redeeming figure:

> But you, dear Franz, sad champion of the drab
> And half, would watch the tell-tale shames drift in [...]
> [...] and read on all the leaves of sin
> Eternity's secret script, the saving proof. (In Butter 1991: 116)

Quite how entangled both Muirs became in the work is evidenced by Muir's account:

> At one stage Kafka's stories continued themselves in our dreams, unfolding into slow serpentine nightmares, immovably reasonable. They troubled us, but not as real dreams would have done, for they did not seem to come from our own minds but from a workshop at the periphery of consciousness busily turning out, for its own private satisfaction, a succession of weird inventions. (Muir 1954: 240)

Their procedure for translating a book was straightforward: tear the book in half, each translate a half, then edit the other's half. It has been claimed that Muir reads something Christian into the Kafka translations, even though Muir would not have described himself as a Christian in the period when they were translating the novels. Certainly he detected in Kafka's fables a sense of what in Christian terms is called "original sin", but he saw that element not as specifically Christian but as a kind of alienation similar to that he detected in Hölderlin and Rilke.

The three novels and most of the short stories of Kafka were translated and published in the 1930s. It is impossible to assess how much of the serious literature written in English since then owes some debt to Kafka as mediated by the Muirs. The slewed, implacable logic, the movement without progress, the falling in and out of focus, the dread, the begging for acceptance, are all parts of the world of *The Trial, The Castle* and *Metamorphosis* which would have found an echo in the second generation of Anglophone modernists. In retrospect, we see Kafka's stories as parables of that interwar "Age of Anxiety", waiting for the end, and indeed W. H. Auden's allegorical poem of that name about the Second World War, like its predecessor *New Year Letter*, both pay homage to Kafka as the spokesman of the modern condition.

Kafka's reputation remains high but the other writer in whom the Muirs invested much time and energy in translating seems to have slid out of sight. *Die Schlafwandler* by Herman Broch (1886-1951) is an enormous, difficult novel, of six hundred and fifty pages. Elizabeth Huberman has written a fascinating essay on the laborious business of translating Broch, borne with

remarkable tolerance by the Muirs (Huberman 1990). Although they admired *The Sleepwalkers* greatly and translated *The Unknown Quality* three years later, they declined when Broch requested them to translate *The Death of Virgil*. *The Sleepwalkers* was written as a trilogy, with the Muirs translating as the parts were written. For some critics, it, along with *The Death of Virgil,* takes the novel beyond the point reached by *Ulysses*. The three sections have each a different narrational focus, operating within and outside different characters at different times in different social and class situations and also with a narrator's or author's voice spliced in. The style of each section is special to that section; plain narrative mingles with dramatic scenes in dialogue, discursive essays and sequences of verse. Even in the syntax there is unpredictability. The reader is faced with huge sentences and tiny ones; some chapters are bulging and indigestible and one chapter consists of a single short sentence. The action moves from 1888 to 1918, but in jumps rather than as a linear chronicle. Each of the three sections has a subtitle, "Romanticism", "Anarchy" and "Realism", which suggests a wider authorial viewpoint or mode of cultural interpretation. This larger scheme is emphasised by a series of chapters entitled "Disintegration of Values".

In such a period of disintegration people sleepwalk towards a total breakdown. Muir was astounded at the beauty of some passages, the psychological acuteness of others, but what most impressed him was Broch's overall stylistic control. Broch, in turn, approved of an essay written by Muir to coincide with the publication of the translation and act as a help to prospective readers of the novel (in Butter 1988). The essay was published in August 1932 in *The Modern Scot*, and in November in the American *Bookman*.

Muir's connection with Scotland needs some comment. Although, between leaving Glasgow for London in 1919 and 1932, he had spent only a couple of short periods in Scotland, he had met the main intellectual figures such as Hugh MacDiarmid, Lewis Grassic Gibbon, Francis George Scott, the composer, and Neil Gunn, and kept in touch with events in Scotland. He considered himself a nationalist and, when he was in Prague or Vienna listening to concerts of Schoenberg or Stravinsky or attending the plays of Capek or Hofmannsthal, he imagined that, in an independent Scotland, Edinburgh could enjoy a similar cultural life. His relationship with MacDiarmid was friendly until he published his book *Scott and Scotland* in 1936, which made an enemy of MacDiarmid for the remainder of his life.

Muir, like MacDiarmid, wished to demolish the parochialism endemic to Scottish culture, but politically and aesthetically as well as temperamentally the two men were incompatible. Although he valued MacDiarmid's poetry highly, Muir considered that the campaign to resurrect Scots as a literary language was unwinnable and misguided. MacDiarmid, despite the fact that he was at that very time in the process of moving from Scots to English in his poetry, saw *Scott and Scotland* as an act of betrayal to him and to Scotland. A much more exciting, inventive and dangerous poet than Muir, he wished to be where "extremes meet" not in reconciliation but in conflict. If Muir favoured meditative models seeking salvation, MacDiarmid sought wilder, revolutionary examples. Muir found support in a kind of quietist German tradition; MacDiarmid gave his adherence to Dostoyevsky and an anarchistic Russian tradition. His example was Leon Shestov, whose *All Things are Possible* was published in England in 1920 (with a preface by D. H. Lawrence), and who argued against rationalist explanations and tidy consistency.

The divide between Muir and MacDiarmid is apparent in their different attitudes to the famous "Caledonian Antisyzygy", a phrase developed by MacDiarmid from G. Gregory Smith's *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919), which pointed to the antithetical forces of the real and the fantastic, the controlled and the anarchic, seen by Smith as a schizophrenic condition endemic in the Scottish intelligence. The clash of opposites is welcomed by MacDiarmid and, in his poetry, is a mark of his modernism. Muir claimed accord with Coleridge in asserting that "the mark of all great poetry is that it reconciles all opposites in a harmony. If Scottish poetry is doomed forever to express the Antisyzygy, then it contains no principle of progress, no dialectic, to use the fashionable cant term, and must remain stationary" (Muir 1982: 36).

Although Muir was, as a literary critic, superior to MacDiarmid, and although he contributed so much to a clearer thinking about modernism and the European intellectual tradition, it is Muir's poetry that is stationary and MacDiarmid's that is dialectical and progressive in the modernist mould. It was Muir's receptiveness, his eagerness to listen for what a variety of Continental writers could do in prose or verse, rather than a desire to quarry material for his own work, that made him such an informed, perceptive and generous commentator on writing in English, and such a powerful mediator of European modernist writing to the heirs of the literary revolution effected by Pound, Eliot and Joyce.

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THE WANDERING *FLÂNEUR*, OR, SOMETHING LOST IN TRANSLATION

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I

The *flâneur* is a frequent visitor to literary commentary and cultural studies, an appropriately fleeting, casually knowing reference, accompanied perhaps by a scholarly nod in the direction of Charles Baudelaire's poetry or the commentaries on him in the work of Walter Benjamin. The idea of the stroller or window-shopper as somehow congruent with an emergent modernity, and its symptomatic expression in the developing city, has become part of modern criticism's shared sense of cultural history, and of its own present discourses upon contemporary forms of urban experience. Beyond any number of passing citations, the figure, or idea, have given an exciting focus to discussions of questions of identity and perception in the city, often in conjunction with other theoretical discourses from feminism, postmodernism and postcolonialism (see Tester 1994). As many recognise, however, in the process the concept has also become detached from its moorings in Baudelaire or in Benjamin's writings: to the point indeed where one wonders how its current usage is exactly warranted, and why it is that the concept persists in the much changed urban environments of the postmodern, when the world is more likely to be viewed from a car window or the supermarket checkout than in a slow tour round an elegant shopping arcade. The idea has gone walkabout, so to speak, leaving the historical figure behind.

I want to comment on this different usage in what follows, and to suggest ways in which contemporary theory has not only reconfigured the *flâneur's* earlier more precisely historical meanings, sometimes in a productive way, but has also lost sight, particularly, of Benjamin's reading of the figure. I want to draw attention here to the way Benjamin understood, not

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