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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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simply the more discrete cultural character of the *flâneur*, but the relation of this figure to the urban crowd as well as to a later contrast between the pedestrian and proletarian. The looser meanings of recent theory turn out, in fact, to be both emptier than, and in excess of, earlier accounts, and to reveal less about any contemporary equivalent figure than about the problematic relationship between this late modern cultural moment and an earlier more modernist agenda. What the sketchy lineaments of the postmodern *flâneur* especially embody, I suggest, is the problematic self-conception of the academic theorist or critic in relation to the crowd or mass: the observed social world the theorist seeks to theorise. My general recommendation is straightforward. If the term is to be retained in re-articulated postmodern contexts, then we ought to try to re-articulate these fuller cultural implications too. This means historicising all the participants in the debate, including contemporary commentators.

There is a common double conflation to begin with of the figure of the *flâneur*: firstly with Baudelaire, who identified this and related types in the new urban environments of mid nineteenth-century Paris, and, secondly, with Benjamin, who commented upon the cultural significance of this figure in his early twentieth-century readings of Baudelaire in his own Arcades Project. Michael Keith and Steve Pile (1993), for example, speak of "Benjamin's arcade", of his work as "famously "botanizing the asphalt" as *flâneur* immersed in the urban experience" (8), when the arcades were, if anything, the historical domain of the *flâneur* and Baudelaire, and "botanizing the asphalt" is Benjamin's famous later description of their earlier style and method. Frequently, however, Baudelaire is nowhere in sight. It is Benjamin himself who becomes "the exemplary *flâneur*" (Keith and Pile 1993: 8), and Benjamin who is said to define "people by their spatial activities: prostitutes, *flâneurs* or street prowlers [...] sandwichmen" (Shields 1996: 230).

What is striking in this sometimes compound after-life granted to the *flâneur* Baudelaire/ Benjamin, is that the *flâneur* belonged strictly to the early and mid-nineteenth century, even especially to Paris, and was of interest to Benjamin, writing in the 1930s, as an allegorical expression of decline associated with this fleeting moment in the life of that city; and that Benjamin writes as a theorist of modernism and as a marxist; both of which, as the world knows, are now routinely discredited.[1]

II

We should remind ourselves, firstly, of some of the details of Baudelaire's and Benjamin's conceptions of the *flâneur*. The *flâneur* had been anatomised as an urban type in popular journalism from the early nineteenth century.[2] He was a stroller, a gentleman of leisure with a scrupulous eye for fashion who moved from café to boulevard, arcade and opera. Baudelaire drew attention to the figure in essays of the 1850s and 1860s, particularly in "The Painter of Modern Life" (in Frascina and Harrison 1982). Here he associated but did not identify the *flâneur* with the artist Constantin Guys. Guys's sketches of fashionable Parisian life answered Baudelaire's call for an art of modern life. "By "modernity"", Baudelaire famously resolved, "I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable" (1982: 23). Guys's glimpses of beauty (the "poetry of history") in the ostentatious and squalid appearances of the everyday answered this description and gave him, importantly, "an aim loftier than that of a mere *flâneur*", for he sought to extract and distil something "more general, something other than the fugitive pleasure of circumstance" (1982: 23).

Benjamin's main essay on the *flâneur* forms a part of his unfinished study of Baudelaire, itself the core of his uncompleted study of the Parisian Arcades, first conceived in the 1920s. Benjamin (1973) linked the figure with other "heroic" urban outcasts (the apache, dandy, ragpicker, prostitute) and saw the poet Baudelaire (not Guys) as patterning "his image of the artist after an image of the hero" they supplied (1973: 67). They were "so many roles to him. For the modern hero is no hero; he acts heroes" (1973: 97). Amongst much else that is both rich and enigmatic in Benjamin's discussion, three key co-ordinates in this identity are relevant here. All of them stress the figure's ambivalence: his association with the intermediary spatial domain of the arcade, "a cross between a street and an *intérieur*" (1973: 37), his relation to the crowd, and his relation to commodity production. Entering the crowd, Benjamin's *flâneur* was by turns intoxicated and contemptuous, lost in its anonymity but aloof in his conspicuous singularity; at once voyeur, connoisseur, companion type of the modern detective, and the observer, above all, of passing women whose "beauty" he gauged and suffered in its agonising transience. Entering the market place "in reality [...] to find a buyer" (1973: 171-172), he retained a distance from the bourgeoisie and world of commerce as he did from the women his eyes pursued. His protest lay in his idleness and aestheticising gaze, at one with the pleasures of petty bourgeois society in "empathising with commodities", though Baudelaire, at least, "had already half withdrawn from it" (1973: 59).

What one must add is that Benjamin clearly saw this environment, class position and artistic distance as passing, as themselves "modern" in the 1860s, and thus, as this moment ran into the course of history, as allegories of decay. The arcades fell into disuse, the nuances of gaslight were lost in the glare of electricity. Baudelaire's "sensitivity" to this process lent a "self-awareness [...] to the strolling commodity" (1973: 61), but the protest of the heroic individual was doomed. It was, said Benjamin, "uncritical" (1973: 66). The *flâneur* rose and fell on the cusp of early modernity, before the urban scene was inescapably awash with commodification and proved his creative incognito unsustainable. "The *flâneur*", Benjamin writes, "still stood at the margin, of the great city as of the bourgeois class. Neither of them had overwhelmed him. In neither of them was he at home" (1973: 170). Within a decade, however, this very system was to commercialise *flânerie* itself in the form of the department store. The advent of this fully commodified realm of active shopping, Benjamin announces, was "the *flâneur*'s final coup" (1973: 170, and see Ferguson 1994: 34-35).

Later debate, and its reactivated *flâneur*s, should be understood in relation to these writings and their respective cultural moments. I want here to comment on two specific tendencies. The first, occurring within feminist literary and social criticism, has debated the *flâneur*'s association with art or writing in relation to gender and the position of women in early or late modern urban environments. The second has assimilated the concept to the discourses, broadly defined, of poststructuralism and postmodernism, and extrapolated the figure to a contemporary perspective, in terms of the changed identities said to characterise global cities or post-Fordist economies.

III

Perhaps the most influential essay in feminist accounts of the *flâneur* remains Janet Wolff's "The Invisible *Flâneuse*" (1985). Wolff makes it clear that the *flâneur* was a male figure, inhabiting the predominantly male public sphere of nineteenth-century Paris as of other cities. This social reality was compounded, she argues, by the newly emerging discipline of sociology which, like the literature of modernity, ignored the private sphere, which was women's domain. The women whom Baudelaire and later sociologists identified as occupying the public realm (the female *passante* and lesbian, prostitutes, victims, widows, consumers) were viewed as approximations to the male type, or the appendage of male status —objects of fascination, disgust, and display; while other women "in domestic service [...] in their factories, mills, schools, and offices" (1990: 44) were simply not observed in the literature or the academic discipline. Wolff's essay is titled "the invisible *flâneuse*", but the point of her argument is that there was and could be no female *flâneuse* in these conditions. The social reality and ideological construction of modernity meant that such a figure was not simply invisible but non-existent.

Elizabeth Wilson (1991) feels this argument, in Wolff and also Griselda Pollock (1985), has been overstated, and that women played an active as well as passive part in the spectacle of "consumerism and erotic illusion" (57) which was the Paris of the Second Empire. Both writers, she feels, confuse the ideology of separated private and public spheres with the social reality in which unchaperoned women did come to occupy the newer public places. But if the prostitutes, courtesans and other figures of the *demi-monde* Wilson describes were active in the economy, sometimes close to the centre of financial and political power, and indeed symbolic of the disturbing sexuality of Paris of the period for writers such as Zola and the Goncourts, they were also, Wilson concedes, "the ultimate objects of conspicuous consumption" (1991: 57). The new sites and scenes of city life and entertainment (the opera, department stores, hotel foyers), or the gay subculture where women could perhaps appear alone in an urban spectacle of sexual innuendo, flirtation and outright display, introduced intermediate interior places between the public and private spheres. For middle-class women of leisure especially they extended one realm into the other, chiefly through the nexus of consumption which connected the bourgeois home with these other sites. In some sense these more feminine places were not unlike the intermediate zone of the earlier arcades claimed by the *flâneur*. However, unlike the *flâneur*, courtesans and shoppers were not strollers, dependent upon but distant from the world of commodities (*contra* Wilson, Wolff, Bowlby, and Ferguson are agreed that the active female shopper is not a *flâneuse*). Nor, until a later figure such Simone de Beauvoir, cited by Wilson, was a woman who spent her time between her hotel room and the pavement café also an artist, intellectual or writer. Janet Wolff is surely right, therefore, to conclude that there is no point inventing a *flâneuse* where there was none.

Or not at least for the period of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Rachel Bowlby argues that while women were "disqualified from *flânerie*" in early modernity (1992: 6), the later coincidence of modernity with the consolidated expressions of literary modernism produced the conditions for an emergent modernist *flâneuse*. Her example is Virginia Woolf, whose arrival as *flâneuse*, as Bowlby shows, also overtakes the figure of the *passante*, the female passer-by, who had been the subject of Baudelaire's original poem "To a passer-by", and had become a presence in much subsequent modernist

literature. The *passante* was the object of the male *flâneur's* desiring gaze; of "love at last sight" as Benjamin had put it (1974: 45): a figure whose allure consisted precisely in the unfulfilled promise conveyed in a fleeting exchange of glances. The *passante,* we might say, comes thus to express the very features of modernity as described by Baudelaire. In the instant she passes by, the woman embodies an ideal of beauty ("the very woman", Peter Walsh in *Mrs Dalloway* "had always had in mind"; in Bowlby 1992: 13). As such, and while the *flâneur* keeps his distance, the *passante* is the emblem also of the commodity, intoxicating and untouched, just as she is. The *passante* then is the focus not simply of the male gaze but the necessary "other half" of the *flâneur's* very being as the ironical, distanced male artist of modernity, at once his object and mirror. Without her he is nothing.

That Virginia Woolf can in *Mrs Dalloway* parody this now "dominant street story", itself "knowingly fictionalised" by its participants, as Bowlby suggests (1992: 15), is a sign of the changed conditions opening the city to the *flâneuse's* own kind of narrative. As modernist street-walker she does not simply join the *flâneur*, nor turn the tables, in the sense that the woman now steps out, stride for stride, and can look at the man, or look as the man has looked. She looks but looks differently and goes off —strolling, dallying, sauntering— in similar style but in another direction. What this entails, says Bowlby, appears in Woolf's essay, "Street Haunting: A London Adventure" (1927). This confirms the woman walker in the role of writer (she goes out, ostensibly, to buy a pencil, and visits a boot shop) but does so, as Bowlby points out, by way of a complex and ambivalent account which involves, not least, the loss of "the self our friends know us by" as the walker joins the "agreeable" society of "a republican army of anonymous trampers" (Woolf 1967: 155). I wish to comment here on one passage in the essay where I think another reading than Bowlby's is called for. This involves the relation of the still individual, "fugitive" figure of the adventuring *flâneuse* and the less mobile social types she encounters. The woman in the essay (a Woolf *persona* we assume, who presents herself in the first person plural) comes at one point upon "the maimed company of the halt and blind" between London's Holborn and Soho:

> They do not grudge us, we are musing, our prosperity; when, suddenly, turning the corner, we come upon a bearded Jew, wild, hunger-bitten, glaring out of his misery; or pass the humped body of an old woman flung abandoned on the steps of a public building [...]. At such sights the nerves of the spine seem to stand erect; a sudden flare is brandished in our eyes; a question is asked which is never answered. (1967: 159)

Bowlby feels Woolf resolves the tensions in this encounter: that there is a "rapprochement, even an identification" (1992: 24) cancelling the felt reprimand and shock of difference. Woolf's "derelicts", she suggests moreover, "freely choose" their position: "They are not beggars, but ideal consumers" (1992: 24). This follows Woolf's notion that the sites these street dwellers "choose" near theatres, restaurants, and shop-windows provide them with "sofas [...] tables [...] sideboards [...] carpets" (Woolf 1967: 159). The more obvious explanation would be that, resentfully or not, they position themselves near the places and people who might spare them a mite of their prosperity. More importantly, the scene would seem to trigger as it hurries to annul the sudden impact of class difference: most transparently in the suggestion that the derelicts are provided with the furniture of a middle-class interior —of precisely the kind Woolf goes on to furnish in her imagination "with sofa, table, carpet" (and rug, bowl, and mirror), as her eye picks creatively over the possibilities displayed in the stores of Oxford Street. The plain fact is that these street people have neither furniture nor home, while she, with "a room of her own", does not need to buy these things and can indulge her fancy. True to the role of the *flâneur*, she can window-shop but does not (need to) buy. As she returns home she muses how one can tell oneself stories of those encountered, in the "illusion" that she and they are linked; that "one could become a washer-woman, a publican, a street singer" (1967: 165). The "illusion" is precisely that: the stuff of fiction. The *flâneuse*, like the *flâneur,* is fascinated by but distanced from these others in the crowd: a figure apart, economically, socially and in the very reflections her walking the street makes possible. The expression of modernity in this case is embodied not by the *passante* but by these others who are the object of her fictionalising gaze: the old, the poor, the ethnic down-and-outs, whose social meaning flares and dies in a shocked moment but haunts her still. The truth of the essay lies not in the rapprochement or linkage it may wish for but in the gulf exposed in the glare of the moment it cannot look at: the question it poses but cannot answer.

What therefore remains interesting both about the *flâneur* and the later *flâneuse* is their relation with others in the city, defined by a configuration of class and ethnicity as well as gender, and the way these factors come to light, and so reshape this figure, in the changing conjunctures of urban modernity. If Elizabeth Wilson over-identifies the *flâneuse* with women in public places, she has some interesting things to say, in terms of this fuller context, about the *flâneur's* relation to women in the sexual economy of the emerging metropolis. "It was the *flâneur* not the *flâneuse* who was invisible", she announces (1995: 75). What this neat reversal means is that the sexualised

presence of women in public places served in fact to "attenuate" the *flâneur's* masculinity. Following and extending Benjamin, Wilson sees here the forms of "the sexual life generated by capitalist relations" (1995: 74). The "violent dislocations" of urbanisation had destabilised masculinity, making the *flâneur* less the predatory male of standard myth than a figure who registers its disintegration: "a projection of angst rather than a solid embodiment of bourgeois power" (1995: 74).

Angst, of a different kind, but connected in its own way with a shock to bourgeois power, is surely what is felt by Woolf's *flâneuse*. Both figures in fact register something of the "fear, revulsion and horror" Benjamin had suggested was provoked by the encounter with the city crowd (1970: 176): this, and the "attenuation and deferral of satisfaction" accompanying commodification (Wilson 1995: 74). The desire for oneness Woolf entertains is only the other side of this social sexual and psychic instability. Both figures, and not only the *flâneur* of Wilson's description, are newly ambivalent, passing types, who venture out to risk the new geography and unequal social/ sexual relations produced by capitalism.

As such, both figures stand in need, as Wilson says of the *flâneur*, of a new discourse to replace the old (1995: 74). In fact, one waits in the wings. "The repetitive monotony of the *flâneur's* regime of strolling", Wilson writes, recalling Benjamin once more, "is an instance of "eternal recurrence" —the eternal recurrence of the new which is "always ever the same"" (1995: 74). We recognise here a description of the logic of commodity production which has produced the discourse of postmodernism. Is this, or a version of it, the discourse of the newly transformed, or the discourse of endless novelty which is the hell of late capitalism? Does it offer new life to the once extinguished *flâneur* and destabilised bourgeoisie or spell still further disintegration?

IV

"Is the *flâneur* someone to be appropriated for our *post*modern times?" asks Sally Munt (1998: 35). If we use our imaginations, is her answer, gazing after the "metaphor" of the *flâneur* as "borderline personality" of "angst and anomie" (1998: 35), as it passes from "the archdandy, Baudelaire" to "[Oscar] Wilde's sexual wanderings" (1998: 34), George Sand's cross-dressing, gay and lesbian life in Harlem, Greenwich Village and present-day Brighton. Actuality stands flat-footed, as symbol and image release a "roving signifier" of "indeterminate sexuality" (1998: 36).

Munt knows what she is doing: "simplifying, condensing, extracting and probably bowdlerising the *flâneur* here, as a vessel to be filled by the lesbian narrative, so that I can contribute to the unfixing of the supremacy of the heterosexual male gaze" (1998: 36). But what is perplexing is why this unfixing needs to stick with a term which in its own way asserted this unwanted supremacy. Perhaps because unfixing history, as this usage does, leaves only a set of words as symbols and signifiers, the detached rhetoric of what Edward Said has termed "travelling theory" (1983: 226-247), to supposedly match a mobile transgressive subjectivity.

Tim Cresswell, following the implications of the metaphor of travelling, sees the *flâneur* as a figure adopted by a privileged "artistic elite who romanticised the outcast" (1997: 361), and links this with the "romanticisation of the nomad as the geographic metaphor *par excellence* of postmodernity" (1997: 360). His examples are Edward Said himself, Michel De Certeau, Deleuze and Guattari, and Iain Chambers. The *flâneur* in this thinking mutates into a company of similarly representative outcasts or marginal figures: the vagrant, the refugee, the exile, and above all the migrant and nomad. These symptomatic types are seen to express the condition of movement, decentredness and displacement marking the postmodern, and are deployed to critique the ideas of belonging, stability, unity, and tradition (or the quest for these) seen to characterise modernism and modernity. Cresswell is critical of the dehistoricising generalisations this produces and of the sleight of hand by which "migrant experience" is equated to "migrant thought" (1997: 362); that is to say, how a highly differentiated social experience is appropriated to a supposedly migratory postmodern intellectual consciousness.

I cannot here consider postcolonial or postmodern experience, nor the operation of these characteristic metaphors; nor do I wish to suggest that the populist or anarchistic character of this tendency in postmodern theory is without its disruptive force. What is remarkable is the way the figure of the *flâneur* haunts or is directly recruited to its ranks. De Certeau, for example, famously contrasts the totalising, rationalistic mentality of a vision of the city from above (the World Trade Center in New York in his example) with the everyday "operation of walking, wandering and "window shopping"" (1984: 97) down below. Pedestrians are "passers-by", walkers and writers combined, "whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it" (1984: 93). These ambling, rambling, illegible stories of the everyday are the narrative traces of "ordinary man" and the "common hero"; "tactics" which deviate from and deflect the disciplinary "strategies" of technocratic civic authorities.

Miraculously, the *flâneur* appears not only to have multiplied but to have changed sides, no longer the detached hero of modernity and lost in the crowd so much as at one with it. This metaphorical appropriation, invariably risking the emptying out of historical specificity, is plainest of all in the description given of the *flâneur* by John Lechte, in a reading of James Joyce. He writes that:

> The *flâneur*'s trajectory leads nowhere and comes from nowhere. It is a trajectory without fixed spatial co-ordinates; there is in short no reference point from which to make predictions about the *flâneur's* future. For the *flâneur* is an entity without past or future, without identity: an entity of contingency and indeterminacy (1995: 103).

The *flâneur* is identified here entirely with the fleeting and contingent, with one side only of Baudelaire's definition of the art of modernity. The *flâneur*, Wilson had commented, "floats with no material base" (1995: 74). Here he continues his flight into the skies above all material reference: "at home when he is not at home" (1995: 103), but somehow embodied in the figure of Leopold Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and in the text of *Finnegans Wake*, an "exemplary instance of writing as indeterminate" with "no intrinsic link with signification" (1995: 104).

Ironically, all of this, we might suspect, remains allegorical of wider processes in something approaching Benjamin's sense. For now, in a dehistoricised or trans-historical reading, the *flâneur* becomes an allegorical self-portrait of the postmodern critic him/ herself: the intellectual nomad in search of a new discourse, scooped up in the very swirl of mass commodification Benjamin had anticipated. But if the *flâneur* is really a name, in the fullness of a historicising allegory, for this condition, this reading too is abbreviated, caught mid-logic so as to produce a self-validating "image" (as in Lechte) of a now thoroughly textualised modernist "figure", valorised for its very emptiness and disconnection: a real nowhere man (or woman). This hollowness, once achieved, is necessary, as Munt realises, if the figure is to be filled with a new content. The problem is that there is so much indeterminate "content" that it overflows and spills everywhere: to the opera, the park, cafes, bars, and malls; to anthropologists and social explorers, common pedestrians, lesbian and gay icons; to shopping, travelling, theorizing; some of these analogous to but some at a considerable (metaphorical) distance from the nineteenth-century *flâneur* and modernist *flâneuse*, and their symptomatic ambivalence towards the crowd and commodity production.[3]

V

"The utopian moment of flânerie was fleeting", writes Susan Buck-Morss (1995: 344). The historical *flâneur* was harassed and overtaken by modern transport and mass production, cordoned off in "the artificially created environments of pedestrian streets, parks and underground passageways" (1995: 344) as in a zoo or museum. What survives, Buck-Morss argues, is a mode of perception and of "being in the world" of mass consumption, a world that extends *flânerie* to the imaginary gratifications of advertising, illustrated journals, fashion and sex magazines, cruising the mall, cinema-going or slaloming across TV networks and the internet (see Anne Friedberg 1994). Whatever else, these examples evidently lessen the connection the original figure has with physical city environments. If the contemporary figure is associated at all with movement, this is likely, Buck-Morss suggests, to be with the tourist taking in cities and exotic locales courtesy of pre-arranged packages. "The flâneur has become extinct", she concludes, "only by exploding into a myriad of forms, the phenomenological characteristics of which, no matter how new they may appear, continue to bear his traces, as ur-form. This is the "truth" of the flâneur, more visible in his afterlife than in his flourishing" (1995: 346).

Do traces confirm an ur-form or tell us there is none? The above examples of a postmodern *flâneur/se* would suggest the latter: that this explosion of the one into the many confirms a floating, metaphorical existence as the co-ordinates of the historical figure are dispersed into orbit. As I have suggested, it is the manner of this appropriation which acquires material reference, as the "*flâneur*" has become a name for the postmodern subject and in particular the cultural intellectual. In this respect, the term is deployed still to consider the relation of the individual to "the crowd" and its equivalents in the community or mass, or the forms of mass culture. Since, however, these latter terms are themselves problematic, the "*flâneur*" helps articulate a relationship with their correspondingly exploded and diversified expression in a de-massified, post-Fordist society where eclecticism, hybridity, mobility and migrancy have become the order of the day. If the plight of the postmodern subject is to be inescapably immersed in the mesh of advanced consumer society, the "*flâneur*" can signify an ambulatory perceptual mode, "metaphorically" or "in theory" distanced from it.

Clearly Benjamin and others, as we have seen, saw the role of the *flâneur* as ambivalent and unsustainable. Interestingly too, Benjamin's own view changed. After 1937, as the rise of fascism took the utopian lustre off his thinking, his writings communicate, Buck-Morss says, less a sense "of new political possibilities than of recurring political dangers" (1995: 304). His

comments on the *flâneur* she sees as indicative of this change of mood. In the late 1920s Benjamin had seen Baudelaire as instructing those of his own generation in realising the nature of their relation to the market place. Their role as intellectual producers argued that their interests (unlike Baudelaire's) converged with those of the proletariat (in Buck-Morss 1995: 304). But where, in an early note, Benjamin had seen the streets as "the dwelling place of the collective", this had been replaced in a similar passage from the late 1930s by a reference to "a background of despotism" (in Buck-Morss: 304-305). The *flâneur* of this later period appears as a salaried photo-journalist or reporter, himself a spectacle whose very trade is to loiter. The logic Benjamin warns against is one which produces "the "true salaried flâneur" and "sandwichman" Henri Beraud, protofascist journalist", who "peddled the fascist line" (1995: 307). In a further passage quoted by Buck-Morss, the ""crowd" on which the *flâneur* feeds his eyes is the mold into which, 70 years later, the "*Volksgemeinschaft*" was poured" (1995: 307). Nevertheless, Benjamin is able to identify a figure who escapes the "assimilation into a massified clientele" desired by the totalitarian state. Thus "the only unreconciled opponent [...] in this connection is the revolutionary proletariat". This "destroys the illusion of the crowd with the reality of the class" (in Buck-Morss 1995: 307).

The *flâneur* whose critical moment comes and goes in the 1860s is by the late 1930s compromised by the joint operations of commodity production and the totalitarian state. At the time of completing his "lasting (solid) materialist 'Baudelaire'" (Broderson 1996: 238), Benjamin saw Bertolt Brecht as "probably the first important poet who has something to say about urban man" (in Gilloch 1996: 132). Present-day appropriations of the *flâneur* would seem to transpose the earlier high point across a century or more while ignoring its perceived logic, along with the history and historical sense which framed it. Benjamin's "solid" Baudelaire melts into air, and the historical *flâneur* disappears, as if abducted by a future intelligentsia to a time where commodification of the bourgeois subject, fascism, and the revolutionary proletariat are a bad memory, if not airbrushed out altogether. The discourse which spoke of such things belongs to a "modernist" political moment and analysis. If we believe this mode and vocabulary (production, revolution, class, Brecht) to be untenable, then the outcome is not surprising: a self-regarding nomadic discourse which prefers the magpie in Benjamin to the materialist.

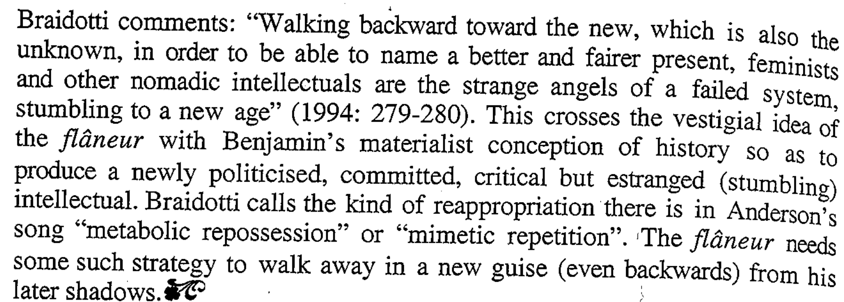
In Benjamin's thought the comparison of the *flâneur* and proletarian is linked with the role of an anti-capitalist, anti-fascist social collective. Much of course has changed since the Europe of the 1930s. However, artists and intellectuals seem not to have forsworn the role of critical or political opposition, nor ceased to think of this in terms of strategically mobilised collectivities. The adoption of the "*flâneur*", like the "nomad" and "migrant", is a sign that oppositional social constituencies do not present themselves so readily, and that intellectuals, writers and artists are both disengaged and too willing to romanticise this disengagement. Who are these collectivities: workers, women, blacks, gays, greens, road protesters, the unemployed, squatters, the homeless? From what position does the intellectual/ artist speak? What explains this gulf? Can it be crossed? This is the kind of question, I believe, Woolf glimpses and glides over. To ask it again we would need to circuit back through the project of modernity, realising that these shifting, possible collectivities are the *flâneur's* other, even his/ her opposite.

VI

I want to end with a reflection on this issue. The haunting question which flares up in a flash of fear for Virginia Woolf's *flâneuse* echoes two other moments: the flash of Baudelaire's encounter with the *passante* and the famous description, in Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History", of *Jetztzeit*, the "time of the now", when a moment in the past flares up in new constellation with the present. This produces a historical consciousness, full of revolutionary potential. A final illustration suggests how this aspect of Benjamin might yet redeem the *flâneur* for present times. Rosi Braidotti sees the nomad as the woman of ideas. She looks to Benjamin not for this notion, however, but for his conception of history. Her example is Laurie Anderson's song "The Dream Before (for Walter Benjamin)", which enacts Benjamin's eleventh thesis on the philosophy of history as a conversation between Hansel and Gretel:

> She said: what is history?
> And he said; history is an angel
> Being blown backwards into the future
> He said: history is a pile of debris
> And the angel wants to go back and fix things
> To repair things that have been broken

But there is a storm blowing from paradise
And the storm keeps blowing the angel
Backwards into the future
And this storm, this storm
is called
Progress. (in Braidotti 1994: 280)



Braidotti comments: "Walking backward toward the new, which is also the unknown, in order to be able to name a better and fairer present, feminists and other nomadic intellectuals are the strange angels of a failed system, stumbling to a new age" (1994: 279-280). This crosses the vestigial idea of the *flâneur* with Benjamin's materialist conception of history so as to produce a newly politicised, committed, critical but estranged (stumbling) intellectual. Braidotti calls the kind of reappropriation there is in Anderson's song "metabolic repossession" or "mimetic repetition". The *flâneur* needs some such strategy to walk away in a new guise (even backwards) from his later shadows.

NOTES

[1] Why or which Walter Benjamin walks the pages of contemporary commentary would be the subject of another essay. One general reason surely is that he has remained chic; that his unorthodox marxism, fragmentary, aphoristic writings, awareness of an emerging mass society mean he can be read less as a marxist modernist than already a postmarxist postmodernist and founder of Cultural Studies. None of this is "wrong". It may in fact suggest how a link with modernity necessarily depends on re-routing its more maverick and marginalised voices. At the same time, I suspect "this" Benjamin —when it produces the image of Benjamin as "exemplary flâneur", for example— has left some important body parts behind: not least Benjamin's materialist theory of history which suggests precisely how such links might be conceived. See the closing discussion below and see McRobbie (1994) for a discussion of Benjamin's place in Cultural Studies.

[2] Priscilla Ferguson (1994) shows how the *flâneur* was a conspicuous urban type in the first half of the century and had already drifted out of circulation at the time of Baudelaire's writings. Elizabeth Wilson (1995) draws attention to an anonymous pamphlet of 1806 in which all the features were already present.

[3] An allusion to Jack London, Arthur Morrison and turn of the century social explorers occurs in Chris Jenks's "Watching Your Step. The History and Practice

of the Flâneur" (in Jenks ed. 1995). In a, in some ways, quite singular attempt to "reconstitute the analytic force of the flâneur", Jenks argues that the figure has been the victim of a reductionist reading by materialist critics, including Benjamin, in the name of "a brand of social realism" (1995: 145, 147). "The original realisation of the flâneur by Baudelaire", he argues, harboured a celebration of "aesthetic excess, abstract expression and the aestheticisation of social life itself" (1995: 145). In the irony, "wry and sardonic potential" and "disinterested interest" marking Baudelaire's *flâneur* he finds the source still of a "resistance to the commodity form" (1995: 149). The assumption that the *flâneur* was original with Baudelaire, and Jenks's reading of Benjamin's reading are debatable, but his dehistoricising, aestheticising interpretation is internally consistent and consistent with other poststructuralist appropriations. What his argument produces, like these others, is "the flâneur as cultural critic [...] "out of step" with the late-modern rhythm of the city" (1995: 150). Why we should attribute this sardonic mode of critical enquiry to what is now an "analytic form, a narrative device, an attitude", and call this the *flâneur*, remains unclear.

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II. AUTHORS AND TEXTS