

## Chapter 1

# *The Flaneur and Modernity*

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Any discussion of modernity depends upon arbitrary definitions, arbitrary distinctions, and highly tentative and qualified generalizations. Any definition of modernity implies controversial assumptions about historical development and consistency. It implies that there are “characteristic” features that distinguish an arbitrarily designated time frame from earlier ones. This act of distinction and definition involves an impressive array of epistemological problems. It is impossible to establish, first of all, whether any experience is characteristically modern. How is it possible to study the “modern” experience of the crowd, if we have no clear understanding of the way in which crowds were experienced in earlier centuries? The use of the word *modernity* may also distort and confuse cultural inquiry by implying connections, which may not exist and may not be demonstrable, between all of the cultural phenomena that are peculiar to the modern period. The development of the railroad and the decline of the influence of religion may both be considered part of modernity, but does this then mean that they are related and if so, how is it possible to formulate the relation? By reifying the distinction between modern and premodern experience, the idea of modernity also tends to simplify and distort the character of complex and gradual processes of development. It tempts those who study modernity to divide history by such an event as the invention of photography, in this way causing them to ignore the degree to which aspects of a photographic relation to reality may have been present in older forms of image culture. In addition to being attended by these problems, the idea of modernity is dangerously universalizing. Although it may seem obvious that the experience of modernity must differ depending upon such factors as class, gender, race, nationality, religion and degree of religious involvement, place of residence, and temperament, this awareness is not always evident in the existing discourse about “modern life” or “the experience of modern man.”

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As I begin what purports to be a study of the phenomenon of modernity, I want to acknowledge these problems and show some respect for them. I want to resist the temptation to simply invoke the term, in a blaze of distinguished French and German names, leaving its meaning open, compromising none of its dialectical richness, so that it can be redefined at various points according to context. It is impossible to use the word *modernity* with the kind of clarity or consistency I would like. The most I can do is promise to be as attentive as I can be to the problems I have just cited, and to be as clear as I can be given the slipperiness of what I am dealing with. In the following discussion, I will use the word *modernity* to refer to a relatively limited yet, as I hope to demonstrate, extremely important and pervasive historical phenomenon. My understanding of modernity derives from a consensual understanding of the term within a recent tradition of discourse about modernity.<sup>1</sup> This tradition has its roots in some of the writings of Charles Baudelaire and in Walter Benjamin's incomplete and therefore infinitely suggestive interpretation of Baudelaire.<sup>2</sup> What distinguishes the conception of modernity within this tradition is its emphasis on the social and historical meanings of what are understood to be "modern" changes in the phenomenological character of experience.

As such recent scholars of modernity as Habermas, Berman, and Frisby have noted, definitions of modernity, written from widely varying ideological perspectives, are nevertheless often similar in their basic elements. Theoreticians of modernity as diverse as Wordsworth, Marx, Nietzsche, Benjamin, Foucault, Lefebvre, and de Man have all observed that, in the modern world, the phenomenological character of experience is less unified, coherent, or continuous than it was in earlier historical periods. As the social and philosophical structures associated with earlier forms of political and economic organization have weakened, it has become harder to assign a stable meaning or value to individual things and experiences. It has become harder to connect the individual components of experience with each other. Yet as older forms of organizing experience have weakened, new forms of producing experience have developed. Capitalism and modern industrial technology produce an immense and perpetually renewing spectacle of commodities and images. Experience has, as a result, become more various and more immediately stimulating, at the same time as it appears to be less substantial and meaningful. There is a surplus of signifiers and a dearth of signification. It is possible to bathe in such a world, to collect images, or to enjoy the way in which they rapidly succeed each other. It is harder to be oriented, rooted, or convinced of the solidity or permanence of anything one believes or observes.

The paradoxical nature of modern experience, understood in this way,

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has had an inevitable impact on the way in which art is produced and perceived. One of the earliest self-conscious efforts to describe the effect of this change on the artistic imagination is Charles Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life." This essay, in which Baudelaire offered a description of a consciousness capable of representing what he himself called "modernity," is the theoretical work in which, according to Jurgen Habermas, artistic modernity first assumed "clear contours" ("Modernity vs. Postmodernity," 4). No other nineteenth-century text figures as prominently in twentieth-century discussions of the development of the idea of artistic modernity. In order to understand the context of Baudelaire's pioneering description, however, it is useful to recognize that much of what Baudelaire observes was also observed, from a radically different perspective, by William Wordsworth in a preface written half a century before.

In the preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), Wordsworth describes the effect upon the imagination of what he perceives to be "modern" changes in the character of experience. He complains that the "invaluable works of our elder writers" are being "driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant stories in verse." Declaring himself and Coleridge to be in opposition to this modern thirst for the sensational, Wordsworth offers an account of the "causes unknown to former times" that have created such an aesthetic climate.

The human mind is capable of excitement without the application of gross and violent stimulants; and he must have a very faint perception of its beauty and dignity who does not know this, and who does not further know that one being is elevated above another in proportion as he possesses this capability. It has therefore appeared to me that to endeavor to produce or enlarge this capability is one of the best services in which, at any period, a Writer can be engaged, but this service, excellent at all times, is especially so at the present day. For a multitude of causes unknown to former times are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the encreasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. (*The Prose Works*, 128–30)

In his preface, Wordsworth identifies modern life with the "accumulation of men in cities" and the concomitant development of a culture

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in which all events and all information have the status of spectacle, consumed by those who “crave” it. Such a culture, according to Wordsworth, weakens the “discriminating powers of the mind . . . unfitting it for all voluntary exertion.” The new consciousness, Wordsworth implies, is passive. Reduced to a “savage torpor,” it finds no pleasure in such traditional “exertions” as the perception of meaning, likeness, and continuity within the flux of experience. It can only find interest in the way in which each moment differs, grossly and violently, from previous moments. It can only find pleasure in the perpetual liberation from context and continuity that “extraordinary incident” provides.

Wordsworth’s analysis provides a model for what was to become a classic criticism of the effects of modernity. The objects of his criticism are big cities, newspapers, and popular fiction, but very similar arguments have been made, over the past two centuries, for the deleterious effects of television, popular music, cinema, and MTV. At the same time, these arguments continue to be made with respect to urbanization, journalism, and popular fiction, often as if these were very recent cultural developments. In his analysis, Wordsworth makes an association that Baudelaire would also make, and that would, through Baudelaire, become central to much of the subsequent discourse about modernity. The lazy, passive modern imagination, Wordsworth suggests, is quintessentially urban. Although it may spread, and although, in the nineteenth as well as the twentieth century, it certainly has spread beyond the physical boundaries of cities, the changes in the nature of experience designated by the term *modern* were identified throughout the nineteenth century and are still to some degree identified with what Wordsworth calls “the increasing accumulation of men in cities.” As Asa Briggs points out in his history of nineteenth-century Britain, a history he entitled *The Age of Great Cities*, the physical and social fact that seemed, to nineteenth-century observers, to distinguish their century from all previous centuries, was the growth of great cities (57). If the fundamental cultural fact of the nineteenth century was understood to be the development of great cities, the representative modern subjectivity was understood to be that of the city dweller, the passive yet compulsive consumer of a rapidly and perpetually changing spectacle.

In “The Painter of Modern Life,” Baudelaire offered a more detailed and more sympathetic description of the modern urban consciousness that Wordsworth found so threatening to the popularity of older literature. Accepting the fact that such a consciousness would find it difficult to respond to certain older forms of art, Baudelaire suggested that it could produce new, identifiably modern forms of imaginative expression. Introducing the word *modernity*, and defining it as “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal

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and the immutable” (13), Baudelaire proceeds, in his essay, to describe an artist who would be capable of representing these qualities. He suggests that “the painter of modern life” must have a consciousness that is open to the ephemeral, fugitive, and contingent. He must adapt, in other words, to the features of urban modernity and not, as Wordsworth would advise, resist them. In the following passage, Baudelaire presented his conception of the ideal imaginative posture of an artist of modern life:

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito. The lover of life makes the whole world his family, just like the lover of the fair sex who builds up his family from all the beautiful women that he has ever found, or that are – or are not, to be found; or the lover of pictures who lives in a magical society of dreams painted on canvas. Thus the lover of universal life enters into a crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life. (9)

In this definition, Baudelaire embraces the very features of modern subjective experience that Wordsworth felt were most threatening to the health of the poetic imagination. For Baudelaire, the passivity induced by urban life is not a “savage torpor” so much as the basis for a new form of creativity. As a “mirror,” or a “kaleidoscope,” the imagination of the ideal “painter of modern life” is indeed passive and indiscriminating. Yet for these reasons, it can capture the ephemeral and the random. It does not resist change because it does not demand continuity. It is not confused by multiplicity because it has no predisposition in favor of unity. It becomes as unstructured as the modern metropolitan environment through which it moves.

To characterize the posture toward experience that a “painter of modern life” must assume, Baudelaire uses a French word for which there

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is no exact English equivalent. In common French usage, a *flâneur*<sup>3</sup> is someone who, without any set purpose, strolls through and observes the life of a city or town. As Walter Benjamin has observed,<sup>4</sup> the word was commonly used in Baudelaire's time, to refer to members of a class of writers and journalists who, in the *feuilletons*, the serial feature sections of the Paris newspapers, and in books called *physiologies*, wrote sketches of urban life from the perspective of a strolling or panoramically situated observer. According to Benjamin, the flâneur, as a journalistic and literary type, originated in the 1830s, when the writers of the *feuilletons* began to represent city life with the same elegant, detached, and leisurely tone they used in their theatrical and literary reviews. At all times insisting upon the randomness with which they encountered what they described, the flâneurs, in their city sketches, would "watch" and present the crowds on the boulevards, and in the arcades, as if they were watching a performance. They would present themselves as reading these crowds as if they were reading the most innocuous and diverting texts. In order to produce this effect, they would claim to possess extraordinary powers of interpretation. The flâneur, Benjamin writes, typically presented himself<sup>5</sup> as a "botanist on asphalt" (36), in possession of special languages and keys that made it possible to identify and classify the components of the crowd. He would also often claim to be able to gain access to the history and consciousness of others. He made it appear as if it were possible, "unencumbered by any factual knowledge, . . . to make out the profession, the character, the background, and the life-style of passers-by" (39). Such powers of interpretation, combined with his invisible detachment, would have enabled the flâneur to experience the crowd as if he were, in Baudelaire's words, a "prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito" (9).

In the completed portions of the "Paris Arcades" project, Benjamin dismisses the flâneur as a fairly transparent social fantasy. According to Benjamin, such a fantastically gifted urban interpreter existed to assure a literate bourgeois audience that urban crowds were not as illegible as they appeared to be, that social life was not as incoherent as it appeared to be, and that the masses were not as politically threatening as they appeared to be. By assuring his audience that the urban crowd existed for their delectation, and that one's fellow city-dwellers were all "harmless and of perfect bonhomie," the flâneur obscured the nature of social relationships within the city. Benjamin writes that "the political secret," on which this literature was based, is "that life in all its variety and inexhaustible wealth of variations can thrive only among the grey cobblestones and against the grey background of despotism" (37), the reign of Louis-Phillipe. The extreme implausibility of this approach to urban life accounted for the fact that it had, according to Benjamin, virtually

disappeared by the middle of the 1840s. He explains: “People knew one another as debtors and creditors, salesmen and customers, employers and employees, and above all as competitors. In the long run it did not seem very likely that they could be made to believe that their associates were harmless oddballs” (39).

Although Benjamin, in the completed portions of the “Paris Arcades” project, did not go far beyond this fascinatingly suggestive and yet reductive and even dismissive conception of the flaneur’s importance, it appears, from the notes that remain, that Benjamin intended to do more with the figure of the flaneur in the larger work that was to have grown out of the material he collected. The flaneur, as Benjamin appears to conceive of him in these notes, and in his correspondence with Adorno,<sup>6</sup> was a “dialectical image,”<sup>7</sup> an archetype in which an aspect of historical reality was made manifest. As Susan Buck-Morss has formulated it, Benjamin seems to have seen the flaneur as offering, “philosophical insight into the nature of modern subjectivity – that to which Heidegger referred abstractly as the ‘thrownness’ of the subject – by placing it within specific historical experience. In the *flaneur*, concretely, we recognize our own consumerist mode of being in the world” (“The *Flâneur*, the Sandwichman, and the Whore,” 104–5).

From Benjamin’s notes, and from the correspondence with Adorno, it also appears that Benjamin perceived a significant analogy between the flaneur’s “consumerist mode of being in the world” and the new public spaces that were creating that mode of being. The flaneur, as Baudelaire had described him, was a great container, a vast mirror and kaleidoscope. Yet although he presents himself as randomly open to everything, he actually, as Benjamin describes, saves himself from chaos and indeterminacy through his improbable pretensions to epistemological control. Producing his benign readings, the flaneur reduces the city to a panorama or diorama, a scale model, in which everything is, in effect, brought indoors,<sup>8</sup> transformed into a legible, accessible, and nonthreatening version of itself, encompassed by the comforting arc of the flaneur’s sensibility. As a *grand magasin* of all experience, the flaneur is analogous to the arcades, department stores, grand boulevards, and world expositions that were his natural and contemporary habitat. Just as these new environments of consumer capitalism could contain an encyclopedia of objects, controlling their potentially disorienting diversity in order to make everything accessible to a consuming spectator, so the flaneur, through the medium of journalism, could impose order upon the potentially disorienting diversity of the city, by reducing it to accessible images that could be collected and consumed.

As a dialectical image, the flaneur was understood by Benjamin to provide a model for the general relationship between consciousness and

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experience that became dominant in metropolitan centers in what he considered to be the era of high capitalism. In his completed essay “Some Motifs in Baudelaire” and in a section of the notes for the “Paris Arcades” project labeled with the small letter “m” and entitled “*Mussigang*” (idleness), Benjamin associates the experience of the flaneur with the German word *Erlebnis*, which designates experience as, in essence, a collecting of lived moments. *Erlebnis* is distinguished from *Erfahrung*, another German word for experience which etymologically preserves the sense of experience as the journeying through life that is characteristic of premodern societies. As Benjamin defined the distinction in his notes: “*Erfahrung* is the harvest from work, while *Erlebnis* is the phantasmagoria of the idler.”<sup>9</sup> As Benjamin appears to have understood him, the purpose of the flaneur was to produce *Erlebnis*, to serve as its advocate and exemplar, to suggest that all experience may be collected in the form of images, from which one may always be safely detached. Making the rich diversity of modern urban experience accessible to his audience, through the production of images in the context of journalism, the flaneur suggests the possibility of an accommodation to modern life. He suggests that it is possible to be at home in modernity, to wander through the arcades, the department stores, the grand commercial boulevards, the world’s fairs, attentive to photographs and panoramas, surrendering to the fecundity of it all, marveling at the ability of the commercial metropolis to produce impermanent images that do not become part of lived experience but may instead be collected and stored in a great warehouse of memory.

By approaching experience in this way, the flaneur provides a model for the creative and consuming consciousness implicit in much of the art of the bourgeois nineteenth century. His panoramic interest in the everyday life of the metropolis is part of the premise of both realist and naturalist fiction. His consuming and collecting detachment anticipates aestheticism. His acceptance of the possibilities of discontinuity make him a predecessor of much twentieth-century art and his reduction of the world to a series of consumable images associates him with a nineteenth-century culture of images that would, in the twentieth century, grow into the all-encompassing envelope of the electronic media. To a large extent the flaneur is that in the nineteenth century which most anticipates the habits of image consumption of the twentieth century. As a dialectical image, he exemplifies the way in which, as Benjamin observed, “every epoch dreams its successor” (159). The idea of the flaneur presents, as Benjamin seems to have recognized, an extraordinarily broad range of possible references and connections. He is, in the “Paris Arcades” project, a kind of capital of nineteenth-century consciousness just as Paris can be understood to have been “the capital of the nineteenth century.” Although I am not entirely comfortable with

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the Hegelianism of believing that there is such a thing as a historical reality that can be made manifest in an image, I do think that, by studying the flaneur as a concrete historical phenomenon, and as an image within the culture of the nineteenth century, it is possible to study the effect of urban culture on mental life, and on cultural products produced in this period. Yet many who may find this a plausible approach will be surprised by the literature I have chosen as the basis of such a study. I intend to show that the flaneur, understood by Benjamin and others as an exclusively and quintessentially Continental phenomenon, was in fact a significant presence in the culture of the United States in the three decades before the Civil War.

The prevailing assumptions about the origins of the flaneur, as well as the prevailing assumptions about the provincial, antiurban character of American antebellum culture, are such that we would not expect to find the flaneur in America at this time. Part of what I hope to establish in this study is that these assumptions have prevented us from encountering the urbanity and the modernity, such as they were, of the American literature written before the Civil War. The existence of these qualities in some of this literature should not be surprising. Few societies in history had ever urbanized as rapidly as America did in the first half of the nineteenth century. And if, as Paul de Man has written, modernity “exists in the form of a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a true departure” (148), then few cultures in history have been more self-consciously “modern” than the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. Despite a strong native tradition of antiurbanism and despite the widespread perception of the inferiority of American cities as compared with those of Europe, many Americans, as I will consider in a later chapter, were fascinated by the cosmopolitan mode of being exemplified by the flaneur. The flaneur may even have had a particular suitability to American culture. To many Americans, he may have represented an aspiration, a desire for the subjective benefits of the metropolitan civilization that at that time existed most visibly in London and Paris but that was even more consonant with the avowed ideals of America’s capitalist, democratic, bourgeois-dominated society than it was consonant with the values of the older European societies, in which pre- or antibourgeois values may have had a greater amount of influence than they did in the United States. America did not invent the department store, the panorama, or the industrial exposition, but it embraced them in the nineteenth century with a passion that suggests that the consciousness with which they can be associated is likely to have had a similar affinity with American culture. For these reasons, we should expect that American writers like Poe, Hawthorne, and Whitman would

be as interested as their European contemporaries in the potential effect of urban life and, in the broadest sense, of modernity upon the creative imagination. As I will argue, their consideration of this issue, through their own engagement with urban modernity, would have important consequences for their creativity. In this context, it is significant that the early efforts of these authors to represent “the crowded life of cities” all involve the representation of a consciousness that incorporates many of the features of the flaneur, as Baudelaire and Benjamin have understood him.

Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd,”<sup>10</sup> for example, begins with a narrator describing his vantage “at the large bow window” (2:510) of a coffeehouse in London. Recovering from a serious illness, he is in a mood that he characterizes as “the converse of ennui.” His intellect is “electrified” and he feels “a calm but inquisitive interest in everything.” Turning his attention from his newspaper to the crowd that passes by his window, the narrator discovers that, in his special mood, he can read the passing crowd as easily as he had read the newspaper. “At first,” he writes, “my observations took an abstract and generalizing turn. I looked at the passengers in masses, and thought of them in their aggregate relations. Soon, however, I descended to details, and regarded with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expressions of countenance.” Observing these details, he divides the crowd into abstract and general classes. Physiognomy and clothing enable him to “identify” men of leisure, men of business, clerks, pickpockets, gamblers, “modest young girls,” and prostitutes. Equally legible signs permit him to distinguish the subclasses of status and temperament within the larger classes.

Throughout his description of the crowd, Poe’s urban spectator maintains an affectation of interpretive ease. “It was not possible to mistake . . . the upper clerks of staunch firms” because, he insists, they all dressed identically and “they had all slightly bald heads, from which the right ears, long used to penholding, had an odd habit of standing out on end.” Gamblers also were “easily recognizable.” “All were distinguished by a certain swarthy complexion, a filmy dimness of eye, and pallor and compression of lip.” “The tribe of clerks,” likewise, “was an obvious one,” with its own set of identifying features, and “many individuals of dashing appearance” were “easily understood as belonging to the race of swell pick-pockets.” Poe’s narrator is so certain of his power to read the crowd that he claims that, in addition to being able to identify types, he can “frequently read, even in that brief interval of a glance, the history of long years” (2:511). Nothing in his text, however corrupt or criminal, is able to disturb his composure. Before he encounters an old man, whose