

Research Article

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Tracing the *Flâneur*: The Intertextual Origins of an Emblematic Figure of Modernity

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Abstract: This article presents an intertextual analysis of the origins of the *flâneur*, tracing his literary evolution from early nineteenth-century attestations to Baudelaire's *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863). From the outset, this figure has embodied ambivalence and complexity, shaped by textual and cultural interactions. Through a philological approach, this study explores the historical transformations of the *flâneur*, focusing on four defining aspects: (1) his emergence alongside the industrial metropolis; (2) his evolution into the figure of the detective; (3) the dissolution of the self into the crowd; and (4) a new aesthetic that celebrates the fleeting, ephemeral beauty of modernity. A crucial moment in this analysis is the dialogue between French "panoramic literature" and Anglophone urban narratives, particularly Baudelaire's translation of Poe's *The Man of the Crowd* (*Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires*, 1857). This engagement reshaped the *flâneur*'s identity, evolving from a privileged observer of modernity to an increasingly critical figure attuned to its contradictions and darker facets. Rather than a static archetype, the *flâneur* remains fluid and evolving, ensuring his persistence in modern critical discourse. This study underscores his role not only as an interpreter of modernity but also as a creator of meaning, shaping urban experience and artistic representation.

Keywords: *flâneur*, panoramic literature, comparative literature, Poe, Baudelaire

1 A Wandering Word: The *Flâneur* Between Concept and Context

A veil of mystery shrouds the figure of the *flâneur*, the solitary walker who roams the boulevards of nineteenth-century Paris, observing the spectacle of the metropolis. As an emblem of the modern gaze and the individual's interaction with urban spaces and consumer civilization, the *flâneur* embodies a concept rich in interpretative possibilities and inherent ambiguity.

In everyday French, the verb *flâner* describes the art of wandering around a city in a carefree, relaxed state. Over time, this term has expanded in the tourism and cultural marketing lexicon, acquiring a more general meaning. It broadly suggests a curious attitude akin to a visitor exploring a historic village or strolling through a shopping center. It is within academic circles, however, that the term *flâneur* has experienced unprecedented success and dissemination over the past 30 years. Following the posthumous publication of Benjamin's *Das Passagen-Werk* (1982), a flourishing tradition of studies in the social sciences and literary fields has developed around this concept, making it a reference point not only in French and European literary history but even more so in contemporary critical theories. Indeed, while some strands of criticism have explored the classic and literary image of the solitary walker of the nineteenth century (Tester, 1994; Solnit, 2002; Nuvolati, 2012), in other cases, the *flâneur* has become a genuine critical category, sometimes even autonomous or detached from its original context, to describe the condition of the individual in urban

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modernity (Buck-Morss, 1986). This trend has become particularly evident in recent years, as new research in cultural and gender studies has reexamined and repurposed the concept of the *flâneur*. The emphasis has shifted from its exclusive focus on the male version, which overlooked real and literary female figures with similar traits (Elkin, 2016; Parsons, 2020; Wilson, 1992; Wolff, 1985). Such a reevaluation has led to the widespread use of the term *flâneuse*. Further evidence of the resonance of this concept is found in the rise of another equally fertile strand of research in recent years, such as in postcolonial and intercultural studies, which explore experiences of *flânerie* in cultural and geographical contexts other than the original ones (Comfort & Papalas, 2021).

The success of the term “*flâneur*” is mainly due to its semantic ambiguity, which renders it particularly flexible. It serves as an interpretative category defining the individual in the metropolis, but the figure proves hard to decipher, difficult to pigeonhole, or too rigidly defined. This complexity is evident in its translations into other languages, which never fully capture its nuances. For example, to limit this analysis to a few major European languages where academic debate on the *flâneur* has been particularly active, the Italian *vagabondo* conveys the idea of aimless wandering but lacks the intellectual and aesthetic connotations of the *flâneur*, a reflective and detached observer. A similar issue arises in Spanish, where *paseante* emphasizes leisure but fails to capture the *flâneur*’s deep engagement with the urban spectacle. In English, the *stroller* conveys the physical act of walking but lacks the conceptual depth associated with aesthetic contemplation. In German, *Müßiggänger* suggests idleness but does not fully encompass the *flâneur*’s role as a keen observer of modernity. And perhaps – though this remains speculative, as no conclusive studies have been conducted – the very phonetics of the term “*flâneur*” may have played a role in its widespread appeal. The word carries an inherent elegance, perfectly aligning with the image of the urban observer it denotes: detached yet keenly perceptive. The initial [f] sound evokes a slight friction as if to mimic a stroll, and its final sound [œ̃] (or [ø̃] in the feminine), so specific to the French language, gives it an exotic, mysterious note, suggesting an ineffable world.

While the *flâneur* has evolved into a widely used and flexible category, it is crucial to revisit its historical foundations and consider them in their original context. A central question in this regard is whether the *flâneur*, now an abstract concept spanning multiple disciplines, originally emerged as a concrete social type shaped by specific historical conditions or remained primarily a literary construct. To what extent did urban transformations, social structures, and literary traditions influence its development?

This article re-examines the emergence of the *flâneur* by tracing how the figure developed across literary, lexical, and artistic sources in the early nineteenth-century France. While previous scholarship has often focused on the *flâneur*’s later reception or symbolic role in modernity, this work returns to the formative decades between 1830 and 1860 to investigate the specific discursive and cultural contexts in which the term acquired its early meanings. By combining philological, intertextual, and comparative approaches, it offers a more integrated understanding of how a variety of genres and traditions – some less explored in previous studies – contributed to shaping the early *flâneur*. The analysis opens with the term’s etymology and earliest attestations and then turns to its gradual codification across dictionaries, periodicals, narrative texts, and artistic expressions. Particular attention is given to the interplay between well-known and lesser-known materials, as well as to the influence of foreign literary traditions – especially through Baudelaire’s translation of Poe’s *The Man of the Crowd*. Primary sources for this research are housed at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) in Paris, with many texts available in print or digitally via the Gallica platform.

2 The Emergence of the *Flâneur* in Panoramic Literature

The figure of the *flâneur* is intrinsically linked to the development of the modern metropolis’ social and architectural landscape. It was in the context of the nineteenth-century Europe, at the peak of its industrial fervor, that this character made its appearance. However, the origins of the word itself remain uncertain and contested. After an early and completely isolated mention in Gabriel Chappuys’ *Misaule* in 1585, suggesting its

likely vernacular origin, it gradually spread through France starting from the 1830s.¹ Understanding the evolution of this term is crucial for grasping how its meaning was shaped before acquiring the layered complexity that defines it in modern discourse.

According to the dictionary *Grand Robert de la langue française* (1985), “flâneur” comes from the Norman verb “flanner” (“to idle,” “to waste time”), emerging as early as 1638, certainly with roots further back. In line with the *Trésor de la langue française* (1994), its presumed origin is from the ancient Scandinavian “flana” (“to run hither and thither”). In 1808, the verb *flâner* appears in the *Dictionnaire du bas langage ou des Manières de parler usitées parmi le peuple* from Hautel – compilation of figurative and trivial expressions, solecisms, and, more generally, phrases considered “lowly” and not suitable for “bonne conversation” – with this definition: “Flâner: rôder sans motif de côté et d’autre; fainéantiser; mener une vie errante et vagabonde” [to wander aimlessly from one side to the other; to idle; to lead an errant; and vagabond life]. The *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIX siècle* by Pierre Larousse (1872) – which takes a positivist approach – had a lengthy entry for *flâneur*, maintaining that the term is attributable to the Irish “flanni,” with the meaning of “libertine.” In this dictionary, the definition is clearly derogatory: “Errer sans but, lentement, en s’arrêtant fréquemment, comme un homme oisif” [To wander without purpose, slowly, stopping frequently, like an idle man]. The *flâneur* is even considered the “plague et [...] fléau des travailleurs” [the plague and the scourge of workers] and proliferates in the heart of modern Paris in particular contrast with this city devoted to material progress and business: “Cette ville où règne une vie, une circulation, une activité sans égales, est aussi, par un singulier contraste, celle où l’on trouve le plus d’oisifs, de paresseux et de badauds” [This city where life, movement, and activity without equal reign, is also, by a singular contrast, the one where the most idlers, lazy people, and gawkers are found]. It is given a similarly pejorative sense in the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*, in which the verb *flâner* made its tardy appearance in 1878, with this definition: “Se promener en musant, perdre son temps à des bagatelles” [To stroll while daydreaming, wasting time on trifles]. These definitions illustrate the word’s initial connotations, often linked to idleness or even eccentricity. However, as the figure of the *flâneur* took shape in literature and cultural discourse, these meanings evolved, progressively acquiring more complex and ambivalent traits.

Despite its ambiguous, controversial etymology, tracing the word’s trajectory through the nineteenth-century French literature is relatively simple (Castigliano, 2017). The first-documented description of this figure is in an anonymous pamphlet from 1806 with the title *Le Flâneur au salon ou M. Bon-Homme: examen joyeux des tableaux, mêlé de vaudevilles* (1806). This pamphlet, just 32 pages long, humorously sketches its protagonist. “Au quatrième étage d’une maison située au n° 27 de la rue Jean-Fleury, entre le palais du Tribunal et le musée Napoléon, habite un individu que ses voisins appellent Monsieur Bon-Homme, mais qui est plus connu dans tout Paris sous le nom de le Flâneur” [On the fourth floor of a house located at No. 27 rue Jean-Fleury, between the Palais du Tribunal and the Musée Napoléon, lives an individual whom his neighbors call Monsieur Bon-Homme, but who is better known throughout Paris as the Flâneur]. The *flâneur*, a man of independent means of wealth, is wandering on the streets of Paris, elegantly dressed. In the early morning, he is already perusing the city’s construction sites and evaluating their progress before turning his attention to shops where he admires the goods on display. His day continues with a plentiful lunch at a restaurant accompanied by a bottle of Chablis. Meanwhile, he does not hesitate to eavesdrop on the other patrons’ conversations. After a short stop in a café where he participates in a discussion about art, the *flâneur* strolls from the Tuileries to Champs-Élysées, carefully observing the crowd and the most interesting passersby. His daily routine includes a stop in a bookstore where he leafs through several novels, followed by an evening in the theatre and the night in another café. The short work ends with reflections on comments about the paintings exhibited at the Louvre.

In the following decades, the word *flâneur* spread through a collection of diverse writings, such as serial novels, pamphlets, and tourist guides to Paris. These texts played a crucial role in shaping the cultural and literary imagination surrounding this figure. They belong to what Benjamin termed “panoramic literature,” a genre in which authors sought to depict the complexities of the nineteenth-century urban life. One such work

¹ See Huguet, 1925–1967.

is an account by Jean-Baptiste Auguste Aldéguier, *Le flâneur, ou mon voyage à Paris, mes aventures dans cette capitale, et détails exacts de ce que j'y ai remarqué de curieux, et de nécessaire à connaître* (1826). The very title of the book illustrates the growing association between the act of *flânerie* and an observational mode of experiencing the city, reinforcing the idea of the *flâneur* as a guide to modern urban landscapes.

In the wake of this tradition, Balzac introduced the *flâneur* in his *Physiologie du mariage* (1829/1980). He describes *flânerie* as an activity that can serve to analyze the dynamics and behaviors of Parisian society. For unmarried men, it can be a useful means to meet the perfect woman. The book is addressed to aspiring husbands (not without irony). Balzac especially stresses the difference between the *flâneur* and the mere walker. A true *flâneur* studies people and their social interactions and even listens to their conversations: “Flâner, c’est jouir, c’est recueillir des traits d’esprit, c’est admirer de sublimes tableaux de malheur, d’amour, de joie, des portraits gracieux ou grotesques; c’est plonger ses regards au fond de mille existences” [Strolling is enjoying, gathering witticisms, admiring sublime pictures of misfortune, love, joy, graceful or grotesque portraits; it is plunging one’s gaze into a thousand lives] (p. 23).

After the 1830s, the *flâneur* became a popular figure in Paris. In 1831, an “anonymous flâneur” penned the article *Le flâneur à Paris* included in the collection *Paris, ou le livre de cent-et-un* (1831–1834). The piece opens with a metaphor of the world as a great theatrical stage, on which “a thousand actors” contend for prominence. The *flâneur* finds one of his particular roles in this setting. While within the four walls of his home he is an ordinary man, as soon as he sets foot in the street, “humé la poussière du boulevard ou le brouillard de la Seine” [inhaling the dust of the boulevard or the fog of the Seine], he springs into action. Nothing escapes his investigative gaze: “une lithographie qui se produit pour la première fois en public, les progrès d’une construction qu’on croyait interminable, un visage inaccoutumé sur ce boulevard dont il connaît chaque habitant et chaque habitué” [a lithograph making its first public appearance, the progress of a construction believed to be endless, an unfamiliar face on this boulevard where he knows every inhabitant and every regular] (p. 100). A kind of mysterious harmony is created between the city and the *flâneur* who lets himself be guided by the beauty of its monuments and the charm of its elegant ladies: “un pied mignon, une taille bien prise, qu’il veut perdre de vue le plus tard possible, décideront de la direction qu’il va suivre” [a dainty foot, a well-shaped waist, which he wants to lose sight of as late as possible, will determine the direction he will take]. His paradoxical contrast to the frenetic pace of the modern metropolis makes the *flâneur* stand out in the crowd. Surrounded by people who appear to be running all day long after “un quart d’heure qu’ils ont perdu le matin” [a quarter of an hour they lost in the morning], the *flâneur* “est maître de son temps et de lui-même il savoure le plaisir de respirer, de regarder, d’être calme au milieu de cette agitation empressée” [is master of his time and himself, he savors the pleasure of breathing, of looking, of being calm in the midst of this bustling agitation] (p. 101). The *flâneur* thus emerges not merely as an urban wanderer but as a figure who embodies a particular mode of experiencing the city – one that contrasts sharply with the increasing acceleration of modern life.

By the 1830s, the term *flâneur* had become deeply associated with Paris, as evidenced by its increasing presence in literary and journalistic works. A notable example is the bi-weekly newspaper *Le Flâneur: cicérone des étrangers à Paris* (1834–1835), whose subtitle – *Journal non politique: renseignements utiles, littérature, sciences, arts, commerce, industrie, flâneries, annonces et avis divers* – illustrates the semantic expansion of *flânerie* beyond mere strolling. The word began to encompass a broader spectrum of interests linked to urban modernity, reflecting the evolving intellectual dimensions of the *flâneur*.

The *flâneur* had transformed into a recognizable and almost emblematic figure of city life, as evident in the *Physiologies*, a series of pamphlets published by Aubert between 1840 and 1860, offering a detailed, though satirical, portrayal of the most iconic social figures of Paris at the time. Among these, Huart’s *Physiologie du flâneur* (1841) stands out as a pivotal text, better embodying than any other work the optimism and euphoria that accompany the *flâneur* as an expression of Parisian modernity. While previous publications had portrayed the *flâneur* in scattered references, Huart’s work consolidates his image, developing key characteristics that would persist in later interpretations.

Huart’s portrayal is both celebratory and satirical. His *flâneur* is unmistakably a young bourgeois man, impeccably dressed, leisurely strolling through the city while displaying an effortless sophistication. Daumier and Maurisset’s vignettes illustrate the text and reinforce this image: the *flâneur* lingers in front of shop

windows, admires well-dressed women, and displays his elegance among the crowd. He leans against a wall, holding binoculars, fully absorbed in the pleasure of observing someone in the distance. He carries a walking stick, a symbol of aristocratic refinement, and cultivates an air of detached amusement. This visual and literary depiction underscores the cultural prestige attached to *flânerie*, presenting it as both a leisure activity and a refined mode of engaging with the city.

Huart is careful to distinguish the *flâneur* from other urban figures, defining the boundaries of the term with precision. To highlight its uniqueness, he provides detailed examples of individuals who, despite their claims, do not meet the qualifications to be true *flâneurs*. “Elderly men” who, after their short daily walk of twenty-five steps, sit on a bench and remain there until dinner time, chatting with acquaintances, cannot be considered *flâneurs*. Similarly, those who walk their dogs or take a Sunday evening stroll with their families, treating it as a light exercise, fail to embody the spirit of *flânerie*. The *flâneur* is also distinct from the *musard*, the idler who takes hours to cover the short distance between Porte Saint-Denis and Porte Saint-Martin. The *musard* lacks intelligence and critical spirit: his walk soon turns into a monotonous wandering, a mechanical act during which he moves slowly, passively drawn to shop windows and street performers, realizing belatedly what is happening around him. The *badaud étranger*, the tourist visiting Paris, though sharing the decisive pace and sharp eye of the *flâneur*, follows a strict map and an overly rigid schedule. Rather in a frenzy, he wants to admire all the monuments and visit every museum and church in Paris, counting the chapels of Saint-Sulpice and the number of steps that lead to the top of the Vendôme Column. Despite his ardent curiosity, the city does not fully reveal itself to him, and the impression he gets is superficial and fleeting. Finally, even the *batteur de pavé*, the homeless man, cannot be defined as a *flâneur*. Although he is a sharp observer and connoisseur of the city, his movements are dictated by necessity rather than intellectual curiosity, and he lacks the refinement and detachment that characterize the *flâneur*.

In brief, unlike his fellow city dwellers always busy with the errands of everyday life, the fortunate *flâneur*, not having to work, walks about following his fancy, “à droite ou à gauche sans raison, sans but” [to the right or left without reason, without purpose] and happily retraces his steps “sans plus de motifs” [without further motive] (p. 2). In differentiating the *flâneur* from other inhabitants, Huart emphasizes a key fact in his definition: the inquisitive attitude that leads him to gain a specific type of knowledge. The *flâneur* may be ignorant of Greek, Latin, mathematics, and other scientific notions, but “il doit connaître toutes les rues, toutes les boutiques de Paris” [he must know all the streets, all the shops in Paris] and “il doit savoir par cœur toutes les affiches de la capitale” [he must know by heart all the posters in the capital]. Huart sees *flânerie* as a sign of intelligence and a noble practice, an exercise in freedom that may elevate people above other living beings: “L’homme s’élève au-dessus de tous les autres animaux uniquement parce qu’il sait flâner” [Man rises above all other animals solely because he knows how to be a *flâneur*] (p. 10).

This period’s descriptions and literary references outline a figure with distinct characteristics: the *flâneur* emerges as a new archetype, a product of modern European society, reflecting a transformed urban lifestyle. He is not the walker-philosopher – of which we have literary models since antiquity and in the “solitary walks” of Rousseau (1782/1944) – who looked to natural environments for inspiration for meditation and delving into one’s inner life. Instead, the nineteenth-century *flâneur* is a man of modernity and an observer of the metropolis, drawn to the visual and sensory experiences of the city.

Although the *flâneur* was formally conceptualized in the nineteenth century, the theme of urban wandering had already appeared in eighteenth-century French literature: it had already been developed in France by authors such as Louis Sébastien Mercier – whose *Tableau de Paris* (1781–1788), published in 12 volumes, offers a collection of everyday life scenes that the city presents to the observer walking through it – and by Rétif de la Bretonne, who, with *Les Nuits de Paris* (1788), describes the pleasure of solitary and aimless wandering in a nocturnal Paris populated by beggars, lonely young women, and thugs. Yet, it is only in the free space of the postrevolutionary capital that the *flâneur* gradually distinguishes himself from the crowd. His privileged social status allows him to waste time and gives him the option of interpreting the city scene, which, under his gaze, becomes an enigma to decipher. The *flâneur*’s predominant interest in the phenomenal world and his freedom of movement contrast both with the principles of the metaphysical and religious tradition on which preindustrial civilization was based and with the productivity dogma governing the emerging bourgeois society. Hence, the paradoxical nature of the *flâneur*: he acts out his dissonant idleness right in the beating

heart of the city, and he steeps himself in the tumult of the crowd while seeking to maintain a critical detachment.

Paris's physical structure further facilitates this practice. The cityscape played a defining role in shaping the habits, providing the ideal setting for the *flâneur's* leisurely yet perceptive exploration (Harvey, 2003). The rise of consumer culture in nineteenth-century industrial society also contributes to this phenomenon (Castigliano, 2023). Benjamin identifies the origin of phantasmagoria and merchandise being elevated to symbols of the early nineteenth-century Parisian passages, like the Passage des Panoramas (1800) and the Passage Jouffroy (1845), which are salons and wonder rooms in opposition to the urban decay of these areas for which it would be decades before Baron Haussmann's modernization plans came (Andreotti & Lahiji, 2016). These passages are shopping galleries along the boulevards of the *rive droite*, covered by lightweight iron and glass structures and lit by gas lamps. Inside, luxury shops, theaters, and cafés offer a unique experience. Here, public space is no longer perceived as an exterior, but as a furnished "interior" that people can inhabit. The *passages* are providential oases amidst the hubbub of the city where people can observe and be observed. Strolling through them became a pastime and a chance to meet, and *flânerie* rose to a way of life for the wealthy Parisian bourgeoisie.

3 Flaneuring Through the Dark Side of Modernity

In the panoramic literature, the *flâneur* is often portrayed as an emblem of modern urban life, a figure embodying the pleasures of observation and detachment. Yet, as we delve deeper into the evolution of this archetype, a more unsettling dimension emerges. The *flâneur*, as a privileged observer, is not merely a celebratory figure of urban modernity but also a witness to its ambiguities and contradictions. Balzac had already hinted at this darker side, particularly in *Facino Cane* (1837), where *flânerie* is not just a pastime but a means of escaping the self – an almost pathological detachment from one's identity. Themes concerning the more intricate aspects of modernity, and the idea of the dissolution of the self in the urban crowd, would become increasingly central after the mid-nineteenth century in defining the *flâneur*.

This shift in perspective marks an important stage in the evolution of the *flâneur*. A key moment in this transformation occurred with Baudelaire's translation (1857) of Edgar Allan Poe, whose work had a notable influence on Parisian literature and contributed to reshaping the portrayal of modernity.² This transition is particularly evident when comparing the different cultural approaches to urban wandering. While French panoramic literature often emphasized the aesthetic and intellectual dimensions of *flânerie*, English literature presented a more ominous vision of the modern city – both an alluring spectacle and a disorienting labyrinth. The London urban wanderer is not a confident interpreter of the city's codes but a figure adrift, reinforcing a sense of dislocation rather than mastery. Baudelaire's fascination with Poe solidified the connection between the English Gothic tradition and the French panoramic one. His translation of *The Man of the Crowd*, first published in *Le Pays* (1855) and later included in *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires* (1857), played a fundamental role in redefining the *flâneur*. Baudelaire described Poe's tale as "*un tableau écrit par la plus puissante plume de cette époque*" ["a picture written by the most powerful pen of this era"], frequently referencing it in *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne* (1863/1991a), the prose poem *Les Foules* (1869/2003), and his critical essays on Poe (1852/1994).

The theme of the city as an uncanny, destabilizing space has deep roots in British literary history. John Gay's *Trivia: or, The Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716/1807) already framed urban wandering as a skill necessary to navigate the metropolis's perils. Later, this image was echoed in plague-afflicted London as told in *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Defoe (1722) and in De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), as an impenetrable universe where the traces of the individual dissolve. We find this same view, with a more

² Brand (1991) explores how 19th-century urban literature constructed the city as a site of both excitement and alienation, capturing the contradictory experience of modernity as a space that stimulates yet disorients its inhabitants. Ridenhour (2012), in turn, examines how the Gothic imagination shaped depictions of London as an overwhelming, impenetrable space.

sociological and political slant, in *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England* by Engels (1845), showing a claustrophobic city in which the physical closeness of people can only increase the sense of isolation and mystery.

Poe's *The Man of the Crowd* crystallizes these anxieties, transforming the *flâneur* into a paradoxical figure – both a reader of the city and an inescapable part of its flux. First published in Philadelphia's *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* in December 1840, the story is organized around two figures who would become influential in modern fiction: an observer who scrutinizes and analyzes the faces and style of clothing of the metropolitan crowd and a man who wanders without apparent purpose, immersed in the crowd. While the first character, endowed with exceptional powers of observation and reasoning, seeks to decipher the enigmatic landscape of the nineteenth-century city, the second is an individual without an identity who moves around seeking something that the narrator himself cannot define despite his attempts.

To fully appreciate the significance of *The Man of the Crowd*, it is essential to consider that Poe's depiction of London was not based on direct experience. As an American author who only briefly traveled to Europe during childhood, Poe had never visited the city as an adult. The lack of familiarity with the city is evident. References to places and streets are often vague or even confused, which heightens the story's dreamlike, uncanny effect. Poe used books, magazines, and descriptions of others as the only sources for his setting descriptions. As a result, *The Man of the Crowd* is marked by a great deal of intertextuality and highlights the influence of para-scientific studies such as those of physiognomy.³

Poe's practice of assimilating and reworking multiple influences makes *The Man of the Crowd* a foundational text for understanding the literary origins of *flânerie*. In addition to the mentioned English author, more immediate textual references – including the episodes of an exploratory journey through the suburbs of London – suggest that Poe was also inspired by Charles Dickens, whose *Sketches by Boz* included vivid urban descriptions and a meticulous representation of the city's social stratification (Dickens, 1836–1837). Poe recreates the same defining dichotomy of Victorian London's imaginary, divided into two distinct halves: the city's respectable, glittering facade, and its darker side hidden from most people. This split is reflected in the contrast between the two main characters in Poe's story, stressing the tension between anonymity and visibility in the city crowd. The work that may have inspired *The Man of the Crowd* more than any other is a sketch by the Irish writer William Maginn, *The Night Walker*, published in 1823 in *Blackwood's Magazine*, of which Poe was a regular reader (Maginn, 1885). This journalistic article describes a tour of the liveliest places of London's nightlife, from the theatre district to the notorious East End, cataloging the city's crowds according to trades and occupations.

Both *The Night Walker* and *The Man of the Crowd* fully develop a fundamental theme: reading and interpreting the city as a text or a system of signs. This metaphor is made explicit in Poe's story, where the act of reading the crowd parallels reading a newspaper. Poe establishes a direct connection between urban observation and the cognitive process of textual analysis, as noted by Hayes (2002). The protagonist, seated on a café terrace, scans the passing figures as though they were words on a page. He attempts to deduce the social class, occupation, and even the inner life of each individual, relying solely on their outward appearance: "I could frequently read, even in that brief interval of a glance, the history of long years" (Poe, 1840/2000, p. 511).

4 Reading Faces: From Physiognomy to the Detective

The idea that a person's character or inner nature can be discerned through their physical appearance has a deep historical lineage, particularly within the tradition of physiognomy. This practice, which gained significant traction during the Italian Renaissance, was rooted in the rediscovery of classical texts and the interest in human anatomy and psychology. During the sixteenth century, figures such as Girolamo Cardano, Antonio Zara, and Giulio Cesare della Scala proposed that facial features and bodily traits could reveal an individual's

³ It is well-known that Poe tended to take inspiration from or even plagiarize specific authors, such as in writing *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (see Quinn, 1998; Fisher, 2008).

moral character. Their work laid the groundwork for an interdisciplinary approach that intertwined these observations with contemporary medical theories and philosophical thought.

In 1586, Giambattista della Porta, founder of the *Academia Secretorum Naturae* in Naples, wrote *De Humana Physiognomonia*, one of the first systematic studies of human traits based on the observation of physical appearance (Della Porta, 1586). The author expands and codifies earlier theories about physiognomy, drawing from classical sources like Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen, and other ancient philosophers, as well as combining his personal observations with empirical studies. Della Porta associated particular physical traits with specific moral and intellectual qualities, believing that outside appearance could reveal a person's inner nature. Decades later, these proto-scientific studies were taken up by the Swiss philosopher Johann Caspar Lavater, who grounded his theories in the belief that human anatomy is a reflection of the psyche and the story of an entire inner life is contained in the human face (Lavater, 1775–1778). According to Lavater, one could carefully examine a person's face and body to discern their nature. The purpose of physiognomy is to help understand the true essence of individuals, decipher their innermost secrets, and judge their character to prevent their bad actions.

In the climate of the nineteenth century, in the years after the literary dawn of the *flâneur*, these studies became even more systematic. The new crowd of the great capitals aroused both interest and fear. The mingling and closeness of strangers are the roots of the new dangers and discomforts; in the crowd, one can get lost, and it is also where the wrongdoer can easily hide and disappear. This fear was reflected in the studies of criminal anthropology that were flourishing throughout Europe at the time. Franz Joseph Gall, a German physician and neuroanatomist, founded phrenology, a science that sought to determine key personality traits by studying the skull and its anatomical development (Gall & Spurzheim, 1810–1819). A few decades later, the Italian psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso, convinced that criminal behavior was hereditary and identifiable through particular physical traits, assembled in his Turin laboratory a vast collection of specimens, including skulls, casts of crania, and brain waxes, all associated with criminal personalities (Lombroso, 1896). He thus arrived at classifying the biological and physical profiles that would allow the medical detective to identify the criminal hidden within the city's crowd.

The theories of physiognomy, now considered without scientific basis, profoundly influenced the literary tradition that led to the creation of the *flâneur*. In *Physiologie du Mariage*, Balzac references Lavater's research, describing *flânerie* as a true discipline, the “gastronomie de l'œil” [gastronomy of the eye], encouraging aspiring *flâneurs* to investigate the society of the time by carefully observing the details of passersby (de Balzac, 1829/1980, p. 930). The *flâneur* is even compared to a gendarme, a policeman who patrols the city and “cherche à reconnaître un signalement” [seeks to recognize a description]. This idea was repeated on other occasions, such as in the novel *Le Cousin Pons*: “La plupart des observateurs de la nature sociale et parisienne peuvent dire la profession d'un passant en le voyant venir” [Most observers of social and Parisian nature can tell the profession of a passerby by seeing him come] (de Balzac, 1847/1977, p. 585). In *Facino Cane*, from 1837, a character dominates the scene who takes long nightly walks to recover from his extenuating study in the day. He does not, however, merely admire the monuments and refresh himself. He is prey to deep inner excitement and devotes himself to an exercise that may seem bizarre: in the city streets, he spies and follows passersby, observing their faces and clothing and listening to their conversations. He fills his solitude and inner emptiness with their images and life stories.

Benjamin was the one to draw a connection between the practice of urban *flânerie* and the emergence of the detective novel (Benjamin, 1974, p. 546). Poe's *The Man of the Crowd* was pivotal not only for its exploration of crowd observation but also for introducing the concept of trailing an individual. Poe's fascination with physiognomy and sociological insights are evident from the story's opening pages. In a piece from a few months after *The Man of the Crowd*, which was *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, from 1841, the figure of the detective is even more defined. In Paris, a city Poe had never visited, Dupin, an ordinary man with exceptional observational skills, solves a seemingly unsolvable homicide case. This tale established the model of the “detective story,” where investigation is an intellectual exercise of analysis and deduction, a model that gained universal success with Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet* (1887/2021), the first story to introduce Sherlock Holmes.

The detective story and physiognomic observation can be explained by a desire for reason to dominate over the phantasmagorical – yet uncanny – scene of the modern city. It is an attempt to compensate for the breakdown of traditional social categories by analyzing the metropolis' crowds through a rigorous classification logic in the reassuring illusion of being able to control the chaos. However, in *The Man of the Crowd*, this attempt ultimately fails. Truth escapes reason, and the irrational prevails. When the detective seems to be able to explain reality through his analytical intelligence, an unsolvable mystery appears to him. The failure of human rationality generates the feeling of uncanniness and horror, as often happens in Poe, pervading the second part of the story. The crowd is a distasteful sight “full of a noisy and inordinate vivacity which jarred discordantly upon the ear and gave an aching sensation to the eye” (Poe, 1840/2000, p. 510). The city is a source of anxiety and wretchedness because of the disorder and dissonance it creates.

The detective's failure becomes dramatically evident by the story's end as the line between his rationality and the madness he pursues blurs. He is driven by frenzied curiosity, “an interest all-absorbing,” pushed to furious nighttime chases in which the figures of the pursuer and the pursued start to conflate (p. 515). For the detective, the act of walking ceases to be purely contemplative; it becomes a form of pursuit, a means of deciphering the social and psychological layers of the metropolis. In this transformation, the *flâneur* approaches the role of the physiognomist, seeking to read the city's hidden meanings through its faces and gestures.

The detective dwells on the man in the crowd's appearance, even giving his depiction hints of the demonic. His face does not bring to mind “anything [he] had never seen before,” and this disorients the detective, who in his physical appearance finds contradictory elements that escape analysis, signs of “vast mental power, of caution, of penuriousness, of avarice, of coolness, of malice, of blood-thirstiness, of triumph, of merriment, of excessive terror, of intense – of supreme despair” (p. 511). As seen in *William Wilson*, Poe's use of mirroring suggests that the detective and the man of the crowd could be two sides of the same person. The detective manages to decipher the characters imprinted on the faces of the passersby but does not understand the mysteries of the man of the crowd, and thus of his own inner self, that will “not suffer themselves to be revealed” (p. 506).

5 A Painter in the Crowd: *Flânerie* as an Artistic and Literary Practice

Through his wanderings in London, the dark side of the *flâneur* comes to light. The rational detective uncovers something mysterious and unspeakable within himself. Upon returning to Paris, his homeland, he is enriched with new and dramatic insights. The transition from spectator to participant, an active interaction with the city, is not limited to the detective but extends to both literary and artistic creation. This aspect is particularly evident in Baudelaire's works following his translation of Poe's *The Man of the Crowd* (published in *Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires*, 1857) where, inspired by Poe's duality, he redefines the *flâneur* as an aesthetic model for the modern artist.

In *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (written in 1859–1860 and published in *Le Figaro* in 1863) Baudelaire further develops these ideas, integrating Poe's influence into the panoramic tradition. The essay frames the city's spectacle as a source of inspiration for a new aesthetic. What Poe framed as an unsettling enigma, Baudelaire transforms into an artistic principle: the artist must immerse himself in the city's flux, embracing its contradictions to capture its essence. Baudelaire portrays his friend, caricaturist Constantin Guys, as the archetype of the modern artist who seeks inspiration in the city's crowd, transforming it into art. For his illustrations, Guys rejects any form of seclusion and does not work in the confinement of a studio but draws inspiration from the dynamism of *en plein air* and direct contact with the crowd: “Sa passion et sa profession, c'est d'épouser la foule” [His passion and his profession are to marry the crowd] (Baudelaire, 1863/1991, p. 291). The modern artist, “parfait flâneur” [perfect *flâneur*], is immersed in the “ineffable orgie” [ineffable orgy] of

the Parisian scene. Baudelaire emphasizes the aesthetic pleasure of observing the crowd, turning urban chaos into an experience that stimulates imagination and creativity. The Baudelairean artist-*flâneur*, “un moi insatiable du non-moi” [a self insatiable for the non-self], is a man of a dual nature, hovering between the desire to distinguish himself from the masses – akin to a dandy – and the contrasting desire to merge with the crowd and dissolve into it (p. 292). At the core of Baudelaire’s *flâneur* is the same *horror vacui* that drives Poe’s man of the crowd: an emotion arising from the disorientation of the individual deprived of the value system that underpinned pre-industrial society. The *flâneur* flees from the “black hole” of consciousness by symbolically appropriating the city, an icon of an unusual form of beauty.

The panoramic tradition, influenced by English literature and developed in the climate of the latter nineteenth century, culminates in a manifesto for a new aesthetic theory. The modern artist pursues a fleeting, episodic, and discontinuous beauty, that beauty “de la vie présente” [of present life] which is manifest in the details and nuances of the uncommon personage, in the multiform aspects of the crowds. Impressionist artists, such as Guys, represented new figurative art trends, introducing a new painting technique and a new sensibility regarding urban spaces and subjects. The *flâneur*’s observational ability is thus transfigured into this brilliant capacity to capture details, to freeze and photograph a fleeting passerby. Through short, rapid brushstrokes, often applied directly onto the canvas without detailed preliminary drawings, the impressionists render the effect of natural light and atmospheric variations with remarkable realism. Art, then, becomes a means of seizing and preserving illuminations – ephemeral impressions crystallized into lasting works.

Baudelaire exemplified this aesthetic idea in his poem *À une passante*, composed in 1860 and included in *Les Fleurs du mal*, giving an example of how the experience of the *flâneur* in the metropolis can form the basis of artistic and literary inspiration. The poem stages a chance encounter between the poet and a passing woman in the streets of Paris. A true modern muse, the woman has “la douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue” [the gentleness that fascinates and the pleasure that kills] (Baudelaire, 1857/1991b, pp. 122–123). For an instant, she shows herself in all her splendor and then quickly disappears into the crowd, prompting the poet to reflect on the vanity of beauty.

Among the many artworks and representations of the era that could be cited, one stands out as a particularly emblematic example of a new aesthetic sensibility: *Le Pont de l’Europe*, painted by Gustave Caillebotte in 1876. Unlike earlier portrayals of the city, this work does not merely depict urban life – it actively constructs a new way of perceiving it. From the artist’s early years, the painting is realistic and features a powerful perspective effect.⁴ The scene takes place on a spring morning near the Gare Saint-Lazare. In contrast to views of the same station painted by Monet (of which Caillebotte bought three versions), where a layer of smoke obstructs the sight, the image of the bridge here is very clear. The painting resembles a snapshot capturing a specific instant and is characterized by an unusual oblique view. It is cut into two by the bridge’s grand iron structure, which represents the power of industry and depicts the changes underway within Paris. It portrays a man in a top hat, whom we can recognize as the typical representation of the *flâneur*, just as he encounters an elegant woman and turns to look at her. The dog’s movement in the opposite direction accentuated the sense of speed. The other figure in the painting is a worker on the scene’s edge. Tired and leaning on a railing, he observes the railway with a melancholy air. The painter created a powerful color contrast to emphasize the great divide between the characters. On the left, the sidewalk and Haussmann-style buildings appear to clash with the *flâneur* in the black suit. To the right, the worker’s grey uniform stands out against the bridge’s dark structure.

Le Pont de l’Europe captures the enigmatic relationship between the *flâneur* and the modern city. The painting can be seen as the realization of the aesthetic trajectory that begins with panoramic literature. Yet, it also signals a fundamental shift: unlike the early nineteenth-century depictions, where the *flâneur* remained a detached observer, here he is an active participant in the urban landscape. The painting’s perspective lines converge on the *flâneur*, and the color contrast emphasizes his figure clearly within the landscape.

⁴ For a comprehensive analysis of the painting, see Ghez and Galifi della Bagliva (2013).

6 Conclusion

By analyzing the formative decades between 1830 and 1860, this study has shown how the *flâneur*, while rooted in a specific historical and urban context, gradually evolved into a critical concept – an archetype shaped by the interplay of literary and cultural forms, from high literature to pamphlets, travel guides, and iconographic sources. The philological approach has highlighted not only the variety of materials that contributed to the figure's codification but also the decisive role played by literary influences beyond France. In particular, Poe – as mediated through Baudelaire's translation – helped render the image of the *flâneur* more ambiguous and layered, paving the way for its further development. Far from being a unified and stable concept, the *flâneur* appears from the outset as a layered figure, capable of assuming multiple meanings.

Within this framework, the early phase of this transformation has been reconstructed, providing a historically grounded basis for understanding the *flâneur's* subsequent theoretical fortune. The approach adopted – intertextual, comparative, and based on a transversal reading of the sources – allows for a historicization of the *flâneur* and offers a model for rethinking long-standing critical categories whose meanings have shifted over time. Its original ambiguity and flexibility have ensured the *flâneur's* persistence: the capacity to adapt to changing contexts and function as a versatile critical tool, capable of absorbing the cultural and historical metamorphoses of its time.

This dynamic continues in more recent developments, as demonstrated by two particularly significant lines of research: first, the reflection on the *flâneuse*, which is not merely a feminine version of the *flâneur*, but also a redefinition from a gender perspective; second, the extension of the term into digital spaces, where practices of virtual exploration and algorithmic wandering have often been associated with the dynamics of *flânerie*. If modernity has transformed literature and the arts through its social and architectural structures, it is through literary and artistic representations that the forms of the city have acquired symbolic meaning, generating new ways of experiencing and perceiving space. These directions confirm that the *flâneur* has been, from its origins, an interpreter of the cultural and spatial transformations of its time; not merely a manifestation of modernity but one of its driving forces.

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