Edmund White

look down on the gardens of the Palais Royal from the window where Colette, crippled with arthritis, would survey her world.

Paris is a world meant to be seen by the walker alone, for only the pace of strolling can take in all the rich (if muted) detail. The loiterer, the flâneur, has a long, distinguished pedigree in France. An Italian traveller said in 1577, 'Looking at people go by has always been the Parisians' favourite pastime; no wonder they're called gawkers.' A few years before the Revolution a writer named Louis Sébastien Mercier wandered the streets of Paris taking notes about the cries of strolling vendors, studying boutiques and watching the hundred and one crafts of the great city being practised. In a massive work called Picture of Paris in twelve volumes (published from 1781 to 1789), Mercier argued for wider streets (with sidewalks and latrines) and called for an improvement in the desperate lot of the poor.

These practical and noble goals, so typical of a man of the Enlightenment, were of course transposed into a discordant key by the Revolution and the Terror. In any event, they seem little more than a pretext for Mercier's enraptured inventories. As he admitted, 'I've run about so much to do the Picture of Paris that I can say I've done it with my legs; and I've learned to walk the pavements of the capital in a manner that is nimble, lively and eager. That's the secret you must possess in order to see everything.' As an observant flâneur, he studied the habits of the city's thirty thousand prostitutes, its multitudinous beggars and the six thousand children abandoned every year, its soldiers and police ('They all seem suited to subjugate for ever the outbreak of any serious uprising', Mercier commented with a singular lack of prescience); its washerwomen and greengrocers - as well as that ubiquitous figure, the décrotteur, who scraped boots clean after a tromp through the muddy, filthy streets ('He readies you to put in an appearance at the houses of ladies and gentlemen; for you can get away with a slightly worn jacket, a cheap shirt or clothes that have been taken in, but you mustn't arrive with dirty boots, not even if you're a poet').

Like a true flâneur, Mercier found his 'research', disorganized and fragmented as it might be, endlessly absorbing. As he put it, 'I haven't been bored once since I started writing books. If I've bored my readers, may they forgive me, since I myself have been hugely amused.'

In the nineteenth century the consummate Parisian flâneur was Baudelaire. One of the key texts
of the modern urban experience is 'The Painter of Modern Life', in which Baudelaire talks about the caricaturist Constantin Guys (a man who so shunned public attention that Baudelaire refers to him only under the misleading initials M.G.). In one sweeping passage, translated below, Baudelaire extols the modern artist who immerses himself in the bath of the crowd, gathers impressions and jots them down only when he returns to his studio. For him a foray into the cityscape is always undirected, even purposeless - a passive surrender to the aleatory flux of the innumerable and surprising streets.

Of the flâneur, Baudelaire writes:

The crowd is his domain, as the air is that of the bird or the sea of the fish. His passion and creed is to wed the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate observer, it’s an immense pleasure to take up residence in multiplicity, in whatever is seething, moving, evanescent and infinite: you’re not at home, but you feel at home everywhere; you see everyone, you’re at the centre of everything yet you remain hidden from everybody - these are just a few of the minor pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial minds whom language can only awkwardly define. The observer is a prince who, wearing a disguise,

Baudelaire goes on to compare the flâneur to a mirror as huge as the crowd - or to a kaleidoscope outfitted with a consciousness that at every shake of the tube copies the configuration of multifarious life and the graceful movement of all its elements.

Of course we must bear in mind that the cosy, dirty, mysterious Paris Baudelaire is discussing (or Balzac or even the Flaubert of A Sentimental Education) is the city that was destroyed after 1853 by one of the most massive urban renewal plans known to history, and replaced by a city of broad, strictly linear streets, unbroken facades, roundabouts radiating avenues, uniform street lighting, uniform street furniture, a complex, modern sewer system and public transportation (horse-drawn omnibuses eventually replaced by the métro and motor-powered buses).

Many people felt that this urban renewal had destroyed the soul of the city. In a play, Maison neuve, written by Victorien Sardou in 1866, an older character explains to his niece what he dislikes about the new Paris:
Dear child! It is the old Paris that is lost, the real Paris! A city which was narrow, unhealthy, insufficient, but picturesque, varied, charming, full of memories. We had our favourite walks a step or two away, and our favourite sights, all happily grouped together! We had our little outings with our own folk: how nice it was! . . . Going for a stroll was not something that tired you out, it was a delight. It gave birth to that eminently Parisian compromise between laziness and activity known as flânerie! Nowadays, for the least excursions, there are miles to go! . . . An eternal sidewalk going on and on forever! A tree, a bench, a kiosk! . . . A tree, a bench, a kiosk! . . . A tree, a bench . . . This is not Athens any longer, it is Babylon! It is not the capital of France, but of Europe!

Even rebuilt and outfitted with all those identical trees (mostly plane trees and chestnuts), benches and kiosks, more than any other city Paris is still constructed to tempt someone out for an aimless saunter, to walk on just another hundred yards and then another. Although the métro is the fastest, most efficient and silent one in the world, with stops that are never more than five minutes’ walk from any destination, the visitor finds himself lured on by the steeple looming over the next block of houses, by the toy shop on the next corner, the row of antique stores, the shady little square.

August Strindberg, the nineteenth-century Swedish playwright, wandered the Paris streets half-mad and entirely hungry, constantly hallucinating as he read all the flotsam and jetsam of the cityscape as signs and portents. As he records in the short novel-diar...
Edmund White

everything and meet everyone of recognized val-

ue) inhibits the browsing, cruising ambition to 'wed the crowd'.

Americans are particularly ill-suited to be flâ-

neurs. They're good at following books outlining

architectural tours of Montparnasse or at visiting

scenic spots outside Paris - the Désert de Retz,

which is a weird collection of follies, for instance,
or Rousseau's gardens of Ermenonville, where he
mediated in a temple built to resemble a Roman

ruin. But they are always driven by the urge
towards self-improvement. Typically, Emerson's
friend the American thinker and historian Mar-
garet Fuller wrote to him in November 1846 that
she had just two weeks in Paris but that she had
already attended lectures at the French Academy,
visited all the picture galleries and the Chamber
of Deputies, met George Sand, heard a short
concert by Madame Sand's tubercular lover Chop-
pin and met Poland's leading poet and revolu-
tionary, Adam Mickiewicz, who had advised her
to frequent 'the society of Italians' in order to get
over her feelings of being ugly (she followed his
advice and married a much younger Italian aris-
ocrat). Despite all this activity, she complains to
Emerson that she knows she has scanted Paris
and 'touched only the glass over the picture'.

The Flâneur

At the turn of the nineteenth century the scientific
flâneur (a contradiction in terms, since flânerie is
supposed to be purposeless) was Eugène Atget,
an obsessed photographer who was determined
to document every corner of Paris before it dis-
appeared under the assault of modern 'improve-
ments'. He had been born in 1857 near Bordeaux
and as a young man had worked variously as a
sailor, actor and painter. Penniless but driven,
Atget carried his tripod, view camera and glass
plates everywhere with him, shooting all the
monuments but also the fading advertisements
painted on a wall, the dolls in a shop window, the
rain-slick cobbled street, the door knocker, the
quay, the stairwell, even the grain of the wood
steps. He photographed the grand salon of the
Austrian embassy but also street vendors hawk-
ing baskets and the humble horse-drawn fiacre
waiting for a customer. He wore his voluminous
cape everywhere, carrying his heavy equipment
in hands that had been badly scarred by develop-
ing solutions. And he travelled beyond Paris,
too, all the way out to the empty, eerie gardens of
Versailles and the grounds of St Cloud - the
palace northwest of Paris that the communards
had burned down in 1870. Despite his irre-
proachable credentials as a documentalist, Atget
came most into his own when photographing

The
Edmund White

these pale gods and goddesses in marble, lining the unvisited allées of bare winter trees. He would have liked the Christo-wrapped look of the Versailles gardens now; all the statues are covered with protective cloth between All Saints' Day and Easter, and only a hand or toe protrudes.

Atget lived in a tiny studio on the fifth floor of 17 bis rue Campagne Première, just off the Boulevard Montparnasse. There he stored his immense collection of documents pour artistes, as he called them, and indeed he sold his photos to theatrical decorators, film directors, painters, tapestry makers – anyone who needed a visual record of a vanished Paris. When Berenice Abbott, the young American photographer who virtually discovered him, asked Atget if the French appreciated his work, he said, ‘No, only young foreigners.’ André Calmette, Atget’s oldest friend, told Miss Abbott just after Atget’s death:

For twenty years he had lived on milk, bread and bits of sugar. Nobody, nothing, could convince him that these were not the only useful nourishment; all other food was dangerous poison to him. In art and in hygiene he was absolute. He had very personal ideas on everything which he imposed with extraordinary violence. He applied

The Flâneur

this intransigence of taste, of vision, of methods, to the art of photography and miracles resulted.

In the 1920s the founder of Surrealism, André Breton, turned flânerie into a pedantic pathology. In his novella Nadja he pursues a woman through Paris and accurately records (in words and photos) each ‘sighting’, for, as he explains elsewhere with characteristic fussiness, ‘Only the precise reference, absolutely conscientious, to the emotional state of the subject at the very moment in which such events took place can provide a real basis for appreciation.’ Thus the Tour St Jacques (all that’s left of a medieval church that was demolished by the Revolution in 1797) behind its ‘veil’ of scaffolding, erected for repairs, suddenly strikes Breton as ‘the world’s great monument to the sphere of the Unrevealed’. He compares it to a giant sunflower. This ruin (as well as many buildings, especially the strange Musée des Arts et Métiers) struck the Surrealists as essential elements in a ‘modern mythology’. As the German essayist Walter Benjamin remarked, the Surrealists were attracted to everything that was out of date, especially ‘the first constructions in steel, the first factories, the oldest photos, objects that had started to die, living-room pianos, clothes more than five or six years old,
fashionable places that had begun to lose their lustre'.

But the city offers the flâneur not only buildings and towers but also amorous adventure:

Picasso met one of his mistresses by following the advice of the Surrealists - to cruise the boulevards near the opera house, the Palais Garnier, and befriend the first woman who took his eye. In that way he met his second wife Fernande. The method was no doubt aided by the fact that the French - men and women - like to flirt with strangers in public. Whereas the word "cruise" is part of only the gay vocabulary in English, its French equivalent, "draguer", is also heterosexual. Straight people cruise one another in Paris; unlike Americans, who feel Menaced or insulted by lingering looks on the street, French women - and men! - consider la séduction to be one of the arts of living and an amorous glance their natural due. When I lived for several months in the States with a young French man and woman, they were puzzled and hurt at the end of their first American week by the lack of attention they were receiving. 'Maybe Americans don't like our looks?' they asked.

I had to explain to them that American-style feminism had retrained men not to ogle women - but that, more significantly, Americans consider the sidewalk an anonymous backstage space, whereas for the French it is the stage itself. An American office worker on the way to work will not worry about her appearance; she'll change out of her gym shoes into her heels only when she enters her office, whereas a French woman will feel that the instant she hits the streets she's onstage. Clothes, hair and make-up must be impeccable. The French are sometimes excessively concerned about the impression they're making; a mother will spend half an hour picking lint off her daughter's navy-blue suit before they leave the house to set off for Mass. Or a mother will hiss at her little boy in the train, 'Don't speak so loudly, you're drawing attention to yourself.' I asked a French couple who recently visited me in New York for their first impressions after just twenty-four hours in America. The wife said, 'In New York you can tell by people's body language that no one cares what other people think of them, whereas in Paris everyone is judging everyone and the only people who have this American-style insouciance are the insane.'

The last of the great literary flâneurs was Walter Benjamin. In a 1929 essay he wrote:
Edmund White

The flâneur is the creation of Paris. The wonder is that it was not Rome. But perhaps in Rome even dreaming is forced to move along streets that are too well-paved. And isn’t the city too full of temples, enclosed squares, and national shrines to be able to enter undivided into the dreams of the passer-by, along with every paving stone, every shop sign, every flight of steps, and every gateway? The great reminiscences, the historical frissons - these are all so much junk to the flâneur, who is happy to leave them to the tourist. And he would be happy to trade all his knowledge of artists’ quarters, birthplaces, and princely palaces for the scent of a single weathered threshold or the touch of a single tile - that which any old dog carries away. And much may have to do with the Roman character. For it is not the foreigners but they themselves, the Parisians, who made Paris into the Promised Land of flâneurs, into ‘a landscape made of living people’, as Hofmannsthal once called it. Landscape - this is what the city becomes for the flâneur. Or, more precisely, the city splits into its dialectical poles. It becomes a landscape that opens up to him and a parlour that encloses him.

In a single packed paragraph Benjamin pinpoints the exact nature of the flâneur. He (or she) is not
Edmund White

puts it, 'Just as waiting seems to be the true state of the motionless contemplative, so doubt seems to be that of the flâneur.' Frequently the flâneur is tired, having forgotten to eat despite the myriad cafes inviting him or her to come in, relax and partake of a drink or a snack: 'Like an ascetic animal he roams through unknown neighbourhoods until he collapses, totally exhausted, in the foreign, cold room that awaits him.'

In my first years in Paris I felt a shyness about going into cafes where I wasn't known - a timidity peculiar, admittedly, in a man already in his forties. I preferred to wander the streets in the constant drizzle (London has the bad reputation, but Paris weather is not much better). The whole city, at least intra muros, can be walked from one end to the other in a single evening. Perhaps its superficial uniformity - the broad avenues, the endlessly repeating benches and lamps stamped from the identical mould, the unvarying metal grates ringing the bases of the trees - promotes the dreamlike insubstantiality of Paris and contributes to the impression of a landscape 'stripped of thresholds'. Without barriers, I found myself gliding along from one area to another. (This inside/outside dichotomy of Paris as experienced by the flâneur keeps showing up in Benjamin's notes: 'Just as “flânerie” can make an interior of Paris, an apartment in which the neighbourhoods are the rooms, so nearly marked off as if with thresholds, in an opposite way the city can present itself to the stroller from all sides as a landscape stripped of all thresholds.')

Eventually I was able to distinguish what Parisians had labelled a 'stuffy' quartier from a 'happening' one, a workers' neighbourhood from the home of the young and up-and-coming, but these distinctions were all acquired later and in conversation. At first, when I had to depend on my own observations, Paris impressed me as a seamless unity in which, by American standards, everything was well tended, built to last and at once cold (the pale stone walls, the absence of neon, the unbroken façades never permitted by city ordinance to pass a certain height or to crack or crumble without undergoing a periodic facelift) and discreetly charming (lace curtains in the concierge's window, the flow of cleansing water in the gutters sandbagged to go in one direction or the other, the street fairs with rides for kids, the open-air food markets two days out of every week, segregated into different stalls under low awnings: this one loaded down with spices, that one with jellies and preserved fruits, not to mention the stands of the pâtissier and the baker,